Explanation of content and background: I really don’t like making videos of me dancing, or writing poetry or songs. So instead I decided to do a short story/fairytale thing. The human girl goes on a quest, and the trials she encounters are supposed to mirror the assignments we had to do this semester in CS101. I chose to set this in the kingdom of bears because I really like bears. I hope you enjoy!

“Bjorn, this is ridiculous. There are hardly enough humans in my line of work, and I am so sick of King Valemon refusing to support humans who want to go into ROOT fields! Humans can contribute to bear-dominated society just as well as bears can, and I’m sick of being undervalued and patronized.” Auberon paced back and forth in front of her brother, her agitation visible.

“For god’s sake, Auberon, you know that seeing Valemon is pretty much impossible,” Bjorn said in a bored tone, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the Bear King’s castle, “and he’s got these ridiculous tests that every person who wants to meet with him has to pass. It’s dangerous and I can guarantee you that it’s useless.”

Auberon glared at Bjorn icily. “I’m sick of not being taken seriously in bear-dominated fields. I’m doing this whether you approve or not.”

Bjorn was familiar with her cold look, and recognized defeat. “Look, Aub, I can see I’m not going to stop you. Give me 12 hours to get some stuff together for you, then you have my blessing in this quest.”

The next morning, Auberon was out the door loaded down by pizza and coffee courtesy of her brother. She set off along the road to King Valemon’s castle, wondering when she would meet the first trial. According to the wikiHow page for going to see the King, there were 8 trials, some of strength and some of wit. When she had been walking for around two hours she came to a huge open field covered in white flowers, though she saw seemingly random squares of bluebonnets scattered among the white. To her left, she heard someone crying, and turned to see a spectacled bear sobbing into huge paws.

“Ma’am? May I help you?” Auberon cautiously approached the bear, who looked up. The bear’s tired eyes lit up and she scurried toward Auberon.

“Oh goodness yes! Please help!” The bear pointed a long manicured claw in the direction of the field, “my children are stuck in the pits of bluebonnets! Please save them and meet my partner on the other side, she’s waiting to take them to the lake for the weekend!” Auberon blinked rapidly, confused.

“Ma’am, not to pry, but how did your cubs get in the pits? And why can’t you get them out?” Auberon asked.

The mother bear darted her eyes around shiftily. “Oh you know how kids are. Especially when you have 5 of them. And I have horrible allergies. This has been a really horrible pollen season, you know.” The bear was still avoiding Auberon’s gaze. “Hurry, please help before she leaves without them!”

Auberon was preparing to run into the field when the bear called to her, “Oh one more thing! You can only move forward and turn 90 degrees at a time! Plan your path wisely!” Auberon rolled her eyes and set off running. She ran toward the first blue patch in a straight line before turning left when she was parallel with the bluebonnets. She
reached the pit and paused to reach into the shallow pit to pick up the squalling bear cub. Stuffing the cub into her backpack, she set off running, pausing only to pick up other bear cubs at the blue patches, several times getting stuck when she had backed herself into a corner and was only able to turn 90 degrees at a time. At long last, she made it to the other side of the field, her backpack and arms full of 5 bear cubs, all of whom were wailing. The bear’s partner thanked Auberon at the edge of the field, who marveled at the Bear King’s lack of subtlety when designing challenges. After readjusting her backpack and picking bear fur off of her clothes, she set off again.

Auberon had walked for several more hours when the totem pole emerged from the gloom. Wooden bear faces were stacked on top of one another, staring sightlessly. A small and very old sun bear puttered around the base of the pole, chipping away at the lowest unfinished bear face. Auberon coughed loudly to announce her presence without frightening the old bear.

“Oh goody, it’s been so long since I’ve met a challenger!” The sun bear happily shuffled to Auberon, brandishing a set of tools at her. “Let’s make this quick, though, I really must finish this.” Auberon took the tools from the bear and stared at him until he felt uncomfortable enough to tell her the challenge. “You, dear human child, will have one hour to complete a 3 foot tall totem pole! Each head must be different. I expect different eyes, different ears, and different hair on each head! Oh, and they must have a bowtie.”

“A bowtie?”

“Oh yes, I think they just look so fine, don’t you?”

Auberon fixed the old bear with a look of disbelief, but knew that questioning the loopy old sun bear wouldn’t help her get through the challenge. The sun bear led her to a small fallen log, then checked his watch and announced that her time had begun.

When the hour was over, Auberon appraised her totem pole, which looked a lot more like vertical heaps of spaghetti than anything else. The faces certainly looked nothing like faces, the bowties looked like triangular chunks of bark, and the hair seemed like rows of jagged teeth. The old bear gasped at the pole.

“I have never seen anything so beautiful! The artistry, the subtle form suggesting that each creature is in a constant state of personal evolution! The melted bowties, certainly a reference to Salvabear Dali’s The Persistence of Neckties? Really excellent, you are welcome to continue.”

“Uhm, thanks sir. Do you know when I’ll get to my next challenge?” Auberon asked, feeling grateful that the bear seemed to be nearly blind. The old bear giggled.

“Why, he’s waiting for you right over there!” The bear pointed into the shadows at a huge, humped shape. Auberon strided over to the shape, who emerged from the shade and revealed himself to be an enormous turtle, coated in saggy tattoos with machetes and spears hanging from a bandolier that circled his shell. The turtle gestured at the path which snaked through the trees deeper into the woods before trudging along the path.

“He wants you to follow him, dear!” The sun bear had suddenly appeared at Auberon’s elbow, startling her. “Remember to follow his footsteps exactly, come hell or high water!” The sun bear happily trotted off back to his totem pole, singing to himself. Auberon stuffed a slice of pizza into her mouth and took a swig of coffee to fortify herself before following the tattooed behemoth. The forest closed behind them and blocked out the sun. They trudged on anyway, with Auberon trying to follow the slow
steps of the turtle. As the sounds of the forest grew louder and wilder, Auberon finally lost her footing and fell sideways off of the path. Without warning, an impossibly large bear suddenly appeared beside Auberon and slashed at her, roaring fiercely. Auberon shrieked and leapt back onto the path, sprint after the turtle, who had not stopped his inexorable march. After another hour, Auberon noticed the same tree she had seen earlier, and then realized that they were marching in a pattern.

Hours later, to her surprise, Auberon and the turtle emerged into the bright sunlight.

“I could have sworn it was afternoon when we went into the forest” she muttered, glancing at her phone, which told her that it was almost 10am. “Christ, time flies when you’re working on these damn assignments.” Auberon said aloud before waving good bye to the silent turtle and moving down the path toward the sun.

Eventually, Auberon came to a fork in the road, where a bear with the face of a beautiful woman stood at the crossroads.

“You are getting closer, if you answer my riddle I will let you pass and point you down the correct path. If you give me the incorrect answer, you lose your life.” Her voice was smoky and had the hint of a growl in it. Auberon nodded and gestured that the bear-sphynx should continue.

“At-why alks-way on-way our-fay eggs-lay in the orning-may, oo-tay at oon-nay, and-way ee-thray in the evening-way?” Auberon burst out laughing.

“You guys really haven’t thought of a new riddle in millennia, have you? Well ok, the answer is errrr... An-may. Man. Zna.” The bear-sphynx stomped her feet.

“It’s tradition! It’s our trademark! All right, you can go on.” She grimaced and stormed away.

Auberon felt good; she was more than halfway done with her quest, and has passed her trials with flying colors. She still was riding the wave of her success when the gallows came into view. Two young black bears waited at the feet, both giggling and braiding long lengths of rope.

“Hello?” Auberon called hesitantly at the two bears. They both laughed delightedly and ran up to her.

“Let’s play a game!” The first bear shouted delightedly. The second bear nodded enthusiastically and gambolled around her feet.

Auberon sighed and pulled another piece of pizza out of her pocket. “What’s the game this time?”

“You guess a word! If you’re wrong, you hang! Then we guess a word! If we’re wrong, we let you go and you don’t hang!” The first bear was apparently incapable of speaking in a socially appropriate tone of voice, to Auberon’s annoyance.

“Fine, let’s get this done.”

The bears giggled and drew four lines in the dirt along with a crude drawing of a gallows.

“Erm, so I just guess a letter? Uhm ok... E?” The bears gasped dramatically, and the bear drew a spiky “E” in the second space. Auberon’s heart leapt.

“Great, what about a... T?” The bears burst into hysterics and drew a round circle with scraggily hair attached to the gallows.

“Shit. Uhm... I guess I’ll try another vowel. A?” The bears gasped again and drew an A in the third space. Auberon looked up at the bears incredulously. “B,” she said
confidently. The second bear scampered about nervously as the first drew a “B” in the first space. “Ok, I’m going to guess the word. Is it “bear”?”

The black bears started howling in rage. “How did you do that?!” The first bear wailed. Auberon was already drawing a new gallows and drew four lines in the sand.

“Go ahead and guess.” Auberon smiled.

“B!” The bear shouted. Auberon drew a rough bear head. The bears yowled.

“E!” She drew a bear body.

“A!” A right arm came next.

“You guys, I’ll give you a hint. The word isn’t “bear.”” Auberon said helpfully.

“R!” She rolled her eyes in exasperation and drew another arm.

“What other letters are there?!! Eeeehhh... T!” She drew a leg.

“L!” Auberon smiled a little bit and wrote in an “L” in the first space. The bears cheered.

“S!” Auberon smiled even more broadly, and drew the last bear leg. She shrugged and gathered her belongings as the bears cried and rolled around in the dirt. Not long after leaving the bears at the gallows, she came to a village. A young panda came loping out to meet her.

“Help us! I don’t know what’s wrong, my baby sister can’t eat bamboo without getting sick! What is wrong with her?! My parents are vacationing at the Outer Banks and I’m not sure what to do!” The panda huffed.

“Oh goodness I’m so sorry, but I don’t really know anything about bear anatomy.”

“Oh lady, I just need your help translating the DNA I sequenced from her into proteins!”

“Oh.” Auberon was too shocked to say anything meaningful, and she followed the bear into a bamboo den. The panda pulled open a laptop and showed her a .txt file of seemingly random letters and a decoder for changing three DNA base pairs into proteins.

“Ok hang on let me try something out first.” Auberon quickly wrote a program in Boa to convert the DNA into proteins.

“She is missing a base, that’s what I think is wrong. This should be made of triads of bases, and that’s not the case.” The panda bear wrapped his arms around her and thanked her. Auberon knew she had passed the test without understanding a damn thing about biology, so she gracefully accepted his thanks and left. She had not even come to the edge of the village when she heard the giggling.

“No. No. Not again.” But it was too late. A sleuth of black bears came streaming out of the forest, led by the two bears from the gallows.

“AGAIN!” The first bear shouted gaily before drawing seven lines and the gallows in the dirt. “AGAIN!!!!!!!” The other bears chorused the word as well, rising to a fever pitch before Auberon shouted “FINE!” and sat down in the sand glaring at the bears that surrounded her.

“E.” Auberon said, and the first bear chuckled and wrote an “E” in the second space. Before she had the chance to guess again, another bear took the first bears place. “What the hell? No. That’s not fair.” The bears circled closer and she heard growls among the maniacal laughs. The message was clear. She guessed an “S” next, but was not successful. Her next few guesses were also not successful as the bears shifted after every
guess. Finally, she guessed “A” and watched as it was written into the space next to the “E.”

“Of course. B” The bears wrote in a B. “R” She said. The first four letters not read “bear.” She remembered how the village panda had embraced her. “U?” She guessed. The bear drew in a U in the second to last space. “Bearhug. The word is bearhug.” Auberon said, chastising herself for overestimating the bears’ creativity.

“I am not playing against you guys again, get the hell out of my way.” Auberon stormed down the road while the irate bears carried on and threw tantrums behind her. She could see the castle just down the road, and she sped up.

“Seven trials down...” She mumbled to herself as she came to the gates. Two huge grizzly bears blocked her way. She bristled. “I have done the most ridiculous assortment of stuff to get to this place and by beargod, you are going to let me in. I just want to talk to Valemar.”

“The King is very busy.” The guard said.

“I do not care. At all. I’ve walked for hours and hours to consult with him and you can’t stop me.” Auberon said, brandishing a slice of pizza menacingly. The bears recoiled and moved aside. She walked through the castle, all dark stone and eerie echoes. At the end of a hall, a light shone through a half-opened door. The sound of curse words and frustrated “humphs” floated through the door. She pushed open the door and laid her eyes on the King for the first time. He was an immense polar bear and sat on a huge crystalline throne made out of ice, though his eyes were glued to a computer screen.

“Uhm, King Valemar? Your majesty? I want to talk about human rights with you. I feel like we are-”

“DAMNIT.” The bear king thundered. “Hundreds of shows, and I can find NOTHING to watch on this cursed website!” A vein jumped in Auberon’s temple as she saw the familiar red screen of Bearflix.

“King Valemar! Please help me out here, you have no idea the sort of stuff I’ve dealt with on my way here!” The King looked up and gazed at Auberon. “You help me, human girl, and I help you. That is your final test.” He growled. “Fine.” She gritted her teeth. “What can I help you with, sir?”

“I have searched long for the perfect show. I feel that I spend hours searching for the right film or show, and I end up spending more time searching than watching! It is mind-boggling!” Valemar lamented.

“Alright, well what kind of movies do you like?” Auberon rolled up her sleeves and took another drink of coffee.

“I truly enjoy John Hughes movies, similar to The Breakfast Club or Pretty in Pink. I also enjoy dark humor like Dr. Strangelove, Fargo, Harold and Maude, and Delicatessen.” The bear said thoughtfully. “Of course this is in no way exhaustive, but it is a good place to start. The older I get, the more I find myself pining for the halcyon days of the 80s” Auberon flipped through her mental rolodex of films.

“Well based on what you like, and what I like, and what I know to be held in high esteem by the average bear... Have you seen Heathers? It’s a stretch, but its also a cult classic and perfect for any 80s fan, especially if you are into darker humor.” Auberon crossed her fingers, praying the king would enjoy the film.

“Hmm... I will try it.” The King said majestically. “You may wait in the hall.” Not needing to be told twice, Auberon walked to the hall and promptly fell asleep against
the wall. Auberon felt like she had barely closed her eyes when she was shaken awake by the grizzly bear guard. He pointed toward the door to the King’s throne room. Shaking off her sleep, Auberon followed him into the room, hardly daring to breathe.

King Valemar inhaled deeply. “Christian Slater is strangely attractive for a psychopath in that film, human girl. The movie also reminded me that Winona Ryder exists, and that bitches be cray. Thank you for your recommendation. You have completed your task. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Smiling broadly, Auberon began to speak.