

Excerpt from CARNIVILE

by Alexander Neville

They always come home.

Katia looked at the GPS on the dashboard of her spacepod. 16 miles until her destination.

“I’m coming back,” she breathed, looking excitedly at the open road in front of her. 15 miles.

Farmland surrounded her on both sides. Occasionally, a small house or barn would break the endless rows of corn and wheat. No other vehicles drove by her, and no birds flew overhead. Her small, spherical craft, while capable of crossing entire solar systems, flew only a few inches above the ground. It certainly *could* fly much higher — if she cared to waste the fuel.

“I can’t believe it’s here.” She pushed a button on the dashboard, and the top of her spacepod opened. She grinned, enjoying the sensation of warm sunlight and wind. With magical enchantments, she could get there even faster, but why not take the time to enjoy the journey? “I’ve waited for so long...”

She’s coming home. They always do.

Her smartphone rang. It was synced to her pod, so the cheerful pop ringtone echoed throughout its steel walls. On her dash, the single word “MOM” flashed in bright blue.

She frowned, folding her arms. “Answer call. Voice only, please.”

“Acknowledged,” a robotic voice said pleasantly. The pod continued flying itself: 14 miles to go.

“Hello?” Katia ran her hands through her dark hair. She leaned back and admired the clouds, scanning the sky for dragons.

“Katia, by the demigods! We’ve been scared out of our minds! Where are you? And why in the world is your location turned off?”

Unfortunately, no dragons flew above her today. Only a few puffy clouds, floating in an endless sea of blue. Katia sighed, pulling her phone out of her purse and booting up a game.

She hadn’t thought this one through very well. It would’ve been better to mask her location instead of shutting it off entirely.

“Er, sorry,” she said lamely. “My phone’s been doing weird stuff lately. Think I need a new one.”

“Oh, *sure* you do,” her mother said. “Now where are you *really*? You know we’re not comfortable with you being out all alone. Not now. Not yet.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” Katia’s fingers glided rapidly over her touch screen, trying to beat the next level. “Look, I’m on my way to the theater. Just wanted to catch another show before the weekend’s over. I didn’t want you and Dad to know because I thought you’d say I was wasting my time.”

You won’t stop them from returning. Nobody can.

There was a brief pause. “Are you going to be home for dinner?”

“Of course,” Katia said. “I couldn’t miss your pasta. And if Lang hogs it all, he’ll get fat for sure.” She giggled, and her mother sighed.

“All right, I’ll let it slide this time. Just don’t let it happen again, okay? I can’t afford to lose you again. To forget you again. They told me — they told me that people go missing. After getting rescued. After finding their way out. I just...I don’t...”

“I know.” Katia paused. “I’ll...I’ll be careful. I’ll stay in the city, and I’ll keep to locations where there are lots of people, okay? I’ll be fine.”

“All right. I’ll see you tonight. Don’t tell anyone who you are. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.” The phone beeped once, and then the world fell silent.

7 miles.

They always come home. Back to where they belong...

After a few more minutes, the farmland slowly gave way to a deciduous forest. The ground was littered with dead leaves, and the trees clawed desperately at the sky. Her spacepod slowed to a halt near the woods’ edge, and parked itself on the side of the road.

“Arrived,” chimed that same robotic voice, and Katia smiled.

She stepped out onto the grass, carrying a small knapsack and her magical staff. A faded, chipped building stood a few feet away. She walked up to it and smiled, stroking it gently.

“I’m back,” she whispered, her voice carried aloft on the autumn wind. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry I ever left.”

She didn’t want to leave Mom and Dad. She didn’t want to quit orchestra, or stop playing video games with Lang. She wanted to practice magic at the park. She wanted to orbit the planet with her spacepod. She wanted to read books, and play her music, and send wishes up to the gods during Nyctfest under a starry night sky.

But none of that mattered now. She was *home*.

Dark clouds gathered above her, and rain began to fall. Her short black hair fluttered in the breeze, and her dark eyes flashed. She looked around, checking to make sure that no one was watching. She then walked around the building, facing its front.

It was an abandoned bumper cars ride. Ants crawled up and down the peeling paint, and LED lettering on the roof spelled “ARAKALOS.” Katia shivered in the rain, pulling her leather jacket closer to her body. Stepping over weeds that sprung up between the cracked floor, she entered the operator’s box and turned the key.

The lights flickered on, and the ride whirred to life. In the distance, an enormous, skeletal Ferris wheel materialized out of the gloom.

Home.

Without fail. They always come back.

They always return.

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Rain fell.

It trickled down the metal roof of the merry-go-round, the hollow sound reverberating through the gloom. Faint yellow lights shone from its tiered center, illuminating faded pictures of mythical beasts and medieval royalty. The carousel horses ran in circles, their frozen eyes wild in the darkness. They leapt up and down endlessly, their mouths agape in an eternal scream.

Tenne smiled, adjusting his suit.

“Ah, Katia. I’m glad to see you have returned! Conductress Mayphage has been missing her star first-chair player.”

The olive-skinned girl leaned against the wall of the bumper cars ride, zipping up her black leather jacket. “I wouldn’t miss another rehearsal for the world.”

He beckoned to a large cotton candy stall, its gray exterior barely visible against the fog and forest behind it. “Come inside, little one. It’s rather cold out.” He held out his gloved hand, and she took it. He held his umbrella over his head as they walked, but only its steely, spider-like skeleton remained. Instead, his black top hat shielded him from the rain.

The interior of the stall kept out the rain well enough, but it was still cold. Within a few minutes, Tenne had started up a small space heater. Katia sat down on a small couch, which lay a few feet behind the ordering window. Tenne handed Katia a steaming mug, and took off his gloves.

“Sorry for the lack of tech. This is one of our older models.”

“It’s fine,” shivered Katia, drinking deeply from the mug. “I came prepared enough. Brought some stuff I might need.”

Tenne laughed, showing his sharp yellow teeth. “Ah, did you now? That’s good. Hope it’ll be enough to tide you over for the next...little while.”

Lightning flashed outside, and the lights inside the stall flickered before roaring back to life. From the forest that surrounded the carnival, a lone wolf howled. Tenne pulled a dusty pink blanket from a closet, and tossed it to her.

Katia shrugged, wrapping the blanket around her. “I think it will? I don’t know. I had to come back.”

“They always do,” mused the joker, resting his clawed fingers on the windowsill.

“They always do.”