



Overcoming the Monster

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Prompts

Human character one: Nurse

Human Character Two: Musical conductor

Non-human character: Magic bear

Setting: Shopping centre

Issue: Crippling depression

Words required: Haphazard, round, flowery, fortuitous, glass

Anticipation – the threat of the monster becomes known

“I can’t do this today,” Cassie said to the bear. The bear gave her a knowing look. “I know I have to,” she growled, irked at his judgment, “but I can’t.”

She looked down at the flyer: BIG BAND EXTRAVAGANZA. Musical instruments covered the paper in a haphazard fashion. The layout was terrible. The designer had used Comic Sans for the gods’ sake.



“It’s going to be a disaster!” The bear’s look was now sympathetic, but firm. “Oh I know. You believe in me. Too bad I don’t.” She sighed, running her fingers roughly through her curls. She stared at the flyer again.

Multi-year band.

Conducted by Cassandra Ashton.

Special Guest Star: Anthony Warlow.

Cassie’s breaths came faster. The bear looked concerned. The idea of getting dressed, leaving the house, getting to school, standing up in front of a crowd AND ANTHONY WARLOW and making her bunch of misfits play even *one* piece of music in time and in tune, seemed completely incomprehensible to her.

She felt the black seeping into the corners of her mind. And she shook her head.

“No.”

The bear’s eyes shone with encouragement.

“One step at a time. All I have to do – *all* I have to do is get dressed.” The bear gave a silent cheer.

Using that method, Cassie pushed the darkness back out of her mind. She got dressed.

“And now all I have to do is get to school.”

Once at school, without the bear’s silent encouragement, everything became much harder. But she had her list. Standing in the darkness behind the

curtains, her band looking expectantly up at her, she congratulated herself on reaching this point. On beating back the black and standing straight, ready to perform. And – a fortuitous circumstance – Anthony Warlow had cancelled! The production company had sent a second-string actor who had once played Javert in *Les Mis*, which didn't intimidate Cassie at all. Cassie flicked a nod at the stagehand peering at her from the wings, the curtains opened, the light hit her face.

She tapped her baton on the conducting stand.

And the music poured out around her. It wasn't perfect (Damn you Selina, can you please keep in time?) but it was hers. And for an hour, she was at peace.



The hero is called upon to confront the monster

"I can't do it!" Cassie moaned. This morning the black was already inside her when she opened her eyes and there was nothing she could do to stop it. The performance had been awful. Everybody hated it. Of course, they *said* they loved it – that's what people did. They lied to your face and talked behind your back.

And how was she supposed to turn up to school and face that? How could she deal with the whispers and the giggles behind her back?

She pulled the blankets over her head and tried to ignore the bear's accusatory stare.

"Leave me alone," she said from under the covers. Even the bear couldn't stand her. "Stop judging me."

"Cassie?" The door opened quietly, and her mother stepped into the room. "It's time to get up for school."

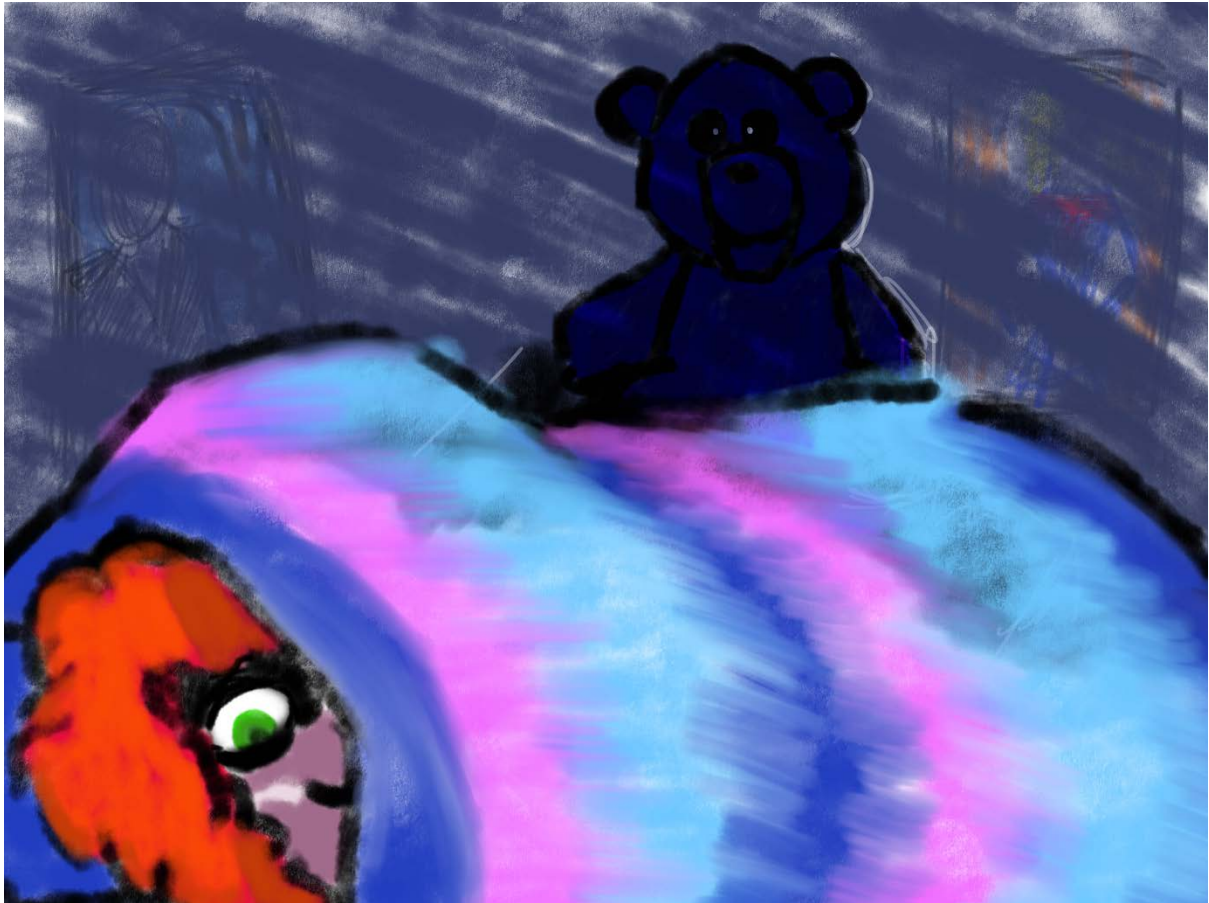
Cassie just huddled tighter.

"Cass? Are you feeling ok?"

"Sick," was the muffled response. Cassie heard her mother step forward on the wooden floor. She stood there for awhile. Cassie wished she would leave. And then she felt the weight of her mother sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Are you feeling bad again?" her mother asked softly. Cassie said nothing for awhile, but then she inclined her head under the covers. Her mother's hand pressed lightly on her shoulders. "You had such a good day yesterday. I've been getting phone calls from people ever since, saying how great you were. Everybody loved you."

Cassie shrugged. How to explain that it was all an act. That what they said and what they believed were two different things. And even if they did like it, that Cassie couldn't allow herself to feel that truth right now.



"It wasn't," she mumbled under the blankets.

"Hmm?"

"It wasn't a good day." Cassie pulled the covers back to look her mother in the eye. "The blackness was there and I only barely held it back. But I can't do it again today. I was too late." She saw the shock in her mother's eyes when Cassie had drawn back the quilt. She obviously looked like the monster she felt eating her mind from the inside. She pulled the covers back over her head, tears leaking from her eyes.

The comforting hand stroked her shoulder through the blankets.

"I'm sorry, Darling. I didn't know it was this bad for you. It was never this bad for me."

Cassie's head crept out from the Doona again.

"For you?"

"My Black Dog was terrible in my teens. I think that I've mostly tamed him by now, but he's never completely under control. But you've always been so strong. I didn't realise."

Cassie sobbed with the realisation that she wasn't alone. That the monster existed for someone else. And her mother reached out and pulled her close. And the darkness slunk back to the recesses of her mind. But it didn't disappear completely.

"There are things we can do," her mother said, eventually. Cassie tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. "I mean, there are people who can help you."

Cassie pulled back. "You want to send me to the Looney Bin?" Behind her mother, the bear looked shocked. Her mother shook her head with a slight smile.

"Not for this, anyway," she said. "No, I mean, I see a therapist once a month. They have someone there who deals specifically with teenagers. He's meant to be very good."

Cassie's eyes were wide. The bear looked nervous. But if her mother was seeing someone, surely she could as well. And she might find a way to keep the black from engulfing her mind. She nodded slowly and her mother smiled with relief.

"I'll make an appointment for you," her mother said, standing up and resting her hand on Cassie's cheek. "You'll get through this. And I'll help."

Behind her, the bear agreed wholeheartedly.



The hero prepares to confront the monster or journey to confront it

Shopping centres were always hard for Cassie. The sheer number of people, all intent on their own business and with little care for personal space or any anxieties other people might be feeling as they scuttle towards their destinations. Cassie gripped her mother's hand, feeling much younger than her fourteen years. The bear's round head poked out from the back of the bag, adding to her feeling of immaturity. But there was no way she was going to meet a head shrinker without her bear in tow.

She craned her neck, but she couldn't catch the bear's expression. Her mother caught the movement and frowned.

"Are you sure you want... what's its name?"

"He hasn't told me," Cassie said.

"OK. Are you sure you want this cryptic bear along with you? Perhaps he'd be happier zipped inside the bag?"

"Would you?"

"Fair enough," her mother conceded. She looked up. "Ah, here it is."

Squished between a medical clinic and a coffee shop, the head shrinkers were holed up in a shop with the seemingly innocent name of CPC. Looking closer, the words Centre Psychology Clinic were written in discreet letters beneath the initials. The glass front of the shop was painted in soothing pastels. Cassie couldn't see through to the interior. That made her feel a bit better.

Her mother pushed the door open and waved cheerily at the man behind the counter. He grinned back.

"Dani, hi!" he said. His eyes were bright and black and his smile was wide. He ran his hand over his bald scalp and stood up, taking them both in.

"You must be Cassandra," he said, briefly making eye contact before looking down at his computer. "I'm Callan. You were lucky that we had a cancellation. Usually it takes a few weeks to make a booking."

"Are- are you the doctor?" Cassie asked, embarrassed. The man's grin widened.

“Oh no, I’m just a lowly nurse,” he said. “And Rami’s not a doctor either, but he really knows his way around the human condition.” He waved over his shoulder. “He’s just finishing up with another patient. Take a seat and I’ll let him know you’re here.” He picked up the phone, motioning them to chairs over by the window. “Rami? Yeah, there’s a bear here to see you. What? Oh, yeah, there’s a girl here too. Ah, easy mistake to make. Right. Seeya.” He winked at Cassie and she gave him a shy smile in return.



Rami was a solemn, intense man in his late forties. He spent a few minutes chatting with her mother before asking to spend time with Cassie alone. From there, he teased her problems out into the open, never pushing, but always searching for a thread. By the end of the hour, Cassie was exhausted, drained and raw. Rami gave her a sympathetic smile and nodded.

“You’re not cured, not by a long shot. But you have made some good progress today. We will look at further strategies over the next few weeks, and soon you will have enough tools to be able to cope. But of course, you will always be welcome to come and see me as you need.”

Her mother saw how tired she was and came over to give her a hug. The nurse behind the counter looked up.

“Ice cream, I think,” he said. “That’s my diagnosis.”

Cassie sighed. “Next time, maybe I should just do the ice cream and skip the grilling.”

Callan shrugged. “Without the therapy, the ice cream is just calories. With the therapy, it becomes a magical balm for your weary soul.”

Cassie had to smile at this. She waved goodbye and pulled her mother off towards the food court. As they walked, her mother quizzed her about the session.

“Isn’t it meant to be confidential?” Cassie asked. Her mum nodded.

“Of course. I just thought there might be aspects that you wanted to go over.”

Cassie thought it through while they were selecting ice cream flavours. With a pistachio and honeycomb waffle cone in hand, she was ready to work through the session with her mum.

“I don’t know how much good he is,” Cassie admitted. “He stares at me like he’s trying to see into my soul. But he was saying some useful stuff. Some mantras to repeat to try and break through the black.” She licked her ice cream. “But Callan’s idea of eating ice cream seems like a better suggestion.”

“He is a nice guy,” Dani agreed. “He’s relatively new, but already knows everyone’s names. I think that even though he’s trained as a nurse, he’s working to complete a degree to join Rami at the practise.”

They ate their ice creams and chatted about therapy and how well the band recital had actually gone. In the back of her mind, Cassie knew that this was just the beginning of an epic struggle for control of her thoughts, but for now, she thought she had taken a good first step.



Frustration: coming face to face with the monster, the hero appears to be outmatched

"I am in complete control," Cassie said. "I can do anything I want to do. Nothing will happen today that is beyond my control."

She sat cross-legged on the bed. The bear faced her, resting against a cushion and giving silent encouragement with twinkling eyes. Cassie bounced off the bed and started to get ready for school. The sun shone through her open curtains. The smell of toast wafted under her bedroom door. She could hear her mother singing songs from La La Land in the kitchen. It was going to be a good day.

"Hi Mum!" Cassie called as she wandered into the kitchen, pulling a brush through her hair. "What a glorious day!"

"You're looking chipper!" her mother said, washing dishes.

"We're not living in an old British movie, but yes, I feel pretty good," Cassie said. "I feel like I'm on top of things. And I have some tools to work with."

A couple of months had passed since she had begun seeing the psychologist. Rami still made her feel uncomfortable, but now she realised that it was because he was asking her to confront feelings and ideas that she had locked away. His intense gaze saw the thoughts that she was trying to hide, and his careful questioning allowed her to dissect her feelings and recognise which were valid and which were caused by her black cloud.

And then there was always Callan the nurse, who always had a smile for her as she entered and exited the office, and encouraged her as she faced her fears. She almost thought that he had more of an impact on her mental state than Rami. And he always had a word or two for the bear.

The bear was sitting next to her at the table. He was eyeing off her toast, which was slathered in honey.

"Don't be such a cliché," she told him. Her mother raised an eyebrow. "Well, bears eating honey is just so A.A. Milne. He could have an original idea, for once."

"Ri-ight," her mother said, shaking her head. "That bear better not be in my kitchen when you head off to school." So Cassie dropped him back in her room before heading off, leaving him with an open copy of Paddington, for variety.

As she walked in through the school gates, the Head of Music motioned her aside. His expression was excited. His tie was flowery.

“My star conductor!” he said. “Got a sec?”

“Sure, Mr Keppler,” Cassie said, glancing at her watch. “What’s up?”

“Exciting news,” he said. “That Javert guy – ah, I keep forgetting his name – was very impressed with your band’s performance at the end of last term. He’s invited us to play at Hamer Hall along with a couple of other schools and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.”

“Oh wow!” Cassie said, “That will be awesome!”

“Each school will play a couple of pieces, and then the band conductors will get to conduct the MSO on a song of their choice.”

“Wait, what?” Cassie said, her eyes wide. “I’d be conducting the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra?”

“That’s right!” Mr Keppler said. Cassie almost dropped her bag. “You can pick a song, classical or modern, it’s up to you. Let me know and I’ll give them a heads up. And then you conduct them on the night. It’s a big opportunity!”

“It’s huge!” Cassie said, her mind turning madly over some of her favourite pieces of music.

“Oh, er, one thing though,” Mr Keppler said, his face reddening slightly. “I was meant to tell you a couple of weeks ago, but you weren’t here – you had an appointment? – and then, well, I thought I had told you, and...” he rubbed at his nose absently. “Well, the thing is, it’s next week.”

“What?” Cassie almost shrieked. Her equilibrium shattered in an instant and the black flooded through her, drowning her in doubt. “Oh my God, I can’t do all of that in a week! What am I going to do?”

Mr Keppler was saying something. It was ok... the band had been practising... something about time out of classes... but Cassie couldn’t pay attention. All she could hear was the roaring of the black with the accompanying whispers of failure, worthlessness and doom. With a wild look around, she backed away from Mr Keppler, shaking her head. He reached out, his face alarmed, and she broke, dashing back to the school gates and away towards home.

You can’t do it.



Everybody will laugh.

There's not enough time.

They want you to fail.

Away from the school, panting from running, she took some deep breaths and slowly realised that she had just left school without permission.

“Oh God. Now I’m going to get a detention as well,” she moaned. She looked around. Panicked, her first thought was to just get home and under the covers. Her second thought was: Callan.

The school was in the same area as the shopping centre – the Year 12s all headed down there for lunch most days – and she realised that she had been running in that direction from the start. Now she headed there with a purpose. Her mum couldn’t help, but surely Rami (Callan) could.

She shrank from the crowd as she entered the centre – Mums with prams, lots of people with nothing better to do with their days, some people in suits striding with great purpose towards coffee and muffins. She almost ran straight back out. But then the thought of Rami (Callan!) made her shake her head, and push forward. She flinched whenever anyone came close, but kept ducking forward, darting into cracks and wishing the bear was in her bag.

Callan looked up, shocked, when she burst into the room.

“Cassie?” he asked. His eyes flicked to the computer screen. “We’re not meant to be seeing you today, are we?”

“No, but I need to see Rami. It’s all going wrong!” She burst into tears, and Callan darted out from behind the counter and drew her over to a chair in the waiting area.

“Hey, don’t- here, grab a seat. You’ll be fine. Take a few breaths. Do you want a glass of water?” Without waiting for an answer, he moved over to the water cooler and grabbed a little white plastic cup, filling it and bringing it over to Cassie. He knelt beside her and handed her the water.

“Rami’s not in today, Cassie,” Callan said, looking up into her eyes. “But there’s no one here for an hour or so. You can sit here and we can chat, if you want?”

Cassie sipped at her water. She started to breathe more easily. “S-sure,” she said. “If that’s ok with you.” Callan nodded.

“No worries. Give me a sec to let your mum know where you are?”

“What? No! Oh, all right.” She’d find out eventually. Cassie downed the rest of the water and went to get a refill. Blackness still sucked at her will. She didn’t want to fight. She didn’t want to do anything. No way did she want to stand in front of a room full of professionals and wave her baton around. Nobody could stop themselves from laughing at her under those circumstances.

Callan returned from calling her mother and came to sit across from her. "Are you fine out here? I'm not meant to have clients in the rooms without a supervisor." Cassie nodded. All of their conversations had been out here. Out here was comfortable. Out here wasn't intense gazes and probing questions.

Callan ran a hand over his scalp.

"Did you want me to ask you questions? Or did you just want to talk? Or, you know, you can just sit there and drink water until you burst." He glanced up at the door. "I don't have ice cream, which is my standard helping device."



Cassie gave a tired smile. "It's all good. I just got scared. Mr Keppler – he's the head of Music at school, dropped a bomb on me, and I freaked out. There was no time to put up any defences, or say any mantras." She punched her leg. "Is this going to keep happening to me?"

"Yeah, probably," Callan said, and Cassie shot him a startled glance. "Look, I don't want to scare you, but this isn't like a cold or a flu. You don't eat the vitamin C tablet or take the shot and then you're good. It's more like needing glasses, or a hearing aid. You're still vision-or-hearing impaired, but you have some tools that help you deal with that. And if someone throws something to you while you're not wearing your glasses, then, well, you might get hit in the head."

“But nobody stresses about having to wear glasses. And with a bit of practise you won’t worry about having depression. You’ll have your glasses and most of the time you’ll see fine.”

Cassie stared at him in silence for awhile, her head tilted slightly to one side.

“That was probably one of the most convoluted explanations I’ve ever heard.”

“Makes sense, though, doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” Cassie conceded. “But it doesn’t help me right now. Every time I think of being on stage in front of all those people and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the black starts whispering at me. There’s no way I can conduct those people!”

Callan frowned. “You realise you haven’t actually told me anything about this, yet, right?”

“Oh, of course,” Cassie said, blushing. She explained the situation, with Callan nodding and asking questions when something needed clarifying. She could tell he was impressed. She could tell that he wasn’t *pretending* to be impressed. The black receded a little within her mind.

“Next week?” he asked. She nodded, feeling a twinge of panic. “And what piece did you want the orchestra to play? And are you taking the bear with you?”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of it,” Cassie said, pondering. “I mean, I don’t tend to take him to school – I *am* fourteen, after all.” She thought. “But if ... Hey, if the song was bear related, then it would be almost expected of me!”

Callan nodded. “Elvis?”

“Let me be your teddy bear? It’s a bit naff.” Cassie shook her head. “I’m thinking a bit more old school.” She started to hum a very recognisable tune, and Callan broke into a wide grin. Cassie’s brow furrowed. “But what if this happens again on the night?”

“It might,” Callan admitted. “But do you think you’re going to be surprised by anything? Because if you’re wearing your glasses...”

“... Then I won’t get hit with a brick. I mean, who would throw a brick to me,” Cassie said, finally cracking a proper grin. “Thanks, Callan. You’ve made all the difference.” She looked up as the door opened. It was her mother.

“Hi Dani,” Callan said. “I think you misplaced this one? Oh, and Cassie, just remember: you’ll lose the odd battle, but you’re more than strong enough to win the war.”

Her mother wrapped her arms around her and they waved goodbye to the nurse, heading off to the car.

Via the ice cream stand.



Nightmare: the final battle with the monster where the hero appears completely outmatched

The rest of the week was full of frantic preparations. Cassie ran lunchtime and after school training sessions with her band every day, and was pleased with their progress. Mr Keppler had been right when he'd told her they had been rehearsing solidly. They sounded great. And if a little black whisper occasionally broke through, when Selina squeaked out a wrong note, then that was fine too. It was ok to be annoyed, and it was ok to be critical. As long as she didn't let herself be hit with a brick.

Keep the glasses on, Cassie read in the bear's expression. She smiled. School was easier with a big purple stuffed bear in tow. Her band were fine with it. She'd told them about her piece, and they loved the idea.

And at home, she scribbled madly in a musical folio, building a score for her song. It was a simple melody, but it had a wide scope for whimsy, and she took full advantage of it. Every morning, she would take what she had done to Mr Keppler, who would email scans of her work to the orchestra in the city. She had to force the black back every time she handed over a page, and she found it very hard to accept the praise that her teacher reported back from the musicians who made up the symphony orchestra. But she pushed through, and let the little warm bud of pride swell inside her, pushing the blackness back from its glow.

The night of the performance arrived. Her mother drove her into the city. Cassie was dressed in a rented tuxedo and tails, as was the bear. She hadn't eaten anything all day, she was so nervous. Her stomach cramped every time she thought about taking the podium, but Callan had been right – with the tools Rami had given her, she was able to keep the black at bay and keep the little ember of pride glowing in her heart.

She had a wonderful time meeting the orchestra. They were effusive with praise for her arrangement and were all very keen to be led by her. She spent some time chatting with the conductors from the other schools and was gratified to see that they were all at least as nervous as she was.

It was time to perform. Her band presentation was easy – she knew them and she knew how they would play and they outdid themselves and the audience applauded (so many more people out there than she'd expected).

And then the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra were setting up on the stage, and the Stage Manager was motioning for her to take the podium, and she was standing in the light and there was deathly silence from the audience. And the black whispers trickled in and told her that the audience had all gone home. And that the orchestra were waiting to see what the silly little girl would do with her stick.

The blackness rose up like a tsunami in her mind and Cassie cowered before it. She tried to fan the ember of her pride into a flame, but the blackness flowed around it, smothering it beneath the whispering ink. She felt like shrieking but she was frozen. She wasn't sure how much time had passed. The silence from the audience stretched on. Was it seconds or hours? The orchestra watched her, their tuning complete, sitting in silence and waiting for her to lift her baton.

Perspiration beaded on her forehead. She blinked it from her eyes. It was all too much! She couldn't do it by herself. Her gaze fell upon the bear. His eyes pleaded with her. She shook her head slightly. He insisted. And she stared into his eyes, remembering the song that she had prepared.

And then she noticed something. She could see the reflection in the bear's eyes. The reflection showed the audience. The reflection could *not possibly* show the audience from where he was sitting. But it did. And in the bear's eyes, she could see her mother, looking up at her, eager and excited. And beside her sat Callan, rubbing his scalp and nudging the man next to him. That was Rami. And they were all there for her. And they were all waiting. But not impatiently, with anticipation.

And the blackness washed away all at once, and Cassie stood tall, and smiled down at the orchestra. And she lifted her baton and set the tempo with a flourish.

The Teddy Bear's Picnic soared out into Hamer Hall and filled the space with jaunty fun. The audience were clapping along, with huge smiles on their faces. Their faces were reflected in the magic of the bear's eyes and Cassie wondered why she never knew that he could do that before. And when it was over, the audience rose to their feet in a roar and the orchestra bowed to her with respect. And the ember of pride burst into flame like a phoenix and lit her soul to the outer limits of her being.



Hero overthrows the monster, making off with a treasure

Back in her room after the party and the hugs and the collection of phone numbers, Cassie sat on her bed, cross-legged, staring at the bear.

“Thank you,” she said to him. “You saved me.”

The bear’s glance was skeptical.

“No really. I had all of my tools and they weren’t doing anything. It was you showing me the people who love me that helped me out.”

The bear’s eyes twinkled. Cassie looked over at her bedside table, where a pile of cards rested, all congratulating her on her performance. Now they were more tools in her arsenal against the black. And she already had an appointment to meet with the boss of the Symphony Orchestra to discuss doing some holiday work there.

“I think I can do this,” Cassie said.

The bear agreed, wholeheartedly.



Cassie is a very talented music conductor, but there is a blackness inside her that whispers otherwise.

When she has the chance to conduct the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, she has to find a way to battle the blackness that will try to prevent her from performing.

She has the help of her understanding mother, her magical bear, and a friendly nurse.

Will it be enough?

