



Snowy Wings
PUBLISHING



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SEA-STARs AND SAND DOLLARS | Lyssa Chiavari

The last call rang out just as I was tightening my final pin. “Yeah, I’m coming,” I muttered, tossing my screwdriver back into my toolbox and shoving Amphitrite into my rucksack. Then I ran out of my room, the door slamming behind me. I hated to rush this much on one of Trite’s upgrades, but I couldn’t afford to miss the last shuttle to the surface. If I did, that would be one less day topside, and with the *Q.U.E.S.T.* putting back out to sea in just a few days, I needed all the time I could get.

The halls of the massive sub were brightly lit, but the air was cold, and my footsteps echoed cavernously off the metal floor and walls. No matter how comfortable the ship was or how relaxed I felt onboard, there was still a part of my subconscious that refused to let me forget that I was encased in a pressurized cylinder under six hundred meters of water—and, considering that subs of this size being able to submerge to this depth was basically impossible before the *Q.U.E.S.T.* launched ten years ago, it could be a trifle unnerving.

I skidded around the corner into the docking facility. Krieg, the shuttle’s pilot, was waiting for me, his arms crossed. “You’re cutting it close today, Delia,” he said, cocking an eyebrow.

“I know. I had some things to finish up. Thanks for

waiting for me.”

He rolled his eyes and nudged me into the docking tube, a small pressurized compartment not unlike a torpedo tube. Designed for launching humans, not weapons, I’d often thought wryly to myself. I clanked down the metal ladder and into the shuttle, a tiny sub—only big enough to hold five passengers and one pilot—that ferried us back and forth to the surface while the *Q.U.E.S.T.* stayed submerged. Every other seat was filled. They really had been waiting on me.

“Sorry,” I said, buckling my seatbelt.

“You’re lucky Krieg is piloting,” said Devin, one of my team members, a snub-nosed boy from Sheffield. “Anyone else would have left you. Maybe then you’d learn to be on time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, feeling my face go as red as my hair. I couldn’t exactly give him an excuse. None of my team members knew what I’d been working on in my spare time. I didn’t know any of them well enough to really feel like I trusted them. As far as they knew, I was just the antisocial nutter who locked herself in her room whenever we weren’t working on modules.

“Just let it go,” Krieg said, swinging into the shuttle and pulling the hatch shut behind him. “You’re only losing a couple minutes’ surface time. I’ll let you stay late to make up for it.”

The others whooped, and I smiled gratefully at Krieg. That matter settled, he strapped himself in and began flipping the switches on the console to disengage the shuttle from the *Q.U.E.S.T.* As always, I watched raptly. I loved seeing these subs in action, trying to wrap my brain around their inner workings.

Through the porthole, I could see the water outside growing lighter as we ascended, turning a brilliant

aquamarine hue, and the silver glint of a school of fish darting past. In just minutes, we breached, droplets of water streaking down the porthole as Krieg steered the shuttle toward the dock on Sea-Star Island. Beyond the hulls and masts of docked pleasure crafts, palm trees swayed in a light breeze, shading invitingly golden sands. A banner hanging loosely between two trees read, *Welcome to Paradise.*

It wasn't a real island. Not in the geologic sense, anyway. Sea-Star was a floating manmade structure. A seastead.

Its builders had envisioned it as a new frontier for humanity in an era of rising waters, a more practical alternative than GalaX's colony on Mars—and, unlike that enterprise, which was being heavily regulated by the Global Space and Astronautics Federation, largely unburdened by the interference of any of Earth's governments. A new nation, a free and independent paradise, right here on Earth.

That sounded nice, but what it boiled down to in practical terms was a tourist trap. Very few people lived on the island full-time, and most that did were staff for the resort. But that didn't make it any less incredible. When you stood on Sea-Star's sandy beaches, you'd never believe it hadn't always been there, or that it could up and move at the drop of a hat. Right now, it was stationed near Bimini in the Bahamas, but it could relocate any time, whether to avoid foul weather or unfriendly neighboring nations. Just one of the wonders of the seastead lifestyle.

When the shuttle docked, I waited for the others to disembark before unfastening my safety belt. I was watching Krieg as he went through the shutdown protocol. Once he'd finished, he glanced up at me. "Well, what are you waiting for? I said I'd give you a little extra time, but

there's no point wasting it here."

"Sorry. Just making sure you shut everything down right," I teased.

"What, you don't trust this old salt to handle his own sub?"

"Just rehearsing for the day you let me drive."

Krieg let out a bark of a laugh. "Dream on, kiddo."

"I don't have anything better to do," I pointed out with a sly grin. "You could let me try now." This had become almost a ritual with us at this point. Krieg always said no, but I still always asked. You never knew. Today might be the day he changed his mind.

Krieg shook his head, as always. "Get ashore, you troublemaker."

I reluctantly climbed out the hatch and scrambled up onto the slick, damp deck. It was just as well. As fascinated as I was by the mini-sub, I didn't have time to waste. I needed to get over to the cove—but first, I had another errand.

The island itself was small, only about nine kilometers across. You could see the hulking form of the resort from just about anywhere on the island, its glinting white walls peeking out between palm fronds or looming over the rooftops of the smaller buildings on the island. One of these was a tiny post office, and I stopped in there to purchase a stamp. I'd sent Finn, my kid brother back in Belfast, a postcard from every place we'd visited so far. I could just send him a text or an e-mail, of course, but he'd always loved getting things by post. He hoarded every letter and card he'd ever received in a cardboard box under his bed.

I affixed the stamp and glanced the card over quickly before popping it in the slot. It read:

27 July 2046

Made port in the Bahamas this week—Sea-Star Island. You'd be dead chuffed. Doing a survey on impacts of manmade island on neighboring waters. Heading for the Gulf next week, likely won't surface again for a few weeks. Trite is well. Will write at our next port.

- D

My handwriting was small and cramped to fit everything on the card. These things were really impractically designed. I flipped it over, admiring the aerial photo of the island. From above, the seastead looked like a sand dollar, the massive resort in the center resembling a five-pointed starfish. The bright blue waters of the Atlantic shimmered around it. On the north edge of the island, a small cove formed a notch, the only irregularity in the perfectly—unnaturally—round island.

That cove was where I needed to go next. I shoved the postcard into the mail slot and hurried out the door.

The beaches were crowded with tourists, but the cove tended to be quieter. I wasn't sure what the purpose of its design was; maybe the island's builders had just been hoping to provide an area of seclusion in an otherwise bustling place. Regardless, it had made the perfect location for me to test Amphitrite. I'd spent every afternoon here, making notes on which of her functions were running smoothly and which needed more fine tuning.

As usual, the cove was relatively quiet. A few groups of tourists splashed in the shallows. An underwater shelf expanded out probably about a hundred meters or so around the island, providing residents and visitors with a safe, shallow area to swim before the steep drop-off to the deeper ocean. The shelf's edge was marked with buoys and signs reading, *Danger: Deep water. Keep back.*

I knelt in the sand right at the shore, looking around to make sure none of the tourists were paying attention before pulling Amphitrite out of my rucksack. I gave her a once-over before placing her in the water. She was compact and rounded, looking almost like a mutant crab, a patchwork of different-colored metals and plastics. My little robot.

Waves lapped over her as I pulled out my mobile and booted her up. A light on her back hatch flashed green, and she scuttled forward, disappearing into the shallows. I watched until I couldn't see her anymore then turned my attention to her status monitor on my mobile. Fifty meters to the edge of the shelf.

A raised voice from one of the nearby groups of tourists startled me, and I looked up from my mobile. Two girls about my age—American, by the sound of their accents—were standing a short distance to my right, at the edge of the water, having a heated row. One of them, a small, thin girl with tanned skin, ran a frustrated hand through her shoulder-length black hair. She glanced in my direction, and my heart almost completely stopped. She had to be the most gorgeous girl I'd ever seen in my life.

Face burning, I quickly looked back down at my mobile. *Focus, Delia*. Trite was ten meters from the drop-off point. I watched her progress, a blipping dot on the map. She reached the edge and then began to dive. *Fifteen meters below surface. Twenty. Twenty-five.*

"It doesn't matter what you say," one of the girls to my right shouted. I glanced back up again at her voice. Her curly dark hair was pulled up into a ponytail, and she stamped her bare foot into the sand. "Nothing is going to salvage this. Just let it go, okay? It's over."

The curly-haired girl turned hotly on her heel, leaving the other girl standing dumbstruck at the edge of the

waves. She stared silently at her retreating form, tears streaking down her cheeks, wisps of hair blowing around her face on the wind. It looked like something out of a film—except film tears usually weren't this messy. I could tell even from this distance that there were a good deal of snatters involved here.

I glanced down at my mobile again. Amphitrite was near one hundred meters below. I sighed and tapped *Suspend* on my mobile screen. She'd hold that depth until I reactivated her or her battery ran out. Then I shoved my mobile in my pocket and approached the girl.

She'd sunken down to the sand, waves lapping around her and soaking her floral-print shorts. Her face was buried in her knees. I came up beside her, not wanting to touch her without her consent. "Hey," I said softly, "are you okay?"

The girl looked up at me with wide, bloodshot eyes, and there went my heart again, *flip-flop, flip-flop*. Even with her face all blotchy and her eyes all red, she was bloody gorgeous. It had been a long time since I'd felt this stupid in front of a girl, and I struggled to get myself together.

"Yeah," she said finally. "I'm okay." She had an American accent. "My girlfriend broke up with me, but that's not why I'm crying."

"It's not?" I said, hoping the concern in my voice masked the internal shriek of, *YES, YES, SHE LIKES GIRLS!* that was involuntarily erupting in my brain.

She shook her head. "Things haven't been going good with us for a while. I had a feeling... It was just the tip of the iceberg. This whole trip has been like the trip from Hell. I wish I hadn't come."

I crouched next to her. "Are you here with your family?"

"No," she said. "It was a school trip. Well, not exactly."

It wasn't *through* the school. It was a graduation trip. Some of my classmates planned it." She swiped at her face with the back of her hand, revealing a palm coated in wet sand. I cringed at the thought of sand in her eyes and unzipped my bag, handing her my jumper.

"You can wipe your eyes with that if you want," I offered.

She smiled blearily. "Thanks." She daubed her eyes with the cuff of my sleeve. "I should have known better. I don't think any of them ever liked me. They just tolerated me since we had such a small class. I go to—er, I guess went to—that is, I just graduated from a private school. Tuition was really expensive, but I had a scholarship. Most of the kids in my class are hecka rich."

I furrowed my brow. That was a word I hadn't heard before. The sentiment came across loud and clear, though.

She sighed, handing my jumper back to me. "A vacation like this is nothing to them, but it cost me all the money I had left over from working at McDonald's last summer. And for what? To have a stupid, miserable time and then get dumped. Everyone's going to know about it within five minutes, and that's all I'll hear about for the rest of the trip. I know I shouldn't care what any of them say or think. But... I still do."

"I'm sorry," I said, zipping my jumper back in my bag and making a mental note to toss it in with the laundry when I got back aboard the *Q.U.E.S.T.* "Was she your first girlfriend?"

She nodded glumly.

"That's the worst," I said, remembering my own experience the year before. "Especially with the whole school watching. It feels like there's more pressure on us, you know? If our relationships don't work out, they think it's because of who we are. It's not just one of those things like

it is for straight people.”

She looked at me in surprise. “You mean you’re also...?”

I grinned crookedly. “Yep.”

Now she looked down, her face flushed. “Oh. That’s cool.”

We didn’t speak for a few moments; then she said, more shyly than she had earlier, “So what are you doing here? Are *you* with family?”

“No, I’m on a gap year program. Do you have those in the U.S.?”

“I’m not sure. What is it?”

“After you finish secondary school but before you start uni. People will take time off and do something different—an internship, or a missionary assignment in another country, being an *au pair*, something like that. Helps you sort out who you want to be before you start your serious studies.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, looking intrigued. “So what are you doing for your program?”

“I’m serving aboard the *Q.U.E.S.T.* for a year,” I said. “Have you heard of it?”

“The big submarine?”

“That’s right. The ‘Queen’s Undersea Exploration and Scientific Testing’ lab,” I added with a posh sniff then laughed. Queen Elizabeth had passed years before I was even born, but they’d still named the sub in her honor. I suspected it was because “*K.U.E.S.T.*” just didn’t have the same effect.

“How do you get involved in that?” the girl asked eagerly.

“Well, it’s just for U.K. residents,” I said before she could get her hopes up. “I know you can’t tell from the accent,” I joked, “but I’m from Belfast. So I had that going

for me. Then they look at your A-levels and such. Especially maths, physics, biology, that sort of thing.”

She crossed her legs, wet sand coating her calves and knees. Seawater was still lapping around us, but neither of us paid much mind. “So you like math?”

That seemed an odd question. “Yeah?” I answered hesitantly.

She beamed. “I love math. It’s my favorite subject. Everyone at school thought I was a freak for it. I should have told them it can get you a year on a submarine. Maybe that would have shut them up.”

My heart twisted. She sounded so miserable when she talked about her schoolmates. I wasn’t exactly close with the others on the *Q.U.E.S.T.*, but that was partly my own fault, since I was so absorbed with working on *Amphitrite*. Even with the gossip that went around after my breakup with Moira last year, I’d never been bullied by any means.

My mobile buzzed, reminding me that *Trite* was still suspended. She still had plenty of battery life, but I didn’t want to forget about her. I looked up at the girl sitting next to me. “Hey, do you want to see what I’ve been working on?”

“For the *Q.U.E.S.T.*?” she asked.

“Sort of. But not officially. It’s my secret project that I’ve been building during my spare time.”

“Is it that thing you put in the water earlier?”

My face grew hot. I hadn’t realized she’d been watching me even then. “Yeah, it is,” I said. I pulled out my mobile to show her. “It’s a miniature ROV. Er, a remotely operated underwater vehicle. But it’s not really a vehicle, it’s more like... an underwater robot.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously? You built it?”

“Mostly. It started out as a toy. You know, one of those

ones kids can operate with their mobiles or a tablet? I used the toy's app as a base. Then I started cannibalizing the parts for a new robot, one that can sustain enough pressure for deep-sea operations." She was looking at my mobile eagerly, so I handed it to her. "This controls depth, this moves it forward and backward, and this moves the arms," I said, pointing to the different on-screen buttons. She hesitantly tapped one that moved Trite forward a bit. "Most ROVs are operated with cables that attach them to a ship," I said, "but I still consider this more of an ROV than an AUV, since it's not autonomous. She won't do anything if I don't tell her to."

"This is amazing," the girl said, tapping to open and close Trite's claws. In a small square at the bottom of the app, the onboard camera showed Trite responding to her command. "It's like the robots they use to repair parts on the Space Station, but underwater."

"That's what I was going for," I said excitedly. "There have been robots like this for years that can do underwater repairs and other tasks, but most of them are quite large. I was going for something more compact and flexible."

"I bet GalaX could use this," she said. "Did you hear about their facility near here?"

I nodded. "We made contact with them last week when we got here." Seeing a GalaX project close up had been one of my highlights aboard the *Q.U.E.S.T.* With the terraformation phase on Mars largely completed, GalaX's eccentric founder, Johann Kimbal, had turned his sights to other extreme environments. His latest pet project was an undersea habitat, similar to the Aquarius and other underwater research labs, but on a grander and more elaborate scale. He'd struck some kind of deal with Sea-Star and had built it near here, though I gathered there'd been some kind of kerfuffle with the Bahamian government

about whether that had been permissible under their treaty or not. Obviously nothing too severe, since both the island and the Habi were still here; but I did suspect that the reason the *Q.U.E.S.T.* had been called in had something to do with their disagreement. Captain Schneider had seemed tense when he got back from his meeting at the Habi last week.

“Fresh,” the girl said, giving my mobile another tap and watching Trite open and close her claws. “Thank you for showing me this, uh...?”

“Delia,” I supplied.

“Delia,” she repeated. “I’m Bryn.” She gave me a smile, the sort that ensured her face and name would be burned in my brain forever.

“Nice to meet you,” I said softly.

She stood, brushing sand off her legs. “Thank you for being so nice. It made me feel a lot better.” She took a step back, almost apologetically. “I need to get going. We’re supposed to check in with the chaperones every few hours...”

I nodded. “Try to enjoy the rest of your trip—as much as you can, eh?”

Bryn grinned. There was a mole just above her upper lip, on the left side. Like an old-time beauty mark. “Good luck with the *Q.U.E.S.T.*, and with your robot.”

She scampered back across the beach, leaving wet footprints in the sand. I watched her go reluctantly before turning back to the sea and Amphitrite.

* * *

I figured that would be the last I saw of Bryn. I didn’t know how long she and her classmates would be here on Sea-Star Island, but there were probably close to a

thousand tourists staying in the resort. The odds of bumping into her again, even if they were still here, seemed slim.

Two days later, on our last day at Sea-Star, Captain Schneider gave us the full day off. We'd completed all our modules for this assignment, and the data had been sent on to our lab in Aberdeen for analysis. We'd have one last day on the island before we put out again.

"You coming with us, Krieg?" I asked as I entered the docking station. He was leaning against the hatch for Shuttle Two, rather than the larger one he usually ferried us back and forth in.

"Not today, kiddo," he replied. "Captain and I have one last meeting at the Habi."

I arched an eyebrow, but there was no time to dwell on it. Devin was already glaring daggers at me. I hurried after him into the tube.

As usual, I waited until the others had disembarked before unfastening my safety belt. "Any plans for your last day on Sea-Star, Delia?" the shuttle pilot, a woman named Lonnie, asked with a smile.

"Oh, nothing in particular," I said, adjusting the straps on my rucksack. "What about you? Do you have to get back to the *Q.U.E.S.T.*?"

She shook her head as her hands moved methodically across the console, shutting the mini-sub down. "Captain gave me shore leave today as well. Just have to be back to ferry the rest of you home this evening. Thought I might check out this famed shopping district of theirs. I'm sure everything's overpriced, but there might be a thrift shop I can hit."

I considered pestering Lonnie for a shot at piloting the shuttle, but I hadn't ever really talked to her before. I wasn't sure how she'd handle it; if she'd laugh or report me

to Captain Schneider. At least when dealing with Krieg I actually had a shot, and I knew he wouldn't rat me out. I decided to let it go. "Have fun," I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder and climbing the ladder out onto the docks.

I headed straight for the cove, but I soon realized I hadn't thought this day through. Ordinarily, we weren't finished with our modules until well after noon, so when it came down to it, I was only onshore for a few hours at best. Testing Trite's motion refinements and depth capabilities was all well and good, but it wasn't going to fill a whole day. Her battery wouldn't last that long, for one thing, not to mention that I'd need to feed myself.

After a couple hours, my grumbling stomach could be ignored no longer. I packed Amphitrite, still dripping seawater, into my bag and trundled back to town. I wandered up and down the main street before eventually settling on a small stand with enticing-smelling smoke wafting from it. The smoke came from a grill at the back of the stand. I stared at the menu for a few minutes before settling on a cracked conch burger and chips. There were a few picnic tables near the bamboo shack, but I decided to take my small cardboard tray of food and sit on a bench beside the wood railing that ran along the nearby pier.

The food was spicy—far spicier than what I was used to, enough to sear the taste buds right off your tongue. Even the chips were spicy. I was trying to decide whether I should keep attempting to choke it down when a large group of people pushed past me, talking loudly, and I heard a voice I recognized.

"I don't have a problem with you guys doing it; I just don't want to do it," she protested. Her face was flushed—whether because she was angry or upset, I couldn't say. She was so agitated, she didn't even glance in my direction.

"C'mon, Bryn, it's not even illegal here," a fair girl wearing tattered denim dungarees said.

Bryn's face was drawn, and her thick black brows looked sharp as razors. She could have murdered someone with those eyebrows. "I'm aware of that," she said through clenched teeth. "That has nothing to do with it. I just. Don't. Want. To."

A tall, barrel-chested boy laughed. I glanced over at him and realized, wincing, that his arm was draped casually over the shoulders of a girl I recognized: Bryn's ex. I wondered if this was why she'd said the breakup was no surprise. Had she been seeing this boy at the same time as Bryn? My temper flared on Bryn's behalf.

"Forget it, Liz," the boy said. "You know she's never going to go for it. Bryn's too much of a goody two-shoes. It would go against her programming to actually loosen up and have a good time—let alone do something that might get her in trouble."

The others cackled, and Bryn looked like she wanted to sink between the wooden planks of the pier. I could hear her words from yesterday echoing in my mind—"*I know I shouldn't care what any of them say or think. But... I still do*"—and my blood boiled over.

"Oh, you think she's a goody two-shoes, do you?" I snapped, my voice ringing out over their laughter. The group fell silent, staring at me.

"Delia!" Bryn said in surprise.

The tall boy looked between us, his eyes resting on me, trying to size me up. I squared my shoulders and glared back at him. He still had a few centimeters on me, but I was easily the tallest girl in the group, and taller than a few of the fellas as well.

"Yeah," he said, his words a challenge. "She is."

"She's not," I replied, meeting him head-on.

“How would you know?”

I glanced at Bryn. Her face was pale, but she looked at me hopefully.

“I know the reason she won’t be going along with—whatever it is you’re doing. Because she already had other plans. With me.”

The boy’s brows disappeared behind his fringe. Someone in the group whistled, and there were a few titters. I kept my hand on my hip, not reacting.

Bryn’s ex pushed out from under his arm, folding her own across her chest. “Yeah? And what exactly are the two of you going to be doing?”

“Stealing a submarine.” I pointed past the railing to the docks, where you could see the shuttle moored at the far end. “That submarine.”

While the others turned to look where I was pointing, I shot another glance at Bryn. For just an instant, she looked panic-stricken, but in a blink she’d smoothed her features into smug defiance. She was game, then. No backing down now.

“I don’t buy it,” the boy said, turning back to face us.

“I don’t really care if you do or not. Come on, Bryn,” I said, reaching out my hand. I felt a thrill of excitement rush through me when she took it. The other stood gawping as I pulled her down the stairs to the docks.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked under her breath once they were out of earshot. “We’re not actually *stealing* it, right?”

“Of course not. I’m *Q.U.E.S.T.* personnel. It’s fine,” I said. And I was about ninety-five percent certain that it would be. Well, maybe eighty. Okay, seventy-five percent sure. We’d just do a quick circuit around the island. I’d obsessively watched Krieg often enough that I was confident in my own ability to pilot the shuttle. It was barely

noon; we didn't need to be back to the *Q.U.E.S.T.* for hours yet. Lonnie would still be out shopping by the time we got back. And if this didn't give Bryn some street cred with those hellions I didn't know what would.

She was quiet as we marched through the docks, but she didn't let go of my hand. I can't say I was sorry. Her fingers fit between mine perfectly. When we reached the sub, I turned back. Bryn's classmates were all crowded on the pier still, watching us. I took a deep breath, staring at the small craft bobbing against the dock. Was I seriously going to do this? I'd pestered Krieg about it about a hundred times, but to take it without permission was something else entirely.

But if I stopped now, Bryn's schoolmates would never let her hear the end of it. It didn't matter that she'd graduated—years of bullying didn't just go away the moment you left school, especially not with social media putting everyone at each other's fingertips. Those scars would last. They'd last no matter what I did, but at least if I helped her now, she'd have a victory to look back on. A memory of wiping the smug grins off those snots' faces.

I could feel their eyes on us still. "No getting out of it," Bryn said softly.

I shot her a grin, reluctantly letting go of her hand, and started loosening the outer set of dogs. "It'll be a lark," I said, trying to sound reassuring.

She smiled back. "More fun than what they've got planned." She watched as I slung my leg over then climbed after me.

"What was that about, anyway? If you don't mind me asking?"

She exhaled through her nose, dropping the last few rungs to the sub floor. The shuttle swayed on the waves. "They're going to a big kegger on the north beach. Wanted

me to join in a drinking contest, even though they know I don't like to drink." She looked uncomfortable, like she needed to explain herself, even though I didn't care in the least. "It's not because it's against the rules. It's just not something I enjoy. I like to be in control." I was watching her intently, and she smoothed her hair, almost nervously. "Plus, I hate being sick," she added with an awkward laugh.

The corners of my mouth drew up, and I reached past her to dog the inner hatch. "Well, I'll tell you what: You're in control here. We'll stay out as long or as short as you want. If you'd like, I can take us just below the surface where they won't see us anymore, but we don't have to go any farther." With a smirk, I added, "Can't make any promises about not getting ill, though. Especially if you're prone to seasickness."

She laughed again. "I'll be fine. And honestly"—she looked around, as though there might be someone lurking behind one of the empty seats, listening—"this is kind of exciting. I've always wanted to ride in a real submarine. The closest I've ever gotten are those ones at Disney that are on a track."

I strapped myself into the pilot's seat, adrenaline coursing through me. I couldn't believe what I was about to do—but I also couldn't wait to do it. An illicit sub ride with a beautiful girl? I felt almost like a pirate.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

Bryn nodded.

I switched on the ignition.

* * *

The water in this part of the Atlantic was achingly clear, with visibility up to sixty meters. It was like we were

floating through space, an alien world of brilliant blue. Vivid fish and other sea creatures swam past the portholes, making Bryn suck in her breath with delight. The seafloor below us was littered with craggy rocks covered in algae and weeds that wafted gently in the water like leaves on a breeze. Rainbow-colored coral made a vibrant kaleidoscope. I hadn't wanted to stray too close to the *Q.U.E.S.T.*—if we showed up on their screens, we'd be caught in an instant. So we headed in the opposite direction, to shallower waters.

"Look at those rocks down there," Bryn said, peering through the portholes with the giddy enthusiasm of a child. "The way they're stacked, it's incredible. Like an arch. Is that natural?"

I nodded. "Though there are plenty of conspiracy theorists who would tell you otherwise. We're near the Bimini Road. It's a natural formation, but it looks like a sunken city street. Loads of people believe it's actually the ruins of Atlantis."

She smiled wistfully, and I could tell a part of her believed it. Truth be told? So did I.

"So are we near the GalaX Habitat?" Bryn asked, still looking through the porthole.

"Not too far. Would you like to see it?"

"I'd love it," she said, sinking back into her seat. "I'd really—" She broke off, considering. "That is... Have you ever thought about it? GalaX, the MarsEpoch project?"

"Going to Mars, you mean?"

"Yeah."

I chewed my lip. "A little. Honestly, don't tell anyone, but I was hoping this gap year might help with that. Look good on the résumé." Working for GalaX on its own would be a dream come true, and if I could get a position on the colony? It would be everything I'd ever dreamed of. "But I

still don't know. I haven't really thought that far ahead yet. My mam would probably go off her nut if I tried."

"Mine too... I think." She gave me a crooked smile. "But I'd still like to."

"Maybe I'll see you on Mars, then," I said.

"Maybe."

Self-consciously, I looked down at the monitor on the console. "We're close to the Habi now. You should have visibility in a tick, through the starboard porthole." I gestured. "That one."

As she scrambled over to the porthole, there was a loud noise, like nothing I'd ever heard before. A rumbling that made the hull of the shuttle seem to groan. The sub kicked back as if we'd been hit by a massive wave, and Bryn lost her balance, tumbling into an empty seat. My body lurched sideways, but my safety belt held me in place. Through the front screen and the portholes, the once-clear water of the Atlantic turned thick and muddy. I could barely see anything until a sea turtle darted past, nearly grazing the sub, far faster than I'd ever seen one move before.

"What on Earth?" Bryn asked, clutching the armrests on the seat she'd toppled into.

"It's a seaquake." I glanced at the monitor. "Not overly strong. Scanner shows a little under a five on the Richter scale. Not enough to cause a tsunami." Thank goodness. The *Q.U.E.S.T.* had been designed to survive that force and even the impact of seafloor debris that those waves often carried, but I doubted this shuttle could, and I dreaded to think what would happen if a tsunami were to strike an artificial island like Sea-Star. "Buckle yourself in. It'll soon pass."

We sat in silence apart from the deafening roar of the quake around us. After about two minutes, the sound died

away, and the shuttle stilled. Clouds of sand floated around us like a thick fog, completely obscuring the view from the front screen and every porthole.

“Well, that was... terrifying,” Bryn said at last.

I nodded mutely.

“Do you think they felt that on the island?” she asked.

“Oh, definitely. It probably wasn’t strong enough to do any major damage, but it would have given them a fright.”

She scrunched up her mouth. I could tell she was worried.

“I’ll bring you back as soon as the water settles enough to give us some visibility. Actually, in the meantime —” I hit a switch on the console, flipping the shuttle’s radio from *Q.U.E.S.T.*’s internal channel to general communications. “That way we can keep abreast of what’s going on, and if any ships are coming in and out of port that might interfere with us docking.”

The radio crackled to life, and the sub was instantly filled with the sound of a woman’s voice. “*Repeat, mayday. This is GalaX Habitat, hailing all ships in the vicinity of—*”

“What’s going on?” Bryn asked.

“It’s the Habi,” I said. “They’re sending out a distress call.”

“*Primary and backup life support systems were damaged in the quake,*” said the voice over the radio. It was calm, but there was a taut undercurrent of panic that was barely audible in the speaker’s words.

“*Both systems?*” came another voice in reply. I recognized it as Ted, the communications officer on the *Q.U.E.S.T.*

“*Yes, sir. We’re operating on reserves. The backup system can be manually restarted, but we’d need a dive team to do it. Operating our pressure chamber will deplete reserves faster than the dive team could restart the backup*

system.”

“*Q.U.E.S.T. can be there in twenty minutes. Can you hold out that long?*” Ted asked.

There was a long moment of silence. “*Doubtful, sir, but we’ll try.*”

Bryn looked at me, her face serious. “Can we help them?”

I blinked at her. “What?”

“We’re closer than the *Q.U.E.S.T.* is. Can we help them?”

“I—I’m not sure? We can reach them more quickly, but we don’t have dive equipment. And at this depth, we’d need a pressure chamber to compensate for not being able to do a controlled descent, or we could get ourselves killed.” Not to mention that I wasn’t dive trained. I wouldn’t have the first clue what to do.

“What about your robot? This is what it’s designed for, right?”

I looked down at my rucksack. It had slid up under the passenger seats during the quake. Bryn was right—this was exactly what I’d designed *Amphitrite* for. But the question was, was she ready?

And was I?

“We could try,” I said at last. “But we’ll have to give up our cover. I don’t know what the consequences will be for us being out here. It could be big trouble.”

“That’s all right.” Her face was determined, her voice cool and collected. The anxious Bryn I’d seen onshore was nowhere to be found now. Now, her confidence made me feel stronger.

I smiled tightly. “Okay.” I reached for the microphone on the control console. “GalaX Habi, this is *Q.U.E.S.T. Shuttle One*,” I said. “We are approximately two minutes away from your location and are available to provide

assistance.”

The radio was silent. My heart pounded uncomfortably in my ears, throbbing as loudly as the seaquake.

“Q.U.E.S.T. Shuttle One, acknowledged. Assistance would be greatly appreciated.”

I took a deep breath and glanced over at Bryn. “If we’re going to do this, I’ll need your help. Do you think if I told you what you needed to do, you could manage?”

She nodded. “I can handle this,” she said, her voice more confident than I’d heard it yet.

“All right,” I said, to myself more than to the Habi communications officer. “Let’s do this.”

* * *

The debris outside the shuttle was beginning to settle as we approached the Habi. Snatches of the facility gradually became visible through the clouds of sand, like a thinning mist on the moors. There were five main buildings, one on each compass point and the largest one in the center. These were made of heavy metal bulkheads, anchored into the seabed with massive steel pillars. There was a large skylight-like porthole on the roof of each and smaller window-like ones on the sides. The main buildings were connected by tube-shaped hallways. Every part of the facility was completely dark except the central building; dim red light shone through its portholes. In the spotlight from our shuttle, I could see Krieg’s small sub docked alongside two others. That meant he and Captain Schneider were still here—and I was utterly doomed.

I tried not to think about it as I shifted the sub into standby mode and our forward propulsion system shut down. We floated about fifty meters away from the Habi. I

unfastened my safety belt and looked at Bryn. "Ready to go?"

"Ready," she said.

She took her place at the pilot's seat, the radio microphone in her hand. I opened my rucksack and pulled out Amphitrite, still damp from this morning's testing. Her battery was about halfway drained after that excursion, but she should have enough power to do this job.

I opened the inner hatch and set her on one of the lower rungs of the ladder. With one tap on my mobile, she gripped the rungs with her claws. I swallowed and swung the hatch shut, spinning the central wheel and feeling the dogs extend. I prayed the inner seal was tight and turned to Bryn. "Open the outer hatch."

She nodded, face pale but calm, and pressed a button on the console as I'd instructed her. I sucked in my breath as water rushed into the tube, but the inner seal was tight. No water entered the shuttle. I squeezed my eyes shut for just a moment.

"All right," I said. "Let's go, Trite." I looked down at my mobile. Amphitrite was still holding the rungs of the ladder, but her body was suspended in the water flooding the tube now. I tapped the button, and she was off. She floated up out of the tube and away from the shuttle. I moved to the porthole and watched her go.

"*Q.U.E.S.T. Shuttle One* to GalaX Habi," Bryn said, her voice deep and steady. "ROV is deployed. Ready for instructions."

A different voice responded, a man's voice. It sounded familiar, and after a moment I realized it was Johann Kimbal. I'd heard his voice on many of GalaX's livestreams about the MarsEpoch project. "*The backup system panel is located on the southmost exterior wall of building four. It was performing a system update when the*

quake struck. Perfect timing, right?" he added wryly.

"That's always the way," I said, my mouth twisting up crookedly.

"We need you to do a hard reset. Do you know what to do?"

"Affirmative," I called, and Bryn repeated it over the radio.

I glanced at my mobile. We were submerged at about one hundred meters. I'd tested Trite up to this depth, but I'd never been able to see her in motion. I looked out the porthole, watching as a little jet of water propelled her forward through the settling clouds of sand until she grew too hazy for me to see.

I looked down at the screen, following her progress with my GPS, adjusting visually using Trite's onboard camera. When she'd reached her position on the south side of building four, I switched her to ground mode. Her crab-like feet extended from her body, magnets on the bottom causing her to latch to the iron bulkhead. She scuttled across the face of the building until I saw a covered panel through her camera.

"Found it," I said.

Bryn repeated this over the radio, and Mr. Kimbal said, *"Good. Unbolt the casing. The panel is water resistant. It was installed by our dive team when we were building the facility."*

I positioned Trite's right claw over the large bolt on the bottom of the casing, praying she'd have enough torque to overcome the corrosion. It helped that the Habi had only been completed less than a year ago—the seawater hadn't caused too much damage yet. I held my thumb down on the screen, and Trite's right claw began to rotate. It took a couple minutes, and my thumb began to ache, but the bolt eventually came off. I moved her to the

top of the casing and unscrewed that bolt as well. Then I moved her out of the way, and the panel sank slowly to the seafloor.

"All right," Mr. Kimbal said. "Now just flip the breaker switch off and back on, and that should do it."

Trite grasped the switch. With a tap of my thumb, she flipped it down. I counted ten seconds and then tapped again. The switch flipped back up.

I held my breath, waiting. Through Amphitrite's camera, I saw a light on the panel flicker on and blink. The small light seemed to match the beating of my heart —*thump, blink, thump, blink*.

Fifteen blinks. Twenty. And then through the porthole I saw the lights in the Habi change. The red light streaming through the central skylight turned blue. Lights throughout the facility began to flicker back on, one by one.

I exhaled, my weak knees threatening to give out on me.

From her position in the pilot's seat, Bryn watched as the Habi came back to life. She let out a gasp. "Did it work, Delia? Did we do it?" She turned and looked at me, her dark eyes wide and hopeful.

I sank down to the floor under the porthole, clutching my mobile to my chest. I laughed, and it burbled out of me, almost hysterically. "It worked. We did it."

Bryn laughed now, too, our voices mingling together, filling the sub. She got up and came over to me, sitting beside me on the floor, her shoulder brushing mine, relief overflowing from both of us. I looked down at my mobile. Trite was still anchored to the side of the Habi, her camera pointing at the open panel. The light was green, solid and steady.

Mr. Kimbal's voice crackled over the radio. *"GalaX Habitat here. All systems normal. Thank you, Q.U.E.S.T."*

Shuttle One.”

* * *

I rested my face against the glass, looking out the window at the vibrant blue sky. The last week had been like a dream, and standing here in the noisy terminal at Lynden Pindling International Airport now was like waking up to a cold splash of water. The *Q.U.E.S.T.* hadn’t moved on to the Gulf of Mexico as planned; they’d be staying at Sea-Star Island a while longer to help with clean-up after the quake. But I wouldn’t be with them.

I’d had a long day of traveling, by boat from Sea-Star to Nassau, and there was more to come: flights from Nassau to Miami to Dublin, and then by train to Belfast—and what was sure to be a stern lecture from my mother. I’d probably be home well before my postcard to Finn arrived.

I’d been expelled, of course. I tried not to be too gutted over it. It was only to be expected after commandeering a sub. Captain Schneider had gratefully acknowledged that we’d saved the day—Bryn, Amphitrite, and me—but it didn’t change the fact that I’d stolen Crown property and endangered the life of a civilian. So my gap year had come to an abrupt halt just a few months in.

But that was all right. I had something better.

The backup life support system had kept the Habi going till the *Q.U.E.S.T.* arrived to evacuate everyone in the facility. Krieg had walked me through docking *Shuttle One* on the *Q.U.E.S.T.*; then they’d refueled and begun ferrying everyone back and forth from the Habi to our massive sub. He had a long day ahead of him yet—after the Habi was fully evacuated, he’d have to take Bryn back to Sea-Star and pick up the others I’d stranded with my

theft of the shuttle.

Bryn and I'd stayed in the docking facility as Krieg made his rounds, watching anxiously as everyone emerged from the tube. I'd expected a number of Habi scientists, of course, but I was surprised to see several men and women in suits with gold pins on their lapels that I recognized as the GSAF crest. I'd thought it was a bit odd, but I supposed it made sense: If Mr. Kimbal was planning to use his research from the Habi to colonize other planets besides Mars, GSAF would have to be involved. It was the only reason I could think as to why they'd be there.

A man who couldn't be much older than me—probably a GSAF intern—had glanced at Bryn and myself with startlingly pale blue eyes as he passed; but my attention was quickly drawn to the man who emerged from the tube after him. Johann Kimbal himself.

I'd realized I was probably staring, but it was hard to look away. This was the founder of one of the biggest tech companies in the world, the visionary who'd accomplished the colonization of another planet. He'd been my hero since I was a kid. Speaking to him over the radio had been one thing, but now that he stood in front of me, it felt unreal. His once-dark hair had gone almost entirely silver, and his face was lined with age, but his eyes were bright, and he looked straight at me as he disembarked the shuttle.

"Are you Delia Randall?" he'd asked, approaching me.

I'd tried not to stammer. "Yes, sir," I said.

"So you're the one who saved our butts out there."

Now I was definitely blushing. "It wasn't just me. Bryn helped." I nodded in her direction.

She held up her hands. "No, honestly. I was just there. It was Delia and her robot that saved the day."

Mr. Kimbal nodded, folding his arms. "That ROV was impressive. Compact but amazingly flexible. Did you build it yourself?"

"Sort of." I shifted awkwardly, looking down at my dirty runners, and explained how I'd built Amphitrite from parts of other robots.

"That's still very impressive, especially for a kid your age. You've got talent. Have you thought about what you're going to do when you're done with the *Q.U.E.S.T.*?"

"Not exactly."

He'd handed me a business card. "You give me a call. I have a place for you at GalaX. And if you need help with college, you let me know. We have an endowment with your name on it."

My face had been on fire, but I'd taken the card, clutching it tightly between my fingers. Bryn had beamed and nudged me with her elbow.

The card was in my pocket now, as I stood in the airport terminal. It wouldn't leave my person until I got back to Belfast. He'd written *Call me* on the back, and underlined it. I knew he meant it, and I was going to call him. I'd lost the *Q.U.E.S.T.*, but if I had GalaX, this whole adventure would be more than worth it.

There was something else in my pocket, too: A tiny sand dollar. Before she'd boarded the shuttle with Krieg, Bryn had pressed it into my hand. "I found this at the beach this morning," she'd said, running her finger over a small notch, the only imperfection in the fine round shell. "I kept it because I thought it looked kind of like Sea-Star Island. But I want you to have it." She'd given me a hug and texted me her email address. We'd promised to keep in touch, but everyone says that, right? Who really keeps in touch with anyone they met on vacation, even one as eventful as this one had been?

But I'd keep the sand dollar forever. Whether I ever saw her again or not, that girl had changed my life. That much I'd always remember.

"Flight Two Twenty-Nine for Miami, now boarding," said a voice over the loudspeaker. I slung my rucksack over my shoulder, glancing one last time out the windows at the sky over Nassau. Cloudless and blue as the sea.

"Slán," I said and turned away.

MAGIC ALL AROUND | Jane Watson

“Take care, Greta dear!”

Greta turned and waved to the candy maker before hurrying down the cobbled village lane, the basket she wore on her arm becoming heavier with each step.

Pausing for a moment, she pulled the packet of gingerbread she'd just purchased free from the basket, regarding it hungrily. She wondered if she could take a small respite from her errands for Frau Rosa to allow herself just a small taste of the delightful bread, but quickly decided against it. The other goblins might give in to their indulgences, but she wouldn't allow it. The bread could wait until after dinner to reward a hard day's work.

With her gray colored cloak tied over her simple dress and tightly-laced boots, Greta looked no different than the other village girls. The mortals didn't notice that her ears were longer with fine pointed tips, or that her dark hair was actually a mix of black and green. They didn't notice that a few of her teeth were long and sharp, or that her skin glimmered when it caught the light. And they especially never noticed when her vivid green eyes—unusually large with a black sliver for a pupil—glowed with a supernatural light whenever she used magic. For though goblins and mortals had lived together in the little village high in the mountains for centuries, with each passing generation, the

mortals lost their ability to see magic.

This did not bother Greta in the slightest. She did not care to use her magic, preferring the simple life of the hardworking and dedicated mortals. They had less leisure time, but they enjoyed it so much more. After years of unhappiness with the other goblins, Greta had finally decided to take matters into her own hands and started working in the shop of the elderly mortal grocer, Ernst, and his wife, Rosa. Greta had known the couple since she was small—they were among the few villagers who could still see magic. A year had passed quite happily as Greta spent her days working in their store and her nights in the spare bedroom of their rambling home.

With a wistful glance at the gingerbread, Greta tucked it back into her basket and entered the postmaster's shop.

At the sound of the bell, the postmaster emerged from the back room. "Ah, Greta! Let's see what we have today," he said, pulling a stack of letters and parcels from a wooden compartment and setting them on the counter.

Greta lifted them one by one to slip into her basket. There were several letters addressed to Ernst and Rosa. She paused, noting that one had fine, straight handwriting, and a sketch on the front of the bronze-tinted envelope. "Hm."

This letter was different than any Greta had seen before. The detailed sketch of a stone building—with pointed windows and ivy growing up the sides—wrapped all the way to the back, interrupted only by the large red dollop of wax that sealed the flap.

"Whoever sent that must be quite the artist," the postmaster commented, peering at her over his wire-rimmed glasses.

"Yes," Greta agreed softly, her fingers beginning to feel warm, tingling with magic. Her eyes widened in alarm

as strands of gold magic wound their way into the lines and form of the sketch. She looked quickly at the postmaster, but he had already turned his back to her, sorting letters and parcels into the boxes. *I mustn't use my magic here*, she chided herself. Ernst had once told her that when he was a boy, some of the shopkeepers who still could see magic sprinkled salt on their doorsteps to keep the goblins away. Not wanting to be treated like an outcast, Greta hid her magic. She stared at the envelope for another long moment, the light finally fading. *Strange, though. I didn't mean to summon my power.* She shook her head to clear her thoughts before stuffing the letter deep in her basket.

"Good day to you," she called to the postmaster before leaving his shop.

She made her way out of the shop and up the winding cobbled street, greeting the other shopkeepers as she passed. The crisp autumn air added a rosy tinge to her cheeks, and she dug her hands into her cloak.

"Little Greta!" An old woman with a pointed face popped out of thin air into the alleyway as Greta approached. Silver hair came out of her messy bun in tufts, and her fiery amber eyes stared at Greta. She lifted a glimmering hand in greeting.

"Oh. Ursula. Hello," Greta mumbled with little enthusiasm.

The elderly goblin emitted a high-pitched cackle. "Out for the day? Why don't you join me at the top of mount Engel? I hear there's going to be quite the gathering this eve."

In Greta's experience, goblin gatherings were nothing more than a way for her kind to eat, drink, and play cruel jokes. She'd attended some in years past and deeply regretted it. She pulled her cloak tighter about her and said

stiffly, "No, thank you. I don't wish to set a landslide on innocent mortals."

"Oh, it was only a little one," Ursula replied with a cluck of her tongue. "You just don't know how to allow yourself any fun, Greta. You toil away as if you hadn't any magic at all."

Greta bristled, about to snap a retort, when Frau Minna from the shop next door came out to sweep the step. "Greta! What a lovely surprise." The florist's expression was puzzled as she looked from Greta to the alley and back.

Greta realized that Ursula had made herself invisible to mortals. She took a deep breath, not wanting to look as if she were rambling madly to herself. "I thought I heard a crash down this way," she explained hurriedly.

She fought to ignore Ursula as the old goblin smirked and muttered, "A crash, you said?"

Minna and Greta both flinched when a deafening sound reached their ears. The metal buckets the florist kept with the stems and scraps had all been knocked to the ground. Greta cast her eyes to Ursula, narrowing them dangerously.

"Oh, dear!" Minna exclaimed, gathering her skirts to hurry down the cobbled alley. "How did that happen?"

Greta set her basket on the ground, righting the bins and scooping the scraps into her arms. "An animal, most likely."

"You needn't help me, Greta," Minna said with a cluck of her tongue as she watched Greta's hands become scratched from the thorny stems. "I'm sure you were off on an important errand."

"No trouble at all!" Greta replied cheerfully, wishing with all of her might that Ursula would disappear. Yet there she was, arms folded as she watched Greta and the florist,

a smug smile on her narrow lips.

"Thank you, my dear," Minna said. "Now I mustn't keep you from your errands."

"Good day, Frau Minna." Greta waved, continuing on her way. She sighed when she realized Ursula was following her.

"Hmph," Ursula grumbled. "Little miss goody two-shoes."

"The fact that I *have* magic doesn't mean I haven't better use of my time than to dabble in mean-spirited tricks," Greta hissed. "Now go away before the mortals see me talking to myself."

"If they knew magic was all around them, she'd see me," Ursula observed shrewdly. "I hardly had to use any power at all for their dull eyes to pass over me. Just because they don't believe in magic, suddenly it isn't there."

Greta slowed her steps, turning to the old goblin. "Go," she whispered firmly.

Ursula scowled. "Don't come crying to me when no goblin wishes to pay you any courtesy."

Greta lifted her chin. "You say that as if it would upset me."

As Ursula disappeared with a loud pop, Greta winced and lifted her hand, scratches crisscrossing her skin. They stung in the brisk air, and crimson droplets of blood popped up on her fingers.

Glancing about to be sure no one was watching, Greta concentrated hard on the threads of magic that now pooled about her, willing them to encircle her hand. She was a bit out of practice, but after several long moments, warmth graced her fingertips as the cuts began to heal. Flexing her fingers, Greta nodded in satisfaction. She convinced herself this was worthy—if it hadn't been for that

nosy Ursula, she wouldn't have been injured in the first place. She hurried on her way back to the grocer's, irritated by the whole thing.

By the time she reached the grocer's storefront, she was out of breath and the basket was heavy on her arm. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts. "I mustn't storm into the shop like this," she whispered, lowering herself to sit on the front stoop. Sifting through the basket, she came across the large bronze-tinted envelope, staring at the delicate drawing once more. The climbing ivy on the building was so detailed, she found herself wondering how the artist was able to make such tiny, precise marks on the envelope. She found her ill mood dissipating as she focused on the lines and strokes of the paper.

Greta was jolted from her reverie when a horrible crash sounded from the back of the store. "Ursula!" she growled, pushing the strange letter back into the basket and hurrying around the corner. She was met with an absolute mess—the rubbish bins were overturned, and the boxes that she had so carefully stacked by the back door, just as Rosa had taught her, had toppled.

"You old kobold," Greta hissed, setting down her load on an upended crate to search for Ursula. "I bet you'd like me to use my magic to fix this mess you made, wouldn't you? Well, if it pleases you to watch me sweep and scrub for the next hour, you're welcome to it!"

Movement caught her eye, and she was startled to see that it was not Ursula emerging from behind the overturned bins, but a small kitten, with black fur and feet that looked as if they had been dipped in flour.

Her anger subsiding, Greta approached the kitten. "So, it was you who did all of this? Rather a large mess for such a little one."

“Meow?” The kitten’s mouth opened wide as it stared up at her with large, vivid green eyes—which bore an uncanny resemblance to her own—and she felt a kinship to the feline. “Meow?”

Greta knelt before the kitten, cautiously extending her hand. The kitten let out another soft meow as she rubbed against Greta’s knees. “Aren’t you the sweet one?” Greta whispered as she began petting the kitten’s long, soft fur. The kitten let out a blab in reply. After a few moments, the kitten raised her nose and began sniffing the air. She bounded over to the crate where Greta had left her parcels, putting her paws up to rifle through them.

Greta scrambled to her feet. “No, no,” she murmured, hoisting the kitten around the middle. She discovered the curious feline had already unearthed her prize, pulling out the small packet of gingerbread with her teeth.

Greta paused, setting the kitten down as its little body began to rumble with purrs. “You like gingerbread?” The kitten looked up at her and blinked slowly, responding with an emphatic meow. Greta giggled, unwrapping the paper and breaking off a piece of bread—which was rather difficult, since the kitten was scrambling for a bite. “There.” The kitten enthusiastically took the gingerbread and gobbled it up, making all sorts of noises that sounded halfway between grunts and purrs. “My, but you can chatter! I think I’ll call you Calla.” The kitten meowed emphatically. “I see you approve,” laughed Greta. She flinched when cold drops of rain hit her head and shoulders, and she thought of the poor little kitten out in the cold rain all night. Placing the basket firmly on her arm, Greta scooped Calla onto her shoulder and hurried inside.

“Meow?” the kitten blabbed.

“Hush,” Greta urged, setting her heavy basket down on the table.

"It seems you have made a friend."

Greta started at the voice. "F-Frau Rosa!"

The older woman lifted her eyebrows, awaiting an explanation.

"I heard a noise out back and found this poor starving kitten. It started to rain, so I..." Greta trailed off, not knowing what to say.

To her surprise, Rosa reached out to pat Calla's head. "The poor little waif looks hungry. Why don't you come help me fix a pot of tea, and she can have some milk?"

Greta smiled hopefully. "Does that mean...?"

As Rosa hurried into the kitchen, she called over her shoulder, "I've always thought the shop could use a good mouser."

Greta set the kitten down and followed Rosa with the basket of parcels.

While Calla lapped up her saucer of milk, Greta handed Ernst a steaming cup of tea as he sorted through the mail in front of the fireplace.

"I've heard from Liesel," Ernst commented to his wife. "Her boy Magnus was accepted to the academy. He'll be with us by the end of the week."

Greta paused mid-sip, turning to Ernst and Rosa, green eyes glowing with curiosity.

Ernst smiled and told her, "Our great-nephew is going to be boarding with us while he goes to school here."

"Oh." Greta wasn't sure how to feel at this sudden announcement, so she said no more.

"How old is Magnus now, dear?" Rosa asked, settling into the chair across from her husband.

"He's growing up in the blink of an eye," Ernst replied, setting the letter on the table beside him. "Around our Greta's age, I should think."

Greta smiled to herself, liking how it felt when the

grocer and his wife referred to her as ‘theirs.’

“Well, it will be nice to have family about,” Rosa went on. “He can help in the store when he’s not busy with his lessons. We’ll have to prepare the spare bedroom for his stay.”

A nervous knot began to form in Greta’s stomach as she wondered if having someone else—Ernst and Rosa’s own flesh and blood—might disrupt what she thought was becoming a happy home for her. If Magnus helped in the store, what if they decided they didn’t need her anymore? Then she chided herself. There was always work to be done, and if this Magnus was anything like his aunt and uncle, she was sure they would get along just fine.

Yet sleep would not come to Greta that night. She tossed in her small bed, her thoughts filled with what this new boarder would bring. Finally, she sat up, throwing her legs over the side of the bed and reaching for the envelope with the beautiful sketch which she’d propped on the bedside table. Ernst had set the envelope by the fire to use for kindling, and Greta had taken it up to her room. She admired the drawing for a few moments, her nerves settling and her fingers growing warm with energy—the drawing calmed her somehow.

Calla tiptoed along the edge of the bed to sit beside her. “I’m sorry I’ve kept you up,” she whispered to Calla, setting the envelope on the table. “Frau Rosa and Herr Ernst turn in early, so it’s nice to finally have someone to keep me company. I just can’t sleep, thinking of what they said this evening. I don’t want things to change.” Calla blinked slowly at her, meowing in reply as if she were speaking. Greta smiled softly. “You understand, don’t you?”

“Me-ow! Meow, meow.” The chatter was accompanied by purrs.

“I wish I understood you,” Greta said absently—and

then an idea came to her. She knew the Gift of Gab spell could be used on inanimate objects—so why not on a little kitten who was dying to be heard? In her troubled state, Greta’s need for companionship and understanding outweighed her oath to never use magic. Placing Calla on her lap, she closed her eyes and concentrated. She worried the spell would be slow-coming since she was so out of practice, but to her surprise, the magic flowed freely. Her green eyes flashed as she felt the glow of her powers crackle at her fingertips. Calla opened her little mouth, and where a mew should have sounded, *words* did instead. “It will be awfully wonderful to talk to you, Greta.”

Greta’s eyes widened. “You spoke—I understood you!”

“I did? You *did*?” Calla ran around in a circle on Greta’s lap. “I can talk, I can talk!”

Calla chattered happily all night long, and though Greta still wasn’t able to sleep, her new companion helped to wash away her fears about this mysterious Magnus and his impending stay.

* * *

The sun streamed in through the window several afternoons later, making the occupants of the grocer’s kitchen forget that winter was fast approaching.

Greta counted under her breath as she draped the strip of dough across the pie she’d filled with sliced apples. Calla rubbed against her ankles, meowing and putting her paws against the cupboard. “Can I have some?” the kitten asked.

Greta laughed and shook her head, placing a finger to her lips. “Hush now. This pie is for after supper. I’m almost finished.”

Calla sat heavily on her flanks, tail flicking impatiently.

"That should do it for the stew," Rosa announced with a sigh, using the hem of her apron to wipe her damp face. She turned to Greta with a smile. "Well, we're in fine shape. The spare room is cleaned and ready for Magnus, I've got supper on, and that pie turned out beautifully! What would we do without you, love?"

Greta blushed. "It's no trouble at all."

Rosa paused at the crate of apples, grunting as she attempted to lift it. "You work so hard. It will be nice to have Magnus helping out in the store. Then you can have some leisure time."

Greta hurried over to take the heavy crate from Rosa. "I love being here working with you and Herr Ernst," she admitted.

Calla cocked her head, her long ears moving back and forth. "Something is coming," she said to Greta.

The sound of hooves against cobblestone and the whinny of horses hit Greta's ears. "They're here," she said to Rosa, wiping her hands on her apron and hurrying to the door.

Rosa stole a quick glance in the mirror that hung over the fireplace. "Oh, what a fright I look. Magnus will see his old aunt and be shocked!"

Greta shook her head, feeling as if butterflies were dancing in her stomach. "You look lovely as always, Frau Rosa." She took a deep breath to steady herself.

Everything will be fine, she told herself. Nothing will change.

There was a rattling at the door, and Rosa hurried to open it. "We made the trip in one piece," Ernst said, holding a crate with books and items wrapped in brown parchment. The sunlight streamed in with him, hitting Greta's sensitive eyes. A young man passed the threshold

after Ernst, and Greta squinted in the light to get a better look at him. Much taller than his uncle, Magnus had short, dark brown hair and golden eyes. Though she knew it was chilly outside, he wore no coat over his shirt and vest, and Greta noticed the sun glinting off a gold pocket watch he wore at his waist.

“Magnus, my darling, how was the journey over?” Rosa asked as she pulled him in for a hug.

“Long, but enjoyable, Aunt Rosa,” Magnus replied with grin. He looked at his aunt and uncle in turn, before he turned his attention to Greta. The butterfly sensation she’d been feeling before his arrival increased as his eyes widened. She felt her throat suddenly go dry under his stare.

Eyes still on Greta, Magnus began, “Uncle Ernst, I don’t believe you ever mentioned that—”

“Well, don’t just stand there, Magnus, introduce yourself to our Greta,” Ernst interjected with a chuckle.

Magnus finally dropped his eyes and extended his hand. “Of course, how rude of me. A pleasure to meet you, our Greta.”

Greta wrinkled her nose, clasping his hand for the briefest of moments. “It’s just Greta,” she said shortly.

Magnus frowned, clearing his throat. “My apologies. I had hoped to be witty.”

Greta’s green eyes narrowed, not finding him amusing at all. She was about to tell him as much when Calla piped up from her spot at Greta’s feet. “I thought it was funny.”

Greta nudged her and made a shushing sound. Magnus—who hadn’t heard anything more than the cat’s loud meow, Greta was certain—laughed and said with a smile, “You have a very nice cat.”

“Thank you,” Greta replied stiffly, refusing to look at

him.

“Let’s get your things up to your room, Magnus. Rosa doesn’t like there to be a mess,” Ernst broke in, signaling for Magnus to follow him up the stairs. “Later this afternoon I’ll have you help me in the store.”

“That will be fine. I just need to unpack my things.” Magnus turned to Rosa. “I’m very grateful to be staying with you and Uncle Ernst and start my schooling.”

Rosa patted his cheek with a warm smile. “We’re happy to have you.”

Greta wasn’t so sure she was happy to have him there, but of course she kept silent, watching him as he ascended the staircase. Her pulse quickened when he looked over his shoulder, golden eyes locking with hers. He smiled before he disappeared from view.

Annoyance bubbling in her chest, Greta was grateful to resume her work in the shop. She felt a nervous sense of anticipation as the hours passed, knowing Ernst would soon bring him into the store to show him his work.

Soon enough Greta became so absorbed in dealing with customers and helping Ernst and Rosa re-stock the shelves and sweep the floor that she forgot all about their new boarder.

The clock began chiming, and Rosa placed the last cake of yeast on the shelf. “Come and help me get the table set for supper.”

“It’s six already?” Greta turned to Ernst with a questioning gaze. “Wasn’t Magnus supposed to...?”

Ernst chuckled. “Never you mind about him. I’m sure he got wrapped up in settling in his new quarters. We can show him the store tomorrow.”

Greta nodded wordlessly and followed Rosa into the kitchen, casting an incredulous glance up the staircase.

* * *

“He was absolutely no help today,” Greta said cantankerously to Calla that evening as they ascended the stairs to the third floor. “Frau Rosa had to call for him *three times* when supper was on!” When Magnus had finally joined them in the kitchen, his hair was tousled, his expression frazzled, and he was distracted for most of the meal. “What was he *doing* all afternoon? Certainly not working in the store like he said he would.” They didn’t require his help—they had gotten on just fine without him—but his inconsiderate behavior on his first day with them frustrated Greta to no end.

“He looked like he’d been concentrating hard on something, and supper interrupted it,” Calla commented as they reached the landing.

Greta scoffed. “That boy hasn’t done one bit of work since he arrived. He didn’t even offer to help with the supper dishes.” Rosa and Ernst had just laughed and told Greta that Magnus needed to get his things around for his classes the next morning, but Greta was not convinced. Work-shy was what he was, plain and simple. “He’s been holed up in that room of his for *hours*. Sleeping, most likely.”

“No, listen! He’s still awake,” Calla said softly, one white-tipped paw inclined to the door at the end of the hall.

Greta saw that Magnus’ door was opened a crack, the light from a lantern pouring in to the otherwise darkened hallway. As she crept closer, her sensitive ears caught what Calla was hearing: a soft scratching sound, and faint tapping.

Only a few feet from the door now, Greta could just make out a voice to accompany the sounds; it sounded as if Magnus were muttering under his breath. She froze as

the tapping and scratching stopped. She held her breath as footsteps approached the door, then relaxed when she realized he was pacing the span of the room. She craned her neck to peer in his doorway, and saw Magnus had paused in his steps, his back to her as he appeared to be staring at something across the way. Magnus turned at that moment, his eyes passing over the doorjamb. Their eyes locked, and he smiled softly and lifted his hand in greeting. Greta hurriedly scooped Calla into her arms and darted into her bedroom. Once she was safely inside, she set Calla down and leaned against the wall, trying to calm her racing heart.

* * *

Greta glanced at the threatening gray clouds several days later as she walked through the village. She needn't have worried that things would change with the arrival of Magnus; in the week that he'd been staying with them, it was almost as if he weren't there at all. He kept strange hours, leaving early and returning late, spending the rest of the time holed up in his room—doing what, Greta couldn't begin to guess.

That morning Ernst had told her to show Magnus how to do the store's inventory when he came to help. When the clock struck three and Magnus still hadn't arrived, Ernst sent Greta to run a few errands. She was nearing the end of her list and was on her way to the candy maker's when she saw Magnus across the way, speaking to Frau Minna in front of her shop. He glanced her way at that moment, locking eyes with her.

Greta pretended she didn't see him, ducking into the candy maker's shop. The bell tinkled to sound her arrival.

Frau Nina, a jolly woman whose blonde hair was

graying at the temples, smiled at Greta. “How are you today?”

Greta approached the counter, eying the various mouthwatering chocolates, peppermint sticks, sweet breads, and mints. “I’m well, Frau Nina. How are things here?”

“The shop is almost back to rights,” Nina replied. “We’ve gotten the kitchen aired out, and my husband has been hard at work ripping out the boards that were too burned to be salvaged.”

Greta frowned in sympathy, thinking of the small kitchen fire poor Frau Nina and her husband had suffered a few weeks ago, and the damage it had caused.

“What do you fancy, dear?”

Greta pointed to chocolates drizzled in caramel, and then to the gingerbread for Calla.

Nina pulled Greta’s choices from the case and began wrapping them. “I still don’t understand how the fire started. I’m always very careful to put out the fire once the chocolate has melted, and I make sure to keep the papers as far from the stove as possible.” Brows knitted together, she sighed and said, “I suppose after all of these years, it’s only natural I may grow careless at times. I’ll just have to work even harder to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

Greta felt a sick knot forming in her stomach. Frau Nina was always careful about everything she did—Greta knew it wasn’t her fault the kitchen had caught fire. Ludwig, the nosy and spiteful goblin down the road, had started the fire to entertain himself. As he wasted his days gluttonously drinking, gorging himself on the finest foods and lurking on the village rooftops, it was no wonder he was bored. *And now Frau Nina believes she has to work even harder,* Greta fretted, looking at the candy maker’s calloused hands. *When she does so much already.*

Once Greta had paid for her sweets, she bid Frau Nina farewell and left the shop, stewing about Ludwig and the other trouble-making goblins the village was unfortunate enough to host.

“Good day, Greta.”

Absorbed in her thoughts, Greta hadn’t noticed Magnus had joined her, his arms full of flowers. Regarding him warily, she replied, “Good day.” Unable to resist, she added, “Just what have you been doing with yourself this whole time?”

Magnus lifted his eyebrows, noticing her little barb. “I’ve been busy with my lessons and schoolwork since early this morning.” He glanced at her parcels. “I see you have a sweet tooth. Frau Nina does have the best chocolates I’ve ever tasted.” He smiled, and Greta noticed with annoyance that his honey eyes lit up when he did so.

Not to be distracted, she ignored his comment and pressed, “I suppose you forgot that you were meant to take inventory today?”

The smile faded from his handsome face. “Was that this morning? Oh, I’m so sorry, Greta, I was so caught up in my assignments it completely slipped my mind. Would you tell Uncle Ernst I’m very sorry?”

Greta frowned. “Tell him yourself. You *are* heading back now to help in the shop, aren’t you?”

Magnus shrugged apologetically. “I’m afraid I can’t. I have to hurry back to my lessons. They’ll be expecting these.” Greta glanced down at the two bouquets he held—one of red roses, and one a mix of chrysanthemums and dahlias. *Why in the world does he need flowers for his lessons?*

Magnus pressed the roses into Greta’s hands. “Would you mind bringing these to Aunt Rosa? They’re my way of saying thanks for letting me stay in their home.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. *He wants me to do absolutely everything for him*, she thought in indignation. *Apologize, thank his hosts, what next?*

"I really appreciate it," he said, stepping away from her and heading down the lane. "I must be off!"

Greta grumbled under her breath, looking at the roses in disdain. Pretty as they were, the fact that they were from that work-shy ingrate made Greta prone to dislike them. The petals of the roses soon became peppered with water droplets as it started to rain, and Greta hastened her stride.

"Oy!"

Greta shielded her eyes from the falling rain to look to the rooftop where Ludwig perched, leering down at her. "If it isn't our little Greta. Who gave you those flowers, then? A young goblin boy?" he asked slyly.

She began to hate the roses even more. Looking around to make sure no mortals were watching, she called back, "Such a ridiculous notion! I'm out on an errand." She'd wasted her time on goblin boys her age before and wanted nothing more to do with their boorish behavior. Attempting to shield her many parcels from the rain with her cloak, she hurried on her way.

Greta came to a halt when Ludwig materialized in front of her. "Haven't got time for any of us, eh? Rather waste your days with *their kind*?" He folded his knobby arms across his bony chest, jerking his head at a mortal family that strolled by. "Shame, really. My nephew would love to take you to the bonfire tonight."

"I don't wish to come off ill-mannered, Ludwig, but I really *haven't* the time to spend with you, or any horrid nephew of yours," Greta said with a sniff. "On the subject of fires, I certainly hope you won't try anything like what you did in Frau Nina's shop again."

Ludwig's orange eyes widened in mock-surprise. "Surely you jest. I would never wish to do anything of the sort, for fear of harming the *kind* and *hardworking* people of this good village."

He was mimicking her. She scowled and hurriedly pushed past him, ignoring his cackles. Her good mood had been sullied by Magnus and Ludwig, and she wanted nothing more than to dry off and enjoy the chocolates she'd purchased.

* * *

Even after she'd changed into a fresh, dry dress and sampled two or three of the chocolates from Frau Nina's shop, Greta found herself tense and irritable, pacing around her bedroom. She finally decided to settle her nerves by scrubbing her bedchamber's wooden floor, which was covered with streaks of mud. Calla raced back and forth chasing the bubbles, creating damp, muddy paw prints wherever she ran.

"Mind yourself, Calla."

Calla paused mid-pounce, bowing her head. "But the bubbles are fun."

Greta's expression softened. "You may chase them over there where I haven't scrubbed yet." She scooped a handful of suds and blew them toward the opposite corner near her bed. Calla wiggled her backside and bounded after the bubbles, purring all the while. Greta resumed her task, wiping furiously at the streaks of dirt and grime. After several moments, she began to feel a tingling sensation crawl up her spine, like she was being watched.

"You never stop working, do you?"

Greta bristled at the voice, looking up to see Magnus leaning in the door frame. She paused in her scrubbing

and wiped her damp hands on the cloth of her skirt. "There's always something to be done around here. Not that you would know," she mumbled, dipping the scrub brush into the soapy water once again.

If Magnus had heard her last remark, he didn't acknowledge it. "I wanted to thank you for bringing the flowers home to Aunt Rosa for me. She seems to like them very much."

Greta pretended not to hear, scrubbing the floor vigorously. When he still did not leave, she sighed and said, "Herr Ernst was hoping you could aid us after supper. The bottom step to the cellar is loose."

Magnus grimaced. "I'm afraid it will have to wait until tomorrow. One of my instructors wants me to finish an assignment this evening. I just came back to fetch a few things."

Typical, Greta thought, staring at him incredulously. She rose to her feet, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Just what *is* it you work on day and night that's more important than helping out around here?"

Magnus seemed surprised by her question. "Well, I've finished my arithmetic, Latin, and botany assignments, but I have a still life, a landscape, and a larger-scale version of that drawing I need to complete." He pointed to a place behind her head.

Greta lifted her eyebrows. "A what?"

Magnus smiled. "I'm working on a full-color version of that building sketch right there."

Turning, Greta realized Magnus was pointing to the envelope she'd perched on her window sill. *Magnus drew that?*

"I must say, I'm flattered that you admire my work," Magnus went on. "I thought perhaps Uncle Ernst had thrown it away."

Greta felt her face grow hot. So this was what Magnus did all the time—he was an artist. While she *did* like his work, the fact that he seemed to care about nothing else, not even assisting his aunt and uncle, made her angry.

Magnus checked the pocket watch at his waist. “I’m running late. I hope to see you later,” he said cheerily, disappearing from her doorway.

Greta deftly approached the sill and lifted the envelope. Where once she felt happy and calm at the sight of the lovely little sketch, now she only thought of his arrogance. She shoved the drawing in the drawer of her commode, not wanting to look at it ever again.

* * *

“There.” Greta rose to her feet, testing the bottom step of the cellar staircase.

“You didn’t have to help me with this, Greta,” Ernst said, following her up the stairs and into the store.

If it were up to that layabout, it would never have gotten done, Greta thought, though she knew better than to complain about Magnus to his uncle. “It’s no trouble at all,” she said with a smile, bustling to the stores of sugar and flour to restock the shelves. Busywork helped her whenever she was feeling vexed—something lazy creatures such as Magnus and Ludwig would never understand. As she undid the knot from around the large sack of flour, she began to dwell on her encounter with Ludwig from that afternoon. He was probably at the bonfire now, causing untold strife for any nearby mortals in his wake. Rolling her eyes, she said aloud, “I just hope that drunken kobold never patronizes this store.”

Ernst turned to her, brows raised. “To whom do you

refer?”

“Oh, that old goblin, Ludwig,” she replied with a grunt, wrapping her arms around the girth of the heavy sack and hoisting it in the air over the barrel. “I can only pray he stays away from us. He’d torment you day and night for hiring a goblin—he might make the roof cave in.”

Ernst didn’t seem too concerned, busying himself behind the counter.

Not to be distracted from her poor mood, Greta pressed on, “And he’ll taunt me for not using my powers to perform simple tasks like this.” The last of the flour dumped into the barrel forcefully, covering her shoulders and face with white powder. She coughed, blinking as her lashes stuck together with flour.

Ernst hid his chuckle, passing Greta a cloth from the counter. “There’s nothing wrong with doing things the mortal way.”

Greta wiped the flour from her eyes. “I wish I’d been *born* a mortal,” she said wistfully. “I don’t belong with the other goblins! They make me feel like such an outcast,” she confessed, biting her lip. “I don’t feel truly *satisfied* unless I’ve worked for what I want, and they shun me for it.”

“Goblins have lived in this village for generations,” Ernst said. “In my years, I have met many who were decent and kind.”

Greta looked skeptical, but Ernst pressed on. “Much like you, they lived in harmony with us mortals. They even used their magic to help some of us.” Ernst sighed, stacking cakes of yeast on the shelf. “But, magic, though wondrous and useful, can make some beings tire of labor.”

“Lethargy,” Greta repeated triumphantly, dusting the last of the flour from her braid and tossing the cloth over her shoulder.

Ernst paused to look at her over his spectacles. "It is not just goblins, my child. Many mortals, if given the chance, would fall victim to the temptations of magic."

"This is why I don't want to use my magic anymore," Greta said, placing the wooden lid on the flour barrel.

"It has nothing to do with whether or not you possess the gift, Greta," Ernst insisted. "Every being is victim to temptation, but it is your *character* which guides you to be kind-hearted. You shouldn't force yourself to hide who you are simply because you don't wish to be like the goblins you know."

Greta bit her lip, pondering his words. Before she could reply, Magnus came through the door. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, his appearance putting her in an ill mood once more.

"There's our hardworking student," Ernst said warmly as Magnus undid his coat to hang on the rack.

Greta wrinkled her nose—hardworking was a term she would *never* use to describe Magnus. Magnus smiled and bade her hello, but she just gave a curt nod in reply.

Ernst approached his nephew. "What have you been working on so late, my boy?"

Magnus pulled a sketchbook from his satchel and held it up proudly. Greta's eyes widened as she took in the beautiful sketch of the seaside. Tiny gulls danced over the waves, which seemed to roll off of the page. There was even a small lighthouse perched on craggy rocks in the distance, foam spitting out over the base of the formation.

"Hm," was all Ernst said before he returned his attention to the shelves.

Magnus chuckled. "You know nothing of art, Uncle. Why do I even show you these things?"

Greta inhaled sharply at Magnus' insult, but to her surprise, Ernst laughed robustly. "That is very true."

“Greta, on the other hand, has a keen eye. She’ll be able to give me proper input.” Magnus tilted the sketchbook in her direction. He lifted his eyebrows with a hopeful smile. “Well, Greta?”

Greta wanted to say something about what she was feeling when she looked at his drawing—a sense of joy and tranquility, as if she could smell the salt air—but Magnus’ cruel comment to his uncle rang in her ears. “It looks like you wasted all of your time for nothing,” she said coldly, ignoring the twist of guilt she felt at the hurt expression on Magnus’ face.

“Well, I won’t keep you two,” Magnus said briskly, dropping his eyes to shove the sketchbook back in his satchel. “I’m afraid I have to hurry upstairs and get to more studying. I have an examination in the morning.” He strode up the staircase and out of sight.

Greta stared after him in disbelief. “Wasn’t he meant to mind the store? He doesn’t appreciate *anything* you do for him,” Greta exclaimed to the grocer. The irritation she’d been feeling toward Magnus all this time came burbling out. “He’d fit right in with the goblins—we should trade places! Magic would suit his lazy ways well.”

Ernst regarded her over his spectacles. “Magic can’t save you from everything,” he said sadly.

Greta had never heard the grocer speak so seriously before. “Herr Ernst?”

Ernst cast a glance up the stairwell before continuing softly, “Magnus has had a difficult life, Greta. Though he may not realize, his father was—” He hesitated, staring thoughtfully at Greta.

“Yes?” Greta prodded.

“His father died when Magnus was very young,” Ernst said at last. “He and his mother have struggled on their own ever since. The boy hasn’t had an opportunity for

proper schooling before this, so he's very eager to prove himself in both his academic and artistic endeavors."

Greta thought back to the hurt look in Magnus' honey eyes when she'd dismissed his drawing, and her pangs of guilt increased. Looking back, Ernst *had* been quick to throw away the envelope to Magnus' letter, ignoring the thoughtful drawing his nephew had done for him. Then she furrowed her brow. *Scrap paper is best meant for kindling*, she thought sagely. *He did no wrong*. "He was mocking you," she insisted stubbornly.

She was taken aback when Ernst chuckled. "It was only in *jest*, my dear," he said kindly.

Her expression softened, and she found herself looking up the staircase to where Magnus had gone, her thoughts racing.

* * *

Greta did not see Magnus at all the following day, for which she was very grateful. She'd had trouble sleeping after her conversation with Ernst and couldn't decide whether to apologize for her harsh comment, or avoid him altogether. His absence meant she didn't have to make the choice.

"It's his fault for being so off-putting," Greta grumbled to Calla on her way to their bedroom that evening. She thought of the times she had caught those honey eyes of his watching her, a smile playing on his lips as if he were the keeper to some secret. She shook her head to rid her thoughts of Magnus. "Come along, Calla, I must mend that dress." She paused when there was no reply. "Calla?" Peering all around, she saw no sign of the cat. "Calla?"

A small thump followed by a crash hit her sensitive ears, and she rushed down the hall to discover the door to

Magnus' room was wide open.

Greta found the kitten sitting in the middle of the room, surrounded by an overturned dish and tubes of paint. Calla happily batted one of the tubes around, chattering to herself.

"You naughty girl! Did you do this?"

Calla lifted her eyes guiltily. "The door was open," she said in a small voice. Her paw inched toward the tube of paint again.

"Stop," Greta said firmly, hoisting the kitten around the middle and setting her near the doorway. "We have to clean this up before Magnus notices." She scooped the paint tubes and returned them to the dish. Her eyes began to sweep over the many paintings that sat on easels around her, and she found herself mesmerized. There was a small painting of a forest, with moss climbing up the spindling trees and two deer in the clearing. The next canvas she looked at was larger, and Greta realized with a start that it appeared to be the painted version of the envelope sketch.

Calla had tiptoed over to where Greta stood, gazing at the paintings in wonder. "Oh," she breathed. "Look at the big one!"

Greta turned her attention to the largest canvas of all. There was a long lane lined with tall, narrow shops on either side. Peering at the signs and storefronts, she exclaimed, "It's our village!" She exhaled in wonder as she took in all of the fine details of the scene. There was Minna minding her florist shop with a basket of flowers on the crook of her arm, and a young couple perusing the storefront.

"It's awfully pretty," Calla said with a sigh, her wide eyes staring unblinkingly at the canvas.

"Why thank you, little one."

Greta gasped. “How long have you been standing there?” she asked breathlessly. Then she caught herself, handing him the dish of paint tubes and scooping the kitten up in her arms. “I’m sorry. Calla came in here and—”

Magnus chuckled, setting the dish on a nearby commode. “It’s quite all right. I’m glad to know she likes my painting.”

Greta lifted her eyebrows. “You can *hear* her?”

“He can?” Calla squeaked.

“Of course. It’s no surprise that you bewitched your kitten to speak. You *are* a goblin, after all.” He smiled and gave Calla an affectionate pat. “But she is quite the talker.”

He knows of our kind? Greta began to think back on all the times Calla had spoken in front of Magnus, and she felt her cheeks grow warm. She turned away from him to collect her racing thoughts, gazing at the painted versions of the village shops once more, when she noticed a small, white haired figure in the shadows of one of the alleyways. A long-limbed figure was perched atop the eaves of a building. There was even a miniature version of herself on the step of the grocer’s shop, holding a broom and sweeping painted leaves. She leaned in closer, the paint hitting her senses as she studied the fine, pointed ears Magnus had given her, and the flecks of green he’d added to her hair. “You see my true self?” Greta was surprised, to say the least—the ability to see magic seemed to wane and wither with each passing generation. She had never met a mortal her own age who knew of goblins.

Magnus smiled and nodded. “You must forgive me for staring when we first met. Uncle Ernst had spoken often of you, but he’d never mentioned you were a goblin.” Then he paused. “He might not have realized I, too, can see magic. Mind you, I’ve only met a few goblins in my lifetime. To think this village is full of them! How truly wonderful.”

Greta grunted, thinking of Ursula, Ludwig, and the rest of the horrid lot. “Yes, it’s wonderful,” she said sarcastically. Calla began to wiggle to be let out of her arms, and Greta obliged, watching the kitten trot out of the room. Greta turned to follow, but Magnus’ voice stopped her.

“Are you leaving so soon?” he asked, perching on his wooden stool before the village painting. “I was hoping to ask your opinion.”

Greta found herself staring at the painting before him, drawing nearer. “Yes?”

“You’ve lived in the village far longer than I. Whenever I work on this section”—he motioned to the lower right corner—“something seems to be missing.”

Greta studied the line of shops for a moment before she spoke. “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? You’ve missed a shop. The candy maker is beside the cobbler.”

“Ah, that’s it.” Magnus nodded slowly. “I’ll have to work on that bit. Unless you want to just give it a go.” He held out a paintbrush to her with a lifted brow.

Greta stared at him in disbelief. Work-shy to the very end. He wanted her to do absolutely *everything*! “I don’t use my powers,” she said coldly.

“I just meant for you to try painting the shop the mortal way,” Magnus replied, setting the brush on the table and eying her with a puzzled expression. “You don’t use your magic? What about...?”

“Yes, I did bewitch Calla with the Gift of Gab,” Greta replied tartly. “But I refuse to use my magic frivolously, or to shy out of chores and effort at every turn.”

“And useless things like painting,” Magnus said, a teasing smile on his lips.

Greta, however, did not smile back. *Why is he bothering me with these questions?* “You’re the one who

insists on painting instead of helping in the store. Why should I do the work for you?" Rather than appearing offended, however, Magnus stared at her, looking amused. "What?" she snapped, feeling hot under his stare.

"I've noticed something about you, Greta," Magnus said at last.

Greta lifted one eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You don't really have a sense of humor," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "The other goblins I've met love to laugh and joke, but you... you don't seem to comprehend when someone isn't being serious." His amber eyes, which were reflecting the glow of the lantern, danced with amusement. He was mocking her. This made Greta even more irritated. "Do you even know how to laugh?"

Greta took a step toward him, her own eyes flashing dangerously in the lamp light. "You're just like all of the other goblins. Yes, I have magic, and yes, of course I can laugh—but life isn't all fun and games!"

His eyes widened, the smile fading from his lips. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said quietly. "I only meant to tease. Please accept my apologies."

Greta found she couldn't stand to look into those golden eyes of his any longer. Stepping away quickly, she said, "I have to get on with my mending. Unlike you, I don't have time to waste on silly paintings." In her haste she bumped into a table and knocked the vase that held Magnus' paintbrushes to the ground with a crash. Greta fell to her knees to pick up the shattered mess, hissing when her hasty fingers met the sharp edge of glass.

"Greta!" Magnus dropped to kneel beside her on the floor.

"I didn't mean to break it—I'm sorry," Greta breathed, head bowed as she cradled her injured hand.

"It's all right, it was a cracked vase Aunt Rosa gave

me. Perhaps I shouldn't have used it." He looked to the door. "I could fetch my aunt—"

"It's but a small cut," Greta lied, biting her lip to subdue the pain. "I'm fine."

Magnus stared fretfully at the blood oozing from her fingers. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure." Greta's reply was curt, but she felt a little short of breath. The tearing of cloth met her ears, and her eyes widened as Magnus lifted a torn strip from his shirt. She froze as he turned her bloodied hand over in his, dabbing carefully at the cut with some cotton he'd pulled from the table. She found herself studying his features as a lock of dark hair fell over his eyes as he wrapped the strip of cloth around her wound.

"There." He pulled the fabric around her hand and made a knot. "Is that too tight?"

She inhaled sharply, but not out of pain. She felt her heart hammer as his warm golden eyes took her in.

"Greta?"

All at once, she came to her senses. She pulled her hand from his and cradled her wrist. Scrambling to her feet, she murmured, "I—I have to go."

Once she'd reached her bed chamber, she fastened the door behind her, leaning against it. Though she'd claimed to feel no pain, her entire hand smarted from the wound. Carefully, she unwrapped the cloth from her hand, but realized the wound did require a bandage if it was to heal. Yet she didn't want to have to look at the cloth and remember how tenderly he'd cared for her.

Calla hopped onto the windowsill with a soft meow. "Greta, you're back." Her eyes flicked to Greta's bandaged hand. "And you're hurt!"

"It's nothing, Calla." Greta dismissed the kitten softly. The pain, however, still bothered her. She took a deep

breath and made her decision. Holding her hand aloft, she unwound the bandage once more. *Stop the bleeding*, she commanded, eyes closed and breathing slowed. *Heal the wound*.

After several moments of silence, she gave a start. The familiar tingle of magic hadn't spread from her heart. She opened her eyes. The wound, the blood, all of it was still there.

"Greta, your magic—" Calla began in a worried tone.

Greta scoffed, weaving the cloth around her hand again. "Gone, I suppose." She stepped lightly to the window, seating herself beside Calla. "It's all right. This is what I wanted, after all." Seeing Calla's crestfallen look, Greta forced a smile and stroked the kitten's head with her good hand. "Besides, I used the last of my magic on you. I'll always have you to talk to. That makes me happy."

Calla relaxed and began to purr as Greta gently stroked her and whispered soothing words. When Calla was fast asleep on her lap, Greta cast her eyes to the rooftops outside. The wind picked up and several leaves fell from the tree just outside her window. "This is what I wanted," she repeated firmly.

* * *

The following morning when Greta came down to help Rosa in the kitchen, the elderly woman noticed Greta's bandage almost immediately.

"Child!" Rosa clucked her tongue worriedly. "You shouldn't work today."

Greta's brows lifted as she stammered, "But I'm fine, Frau Rosa!"

Rosa's gentle expression turned stern. "Now, how do you expect to tend the store with your hand like that? You

work far too hard, love. First, I'll see to giving that wound a proper dressing, and then I want you to rest. Perhaps take a stroll around the village. The fresh air will do you and that hand some good."

Seeing the severe look in Rosa's gaze, Greta relented, following the elderly woman into the washroom. "However did you cut yourself in the first place?"

All at once, the events from the night before flashed in Greta's mind—Magnus' chamber, his paintings, his voice, his eyes... She shook her head. "I picked up a broken piece of glass."

"You should have come right to me," Rosa went on, pouring warm water over Greta's hand. "Magnus is no doctor."

Greta's eyes lifted sharply. "Magnus?"

Rosa smiled knowingly. "This bandage is from the shirt I mended for him last week. I wonder if I would be able to mend it now?"

"Oh." Greta's face suddenly felt very warm.

"There." Rosa tied off the clean dressing. "Off with you, then."

Greta was about to follow out of the washroom when her eyes cast back to the strip of Magnus' shirt that hadn't been sullied by the wound. Unbidden, his smiling eyes flashed through her mind. She tucked the strip of cloth into the waist of her skirt, dismissing her thoughts and hurrying out the door.

The brisk autumn wind blew her hair and her cloak about during her stroll through the cobbled streets. Try as she might, she couldn't calm her racing thoughts—or her heart.

Her steps slowed as she saw Magnus in the shop across the way. She took a deep breath and strode quickly, hoping he wouldn't take notice.

“Greta!” Magnus waved and hastened his steps to catch up with her.

Greta cleared her throat, pulling her cloak closer to her body. “What brings you out this early?”

“Just taking a break from my lessons.” Magnus fell into step beside her, and Greta tried to ignore the mixture of emotions she was feeling when his arm bumped hers.

“How are you feeling?”

Reddening, Greta stared at him wordlessly.

Magnus lifted an eyebrow. “Is your hand any better?”

Feeling foolish, Greta dropped her gaze. “It’s fine.”

“It may feel better with some sweets,” Magnus said with a small smile, pulling a bar of chocolate from his coat. His eyes sparkled with merriment as he stared at her.

Heart hammering, Greta wanted to turn and run from his watchful gaze, but her incurable love of sweets won out. He broke off a few squares and dropped them into her open palm. As the chocolate passed her lips and melted on her tongue, she felt her mood calm. “Thank you.”

Magnus’ face broke into a grin. “You’re very welcome.” They walked along in amiable silence, the dried leaves crunching beneath their boots. “Has Aunt Rosa sent you on an errand?”

Greta shook her head. “No. She told me to take the day to rest my hand.”

“I can’t think of anyone who deserves some respite more than you, Greta,” Magnus said seriously. “You work very hard.”

Greta smiled at his praise. “Well, there’s always work to be done.” She found herself relaxing. “What are you studying today, Magnus?” But he had stepped ahead of her, staring at the balcony of the shop next door. Greta followed his stare to see that a flower pot was inching over the edge. She saw with panic that Frau Minna was

sweeping the stoop below.

“Look out—”

Magnus darted under the line of the flower pot and pushed Minna out of the way. “What in the world...?” Minna began to cry out, until the deafening crash hit her ears. Her eyes widened as she stared at the wreckage on the street. “Why, young man—that pot could have—and you...”

Greta watched for a moment as Magnus spoke with Minna before she lifted her eyes to Ludwig, who was perched on the florist shop’s roof watching the scene unfold. She set her jaw and hurried to the side of the shop and up the winding staircase.

“Ludwig!” she cried when she reached the roof, storming toward him. “You could have killed that poor woman. What in the world were you thinking?”

Ludwig tucked his knobby knees under his pointed chin. “Come now, Greta, just having a bit of fun. It’s been days since I’ve played with the mortals.”

Greta could practically feel her temperature rise as she seethed with anger and disbelief. “Your cruel stunts *aren’t* what anyone would call playing. Mortals can’t heal themselves the way goblins can!”

Ludwig’s bright orange eyes narrowed as they settled on Greta. “Why didn’t you stop me, then? Had to let that uppity mortal do it for you. Too good to use your magic?”

She inhaled sharply, a weak and powerless feeling washing over her. Nevertheless, she stood her ground, lifting a finger threateningly at him. “Don’t let me catch you doing that again.”

Ludwig eyed her bandaged hand. “And too proud to even mend your wound? If you bleed like ‘em, suddenly you’re one of ‘em?”

Greta made a disgruntled sound, turning her back on

the goblin to watch Magnus speak with Frau Minna in the street below. She smiled to herself, grateful Magnus had noticed the flower pot when he had.

“Maybe *bleeding* isn’t the only way you want to be like the mortals,” Ludwig said shrewdly as he watched Greta. “No wonder our little Greta doesn’t go with goblin lads. She wants the mortal boy to love her, so she tries to pretend she’s not different from them.”

Feeling her cheeks grow hot at his accusation, Greta tried to form a quick retort to deny his words.

“Greta,” Magnus called as he hurried up the wooden stairs.

Greta felt her heart give a funny leap at his voice, and she hoped with all of her might that he hadn’t heard what Ludwig had said.

When he reached the rooftop, Magnus approached Greta. “What happened? I was wondering where you’d run off to...” He paused, his eyes landing on Ludwig. “Oh, my apologies, I didn’t realize you weren’t alone.” He held out his hand to Ludwig. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, good sir. My name is Magnus.”

Ludwig recoiled, hopping off of the ledge and adjusting his long silken sleeves. “The—the mortal can see me?”

Greta scowled at him, but Magnus chuckled amicably. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I can. I’ve seen you around quite often, but never had the chance to introduce myself.” His hand was still extended to Ludwig in greeting. The goblin stared into Magnus’ golden eyes, frowning thoughtfully. Grudgingly, he clasped Magnus’ hand for a long moment, before recoiling as if he’d been burned.

Magnus cocked his head, clearly puzzled. “I promise being mortal isn’t catching,” he teased in a light tone.

After staring at Magnus several moments longer,

Ludwig at last turned his pensive gaze toward Greta. "You're even blinder than I thought," he whispered hoarsely, turning on his heel and disappearing into thin air. What he had meant, Greta hadn't the faintest idea. Magnus wasn't blind to magic like other mortals, as he had clearly just proved.

"He seems... interesting," Magnus remarked with a chuckle. "Does he prefer to stay perched on rooftops to watch us mortals below?"

"That and drop flowerpots on their heads," Greta replied, forgetting the odd exchange they'd just had for a moment.

"That was him?" His features paled as he realized the seriousness of the situation.

"Yes, Magnus. Ludwig could have killed Frau Minna," Greta said severely. "This is why I don't like to associate with other goblins. They use their powers to make mortals suffer."

"While I see your point of view, Greta, I know not all goblins are like that," Magnus replied gently.

The wind picked up, strands of black and green hair whipping in Greta's face. "How do you know?"

Magnus gave a soft smile, lifting his hand to push the hair behind her pointed ear. "Because you're not."

Heart hammering, Greta followed Magnus down the staircase, Ludwig's words ringing in her ears.

* * *

The following days were spent avoiding Magnus at every turn. Her hand healed, but slowly, and a knot formed in Greta's stomach as she thought about what it all meant—her magic, Magnus, what Ludwig had said—but she tried to dismiss those ridiculous thoughts. She'd renounced

her heritage long ago; the butterflies and the racing heart had everything to do with losing her magic and nothing to do with Magnus.

Due to her injury, Rosa had encouraged her to refrain from work as much as possible to speed the healing along, which gave Greta bounds of free time she was unaccustomed to. Magnus had seemed eager to accompany her when she went on walks in the village, so she'd taken to spending her afternoons and evenings holed up in her bed chamber with nothing but Calla and her swirling emotions to keep her company.

"Why do you look so sad, Greta?" Calla asked her one evening after Greta reached the staircase landing on the way to her bedchamber.

Greta stared down the hall at Magnus' closed door. The lantern light shone through the keyhole and under the door jam, showing he was there. "I'm just tired, little one." A part of her longed to draw nearer, to—

Greta's heart leapt when his door opened, and he poked his head into the hallway. "I stopped in Frau Nina's sweet shop on my way home," he began, not looking Greta in the eye, "And I realize I purchased far too many chocolates. Would you be interested in some?"

It was a feeble attempt at conversation that Greta saw through straight away. Yet she couldn't bear the thought of another evening spent holed up in her bedchamber. She cursed the fact that Magnus was privy to her love of sweets. "I suppose I might." She tried to keep her voice nonchalant as she approached his chamber.

Greta slowly unwrapped the chocolate Magnus handed her as she stood before his easel, trying to ignore her thrumming heart. As she let the sweet treat melt in her mouth, she stared at the village scene. "You finished the candy maker's shop!" she exclaimed, turning to Magnus

with a smile.

Magnus smiled back, but he seemed different, somehow. For the first time, Greta noticed the dark circles under his eyes. "Have you been sleeping well?" she asked.

Magnus shrugged, perching on the stool. "I really wanted to finish this piece, but I haven't cracked it yet."

"Why do you work so hard on something like this?" Greta wondered, genuinely confused. Wasn't art just meant to be leisure? She'd always thought him work-shy, but the hours he'd spent on these paintings showed otherwise.

"Because it makes people happy," Magnus replied simply. "Beauty... art... can breathe magic into life. Even when it's hard. Even when it's frightening." He rose to his feet, stepping closer to Greta. "When my father died, my mother was so *sad* every day. She tried hard to be strong for me, but it was as if a part of her had died with him." He lifted the gold pocket watch at his belt and ran his thumb over the face, and Greta realized it must have belonged to his late father. "My father painted in his spare time and taught me to paint when I was a child. At first when he passed away, I wanted to throw away all of my paintings, because the thought of painting without Papa hurt so much."

"What stopped you?" Greta asked softly.

"My mother loved his paintings," Magnus said, lifting his eyes to look at Greta. "She loved *my* paintings. I couldn't take them from her. When I finally decided to take it up again, my mother began to smile again. Each time I painted something for her, it made her happy that I was carrying on his legacy, and we both felt closer to him. Whenever I would feel sad about my father, I would just envision us side by side, working on a canvas." Magnus smiled, his honey eyes lighting up. "It was... magical."

Greta exhaled, thinking about her own magic, or lack thereof. “Magical...”

“Your magic is also a wonderful gift, Greta,” Magnus whispered, staring into her eyes. “Like giving Calla the power to speak. You bring magic into mortals’ gray and dull lives. You shouldn’t hide who you are because some goblins squander their gift.” He shook his head, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. “That’s... that’s *life*, isn’t it? Mortal or goblin. You choose how to make use of your time—and your talents.”

Greta found his words resonated with her. Maybe she’d been wrong—about her magic, other goblins, Magnus—everything. Yet the stubborn streak in her made it irresistible to add, “I understand that your paintings and schoolwork are important to you, but family should be, too. Why don’t you repay Frau Rosa and Herr Ernst’s kindness by offering more help?”

Magnus chuckled incredulously, lifting his eyebrows. “You never give up, do you? But you’re right. I don’t want to take advantage of them.”

Greta smiled, turning her attention back to the village scene. Staring at the painted version of herself, taking in her tiny goblin features, she gave a shuddering sigh.

“Are you all right?” Magnus asked in alarm.

Greta bit her lip. “I just have a lot weighing on my mind,” she whispered. “That’s all.”

“You work too hard,” Magnus said seriously. “You’ve wound yourself too tight with everything you do—you need something to relieve the tension. Painting always calms *me*—have you ever tried it?”

She shook her head wordlessly, taking the paintbrush Magnus offered her and positioning herself in front of the canvas.

“Painting isn’t really all that hard,” he said softly,

stepping closer to her so that he was looking over her shoulder. "I just watch the world as it goes by, and let it flow through my brush." His hand curled around hers, moving the brush across a blank part of the canvas.

Greta turned, her face so close to his, she became lightheaded. Eyes locked with his, she vaguely felt a tingling in her fingers as she distractedly moved the brush against the surface.

"You've got a knack for that," Magnus said with admiration. Greta finally tore her eyes from him to look back at the canvas. Where she thought she'd made a simple brush stroke, a detailed rooftop with curvature had appeared. *Did I...?*

"Keep going," Magnus urged, withdrawing his hand from hers to rest it on her shoulder. "Add whatever you'd like."

Greta frowned, wondering what she—a complete novice—could add to the beautiful painting. She cocked her head as she studied one of the painted shops. "There should be flower boxes here." She gestured to the upstairs balcony with the brush. In a flurry of glimmering dust, tiny flower boxes with red and pink blooms appeared on the canvas. She gasped. "By the stars!"

"That's wonderful, Greta," Magnus exclaimed with a grin.

"Y-You don't understand." She took a step back from the canvas, dropping the paintbrush on the table as if she'd been burned. "I thought my magic was gone forever." Seeing Magnus' worried expression, she elaborated. "Normally, I have the ability to heal wounds, but I couldn't." As she uttered the words, her hand—which still had a long, thin scar from her injury—began to glow. "Look!" As the scar vanished from her skin, she giggled. "Why is it coming back in such force?" Her green eyes shone with confusion

as she looked at Magnus. “Just this morning, I felt so weak...”

“Perhaps you’ve been feeling torn between mortals and goblins for so long that your guilt started suppressing your magic,” Magnus suggested. “And doing something that you enjoy stirs the magic within.”

His words stirred something else in Greta, and she found herself drawing into him. Their faces mere inches apart, Greta’s heart thrummed with adrenaline as her eyes slipped closed.

“Greta!”

Magnus and Greta jumped apart at Rosa’s shout up the staircase. Shaking her head, Greta quickly stepped away from Magnus. “I... I should go,” she said in a dazed voice.

Magnus smiled softly, bidding her goodnight as she slipped through the door and away from him.

* * *

Magic All Around

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Greta was surprised when she came down the next morning to find Magnus in the kitchen surrounded by baking supplies. Taking in the flour that dusted his shirt and even some of his dark hair, it appeared that he’d been there for some time.

He looked up just then, catching Greta’s eye and smiling. Cheeks flushing, she smiled back, about to say something when Rosa came bustling in. “Good morning, Greta. Could you be a dear and get the porridge on? Magnus and I almost have this batch of bread finished.”

The morning passed quickly as Magnus helped his uncle move heavy crates in the storeroom while Greta

assisted the customers. He eventually came into the store and announced that he would be leaving for his lessons shortly. "But before I go, Aunt Rosa, I wanted to give you this." He reached into the broom cupboard and pulled out a flat parcel wrapped in brown paper.

Greta watched with interest as Rosa carefully tore open the paper to reveal the painting of the forest clearing. It was much more detailed than when Greta had last seen it, the fawn's white spots glistening as Rosa held the canvas up to the light.

"Oh, Magnus," Rosa exclaimed, growing misty-eyed, "it's beautiful!" She held it up proudly for Ernst and Greta to see.

Ernst chuckled, coming to stand beside his nephew. "Now I know I haven't an eye for art, but that is a fine painting." He clapped Magnus' shoulder. "Your father would be proud."

Magnus grinned, catching Greta's eye. Cheeks flushing, she smiled in return.

"I'll hang it over the mantle," Rosa declared, laying the painting on the table.

"I'd better hurry and clean up for my lessons," Magnus told them, heading for the staircase. Greta found herself staring after him.

"Would you take care of some errands for me, Greta?" Rosa asked, pressing a list into Greta's palm.

Greta nodded, pulling her cloak from the hook by the door and kissing Calla on the head as she left.

Stepping out onto the street, Greta had to shield her face as a strong wind picked up, blowing the leaves many of the shopkeepers had so carefully swept into piles every which way. Greta tucked the list into the inner pocket of her cloak to keep it from blowing away.

"Greta!" She turned at his voice, smiling to herself as

Magnus hurried toward her.

Greta paused, waiting until he'd reached her to resume walking side by side. "That was a very sweet thing you did," Greta said. "Frau Rosa loved the painting."

"I'd meant to give it to her when I first arrived, but I was stuck," Magnus told her. "I'm pleased I was able to finish it at last." He slowed his steps, turning to face her. "I finally found the inspiration I needed."

Greta felt her cheeks grow warm at his meaning. Her long black and green hair blew about in the wind, and Magnus smiled, lifting his hand to push a lock of hair away from her face. "Perhaps I'll see you this evening?"

Gazing into his eyes, Greta nodded, her heart hammering. Magnus smiled and pulled away, walking down the lane. As Greta lifted her hand, she could see her fingers tingling, bits of light coming off them. She glanced around to ensure no one was watching. Thankfully, there was only one shopkeeper about, and he was busily pulling down the dried herbs that were being beaten by the gale. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm her racing heart and focus on her errands.

The sun was slipping beneath the trees when Greta finally made her way back to the grocer's shop. Though her arms were laden with packages, she found herself hurrying down the cobbled street, a sense of excitement she hadn't felt in ages fluttering within her.

When she drew closer, she knew something was wrong. A small crowd was gathered in front of the grocer's home. Her heart raced when she caught a strong scent. Smoke.

Looking up, she saw black clouds billowing out of one of the windows of the second story. Ernst and Rosa's home—*her* home—was on fire!

"Greta, thank goodness." Rosa hurried from the

crowd toward her. Greta's nerves relaxed a bit when she saw Calla was snug in Rosa's arms, eyes as big as saucers, but no worse for the wear. Ernst was in the small crowd talking to Frau Minna and some of the other shopkeepers.

But Magnus...

Rosa could sense Greta's unspoken fear. "The boy's not back from his class yet," she said, patting her arm.

After her initial relief, Greta's heart sank as she saw flames whip out from the upstairs window. The fire was in Magnus' bedchamber.

His paintings.

Amidst shouts and protests, Greta rushed to the burning building and burst through the front door. Looking around wildly, she saw that the fire seemed to be contained to the second floor, at least so far. She pulled her handkerchief from her skirt, covering her nose and mouth as she hurried up the staircase. Ignoring her racing thoughts—which told her that this was stupid, senseless, irrational—she ran to the end of the hall and tried for the knob. Cursing when the handle scorched her hand, she closed her eyes and said a spell under her breath. Her hand went numb, and she was able to pass through the threshold with no feeling.

The flames leapt all around the small room, but Greta rushed to the easels, pulling his paintings free and tucking them under her arms. A line of fire was trickling ever closer, and Greta narrowed her eyes, extinguishing it. Feeling a rush of power, she held her hands aloft. *I wish the fire was out. Disappear, wicked flames!* A few of the smaller flames whimpered and hissed as they vanished, but to Greta's horror, one of the beams gave way and fell to the floor, blocking her path to freedom. The fire whipped up, ensnaring Greta in a circle of flame.

“Greta!”

Greta looked to one of the small windows that hung high up the wall and saw her kitten had somehow managed to climb the side of the building. Calla crouched, as if she were about to leap to her mistress’ side.

“Calla, get outside!” Greta screamed. She fell to her knees, coughing as the heat and smoke overtook her. “It’s not safe—go!”

To Greta’s relief, Calla turned and fled through the window. Greta shrieked as chunks of burning wood fell from the ceiling. She wrapped her arms tightly around the stack of paintings and sketches, trying with all of her might to summon her powers, feeling dizzy by the moment. *If I can’t save the whole building, if I can’t save myself, please may I be able to save his beautiful works.* While she could feel her powers, the smoke made her too weak, and she could muster no more spells. She thought of Magnus’ handsome, smiling face as the world burned around her.

“Greta, are you in here?”

Greta looked in disbelief to the blocked door when she heard Magnus’ voice.

Coughing, she cried, “No, Magnus! The fire is on the other side—you’ll be trapped, too!”

“I don’t care!” A loud crash hit Greta’s ears. The door had somehow been hurled off its hinges to the floor, and Greta watched with awe as Magnus burst into the room, honey eyes glowing with cat-like slits for pupils, just like her own eyes. *Did Magnus just...?*

Magnus saw her trapped in the circle and hurried toward her, reaching over the beam as the flames seemed to shrink around him. “I’ve got you.”

Greta relinquished one hand from its protective grasp around the paintings, extending it toward him. As their hands clasped, a bright spark swept throughout the room,

blinding both of them.

When the light finally faded, Greta looked about in wonder. “Magnus...” she breathed. “The fire is out. And you—you just used magic!” It all made sense now as the pieces of the puzzle came together in her mind—the surge of power she felt from his paintings, her conversation with Ernst, Ludwig’s cryptic message... Magnus’ father had been a goblin.

“We just used magic,” Magnus corrected, shoulders rising and falling heavily with adrenaline. He cupped her cheeks in his hands. “Are you all right? Calla raced out and told me that you had run inside and were trapped. What were you doing in here?”

“I...” Gently, Greta released her hold on his paintings and sketches.

Magnus chuckled incredulously, unable to hide the smile that was spreading on his face. “You came for these?”

Greta bit her lip. “I couldn’t let them burn.”

Chuckling, Magnus asked in a teasing voice, “So these paintings aren’t a waste of time?”

When she shook her head, Magnus grinned and touched his forehead to hers.

Pulling back, Greta sighed and looked at the wreckage around them. “I’ll never forgive them,” she cursed.

Magnus rested his hands on her elbows, looking at Greta with a frown. “Who?”

“Ludwig,” she hissed. “Or Ursula—whoever it was that started this fire and almost destroyed your beautiful paintings.”

“Greta, it wasn’t a goblin,” Magnus broke in, casting his eyes to the floor. “The fire was my fault. I realized it when I came in—I left the candle by my painting supplies.”

Eyes widening, Greta looked to his tabouret, seeing that the candle was tipped over, the end scorched. She realized that the window had been open—the gust of wind must have knocked the candle over.

“I shouldn’t have left it lit, or so close to my materials,” he admitted. “I was careless. You’ve been right about me all along.”

Greta shook her head, squeezing his hand. “I was wrong about a lot of things.” Looking into his eyes, she confessed, “What you said is true—I can believe in a hard day’s work without losing who I am.”

Magnus smiled. “Then are you going to let the magic live on inside of you?” He lifted her hand in his, and she felt the sparks of magic fly off of his fingertips and surge into her veins.

“I will as long as you do,” Greta teased.

“You’ll have to teach me.” Magnus tucked a strand of hair behind her pointed ear as he spoke. “After all, I *am* still a novice.” He looked around at the charred beams in the bedchamber. “I doubt I could manage fixing this all by myself.”

Her cat-like eyes danced as she reached out to touch his cheek. “I suppose we’ll just have to add this to your daily lessons.”

Magnus grinned, weaving his fingers in her dark hair as he pulled her in for a lingering kiss.

THE TIME THIEVES | Selenia Paz

I wrapped the flannel shirt around myself, the sleeves too big for my skinny arms. The other children ran and chased each other and I watched them, shivering while I waited for my grandfather. The tent loomed in front of me, the *papel picado* almost glowing, the only brightness in the gray of the day. The sun, what could be seen of it, would set in a few hours and the dancing and laughter would start. The breads would be passed around, the guitars would be strummed, and the singing—and crying—for loved ones would wake up the night.

Las Tres Hermanas was one of the many tents that was set up outside the cemetery every year, its proprietors hoping to make a few hundred pesos during the three day festivities, if they were lucky. The wax candles in front of the tent were already burning, the wax dripping slowly down the sides. The tent opening flapped in the wind, beckoning.

I stepped forward, then stopped. My grandfather's words passed softly through my mind. "*En unos minutos regreso.*" My eyes had flickered to the sign above the colorful tent. "*Tu no necesitas ese tipo de ayuda.*" He would still be a few minutes, having run back a few streets to the house to get the books we would spend reading to my grandmother that night. It had grown cold so quickly, so

he had promised to bring back a blanket as well.

I felt the coins in my pocket and they made a jingling noise as I shook them. I took a step forward, but was pushed back, falling flat on my back in the dirt. A man had rushed out of the tent, his hair gray and wild, his eyes wide as he saw me. For a moment he stopped to stare at me, his mouth open slightly. He shook his head as he backed away, then as quickly as he had come out of the tent, he rushed forward and grabbed my shirt.

"No," he whispered. "No."

He backed away again, this time moving toward the street. "It was me, it was me, it was me," he repeated as he grabbed at his shirt. He turned and ran away, only a few people stopping to notice him. I felt a hand grab my shoulder, and I turned and looked up to see a tall dark-haired woman with the blackest eyes looking down at me.

"*Listo?*" she asked. She gestured toward the tent, and I nodded and walked through the opening. Two other women sat around the table, a deck of cards at the center.

"It took you long enough," one of them screeched, her red nails tapping impatiently on the table.

"I am Amana, and these are my sisters, Marzia and Catalina," the tall dark haired woman said, gesturing first toward the red-haired woman, and then toward the third, who nodded. I nodded back and stood looking around the room, the gold shimmer of the cloth hanging on the tent walls mesmerizing me with its shine.

"What can we do for you?" Catalina's deep, low voice sounded like a warning, a threat. She narrowed her eyes and stared at my dirty pants and my too-large shirt, ripped near the bottom button.

"Never mind *that*," Marzia said, laughing, almost cackling. "How much you have determines how much you get. So, how much?" She pointed a long red fingernail

toward my pocket, and I felt a sharp jab on my leg.

"I...I..." I couldn't find my voice. I took the coins out of my pocket and handed them to Amana.

"Sixteen *pesos*," Amana said to her sisters. Marzia let out a sharp, quick laugh.

"And what's this?" Amana asked, looking at one large coin.

"An old silver coin, from America," I said, my voice quiet.

"And how on Earth did you get this coin?" Marzia laughed. "Did you steal it?"

Catalina's voice rasped out, "Quiet, Marzia. Control your laugh and let the boy talk."

All three sisters looked at me. "My grandfather, he gave it to me. He used to work for a rich man, in America. He had a lot just like that, he said."

"So your grandfather's the one that stole it, eh, boy?" Marzia cackled.

"Enough, Marzia," Catalina slammed her palm on the table.

"No, he said the man just left one day, and dropped it. He tried to follow him, to give it back, and he waited, but the man was gone." I started to back away, looking at the coins Amana still held in her hand.

"Sixteen *pesos* and one silver coin, what do you say sisters?" Amana asked, looking over at her sisters.

"I say we keep them all and send the little rat back out in the cold. That's not enough for even a new blanket or a set of candles," Marzia said sharply.

Catalina looked over at her, then back at me. "Why are you here, boy?"

"I...I..." I hesitated again.

"Out with it, boy!" Marzia shouted.

"You grant wishes," I said quickly.

“Wishes?” Catalina asked. “And who told you that?”

“You’re the three sisters, they talk about you in the neighborhood. You come every year and you can grant wishes,” I said.

Amana lifted her hand up before Catalina could ask another question.

“And what is your wish?” she asked me.

I saw Marzia examining my dirty pants and my torn shirt.

“I wish...I wish what everybody wishes for,” I said softly.

“And what is that?” Amana asked.

Catalina stood. “The boy doesn’t know what he wants, look at him. You take your money and go on. All we do is read the cards, and you don’t even have enough money for that.”

Marzia grabbed Catalina’s hand. “Oh, he has enough. Look, I’m getting tired. Look at how young he is. Once we finish I’ll feel a lot better and be less irritable.”

“But he doesn’t even know what he wants yet,” Catalina replied angrily.

“They never do,” Amana said softly.

She turned, her eyes hovering over my face. “Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to a small chair on one side of the table. I walked to it and sat, my feet making a shuffling noise on the soft carpet.

Amana dropped some coins into a glass bowl, but placed the silver coin in front of me. “Keep that one,” she said as she pulled up a chair and sat between her two sisters.

She moved the cards aside and gestured for me to place my hands on the table, flipping them over so the palms would be facing up.

“I thought I didn’t have enough money,” I said, looking

down at the silver coin in front of me.

"Nobody ever does, do they?" Amana replied.

Catalina reached over, about to grab her sister's hand. "Don't forget, Catalina." Amana spoke and Catalina's hand stopped and she placed it down on her lap.

"Oh, just get on with it!" Marzia said, annoyed.

"Tell us about yourself," Amana said in a quiet voice.

I frowned. What if Grandfather came back and couldn't find me?

"So you have a grandfather. Is he the only family you have?" Amana asked.

I pulled my hands back quickly, uncertain whether I had spoken aloud.

"No, you didn't. But I heard you anyway," Amana said, answering my silent question.

"If we can grant wishes, boy, then don't you think we could do other things? These children are getting more and more stupid every year," Marzia complained.

"Go on," Amana said.

"I, yes, I live with my grandfather. My grandmother died a long time ago, and my parents, they left," I answered.

"Left?" Amana asked.

"They left you," Catalina said, not asking.

"Yes," I said.

"How sad," Amana said, but I could sense she was bored, and her sympathy for me almost seemed like a mask that made her face blur.

Marzia rolled her eyes. "Go on, go on," she said with a few quick waves of her hand. "You're poor like half the people in this town, I'm sure, and want us to do something about it."

"Can you?" I asked. "I've heard...I've heard people talk about the wishes their family members have made,

how they are so great, so many riches and things that they get, that they never return to this sad town. Is that true?"

Catalina sighed.

"Oh, it's true," Amana replied, her eyes widening.

"What people ask for, we give. What can we give you?"

"Sisters—" Catalina began.

"Shush! Let the boy answer!" Amana's sharp voice startled me, and I rose a little from my chair.

"It's all right, Catalina is just tired, that's all. Once we finish working tonight and get some rest, she'll wake up feeling at least ten years younger. Now, what can we do for you?"

"But, is sixteen *pesos* enough? I won't owe you anything, will I? Because my grandfather—"

Amana cut me off. "Oh, don't worry about that. Now, what is the wish you would like us to grant you?"

My head turned, my ear straining to listen. I rose from my chair again. "I'd better go, I think my grandfather..." I began.

"Your grandfather, is he sick?" Amana asked quickly.

"How do you know that? I didn't think it," I said, the response coming out shaky, afraid.

"Oh, people talk all the time," Marzia replied. "We hear all the gossip from this tent. You wouldn't believe what people confess to us. Why, just last year—"

"Marzia!" Amana said impatiently, and Marzia stopped talking.

"Amana, the boy is good, we can't get him—" Catalina began.

Amana turned her head sharply and narrowed her eyes. All three sisters grew quiet, as if a silent communication had passed between them.

"But you need money? To help him?" Amana asked, her voice soft again.

“That was all my money,” I said, looking at the silver coins in the clear bowl.

“And you want more, so you can help your grandfather?” Amana asked.

“Amana, that is not fair!” Catalina said, her voice rising.

“Is that what your wish was? What everyone wants? Money?” Amana asked, rising from her chair until she was standing straight, tall.

“Is it?!” Marzia yelled.

“Yes, that is what I wanted to ask for. Money, to give to my grandfather,” I answered, backing away from them now.

I had almost reached the tent opening when Amana raised her hand. “We can give you that.”

“But it’s for his grandfather,” Catalina said, her voice breaking.

“What a fool,” Marzia said, shaking her head.

Amana came around the table and placed her hand on my shoulder. “It was a pleasure doing business with you again.”

I felt a sharp pain as she grabbed my shoulder and shook it, first slowly then fast, her nails piercing my skin.

* * *

My eyes opened and a woman with dark brown hair was looking down at me, shaking me slightly. She moved back when she saw my eyes and placed her hand on her chest. “For a moment I...” she said, but then trailed off.

I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain shot up my back.

“I’ll get your medicine, sir,” she said, and ran into another room where I could hear her moving things around. I managed to move myself up with my hands as

she came rushing back into the room with a glass of water and two small pills in her hand.

"Where am I?" I asked, my voice low and rough. I touched my throat. Was I sick?

My hands felt dry and I brought them up to my face, but they were no longer small and brown. They were large and pale and covered in little hairs. I moved my back forward but another shot of pain ran up my spine to my head.

"Sir, you have to take your medicine, for the pain."

I looked up at the woman waiting next to my bed, the glass in one hand and the pills in another.

"What is this?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"Your medicine, sir. You know you have to take it every morning."

"Where am I?" I asked, and she shook her head slowly.

"Your memory, it's getting worse every day," she said.

"Where am I, please?" I said, the deep rough voice cracking.

"At home, sir, in your bedroom," she said, her eyes looking me over.

"No, no, what is this? This..." I said, raising my hands and shaking them. "Where am I? Who is this? Where is my body, my own body?" I started thrashing on the bed, the pain in my back becoming unbearable.

"Help!" the woman yelled. "Help! Please!"

The sound of footsteps grew louder and a man in a black suit and hat entered the room. He rushed to the bed and pinned my arms down, yelling at the woman, "Give him all the medicine now! Hurry!"

I felt my mouth fill with water and I struggled to swallow it all down. I felt some of it spill over onto my shirt, the liquid cold against my skin.

“What is this?” I coughed. “Who are you? What am I doing here? Please...”

“He’s getting worse,” I heard the woman say.

“I don’t know how much longer we can keep him here, this way,” the man replied.

The woman covered me with the blanket before leaving, whispering, “It will be all right, sir. Your medicine will make you better, just wait.”

I closed my eyes but was too afraid to touch my face or any part of myself, too afraid to see that whatever I was, I was not me. The pain in my back disappeared slowly, and soon I found I could move from the left side of the bed to the right with no pain. I sat up slowly and moved my legs over the side of the bed, unable to overlook their large size and the blue pants that were not mine.

I walked over to the open room from where the woman had brought the water and medicine, a small white bathroom, and turned on the bright light. My heart beat quickly but I was too afraid to lay my hand on my chest, too afraid to have my hands rub any part of this body and confirm again that it was not mine.

There was a small square mirror above the sink, and I stood for a few moments, afraid to get any closer to it. With a sigh I moved in front of it quickly and looked in. There was a pale face staring back, with a white and gray mustache and matching hair. Small brown age spots dotted the neck, and there were wrinkles everywhere. I reached up to touch the face, but stopped when I saw it right in front of my eyes, the hand of a stranger.

I didn’t hear the click of the bedroom door and only turned when the woman cleared her throat.

“Sir, do you need me to call the doctor?” she asked quietly.

I shook my head. “Where am I?”

She sighed. "Sir, I..."

"No, I don't mean this bedroom. I mean where is this house? Where in the world? And who am I? Who is this person?"

She gave me a strange look and backed away a few steps.

"Sir, you are in your home, in California. You own this house and this land," she replied.

"This is the wrong me. The wrong body. This is not mine," I said, my voice getting louder. She stepped back a few more steps, almost nearing the door. "Please, please don't, don't go," I said, lifting the strange hand up. I could see it shaking in front of me, but I hoped she didn't notice, hoped she wouldn't run away.

My face felt warm and I felt the tears building up inside of me, the desperation. Maybe it's only a dream, a horrible nightmare. Such a real nightmare, I thought.

"Please. I just, yesterday, last night, I think, I...I was with my grandfather at the cemetery. We were going to visit my grandmother's grave during the Dia de los Muertos celebrations, and I stepped into the *Tres Hermanas* tent, just for a moment while he went to get some things. Then, then they said they would help me, grant my wish for money for my grandfather, because he is sick. And then, then I woke up here, but this...this body, it is not mine. I—I am twelve. I don't know, please, please help me..."

The woman was quiet for a moment, and I thought if she didn't speak my tears would escape along with the desperation in my chest.

"Sir," she finally began. "That was just a dream."

"No, no, it was not a dream. It was my life. It is my life. How can I be in California today if I was in Mexico yesterday?" My throat felt strangled and I wished I would

wake up from this place, wherever it was.

The woman laughed a little. "Sir, how is that possible? How could you be in Mexico if you don't even speak Spanish?"

A heavy dread filled my chest as I realized she was talking to me in English.

* * *

I stopped talking after that. When they asked me if I wanted water, juice, milk with my toast, I never replied, never even nodded my head. I was too afraid to hear the truth, hear the English slide off my tongue as easily as the Spanish once had. Every morning I took my medicine, waited until my back was able to move, my legs able to walk.

I looked over the vast fields that they said were mine. Oranges and peaches, miles and miles. Estelle, who said she had worked for me for twenty years, showed me the pictures in the drawing room, pictures of people who had been my friends. When I mustered up the courage to ask her about my family, she simply shook her head and said I had always been alone. "No grandfather?" I had asked. But she had looked at me sadly and said no. Estelle brought me the newspaper every day, told me I liked to read the *Peanuts* strip.

"Hard to believe that man has been making that cartoon for almost twenty years," she said one morning. It didn't take me long to figure out I was living in an impossible year, 1969. More than thirty years before I was born. I asked Benjamin, who always wore his black suit and hat, to drive me out to the fields, but I could see the glances he gave me in the rearview mirror.

Months passed. Estelle helped me settle my accounts

every month, reporting the gains the fruits and vegetables had made and how much profit would be made after the workers were all paid. She said the house and car were paid, and the final sums she showed me every month made even her eyebrows go up. I started giving them more money and telling them to have a day off, partly because I wanted to be alone.

It was almost November again when I looked over toward the fields and saw the workers busy picking the fruits. The peaches and the oranges had been picked long before, but the carrots, cilantro and other plants were still left to be picked.

“What do they do in the winter, Estelle?” I asked her.

She looked toward the fields. “Some of them get other jobs, some of them travel and come back, some of them stay here and do odd jobs for you, remember?”

I nodded slightly, feigning as if I did.

“Yes, well, and some of them go back home.”

“Home?” I asked.

“Yes, mostly Mexico, but some of them come from as far as Central America,” she said, picking up my plate and setting down a glass of water and some more medicine.

“Mexico?” I said

“Yes,” she said. Her strange look told me she had not forgotten what I had told her. “Sir—” she began.

“Call Benjamin, please,” I said quickly.

“Yes, sir,” she said, and left the room.

“Take me to visit the workers, please,” I said, putting on my coat.

“But sir, it will soon be dusk,” Benjamin said.

“Quickly,” I said. “It will be quick.”

I saw a look pass between him and Estelle, and I hoped they wouldn’t call the doctor.

“Yes, sir,” Benjamin finally said.

It took only a minute to drive out to the field, but the legs I had gotten so used to were much weaker than my real legs.

I stepped out of the car and watched as the workers finished up, trying to find a familiar face among them. I had to keep reminding myself that my grandfather would be so much younger that I might not be able to recognize him at first.

They all looked over at me nervously, perhaps thinking I would be telling them I no longer needed them.

"Tell them," I whispered to Benjamin, who knew some Spanish from all the errands he ran. "Tell them I want to give them some more pay. Tell them I will be giving them each, I don't know, a thousand dollars to take home, or wherever they are going for the winter."

Benjamin's eyes opened wide. "But sir—"

"It's fine, just tell them, please," I said.

Benjamin kept glancing at me from the corner of his eye, and a fear began to grow in me that he would be calling someone when we returned home.

I reached into my pocket as Benjamin translated what I said. I could understand some of the words, like *dinero*, but as hard as I tried I could not form a sentence myself. I wrote out checks for the men and handed them over, trying to find some sort of resemblance to my grandfather in their faces.

And then there he was. Last in line, wearing a crisp red flannel shirt, the same shirt he had given me to wear that cold night. I filled out the check and handed it to him, noticing the odd look he gave me when I didn't ask his name. He took it and shook my hand gratefully, "*Gracias, muchas gracias señor.*"

I held his hand for too long, and suddenly he was away. I stood there watching him, Benjamin making no

effort to hide his odd look.

"I can't forget you, can I?" I said, trying to sound calm.

Benjamin took the check and stared at it, uneasiness showing on his face.

"Should we go, sir?" he asked.

"In a minute," I said, looking out at the fields with my face, while my eyes only saw my grandfather.

For a few moments I had to drown the desire to run to him and tell him it was me. What would he say? No, what *could* he say? He would think me mad, just as Estelle and Benjamin did. How could I prove to him that I was a grandson who had not even been born yet? I had nothing.

I could sense the workers getting a little uneasy at my prolonged presence, so I turned and began walking toward the car. Excited chatters surrounded me as I walked, and I could understand "*noche*" and "*carnaval*" as I walked by. Before I opened the door I stopped.

"*Tres Hermanas*," one of the men had said. Had I not known it, I don't think I would have understood what it meant. I turned around and looked at the men who had been talking.

"What did you say?"

Benjamin came around to my side. "Benjamin, please, ask these men, what did they say? About—about the three sisters?"

Benjamin asked the men, and their excited chatters floated through the entire group. I saw my grandfather step forward to listen.

"He says there is a carnival tonight, about ten miles north, to celebrate All Hallows' Eve and the start of the Day of the Dead celebrations. There is a tent there, The Three Sisters, very famous. They are supposed to be wish granters," Benjamin translated.

"Ten miles, north." I repeated. "You will take me there,

Benjamin.”

“Yes, sir,” Benjamin said, but I could see the doubt in his eyes.

“Sir, please,” I heard behind me. I turned, my grandfather stepping forward. “*Usted no necesita ese tipo de ayuda.*”

“He says—” Benjamin began.

“I know,” I replied. “Tell him...tell him I do.”

* * *

I walked through the gates, the silver coins in my pocket jingling in the night. I had brought all the coins I could find in the house, Benjamin and Estelle looking at each other nervously as I gathered them.

I walked around the grounds twice, passing by candle makers and jugglers. I walked through the trees, hoping to see the bright paper decorating that devil of a tent. Some of the workers from the fields passed me and nodded slightly. The cane I had come to rely on was shaking under my grip, and my back was beginning to feel sore from walking around the grounds so much.

As dusk gave way to the night, I saw it, that horribly beautiful tent, its opening flapping in the wind, beckoning me once more.

My heart ached to cry and have my grandfather hold me and tell me it was all a terrible dream, but too much time had passed for me to believe that was possible. There was no more grandfather coming back for me. There was only a young man who had no idea who I was, and who I could not bring myself to push away with my crazy story. This time I walked in without hesitation.

“It took you long enough,” Marzia said, calmly this time.

All three sisters were sitting at the table, the deck of cards folded neatly in front of them. Catalina was the only sister who could not meet my eyes.

I sighed. "What did you do to me?" I asked, the tears escaping my eyes. "What did you do?"

Marzia laughed and Amana smiled a small smile. "We gave you what you wanted. We grant wishes, remember?"

"No, you didn't. I don't know what the point of this is, but you made me an old man, you took me away from my life and brought me back to this time and place. This is not my life. I want my life back," I said.

"Oh, too bad," Marzia said with false sympathy. "I'm afraid that's just not possible."

"I didn't ask for this!" I yelled.

"Didn't you?" Amana asked, just as loudly. "Did you not ask for the ability to give your grandfather money? And haven't you?"

I placed my hand on my mouth, afraid of letting the scream inside me escape.

"That's not what I meant. This is not what I meant. And you know it!" I said, my voice a choke.

"We gave you what you wanted. It is done. No refunds," Marzia said, her face bright and smiling.

"But why would you? Why would you do all this to me, and for what? Sixteen pesos?"

"Oh, son, you have no idea," Catalina muttered.

"What?" I asked, impatient. "What is it?"

"Well, you are certainly not young anymore, are you?" Amana asked.

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"And we look so beautiful now," Marzia said, giggling.

I looked at Catalina, her face void of any emotion.

"Go on, Catalina. Tell him," Amana ordered.

"We took it," she said without looking at me. "Your

youth. It is ours now.”

“It’s what we do,” Amana said in a cold voice. “It is how we survive.”

“We gave you what you wanted, and now our deal is done,” Marzia said, still smiling.

“You better run on now, your grandfather is waiting,” Amana said.

I shook my head and turned, pushing the tent flap open. There was a group of workers in front of the tent and they moved as I passed them, shouting greetings behind me. I fell over as I tripped on a tree root, the jumble of coins bursting from my pocket. I heard the shouts of the workers as they tried to pick them up for me, my grandfather’s voice calling out behind me. I looked back one last time and saw him holding up a silver coin, his face tight with worry. I ran even as the pain in my back shot down my legs. I could see Benjamin in the car outside of the gate.

As I pushed the metal door open it softened under my palms, becoming only a thick flap of cloth. I looked up to find Benjamin and the car gone, children running and playing. A boy stood in front of me, flat on his back from the push I had given him. I shook my head and moved back toward the tent. Then I saw the old red flannel shirt he was wearing—I had been wearing. I moved forward and grabbed the shirt and looked into my own face.

“No, no,” I whispered. I moved toward the street, clutching at my own shirt as I walked away from myself. “It was me, it was me.”

CRAFTING AN ARTISAN | BJ Pierson

“An Artisan? *Here?*”

Ting ting tingtingting. Metal against concrete rang through the shop as Jonah dropped his wrench. At least it didn't fall on his head. He'd done that, and the bumps had lasted even longer than the headaches.

“Yeah, they've set up a little stand over on 28th Street. You in?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I'm in!” Artisans were so rare, and so rarely left their quarter downtown. To have one here, practically in his backyard? Jonah would be an idiot to miss this. Seeing an Artisan at work was magical. Literally.

He pushed himself out from beneath the car, wiping engine oil and grease on his already greasy cotton overalls. “What's their craft?”

Zach's eyes practically glowed. “Brewing.”

“No. Freaking. Way.”

“Yeah. Beer and coffee. All kinds of flavors, all kinds of magic.”

“I think I just died, cause this has got to be heaven.”

Jonah pitched his filthy mechanic's overalls into the laundry bin and retrieved his blue-and-silver plaid shirt from a hook above. He felt more like himself as soon as he buttoned the perfectly tailored, crisp linen over his plain

white tee. Zach rolled his eyes as Jonah smoothed the fabric and straightened his collar. He was well used to Jonah's standards of clothes these days, but he still gave him a little crap for it.

He put away his tools and clocked out, hollering to his boss in back that he had to run. He'd need to come in after school or over the weekend to make up the time, but it would be worth it to see an Artisan at work. They didn't follow the rules of the regular world. The crazy everyday nightmare of classes and careers and technology didn't apply to them. They created, and crafted, and innovated, and produced true magic.

Technology made the world work, but Artisans made it *amazing*.

He and Zach made their way down the street, two average teenage boys on an average spring afternoon. They talked about mindless, average topics, admired cars and girls, worked average jobs, went to average schools.

It wasn't bad. Jonah had good friends, a job he liked, and good prospects for college next year. He liked his life. But it was all so... average.

As soon as they reached the street where the Artisan was, though, all that changed.

The Artisan had caused such a traffic jam the police had closed the street. People crowded together, pushing forward, trying their best to get a glimpse of the Artisan. The few lucky ones up front held glasses of frosty beer and tall, ombre lattes up, a forest of phones flashing photos behind them.

Dense as it was, the crowd still moved forward at a decent pace. Soon Jonah could read the chalkboard menu the Artisan had propped on the awning behind him.

The Never Enough Caffeine Espresso – six hours of unreal energy!

The Indecisive Latte – changes flavors every third sip!

The Tipsy Pale Ale – instant buzz, never drunk!

The Beer Goggle Brew – everything is so pretty!

His prices were high—much higher than the local coffee shops—but that was normal for an Artisan. Their magic came from the work of their hands and minds, everything homemade to give it as much punch as they could. It was a slow and expensive process. Hence why most people chose chain restaurants and assembly-line products. Tech was fast, cheap, and everyone could use it. But those ready-made items could never compare to true Artisanship.

Jonah checked his depressingly empty wallet. He wouldn't get paid for another few days. If he wanted to taste this guy's coffee—and of course he did—he'd need to dip into his secret stash.

He checked left and right. No one paid attention to anyone but the Artisan. Zach wouldn't notice.

Jonah reached under his belt and unlaced the teeny cloth bag tied to the inside hem of his jeans. It was hideous, yellow and blue floral pattern on one side, pink stripes on the other, with thick, clumsy black stitches holding it together. It was no larger than a deck of cards, but he reached his fingers in. Then his entire hand. He pushed aside a large pocketknife, some cookies he'd snagged from his grandma's, the aforementioned deck of cards, and the firesteel he kept around for emergencies before finding his stash of cash. The handmade, Artisan-crafted bag could hold far more, but Jonah didn't want to add too much weight to it. After all, he'd made it when he was five. He didn't want to strain the amateur stitches and break his most sacred, most prized—and most secret—possession.

Jonah the Artisan, the boy who could sew bags that

never filled up.

Not a soul on earth knew.

It killed him to keep it a secret, to not use this magic and create beautiful things all the time. If his Artisanship had been in something “cool”, like leatherwork or forging, or even something acceptable, like painting or writing, he’d never have hidden it. But sewing? He’d learned long ago to hide this passion. It wasn’t for boys. Sewing was sissy stuff. Better to pretend he had no skill at all than face the ridicule of being a boy that loved fabric and stitches and sewing, who tailored his own clothes, who bought his sewing supplies in secret and kept them hidden in an old Chinese take-out container under his nightstand.

Money extracted and bag safely hidden, Jonah waited while the line before him slowly grew shorter. He could smell the coffee now, that rich earthy scent that perked him up without even a taste. His mouth watered. Hearing the people before him rave over the drinks didn’t help his patience any.

By the time he got to the front, he was practically drooling. “One Indecisive Latte, please.”

The brewer moved with precision, mixing and pouring and exchanging cash for coffee with practiced ease. At the same time, he monitored the beer and got more milk ready and juggled so much it made Jonah dizzy. “Isn’t it exhausting, to have so many different things going? One craft is hard enough to manage.”

“Sometimes,” the brewer said, “but I love it too much to quit.”

Jonah nodded. He understood that. Despite keeping his skills hidden, he could never quit.

“You speak from experience. Are you an Artisan too?”

Jonah’s heart broke. “No.”

The brewer eyed him, but didn’t say anything. He

knew Jonah was lying, or at least suspected there was more to the story. But he didn't press the matter, and within seconds Jonah was pushed out of the way and another eager customer had captured the brewer's attention. He let himself be swallowed by the crowd, fighting the despair in his chest. He'd lied about being an Artisan dozens of times before, but it destroyed him every single time.

* * *

Once a month, Jonah and Zach went downtown for the indie theater's Horror Fest. There was no better way to waste a Saturday than with a couple of sodas, an unfillable bag crammed with junk food, and a triple-header of the scariest, cheesiest, and downright creepiest horror films in history.

Every month Zach asked how Jonah managed to sneak so many snacks into the theater. Every month Jonah gave him a different, completely ridiculous answer. Once, amidst all the preposterous and impossible explanations, Jonah had actually told him the truth. Zach had waved it off as another dumb evasion and never given it a second thought.

Their small talk about finals and college applications couldn't hold Jonah's attention today. His mind kept wandering, his gaze slipping to the side. He did this every month, losing a few moments of their walk while he ogled and daydreamed, but today was worse. Much worse. By the time they rounded the corner and Crafter's Row came into view, Jonah wasn't hearing a word Zach said.

He looked down the street, where asphalt turned to cobblestones and industrial concrete became warm wood and smooth stone. The lines in the Artisan's Quarter were softer, the colors more vibrant, the atmosphere cozy and

welcoming and brimming with excitement. What treasures waited down there? What craft he'd never seen, or skill he'd never imagined, or talent he'd only dreamed of?

The only limit was imagination. Here, where technology reigned, there was so little imagination. The buildings all looked the same, the streets followed boring, predictable paths, everyone dressed the same and ate the same and did the same things all the time.

Artisans didn't follow those rules. They wore and ate and made whatever they wanted. The beautiful, the frightening, the strange, the intriguing—everything was fair game. That was the place for misfits, for individuals, for creative souls who didn't fit in the mold this technological world squashed everyone into.

It called to him like a siren's song.

Zach never looked down Crafter's Row. His eyes were always fixed ahead, on the blaring lights of neon signs and the shiny cars zipping past. But Jonah lingered, his steps growing slower. He thought back to the brewer, his amazing coffee, his instant knowledge that Jonah was an Artisan too. Was he down there, somewhere?

The lure of Artisanship called to him more heavily than normal. Maybe it was because of his recent interaction with the brewer. Maybe it was the weight of his tiny bag, extra full this month, pulling on his belt. Or maybe Jonah was just tired of pretending to be an average, normal teenage boy when there was so much *more* waiting out there.

"Jonah? You coming, man?" Zach backtracked to where Jonah stood, mesmerized. He glanced down Crafter's Row, then back to Jonah. "We're gonna miss the show."

"Don't you ever wonder what's down there?"

Zach shrugged. "Artisans."

“Yeah, but... what are they making?”

“I dunno, man. Crafty stuff.”

Jonah finally tore his eyes from the brightly colored shops. “You aren’t even a little curious? A little intrigued?”

Zach stared into the Artisan’s Quarter, but Jonah could tell it didn’t look the same to him. Where Jonah saw potential and beauty and creativity, Zach saw an expensive, jumbled mess. He was a tech guy, through and through. All his dreams were here—the career, the car, the status. Zach belonged here. And that was good. Everyone needed to go where they belonged.

Jonah was different. This tech world was great, and he could succeed here, but it wouldn’t be what he wanted. He could fix cars and go to college and be just fine. But that’s all he’d be. Fine.

If he stayed, he’d be following Zach’s dreams. Not his own. His dreams lay down there, where creativity reigned supreme. Down there, he could be better than fine. He could be happy, doing what he loved.

Everyone needed to go where they belonged.

He reached into his Artisan bag and pulled out some chips and a package of Zach’s favorite cookies. He didn’t even try to hide the magic. Zach’s eyes widened as he took the snacks.

Jonah didn’t take his eyes off the Artisan’s Quarter. “I’ll catch you later, man.”

“Wait, what? How did you do that?”

“Enjoy the shows!”

“Jonah? Hold on a second. *Jonah!*”

He didn’t stop to explain. He just bolted down Crafter’s Row.

* * *

Oh. My. God.

The colors. The textures. The *art*! It was like nothing Jonah had ever seen.

On his left, a line of colorful tin pinwheels generated wind instead of reacting to it. On the right, intricate paintings created doorways to the places they depicted. Shoes that grew with a child's feet, books that let the reader guide the story, tissue paper flowers that grew like real plants. Potters, quilters, origami artists, bakers, weavers, knitters, glass blowers. Even crafts Jonah had never heard of before. Quilling, where they created gorgeous panoramas with colorful, curled paper. Tatting, which he learned was how grannies made those frilly doilies every old house seemed to have. Crafts small and large, magicks useful and whimsical, it was all here. Jonah could spend days perusing the shops and see only a fraction of it.

He lost track of time as he wandered, talking with the Artisans, admiring the crafts. This was even better than he'd dreamed. It was like a whole different world here—a slower one, full of beauty and creativity rather than success and stress. Jonah felt himself moving slower, breathing deeper, taking time to appreciate everything around him.

His steps faltered when a small, metal sign caught his eye. *Joey Eston, Chainmaille.*

No way. Joey Eston was a legend! First to exhibit true Artisanship—and strong magic—in chainmail for over a decade. Youngest member ever inducted into *three* Artisan guilds. Kevlar and body armor were great and all, but if you really wanted someone to survive a war zone, you sent them out in a suit of Joey's chainmail. The waiting list for even a tiny piece was years long, despite its cost.

When Jonah had first learned of chainmail, he'd

nearly wet himself. They made *fabric* out of *metal*. He couldn't pass by without a peek into the shop.

The heavy wooden door was propped open, so he walked right in. Sheets of silvery metal rings shone against varnished wood backgrounds, a dozen patterns or more lined up side-by-side. Jonah hadn't known there was more than one way to make chainmail, let alone this many. A display case on his right held intricate necklaces and bracelets made from rings smaller than a pencil's eraser. Most of it was silvery—steel, he guessed—but a few of the jewelry pieces had brightly colored rings making beautiful, seamless patterns.

Joey sat behind a large worktable, tools and rings littered across its surface, hunched over a piece of heavy-looking mail. Jonah froze in his steps. He shouldn't gawk, but he couldn't help it.

Joey Eston was a year, maybe two, younger than him—fifteen, sixteen at most.

And Joey Eston was a girl.

She finished linking a few rings together before putting her tools down and pulling off her gloves. She stood, ran her hands through her turquoise-blue pixie cut hair, and swiveled away a magnifying glass mounted to her forehead with a thick leather strap. "Welcome. How can I help you?"

"Uh." He tried to find something to say, but nothing came out.

She smiled. "You didn't know I was a girl, did you?" Jonah sputtered like a fish out of water, but she just laughed. "It's okay. I get it all the time. Sorry to embarrass you, but the reactions I get when I catch guys like this are *hilarious*."

She truly didn't seem offended, but Jonah still felt like an idiot. "I'm a big fan," he muttered. Not much better, but

at least it was something.

"Thanks," she said, glancing around her shop and beaming. "Do you have any questions about anything?"

"Only about a thousand or so."

"I think I have time for five, tops."

They talked about patterns and ring sizes and time requirements for each piece, designing chainmail jewelry, and how she got her start in chainmail to begin with.

Everything was going great, until Joey asked the question Jonah could never seem to escape.

"Are you an Artisan too?"

He put his hands in his pockets, feeling his precious, enchanted bag. The bag he'd hid his entire life, the treasure he loved more than anything else in the world. It would be so easy to deny it again and walk away, pretend he didn't have anything to offer. But standing in Joey's shop, surrounded by the beautiful and powerful metal fabric, talking to an Artisan as young as excitable and passionate as he was... he couldn't do it. "I... yeah, kinda."

Saying it aloud sent chills down his limbs. He couldn't decide whether he wanted to scream it to the world or run under a rock and hide.

"Awesome. What do you do?"

He pulled out the bag, with its uneven stitches and mismatched fabrics, and showed it to Joey. She cocked her head, clearly confused by the shoddy craftsmanship, but didn't question. He opened it up and pulled out the deck of cards, then the cookies, then his pocketknife.

Her eyes widened and she grinned, clapping like a child just shown the greatest magic trick on earth. "That's amazing!"

"I made it when I was five."

She looked away from the bag to meet his eyes.

"Unbelievable! Who do you work for now?"

“Nobody. I mean, not in sewing. I’m a mechanic.”

“You mean you don’t use this?” she asked, grabbing at the bag. He let her take it, feeling more vulnerable than if he’d been naked in the middle of the street. She looked it over then peered inside. “That’s a shame. This kind of magic would be so useful. How much can it hold?”

“I’m not sure, but a lot. Anything that fits through the opening at the top can go into it. It gets pretty heavy, though, so I haven’t tested it out too much.”

“Dang. I was hoping it would be weightless, too. I could have used that for my rings.”

“I might be able to do something, though. Leather would be stout enough, and as long as I had a good leather needle and some solid thread I could make one that would hold a lot. Maybe some kind of lining could help with the weight. A silk, maybe? No, that would snag on the metal...” He snapped himself back to reality before he got lost in designs.

“A lining?” Joey’s eyes lit up and she practically danced from foot to foot. “I think I have just the thing.”

She raced toward the back of the store, returning moments later with a ball of silvery chainmail in her hand. She held it out to him and he took it, surprised by how little it weighed.

“I thought chainmail would be a lot heavier than this.”

“Most of it is. But this is aluminum. My best friend Krinn makes jewelry a few streets over and she gave me a spool of aluminum wire. It isn’t quite as strong as steel, but no matter how much I add on it weighs practically nothing.” She rolled the mail through his hands, moving it around to show him the hole in the top.

“Wait. Is that a bag?” He opened it up, feeling the smooth metal inside. The rings slid across his palm with a slight metallic ring.

She nodded. "An aluminum chainmail bag. It isn't truly weightless, but I've tested out a few things and it does seem to lessen the weight of anything added to it." She reached over and grabbed the pliers off her desk. She dropped them into the bag, but Jonah hardly felt a change. "I'd thought it was more of an interest piece than anything, something for the hardcore gamer guys to keep their dice in or something, but maybe..."

"Maybe my bottomless bags and your weightless bags could work together? If you made the bag, and I made the lining..." Jonah peered at the chainmail bag again, more critically this time. "I'd have to hem the lining over the top for something to sew onto but as long as it's a nice fabric that'll look good. Do you think it would work?"

Joey shrugged, but her eyes sparkled. "Wanna test it out?"

Goosebumps. "Hell. Yes."

Joey bustled around the shop for a minute before double-tapping an elegant, wood-burned sign in the window. The burns on the face shifted from OPEN to CLOSED. She locked the door then led Jonah down the street, farther into the Artisan's Quarter. They passed so many amazing crafters, but Jonah was so consumed with excitement he couldn't do more than glance at them. He was making something. With Joey Eston. They were going to use their Artisanship together, to create something truly magical.

Every one of his dreams had just come true.

A couple minutes later, Joey led him into a brightly colored tailor shop. Jonah could have died of joy then and there. Everything from satin to muslin, midnight blacks and true indigos to neon pink and lime green, blankets and curtains and clothes and the most beautiful stitching he'd ever seen in his life. Jonah couldn't help but reach out and

stroke the fabrics, run his fingers over the stitches. It was masterful.

“Joey! Good to see you!” A woman about his mom’s age, wearing an apron cut to look like a knee-length prom dress, stepped out from the back of the shop and gave Joey a hug. Slim pockets covered the apron, and Jonah caught sight of scissors and thread and pincushions stashed in every single one.

“Hey, Talia. How’s it going?”

“No complaints. You?”

“Better than that. I have another Artisan I’d like you to meet. He might even be better with fabrics than you are.”

Jonah’s heart thudded as he shook hands with Talia. *Artisan*. Dang, that sounded good. “I’m Jonah.”

“Great to meet you,” Talia said, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

“Back atcha. Your shop is magnificent.” It was the only word he could think of to describe it.

Talia blushed. “Thank you. So. Joey thinks you can rival my talent?” She crossed her arms, but her grin made it clear the challenge was just a show.

“That depends. What can you do with all this?”

Talia grinned, grabbing hold of the outer hems of her apron. She held it forward a little for Jonah to take a look at. Smooth, forest green cotton-poly blend, lightweight, with a contrasting golden stitch around the edges and the pockets. Simple, but elegant. Every single stitch was perfect.

She released one hand and slid it over the fabric, the way a magician waved over an empty top hat before pulling out a rabbit. The fabric was now bright, sunshine yellow, with forest green stitches. Another wave and a paisley pattern appeared, yellows and green swirling in a vaguely floral arrangement.

Jonah felt his jaw hit the ground.

"I've shown you mine. Now show me yours."

Jonah, hands shaking, showed Talia his ugly little bag. Her eyes went as wide as Joey's grin when he showed her its magic.

"We're gonna add this to the aluminum chainmail bag I made a while ago and see if the magicks will combine," Joey said. "Weightless, bottomless bags. Can you believe it?"

Talia had to tear her eyes from Jonah's bag to look at Joey. "Be sure to sell those far away from my shop. I don't want you guys stealing all my customers."

To the three of them, it was the best compliment anyone could have possibly offered.

"I need something sturdy to prevent snagging from the mail," Jonah said. "But thin and soft enough to make a good lining. A linen or muslin, maybe. What would you recommend?"

Talia took only a fraction of a second to think before turning toward her workroom and waving Jonah and Joey to follow. "Let's see what treasures I can offer."

* * *

Hours later, Jonah and Joey sat hunched over the worktable in Joey's shop. Jonah smoothed and cut and sewed the beautiful, grey tricot they'd chosen for the linings while Joey linked ring after ring together in a circular pattern. They chatted while they worked, munching on snacks from Jonah's bag, drinking cherry colas Joey had stashed in a fridge in the back. He could feel the magic working, a tingle in the back of his neck like a tiny jolt of excitement making his nerves spark and jitter. As he pieced things together and the bags grew close to

completion, the feeling grew stronger. Making stuff with your own two hands had its own exhilaration to it. A satisfaction that didn't come from anywhere else. To hold a thing in your hand and say "look what I have created!" Jonah would never get over that feeling.

"This is my favorite part," Joey said, linking the final row together and laying a finished chainmail bag beside a pile of aluminum rings. "Looking at what I had, and what I made with it, side-by-side." Jonah could hear the same satisfaction in her voice he had just been feeling.

"Yeah. It's really nice to just make stuff. Without being stuffed in the corner of my room, working out of a sewing kit I pieced together in an old fried rice container, that is."

"I still can't believe you've never tried to become a full Artisan before. You have a really useful talent people will pay for, and you obviously love it. I don't understand why I've never seen you around Crafter's Row before."

"I like my job," he said, and he meant it. He loved fixing cars. Not as much as sewing, but enough that he would probably go to trade school next year instead of a fancy college. Becoming a full-fledged master mechanic was a solid second choice for his career, and one he could definitely be happy in.

Joey gave him some serious side-eye. "That's nice, but it isn't the whole story."

Dang. Was he really that bad of a liar?

"Come on, Jonah, you can tell me. Honestly. Why have you been hiding your Artisanship all these years?"

Jonah shrugged. "I'm a guy."

"So?"

"Guys aren't supposed to sew."

"And girls aren't supposed to make chainmail, yet here I am."

"Yeah, but that's..." Different? Was it, even?

Joey scrunched her face up like he'd said something really, really stupid. "Let me tell you a secret about being an Artisan." She leaned in close. "No one actually cares."

"I wish that were true."

"It is. We make stuff here. I can guarantee no Artisan will ever care about your gender as long as you make a good product. There will always be trolls out there trying to be jerks about stuff like this, but the majority of regular people are the same too. As long as they like what you create, it doesn't matter if you're a girl or a guy or a goldfish."

Jonah didn't reply, focusing on his stitches and mulling over what she said.

"The secret is to own it. This is you, and this is what you do. In the end it doesn't matter what other people think of it. What matters is being true to who you are and doing what you love. If someone's gonna disown you because of something as inconsequential as a hobby, they weren't worth keeping around in the first place."

Jonah had lots of friends. None of them knew about this side of him. Would they stick around if they found out? He didn't know if he could handle losing all his friends.

But after today, after experiencing a taste of life as an Artisan, he could never be truly happy suppressing his craft again. This is who he was, and he wanted to *be* this, every day, everywhere. He wanted to be a guy who fixed cars and sewed clothes, all at once. If people didn't want to be friends with him because of that... well. He'd be happy. And didn't that mean more than being popular?

"Jonah?"

Jonah's heart raced, his stomach flipped inside out. He couldn't have had a little time to figure all this out, to decide if he was brave enough to really go through with this?

Zach stood in the doorway to Joey's shop, a huge cup of soda in his hand, staring at Jonah like he'd suddenly grown three heads. He looked out of place here, in his ill-fitting graphic tee, cargo shorts, and designer sneakers. He knew it, too, from the way he stood with his arms close in and his eyes glanced everywhere like he couldn't quite grasp what was real.

"You never showed up after the movies," he said, voice distant as he looked around Joey's shop. "After the way you ran down this street, I wasn't sure if you'd ever come back."

"I... yeah, sorry, Zach. I just..."

Zach took a hesitant step inside. He glanced at Joey, started to say something, but then he saw what lay on the table before them. Fabric, thread, needles. An almost complete lining in Jonah's hand, needle still poised halfway through a stitch. "Dude. Do you sew?"

Jonah could see it in his friend's face. That disbelief, that momentary *why are you sewing you're a guy* reaction. Jonah's brain spiraled into NOPEs and he reflexively started to deny it.

This is who you really are, Jonah. Stop denying it. Be who you are.

But what will my friends say?

He glanced at Joey, who gave him a tiny nod of support. He could do this.

Just own it.

Jonah finished his stitch and handed Zach the lining. "Yeah."

Zach's forehead wrinkled like an old man's, but he put down his soda and took the bag. He looked at it, completely confused, then spotted the empty chip bags and cookie wrappers on the table. The same kind Jonah had pulled from his bag before he'd run off. Zach raised an

eyebrow, clearly remembering the trick, and peeked into the bag. He wrinkled his brow some more, then stuffed his hand in.

Jonah couldn't hold back a laugh when Zach's arm sunk in halfway to his elbow. He'd never seen anyone's eyes go quite so round before.

"Did you make this?" Zach asked. He kept reaching farther into the bag, trying to find the bottom. Jonah had already tried that—it had extended almost as far as his entire arm.

"Yeah."

He pulled out his arm and stared into the bag like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Are you an Artisan?"

Moment of truth. One final chance to walk away... or the first step to being who and what he really was. *Just own it.*

"Yeah, I am."

"And you never freaking told me?"

Joey grinned and gave him a thumbs-up, with a little *I told you so* in her eyes. Zach didn't say it was girly, or stupid, or anything like that. He didn't care Jonah's Artisanship was in sewing. He saw what Jonah could do, thought it was awesome, and that was that.

It couldn't be that simple. But it was. Just like Joey had said: it didn't matter if he was a guy or a girl or a goldfish. He could be whatever, whoever, he wanted to be.

And he was a guy who liked cars and fabrics and horror movies and sewing beautiful things. He was a mechanic and a tailor. He could be all these things at once, your average teenage guy who loved to sew. Because that was Jonah, and he wouldn't hide it anymore.

* * *

By the time graduation rolled around, Jonah was relieved. Not just because he'd made it through high school, but because now he could finally dedicate all his time and energy into his business. Goldfish Designs was flourishing, the trade in weightless, bottomless bags surpassing Jonah's greatest dreams.

He'd been offered scholarships to a bunch of different universities, to get his business degree. He'd even been offered acceptance into some of the most prestigious Artisan academies in the country. He was honored, but he turned down every single one. He already had a business, and a quite successful one, thank you very much.

But he kept working at the mechanic's, too, and kept going to the monthly Horror Fest with Zach, kept talking about girls and cars and Zach's internship at the accounting firm. He was an Artisan, but he was also your not-so-average teenage guy. He wasn't about to choose one or the other. And he'd never been happier.

The bell over his door jingled as another customer entered his shop. Jonah kept sewing for a few seconds, giving them time to look around. When they hesitated and glanced at him, he put down the bag—he was experimenting with embroidery now, seeing what new magicks he could add to his stock—and smiled at the customers. A young mother and a little boy, maybe five years old. The same age Jonah had been when he'd made his first enchanted bag.

The woman asked about bags and prices, and Jonah sold her a beautiful galaxy-themed bag with pearl beads that sparkled like real stars. The little boy kept staring at it, reaching out to pet the soft fabric, looking around at everything with wide, dreamy eyes.

"I like that one," he finally said, pointing at a bright yellow chainmail bag with a pink-and-yellow striped lining.

“It is pretty,” his mother said. “But wouldn’t you rather have the blue one?”

“Nope. I like that one.”

The mother rolled her eyes, like she knew it wasn’t worth arguing with the boy over color schemes.

Jonah reached over and took the bag from its display, holding it forward so the boy could pet this one, too. His eyes shone as he ran tiny fingers over the cheery yellow rings.

“I wanna make pretty things like this when I grow up,” the boy said, his voice quiet and wistful.

“You can,” Jonah said, kneeling to look the boy straight in the eye. “Let me tell you a secret about being an Artisan...”

DROWNED SILENCE | Amy McNulty

“You don’t smell half bad for someone who can’t shower.”

Of all the things Dylan Kushner could have said to Kelsey Wade to fill the silence, the comment about her odor was probably among the stupidest. But he’d already tried the “Mr. Castaneda’s class blows, right?” that had opened successfully with his last research partner, and which led into his perfect imitation of Mr. Castaneda droning on and on about dead people through a perpetually-clogged-up nose. He might have tried what he’d asked a number of people this week, “What’s your costume for Randi’s Halloween party tomorrow?” but Dylan knew he didn’t need to see the crickets chirping on Kelsey’s Facebook friends list (did she even *use* Facebook?) to figure out no one was going to be inviting Kelsey anywhere—even if Randi was her sister. (“We’re *not* twins, god. Why do people always think that?” Randi had made it clear she was a whole eleven months older than Kelsey the only time Dylan had bothered to ask. It probably didn’t help that their parents had waited to enroll Randi and Kelsey in the same grade back in kindergarten, something Randi said they thought would be “cute,” saying the word “cute” like it was a synonym for “nauseating.”)

So Dylan had sat there, watching Kelsey fumble

through that bag of hers—it wasn't a purse, or even a backpack; it was something like one of those sparkly small bags the girls brought with them to dances, the kinds that only had room for a tampon and lipstick and whatever else girls absolutely needed even just for a few hours. But it wasn't sparkly. It was made of some old fabric that Kelsey might have torn off of her grandmother's—scratch that, *great-grandmother's* couch. And because she wasn't speaking, he thought of everything he knew about her—*weird*, quiet, *weird*, Randi's sister, maybe a little hot, just a little, in a *weird* way, uh, allergic to water—and asked her if it was true that she broke out in hives if water touched her, and if that's why she got out of swimming. She hadn't answered—just sort of nodded—but he kept going. “How can you be allergic to water? Isn't that like being allergic to air? Do you die if you drink?”

And it was the first thing he'd asked that actually got her to open her mouth.

“Obviously not, moron.”

Dylan took the insult in stride, considering who it was coming from. “But I thought I saw this thing on YouTube once about a woman who was even allergic to *drinking* water—”

Kelsey had bent under her chair to retrieve the pile of books she kept in book straps that resembled a couple of belts. “Well, that's not what I have. Just the skin contact thing.”

That's when the line popped out: “You don't smell half bad for someone who can't shower.”

Kelsey's darkly-shadowed eyes didn't open fully, but they did grow just a centimeter wider—enough to shoot Dylan a highly unamused look. Dylan cleared his throat a few times and started tapping his finger against the table. Kelsey did nothing to alleviate the building silence. All

Dylan had for comfort were the soft murmurs of the other research teams around the library, but of course, he'd been stuck with the partner who walked straight toward the back corner, the farthest possible from other human contact. He'd had no choice but to follow, shrugging his shoulders apologetically to Ryan and Ashley, who'd beckoned him to the empty seat at the end of their table by the window.

Kelsey pulled a little jar of ink out of her handbag and an actual quill—a bird feather with a pointed end. She laid a stack of unlined paper atop the desk and unstrapped her pile of books, positioning a thick encyclopedia beside her jar of ink.

Dylan couldn't help it. The words came tumbling out of his mouth. "You don't... seriously need to use that, do you?"

Kelsey shrugged and pawed her encyclopedia volume, letting the cover fall open with a great thud. "This is history. There's nothing they didn't know about Martin Luther before the Internet that they suddenly know now."

"Sure." Dylan wasn't quite sure he believed that statement, since Mr. Castaneda had emphasized the importance of historical theory as much as historical fact, and surely the Internet was home to a few thousand more theories on pretty much anyone in history, ancient or not. But that wasn't actually what he'd meant. He pointed to the feather quill. "I meant that." He dug his tablet out of his backpack and placed it next to Kelsey's encyclopedia. It was less than half the width and easily a hundredth the thickness of Kelsey's outdated research tool. Dylan brought up his word processor app. "You can take notes on a tablet without lugging a little pot around filled with a laundry disaster waiting to happen."

Kelsey didn't look at Dylan; the only indication she'd

even heard him was the slight twitch of her eyebrow. She licked a finger and turned a page. “Inkwell.”

“What?”

Kelsey rolled her eyes. “The ‘*little pot*’ is called an inkwell.”

Dylan took a breath. “Okaaaay...” When Kelsey didn’t respond, Dylan shrugged, figuring that was the end of that conversation. He grabbed his tablet, googling “Martin Luther” and sorting through a few pages of the much more recent civil rights leader before finding the Wiki on the 16th century German monk. He began skimming the entry, drifting dangerously close to sleep. He shook his head to clear it and reached for the bottle he’d tucked in his backpack’s pocket for drinks.

“I don’t like using anything invented after the 19th century.”

Dylan nearly spit out his swig of Lemon Lime Gatorade. Kelsey still hadn’t turned to face him, instead carefully removing the cork from her pot—*inkwell*—and dipping the quill in.

“Oh,” said Dylan, after a moment’s uncomfortable silence. He screwed the cap back on his Gatorade and slid it back into the backpack, rummaging around and finding what he was looking for at the bottom. He shifted aside some old Kleenex and scrap paper and what felt like possibly an old forgotten sandwich in a Ziploc bag. He tossed the ballpoint pen on the table. The freebie marked with his mom’s bank rolled and came to stop against Kelsey’s elbow. Kelsey’s hand stopped, the tip of her quill pooling ink onto her paper with each passing moment.

“What. Is. That?” Kelsey’s eyes shifted slightly to meet Dylan’s expectant glare.

“A.... ballpoint pen?” Dylan suddenly wasn’t very sure.

Kelsey sniffed. “No thank you.” She picked her quill back up and dipped it in the pot, continuing her slow scrawl across the blank page.

Dylan reached for the pen awkwardly, his fingers brushing Kelsey’s puffy black sleeve as he retrieved it. “I’ve seen you using pens in class before,” he muttered.

“Those are fountain pens.”

“Okay.” Dylan scratched the back of his head while tapping the ballpoint pen on the tabletop, eliciting another sideways glare from Kelsey’s heavily made-up eyes.

“Ballpoint pens weren’t around in the 19th century?”

Kelsey’s shoulders stiffened. She dipped the quill again. “No.”

Dylan chewed his bottom lip. He didn’t really care, but — “I think you’re wrong about that.”

The corner of Kelsey’s deep-red lips twitched, but she kept writing. “Are you a pen expert?”

“No, but—” Dylan slid his tablet closer, entering “ballpoint pen” into Wikipedia. He tapped the screen with the top of his rarely-used pen. “Ha! The first patent was in 1888.”

Kelsey’s quill stopped moving. “It wasn’t widely in use.”

“Ah,” said Dylan, putting as much sarcasm into the one syllable as he could muster. “I suppose the knee-high skirt was a regular fashion trend by then, though?”

Kelsey’s hand moved to shift her short petticoat and layered skirt more securely over her white-tights-covered knees. Dylan could tell she was sort of dressed old-fashioned-like—and by *old-fashioned*, he meant like something out of *A Christmas Carol*, not the poofy ’80s fashions his parents wore in prom photos—but he knew he was right about the skirt length. Probably the knee-high boots she paired them with, too.

“It’s Gothic Lolita,” said Kelsey. She dipped her quill again and ran her left hand over her book. Dylan wondered why she didn’t worry about dragging the long, flowing sleeves over her ink-stained paper, but she was wearing black. It probably just blended right in.

“And that was a fashion style in the 1800s?”

Kelsey sighed. One of the pale pink curls framing her face escaped from underneath the frilly lace black headband she wore. “No. But it’s close enough to make me feel comfortable.”

Dylan nodded and rolled the side of the pen over his upper lip. “Uh huh. And a ballpoint pen isn’t. Got it.”

Kelsey lay her quill down gently, keeping the white feather out of the still-glistening ink. “Are you going to pick on me all day or are we going to do some research?”

Dylan shrugged and laid down his pen, picking up his tablet and whisking his fingers across the screen. “Since you’ll take about twenty times longer than me to research with your *inkwell* and book, I figure I have some time to—”

“Some time to what, Mr. Kushner? May I ask exactly how much work you’ve gotten done so far?” Mr. Castaneda appeared like Batman—a portly, cardigan-wearing Batman—out of the shadows and stood in front of the table, his arms crossed. Kelsey continued to write her calligraphy undisturbed, but Dylan dropped his tablet, causing a number of people to glance over at the thud.

“Uh—” Dylan’s usually ever-moving tongue suddenly failed him.

“We’ve started the basic research,” answered Kelsey, not completely untruthfully.

Mr. Castaneda leaned over the table to examine Kelsey’s paper. He nodded. “Don’t make a mess, Miss Wade.”

Kelsey crossed a ‘t’ with an especially prolonged

flourish of her hand. “I won’t.”

“All right.” Mr. Castaneda looked at Dylan. “You two have Martin Luther. So what are you going to do for your presentation?”

Dylan ran through the possible answers in his head, feeling the weight of every second of silence that followed. Kelsey kept scratching at her paper and dipping her quill in ink. A clock ticked somewhere off in the library. He could even hear the hum through the walls—the heating system, maybe, which popped and crackled annoyingly every few seconds, like some workman was crawling through the walls and continuously dropping his tools down the air vent. He started spacing out, no longer hearing any of the possible excuses he could come up with.

Kelsey finally released Dylan from the agonizing silence. “We’re not sure yet.”

Mr. Castaneda rapped his knuckles on the table and started walking away. “Get to it. I expect you to present *fully prepared* on Monday.”

Dylan watched the teacher retreat to the next table of students, taking the looming threat of silence with him. Dylan bent to grab his bottle of Gatorade and took a drink to calm himself.

“Are you coming to Randi’s *thing* tomorrow?”

Dylan snapped back to his presentation partner. She’d stopped writing and looked at him expectantly, the quill in her hand dripping ink from its tip onto the paper. “Are *you* going?” he asked.

Kelsey sighed and lay her quill down. “I *live* there, genius.”

“Yeah. I know.” Dylan had to stop himself from pointing out he figured Kelsey would be as welcome in her own home during a party thrown by Randi as a ballpoint pen would be welcomed by Kelsey. Dylan cleared his

head, smirking. "Yeah. Yeah, I am." He lifted both hands in the air in his best impression of Frankenstein's monster, even with the Gatorade bottle in hand. "I'm wearing a Frankenstein mask. You going as a modern teen in jeans and a sweater or something?"

"Ha ha." Kelsey put the cork back in the top of her inkwell, shut her book closed and stacked it with the others. "We can finish then. I'll look for the oh-so-original green skin and bolt coming out of your head."

Dylan took another swig. "I'll search for the uptight girl looking like she stepped out of a Dickens book."

Kelsey pinched her lips and finished tying her book strap. "I'd avoid her, if I were you." She gathered the papers, blowing on the slowly-drying ink. She folded the pages, stuffing them into her handbag as she stood.

Dylan gestured his bottle lazily in her direction. "Wait, you couldn't possibly want to *work* on this during a *party*—"

"Watch out!" shouted Kelsey. She took a step back, but she fumbled, reaching out to grab the table to steady herself. Dylan instinctively tried to grab her hand, dropping the bottle of Gatorade on the table. The remaining liquid leaked out, covering Kelsey's pale hand in bright green liquid.

Kelsey shrieked and pulled back her hand, shaking it. Dylan could hear the moving chairs behind him. The curious murmurs.

"Kelsey, I'm sorry." He reached out to the hand she cradled like it was wounded. He thought he saw—well, that was ridiculous. If her allergy was as bad as she said, her hand might have been bright red with hives, but the discolored skin Dylan saw was green, maybe even yellowy.

The color of his Gatorade, of course.

Kelsey tucked her discolored hand under her other

arm as she slung the book strap full of books over her shoulder. She clutched the handbag with the same hand. "Forget it."

"Miss Wade, is everything all right?" Mr. Castaneda had returned, incapable of standing in front of any student without his arms crossed over his chest.

Kelsey wouldn't look up. Her arm twitched. "Yes. I'm sorry for screaming."

Mr. Castaneda sniffled, speaking low. "This is the *library*." He looked down. "What a mess! Miss Wade, I warned you about your archaic methods of note-taking!"

If Kelsey wondered how Mr. Castaneda confused Gatorade with ink, she said nothing. "I know, I'm sorr—"

Dylan stood and stuck a hand out in front of Kelsey. "I'm sorry, Mr. Castaneda. It was me. I spilled it and—" He looked at Kelsey, who refused to look back at him. "I got her hand wet. I think her allergy is acting up. Can you let her go to the nurse?"

Kelsey's eyes met Dylan's, and for the first time, Dylan thought she saw something other than annoyance in her expression. Mr. Castaneda fumbled and waved a hand. "Yes, yes, of course." He pointed at Dylan. "I expect you to clean this up, Mr. Kushner. Ask the librarian for paper towels."

"Sure." Dylan nodded at Kelsey, and she tore her eyes away. She looked about to speak but squeezed her arm to her chest tighter and left without saying anything more. Dylan glanced once more at the mess he'd made.

The puddle of Gatorade had turned brown and murky. At first glance, it was almost black.

The ruckus over, the library grew disturbingly quiet.

Dylan tossed his car keys on the counter with a little more force than necessary. He watched the back of his dad's head that poked over the top of the couch. A basketball game lit up the 52-inch TV in bright reds and yellows, but no sound came out of the surround sound speakers. His dad's head didn't so much as twitch at the sound of Dylan's keys on the counter.

"I'm home," mumbled Dylan. He'd run out of things to say to his dad to break the silence long ago. "Sorry I'm late."

Dylan's dad brought a cupped hand to his mouth. The hum of the refrigerator cut out with a snap, and Dylan could hear the subtle working of his dad's jaw as he chomped his handful of popcorn. Dylan swallowed, noting with a shudder the sound of the brief tightening of his throat muscles. He shifted his backpack back up the shoulder on which it hung limply and walked up the stairs. The wood of the stairs groaned at the touch of his feet. Step. Step. Step. He counted seventeen, speaking the numbers softly aloud.

At the top of the stairs, he found his parents' bedroom door ajar, a slice of light breaking through the darkness and growing wider and wider the farther it traveled on the hallway floor. He averted his eyes as he passed, certain that if he looked in, he'd find his mom in her bathrobe in the chair next to her bedside table. He could tell without looking that the book in her hand would be yellowed and tattered, some yard sale find or one of those decaying paperbacks she snapped up at the library fundraiser. As if to prove his point, Dylan heard the chafing of gritty paper turning. Crackle. Crinkle.

He thought suddenly of Kelsey licking a finger and turning the page.

He shook his head and retreated to his room,

slamming the door behind him. He jammed the power button on his remote, picked up his Xbox controller and turned the system on, tossing the blinking white controller onto his bed. He dropped the backpack next to the controller, unzipping the outer pocket to grab his phone. Kicking aside a pile of dirty clothes and what might have been a wet washcloth, Dylan found his eye-popping red Beats and jammed the cord into his iPhone socket. He flicked his fingers and brought his house to life.

The music flowed through his headphones, traveling across his eardrums, down his shoulders and through his blood stream, loosening some of the tension. He plopped onto the bed, oozing into the cushion of the crumpled comforter. Picking up his controller, he loaded the game screen.

* * *

“Matthew?” The witch in the sparkly purple hat must have forgotten her psychic powers at home along with her warts and broomstick. “Zachary?”

Dylan grinned beneath his Frankenstein mask, even though he knew Bethany couldn’t see it. He sucked his breath deeply in and out, knowing it’d make the latex mask crumple inward and then expand.

Bethany laughed. Dylan liked the way her smile showed off the sparkles she’d sprinkled all over her cheeks in the dim light.

Bethany shifted her plastic cup to one hand and reached up to slide her hand under the Frankenstein mask. She pouted her lips and stood on her toes, poised for a kiss. “If you’re not going to tell me, how will I know who I’m about to—”

“DYLAN!” Ryan ran by, drumming his fists against

Dylan's back in a rapid beat before rushing out the open sliding glass door. "WHOO!" Dylan could hear him scream outside, even despite the volume of the music blasting.

Bethany chuckled, landing back on her heels and clutching the cup with both hands against her chest. The corner of her lips twitched. "That was my next guess," she lied. She looked over Dylan's shoulder, suddenly interested. "Oh, is that— Nice seeing you!" Dylan watched her go, sliding in next to a sexy Red Riding Hood and a Wonder Woman with glowstick bracelets on the makeshift dance floor Randi's parents had set up in the living room for the party. Dylan watched them shake their hips back and forth for a short while, plastic cups raised like Olympic torches, until he heard screaming coming from behind him outdoors.

Dylan stepped out the sliding glass door and followed the few curious onlookers to Randi's backyard. Two guys on either side of Randi's swimming pool, gripping the tarp, ran alongside the pool, ripping the ropes tying it down and shaking leaves and debris every which way.

"Oh my god, *stop!*" Randi, almost popping out of a rather cheap imitation of a Native American princess who showed off a little too much skin, and rather pale skin at that, shrieked, shaking her head and her gaudily fake black braids back and forth. "My dad will *kill* me! You have to put that back!"

Ryan, a Dracula-type vampire ornamented with sparkles on his face and hands "for the ladies," as he'd told Dylan, shouted again and clapped his hands together above his head. One of the guys in a Freddy mask did the same on the other side.

Randi flopped her moccasins to Ryan's side, peering down at the damage done. "There's not even any water, idiots! Daddy drained it last month."

“Oh? And did *Daddy* not realize Halloween would be a perfect time for a dip? Or a snack?” Ryan roared and pretended to nibble at Randi’s neck. She screamed and shoved him away, but her strength wasn’t entirely in it, and her screams dissolved into a hysteria of giggles.

“Dylan! Come on!” Freddy-masked guy had run to the side of a small garden shed, where Randi’s hose lay coiled around its holder. Freddy pulled on the hose. “Give me a hand!”

Dylan crossed the yard to the garden shed, his eyes darting to the empty pool as he passed, getting a look at wet, soggy leaves peppered across the sickly green cement in the glow of the moon and the back porch light. Randi’s laugh-screams distracted him.

“Don’t you dare, Dylan! Matt, *stop!*” Randi pushed harder on Ryan this time, and he let his arms fall. She marched around the pool to the garden shed, trying to grab the hose out of Freddy-mask’s hand. Out of *Matt’s* hand. He hadn’t decided on a costume when Dylan had last asked.

“Give me that!” Randi shouted. She was trying to balance a light, flirting tone with the anger seeping through her voice, but the anger was winning.

“Isn’t it a little cold to go swimming anyway?” Dylan asked, his voice muffled through the Frankenstein mask. Matt shrugged and let go, sending Randi wheeling backward.

Randi screamed and Dylan dove to try to stop her fall, and they both landed with a thud on the ground. A rather echoing thud, with no grass or dirt to cushion their fall. Dylan realized they’d fallen on wood planks, even though he hadn’t noticed a pool deck.

Randi looked around for a minute, running an absent-minded hand to her wig and readjusting it so the braids

weren't hanging askew. She still clutched the hose in one hand, which spurt wildly with water. Ice cold water.

"Yuck!" Randi shrieked and tossed the hose away like it was a centipede leaking mucous. She took Dylan's offered arm and the two stood, both their fronts speckled with water stains. Randi's lips quivered as she looked down at the mess of her Native American dress. She spun toward the garden shed, dropping Dylan's arm. "Matt, I will *kill* you, I swear to God—"

Matt waved a rubber-knives-tipped glove at Randi and Dylan from the garden shed, where he'd turned on the spout. He ran back toward the house on the other side of the pool, not bothering to shut off the water. Randi ran after him, losing a moccasin in the mud that formed around the fallen hose, and Ryan swooped down in front of Dylan to grab it.

"My Cinderella awaits!" he said, winking. "Hold up!" he screamed, running back into the house after Randi.

Dylan stepped carefully around the mud, jumping at the cat-like creak of the wood as he stepped off of it. He turned, taking in the circular design of the planks, watching the water from the hose pool around them, leaking through the small slits where the pieces of wood came together like small rivers through a dam. The sounds of the party got disturbingly far away. The base of the music, boom, boom, boom, boom, the lyrics lost beneath it. The chatter soft and quiet, like someone laughing at him from another room, someone whispering behind his back. Even the shrieks were quiet, apart from him. Like people on a roller coaster that soars by above your head when you're alone on the ground.

The trickle of water. The creak of the wood. Nothing else was real.

Dylan stared at the water running over the circular

wood. The moon was full, and he could almost see it reflected against the glossy surface of the wood. Without knowing why, he reached a hand out.

“Help...”

Dylan jumped, pulling his hand back.

“Help me...”

Dylan shook his head and turned toward the water spout. He just needed to shut the water off and then he could go back inside. Back to the party. Back to Bethany, or one of the other girls.

“Help me already, you moron!”

Dylan screamed, flailing backward. Kelsey smirked, her arms crossed. She was wearing another black “Lolita” dress, but Dylan couldn’t say for sure whether or not it was the same one she’d been wearing the other day when they’d been assigned research partners. All the black laces and ribbons got lost against the black ruffles. He did notice that her pink hair was in pigtails now, the puffy, wavy hair looking strangely fitting framing Kelsey’s pale face, even if most girls stopped wearing pigtails ten years before she did. And instead of a black headband, she wore a little black top hat, slightly askew so that it wasn’t centered perfectly atop her head. Dylan wondered how on earth she managed to keep the thing in place. It’d require glue or pins; otherwise the thing might have just grown out of her scalp.

On a night when everyone was wearing weird clothing anyway, she actually looked kind of nice.

Kelsey widened her eyes and pointed to the hose at Dylan’s feet. She nodded her head as if to say, “d’uh!” “Pick it up!” she said. “Don’t let it leak on that old well cover.”

Dylan scrambled to do as ordered and Kelsey ran—well, it was more like a brisk walk in her lace-up boots—to

shut off the spout. Dylan, keeping the hose at arm's length to keep from getting any more drenched, waited until the hose stopped bubbling and shook it out.

"Watch it!" Kelsey jumped back. At some point, she'd returned to Dylan's side.

"Sorry," said Dylan, sheepishly remembering the girl's allergy to water, and their last parting. He held the hose out to her. She crossed her arms. "After the 19th century?" he ventured.

Kelsey snorted. "Not by a long shot. Try a few hundred years earlier." Her shoulders stiffened and she jutted her chin toward the dribbling water. "I just don't want to get wet."

Dylan nodded and began to coil the hose around his arm as he walked toward the garden shed. Kelsey stayed several paces behind. Dylan took in her dainty, careful steps. "I'm surprised you have a pool," he said, hanging the loop of hose on the shed's wall.

Kelsey shrugged. "My parents had it put in before my allergy."

"Before your allergy? You weren't born this way?"

Kelsey shrugged again. She stared at the well cover for a moment and then looked up at the moon and shivered, drawing her arms tighter. "People develop allergies," she said at last, breaking through the uncomfortable silence. She turned, not seeming to care whether or not Dylan followed.

Dylan wasn't going to be left alone outside, even if it meant following his weird research partner. He fell in step behind her. She said nothing, and Dylan was left to the quiet sounds of the air rustling through the grass, the crunch of their feet on the sheet of fallen leaves. The party was still several yards away, a quiet thumping in the background of the still night. His mind raced desperately

for something to get her talking. He shifted his Frankenstein mask up over his head, making the rubber resemble a squished hood. He saw the well cover better. It was stained dark with the water, the stains resembling something like claw gashes running across its surface.

“You have a well?”

Kelsey paused. She stared down at it. “It’s not in use anymore.”

Dylan cocked his head. “Is this the well where—”

“So what if it is,” cut in Kelsey sharply. She squeezed her shoulders tighter and started walking.

Dylan followed, not bothering to finish asking his question. “Your house must be pretty old.” He gazed up at the Victorian-style two-story in the near-darkness. “I mean. Besides the things like the modern pool.”

Kelsey’s shoulders nudged up just slightly. “All the houses on this street are old.”

“Yeah, but...” Dylan didn’t get to explain the kind of horror-movie quality he thought the house was giving off in the moonlight. He supposed part of it was the holiday, anyway. And Randi and Bethany had freaked him out a couple of days before. Just a little. But he couldn’t admit that.

Kelsey stepped through the open sliding glass door and slipped past the jamming throngs, not even flinching when she put both hands out to nudge apart a couple merged at the hip so she could pass. Dylan slid his Frankenstein mask back over his head and mumbled “sorry” to the Katniss and werewolf who were staring as he followed her.

Kelsey retreated up the stairs to the second floor, not once looking behind. Dylan hesitated, not sure if he should follow her. He wasn’t particularly in the mood for a research project.

Kelsey stopped at the top of the stairs and spun around. Her eyes narrowed, and she gestured wildly, mouthing or speaking, "Come on!" Dylan couldn't tell with the beat of the music. Kelsey's lips moved. "Now." Dylan sighed and followed suit.

The hallway was dark, and Dylan had only taken two steps onto the second floor, when the sounds of the party seemed almost to cut out. He paused, straining to hear. The music was still there, like the muffled sound of buzzing bees trapped between the walls.

"*Excuse me.*" Kelsey wasn't at all embarrassed to call attention to the couple making out at the end of the hall. "Second floor's off limits, 'kay?" The way Kelsey said it, Dylan could practically picture the sarcastic grin she'd be giving the pair if they could see her clearly.

Dylan squeezed against the wall as the two headed for the stairway, giggling. The guy in the pair—a rather lame cowboy, Dylan noted—muttered, "Bitch," as he passed by.

Dylan was torn between calling him out and wondering if he had a tiny bit of a point.

"Hey, genius. In here." Kelsey had opened a door and beckoned Dylan to follow.

He did. And as soon as he stepped into the room, he almost stepped right back out. He took his Frankenstein mask off entirely and held it in one hand, hoping to see better. It didn't help much, as the moonlight streaming through the open gaudy curtains was the only way he could make out the basic shapes of sparse furniture.

Kelsey closed the door behind them, pushed aside Dylan and walked to a desk. She fumbled at the desk and Dylan heard the scraping sound of the strike of a match. Kelsey held the lit match before her, bathing the small area of the room in an orange glow. She bent and lit a strange

curvaceous glass lamp. She turned a little handle on the side, like a jack-in-the-box, and the light grew slightly brighter.

Dylan turned behind him to make sure there was a light switch beside the door—there was—but as he reached to put his hands on it, Kelsey screamed, “*Don’t!*”

Dylan paused, his hand on the switch. Kelsey nodded up at the ceiling and dragged a second chair from a corner to the desk. “There are no bulbs anyway.” Dylan’s eyes had adjusted enough to the low light to take in the empty light fixture above him. Loose wires hung dangerously from the sockets. *Kelsey’s family must put up with a lot to accommodate her odd tastes*, thought Dylan.

Dylan sighed and sat down in the chair offered to him, tossing the mask on the floor beside him. “I take it electricity wasn’t invented before the 20th century.”

Kelsey sat at the chair beside him and straightened the inkwell and papers on her desk. She popped the cork off the inkwell. The encyclopedia she’d brought to the library was already open. “Technically, it was. But it wasn’t in wide use for another few decades.”

Dylan nodded, not really believing he was having these kinds of conversations with a teenager from his school. His eyes traveled over the desk and Kelsey’s notes, the shadows of the orange glow dancing wickedly across the white sheets of paper. He realized then he’d forgotten to bring his tablet, probably because studying during a party seemed so ridiculous he hadn’t believed it would actually happen. But that meant he was stuck with his tiny phone screen for any Wikipedia lookups. He wasn’t relying on that outdated two-ton brick of Kelsey’s in any case.

Kelsey picked up the quill with her right hand and dipped it in the ink. With her left, she traced lines of text in

her book, her eyes traveling back and forth between the book and notes she slowly shaped to life on her loose paper. Dylan just stared, not believing she could jump in without saying a word. He listened to the crackle of the flame in the weird lamp. The party's music was there in the background, but so quiet and muffled now, it might as well have been next door.

Dylan sighed and rapped his knuckles on the table. "So what's up with the old-timey stuff? Do all girls who dress like you do that?"

Kelsey snorted and peered closely at her monstrous tome. "I doubt it."

"So why do you?"

Kelsey dipped her quill again and kept taking notes, not bothering to look at Dylan. "The last person who wanted to know is dead."

The brief conversation snapped abruptly back into silence. Dylan focused on the crackle of the flames, the tiniest vibration of the music. "That a joke?" he asked at last, not amused.

"No." She didn't elaborate.

So her grandma who died of old age or something. Kelsey just wants me to think she killed her. Ha ha. Dylan let a deep breath out and reached into his back jean pocket for his phone. The screen blinked to life, bathing Dylan in a bright wave of artificial light.

"Please don't..." Kelsey's quill cluttered to the desktop.

Dylan snatched his hand away out of Kelsey's reach. "I didn't say *you* had to use it."

Kelsey's lips hardened into a straight line. "*Put that away.*"

Dylan stared at Kelsey. He couldn't believe she had the nerve. "I used a tablet at the library..."

Kelsey stood, clutching her fists. “This is *my* room, and you have to *put that away right now!*”

Dylan stood up, backing away on reflex. He lowered his phone, the blinding light passing over Kelsey for a moment and—Dylan screamed, dropping the phone. It clattered to the ground.

“*Jesus,*” said Dylan, daring to look at Kelsey’s face again. In the orange glow of the lamp light, it seemed normal. Pissed off and pale with darkly-lidded eyes, but that was normal.

What he thought he’d seen was something like a zombie mask. Puffy, bloated skin. Her dark eyes had been empty sockets. An eyeball had even popped out, hanging...

Dylan turned away from Kelsey, pushing his hands against his stomach. He was going to be sick.

“Just leave it,” said Kelsey, mistaking Dylan’s keeling over for an attempt to pick up his phone. Dylan could hear her chair scrape against the wooden floor. “Let’s get back to work. I was thinking we’ll just split up Luther’s life. I can talk about the early life, you can talk about the end of it.”

Dylan took a deep breath and spun around. “Is this some kind of joke to you?”

Kelsey picked up her quill. “Is what some kind of joke?”

“All these stupid rules. I hate to be the one to tell you, but there are *lights* at school. Like real ones. Electric ones. There’s a stereo system booming right below us.” Dylan bent down to grab his phone. “And how about if you’re going to be such a prick about technology in your room, you *tell me* before I...”

Something cold and wet seeped through his fingers.

Dylan screamed, dropping his phone. It bounced once, its bright screen flickering before the light vanished

entirely. In that brief moment of artificial light, Dylan saw—he *thought* he saw—a mass of something moving on the ground. On his Frankenstein mask. Cockroaches or even mice or...

Dylan stared at the hand he held out before him. The dance of the lamp light revealed something brown, green and oozing. “What the hell?” Dylan shook his hand, flicking some of the muck off his fingers.

Dylan could hear Kelsey behind him sigh. “Latex.”

Dylan spun around. “*What?*”

Kelsey pointed to the floor. “Your mask is made of latex.”

Dylan scowled. “Let me guess. Post-19th century?”

Kelsey’s eyes dropped to her lap. “Yes.”

Dylan swooped down to pick up his mask and his phone. “Well, let me get my latex, my phone, and my modern-ass *jeans* out of your room—”

“Jeans are from the 19th century,” said Kelsey.

“Well, *that’s* great to know. That’s great that you make an exception, so I didn’t have to rip my pants off to walk in here.” Dylan stood up, the cracked phone in one hand, the mask in another. He slipped the phone into his pocket and gazed at the mask. The Frankenstein mask was warped, its cheeks stretched and bloated, the empty eye sockets weeping, oozing muck. A strip of flesh was torn from one eye to the nose. Leaves poured out of the hole. Sopping, decaying leaves, followed by a rush of water.

“What the hell!” Dylan dropped his mask. His feet were suddenly cold. He took a step back. Water was seeping through the cracks between the wood panels.

“Your pipes have burst!” screamed Dylan. He whipped around to face Kelsey. She’d climbed on top of her chair. *Her allergy.*

“Come on!” Dylan gestured toward the door. “It can’t

be *that* bad! We've got to shut the water off. Your basement probably. We've got to let everyone know!"

Kelsey shook her head. She climbed backward up onto the table.

"Careful!" Dylan lunged toward Kelsey's legs, where her feet were dangerously close to knocking the lamp over. He paused. The flame flickered across the white sheets of paper Kelsey had been using to take notes on Martin Luther:

HE KNOWS SILENCE. HE HEARD ME. I'LL DROWN HIM.

The threat was written in glistening ink below a few notes about Martin Luther's life.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Dylan grabbed Kelsey's ankle and tugged it away from the lamp. He tried blowing through the open top of the glass. His feet were getting wetter. The pipe leak was bad. He could feel the water already sloshing over his toes.

"Turn the knob!" Kelsey's hand shook as she pointed at the lamp.

Dylan grabbed hold of the knob and turned, but the flame grew stronger. He was about to turn it the other way when Kelsey bent down, snatching the lamp out of his fingers. "Forget it!" she screamed, raising the lamp above her head. She flinched at the heat of the metal.

"No, no!" Dylan reached for the lamp, but Kelsey stood too far above him. She chucked it down to the floor with a crash.

* * *

Dylan jumped backward, eager to put some distance between him and the shattered glass and crackle of flame. For the first time since the disaster had started, he was

glad to be standing ankle-deep in water in a weird girl's old-fashioned bedroom. He watched with relief as the water extinguished the flame, smoking upward and...

A hiss. Not just the hiss at the death of the flame, but something more. Dylan was sure he'd heard an animal hiss. *A person* hiss.

He looked up at Kelsey. She stared down at the broken lamp on the floor pooling with water. This hiss died as it faded into silence. He didn't see her lips move.

He shook his head and gestured toward Kelsey. "Come on already," he said.

"No." Kelsey wouldn't stop staring at the floor.

Dylan held out his arms, which were rather thin and probably going to get a bit sore at what he was about to offer, but there seemed to be no other way to get the weird girl moving. "I'll carry you."

Kelsey tore her eyes from the ground slowly to look at Dylan's outstretched arms. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Dylan stomped a foot into the puddle. "*Now.*"

Kelsey's eyes moved between the floor and Dylan's arms. At last she bent down and climbed cautiously into his arms, wrapping her own arms around his neck.

Dylan felt utterly ridiculous, supporting the oddly-dressed girl in his arms, one arm slid under her knees and the other wrapped around her back. Her frilly dress ruffled outward, her little hat jammed against his shoulder. His muscles burned a little, but there was no time to change his mind. He wasn't going to convince her to walk through the muck, so he did.

Each step he took was frighteningly cold, sending what felt like a bucket of ice cubes up his legs and to his spine. And it wasn't just water, either. There was something slimy. Old, decayed leaves and muck. In a

bedroom on the second floor. If this was Kelsey's idea of a joke...

"Why is there even a water pipe running under a bedroom floor?" he asked Kelsey, who'd reached out for the handle on her door.

She froze and looked up at him. He noticed for the first time just how dark and round her irises were, although he couldn't be sure of the color in the dark. They were like black spots in a pale face. In a pale, bloated...

Kelsey's lips moved slowly. "There isn't." She grabbed the door handle, turned and pulled.

The boom, boom thrum of the music from the floor below stopped.

Dylan felt the sharp ice of the water vanish from his feet, leaving only squishy shoes and clammy skin behind. He looked down, expecting to see more water having leaked through under the doorway or at least once out once the door opened. There was nothing. Just a normal, dry hallway. His sneakers were the only thing dripping water onto the hardwood floor. He turned around to check the floor behind him, and he'd just seen what looked to be like solid wall out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't." Kelsey let one of her hands fall from behind his neck and cupped his cheek. Startled, Dylan stopped turning and looked into her eyes. They were dark, but they seemed more alive in the hallway. But he still couldn't see clearly, not without lights.

Dylan looked toward the stairway for some hint of the glowing colored lights from the lower floor. There was nothing. He listened. There was no laughter. No talking. No music.

"What happened to the party?" asked Dylan slowly, quietly, afraid to intrude on the silence.

Kelsey swung her feet toward the ground and Dylan

bent to let her stand. She stood no higher than his shoulders. Her hand around his neck was the last thing to fall, severing the contact between her and Dylan.

Dylan felt a little warmer, unless he was imagining it. He ran down the hallway, his shoes squeaking and slipping on the floor.

“Dylan, don’t go down there.”

It was a strange thing for Kelsey to say, even if all she ever said were strange things.

Dylan didn’t listen. He grabbed the banister and took the first few steps down. He looked around, peering into the living room, but no one was there. Everything was still set up for the party—the stereo was there, but it didn’t even blink with lights—but it was dark. And he couldn’t see anyone, not even a silhouette. There were cups, though, on tables. On the sofa. Even spilled on the ground. Like the people carrying them had just dropped them and run.

“Randi?” said Dylan, shattering the silence. “Ryan? Bethany? Hello? Anyone?”

He reached the bottom of the steps and reached for the light switch on the wall.

“Don’t.” He looked up to see Kelsey’s outline at the top of the stairs, staring down at him. Even in the darkness, he could see the paleness of her face.

He watched her and turned the light switch on anyway. She seemed to vanish into the darkness of the upstairs hall.

No lights went on. A power outage, then, in addition to a pipe leak. Or maybe because of it...

He heard something. It was quiet at first, distant. But it was someone speaking. Someone singing, maybe. Someone nearby. Someone outdoors.

Dylan slapped his wet sneakers across the carpet, ignoring the slosh his feet made with each step. He

reached the sliding glass door. It was open. And there in the backyard was the swimming pool, the tarp still tossed aside, the edges still littered with soaked leaves. But there were lumps in the pool. Lumps near the top. Dylan took a few steps closer.

Bodies. People. The pool had been filled with water, and there were people floating, face down. A vampire cape. A witch's hat. A cowboy. A moccasin on one bloated foot.

"No..." The word escaped Dylan's lips before he could stop it. "No." It made no sense. The pool hadn't been filled. And *that many*. That many couldn't have drowned. And the water was still flowing, up and out of the pool, threatening to drown him.

"*Help me.*" Dylan's gaze left the bodies since the first time he'd come outdoors. A girl stood beside the pool, looking down at the floating bodies. She was soaking. Her long skirt dripped muck onto the side of the pool. Dylan watched as a chunk of muck dropped next to her stocking-covered feet. Toes poked out of the rip of her stocking.

She was pale. Her hair was pale, almost white. Her whole outfit was pale. Like Kelsey's, only with a longer skirt.

The girl's head turned to meet Dylan's gaze. "Help me," she repeated.

The face was the one he'd thought he'd seen in Kelsey's room. Bloated, with empty sockets. The eyeball hanging from one of the eyes.

Her voice still lingered in the air. It was the only sound in all of the silence. Not even the flowing water trickled. Dylan took a step back. It was the quiet that spurred him backward. The quiet that filled his whole body with fear.

"The well," said the girl, lifting one arm toward Dylan. "You heard me at the well. The water woke me. Always the

water.”

Dylan bolted. It had to be some sick Halloween prank. He must have pissed off Randi somehow, or maybe Ryan was just being a dick, and they’d even got Kelsey in on it. They’d put aside their dislike for the weird girl and somehow rigged her bedroom to leak water.

But none of it made sense. The bodies. They weren’t just floating there in wait. They were bloated. Dead. Dylan ran through the living room, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He jammed the screen again and again with his finger. “Kelsey!” he screamed. “I’ve had enough of this. Get out here now!”

His phone was unresponsive. The crack on the screen must have broken it. He ran a finger across the screen again, and shouted, dropping the phone to the floor. The crack had sliced open his forefinger, and blood now stained the phone’s screen, almost like it was oozing out from the device itself.

The hiss. The animal-like sound was the only noise puncturing the silence.

The well...

“Par-tay at Randi’s!” Ryan had made a ghost “oooo” sound after that, jiggling his fingertips in front of Randi’s face.

“Shut up,” Randi said, although her tone clearly wasn’t one of anger. She chomped her wad of gum and turned her attention back to her phone screen.

“But your home’s pretty damn creepy is all.” Ryan lifted both his eyebrows as if to punctuate his point. “A perfect place to drink your blood!” Ryan spoke the last few words with a terrible thick Transylvanian accent.

Bethany giggled as Ryan made to “bite” Randi’s neck. Randi pushed Ryan away and kept texting. “Let me guess. Vampire. So original.” Randi rolled her eyes.

"What's so creepy about Randi's house?" I asked, a little bored with Ryan's attempts to flirt with Randi.

"Oo. Oo," Bethany cut in, bouncing up and down. "Didn't someone die at your house?" It seemed a weird thing to get excited about.

Randi shrugged and still didn't look up. "Yeah, like over a hundred years ago."

Bethany gasped, covering her mouth. "That's still pretty scary!"

Randi sighed and pocketed her phone. "If you say so."

Bethany shook her head. "I couldn't sleep in a house where someone died."

Randi crossed her arms. "She died in the backyard. Drowned in the well. Or maybe someone pushed her in or something. I mean, it's pretty stupid to fall in a well."

Bethany's mouth opened into a perfect 'o.' "Maybe that's why your twin won't go to swimming class! She's afraid of drowning!"

"We're not twins, god. Why do people always think that? She's got a medical condition." Randi rolled her eyes, but then her eyes got a little glazy.

Dylan turned to see what had caught Randi's attention. The weird girl in a short, frilly skirt. The girl with pink hair. She opened an umbrella—a parasol, Dylan supposed—and stepped outside, even though it wasn't raining.

"She creeps me out," said Randi. She spit her gum into her hand. "Half the time I forget she exists." She flicked the gum onto the ground.

Someone died in the well in Randi and Kelsey's backyard. Someone over a hundred years ago. Dylan cradled his finger against his chest and ran to the stairway. "Kelsey?" he called out up the stairs. His voice was quieter

than he'd hoped. Strained. Like the silence was drowning it.

"Kelsey?"

The bloated, eyeless face. Just like the one he'd seen on Kelsey. But she couldn't have changed and got out there before he had. It just wasn't possible.

Dylan took a step up the stairs, clutching the banister with his not-bleeding hand. "Kelsey? We have to get out of here. We have to call for help. We..." The squish, squish, squish of his wet sneakers on the stairway. The trickle of the water begun again. The hiss.

"Help me."

Dylan had reached the top of the stairs. He felt the voice travel across his shoulders and down his spine. But still he turned. Slowly, he turned his head and looked down.

The eyeless, bloated girl stood at the bottom of the stairs, one hand reached upward. "Help me."

Dylan slammed his back against the wall. His knees grew weaker and he slouched down, running his bloodied hand over the stairs and the wall behind him, leaving streaks of red wherever he touched.

The girl's emotionless face twisted into a sneer. "Help me already, you moron!"

For the briefest second, Dylan thought he saw a healthier face over the pale girl's. A pale one, but with pretty features and dark-shadowed wide eyes.

"Kelsey...?" Dylan sputtered.

"You got me wet," spoke the girl, wholly bloated and eyeless again. "I hate being wet. It reminds me of that day. It reminds me of the darkness. Of the quiet."

Dylan swallowed. "The quiet?"

The girl took one step up, her hand still outreached. "Have you ever been alone? Truly alone?" She took

another slow step up, the stocking revealing her toes slamming onto the next step with a squish. "It's so quiet."

Dylan nodded, thinking of home. "I know. The quiet hurts more than the anger sometimes."

The girl dropped her hand to her side and clenched her fist. "No, you *don't* know!" Water started dripping off of her dress like she'd just come in from the rain. "I was drowning! I fell, and no one heard me! I thrashed and thrashed because that was all I could do! That was the only noise I could make! But no one heard me!"

The eyeless face smiled, and the smile was more discomfiting than the straight lips. "Mother and Father didn't speak by then, you see. Not to each other. Not even to me. I was scared of the silence, so I thought... Jump in. Scream for help. Thrash my arms. They'd hear me. They'd come." She took another step up, her arm outstretched again. Streams of water fell off the arm onto the stairway. "But soon I gave up. I stopped moving. And there was nothing. Nothing but silence."

Dylan stood on shaky limbs, his back hugging the wall. "I heard you." It was all he could think to say.

The smile dropped. The head tilted inquisitively. The arm faltered. "You do know. You do know the silence."

Dylan bit his lip and nodded, pressing himself back into the wall. "I do." He took a deep breath and reached his bloodied hand down toward hers. "Kelsey, I heard you."

Her lips trembled. Dylan cringed but straightened his shoulders and grabbed her hand.

Kelsey's face looked back at him from the pale, fair-haired girl. Her eyes were back in place. Her eye shadow was gone, but there was no mistaking her beautiful irises. "Thank you." She smiled.

The lights flicked on, and the music roared to life. Dylan was left with his hand clutching thin air. He climbed

down the stairs one at a time, dazed.

“Who turned the lights on?” The Native American princess with the bad wig thudded over to the bottom of the steps. She reached out to flick the lights off, but her hand paused at the switch as she gazed up at Dylan.

“Jesus, what happened to you?”

A few of the people nearby stopped gyrating just slightly to gaze at the exchange. Dylan looked down at his bleeding hand, his soaked pant legs. “I was just with Kelsey. We—”

Randi crossed her arms. “Who’s Kelsey?”

Dylan looked around him at the curious crowd. More had stopped dancing and ventured over. “Your sister.”

“Dude, I’m an only child.” Randi sighed. “*Somebody* got into Daddy’s liquor cabinet. Let me get you a bandage.” She padded off around the corner.

Dylan watched her leave and saw the way the people stared at him before breaking off into hushed whispers. He laughed and slid his butt down onto the bottom stair, reveling in the thrum of the music and the buzzing murmurs of the crowd around him.

* * *

Dylan dropped his keys on the counter and flicked on the kitchen lights. He stomped over to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of root beer, slamming the door shut. He threw open the drawer, found the bottle opener and popped off the metal top, letting it clatter to the floor. Then he took a swig of the root beer and slammed the glass bottle against the counter. He waited.

“Dylan, do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Son, when you come home late, would it kill you not to wake up the whole—”

Dylan's mom clutched her bathrobe at the bottom of the stairs and stared at Dylan's dad, who'd gotten off the couch in his undershirt and boxers.

"Lisa," said Dylan's dad curtly.

"Don," replied Dylan's mom. She pinched her lips.

Dylan laughed and grabbed his root beer, taking another gulp.

Dylan's mom turned her soured expression back toward her son. "What's so funny, young man?"

Dylan clucked his lips together as he took the empty bottle away from his lips. "Nothing. I just thought you two might have forgotten each other's names."

Dylan's parents exchanged a glance. Dylan chucked his bottle into the recycling, not even caring when the glass shattered into the bin.

"Dylan, Christ, no need to throw glass!"

"Are you soaking wet?"

Dylan padded past his mom and headed up the stairs, enjoying the squish, squish, squish he made with each step.

"*Dylan!*" called his mom. "At least go take a warm shower!"

"Lisa, you're too soft on him. Look at that. He's dripping water everywhere."

"Me? *Too soft?* Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

Dylan shrugged and headed for his room. No need for the music tonight. Not as long as everyone knew everyone else in the family was alive. He smiled.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SILICON BEECHES | Mary Fan

*Sometime beyond tomorrow...
Someplace across the stars...*

* * *

I never knew whether to curse or praise the day I fished Sherlock out of the Obsolete Equipment Storage Center, which is essentially a glorified scrap pile. VH Labs, my employer, used that overstuffed old room in the basement to store whatever malfunctioning, outdated, or broken-down machinery they chose not to dispose of outright in hopes that one of their enterprising engineers would find some way to recycle it. I was one such engineer—in the biomedical division—and had gone down there in search of salvageable equipment for my lab. Though VH had plucked me out of university two years before my expected graduation in order to sooner harness my talents—after I won an interstellar science award, it mattered little that I had not yet obtained my degree—they'd been unwilling to allocate *too* much budget to a sixteen-year-old girl.

Like everyone else, I'd heard about the ill-fated Project Sherlock, which had been shut down three years before I joined the company, but I hadn't expected to find

Sherlock herself staring at me from under a heap of mechanical rubbish with her one remaining robotic eye. Named after a figure from ancient Earth Zero mythology, she'd been VH's attempt to replace their own scientists with an artificial intelligence. They'd given her a humanoid body and programmed her to think not only analytically, but creatively and practically as well. This had the unintended side effect of giving her an unmanageable personality—and sentience. Though sentient AIs were nothing new, they were rare. And despite a century having passed since the first known synthetic being with a humanlike consciousness had been created, no one quite understood why some AIs developed such self-awareness while others remained purely mechanical. The creation of artificial life was illegal in the Interstellar Confederation, but that did not prevent VH from attempting to use their creation, claiming that Sherlock was only a convincing *imitation* of life. However, after she proved to be not only obnoxious and disobedient, but destructive as well, they deactivated her and left her to collect dust—until I stumbled upon her.

I don't know what possessed me to take her home with me that day. Neither can I explain why I thought it would be a good idea to repair her (as other engineers had mined her mechanical body for parts) and reactivate her. Especially since I was a *biomedical* engineer, not a mechanical one, and these efforts caused me many, many, *many* headaches and far too much time. Perhaps I'd done it for the challenge, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't also because I was affected by the sight of such a human-looking face, behind which lay so much intelligence and potential, lying slack amid discarded computers as if she were no different. My employer was not happy when they learned of what I had done, but as they'd already relinquished their claim over her by designating her as

garbage, there was nothing they could do to stop me.

About a year after I found her, I was in my lab working on solving one of the most frustrating challenges in the biomedical world—how to create synthetic human bone, complete with marrow that could produce blood—when the alarm on my slate began buzzing urgently. I’m fairly certain I was on the cusp of an epiphany, but I’ll never know what it might have been, since I was so startled by the loudness that all thought flew from my head. Since I didn’t recall setting any alarms, I scrambled to dig the device out of my bag, thinking I’d forgotten something important.

But after I unfolded the slate from its portable triangle shape and snapped it flat into a rectangular tablet, I found not a reminder, but Sherlock’s face filling the screen. She must have messed with my slate’s settings while I wasn’t looking, and I couldn’t say I was surprised by this. Her right eye, usually almond-shaped, had expanded into a near-perfect circle, while the metal patch over her left had been pulled so high by her lifted eyebrows, it threatened to pop off and expose the hole beneath. Her wild expression gave her a frightening look, despite the fact that her face had been designed to be attractive and non-threatening. No one had a good explanation for why an AI named after a middle-aged man had been built to resemble a nineteen-year-old actress named Shi Lei Wang; my theory was that the engineer who’d headed Project Sherlock had a thing for black-haired beauties.

“Watson!” Sherlock exclaimed. She was the only one who called me by my surname, and if I had a throne for every time I asked her to call me Chevonne instead, I could buy the planet Shimshawhenn. I was glad that most people weren’t familiar with the Earth Zero lore her name had been taken from. Otherwise, I would have never heard the end of the Sherlock-and-Watson jokes.

A lock of her gleaming black hair slipped down her pale forehead as she moved closer to the camera on her side. “You must come home at once!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, puzzled.

“I don’t know how to deal with this—come home *now!*”

“What the hell are you going on about?”

“Are you coming or not?” Sherlock’s expression turned from panicked to irritated.

Unwilling to let her handle whatever she was dealing with alone—the last time I did so, her solution to her problem had somehow involved disintegrating the kitchen table—I said, “Okay, all right!”

The screen went black without so much as a “thank you” or a “see you soon.” I rolled my eyes. *Typical.*

Though I was accustomed to her rudeness, this was the first time she’d summoned me from work with such urgency. I tried telling myself that I shouldn’t to worry, that she likely needed extra hands for some new cockamamie experiment of hers, but I couldn’t keep the concern from bubbling up my chest.

So I rushed out of my lab and into my starship—a tiny hunk of gray metal called a Zander—which was docked against the orbital habitat that was VH Labs. I was one of the few employees who commuted there from the planet Aryus below; most lived in corporate housing right there on the float, just an elevator ride away from their offices. I had as well until Sherlock became my roommate. It took me all of two days after reactivating her to realize that making her inhabit the same air as those who’d created and then disposed of her was a terrible idea.

It wasn’t until I’d jumped into the pilot’s seat of my Zander that I realized I was still wearing my orange lab coat. I was one of the few people in my division who didn’t

mind the shade; in fact, I rather liked how the fiery color glowed against my dark complexion. Though I wasn't supposed to wear it outside of work, I couldn't be bothered with putting it away, so I went ahead and buckled myself in. The Zander jerked as I pulled it out of its docking station, sending several locks of my tight black curls flying into my face. I tossed my head and steered my starship toward the small, blue-green planet below.

By the time I arrived at the two-bedroom apartment I shared with Sherlock, I was out of breath. But I was too late to thwart her destructive tendencies. This time, however, it wasn't the furniture she'd harmed.

The first thing I saw when I opened the door was Sherlock lying flat in the middle of the floor, her lone black eye fixed on the ceiling with a blank expression. With her outfit of gray pants and a gray, sleeveless top, which were nearly the same color as the carpet, she looked like she was melting into the ground. I wish I could say I was shocked, but unfortunately, this was an all too familiar sight.

Spotting the metal syringe in her left hand, I snatched it from her in fury. "What the hell, Sherlock? You promised you'd gotten rid of it all!"

Sherlock blinked up at me. "I did. But I procured more."

Scowling, I grabbed one of the hazardous waste disposal bags I'd nicked from my workplace; VH wouldn't miss them, and they were a necessity when one roomed with Sherlock. I shoved the syringe—and the empty vial of acid lying by her head—inside, then began combing the apartment for any more of the infernal stuff.

Why did Sherlock have to pick up her namesake's most frustrating habit? I didn't know if she'd gotten the idea after learning about the mythological detective and his

infamous addiction to narcotics, or if her self-destructive tendencies had always been part of her personality.

The first time she'd realized that damaging her body would shut down parts of her mental systems to divert energy to repairs, she'd torn off nearly all the synthetic skin on one arm. The self-healing polymers grew back so neatly, not a scar remained. Then she'd discovered that injecting corrosives that would eat away at her metal skeleton took more energy to heal, and therefore would send her head into higher states of euphoria. She'd told me once that this was the only way to quiet her mind, which absorbed and processed information at what seemed like lightspeed. I dreaded that someday, she'd go too far and end up permanently damaging or even destroying herself.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I yelled. "I spend all day trying to figure out how to grow bones for people who've lost them through disease or accidents, yet here you are purposely wrecking yours!"

"They'll fix themselves." Sherlock's voice was light and carefree. "They always do."

I was about to launch into a full-fledged rant when I noticed someone sitting in the armchair by the window. I froze, staring at the silent, dark-haired boy. His physical features made him appear around my age; his athletic frame was significantly taller and broader than my five feet and three inches, and his smooth, copper-complexioned face had powerful, mature cheekbones. Yet something about his wide, startled black eyes made him seem younger, almost childlike.

"Who are you?" I demanded, too furious to bother with manners. "And why the hell didn't you stop her?"

"My name is Makya Namoki." His voice was quiet, nervous. "She... She told me the injection was an AI

maintenance thing.”

I sighed, feeling bad for this poor, confused bystander. I often forgot that most people in the galaxy had never and would never encounter a humanoid AI—let alone a sentient one—and therefore wouldn’t know how to deal with one.

“Well, she lied.” I glared down at Sherlock. “What’s he doing here?”

Sherlock sat up, tucking her knees against her chest. “He’s a client.”

Of course. One of the reasons why VH Labs shut down Sherlock was because she found scientific mysteries far less interesting than ones that directly impacted the world around her—crimes and the like. The last straw was when she blew up a lab to flush out a VH executive she claimed was a corporate spy. Since I reactivated her, she’d spent most of her time on the Net, where people would message her with their mysteries, and she’d respond with either the answer she’d deduced or instructions for gathering more clues.

Basically, she fashioned herself into a private detective. I had to wonder if her creators took her name too literally when they programmed her.

Mostly, her interactions remained online, but every so often, a client would find their way into our apartment. I crossed my arms. “Is *this* the big emergency you called me home for?”

Sherlock glanced up at Makya. “Tell her what you told me.”

Makya looked so confused and scared—traumatized, really—that I wanted to give him a hug. His shaky gaze teetered on the edge of tears, and he couldn’t stop fiddling with the edge of the burgundy shirt he wore.

At first, I thought it was because of Sherlock’s antics

and my ensuing anger, and I opened my mouth to apologize. But then he said, “There’s something wrong with my parents. They’re behaving strangely, and I fear they’re in some kind of trouble.”

Deciding I might as well learn what all this was about, I took a seat in one of the armchairs, dropping the hazardous waste disposal bag on the floor, and waited for him to continue.

“It started after my accident.” Makya clasped his hands in his lap, looking incongruously brittle for one built so sturdy. “I hit my head really hard during wrestling practice at school—so hard, they had to put me in a medically induced coma for a few weeks. I barely remember anything from before the accident other than a few scattered memories, but my parents told me I was physically fine other than that.”

I furrowed my brow. Brain trauma was not my area of expertise, but I knew enough to find the story odd already. “Wait... your parents? What about your doctor?”

“I never saw a doctor.” Makya spread his hands. “I was already on board the *Silicon Beeches*—that’s the starship we live on—when I woke up. My parents told me that I’d been released from the hospital while I was still asleep.”

“And *they* brought you out of a coma?” I blinked. “Are they medical professionals?”

“Not even close,” Sherlock quipped. “Kaia Namoki, a.k.a. Mom, owns a wealth management company. Hence living on a private starship—her net worth makes Aryus look like a backwater world. Bolivar Namoki, a.k.a. Dad, is a professor of Earth Zero Cultures. He’s currently unaffiliated with any one university, but in high demand for guest stints due to his specialized knowledge.”

“Well, that is strange,” I murmured.

“Quite,” Sherlock said. “Particularly when you take into account just who the Namokis are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She leaned back on one elbow and waved a hand at Makya. “You tell her.”

I threw her an irritated look. “Why do you keep making him repeat for me what he’s clearly already told you? What’s the point in keeping him here and making me listen?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I’m terrible at storytelling.”

That was as weak a reason as I’d ever heard. But I should have known better than to expect a straight answer. You’d think someone as analytical as Sherlock would behave logically, but as far as I could tell, there was simply no rational explanation for many of the things she did.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I gave Makya a resigned look. “What did Sherlock mean by that?”

“We’re among the last of our people,” Makya said, and I wasn’t sure if the bewilderment on his face was a reaction to Sherlock or due to the mystery he’d sought her for. “We trace our ancestry all the way back to an Earth Zero tribe called the Hopi.”

I widened my eyes. The planet from which humans originated was so long-lost, it was almost a legend. Centuries and centuries ago, disaster forced people to evacuate to newly discovered planets, scattering them across the galaxy. Much information had been lost; even my family, which always stressed the importance of knowing where you came from, had no idea which Earth Zero nation our ancestors had lived in. That the Namokis could pinpoint their origins so precisely was something of a miracle.

“You must know how risky medically induced comas can be.” Sherlock glanced at me. “Isn’t it odd that such

protective parents would bring their only son out of one themselves?”

I lifted my eyebrows at her. “I suppose you have an idea as to why?”

“At this point in the story, I had twenty-eight ideas.”

“Of course.” Knowing better than to ask what they might have been—if she’d wanted to tell me, she would have already—I turned back to Makya. “So what made you seek Sherlock?”

“It’s... It’s going to sound really stupid, but believe me, I wouldn’t have come if it weren’t important.” Makya raked his hand through his short hair, which was so unevenly chopped, I wondered if he’d cut it himself. “Let me start by saying that the parents I remember and the parents I woke up to after my accident seem like different people. They were always so loving and affectionate in my memories, but now, they seem... cold. Almost... almost as if they don’t want me anymore.” The look on his face was so pained, I again had the urge to give him a hug. “My father looks at me like I’m some unwelcome thing he’s been saddled with. In fact, he barely speaks to me. My mother... she goes back and forth. One moment, she has no time for me, and the next moment she’s going out of her way to make sure I’m happy—buying me anything I asked for, telling me funny stories, letting me do whatever I want... except leave the *Silicon Beeches*. And I knew she was watching my transmissions and Net activity as well. I began to feel like a prisoner.”

“So that’s why you came in person.” I leaned back in my chair.

Makya nodded. “They don’t know I’m here, though it won’t take them long to figure out that I took one of the *Silicon Beeches*’s shuttles. I’d been meaning to for a few days, but couldn’t quite work up the courage until...” He

paused. "Like I said, it's going to sound really stupid. But please understand, it's actually about a lot more..."

"What is it?" I asked impatiently.

He dragged his hand through his uneven locks again. "My hair used to reach past my shoulders. Keeping it long was part of our tradition, and it meant a lot to my parents that I keep that little piece of our heritage alive. But shortly after I woke up from my coma, my mother cut it. I was puzzled by how angry she was when I initially refused to let her. It sounds like such a small thing, but it... it just wasn't like her. Then yesterday, I went into her dresser to search for a family heirloom she'd told me about—I was bored and just wanted to see it. Instead, I found several locks of black hair—my hair—sitting in one of her drawers. But I recall a cleaner bot sweeping my hair away after she cut it... when I asked why she'd retrieved it, she became so furious, I feared she might..." He trailed off and drew a breath. "I thought she was going to kill me."

The acute terror in his eyes told me that these words weren't superlative. "You thought she'd actually *kill* you," I echoed, disturbed.

He nodded, but before he could say anything else, a high-pitched buzzing noise filled the apartment, indicating that someone was requesting entry.

Since Sherlock, now curled up on the floor, was in no state to answer the door, I got up to check the security monitor. To my surprise, an armed security bot—a rectangular machine on large wheels with two massive robotic arms ending in weapons—stood outside. It wasn't unusual for someone to send a bot to run an errand, but normally, they'd dispatch a messenger drone or delivery android. Security bots were used for guarding places and escorting prisoners.

"State your purpose," I said into the intercom, doing

my best to sound authoritative.

"I was dispatched by Kaia Namoki to retrieve her son, Makya Namoki, and return him safely to the private starship *Silicon Beeches*." The bot's voice was a mechanical monotone. "I request entry."

I glanced at Makya, whose pursed lips failed to hide the fear still plain in his eyes. "You don't have to go." I didn't know what I'd do if the bot was programmed to use force to complete its mission, but I wasn't about to let a terrified kid walk off with that mechanical monstrosity if he didn't want to. "You can stay with us until we figure out what's going on."

Makya stood slowly. "Thank you, but I've caused enough trouble." He looked down at Sherlock. "Do you... have any answers?"

Sherlock rolled over to face him, but didn't get up. "Based on the information you've given me, I've deduced seven possible explanations, but I'll need to know more in order to narrow it down to one. And I never share my deductions until I'm certain I'm right."

"Thank you for listening, at least." Makya made his way over to the door, then turned to me. "And thank you as well. I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"Chevonne Watson," I said.

"Chevonne. It's been a pleasure."

Now, why can't Sherlock have manners like that? As I reluctantly opened the door, I assured Makya that Sherlock and I would be in touch soon. Then I watched him leave with the menacing bot, an uncomfortable sensation swirling in my gut. I couldn't help feeling that he was in some kind of danger, and I reminded myself that the bot had been sent to *protect* him, not to harm him.

After shutting the door behind me, I spun toward Sherlock.

“Don’t think that Makya’s case made me forget what you did.” I grabbed the hazardous waste disposal bag and resumed my hunt for Sherlock’s corrosives. “How many times do I have to tell you—you’re not indestructible! One of these days, you’ll go too far, and then what? It took me *ages* to repair you the first time, and I don’t know if I could do it again!”

“Calm down, Watson.” Sherlock pulled herself up onto the armchair, then collapsed sideways into it. “I assure you, I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” I rifled through the kitchen, searching every nook that could possibly conceal a syringe. “It’s bad enough that you do this to yourself, but for freak’s sake, Sherlock, Makya was here! How could you do that in front of a kid?”

“He’s no kid.”

I emerged from the kitchen and found her with a dark expression on her face—her slender black eyebrows knit into what looked like a scowl tinted with sadness. “What do you mean?”

She adjusted her position so that she sat with perfect posture. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought she’d suddenly sobered up. “Merely that he’s a legal adult—a year older than you, in fact. The school he referred to is the University of Thern. Of course, he has not attended in some time, due to his so-called accident.”

“So-called? You suspect foul play?”

“I do. And I need to observe what’s going on up close. Can I borrow the Zander?”

I crossed my arms. “I am *not* loaning you my starship.”

“Then you’ll have to come with me. Which I was going to ask you to do anyway. Extra hands are always advantageous.”

“Sherlock, I have a *job*.”

“And the day after tomorrow is the weekend, which is perfect because that gives me a day to prepare for our mission. Come now, Watson, where’s your sense of adventure?” Her expression gained a brightness that reminded me of an excited kitten—the look it gets right before it begins bouncing off walls and tearing things apart.

I had to admit, the promise of adventure was rather irresistible. Particularly since meeting Makya made this case feel strangely personal to me. If his parents’ odd behavior ended up causing him harm, I’d hate myself for failing to intervene.

Also, the case seemed to matter a lot to Sherlock. I hadn’t forgotten that she’d failed to explain why she’d needed me so urgently.

“Fine.” I shook my head. This would hardly have been the first bizarre escapade I ended up on thanks to Sherlock. “Why not?”

“Fantastic!” Sherlock grinned. “We could be the ones to connect the famous businesswoman Kaia Namoki to a crime. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“You like causing trouble way too much.”

“I’m just playing the role I was made for.” As if to prove her point, she grabbed her deerstalker hat (which I’d given her as a joke) from the shelf behind her and pulled it over her head.

* * *

The *Silicon Beeches* was a gleaming, copper-and-white Birchir-class ship that could easily have dwarfed my apartment building. The wide, somewhat triangular shape reminded me of an enormous bird with outstretched wings. One side featured an image of three lush trees rendered in

a dark silver shade, and I wondered if these were the beeches the ship had taken its name from. Quite a contrast from the boxy little Zander that Sherlock and I occupied. Only the extraordinarily wealthy could afford to live on private starships—not only because the ship itself was insanely expensive, but also due to the exorbitant costs associated with stocking and maintaining such a vessel.

The day Sherlock and I went to investigate, the *Silicon Beeches* was hovering in a remote region so far from the nearest civilized planet, it took us nearly a day to reach it. If I'd had any doubts that Makya's parents were into something shady, the location alone dispelled them. A person didn't take their starship so far from the known worlds unless they had something to hide. As to what it might have been, well, I decided not to attempt any conclusions, since Sherlock would surely deduce the answer soon enough, and I'd look idiotic for trying to compete with her.

I steered the Zander toward the enormous starship, feeling like an insect approaching a lion. My Zander was so ridiculously small, it didn't even contain living quarters; just a cockpit, a washroom, and a storage closet. Which meant I had no place to escape Sherlock's company during the journey and was forced to listen to her relive her latest cases. That wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't insisted that I attempt the deductions myself, only to tell me that I was wrong and that the right answer was—you guessed it—"elementary." By the time we were within visual range of the *Silicon Beeches*, I was seriously wishing that I'd just lent Sherlock my damn ship and stayed home.

"If you want this plan to go smoothly, then it's in your best interests not to drive your partner insane," I grumbled.

Sherlock gave me a quizzical look. “But you’re the one who told me to make my conversations more interactive, rather than just talking at you.”

That was true, but her idea of a solution was not what I had in mind.

Before I could respond, she pointed enthusiastically at the viewscreen. “See those drones around the *Silicon Beeches*?”

I did not. Assuming her superior sight had allowed her to spot something too small for my mere human eyes, I glanced down at the scanner on the control panel. Several red dots surrounded the green outline of the *Silicon Beeches*, indicating armed vessels.

“Bettas?” I pursed my lips. The small attack drones were mostly used by warships in combat. Why would a businesswoman and a professor have them around their home? “Seems a little paranoid.”

“They’re afraid of something.” Sherlock leaned back in the copilot’s chair. “Let’s hail them before they decide we’re a threat.”

She pressed an icon on the control screen to request communication. Except the signal wouldn’t be coming from a crappy little Zander registered to one Chevonne Watson. Thanks to bit of code she’d obtained the previous day, the Namokis would be receiving a transmission from an armed, respectable Barracuda-class fighter registered to the Thern Police Department. I didn’t want to know how she’d gotten her hands on that.

The *Silicon Beeches* accepted our transmission, and the viewscreen switched to an image of a middle-aged woman with black hair wound into twin knots on the sides of her head. Together, they resembled butterfly wings, and they framed a regal face with hard, black eyes and a wide mouth. Though she shared Makya’s copper complexion

and broad cheekbones, her aura of shrewd sternness contrasted his wide-eyed innocence so greatly, I almost didn't notice the physical resemblance.

"Kaia Namoki?" Sherlock squared her shoulders. "This is Detectives Scarlet and Baskerville of the Thern Police Department."

Very clever, I thought dryly. I hoped Kaia's knowledge of her Earth Zero roots didn't extend to mythological characters her ancestors might have enjoyed reading about.

"What's this about?" Kaia asked, apparently unperturbed.

"One of your son's classmates reported him missing after an extended absence from school," Sherlock replied. "We were called to investigate."

Annoyance flashed across Kaia's eyes. "There's been a misunderstanding. My son received a serious head injury following a sporting accident and is taking time off to recover here at home. I informed the university three weeks ago."

"So we've heard," I said, playing my part. "Nevertheless, our department takes missing persons reports very seriously. If you don't mind, we'd like to dock and confirm with our own eyes that Makya is on board the *Silicon Beeches*."

"Of course." Kaia gave us a cold smile. "You may use Docking Hatch Nine-Dash-Two."

"Thank you, ma'am." I ended the transmission and approached the docking hatch. If Kaia had looked out a window instead of relying on her ship's scanners, our charade would have ended before it began. Fortunately, she seemed to take our story at face value, and I hoped that meant she wouldn't ask us to show our badges... and that she wouldn't ask why the Thern Police Department

had sent detectives instead of uniformed officers.

As I brought the ship to a halt, Sherlock pulled a small, silver disc from her pocket and gave it a pinch. That coin-shaped device was the reason why we had to get on board. Once attached to the ship, it would allow us to access the *Silicon Beeches*'s central computer. Again, I didn't want to know how she'd obtained such a thing.

I approached the ship's door, taking a moment to straighten my black blazer. My businesslike outfit and straight posture must have been enough to conceal my youth, because Kaia did not question my identity when I stepped on board her ship. The entrance brought us into a circular room ringed with shelves displaying ancient artwork—figurines, pottery, and sculptures in bright, saturated colors. Turquoise-hued sofas formed a semi-circle around a reddish-brown table in the center, but I had a feeling we would not be invited to sit.

Kaia was waiting for us right in front of the door with one hand on Makya's shoulder. His dark eyes widened when he spotted me and Sherlock, but, to my relief, he didn't say a word.

"As you can see, officers, my son is perfectly safe." Kaia lifted her chin. "Will that be all?"

"I just need to ask a few standard questions, and then we'll be out of your way." To give Sherlock a chance to plant her device, I asked Kaia for details about when she'd informed the university of Makya's absence and when he would return to school, then pretended to check her answers with a nonexistent contact. Fortunately, feigning confidence was a trait I'd mastered while presenting projects before stern-faced adults at science fairs. Kaia remained cool though my interrogation, betraying no emotion other than mild annoyance.

Makya, however, jittered with anxiety. He shot me a

questioning look, and though he didn't speak a word, I could tell he wanted to say, *Please tell me what's going on.*

When I finished my questions, I gave him a brief smile that I hoped conveyed, *You'll have your answers soon.* Then, I apologized for the intrusion and returned to the Zander with Sherlock.

"Mission accomplished?" I asked as I pulled away from the *Silicon Beeches*.

"Naturally." Sherlock didn't look up from her slate, which she was in the middle of swiping at. "I should be able to blind the *Silicon Beeches*'s scanners to our presence and tap into their security cameras. Did you notice how distressed Kaia was?"

"She seemed calm to me." I immediately regretted the words as I recalled just how much sharper Sherlock's senses were than mine.

"Her heart rate was elevated, and—"

"I know the biological indicators of nervousness, Sherlock. So she was worried about something. Any idea what?"

"Nine ideas, actually."

"I don't suppose you care to share?"

"Not really, no."

I huffed, wondering for the millionth time why I put up with her. My own mind began jumping to conclusions about the fabulously wealthy Kaia Namoki being entangled in some crime syndicate and being forced by a mobster to treat her son a certain way to prevent him from catching on. Perhaps that same mobster had implanted Makya with a brain chip to alter his memory, maybe to keep him from remembering something he'd witnessed. Such things had been known to happen. All that would explain why Kaia didn't question me and Sherlock; she likely wanted to get rid of us as quickly as possible. *Now, now, Chevonne, I*

scolded myself. *You've got no evidence for any of these conclusions.*

"Now, that's odd." Sherlock cocked her head. "There doesn't seem to be any cybersecurity around. I've already tapped into their system of security cameras, and I haven't even activated the device."

"What?" I leaned over to look at her slate. Given the lengths to which the Namokis had gone to secure themselves physically, I'd expected the *Silicon Beeches's* central computer to have countless firewalls and whatnot. But sure enough, Sherlock was easily able to pull up any camera she wanted.

The footage revealed a vast but mostly empty residential starship staffed entirely by machinery. The only living beings on board were Makya and his parents. I found that unusual. While technology had made it possible ages ago to live without ever interacting with another member of the human race, most people were social creatures and preferred actual assistants, security guards, and crewmembers over their artificial counterparts. Especially the rich—the more cheaply one could replace humans, the higher a status having them indicated.

But if Kaia Namoki was hiding something nefarious, her behavior didn't show it. After briefly informing her husband about what had transpired with "Detectives Scarlet and Baskerville," she casually retired to her office.

Bolivar Namoki, a tall man who reminded me of my favorite uncle with gentle his black eyes and soft features, proceeded to lead Makya to the ship's library and introduce the young man to an ancient Hopi verse. Recalling what Makya had said about his father, I expected Bolivar to be distant or cruel. Instead, all I saw was a loving, scholarly father teaching his son about their family's origins, and I became rather jealous of the Namokis's

connection to their Earth Zero ancestry. Later, Kaia joined the two of them, and the ensuing scene could have come straight out of a sappy holodrama. A mother, a father, and their beloved child reveling in their family's rich history.

Hours passed, and we witnessed absolutely nothing that would prove Makya's assertions that his parents were behaving strangely. And, in sharp contrast to the anxious boy I'd met two days earlier, the Makya I viewed through the *Silicon Beeches's* security footage appeared perfectly at ease. Happy, in fact. I began to wonder if maybe the issue wasn't with his parents, but with him. Perhaps the head trauma that had cost him his memories had also induced some kind of paranoia. Yet I couldn't shake a gut feeling that I was missing something. Could he have been the victim of some kind of behavior modification? If not a brain chip, then a drug?

I thought Sherlock would start pointing out all the things I was missing, as she usually did, but she remained mostly silent, responding to my questions with single-word answers or grunts. Her taciturnity was almost a mystery of its own. But I'd learned by this point not to try figuring out her erratic behavior. She had, after all, recently injected herself with corrosives in front of a client.

Eventually, I grew bored and decided there was nothing to be gained from me watching the footage with Sherlock. A growl from my stomach reminded me that it was well past dinnertime, and I opened the storage compartment behind my seat in search of one of the disgusting, nutritionally optimized food packets I always kept on board. To my surprise, I found instead an assortment of fresh foods packed in temperature regulators that kept them refrigerated and would heat them up at the press of a button. Since I didn't recall having been so prepared—I'd worked up until the last minute,

knowing I could rely on the aforementioned food packets to sustain me during this trip—there could only be one explanation.

I nudged Sherlock's shoulder. "You brought food for me?"

"Of course it's for you." Sherlock didn't look up from her slate. "In case you forgot, I don't eat."

I smiled. "That was very thoughtful. Thank you."

She waved her hand. "It was in my best interests not to have the pilot starve to death."

I could have pointed out that I wouldn't have starved anyway, but knew better. I grinned at this little reminder—not that I needed one—that despite her best attempts to appear totally robotic, Sherlock was, in many ways, as human as I was.

More hours passed, which I spent reading biomedical journals in an effort to keep up with the latest discoveries in my field. I was halfway through a fascinating new study about the impact of certain chemicals on human behavior when Sherlock let out an abrupt cry, startling me into dropping my slate.

"I *knew* it!" she exclaimed.

I scooped up my fallen device. "What did you find?"

Sherlock shoved the screen in front of my face, and I saw two side-by-side videos of Makya asleep in his bedroom. "The one on the left is the footage from the *Silicon Beeches*'s central computer. The one on the right is from the device I planted earlier today. See the difference?"

I did not. But I decided to look a little closer before asking Sherlock what her more acute vision picked up. At first, the two images of a peacefully sleeping young man appeared identical. Then, light spilled into the video on the right... while the video on the left remained dark. I gasped

as the video on the right showed Makya's parents entering the room while the one on the left continued showing him sleeping.

"They're shielding their actions from their own security cameras!" I thought aloud. "They must be worried that someone will tap into their central computer and see what they're up to."

"Precisely," Sherlock said.

Ideas spun through my head. Was this more paranoia? Were they afraid of what would happen if the authorities were to investigate them and demand that they turn over all the data in the *Silicon Beeches's* computer? Or did they suspect that someone was already watching them? Could they have known it was us? Sherlock had claimed that the same device that allowed her access to unaltered footage from the ship would veil my Zander from their scopes, but it was possible that they had other ways of detecting us.

Either way, I was about to witness something the Namokis did not want me to see, and my heart raced as I watched the screen.

Kaia shook Makya's shoulder. "Wake up!"

When he didn't respond, she shook him harder and yelled in his face. It seemed rather rude, and her demeanor lacked any of the warmth I'd witnessed earlier.

Makya woke with a start. He barely had time to groggily ask what was going on before Kaia grabbed his wrist and yanked him out of bed.

"It's time for another exercise." Her voice was harsh—the antithesis to the loving manner with which she'd treated him before. Recalling that it was actually possible her behavior had been modified by a brain chip or mind-altering drugs, I shuddered. As I watched her roughly shove Makya against a wall, then force him into a straight

posture against it—all while Bolivar looked on unsympathetically—I realized why Makya had seemed so afraid.

This was not affectionate mother I'd spied on a few hours ago. This was a cold woman who I fully believed would harm or even kill Makya if he didn't obey her.

Who the hell was she, really? And the father—where was the man who reminded me of my favorite uncle, and who was this statue who witnessed everything without reacting?

"You remember the words?" Kaia said.

Makya nodded, fear plain in his eyes.

"Wipe that look from your face." Kaia shoved a slate into Makya's hand. "This scene is supposed to convey regret, not terror." When his expression didn't change, she sighed. "Relax. Remember, it's just an acting exercise to stimulate the injured parts of your brain. The sooner you get it right, the faster you'll heal."

"That's nonsense!" I exclaimed, unable to help myself. I was no expert in head trauma, but even I knew you couldn't *act* your way out of a brain injury.

"Shush!" Sherlock threw me an irritated look.

A feeling of trepidation gripped me as I watched Kaia back away from her son, then instruct him to "perform it as if it's real." Makya held up the slate with both hands, then spoke into the camera.

"Hey, Ibis. Look, I'm sorry it's been so long since I contacted you. I was doing a lot of soul-searching, and I just couldn't handle facing you until now. There's no easy way for me to put this, so I'll just say it: I don't love you anymore."

Makya's words sounded stiff and unnatural as he recited the rest of what must have been a rehearsed speech, and I wondered why the hell his parents would

make him memorize a break-up message. Even if they had some kind of strange obsession with monologues, surely there were better ones out there. I didn't recognize the holodrama this one must have come from, but it was apparently a poorly written one.

My confusion turned to anger as I watched Kaia force Makya to recite that garbage over and over and over, yelling at him between each recitation for how unconvincing he was until he was close to tears.

"What the hell is she doing?" I never thought an acting exercise could become abuse, but the way she harangued him and called him ugly things like "worthless" and "piece of junk" made me want to storm onto the *Silicon Beeches* and rescue him immediately. Yet other than giving a few weak protestations about not knowing what she wanted of him, he never once fought back.

Meanwhile, on the left, the image of a peacefully sleeping Makya continued looping.

"She won't harm him, Watson," Sherlock said. "She needs the world to believe that he's completely all right. And this is nothing new to him. As you must have construed, this is exactly the kind of behavior that led Makya to seek me in the first place."

The urge to intervene raged fiercely in my chest, and I reminded myself that Makya had sought Sherlock—and me—for answers, not rescuing. It would do no one any favors to yank him out of there before we knew what was going on. And if Sherlock and I attempted such a thing, we'd be charged with trespassing and possibly kidnapping, depending on whose side Makya took.

Besides, he's not a kid, I thought, somewhat puzzled by the fact that I had to remind myself of that. He wasn't a small person, and he showed no signs of having a mental age lesser than his physical one, so why did he seem so...

young?

I looked away from the screen. "This is screwed up. Why the hell is she treating him this way?"

"Out of desperation." Sherlock's expression remained cool and neutral, but there was an edge in her voice. She pressed an icon on the screen, muting her slate.

I angled my head. "Have you narrowed your ideas down to one, then?"

"Almost. To confirm my deductions, I'll need to board the *Silicon Beeches* once again."

"And why's that?"

"Because there's a sector of the ship that even my marvelous, illegal device can't access. A mystery sector, if you will."

"What?"

Sherlock swiped at her slate, then turned it toward me. The left video showed rotating footage of empty rooms, but the right video was completely blank. "This is the display from what should have been a residential sector of the ship."

"Someone disconnected it from the security network." I wove my fingers into my curls. "They're feeding the central computer false images to fool anyone who might try hacking in." Ideas ricocheted around my mind—that this was where the Namokis kept contraband, that they were smugglers under the thumb of a powerful crime boss, or perhaps they *were* the crime bosses, and this was where they hid their illegal operations.

Just then, I noticed something odd on the scanner: a red dot where there was only blank space on the viewscreen. For a moment, I thought it was a betta drone that the visual scopes either failed to pick up or displayed in too minute a shape for me to make out. Then I realized that we were close enough to the *Silicon Beeches* that the

drone would have to be small indeed if I couldn't see it.

Sherlock raised her eyebrows at me. "I see you've noticed our companion."

Our companion? Then I realized what the dot indicated: a third ship. An armed and concealed one, in fact. A criminal enforcer, perhaps? Or a police ship conducting a secret investigation?

"We're not the ones the false security footage is meant to fool," I muttered.

"Exactly," Sherlock said. "Setting up that system must have taken a significant amount of effort, and the Namokis could not have known that we would follow Makya back here. So the conclusion that there is a third party involved is—"

"Don't say it."

"—elementary."

I scowled.

A vague smirk lifted her lips. "Whoever they are, this third party must be searching for what lies within that mystery sector as well."

I started to reply, but then a great yawn engulfed my words. I hadn't noticed how tired I was until then, and I looked at the clock for the first time since we arrived at the *Silicon Beeches*. *No wonder*, I thought as I regarded the ungodly hour. But of course it was late—Makya had been asleep, and his parents had basically roused him in the middle of the night. Which meant it was time for Sherlock and I to retire as well.

Annoyance crossed Sherlock's face when I mentioned this. "You can remain on the ship and sleep if you'd like, but—"

"But I'm the pilot, so I decide where we go." As I was still the one behind the controls, I took the liberty of steering my Zander away from the *Silicon Beeches*. "I

never agreed to an all-night stake-out, and even AIs require rest.” That was something I’d learned a few days after bringing Sherlock into my home. She’d remained awake for four days straight and then began pausing abruptly in a dazed state, only to come to several minutes later wondering what had happened. After I did some research and learned that AIs needed sleep just as humans did, I insisted that she maintain a schedule more or less similar to mine. Mostly because I also learned that sleep deprivation could cause AIs to behave erratically, and I feared for the furniture.

“I slept two days ago!” Sherlock protested. “There’s no need to interrupt the investigation.”

“What’s your plan for getting on board?” I cocked one eyebrow. “Your device keeps the *Silicon Beeches* from seeing us, but not from sensing one of its hatches opening—correct?”

Sherlock started to reply, then sank back into her seat. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Perhaps the lack of sleep is preventing you from realizing such an obvious obstacle?”

“Your point has been made!”

This time, it was my turn to smirk. “And it was so—”

“I already conceded!”

“—elementary.”

* * *

Whirring and zapping noises woke me the next day. Recalling that I was still in the pilot’s seat, stuck on board my minuscule Zander with Sherlock, I knew the sound could mean nothing good.

“Sherlock!” I got up and whirled toward the noise, which was coming from the narrow area between the

cockpit and the storage closet at the back of the ship (I won't insult the word "corridor" by assigning it to that undersized space). Sherlock was crouched inside the closet, whose doors were open and whose spare contents had been shoved into the washroom. The Zander's repair bot, which normally sat tucked into its compartment until needed, wheeled before her on its squat body, then turned toward me, aiming the laser usually used to cut metal in the direction of the control panel. "What the—"

A quick blast cut me off, and I looked around in alarm to see what had been hit. Answer: one of the disgusting nutrition bars I'd been spared from eating yesterday. A quick glance around revealed that Sherlock had stuck the bars to multiple surfaces around our small space. Several had already been blasted.

"Target practice for a repair bot?" I put my hands on my hips. "What, did you run out of types of dust to set on fire?"

"Hackers have been known to use repair bots as weapons." Sherlock tapped at the slate in her hand, which she was apparently using to control the bot. "Crude as they are, I need to know what kind of damage they can cause. And you needed to dispose of those food products you so disliked."

"They're imperishable. What if I'd wanted to keep them as emergency rations in case I ever got stranded?"

"The probability of that happening is too remote to consider." She made a derisive noise. "While commuting between Aryus and your place of employment, you are never more than two light-minutes from the nearest starship. And you'd never find yourself anywhere else unaccompanied by an expert in starship mechanics who'd ensure your safety."

Knowing that Sherlock was referring to herself, I

couldn't help but smile. "That's a nice thought. But did you ever consider the possible consequences of aiming a laser at the ship's controls?"

"Of course I did, and I deemed the risk acceptable."

I threw up my hand. *Why do I bother? Sherlock will be Sherlock.* At least I'd never have to worry about life getting boring.

Still, I wasn't about to let her continue. I yanked the nutrition bars off the walls one by one, ignoring her protests.

"But I'm not finished!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, you are," I said. "Don't you have a case to solve?"

"Oh, it's basically solved already." Sherlock pouted like a petulant child as I deactivated the repair bot and put it back into its compartment. "I just need a few confirmations."

I gave her a funny look. "You've never needed this many confirmations before."

"Each case is different." She stood, then made her way back toward the cockpit, her slate dangling from her hand. "I'll still need to board the *Silicon Beeches*, and while you were asleep, I obtained an upgrade to my device that will mask the opening and closing of a hatch."

I narrowed my eyes. "One day, your dealings with cybercriminals will get you arrested, I'm not going to rescue you."

"Don't be absurd," she replied, and I decided that whether she meant she'd never get caught or that I'd never let her be captured, she was right. "Anyway, I watched the Namokis through most of the night, but observed nothing of note. After a few hours of so-called acting exercises, the parents allowed Makya to return to bed before retiring as well. At that point, the two security feeds synced up once

more. And since then, they've been perfectly aligned."

"What about Makya?"

"He seemed a bit distressed, but Kaia told him that any anxieties he had were due to the lingering behavioral effects of his head injury."

I barked out a humorless laugh. "That's garbage."

"Agreed." A ping emitted from Sherlock's slate, and she held it up with an eager look. "I programmed my slate to alert me if the visual feeds differed again."

I peered over her shoulder. The video on the left depicted all three family members in the library. Makya and his mother sat at separate desks tapping at their slates while Bolivar had his nose buried in an ancient paper tome. A charming image—but fake. Because in the right video, Kaia approached Makya, who watched her nervously.

"It's time. Take care not to make any mistakes." Her voice carried a subtle threat.

I shuddered. If I didn't know any better, I'd think she were speaking to a hostage. *Were they always this dysfunctional? Or is this more of the strange behavior Makya came to us about?*

Kaia returned to her seat. A moment later, the slate let out a second ping.

"That one means the videos synced up again," Sherlock said.

On the screen, Makya stood from his desk, then turned toward his parents.

"Mom, Dad... I... I have something to say." Makya knotted his fingers before him, and I wondered if he was finally about to confront them about the way they'd been acting. "I'm sorry about all the trouble I caused. I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I know now that you only had my best interests in mind."

I furrowed my brow, wondering what trouble he was referring to.

"I should have listened to you." Makya dropped his gaze. "I ask your forgiveness."

For what? I regretted having been so hands-off with the case and wished I'd taken a few moments to stalk him and his parents online to learn more about their pasts.

Kaia walked up to him and put her hands on his shoulder. "Of course we forgive you." The gentle mother had returned. "I'm just glad you are yourself again."

"As am I." Bolivar put down his book. "It's time we all move on from what happened."

Which was...? I hoped they'd say something more specific, but alas, no such luck.

Makya straightened, his expression firm. "I'm going to end this once and for all, and I want you to see me do it." He returned to his desk, picked up his slate, and opened a communication line.

A chill ran down my spine as he recited the same words he'd been harangued into repeating just a few hours before.

"Hey, Ibis. Look, I'm sorry it's been so long since I contacted you. I was doing a lot of soul-searching, and I just couldn't handle facing you until now. There's no easy way for me to put this, so I'll just say it: I don't love you anymore." Unlike his previous recitations, Makya sounded entirely genuine this time.

I realized that the entire scene had been rehearsed from the moment the two video feeds had synced up again. But what was the purpose?

Then, the answer struck me. "This whole charade is to fool an ex-lover—this Ibis."

"Mmm." Sherlock's attention remained glued to her slate.

My mind spun. “Makya and his parents must think that Ibis is watching them through the security feed, and they want him or her—”

“Her. Ibis is a woman.”

“They want her to believe that Makya is through with her.” I stroked my chin. “Could—”

“Shush, Watson! I’m trying to listen!”

It seemed to me that there was little to be gained from watching the rest of the scene play out, but Sherlock apparently disagreed. *This Ibis must be a stalker—and a dedicated one at that*, I thought. That was the only explanation for why the Namokis believed she’d be watching them through their security cameras even as Makya sent her a message. *She must be the one in the third starship*. That might even explain Makya’s distress; maybe he was still in love with her despite her stalking, but his parents were forcing him to get rid of her. *If that’s the case, though, why didn’t he tell us?*

The slate pinged again, and what I saw next blew my theory to smithereens.

On the left, the happy family resumed their reading. On the right, a nervous Makya approached his mother.

“Will there be more acting exercises now that I’ve completed this one?” he asked.

Right... It was all just acting to him. Which means Ibis isn’t even real... right? I was shocked that someone who seemed as disingenuous as he did could put on such a convincing performance. *The guy deserves a goddamn statuette.*

“Most likely,” Kaia said, responding to Makya. “Return to your desk. I’ll have further instructions for you later.” She deserved a statuette as well, because both the loving mother she’d appeared to be moments earlier and the frosty mistress she appeared to be now were equally

convincing.

Makya obeyed, and once he was back in his spot, the videos synced up again.

All I could conclude from what I'd seen was that something incredibly weird was going on with the Namokis, and that I had no idea what it was.

Sherlock switched off her slate's screen, and I found her silence disconcerting. I couldn't read anything in her expression either, and for the first time in a long time, she looked like the emotionless machine she'd been designed to be.

She gestured toward the pilot's chair. "If you'd don't mind, I'd be much obliged if you'd steer us to Docking Hatch Nine-Dash-Two."

"You want to board *now*?" I gave her an incredulous look.

"Yes. The family is presently occupied in the library, which is at the opposite end of the ship from both the docking hatch and the unknown sector. Now is the perfect opportunity to find out what's hidden there."

I wish I could say I was unperturbed by the notion of trespassing, but that would be a lie. Though I told myself that the Namokis were hardly people to be feared, I couldn't stop my brain from formulating the worst possible scenarios. That they were actually master criminals in disguise. That they were rich enough that they could shoot trespassers on sight and trust their wealth to shield them from the consequences. That Sherlock's device would fail, and those attack drones would fire on us before we could get on board.

Fortunately, all my worries turned out to be unfounded. We made it onto the *Silicon Beeches* without incident and slipped silently through the pristine corridors. Each time a stray noise caught my attention, my heart

hopped unsteadily in my chest.

We reached a nondescript metal door, which, according to Sherlock, led to the mystery sector. A control screen glowed against the wall to its left, displaying a number pad. *It's locked with a security code*, I realized.

Sherlock didn't hesitate to start punching buttons. I would have asked how she'd deduced the code, but feared my voice would alert the Namokis to our presence. *Of course, all they need to do is actually look at the security feed they've been messing with to know we're here.*

I exhaled with relief as the door slid open without a fuss. I didn't know what I was expecting, but I was disappointed to find myself standing before a sitting room. It looked like a stripped down, boring version of the room the Namokis had received us in—just a round space with a few armchairs. An open doorway to the right led into a space I couldn't see from my angle. I started to approach, then froze as a voice rang out.

"Who's there?" It was Makya.

Except... It couldn't have been. The library was on the other side of the *Silicon Beeches*—he couldn't have made it here so quickly.

"Mom? Is that you?" No question about it—that was Makya's voice.

Quick footsteps approached—he was running toward us. Sherlock abruptly seized my arm and yanked me back. Before I could react, the door to the mystery sector slammed shut, and I glanced over to find her hand on the door's controls.

"What'd you do that for?" I hissed.

Her face was an unreadable mask as she strode back the way we came. I followed, since I didn't want to risk being caught by Makya's parents, but an uncomfortable feeling twisted my gut. Sherlock had never been afraid of

taking risks, and she ordinarily would have at least told me what was going on. This stoniness, this silence... It wasn't like her.

We returned to the Zander. I'd just closed the door when Sherlock shoved her slate into my hand.

"See what Makya's doing right now, will you?" she said.

It was a strange command, but I was curious, so I pulled up the security feeds. Makya was still in the library with his parents, and there was no sign that he'd moved. *Weird.*

In the corner of my eye, I saw Sherlock seize something from underneath her seat. Realizing what it was, I rushed to stop her. I was half a second too late to keep her from plunging the syringe's contents into her arm.

"What the hell, Sherlock?" I snatched the needle full of acid from her arm, but it made no difference now that the deed was done.

"Emotion is a useless thing." Sherlock flopped backward in the chair, her black hair cascading over her face. "I want to be rid of it."

Too much fury boiled in my blood for me to reply. The carelessness, the randomness, the uselessness of her action angered me into a silence of my own. I could have given her some pithy reply about how it was emotion that separated her from repair bots and attack drones and other such machines—and I had plenty memorized from having spent too much time on Netsites dedicated to supporting humans who'd befriended sentient AIs—but I knew such platitudes were pointless.

I ransacked the cockpit for any other stashes of corrosives she might have lying around. Finding nothing in the cockpit, I moved on to the space between it and the storage closet, patting the walls for any cracks my eyes

might have missed.

“Answer one question for me, Sherlock,” I said finally. “Do you give a damn about me?”

“The answer to that is elementary, my dear Watson.” Sherlock didn’t move. “I owe you my life, after all.”

“Then why do you put me through this?” I marched up to her. “Where are the other corrosives?”

“I only brought the one syringe. I didn’t have time to restock after you destroyed my last batch.”

I didn’t believe her, but before I could respond, she went on.

“I lied, Watson.” She tilted her face toward me. “I only had one idea about what was happening on board the *Silicon Beeches*. The answer was”—she smiled wryly—“quite elementary. I came here not to find answers, but in hopes of proving myself wrong.”

Those were words I’d never expected to hear from her. Sherlock derived too much delight from always being right. Something was terribly off; something had triggered her need to rid herself of emotion by forcing her body to shut down parts of her mind. Which meant that something was causing her deep, unyielding pain.

I dropped into my seat beside her, trying to figure out what it was about the case that could have this effect on her.

When the answer finally occurred to me, I realized that it was, indeed, elementary.

There were two Makyas.

Everything clicked together in my mind. The so-called brain injury, the behavior of Kaia and Bolivar Namoki, Sherlock’s reaction... They all pointed to one thing.

The Makya I’d met was not Makya at all. He was an AI like Sherlock—one meant to imitate the Namokis’s real son. And he had no idea.

Someone had created him to be the original Makya's AI doppelganger, and the claim of a brain injury was meant to mask the fact that the builder hadn't been given the time or resources to fully implant memories. This wouldn't have been the first time an AI had been created to believe that they were human; one of the first known sentient AIs had believed himself to have lived a full twenty-three years before learning that he'd actually been manufactured just a few months earlier, and that most of his existence had been nothing more than false memories. The Interstellar Confederation's laws forbade people from creating such beings, but the technology had been around for decades. And laws couldn't stop everyone.

But what would drive Kaia and Bolivar to create an incomplete duplicate of their own child?

My mind flashed back to the rehearsed scene I'd witnessed earlier. *Ibis...* It was all meant to fool Ibis. This was about an unapproved lover after all. The parents wanted their son to get rid of her, but he must have refused. And so they locked him in the mystery sector and had an AI lookalike made. It seemed so extreme—what kind of person was Ibis that they'd take such drastic actions?

"I can tell by your expression that you've figured it out." Sherlock's head lolled in my general direction, but she didn't meet my gaze. "I suspected that Makya was an AI replacement for the Namokis's real son the day he came to our apartment. While he told his story, I accessed his social media networks. The Makya I saw online was markedly different from the meek boy before me—gregarious, strong-willed, confident to the point of arrogance. He was the kind of entitled brat who delighted in breaking the rules because it never occurred to him that he could get into real trouble."

In other words, absolutely nothing like the young man I'd met, who seemed obedient to a fault. It turned out, there was a reason he acted that way.

When I'd first taken Sherlock home, I'd read everything I could about AIs, including what the illegal AI market looked like. In order to fulfill orders quickly, AI builders used templates for both the bodies and the programming, all of which could be easily modified to fulfill a customer's specifications. The default personality was docile, gullible, and subservient—that of an ideal slave. Given the relatively short timeframe the Namokis had to procure their artificial son, they must have had their builder use the default and layer on a few memories, then came up with the brain injury excuse to explain the gaps.

"I didn't want to be right," Sherlock continued. "I couldn't bring myself to tell him that his entire life was a lie. The whole situation caused me to experience far too many emotions, and you know how I detest those things."

"That's why you called me saying you didn't know how to deal with it." I shook my head. "And that's why you took the acid that day. You were trying to block it all out."

She didn't respond; she didn't have to. The truth was as clear as the stars outside the viewscreen. And I was thoroughly depressed.

"Why, why, *why*?" I asked. "Who is this Ibis?"

Sherlock handed me her slate, her expression still deadpan. "Type in the search terms 'University of Thern' and 'Natalia Cruz'."

I complied, and what I found explained everything.

About one month earlier, a grad student at the University of Thern named Natalia Cruz had been revealed to be a notorious mercenary known as Ibis. The image of a striking young woman with mesmerizing black eyes, cropped black hair, and sandalwood skin accompanied

several news articles about the scandal. Evidently, she'd been hired by a crime boss to keep an eye on his son, who was a classmate of Makya's. Though she was only twenty-three years of age, she was already wanted on several charges ranging from petty theft to attempted murder.

I dropped the slate into my lap. Makya—the human one—must have fallen in love with Ibis while she was posing as a grad student. He'd fallen so far, learning her real identity hadn't changed his heart. And like any responsible parents, Kaia and Bolivar wanted to protect their darling son from a known criminal. Ibis must have fallen pretty far too, because she was apparently hovering around the *Silicon Beeches*—and the Namokis knew. Hence the lax cybersecurity—they wanted her to see that their son was happy without her. And hence the break-up message they forced AI Makya to send. Despite her shady history, Ibis's feelings for the human Makya must have been genuine if his parents had to go so far to make her leave. After a whole month, she was still lingering nearby, watching. Probably trying to make sure her boyfriend was all right and searching for any sign that he still loved her.

"Ibis would have had to flee after she was exposed," Sherlock said. "She was headed into the lawless corners of the galaxy to disappear. And she asked Makya to disappear with her. As an only child, Makya would have been particularly dedicated to his parents. He might even have told them he was planning to leave. Whatever the case, the result was an argument during which the Namokis pointed to their rare heritage in an effort to convince him to stay, and he chopped off his hair in protest."

"The locks our Makya found—they were actually the other one's." I imagined how hurt Kaia and Bolivar must have been to see their child throw away his heritage so

carelessly. I supposed that was why they'd kept his hair as a memento.

"The Namokis would have needed to provide a full-body hologram of their son to whichever AI builder they went to. Their son was likely unwilling to pose for one after he cut his hair, so the result was an AI that was identical to him except for that one aspect, which was why Kaia chopped off the AI's hair. And the AI has served his purpose now." Sherlock stared up at the ceiling. "Once the Namokis are sure Ibis is gone for good, they'll have no need for him anymore."

In other words, they'd dispose of Makya, just as VH Labs had once disposed of Sherlock. Since they'd broken the law by having the AI version of their son built, they'd probably destroy him to ensure that no evidence of their crime was ever found. He wasn't a person to them—he was tool designed to protect their real son.

Do they realize he's a sentient being? It occurred to me that I couldn't be sure of his sentience either. There were, after all, AIs who acted and reacted as though human, but were actually only convincing imitations. I supposed I didn't have proof that Sherlock was sentient either. Then again, neither did I have proof of anyone's consciousness but my own, and I didn't need it. I'd met Makya, and he was a nice boy who didn't deserve to be lied to, then thrown away.

I squared my shoulders. "We can save him."

"How?" Sherlock glanced over at me.

"The same way I saved you: By asking no one for permission."

Just then, a shrill alarm ripped through the air. I looked at the control screen in alarm. Red dots swarmed toward the gray one representing my ship; the betta drones had been ordered to attack, and they were closing

in on us.

I cursed. “We’ve been spotted!”

As I reached for the controls, Sherlock held out a hand to stop me. “Look closer,” she said.

I realized that the drones were pursuing another red dot—the one representing the mysterious watcher. Ibis. She was making a move on the *Silicon Beeches*.

“I guess she didn’t take that break-up message well,” I said dryly.

“Most likely, she was attuned enough to her Makya’s behavior that ours didn’t convince her.” Sherlock brushed a strand of hair off her metal eye patch. “She must have figured out that something was wrong, and this is her idea of heroic rescue.”

How romantic. I rolled my eyes. *But as long as she’s distracting the Namokis, I might as well stage a heroic rescue of my own.*

I marched toward the airlock. I didn’t ask Sherlock to come with me, since her impaired state would have been an impediment, but I didn’t stop her either. She followed me back onto the *Silicon Beeches*, then, since she was more familiar with the ship’s layout, led me in the direction of the library.

We’d just entered a corridor when she shoved me back abruptly, and I slammed against the wall. A red blast flew toward us and barely missed. A security bot rounded the corner ahead, and I recalled the one that had come for Makya at our apartment. The Namokis had sent it because they saw it as retrieving wayward property, not bringing their son home. Anger coiled through me as I thought about how they’d only ever seen him as a tool while he still thought they were his parents. It was wrong. I didn’t care if he was technically a machine—it was *wrong*.

The security bot wheeled toward us and fired again. I

gritted my teeth and pressed myself further into the wall, hoping to make myself as small a target as possible.

"These people don't mess around," I muttered. Clearly, they were dead serious on ensuring their son's safety. Emphasis on the *dead*.

"Follow me!" Sherlock sprinted along the side of the room, avoiding the bot's direct line of fire.

I ran after her. We wound our way through more corridors, and my lungs burned from the effort. I had no idea where we were going, but I trusted that Sherlock did.

Then, I recognized the latest corridor she'd led me into as one we'd visited less than an hour before. "This is the way to the mystery sector," I said between heaved breaths.

"Exactly." Sherlock did not seem a bit perturbed by the effort of our chase. Her mental faculties appeared perfectly well, though I noticed that she cradled the arm she'd injected. I guessed that her internal systems, detecting danger, had determined that routing energy to her mind was more important than repairing the damage she'd done to herself. "We're least likely to get shot in the part of the ship where the Namokis are keeping their precious son."

Seeing her point, I followed her around another corner. But when we arrived at the door to the mystery sector, we found it already open. I stopped before it, panting from the pursuit. Two figures emerged from the doorway from which I'd heard footsteps earlier.

To Sherlock, the differences between the Makya we'd met and the one who stopped in his tracks at the sight of us must have been obvious, but I could have sworn they were one and the same. The powerful cheekbones, the short, choppy hair—except this Makya seemed much bolder. His hand clasped that of a muscular young woman

with black eyes, whom I recognized as Ibis. She must have seen through his parents' deceptions and was breaking him out.

"Whoever you are, get out of my way," she growled.

"Makya!" A woman's voice rang out behind me.

I spun to find Kaia and Bolivar rushing toward the scene. The security bot stood deactivated against the wall. A third person approached... Makya. The other one. The artificial one.

He gasped, clearly shocked at seeing his double.

"What's going on?"

I watched his eyes go from startled to perplexed to terrified. He was a kid after all. He may have been built to look and act nineteen, but he'd only been alive a few weeks and had only a spattering of memories to fill in the years he hadn't lived.

The first Makya showed no such fear, and I soon realized what Sherlock had meant when she'd said his behavior was completely different from that of the Makya we knew.

"What the hell!" He marched up to his parents, releasing Ibis's hand and ignoring Sherlock and me. "Ibis told me about how you tried to trick her with a double. I thought she meant you'd fed her a computer-generated image—what the hell is this thing?" He gestured at his AI clone.

"Listen, Makya." Kaia stepped toward him.

"I'm through with you!" Makya—the human one—clenched his fists. "I'm leaving with Ibis, and you can't stop me!"

"Son." Bolivar approached as well. "You know what kind of person she is. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life as a criminal?"

"At least I live with honor!" Ibis spat.

Apparently, Sherlock and I had ceased to exist, because mother, father, son, and unapproved lover proceeded to argue vehemently about the state of things. My first thought was that they were all horrible people who ought to be tossed into a black hole, but I soon realized that everything they'd done had come from a place of love and desperation. Here were parents desperate to protect their beloved child from a known criminal. There was a young man too desperately in love to care what his girlfriend did for a living. And between them was the woman who'd watched them all—or thought she'd been watching them all—for weeks, desperately hoping her love was requited.

There were no villains here. Only people willing to do anything for what they saw as right—no matter what the cost.

No one seemed to notice the fifth player in this drama through the flames of the argument. But I had the unenviable experience of learning just what someone's face looked like when their world collapsed. The second Makya, the Al Makya, observed the scene in silence, but his expression said it all. The hurt, the fear, the confusion... He wasn't who he'd thought he was, and never had been. And the way they talked about him, he was nothing. No one.

Sherlock had apparently determined that she was out of danger, because she'd gone back to her impaired state and was now leaning against the wall, staring blankly at the floor. She'd dissolved her own skeleton to stave off the emotions of witnessing what Makya was going through. However awful I felt, it must have been a hundred times worse for her because he was one of her kind. Because she'd been where he was now—unwanted.

Screw this! I couldn't stand it any longer.

“Shut up, all of you!” I yelled. Everyone fell silent and stared at me. “In all your love and desperation, did you forget that you were dragging an innocent being into the quagmire of your lives?” I pointed at Makya.

“Who are you?” Kaia glowered. “You’re not a detective with the Thern Police.”

“Well spotted,” I said acidly.

She looked me up and down. “I already informed the authorities that we have intruders on board, and they are on their way.”

“It’s in your best interests to call them off.” Sherlock’s expression was still dazed, but her voice was sharp enough. “After all, it’s you who broke the most laws.”

Kaia turned to her sharply.

“Do you know what the penalty is for illegally commissioning an artificial life?” Sherlock let out a dry laugh. “The only reason VH Labs got away with creating me is because they’re a large corporation with armies of lawyers ready to poke holes in the regulations and disprove the obvious, which is that I am sentient. But wealthy as you are, I suspect that you, as an individual, do not have so many resources. You also do not have as believable an excuse. Creating a science bot is one thing, but duplicating your own child is another matter. Oh, and you’re also guilty of kidnapping and false imprisonment.”

That last sentence surprised me as much as it did Kaia, who glowered. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Sherlock held up her hand, which clutched the coin-shaped device she’d planted on the *Silicon Beeches*.
When did she retrieve that?

“While you were bickering, I used this to download the *Silicon Beeches*’s security records—the real ones, not the doctored footage you were using to fool Ibis.” She

shifted her position against the wall, but remained slouched. "They show that you were holding an adult man, an independent person, against his will. That is a crime, even if he is your son."

Bolivar started toward her, and she held out her hand to him.

"Go ahead, take it," she said. "The information is already uploaded to the Net. I haven't released it yet, but one tap of my finger will do just that. I'll bet I can tap faster than you can snatch." She gave him a lopsided grin.

"Now, look." The human Makya strode up to her. "My parents and I may disagree about many things, but they did not kidnap me!"

"Sure looks like they did," I said, holding myself erect even as nervous blood pounded through my veins. I really didn't want to be arrested, especially since I'd impersonated an officer of the law the previous day. I turned to Kaia. "Do you want the entire galaxy to know about this ugly affair? Because that's what will happen if Sherlock taps that button." I wasn't even sure which button Sherlock was referring to, but I didn't care as long as the threat seemed believable. "Whether the criminal charges stick or not, your reputation will be ruined, and your business will hemorrhage clients."

Kaia pursed her lips and glanced at her husband. I didn't need Sherlock's level of observation to know right then that they were going to call off the authorities. Sherlock had them cornered.

I did my best not to exhale audibly as Kaia pulled out a communicator and said her distress call had been a false alarm.

"Thank you kindly." Sarcasm dripped from Sherlock's voice. "By the way, in case you care, the solution to your problem is for Ibis to adopt a new, legitimate-seeming

identity so that Makya can continue seeing her without vanishing from civilized society. And for the two of you”—she gestured at Bolivar and Kaia—“to accept that a rich boy and a mercenary can be together. Really, you’d think humans would have learned by now that keeping young lovers apart never ends well.”

I can’t say I’d ever expected to see Sherlock dispense life advice, but then again, she did always like solving things. Meanwhile, I couldn’t care less about what happened next with the Namoki family and Ibis. It was the AI Makya who had come to us for help.

I held out my hand to him. “Come with me. I’ll get you out of here.”

Makya looked uncertainly at Kaia and Bolivar.

“Don’t worry, they won’t stop you.” I shot the two of them a glare meant to be a warning, but they hardly seemed to notice, for they’d already fallen back into conversation with their real son. Makya took my hand, and I led him down the corridor, nudging Sherlock as I passed her. “Are you coming?”

Sherlock followed in unsteady steps as I made my way back to the Zander. The effects of the corrosive she’d injected were in full swing, but at least she was still lucid.

“Where are you taking me?” Makya asked as we entered my ship.

“Aryus for now.” I sighed. “Look, I don’t know where you should go from here, but I can tell you that life as a sentient AI isn’t so bad. They’ve lived in peace among humans for decades. There have been AI scholars, AI entertainers, AI doctors—hell, there was even an AI priest once. Your creation was illegal, but your existence is not, and one way or another, I’m going to make sure you’re okay.”

He smiled, and though I could still see the uncertainty

in his eyes, it was a smile full of warmth and trust. "Thank you, Chevonne."

I smiled back. Since Sherlock seemed to prefer lying on the floor to retaking her seat, I told Makya to strap himself in. Maybe having another of her kind around would be good for her.

Great, Chevonne, I thought to myself. That's the second time you've taken in a lost AI. Are you going to set up some kind of AI sanctuary?

I seemed to have some kind of pathological need to rescue unwanted beings, some kind of chronically bleeding heart.

Oh well. I steered the Zander away from the *Silicon Beeches*, letting out a resigned sigh. *Let it bleed.*

THE FAOLADH'S SECRET | Annie Cosby

There are no wolves in Ireland. Not anymore. They were hunted out of existence many years ago. Yet, every now and again, there are whispers. Sightings. Rumors.

Every seven years to be exact.

It's a number with great meaning for many in Ireland, but most particularly for a clan named Whelan who lived in Kilkenny.

You see, there were seven Whelans, and seven Whelan cows in their seven-acre field. And the youngest, Cian, was only seven years old when his sister Grainne died—drowned, seven years ago, in the River Nore, along with her beau, Fintan O'Toole.

And it wasn't just the sevens that made everyone else in town think the Whelans strange. There were other odd things about them, too. Like the fact that they'd boarded up the children's room when poor Grainne drowned. There's sentimentality, the neighbors would say, and then there's the absurdity of squeezing six Whelans into the cottage's two remaining rooms.

But the neighbors aren't nosy, no sirree, and if Mr. and Mrs. Whelan wanted to force their grown son to sleep on the floor in his grandparents' room, then far be it from them to criticize. And though Cian had indeed been sleeping on a hay mattress on his grandparents' floor for

half his life, he didn't mind. For his brother Enda was on the floor beside their parents' bed in the main room, and that, in Cian's opinion, would be far worse.

In fact, Enda and Cian often forgot they were strange, that their family was harboring quite a dark secret, and fancied themselves normal.

Until the seventh year after Grainne's death.

That's when everything went crooked.

For the Whelans did indeed have a dark secret. And secrets in Kilkenny didn't last long.

It all started with Dahey Lynch, which is a sentence many a man has uttered to his wife in trying to explain how he'd come to be brawling in the middle of the street in broad daylight. But this time, it wasn't a tussle Dahey started. It was a panic of a different sort.

He came running into town one day, hollering and whinging. Now, Dahey had been to Tralee to see his family, but was supposed to return nearly three days past, so everyone was quite confused, but quite happy to see him. However, their smiles faded as they realized what exactly he was hollering about.

"I was lost!" he shouted, as a group gathered around him, young Cian Whelan and his grandpa among them. "On me way back from Tralee, I left the road for a wee, and got lost. But a great big wolf stepped out of the brush and showed me the way!"

This made Cian go cold. For there was one more strange thing about the littlest Whelan that he didn't talk about.

No, he never mentioned it, for the one time he'd told his mam, she'd scolded him fiercely and told him never to speak of it again. But sometimes he *thought* about it, late at night, as he listened to his grandfather's snores.

And the *it* that he thought about was the giant gray

wolf he'd seen seven years ago.

Cian had been sitting out back of the house, trying to block out the shouting in the house, which is all his mam and dad had done in the days following Grainne's death, when a wolf stepped out of the trees. Cian had stared, terrified and transfixed, for he'd only ever seen a wolf in storybooks. Because there weren't any left in Ireland. As everyone knew.

But there one stood, staring back at him with golden eyes.

It had stared for several more moments, listening to Cian's family fight, almost as if saddened by the sound, before ducking back into the trees and slinking away. And when Cian ran into the woods after it, as curious boys are wont to do, there was nothing there. So, he raced back to the house at once and told his mam, his father having just stormed from the house himself.

But she didn't react like Cian had expected. She didn't run out back and ask him to lead her to where he'd seen the mysterious creature last. No, instead, her eyes filled with tears and she begged him not to mention what he'd seen to anyone else. Not even his father.

"And he—he spoke!" Dahey spluttered, pulling Cian from his memories and putting him right back there on the street in Kilkenny.

"What?" Cian's grandpa shouted with a laugh.

"The wolf *spoke* to me!" Dahey yelled. "In Irish! I swear it!"

Cian frowned. Maybe Dahey really was mad after all. The wolf he'd seen all those years ago hadn't *spoken*. That was absurd.

"He had a great, deep voice, and he called me by name!" Dahey yelled. "When I'd never even said it!"

"You been drinking, Dahey?" one of the neighbors

asked, shaking his head.

“O’ course not!” Dahey snapped. “I knew ye wouldn’t believe me!”

“Then why didn’t you bring ’im back wi’ch’ya?” insisted Nessa Creighton, one of Cian’s best friends. A spunky girl with red plaits, she crossed her arms over her chest, challenging Dahey’s story.

“Because he ran off as soon as he’d shown me back to the road, din’t he?” Dahey snapped at her. He looked right silly arguing with a fourteen-year-old girl, but Cian didn’t have the heart to make a joke. He was still unsettled.

“Pshaw,” a neighbor said as the others began to disperse, convinced there was no actual news to be had here. “There are no wolves in Ireland, Dahey!”

“Yeah! No wolves in Ireland!” people mumbled as they walked away.

Only Cian knew better.

* * *

That afternoon, Cian and Nessa discussed Dahey’s unbelievable story while languidly lying on their backs beneath a bush. Well, Nessa discussed it, altogether too near Cian, while his heart hammered in his chest. Nessa had been his friend for most of his life, but it was only in the last few years that her presence had started to make his palms sweat. Sometimes he imagined she looked at Enda an awful lot, but that didn’t change that Cian thought about her and her beautiful hair when she wasn’t around.

Yes, Cian had started to like Nessa in a way he’d never liked anyone before, and it had quickly morphed into something more. He didn’t use the word *love*—except in his own head—but it was having an altogether strange effect on his being. This thing he felt for Nessa, it made

him want to talk to her for hours on end, ask her for every minute detail of her day, and spill all his deepest secrets. And Nessa had always been such a good friend he thought just maybe he could start with one secret in particular.

"It just doesn't make sense," she was saying, twisting a twig above her head into the shape of a heart. "There—"

"Are no wolves in Ireland," Cian interrupted. "I know." He gulped. "But..."

"But?" Nessa asked, her pretty eyes blinking at him.

"But I saw one once."

Nessa gasped. "You didn't!"

"I did." Cian nodded for emphasis. "A long time ago. Just after Grainne died. Right out here, on the edge of the woods."

Nessa's mouth made a little O, and she stared at him for a few long moments. Cian began to scold himself, for surely someone like Enda wouldn't see things like wolves in the woods. Or, if he did, he wouldn't tell pretty girls like Nessa about it. Cian was just about to declare it all a great big joke when Nessa breathed, "Did it speak?"

Relieved, Cian laughed. "No. I think *that* part was made up, at least."

Nessa didn't laugh. She looked dead serious as she said, "*I* want to see a wolf."

They lay there, beside each other, for many long, silent minutes. Cian didn't know where Nessa's mind was, but he was thinking about her face when he'd told her. She hadn't scolded him to stop telling tales or being silly. She'd *believed* him. It made him want to tell her all his other secrets, too—or, at the very least, reach out and grab her hand, which was so close to his. But he didn't do either of those things.

At long last, Nessa grumbled, "These brambles are

fierce hard on my plaits, Cian.”

They were hiding in the back of the Whelan house, tucked away in a bush, because Cian’s father was shoeing the new horse with Enda’s help, and if Cian was found lolling about, he’d be forced to help, too. There was little Cian loathed more than shoeing horses—except maybe helping his mother in the house. Which is why he groaned out loud when he heard his mother yell, “Cian, where’ve you gone to? I need ya!”

Nessa poked his side and grinned. “I think yer wanted.”

“Not on my life,” Cian grumbled, sitting up. He wasn’t about to go help his mam, not when Nessa was about, but he couldn’t stay here, sprawled beneath the bush, either. For he had a bit of a reputation for sprawling in bushes, and this was the first place his mam would look. And if she didn’t, their dog Jack, forever at her heels, would find him in a heartbeat.

Rolling out from under the foliage, he leapt to his feet, helping Nessa out after him. She climbed to her feet, too, ready to run, a smile on her face. She wanted to spend more time with him. Not Enda. *Him*. Cian’s heart beat faster.

There was only one place he’d go if he were alone—a place his mother would never look. But he couldn’t take Nessa there.

Or could he? She’d just accepted one of his biggest secrets with interest. And Fintan O’Toole, Grainne’s beau, had been Nessa’s cousin. She would understand the grief surrounding the young couple’s death. If there was anyone in the world he could share this particular secret with, it was her.

He looked back at her and saw her great, big, expectant eyes, just as his mother called him again—her

voice louder, closer this time.

There was nothing for it. He had to trust that Nessa would accept his family's dark secret. He dashed toward the back window.

"Grainne's room?" Nessa asked, as he jimmied the window open, a skill honed over years of practice.

It wasn't always Grainne's room, of course. It used to be all the Whelan children's room. But things had changed when she died.

Cian lifted himself inside, landing nimbly on the floor, and then helped Nessa climb up behind him. He shut the window and ducked out of sight as his mam's voice came from just outside.

"Where's that boy got to?" she muttered on the other side of the glass, clearly annoyed, before stomping away to the tune of Jack's playful yaps.

When Cian turned around, triumphant, Nessa stood, stock-still, in the spot where she'd landed on the floor, her hair glowing brilliant in the sun through the window. But the look on her face...

He had to explain, and quickly. "Nessa—"

"What—Cian—what—" A choked sob escaped her throat, cutting off her words.

Cian had been wrong. She wasn't going to accept this particular secret.

There, on the bed that had been hers in life, Grainne's body lay, spread out as if sleeping. Her gray fingers were clasped upon the bed cover, and her hair, still as shiny and gold as the day she died, was spread upon the thin pillow that hadn't moved in seven years. Her eyes were closed, as if they might flutter open and wake from this deep slumber called death at any moment.

"Cian," Nessa breathed, and he could see her hands were trembling like leaves in the wind. "Cian...what..."

Since he was seven years old, Cian had been taught that he wasn't to enter this room that had been his once upon a time, nor tell a non-Whelan soul that Grainne's body was there. Instead, the whole town thought Grainne's body was washed to the end of the River Nore and into the sea, never to be recovered, with the body of poor Fintan O'Toole.

"My parents..." He shook his head, and his folly unraveled before him. He realized then that he didn't *have* an explanation. He couldn't tell Nessa why his sister's corpse was kept hidden in their house because he didn't *know* why. Lord above, why did everything about the Whelans have to be so *strange*?

"S-seven years," Nessa spluttered, stumbling away from the bed. Her back hit the window, and, as if it woke her from her stupor, her gaze darted to Cian. "She's been dead seven years! What—why?"

"Nessa, I don't—" He broke off as she pushed the window open. "Nessa, please, I just wanted—"

She was halfway out the window when she screamed, "This is insane! This is deranged! She's dead, Cian! You keep her *corpse* in your house? Your family is insane!"

And that, at least, was something Cian couldn't dispute.

* * *

When Cian went to Nessa's house that evening, her mother told him she wasn't home. He knew from the sad look in her eyes that it was a lie, but she didn't look disgusted, so he knew Nessa must not have told her mother why she wouldn't see him anymore. And if she hadn't told her mother, she probably hadn't told anyone

else either.

Cian let out a relieved sigh.

And when he realized how relieved he felt, that relief began to morph into something more sinister.

Anger. Cian was angry.

Because he was not the one who'd hidden his sister's corpse away in a room of the house, only to board up that room and tell the world the girl had drowned, despite no sign of a water mishap on her body. He wasn't the one who lied to every neighbor about poor Grainne's body being buried somewhere beneath the sea. He wasn't the one to avoid the O'Toole family any time they met in town.

It was weird, it was disturbing, it was unnatural. And what about Grainne? She deserved a proper burial, to have her soul put to rest for good.

He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling jumpy. When he was younger, he'd sneak into the room to talk to Grainne, because at seven, he'd convinced himself she could still hear him if he whispered quite near her ear. He'd always known it was strange, of course, keeping his dead sister's body in the house, but that wasn't even the half of it. One day when he was nine, he climbed in the window, and there was a great gash across Grainne's leg, bleeding as if fresh. Another day, there'd been a large bruise on her forehead. But at nine, he knew if he asked his mother about it, he'd be in more trouble than he'd ever known for going in there at all.

He shivered, the anger running through his veins. Why had his parents done this to him, saddled him with such disturbing memories—and jeopardizing his future with a sweet, normal girl like Nessa?

As if he'd ever had a chance with her. It was clear as day she was smitten with his brother. And that just made him angrier.

But she would surely never speak to *either* of them ever again.

When he got home, he didn't even say hello to his family, gathered around the table for dinner, but instead charged right over to the door to Grainne's room. Jack was there, nose to the crack beneath the door, as usual. He was always sniffing around the door, a habit as old as Jack himself. Cian shook his head. The whole house was mad. Without a word, he began wrenching at the boards his father had nailed over the doorway long ago. Seven years ago, to be exact. With three big tugs, the first sprang free.

"What are you doing?" his mam demanded, on her feet and across the room in the blink of an eye. Jack whimpered.

Spoons clattered into bowls. "Stop, lad!" his grandfather called.

Cian didn't stop. He felt his mam's hands on his arms, but he wrenched them free and removed another board.

"Stop, Cian!" she cried, and he thought he heard real sobs in her throat. He didn't turn to see if there were tears.

He removed another two boards at once.

"What are you doing?" It was his father's voice. Calm, steady, always in control.

Cian wheeled around. "It's unnatural, what you've done here!" he screamed at his family. Enda stood, nervous, by the table, and Cian's grandparents looked worried, but it was his mother who looked like she was about to fall to pieces. Then Cian looked at his father. The man never let emotion show on his face, but this time, his features were lined in ice.

"She doesn't deserve this!" Cian yelled at him. "And neither do I!" Whirling around, he wrenched the last two boards from the doorframe and stormed inside.

"Cian, I will tell you only once not to enter that room!"

his father thundered.

But he was already inside, so they didn't see him flinch. His whole life, Cian had been instructed never to enter this room, never to touch his sister's body, but the look on Nessa's face when she'd seen it was etched permanently upon his mind. If his best friend couldn't accept this, then neither would he.

"Stop!" his mother wailed, grasping for his arms, but she was easy to shake off. Jack growled, but he was too small a mutt to instill fear in anyone.

Cian rounded the bed and slid one arm beneath his sister's ice-cold neck. He was just about to slide the other beneath her knees when he heard a click and glanced up. Right into the barrel of a gun.

"Do not," his father breathed, "move."

Cian froze, every muscle petrified. His father had never so much as raised his voice in this house. When had everyone gone mad? Or had they always been mad, and he'd just never noticed it?

The only sound now was his mam's sobs in the corner of the room.

"Remove your arm, as slowly and carefully as possible," his father said, his eyes wide and darting between Cian's face and the arm he had round Grainne.

Cian did as he was told and stepped carefully away from the bed. The mouth of the rifle followed him.

"Now leave the room," his father instructed.

As Cian stepped carefully toward the door, his father positioned himself between his son and his daughter's body. When Cian reached the threshold, he ran to the front door and out into the night.

He didn't come home for a long time. But when he did, Grainne's room was boarded up again, and in front of it, his father sat in a chair, fast asleep, the rifle across his

knees.

* * *

Cian hadn't cried in a very long time, not since his sister died, but he cried himself to sleep that night.

* * *

When he opened his eyes again, it was dark outside. And when he heard the hushed whispers, he realized why he'd woken in the first place. Outside, his grandpa was whispering something fierce.

As he stood, he saw his grandmother was missing from the bed, too. He crept to the window, but he could tell from his grandfather's voice that he was out round the front. So he tiptoed into the main room. Immediately, he saw the chair in front of Grainne's room was empty. And a glance to the corner showed his parents' bed was empty, too.

But Enda stood, his ear to the front door. Cian hesitated, for he still felt a painful jealousy for his brother, but that wasn't Enda's fault, was it? Sighing, Cian joined his brother at the door.

"What are they talking about?" he asked in a whisper.

"Dunno," Enda murmured. "Something about Grainne."

"I told you, didn't I?" their grandfather grumbled, his voice reaching a pitch that could surely be heard by the neighbors.

Their mother reacted instantaneously. "Shhhh!" she hissed.

Their father whispered something, but his restraint wasn't yet washed away by age. They couldn't hear him.

Whatever it was, their grandfather replied, "You better tell them boys before you lose all your children."

"We can't," their father said, annoyance making his voice louder.

"They'll go lookin'," their mother hissed, "and you know how dangerous that is."

"Go lookin' for what?" Enda whispered to his brother.

Their grandfather scoffed. "Sure it's dangerous, but if you stop treatin' 'em like children, maybe they'll stop actin' like it. What's the alternative? Ye just goin' to wait and have 'im drop in the fields one day? Leave 'im out there to rot then? For all the neighbors to see?"

Enda and Cian exchanged a nervous glance.

"Of course not!" their father snapped.

"Then tell him! He needs to be prepared, don't he? Tell him before I do!"

Then his heavy footsteps sounded on the dirt path. Enda and Cian scrambled back to their respective mats to feign sleep.

* * *

It was only seven days later that little Tara Creighton, Nessa's littlest sister, went missing on her way to the shop.

The whole town turned out to search, and search they did, for seven fruitless hours.

Until Cian himself found her stumbling out of the woods down near the stream.

* * *

Nessa was the first to come running at Cian's call. "Are you hurt?" she demanded, her palm on her sister's forehead.

She was so preoccupied searching her little sister for injuries that she forgot Cian was there. Surely she'd have sent him away if she'd realized. But others were crowding around them now, pushing and shoving to get a look at the foundling. Was she hurt? Was she okay? What happened?

The questions came hurtling at the poor little thing, but Tara was quite as spirited as her sister and seemed to be basking in the attention. There were leaves and twigs in her plaits, and her day dress was a mess Mrs. Creighton would surely have to burn.

"You'll never guess what happened to me!" she cried, her eyes alight with excitement. "I got lost!"

"Lost?" somebody repeated. For how did one get lost on the way to a shop one had visited every week of one's life?

"Well, I saw a hare," Tara admitted, "and I went chasing after it, and I lost it round about the stream"—here she pointed with her left hand, as if anyone didn't know where the stream was—"but I decided to keep walking anyway, in case I could find it again. And then when I got tired, I realized I didn't know how to get home. So I turned around and walked some more, but maybe I didn't turn quite far enough, because no matter how far I walked, I never reached home."

"Arah!" someone grumbled. "What a waste of a day!"

"Wait!" Tara cried, afraid of losing her audience.

"That's not the exciting bit!"

"Then get to it, girl!"

"Well, I happened upon a stag, din't I!" she exclaimed. "And I thought for sure I was a goner, for 'e was squaring up to me, for I must've frightened him! But then, out of nowhere, a great big wolf came bounding out of nowhere and scared the stag off!"

There was a collective gasp around the gathered

neighbors.

“And I thought it was a boy wolf at first, but she came over to me when the danger was gone and said to hold her fur and she’d show me the way home, and it was a girl’s voice.”

“Here!” someone shouted. “She’s been listening to Dahey’s stories!”

“Have not!” Tara shouted, her tiny fists on her hips. Cian hated to admit it, but he was wont to agree with the naysayer. Tara wasn’t yet six, and she had the imagination of a storyteller.

“Yeah? Prove it, then!”

But Tara was also a Creighton, and they each had the tenacity ten times their peers. The little girl opened her palm, and in her hand was a tuft of gray fur.

Her audience gasped.

It seemed, to the casual observer, quite like the nonexistent wolves of Ireland were becoming *restless*.

* * *

In her joy at having her sister back safe and sound, and her confusion over her sister’s tall tale, Nessa quite forgot to shoo Cian away. So he sat with the Creighton family as they received neighbors and celebrated Tara’s health late into the night. Of course, Enda was there, too, but Nessa was far too occupied to give either brother much of her time. Cian was equally disappointed and relieved. When the brothers finally returned home, their father sat at the table, their mam curled on her bed in the corner, her back to the room. Their grandparents shuffled away to their room.

“What’s happened?” Cian asked, glancing at his mother’s back.

“Nothing’s happened,” his father said, gesturing for them to have a seat. “But there’s something I need to tell you lads. Straight away. I wanted to wait as long as possible, but...” He cleared his throat.

Wary, Cian took a chair across from his father.

“I can’t explain what I’m about to tell ye,” their father began. “But I need ye to trust me.”

A strangled wail came from their mother’s bed, and both boys turned to look at her, but their father didn’t flinch. Only Jack sat at her feet, concern clear in his furry little face.

“The Whelans have a curse upon them,” their father went on, his voice shaking. “But we aren’t the only ones. For as long as time itself, the Whelans and the Maguires have had this curse upon them.”

The Maguires? Cian glanced at Enda. His face was just as pale as Cian’s felt. Nessa was a Maguire, and Fintan O’Toole—through their mothers.

Jack’s nails tapped on the floor as he went over to the door to Grainne’s room, only to sniff around and return to Cian’s mother. Then he did it twice more. It sent a chill down Cian’s spine.

“It’s said that a saint was the one to do it, many centuries ago. For reasons lost to time.” Their father took a deep breath. “I don’t want you two to be afraid—”

A scratching on the front door made them all fall silent—even their mother’s sobs. Jack looked at the front door, ears perked, but stayed put, in front of Grainne’s door.

“Heavens,” their father breathed, “not yet.”

But when he launched to his feet, they didn’t move toward the door.

Cian leapt to his feet in fright, for his father was halfway to the bolted doorway to where Grainne lay. Jack scurried away, scared, and Cian and Enda were behind

him in an instant, the both of them tearing off the boards together, though they didn't understand the fervor. Their father threw open the door as Cian wrenched the last board from the frame, and they scrambled into the room, Mam and their grandparents close behind.

Grainne lay, as ever, atop the bed, but their father kneeled at the bedside and gazed at her like he never had before. Almost as if he was waiting for her to...do something.

"What—" It was Enda, voicing what was in Cian's mind, but his voice cut off as he collapsed into a heap on the floor.

"Enda?" Cian wailed. But he seemed to be the only one in his family to notice.

For Grainne sat up in bed, her eyes wide, her hands held in front of her face like she'd never seen them before.

"Mam?" she gasped. "Dad?"

Their mother shrieked, and their father burst into tears, and Grainne disappeared in their collective embrace. Their grandmother stroked Grainne's feet and murmured, "My pet, you made it, you're okay, my pet," over and over again while their grandfather cried nearby and Jack leapt onto the bed to lick Grainne's face.

Cian just stood there. Frozen to the spot. His sister, who'd disappeared before he could fully form memories of her, was alive and breathing, her lungs rattling like death itself. And there his brother lay, as still as the tomb. "The curse?" Cian whispered.

Had the curse brought Grainne back from the dead? And taken Enda in the same moment? But no one heard him.

Cian's breath came fast, his chest heaving, and he backed out of the room. His father's sturdy hands clasped around his arms, holding him up.

"It was his time," his father said, his calm, steady tone returned. "Just like it will be your time eventually."

"My-my time?" Cian spluttered.

"Son, we are the *faoladh*," he said. "The Whelans and the Maguires, we are the last wolves of Ireland."

"The what?" Cian breathed.

"Your brother's time has come, and yours will, too, in seven years."

Cian shook his head, horrified. Finally, something broke through the haze in his mind. A scratching. The scratching at the front door. It was followed by a howl.

Breathing heavily, Cian started for the door, but his father wrenched him back. "No!" he cried. "Don't open it."

"What? Why? What is it?" Cian wailed. "What's out there?"

His father turned Cian around to face him and lowered his head so that his wide eyes were all Cian could see. "He will leave in the night and keep to the woods as his human memories fade away. And then you must promise me you won't go looking for Enda. He's not himself now. Though the *faoladh* are kind creatures, they are wolves. Should they be crossed at the wrong time, serious injury can occur. Many a man has met his death at the hands of a hungry *faoladh* who didn't know his own heart. I know it will be tempting, with him living so near, but you must not think of him as your brother for these next seven years. You must promise me you will not search him out!"

Cian gaped at him. Enda was out there—right now—and that's where Grainne had been all these years!

"Cian!" His father shook his shoulders.

"I-I won't," Cian whispered.

His father released him, and Cian stumbled. He was only several steps from his brother's body. Enda looked as

pale and lifeless as Grainne had looked for seven years. His eyes were closed, as if he were sleeping, and Cian supposed, in a way, he was. But his limbs were splayed so unnaturally, it made Cian's chest hurt, even if he knew his brother lived still. He reached out, wanting only to rearrange his brother into a peaceful resting pose like his sister had taken for years.

But his father's hand clasped his shoulder. "I'm, sorry, lad," he said. "But we cannot move his body, for if we do, his soul won't be able to find it again. If he survives these seven years as a wolf, he will return to us. I swear it to you, my son."

Cian took a stuttering breath and nodded. Grainne was alive. And Enda was gone. For now. And Cian hadn't been seeing things seven years ago. The wolf on the edge of the woods, that had been his sister. And Dahey and Tara. None of them had been lying.

Grainne was standing now, their mam's arm wrapped protectively around her middle. Grainne stepped slowly, as frail as their grandmother, who came behind her, her arms outstretched as if Grainne was a toddling babe who might fall at any moment. Grainne's skin was still wan and her hair limp around her shoulders. Her eyes moved from Enda's body to Cian, who stood, shaking, near the doorway.

"Don't worry for him, Cian," Grainne said, and her voice was as scratchy as gravel. "He isn't alone. The next in the Whelan line has joined the next Maguire."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Cian nodded. And slowly, it dawned on him. His brother was indeed the next Whelan.

And Nessa was the next Maguire.

As the thought hit him, he realized the scratching had stopped. Cian went to the front window and looked out. He

saw the large gray wolf in the garden as it stepped toward the lane. There, a smaller wolf waited, its head hung low. Then, together, they bounded toward the forest.

THE DESPERATE WARRIOR AND THE BEAST WHO WALKS WITHOUT SOUND | T. Damon

“The painful warrior famoused for fight,
After a thousand victories once foiled,
Is from the book of honour razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toiled:
Then happy I, that love and am beloved,
Where I may not remove nor be removed.”

- William Shakespeare, Sonnet 25

* * *

Wakiza crouched low, hiding his body behind a thick bramble bush deep in the deciduous forest he lived in with his tribe. He heard a branch crunch behind him, and whipped around to quiet his father, Siwili, who was creeping close on his heels. A short distance ahead, a lone buck grazed in a grassy clearing, unaware of the men who stalked him, though the recent crack of the branch under Siwili's foot seemed to put the creature on edge.

As the buck froze, gazing around at the foliage surrounding him, Wakiza took the opportunity to tiptoe closer, readying his bow with a sharp, obsidian-bladed arrow. He motioned to his father to do the same.

“I've almost got the perfect shot,” he whispered, to which his father fervently nodded. “If I miss, fire before it figures out what's going on.”

“I doubt I'll need to. Take the shot, son,” Siwili replied,

unconsciously holding his breath as he waited for Wakiza to release his arrow.

Wakiza took one more swift step forward, pulled his bow back, and shot his arrow in the buck's direction. At first, it looked as though the arrow had not hit, as the buck flailed back and swung its head around to run in the opposite direction, but as it darted away began to falter, slowed significantly, then finally fell to the ground.

Wakiza jumped out of his hiding spot and rushed toward the deer, taking care to approach the buck from the back so as to avoid a potential stab from a swing of its antlers. But as the warrior grew closer, he found that his shot had been precisely true, as it normally was, and one mere arrow shot to the heart was all it took to bring down the enormous stag. Siwili cheered, and the two men dropped to their knees to pay their respects for the life of the animal who would now provide their ailing tribe with food for the next few days.

"I'm proud of you, son," Siwili, whose name meant 'long tail of fox', said as the men trekked back to their village, each lugging a large half of the deer on their backs. "This will help take some of the pressure off of Chief Taima. He's been worrying for days over when the tribe was going to eat next."

"Glad I could help," Wakiza beamed. "This war has been difficult on everyone. If I had one wish, just one wish at all, I'd want the fighting to stop. The Sun tribe should understand that resources are tough to come by these days, and we need to share this land so we can all reap the benefits of it."

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple, my son. The Sun tribe is coming from a place of greed. We can't allow them to step all over us this way. It's bad enough that the Beast has begun to terrorize our tribe. We can't do anything

about that, but we do have the ability to fight against our human foes.”

“I don’t think they’re enemies,” Wakiza said softly. “And I’m not sure I even believe in the Beast. Seems like a bunch of old folklore to me.”

“Perhaps the Beast is unable to be defeated,” Siwili replied, ignoring Wakiza’s comment, “because he is being prayed to by the Sun tribe. That’s where he’s getting his strength.”

“We’d know for sure if Muraco were here. He is the tribe’s shaman, after all. Wouldn’t he be able to tell us if the Beast is a spirit, or a monster of flesh and blood? And couldn’t he sense if the Sun tribe was controlling him and sending his wrath upon us?”

“Indeed he could. But he is not here, and no one knows where he went, or when he’ll be back, if ever.”

“He probably left to escape the war,” Wakiza said. “I wouldn’t blame him. Even I have lost my taste for battle, and it has been my dream to become a warrior since I was a little boy.”

“That I know,” Siwili replied, glancing at his son with sympathetic eyes. “But you are a great warrior, Wakiza, and an equally exceptional hunter. Though you may not agree with this war, you still have a duty to your people.”

Wakiza watched his large feet take turns stepping across the pebble-riddled dirt, only able to look up for a glance at a time due to the oversized carcass draped across his back. He was tall, though not lanky in the least, and every muscle was visibly apparent on his tanned frame. His hair was coarse, dark, and long, and his eyes were a nearly-black brown to match. His name, meaning ‘desperate warrior’, had been given to him after the exceedingly long and difficult labor he gave to his mother, Bena, while being born. It had been a surprise to everyone

in the tribe that she had survived that ordeal fairly unscathed. The chief declared that for a baby to put up such a fight, he must be destined to become a great warrior, desperate to assert his will in any given situation—an extremely auspicious prediction for such a new life. Thus the name stuck, and seemed to grow more and more fitting as each year of his life passed. He became revered among his tribe for his warrior and hunter accomplishments, the perfect son destined for chieftdom in a tribe where the reigning chief only had daughters, and whose wife was too old to produce any more children.

Perhaps Wakiza was a desperate warrior, but he lacked the desperation many had for power, and rather maintained his desperation for a life beyond what anybody in his tribe—even his parents—could understand.

The sun was setting behind the great mountain in the distance. By now, Wakiza and his father had nearly reached their home, the village of the Thunder tribe. He breathed a sigh of relief as the deer carcass was growing heavy upon his back, and quickened his pace to reach the commune before the sun dropped behind the mountain completely and darkness overtook the forest.

As the men approached their village, cheers rang out as everyone noticed the fresh meat being carried toward the chief's house. Upon hearing the ruckus, Chief Taima, whose name meant 'thunder', stepped out of his home and greeted the father and son, thanking them for their contribution to the tribe.

"You have done us a great service, Siwili and Wakiza," Taima said. "And for that, the two of you will get the first bites!"

"It was Wakiza who slew the animal," Siwili admitted. "I just provided moral support."

"Then it is Wakiza we will celebrate tonight," the chief

acquiesced. "And he will have his pick of any of my three daughters to spend the night with. Hopefully," he winked, "it will end in a marriage!"

Wakiza shifted his weight uncomfortably, but managed to muster a smile at Taima. "Thank you, Chief," he said humbly. "It is a great honor."

"You bring honor to this tribe, great warrior," Taima replied. "Now, everyone," he called out to the gathering that had formed around his home, "we feast!"

* * *

The tribe gathered around the roaring fire after all had eaten their fill of venison, and the chief's wife, Ituha, indicated that it was time for storytelling, a favorite activity amongst the members of the tribe. Wakiza sat alone; that is, until the chief's three daughters emerged from their house after their meal, and upon seeing him swarmed around his body like a pack of ravenous wolves. Their names were Elu, Eyota, and Etenia.

The eldest, Elu, meant 'beautiful', and she was clearly so, and knew it well, always using it to her advantage—as if her status as the chief's favorite daughter weren't advantage enough. She always managed to avoid the tasks of everyday life in the village, spending most of her time doting on her father while her sisters did her share of the work.

The chief's second daughter, Eyota, which meant 'great', was known for her intelligence, though she rarely had an opportunity to use her keen wits, since her father kept her busy weaving intricate baskets and forming delicate pottery for the tribe to use.

Taima's youngest daughter was Etenia, whose name meant 'rich'. She was neither pretty nor smart, but didn't

seem to understand that she lacked both brains and beauty. She was known as a spoiled brat within the tribe, and many wondered if she would ever take a husband—or, rather, if one would ever be willing to take her.

“Wakiza! Stay with me tonight,” Elu whispered in his ear, taking care to lean forward enough to allow him a glimpse down her dress. He blushed, and looked the other way, which left him eye to eye with Eyota.

“No! He’s staying with me. We’re going to have deep conversations.” Eyota sat next to Wakiza and scooted as close to him as she could. “A man as intelligent as Wakiza deserves nothing less than an equally smart wife.”

“Wakiza is handsome! He needs a wife as attractive as he!” Elu remarked.

“Ha! He doesn’t want either of you,” Etenia shouted, nearly rupturing Wakiza’s eardrum with her screeching voice. She had firmly planted her rear on the other side of him and leaned as close to him as possible. “He wants me!”

“No, he doesn’t!” Elu argued. “He wants a wife that wouldn’t pain him to look upon each day, with beauty as deep as the raging river, but as soft as the wings of a butterfly.”

“Such a woman’s looks will fade like the falling star, leaving Wakiza with nothing but a fool for a wife!” Eyota retorted.

“He doesn’t want either of you!” Etenia screamed. “He wants the woman who has a little bit of everything—ME!”

“Now, now,” a gentle voice interrupted, much to Wakiza’s relief. “This will all be decided later on. It’s story time now.” Ituha smiled at Wakiza, who grinned and let out an exasperated sigh. “I know what you mean,” she laughed, then motioned for everyone to gather around her.

“What story is it tonight, Mama?” Etenia asked, sitting

cross-legged in front of Wakiza and leaning her back against his knees, as if trying to ensure that he would be unable to get up and leave without her noticing.

“In light of recent events, I’ve decided to tell you all the tale of Kajika, the Beast Who Walks Without Sound.”

“Now, Ituha, are you sure you want to...” Chief Taima interrupted.

“Yes, my dear. I think it’s time our people knew about the creature that’s been tormenting us. Now, Kajika lives deep in the forest, beyond the areas where we all know well not to venture, slumbering in his lair as he awaits his perfect opportunity to strike the innocent. He lived in this forest long before we came along, and will reside here long after we are all gone. Nobody knows if he is a being of flesh and blood, like us, or an entity, sent here from the underworld to torture the living for all their wrongdoing upon this earth. Some say he may even be an elemental, a creature once good but turned away from the positive to live an existence of evil.

“Kajika resembles a lizard, though he is far more enormous than any other animal that we know of within this forest. He has sharp, jagged teeth and pointed horns upon his wretched head. His claws are massive, and able to slice through skin and flesh with ease. All those who have dared to face Kajika never lived to tell of his wicked glory, and I urge you—all of you—to avoid looking into the Beast’s eyes if you are ever unfortunate enough to come upon him while walking in the forest.”

“Why?” Etenia asked inquisitively.

“Why, because his eyes will freeze you in place, of course,” Ituha, whose name meant ‘sturdy oak’, replied, her eyes wide. “And then it will be all the easier for him to feast upon your body while you’re still alive. He starts at your legs, and works his way up, munching on every bone

and muscle as if it were a delicacy. Then once you're at the brink of consciousness, he finishes you off, slicing off your head and saving it for his last bite."

"Oh, come on," Wakiza groaned, rolling his eyes. "Surely you can't believe that's true."

"Then what about all the people who have gone missing?" Eyota argued. "No trace of them has ever been found."

"We're at war with the Sun tribe," Wakiza reasoned. "Isn't it more logical to assume that they were taken as prisoners of war, or possibly killed?"

"The Sun tribe has made no secret of their attacks on us in the past," Eyota remarked. "And wouldn't they use the hostages as a bargaining tool? Seems more logical to me that the Sun tribe allied with the Beast in an attempt to destroy our tribe."

Wakiza sighed loudly. "You're probably right, Eyota," he replied, standing up abruptly and nearly knocking the chief's three daughters over in the process. "Now, if you'll excuse me. Nature calls."

"Watch out for the Kajika!" Taima's three daughters taunted in unison, but Wakiza ignored them and sauntered off into the forest.

Wakiza walked a good distance away from his village, close enough that he could still see the glow of the fire and hear the muffled chatter of his people, but still far enough that the silence of the forest, occasionally disrupted by an owl's hoot or a cricket's chirp, overpowered the human sounds. When he reached a towering oak tree drooped over a cluster of blackberry brambles, he stopped, and waited. He cleared his mind of all the matters of the day—the stress of the hunt, his aching feet from his travels, the incessant attention from the chief's three daughters. He then ran his fingers delicately over a carving in the trunk of

the tree, and closed his eyes until a serene and pleasant sound glided through his ears.

“Wakiza?”

He opened his eyes, and felt his heart begin to race. His whole body flushed pink, and his hands started to tremble. “Aiyana...” he whispered. “I’ve missed you.”

A stunning woman stepped into a glimmer of moonlight, and graced forward to embrace Wakiza. His lips found hers, and the two grasped on to each other as tightly as they could. Aiyana’s tongue melted into his mouth, her lips soft and smooth. Wakiza had waited so long for this moment, had dreamed of those perfect lips for days, maybe weeks, since he’d last seen her. Now he wanted nothing more than for this tight hold upon her to never come to an end.

Finally, she pulled away from him. Strands of her long black hair had fallen loose from her braid and drifted across her face, as her bewitching copper-colored eyes met his.

“Wakiza,” she said, “I didn’t know if you’d come. I saw the fire in the distance, I thought it might be hard for you to escape.”

“Of course I’d come,” the warrior replied. “I’d never miss a chance to see you.” He paused. “But what about you? Aren’t you afraid to venture out of your village alone like this, with that Beast lurking in the shadows?” He growled, and grabbed around Aiyana’s waist playfully.

“I wouldn’t joke about that if I were you,” Aiyana scolded. “You’re asking for trouble.”

“My only trouble is you, my love!” Wakiza beamed, and stole another kiss before she teasingly pulled away from him once again.

Aiyana looked up longingly at Wakiza, her eyes dilating as she focused on his chiseled face illuminated by

the moonlight. She was a petite woman, lean and athletic, but curved in all the right places. Her name, meaning 'eternal blossom', was, like Wakiza, a nomination that seemed to perfectly suit her in the present despite it being given at birth. Though, as a child, her name didn't always suit her so well. Like the budding flowers of the spring, it had taken many seasons before Aiyana looked the way she did currently. She often wondered if Wakiza would have noticed her in the way he did now if he'd known her in her youth.

"Oh, Aiyana," Wakiza scoffed, "don't tell me you believe all those ridiculous tales about the Kajika. You're smarter than that. The biggest danger to the forest is the war between our tribes."

"I know. It's horrible. I just wish this could be resolved so we could finally be together."

"If only it were that simple."

"Wakiza?"

"Yes?"

"I... I should probably tell you something. But if I do, you have to promise me that you'll keep it to yourself and not tell anybody. Because if you do, everyone will wonder how you knew, and it might give us away."

"Of course I'll keep it a secret. Why, what is it?"

Aiyana paused, and took a deep breath. "My tribe is planning an attack on yours. Tomorrow. Just before dawn. My father is hoping to catch Taima off guard."

"Are you serious? I must warn my people, Aiyana!"

"You can't! Please, Wakiza, you said you wouldn't tell anyone!"

Wakiza sighed, then grabbed Aiyana's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Well, maybe I can try to 'accidentally' make some noise tomorrow morning and at least ensure that everyone is awake."

“I think that’s all you can do,” Aiyana replied softly. “I just keep praying to the Raven that you’re protected, and nobody from my tribe can harm you.”

“I’ll ask the Mountain Lion for help tonight before I go to sleep as well.”

Aiyana smiled. “I should go. You should get some sleep, so you will be well-rested in the morning.” She tried to hide her face so as not to show Wakiza the tears that were now welling up in her eyes, but he noticed and embraced her tightly. “I guess this is goodbye then.”

“It’s never ‘goodbye’. It’s ‘until the next time we meet’,” Wakiza whispered softly in her ear. “I will dream of you every night until then.”

“As will I,” Aiyana replied, and the two kissed one more time before reluctantly turning away from each other and walking off in opposite directions.

As Wakiza ventured back to his village, his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Aiyana, the impending attack, and the pointless war with the Sun tribe. He wished more than anything that the situation between the two tribes were different. He longed for time spent with his love that could span beyond just a few brief moments.

He was so distracted by his internal fantasies that he didn’t even notice a large, dark shadow looming behind a cluster of trees in the short distance. It was only when he heard a raspy groan, followed by what sounded like a deep growl, that Wakiza’s senses perked up.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a slight yellowish reflection of the moonlight. He froze and squinted, desperately trying to discern the sounds and shadow, but even the most practical of thoughts could not shake the chills his body now felt, and the hopeless, taunting feeling of being watched. The small hairs on the back of his arms stood upright. Just when it appeared as

though the shadow was beginning to slowly—yet menacingly—grow larger, rising further above him, Wakiza took off running. He didn't stop until he had safely reached his home.

* * *

Wakiza had difficulty sleeping that night. Whether it be because of the impending attack on his tribe, the strange, shadow-like anomaly that loomed toward him on his walk home, or the aching desire for Aiyana that welled up in his heart every time he was forced to leave her side, he could not say. But for whatever reason, he found himself wide awake well before dawn, and took that time as an opportunity to plan his defense against the inevitable battle he was soon to face.

Just before sunrise, Wakiza took a deep breath and prayed to his spirit animal totem, the Mountain Lion, before stepping out of his house and gazing around the camp. He noticed several large clay pots outside of some neighboring homes, and—though he knew he might have to face the wrath of Eyota—began picking them up and violently slamming them down upon the ground, one by one. With each pot that shattered as loudly as a thundering storm, more and more people emerged from their houses, rubbing their eyes and scolding Wakiza for making such a ruckus so early in the morning.

“Oh, no! Sorry, it was an accident,” Wakiza said nonchalantly, prompting his people to look at him strangely and mutter that they were going back to bed. But before they could return to the warmth and safety of their homes, a harrowing war cry rang out and echoed through the trees. The sound of pounding drums and darting footsteps thrummed, quickly drawing nearer.

Chief Taima burst out of his house and briefly glanced at Wakiza, confused. “Women and children get into my house, quick! Men, ready your weapons and prepare to fight!”

Just over the peak of the small hill on the brink of the Thunder tribe’s camp, intricately painted warriors of the Sun tribe started to emerge and impose upon the village, tearing through homes and breaking everything they could within. The sounds of gasps, then screams, mixed with war cries, echoed through the village and imprinted the pain and desperation of the people deeply into the Thunder tribe’s land.

Wakiza drew his bow and positioned himself behind a large rock, peering around at the men who were quickly approaching his hiding spot. When one grew close, Wakiza wasted no time whizzing an arrow his way, slicing through several breastbones and causing quite a few warriors to fall to their knees in pain. Some perished from their wounds, while others desperately tried to drag their ailing bodies away before Wakiza could strike again. But since so many were coming at a time, Wakiza only had an opportunity to shoot each adversary once before another noticed him and headed his way.

Wakiza had knocked down at least ten warriors of the Sun tribe when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his father in a hand to hand combat with a man he vaguely recognized. He assumed both his father and the Sun warrior had run out of arrows, and as he ventured closer he was able to make out the familiarity of Siwili’s opponent.

Wakiza had only seen him once—and, granted, it was from afar—but he was sure he knew the man to be Aiyana’s older brother, Akano. Akano, whose name meant ‘worthy of trust’, surely had much to prove in this battle, as he was set to become the Sun tribe’s next chief, and as

Wakiza pondered this thought he realized that because of this, under no circumstances would Akano allow Siwili to walk away from their fight alive. Without thinking, Wakiza rushed to his father's side and threw a swift punch to Akano's face. Dazed, Akano staggered backward, stumbling to the ground.

"Run, Father! I've got this!" Wakiza shouted, only to find his father hesitate and stare back at him blankly.

"This is not your fight, son," Siwili replied, out of breath.

"If you continue fighting him, he will kill you," Wakiza hissed. "Please, Father. He's stronger than you!"

Siwili paused for a moment, eying his son carefully. Then he reluctantly nodded his head, and, though he appeared somewhat defeated, rushed away to find an opponent to fight who was more suited for his age. Though exhausted, he could not stop fighting altogether, as it would bring a horrible dishonor upon his family, and it would be more appropriate for him to have died in battle than given up completely.

Wakiza glanced at his father as he darted away, but was quickly brought back to reality when he felt a tremendous blow to the back of his head. He turned around and was quickly punched again by Akano. Wakiza gathered himself and vigorously swung at Aiyana's brother, landing a forcible jab across his cheek. Akano struck again, this time missing Wakiza and slightly losing his footing, offering Wakiza the opportunity to swiftly thrust his leg under his, forcefully knocking him to the ground. But Akano was quick to stand up again and sprinted at Wakiza, tackling him in his midsection, and the two warriors plummeted to the ground.

Wakiza and Akano rolled around in the dirt, landing blows here and there, but mainly wearing each other out

as they continued their fight. Then, out of nowhere, Akano pulled a long, razor-sharp piece of obsidian from the strap of his loin cloth, previously hidden by a perfectly sized pouch that Aiyana had no doubt sewn for him. Wakiza and Akano rose to their feet once more, and Akano loomed over the warrior, wielding the obsidian around as if it were a blade. Wakiza stared at Akano in disbelief, but though he kept his own blade tightly secured to his waist, he did not draw it.

Wakiza felt his heart nearly pounding out of his chest. *This is it, he thought to himself. This is how I will die. At the hands of the brother of the woman I love. Seems oddly fitting, I suppose, for a desperate warrior like myself.*

Akano shot forward, swinging the blade across Wakiza's stomach. Luckily, Wakiza leaped backward, narrowly avoiding the slash of the blade and sparing himself the sight of his own entrails being spilled across his feet. Akano struck again, this time aiming for his throat, but a quick movement again from Wakiza resulted only in a slight graze through his left bicep. Wakiza winced in pain, but readied himself for another attack.

Akano lurched forward, and took a quick step in his direction. Wakiza thought fast, and leaned backward while thrusting his arm forward, causing a severe blow to Akano's head. As Akano recovered from the hit, Wakiza swung his other arm around, swiftly chopping his wrist into Akano's arm, and successfully knocking the blade from his hands and away onto the forest floor.

Akano tried to hurdle over Wakiza in an attempt to retrieve the blade, but Wakiza thrust his body upward and tossed him to the ground once more. Then Wakiza bounded over to the blade and hurriedly picked it up, pointing it in his adversary's direction. Akano put his hands up, then lowered his eyes and fell to his knees, admitting

his defeat. Wakiza stepped forward, hovering over him, but he did not make the final strike.

Akano knelt, tense, and waited for the blow. When it did not come, he looked up into Wakiza's eyes.

"Aren't you going to kill me?" Akano asked, breathing heavily, his voice shaking slightly.

Wakiza took a deep breath, and looked around to his right and left. Then his eyes met Akano's once more, and he noticed a hint of Aiyana looking back at him through her brother's eyes.

"Get out of here," he hissed. "Go, before someone sees us."

Akano rose, confused, and began to slowly back away, maintaining eye contact. Then he turned his body, looking at Wakiza gratefully just one more time before sprinting away as fast as he could. Wakiza dropped the obsidian blade, and, upon feeling his knees buckle beneath him, gave in and fell to the ground. But before relief could overtake him, he heard a familiar voice from behind.

"I cannot believe you, Wakiza." Wakiza felt his blood run cold. He turned around, only to find Chief Taima approaching him. "I cannot believe you would let Akano live and just leave like that. Don't you know who he is?"

Wakiza thought carefully before answering. "No, who is he, Chief?"

"Don't play with me. We both know that's a load of bear crap. You know just as well as I do who that man was, who he was destined to become. You had him in your grasp, Wakiza, and you let him go. Why?"

"He said his wife had just had a baby, and I just couldn't..."

"You lie again. That's twice now you've lied to me, Wakiza. I saw the whole thing. Akano was one of the last

men still fighting. The rest were either killed or driven away, back to the Sun tribe. All thanks to you and your commotion this morning. Awfully fishy, if you ask me. One might think you knew something was going to happen. And after witnessing this, well, I'm very inclined to think that."

"How much did you see?" Wakiza asked, a lump forming in the back of his throat.

"I saw your father running away, so I came to investigate what had happened. I'd seen him fighting with Akano, so I was surprised to see he survived that battle. I wondered how he could have defeated such a strong, viable warrior. Then I came over here and saw you, my prized Wakiza, one of the most honored warriors in the tribe become a traitor to our people. And to think I actually believed that one day you would take over as the leader of our tribe. You've made a fool out of me, Wakiza. You've made a fool out of all the Thunder people."

"Chief, I'm sorry."

"If you are a traitor, I should kill you right now. But first, Wakiza, I want you to answer me one question."

"What's that?"

"Why did you do it? Why did you let him live?"

Wakiza paused, and looked into Taima's eyes, but said nothing.

"Very well. Wakiza, I cannot in good conscience kill a man who, in the past, has done so much for our people, who was once so revered as a warrior. But you are henceforth excommunicated from this tribe. You are no longer welcome in our village. May the Earth grant you more mercy than I have."

With that, Taima turned his back on Wakiza and walked away, back to the shambles that were once the Thunder tribe's encampment.

* * *

Wakiza sat numbly on the ground as the whole magnitude of his predicament settled upon him. He'd been banished from his family, the only home he'd ever known. He wondered if he would ever see his parents again in his lifetime.

He stayed there, motionless, for quite a while, listening to the distant sounds of his former tribe recoiling from the surprise attack. Tears welled in his eyes at the sobs of devastated wives and mothers, and the cries of grown men who had lost a brother, son, or friend. Many had died protecting their families, as Siwili surely would have had Wakiza not intervened. The destruction would have been far worse without his impromptu warning; but in the end, it didn't matter. He was alone now.

Finally realizing there was nothing he could do to remedy his current predicament, Wakiza picked up his blade, pulled his body up, and began to walk.

He walked away from the Thunder tribe, and ventured in a direction far even from the Sun tribe. If he had been excommunicated from his own people, he figured there wasn't much of a chance of him being accepted by Aiyana's tribe either. Sure, he had saved Akano, but he was still likely considered an ally of the Thunder tribe, given his status up until recently. If he chose to approach Aiyana's tribe, the best he could hope for would be that her father, Chief Etu, would kill him and spare him the shame and loneliness that he was now destined to face. But even that sounded undesirable to him, and he had a feeling that although he was shunned, there might still be hope to have a decent life on his own—if he created that existence for himself, that is.

So Wakiza walked, and walked, and walked, until

eventually he came upon what appeared to be some kind of makeshift shelter deep in the woods.

Wakiza approached the tent, which was made up of tightly woven branches and leaves, with a drooping bear's hide for a door. He crept up to the entrance slowly, taking care not to crunch down on any sticks, but his attempts at remaining silent were futile as the hide swung open and Wakiza found himself face to face with a snarling wolf's head.

Wakiza started to back away, but as the wolf emerged from the doorway to the hut, he realized that it was not in fact an actual wolf, but rather a stocky old man wearing a wolf's hide. He froze, then decided it might be best to try to reason with this wolf-man and see if perhaps he could provide him with any kind of enlightenment on where he was, or where he could go from here. He did not want to impose on the man, but was simply curious as to why the wolf-man would go to all the trouble of building such an intricately designed house in such a remote location of the forest.

"What is it?" the man growled, much like a wolf might if Wakiza had in fact come upon an actual wolf.

"Hello... My name is Wakiza, of the Thunder tribe. Well, formerly of the Thunder tribe. I was hoping you might be able to help me."

The man pursed his lips, and stared at Wakiza inquisitively. "What do you want?"

"Um, well, I was sent away from my tribe, and am looking for a place to stay. Might you have any idea where a good location would be? You see, my tribe is at war with another tribe, and I don't want to live anywhere that might intersect with either one."

"So old Chief Taima cast you off, did he?" the man harrumphed. "Typical. No wonder the Earth never blessed

him with a son. He doesn't know how to treat them well, now, does he?"

Wakiza said nothing. He had no desire to speak ill of his former chief, even despite his most recent interaction with him. Though he was deemed a traitor, Wakiza was far from one, even in his excommunication.

The man glared at Wakiza for a moment before sliding the wolf's hide off his body. "I, too, was once a member of the Thunder tribe. But unlike you, I chose to leave. I am not the kind desperate for glory born from violence." He cocked his head at Wakiza slightly and winked.

Wakiza squinted his eyes, and suddenly recognized the old man as the former shaman of the Thunder tribe. "Muraco?" He asked inquisitively.

"That's me," the man, whose name meant 'white moon', replied.

"What are you doing all the way out here? And by yourself?"

"Well, like I said, I chose to leave."

"Aren't you worried, being out here and all?"

"Worried about what? The Beast?"

"Aren't you afraid he'll try to eat you?"

"He's not interested in eating my old meat!" Muraco chuckled. "Now, enough questions about Kajika for now. You'll learn about him soon enough."

"What does that mean?"

"Now, have you managed to become the great warrior you were foretold to be yet? Judging by your current predicament, I'm inclined to think otherwise."

"I guess I sort of was. Up until recently."

Muraco furrowed his brow. "I don't know, Wakiza. I have a sense you might still have a chance. But it won't be easy, of course."

Wakiza mustered a small grin and chuckled. "Nothing ever is, right?"

"Right. Now, come on in, would you? It's almost dark, and I'm sure you're hungry and thirsty by now, after all your travels."

"Thank you," Wakiza replied, following the shaman into his home.

The interior of the tent was dark except for a small fire burning in the very back, below a tiny hole in the roof that allowed the smoke to disperse from the inside. A bed composed of leaves and animal hides on the ground extended down the side of one of the walls, while on the other side stood several clay pots that likely contained food and water. Wakiza gazed from pot to pot, wondering what could possibly lie within their hollows.

"Now, have a seat," Muraco said, pointing to his bed. "I think I may be able to help you."

"How?" Wakiza inquired.

"Well, there's quite an easy way to find the answers you seek."

"And what way would that be?"

"A journey of course!"

"Journey to where?"

"Not an actual journey somewhere, although I can't guarantee that's not what you may discover along the way!"

"Please, Muraco," Wakiza nearly pleaded, rubbing his temples in exasperation. "I'm not so keen on the folklore and riddles and such. Can you just tell me outright, please?"

Muraco laughed. "Typical moose-headed warrior. I'm speaking of a spiritual journey."

"A spiritual journey?" Wakiza said, though part of him wasn't surprised. "You mean, like taking mind-altering

substances?”

“‘Substances’? Boy, Taima sure has done one over on you. It’s mushrooms, to be exact. A special kind of mushroom. One that can take your mind to places never thought possible.” Muraco harrumphed again. “Mind-altering substances,” he muttered mockingly.

“But I am not a shaman!” Wakiza protested.

“Of course you’re not. But a lot of people in your very position do it, too. To find themselves, or their life’s purpose, if you will. If you’re unable to on your own, that is. Most people are, but you’re one of the lucky ones that, so far, has not been able to. So here we are.”

Wakiza sighed. “I guess what do I have to lose at this point, right?” he lamented.

“Exactly!” Muraco exclaimed, opening one of the clay pots and removing a few pieces of dried, brown lumps.

“Chew and swallow, if you please.”

Wakiza took the mushrooms from the shaman and sniffed them. They oddly enough did not smell as terrible as he expected. He took a quick lick of one, and found it didn’t have much taste. Reluctantly, he plugged his nose, opened his mouth, and dropped one in. As he chewed, he found it wasn’t horribly offensive to his taste buds, and when his saliva had broken down the mushrooms significantly, he swallowed.

“There you go,” Muraco said. “Now we wait.”

Wakiza lay down, and allowed his thoughts to gradually drift away. He pondered his predicament, explored possible outcomes, and—at last, when he couldn’t bear to think of the real world any longer—allowed himself to daydream of Aiyana.

Just as he was finally feeling like he might fall deeply into sleep, he slowly became aware of slight color changes within Muraco’s house that seemed to shift before his very

eyes. Each color intensified, and began to trace across the room, trailing an aura of mist behind it. Sounds began to fluctuate within his mind, sounding very distant from him, then instantly loud, ringing and echoing in his ears. Then the colors cascaded down the walls, and patterns began to form that represented nothing to Wakiza's eyes but pure perfection.

"Wakiza. Wakiza, do you feel it? Just visualize." Muraco's voice trailed across his brain. Wakiza sat up, looked around with wide, dilated eyes, then fixated upon the shaman.

"I feel... strange," he whispered. Muraco laughed.

"Well, let's get up then, and walk around the forest," the shaman replied.

"No!" Wakiza protested instantly. "I... I can't."

"Nonsense. What kind of journey is spent just lying around? Get up, and let's go."

Wakiza reluctantly obliged, and followed Muraco out of his tent. The two men walked into a thick patch of trees, the songs of birds and the rustle of leaves surrounding them, and twigs cracking beneath their feet. The proximal noises violently assaulted Wakiza's ears, and he couldn't help but notice a faint chanting and pounding drums in the far distance.

"Here we are," Muraco announced when the two had reached a very large and ancient-looking oak tree. "Sit. And close your eyes."

Wakiza sat cross-legged on the ground, his eyes darting around and his torso whipping back and forth with every sound that came at him. He shut his eyes.

"Tell me, desperate warrior," the shaman said softly. "What do you see?"

Wakiza squinted, hoping for some apparition or visualization to just appear out of nowhere, but all he saw

was the pure darkness of the insides of his eyelids. He began to grow impatient, but instead took a deep breath and sighed. He relaxed his body and waited.

Suddenly, Wakiza got the distinct feeling that he and Muraco were no longer alone. There was a new presence, though not a human one. Wakiza tried his hardest to focus on the visitor as its energy swirled around him. Within his mind, he attempted to reach out to the being, hoping to discover its identity.

Who are you? he asked fervently within his thoughts.

A voice, deep and gnarled, growled in reply, echoing only in his mind. *I am the Spirit of the Mountain Lion. I've come at your request for guidance. What do you seek?*

I seek the knowledge and wisdom necessary for peace within myself. I do not know who I am anymore, Wakiza replied.

I do not agree, the Lion snarled. *You do know who you are, but your tribe chose not to accept you. I can help, if that is what you desire.*

Wakiza opened his eyes, half expecting to snap out of his daydream and find himself sitting alone with Muraco. But he found to his surprise that Muraco was nowhere to be seen. In his place was a faint vision of a mountain lion—though much larger than an actual lion. The apparition floated distinctively before him, glaring him straight in the eye, staring through his entire soul. The forest around him had also grown eerie, the air was still and stale without a hint of wind, and an overall mist enveloped through the canopy of the trees.

Wakiza felt uneasy about the sudden change, but knew this was likely his only chance to communicate with his spirit animal totem directly.

"Please. I desire your help, Mountain Lion," the warrior said aloud, to which the lion narrowed its eyes and

nodded. Then the lion dissipated into thin air, and an image of a dark cave, rooted in the base of the northern mountain appeared, and an enormous, lizard-like monster emerged from the cave, its sharp, jagged teeth dripping with drool.

Here is where Kajika lies. Slay the Beast and reunite the inhabitants of this forest. Fail, and bear witness to the destruction of all the tribes within these trees.

So the Beast is real... Wakiza thought.

But remember, the lion added, Kajika walks without sound, so use your other senses to guide you. And whatever you do, do not look into the Beast's eyes.

The energy then shifted, and Wakiza felt his stomach turn. He blinked, then looked around and found that once again Muraco was sitting beside him, and the forest had returned to its former normalcy.

"Well? How was it?" Muraco asked, excitement apparent in his tone.

"Very insightful," Wakiza replied. "I think I know what I need to do now."

"And what is that?"

"Slay Kajika. I guess he does exist, after all."

"Then get on with it!" the shaman exclaimed, throwing his arms in the air. "I will leave you now. But you know where to find me if you need anything."

"Thank you Muraco. And if I succeed in my quest, I hope you will to return to the Thunder tribe."

"If the fighting has ceased, I just might. Goodbye." And with that, Muraco rose from his seat, turned from the warrior, and walked away.

* * *

Wakiza set off to the north. His mind was still unsure

that this was the right path, yet something within his heart urged him to follow it. Though the vision of the spirit of the Mountain Lion had passed, Wakiza could still feel a hint of his almighty presence, looming over him and watching closely as he traveled. Every so often, Wakiza would stop, look around, and whisper some brief words of gratitude, expressing his appreciation for the lion's invisible appearance and silently pleading with the spirit not to leave his side. His rhetorical offerings seemed to be effective, for all the while that he traveled, he was accompanied by his animal totem.

As Wakiza walked, he found himself thinking of nothing but Aiyana, recalling the moment he had first met her over and over within his mind. It had been spring, and both tribes were eager to resume their hunting and gathering routines after the long winter. Wakiza had been hiding behind a blackberry bush, spying on a family of rabbits in the distant clearing, poised with his bow and arrow and ready for one to draw close enough to provide him a suitable shot.

One of the larger rabbits had moved away from the group, drawing closer to Wakiza's hiding place. He readied his arrow, tense with anticipation, ready to loosen the taut string at a second's notice. Then he felt a slight shove, and lost his crouched footing, falling to his rear with a loud thump. The family of rabbits perked up, eyes wide, then instantly scattered back to their burrows.

Wakiza stood up, angry and indignant, but his rage quickly dissipated as he found himself gazing directly into the shimmering eyes of Aiyana, who had been picking blackberries from the other side of the bush. Apparently he had been in her way, and was blocking a prime batch of berries, which prompted her to try to move him rather than request his relocation. Rather than protest, Wakiza had

been so stunned by her beauty that he was at a loss for words.

"Very articulate, I see," Aiyana teased, flashing a quick wink in his direction.

"I, uh, um..."

"The hunter speaks!" Aiyana giggled. "Or, judging from your arm tattoo, I should call you the brave warrior, yes? From the Thunder tribe?"

"That's right. I'm Wakiza."

"Aiyana. Pleasure to meet you, great warrior."

"I... I'm sorry that, um, my body happened to be in your way," Wakiza stammered.

Aiyana smiled. "It's not a problem. Luckily for me, my meal isn't able to just up and hop away." She delicately plucked a few more berries from the bush and dropped them into her basket, then glanced at Wakiza once more, her eyes sparkling. "Sorry about your rabbit. I'm happy to share some of these ripe berries with you, if you'd like."

Wakiza felt his face flush, and took a deep breath. "Thank you," he nearly squeaked out. "That will be better than returning home empty handed."

"This batch over here looks the best. Why don't you grab some of them?"

Wakiza inched forward, and held out his hand to select one of the berries from the batch. To his surprise, Aiyana reached her soft hand toward his, guiding it to the ripest, juiciest berry of the bunch. The two locked eyes, and Wakiza felt a chill radiate through his entire body. He couldn't look away from Aiyana, and knew at that very moment that this was the woman he forever wished to look upon. Not just for the remainder of his life, but in his heart he knew it was for all of eternity.

"Aiyana! Aiyana, where are you?" An unfamiliar female voice rang out, and Aiyana quickly pulled her arm

away from Wakiza, and quickly stood up.

"I have to go," she said. "My mother can't see me talking to you." She began to hurry away.

"AIYANA!? AIYANA, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

"Coming, Mother!"

"Aiyana, wait!" Wakiza called out, and Aiyana whirled around. "When can I see you again?"

"Meet me by the oldest oak that marks the line between our tribes. Tomorrow night just after the sun sets," Aiyana hollered back before darting off and finally disappearing within the trees.

After that, the two of them began to meet in secret, disappearing from their tribes for short periods of time to walk through the forest together, sharing stories and laughing. They would always meet at the same tree, and with each passing day they fell deeper and deeper in love.

Wakiza's eyes teared up as he walked. He swallowed, then within his mind begged the Mountain Lion to help provide him the strength to survive so that he could see Aiyana once more. Even if fate decreed that the two could never be together, if he could just see her one more time, he could die happy.

The Mountain Lion gave no reply, but Wakiza harbored a strange feeling of an entrance into his body, and assumed the Mountain Lion had imparted into him some of its energy.

By late afternoon, Wakiza had finally reached the foot of the northern mountain. It loomed over him, much like the Mountain Lion's spirit had during his spiritual journey. But there had been an innate sense of comfort from his animal totem, a security and eagerness to help, that the mountain certainly did not seem inclined to provide. Jagged rocks jammed out of the mountain's side, poised to slide down upon Wakiza's head at any moment, and there were no

plants around its base, as if even the spirits of the plants found the blackened dirt not suitable enough for nourishment.

As Wakiza scanned the mountain, he could feel the presence of Kajika within it, though perhaps it was the spirit of the Mountain Lion that allowed him such sensitivity to the energies around him. But somehow, by some means—Wakiza inherently knew that he was in the exact place he needed to be.

Wakiza approached the mountain cautiously. He had no desire to give Kajika the advantage of sensing his presence before he was able to furnish an initial attack upon the Beast. But as he turned a blind corner around a particularly large boulder, he very quickly found himself looking into the infinite blackness of the mouth leading into a deep, dark cave.

“This must be it,” he whispered softly to himself, but before the warrior could even ponder a possible advancement into the cave, he was startled by a very low, resonating growl from deep within the hole in the mountain.

“Who dares enter my lair?” the voice boomed.

Wakiza stood frozen in his tracks, unsure of what to do next. In his mind, he was kicking himself for not using all of his warrior training and experience he had accrued over his many years of life, but something about this Beast was paralyzing, and he found himself unable to exert any form of aggression upon the creature in his current state. His body was still, yet his mind and mouth were able to work properly. Wakiza realized he would need to snap out of his condition, and asked the Mountain Lion for assistance within his thoughts.

Call the Beast out, he heard within his mind.

Are you crazy? Wakiza thought.

Do as I say, O great warrior.

Wakiza hesitated for a moment, then called out, his voice shaky, “Kajika?”

“Fool!” the Beast taunted, though still denying the warrior the chance to look upon him. “How desperate your pitiful intentions are. I know why you’re here, young warrior. Killing me will not save your people. Why, you’ve merely saved me the trouble of traveling out of my humble home to hunt my dinner! Your tribe resides quite far from here, you know.” Kajika laughed, a raspy hiss. “I must say, you are quite brave to sacrifice your own life to save just one of your... *tasty* people. Tomorrow I will hunt again, and all your efforts will have been in vain.”

Wakiza quickly considered his options. He knew that if he could lure the Beast out of its cave and far enough into the sunlight, he would have a better chance at fighting him. If he succumbed to Kajika’s attempts at mind-trickery and attacked him in the darkness of the cave, he would surely fail. But most importantly, he needed to avoid looking into the Beast’s eyes!

Wakiza had always been a warrior acting out of desperation, but perhaps in this particular instance patience and ingenuity could lead to his success, much like the delicate ambush-hunting methods of the Mountain Lion. Wakiza fully embraced the spirit of his animal guide within him, took a step back, and ducked behind the large boulder. Suddenly he understood what he needed to do.

“Kajika!” he called out, his voice sly and mocking. “O great Beast, if fresh human meat is what you desire, I suggest you get off your lazy rear and come get it!”

Kajika roared angrily at the warrior’s insolence, then silence followed. Wakiza turned his head slightly, peering just the corner of one eye around the boulder. He did not hear any footsteps approaching. In fact, there was no

sound at all.

But as Wakiza continued to watch, a pointed snout emerged from the darkness, silently sniffing hot breath as it swung around in all directions, trying to catch a whiff of where the warrior was. Then a set of jaws became visible, smacking thin lips around long, jaggedly sharp teeth that spanned the whole perimeter of the Beast's mouth. And finally, two eyes, yellow and slitted, surfaced from the cave, reflecting the sunlight, pupils retracting their dilation from the dark.

Remember, don't look directly into his eyes, Wakiza heard within his mind, though he didn't have time to consider whether the voice he heard was his own, or that of the Mountain Lion, whose spirit he felt within him. Kajika was becoming more and more visible.

The Beast was a lizard, though enormous, and he scuttled over the dirt and rocks in the exact manner of his smaller counterpart. Wakiza knew for sure, now, that this was the same creature he had seen in his vision. Muraco's spiritual guidance had led him true.

Kajika's tail was thick, and provided the majority of his balance as it dragged along the ground. Acuminous claws protruded from long, spindly fingers, but there was still no noise, no scratching to be heard as his feet moved across the rocky surface. The Beast indeed walked without sound as he slunk further and further out of his lair.

As Kajika approached, Wakiza knew that he would have just one perfect opportunity to make a first strike. There was no room for error. Failure was not an option. He clutched onto his obsidian blade tightly and desperately prayed to the Mountain Lion.

Just a few more steps this way...

Kajika had ventured out of the cave completely, and crept around the side of the boulder. Wakiza counted his

heartbeats, timing the Beast's soundless approach. Then he leaped forth, his eyes squeezed tightly closed to avoid Kajika's glare. The blade connected, slashing Kajika across the face. The Beast wailed, and thrashed around, whipping his tail in all directions. The flailing limb slammed into Wakiza, tossing him a good distance backward.

Kajika, blood streaming down his reptilian features, watched the warrior fall. Then he stampeded over, mouth opened wide to reveal his razor-sharp teeth, jaw gnashing in anticipation of the impending ferocious bite.

Wakiza rolled back on his feet, snatching an arrow from its sheath and drawing back his bowstring. He sailed the arrow through the air, glancing only at the Beast's shoulder as he lunged forward. Kajika reared back, and Wakiza turned to retreat, but the Beast bit down hard onto Wakiza's ankle, latching onto the warrior's flesh. Wakiza howled in agony.

Wakiza slashed his blade at the Beast, cutting through the thick skin that hung from his throat, while buying himself a little extra time to avoid another chomp from the Beast's jaws. Though it was not a deep wound, it was enough to cause Kajika to recoil, allowing Wakiza the opportunity to right himself.

The warrior crouched low, much like he would if he were hunting, and prepared himself for the next impending strike. Kajika charged back at him, but this time Wakiza ducked and managed to stab his blade upward as the Beast passed over him, slicing a large, gaping hole down the ventral length of Kajika's body. The Beast looped around and, with a quick flip of his neck, smacked into Wakiza and sent him flying.

Wakiza landed heavily on his feet. His ankle screamed in pain from the wound, but Wakiza didn't have time to tend to it now. Kajika stormed back at him, opening

his enormous jaws as he took a swipe at the warrior's head, attempting a clean bite to behead the warrior. Wakiza whirled around and leaped as high as he could, using his good ankle to brace himself. His blade slammed forcefully down through Kajika's head, stabbing straight into the Beast's brain through his thick skull. Kajika shrieked and moaned, body thrashing around violently. Then suddenly, the Beast halted, looked Wakiza dead in the eye, then rolled to his side before collapsing in a heap upon the ground.

Wakiza exhaled deeply. His arms hung at his sides, heavy with exhaustion, but he could move. He was surprised by the fact that he had not turned to stone, and wondered if the Beast was indeed able to paralyze one with simply a glare. Or perhaps at the exact moment that Wakiza looked into the Beast's eyes, it was possible Kajika was already dead, and therefore his glance would not have affected him. All that mattered now was that the Beast was dead. He shrugged, then chuckled wearily to himself. Maybe some folklore was worth paying attention to, after all.

Wakiza's attention then turned to his injured ankle, and he began holding pressure on the bite wound to stop the bleeding. He ripped some fabric from his loin cloth and wrapped the gash tightly before pulling himself up and surveying his victory. Kajika had fallen by his hands, and now he just needed to prove it. So the warrior took his obsidian blade and began slowly sawing off the Beast's head. When the gruesome task was completed, he tucked the head under his arm and began to limp in the direction of his former home as the sun began to set, far off in the distance behind the western mountain.

* * *

Wakiza walked through the night, but as he drew closer to his former home, he decided to take a slight detour. He couldn't stop thinking of Aiyana, and the longer he traveled, the more certain he was that there was something he must do before approaching Chief Taima. So Wakiza ventured in the direction of the Sun tribe, and upon arriving found to his utter surprise that there was already quite a commotion going on.

As he approached, Wakiza could hear sounds of a battle, the hoots and hollers of both his tribe and Aiyana's, as well as the sounds of blows being thrown, arrows whizzing through the air, and blades being wielded about. Wakiza halted in his tracks, and chose to creep very quietly toward the irreverent sound of war. Given the fact that he was heading toward the Sun tribe, Wakiza could only assume that it was his former tribe that had prompted the attack.

Wakiza peeked around a thick tree trunk, and witnessed his former chief, Taima, actively fighting against both Akano and his father, Chief Etu. Taima was doing a fairly decent job of holding his own against the two braves, but from the looks of it was beginning to weaken considerably. Wakiza took a deep breath and stepped around the side of the tree.

"Stop! There's no need for fighting anymore!" he cried, holding up the head of Kajika for all to see.

The two chiefs and Akano paused, staring as incredulously at Wakiza as if the warrior had, in the time of his absence, magically sprouted two more heads upon his shoulders. But Taima quickly snapped out of his stagnation, and aggressively pointed his blade directly at Wakiza.

"Traitor! I knew you would come here. To turn on your

own people and join our most hated enemies!”

“I have done no such thing, my chief. Look before you! This is the head of Kajika, the Beast that caused all this fighting.”

Wakiza held his breath, waiting for a reply. Finally, Etu took a step forward, gently placing his hand on Akano’s shoulder.

“Shunned warrior,” Aiyana’s father spoke softly, “this war was caused by your chief, Taima, blaming us for the disappearance of his people.”

Taima looked at Etu, clearly appalled by his words. “Don’t listen to him!” he cried. “Etu and his people started this war by praying to the Beast Who Walks Without Sound! They caused Kajika to devour our people, and I’ll be damned if my tribe has to share our land and resources with a bunch of murderers!”

“Taima, listen!” Etu, whose name meant ‘sun’, implored. “Our people have also gone missing! Kajika did not only attack and devour your tribe. Our people were victims of the Beast as well!”

Taima grew quiet—more quiet than Wakiza had ever seen in all his years living under the Thunder chief’s rule. Taima’s face looked pensive, pondering Chief Etu’s words as his eyes moved back and forth from the Sun tribe’s chief to the severed head of Kajika delicately dangling from Wakiza’s fingers. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, then suddenly opened them and looked directly into Wakiza’s eyes.

“Desperate warrior, you have slain the Beast who caused the trouble between the Thunder and Sun tribes. If this is indeed true, then there is no longer a reason for us to fight. You have unified our tribes.” He smiled at Wakiza. “And for that, I accept and encourage your return to the Thunder tribe. You will be welcomed with open arms, and

my offer for you to receive one of my daughters as a wife remains.”

Wakiza gazed back at Taima, his mouth agape, unsure of how to reply. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a slight movement around one of the trees behind Akano and Etu. Then, a flash of shiny black hair, and a set of beautiful, sparkling eyes peering back at him.

“Aiyana,” he whispered, his breath suddenly taken from him, his ankle no longer throbbing. Taima turned, noticed the woman, and his demeanor seemed to shift.

“I see,” he said quietly. “Then none of my daughters can possibly be the wife you seek.”

Etu turned and noticed his daughter standing behind him. He whirled back to glare at Wakiza, but instantly, he softened.

“So you’re the reason my daughter refuses to take a husband from our tribe,” he chuckled. “I’ve been trying to arrange a match with our best warriors for years. But she always found a reason to disapprove of them.”

“Father, this is the warrior who spared my life,” Akano spoke up, looking solemnly at Wakiza. “Now I know why.”

From the ranks of the Thunder tribe’s warriors, Siwili appeared and rushed to his son’s side. He stood behind him and placed his hand on Wakiza’s shoulder. “My son,” Siwili said. “I am so relieved to see you. But what made you come here?”

Wakiza said nothing, but turned to smile at his father, then glanced over where he assumed Aiyana stood, watching them.

Aiyana stepped out from behind the tree, then approached her father and brother. “Please forgive me,” she spoke tenderly, “for I cannot help whom it is I truly love.” She embraced her family, then turned to Wakiza, gently taking Kajika’s head from him, dropping it upon the

ground, and slipping her soft, tiny hand into his.

Tears filled Etu's eyes, and he walked over to the two. "O desperate warrior," he said softly, "I cannot think of a better match for my precious Aiyana. Will you take her as a wife, and unite the Sun and Thunder tribe for all eternity?"

Wakiza beamed, his face flushing a bright red as he swung his arm around his bride and drew her in for a passionate kiss. "Nothing on this earth would make me happier," he declared, amid whoops and cheers from the members of both tribes who had gathered around them.

Taima and Etu embraced, and from that day forward, the Thunder and Sun tribe forever lived in peace, sharing the land and resources bestowed upon them from the Earth, and each and every day expressing their gratitude to the brave man who unified their people.

And, with the everlasting love of Aiyana, the brave warrior Wakiza was no longer desperate.

BALL GOWNS & BLOOD STAINS | Dorothy Dreyer

I slowly unwrap the bandage from around my ribs. The skin underneath is dark purple and extremely sore. Crap. Not that I'm not used to this. My twin brother Jordan always goes for my ribs when we fight. But I'm kind of getting sick of my skin being purple. It means I can't wear the more interesting outfits in my closet. I cringe as I apply a new bandage, but then I smirk remembering that I got him back pretty good; I broke his arm in two places. His good arm too. And the scream he let out was like music to my ears. But we heal pretty fast, my brother and I. About three times faster than humans. Just a small plus from being Devil spawn.

And I mean that literally. Our father is Lucifer.

Other than our demonic powers and our devilish skill at manipulating people, we suffer some of the same problems other kids our age do. Well, one in particular anyway: pressure from parents to follow in their footsteps. Good old—or should I say “bad” old—Dad is preparing us each to take over one of the circles of Hell. Home sweet home. All we have to do is build ourselves an army of the damned. And what better place to collect damned souls than high school.

About a week ago, we moved to a new town so we could attend another school. We've simply killed off too

many in one place, and it was time for new hunting grounds. If more humans would have died in our old place, it would have called the attention of Angels. And we can't have that.

"Ready, sis?"

I turn to glare at Jordan, who's propped up against my door frame, his hair a perfect combination of male model and dangerous rebel. "I would have been ready twenty minutes ago if I hadn't been wrapping half my body up, thank you very much."

"Just get Dad to fix it, Jessie." He's not even looking at me. He's adjusting the clasp on his shiny watch. Or maybe he's trying to catch his reflection in the watch's face so he can admire himself. "He can have you as good as new in no time. Look, my arm's fine. Thank *you* very much."

I look away from him before I wrinkle my nose. Dad could fix my ribs, no doubt, but I'd rather not go through the burning pain and agony that comes with demonic healing. That torture is much worse than the dull ache of a couple broken ribs. And anyway, I'll be healed by tomorrow, day after tomorrow at the latest.

"Let's just get to school. I want to finish assessing my future victims." I throw the bandage tape on my nightstand and follow him out to the car.

It's a shiny, convertible, of course. People who make deals with the Devil usually get gorgeous houses, the sleekest cars, willing and able people to serve them. So it goes without saying that the Devil himself—and his spawn—would have the best, most expensive, most luxurious houses and cars. Call me a snob, but this is a definite plus for me.

"Have you picked any yet?" Jordan asks as he breaks every speed limit on the way to school. "Victims?"

“A few, yeah.” I don’t want to tell him who, though. Because, although it’s our mission to build our army, to my twin brother, Jordan, it’s more like a competition. Whoever collects more damned wins. The grand prize? Ruling over a better circle of Hell than the lesser sibling. And Jordan doesn’t care if I’m his twin sister. He’s determined to beat me at this and take over a choice circle of Hell, no matter who tries to stand in his way. Talk about fraternal damnation.

“What about you?” I take out my phone and scroll through social media—yet another way of evaluating our classmates. Talk about no shame; I’ve already picked out a few damned purely based on their Instagram feeds.

“What do you think?” He smirks and cocks an eyebrow, barely glancing my way.

I’m about to scoff when the car comes to a jolting stop. My phone flies out of my hands and lands somewhere near my feet. When I look up, a train rockets past us, inches away from the hood of the car. My hair flies around my face as the train kicks up wind.

I glare at Jordan, knowing he stopped short on purpose, and his smirk confirms it.

“You’re such an ass,” I say.

“Aw, sis,” he says with mock appreciation. “Dad will be so proud to know I’m following in his footsteps.”

“Shut up.”

The last car of the monstrosity of a train finally bustles past us, and Jordan’s foot lands hard on the gas pedal, barely giving time for the crossing gate to lift before we tear down the street toward school.

* * *

The car screeches as we hug a curb, onlookers be

damned, and the next thing I know, we're swerving into a spot in the school parking lot.

I simply roll my eyes and sigh, telling myself to stop obsessing about how obnoxious my brother is and get working on my army. My boots crunch down on the asphalt as I step from the car, and I adjust my short skirt over my thin, black leggings. Stupid dress code. I could have definitely had done without the leggings. But I can't collect damned if I'm expelled from school.

"Later, loser." Jordan aims his fingers at me like guns as he skips off. Locked and loaded, I guess he means. I notice a few girls stop and stare as he passes. This pisses me off because I know he's used his looks to lure in his army recruits, and he wouldn't think twice about doing it again.

The students here seem like every other student in every other high school we've been to so far. Jordan goes right for the crowd of not-so-popular girls. His good looks work like a charm on them. His reasoning for this method of operation is that no one will really notice, or care, if they go missing. Or at least, once they do, we'll be long gone. I guess I adopted his theory. That's why I usually go for the skaters.

But first I do something totally unlike me: I head for my first class of the day. This isn't because I love biology or anything. It's because of Paige. Something about her draws my demonic side. Even with only being here a week, I know her type. She pretends to be all put together, but secretly she's a wreck. She's sure to have sinful vices she hides from the rest of the world.

I sit at my desk near the back of the class, and my eyes lock on her. She only glances at me for a second before tossing her auburn locks over her shoulder and giggling with her friends. Probably about my hair or my

outfit or the fact that my lipstick is way too dark. Her friends try to be sneaky as they look my way. They're terrible at being subtle, but I don't even care. It's Paige that matters. She has officially won top billing on my list of the damned. Taking her friends down with her will simply be a bonus.

I spend the lesson trying to read her vibe. All humans give off vibes, the energy of their soul, and I'm usually good at determining just how bad they are and if they're bad enough for Hell. Paige's vibes tell me she is. I don't really care about what it is she does that makes her damned; all I care about is building my army.

As soon as class ends she scuttles off, and I take my time gathering my books. I'm not one to rush into a killing spree. I make a plan. I figure out the best ways to take out my victims. Dad says it's a wise thing to do, since we need to operate under Angel radar.

In the hall, Jordan's got his arm draped around one of the girls on his list. She looks ecstatic to be walking with him. If only she knew how his leading her into temptation will be the death of her. He catches my eye, then elbows me hard as he passes. All my books scatter to the floor. His arm candy giggles at me over her shoulder.

I make a note to stab my dear brother in his leg, later while he's sleeping.

My skirt is kind of short, and my ribs are still pretty sore, so it's difficult to pick up all my books in a swift manner. But I try my best.

"Here let me help you."

I look up at the guy who now crouches down on bended knee and hands me a couple of my wayward books. I recognize the guy. His name is Eli. A picture of perfection with his golden halo of hair and sky-blue eyes. I don't know that much about him, but he's probably the captain of some school team, if not all of them.

“Thanks.” I give him a small smile and try to read his vibe as we stand. I don’t sense any evil in him just yet, but that doesn’t mean he can’t be made to join the dark side, so to speak.

“Jessie, right?”

This is where I try to be coy and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yeah. It’s short for Jezebel. My parents are a bit on the eccentric side.” If he only knew.

“Jezebel. That’s nice. I like it.” He flashes me his million dollar smile, the one his parents probably paid a fortune for, and nods goodbye as he leaves me in the hall.

He likes my name? That’s weird. No one ever likes it. They say they do, but as soon as they say it, I feel the vibe from their lie electrify the air around them.

I stare absently down the hall, the ache in my ribs a dull memory. Eli’s not there anymore, but it isn’t until the bell rings for class that I’m able to tear my eyes away from where he turned down the corridor.

* * *

One month into the school year and it’s already time for the homecoming dance. Jordan’s been in an upbeat mood all week. I know why: this is usually where Jordan goes in for the kill. Literally. It seems he’s got a fetish for killing girls all made up pretty in fancy dresses. Ball gowns and blood stains. How poetic.

I’m going to the dance for the same reason. Not that I have a bloody gown fetish like Jordan or anything—and not that I have a date, because I don’t—but homecoming feels like the perfect opportunity to take down Paige. And maybe a few of her friends.

I feel the pressure because a kid went missing a couple days ago and Jordan claims it was his first kill at

the school. He couldn't provide any evidence, though, so I say he's bluffing.

As I slip on my black dress and check that my eyebrows are properly filled in, a knock at my bedroom door forces me to turn.

"Dad!" I feel my face light up. He looks like any old father, back from a business trip, standing in my doorway wearing a three-piece suit. He's been gone for a few weeks taking caring of who-the-Hell-knows—and I mean that literally. I'm excited to see him, but I don't run up and give him a hug or anything. Demons don't hug. Not without an ulterior motive.

"Great dress for hunting the damned," he says, the corner of his mouth turned up mischievously. "Got a few targets in mind?"

I playfully bat my lashes. "What self-respecting daughter of the Devil himself would I be if I didn't?"

"That's my girl. Need a ride?"

"No. Jordan's driving me."

Dad's brow lowers, but he's still smirking. "I think you better double check those plans. The car's gone, and Jordan's not in the house."

My jaw drops and I mutter a curse, sweeping up my clutch purse. "Bastard."

Dad snickers, and I scowl.

"You still offering a ride?"

"Sure, come on."

Fuming the whole way there, I'm finally relieved when we pull into the school parking lot and not faced with a scenario of screaming teenagers fleeing the scene. I guess no one's died yet. At least, not that anyone has noticed.

"Thanks, Dad." I practically jump from the car and stomp toward the school. So typical of Jordan to want to get a head start.

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” Dad calls from the car as he peels away.

I throw open the gym door and am immediately surrounded by a barrage of streamers and pastel colored balloons. The lighting is dim, but when I focus, I spot him. Jordan’s surrounded by his clan of needy girls, one on each arm and two waiting for their turn for his attention. When he spots me, I narrow my eyes at him, jaw clenched. He simply laughs and shakes his head. I grind my teeth as I plot out ways to torture him.

“I didn’t think dances were your kind of thing.”

I turn to the source of the voice. It’s Eli, who I now notice is a head and a half taller than me. Was he this tall the last time I saw him? Maybe the artificial ingredients and chemical additives humans put in their foods have caused him to have some kind of spontaneous growth spurt. He smirks at me as he stands with his hands shoved into the pockets of his black dress pants.

I clear my throat and put on my best bad-girl grin. “You’re right. I’m just here for the spiked punch.”

He leans closer to me, his mouth mere inches from my ear. “Me too.”

I can’t stop my lips from curling into a wide smile.

“Where’s your date?” he asks.

“I’m stag. Where’s yours?” Why do I hold my breath, waiting for him to answer?

“My date got sick.”

“That’s a shame. Anyone I know?” Why the Hell am I asking him this? It’s none of my business and I shouldn’t care. Unless she’s full of sin and on her death bed.

His right brow rises slightly. “April McCormick. You know her?”

I search my memory, but I can’t place the girl. I shake my head. “No. So she’s your girlfriend?”

The corner of his mouth inches upward. "No. We're just close friends."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Does she know that? Or does she think you're destined to be a couple, and you're just sticking her in the friend zone?"

He tips his head back as he laughs, and his shoulders jerk a little. "No, really. We're just friends. She's into girls. And I'm here stag. Like you."

Behind him, a blur of auburn hair flits by. I crane my neck to see if it's Paige, but whoever it was is gone.

"Am I keeping you from something?"

I shift my attention back to Eli and fake a smile, shaking my head. "No. I just have to ... find the ladies' room." At least, I think that's the direction that blur headed. "Catch you later?"

"Sure." He looks a little disappointed, and part of me hesitates before I leave his side. But I have a job to do, and I'll be damned if Jordan usurps me.

As I walk to the restrooms, I pat my dress, feeling the knife that is strapped to my thigh. Adrenaline rushes through me. Maybe I could take out Paige *and* her lackeys right here and now, and get the one-up on my dear twin brother. That'd show him.

My jaw drops when I push the ladies' room door open. There must be at least a dozen girls in here. Maybe double that. I can't possibly take them all out. Not all at once. I've never attacked more than four at a time, and never that many while I was wearing such a tight dress. Biting the inside of my cheek to subdue a curse, I snake my way through the crowd and am lucky enough to find an empty stall. I shut the door and pound it with my fist. Now I'll have to think of another way to corner my target.

I wait a few minutes, and the room gets slightly quieter. I wonder how many girls have left. It takes all I can

muster to stop myself from stepping onto the toilet and looking over the stall door.

“God, I can’t wait for the after-party.” It’s Paige. I squat down a little and try to peek under the door to count feet. “Ricky says he’s got real music, not the lame crap they’re playing here.”

“I’m dying for a drink,” one of Paige’s friends says. “And I missed last year’s party, so I’m going to have to make up for it.”

The girls laugh. I realize I’ve been in here too long and should probably make an exit. I flush the toilet and force myself to act casual as I go to the sink to wash my hands. Paige catches my eye in the mirror’s reflection. I don’t look away, and neither does she. I know what she’s thinking. She’s wondering if I heard about the party. I’m wondering what her screams will sound like.

I saunter out to the main room and search for one of Jordan’s groupies. I need to find out more about the after-party, and I’m almost positive one of his girls knows all the details. My mouth breaks out into a devilish smile when I spot a groupie by the punch table.

Putting on my most convincing nice-girl face, I tap the girl—Carly, I suddenly remember—on the shoulder. “Carly! You look so gorgeous in that dress!”

The sugary-sweet tone of my voice makes my stomach churn, but I have to make her buy it.

“Oh. Really?” She smooths out the skirt of her dress, a huge smile plastered on her face. “Thank you. Wow, that’s nice of you to say.”

I inch in. “But you totally do. And believe me, Jordan notices. Don’t tell anyone, but he kind of likes you the best.”

Her eyes widen and she sets her punch down. “Seriously?”

I move in even closer and take her hand, as if I'm confiding in her the deepest of secrets. "Would I lie to you? He told me he wants to take you to the after-party."

I hold my breath, waiting for her response.

"No way! The after-party? At the abandoned warehouse?"

Score. "Yeah. He hasn't asked you yet?"

She looks like she's about to hyperventilate. "No. Not yet."

"Well, I'm sure he will. He talks about you all the time."

Her face is bright red, and she can't stop wringing her hands. "Maybe I should go find him."

"Yeah, maybe you should."

* * *

Finding the party is easier than I expected. Turns out there's only one abandoned warehouse in this little town. It's near the train tracks and bordered by woods that lead out to the river. How convenient. And a much easier place to dispose of some souls. With some effort, it could take weeks before their bodies are discovered. I could probably even take out more than just four in one night.

Loud music pumps through the warehouse, which is barely lit. Someone walks around handing out glow sticks, and almost everyone has a drink in their hand. The way most of the couples writhe up against each other to the music reminds me of the sinful souls that fill the circles of Hell. And they're about to be joined by a few more.

Just as the bass of a new song shakes the ground, I see my target. Paige presses her chest against the football player in front of her, his hands moving in seductive circles over her backside. They'll probably leave the dance floor

soon, in search of a private place to continue their dance. And that's when I'll swoop in and take them both. I move to a place where I can keep an eye on them without being too conspicuous.

That's when I get hit hard in the shoulder and almost trip to the floor.

"Keep your hands off my girl!" Some jerk—the one who pushed a guy into me—stands with clenched fists. Behind him cowers a wide-eyed girl, her eyes darting between the two figures of testosterone. I spot Jordan off to the side, smirking. No doubt, this is his doing.

"We were just talking, jackass."

"Oh, is that how you talk? With your tongue down someone's throat?"

"Why don't you back off, man."

"How 'bout I back my fist into your face?"

Jerk number one shoves him again. This time I dodge the collision. The crowd gathered around the two gets rowdy. People start yelling and pushing, and all the while Jordan smiles on the sidelines. He's projecting his demonic power to escalate the rage. This is why people say, "The Devil made me do it."

I guess you could say Hell breaks loose. Jordan smirks at me, and I respond with an eye roll. But not all is lost. I spot my target near the door. Her date has left her side, undoubtedly engaging in some fist swings. I keep my chin down and shove toward her. In the chaos, I grab Paige, pulling her outside and around the corner of the warehouse.

"Wh-What are you doing?" She squirms but can't break free from my grasp. Of course she can't; I'm much stronger than I look.

A train whistle blares nearby. My hand goes for the knife tucked into my garter belt, but just as my finger

touches the cold steel, Paige is swept away from me. I look to my side, and Jordan holds the wide-eyed Paige in a head lock. Quicker than I can think to react, Jordan snaps Paige's neck and lets her slump to the cold ground, all while sending me a devilish grin.

I growl at him.

The approaching train's lights illuminate his face. He's laughing. What a jerk.

I rush forward and shove him. "You ass! That was my kill."

His dark brows lower. "So?"

I reel my arm back and punch him in the jaw. His head snaps back, but then he faces me again. Solidly. With fire in his eyes.

I take a step back, but it's too late. He grabs my throat, lifts me off the ground, and snarls as he uses his demonic power to hurl me through the air. My arm and side hit metal when I land. Train tracks. Pure white light blinds me, and a train whistle blares in my ears.

I gasp, not knowing if I'm built to withstand the impact of a train, but even before I can scurry to my feet, I'm lifted off the tracks. Someone has scooped me up and is rushing me out of harm's way. It isn't until the whoosh of the train passes that I can move my hair out of my eyes and see who's holding me.

Eli.

He's panting, obviously shocked by what's just happened. Or what could have happened. He saved my life.

"Are you all right?"

"I ... " Instinctively, I search for my brother. But he's nowhere to be seen. My gut tells me he's already collecting more souls from the riot in the warehouse.

Eli sets me down and looks at me. "You're bleeding."

I feel the warm blood on my temple and reach to wipe it away. "It's nothing." Still, I wince when I touch the bump beneath the cut.

"Come on. I have a first aid kit in my car. Let's get you fixed up. I think the party's over anyway."

With his hand on the small of my back, he leads me to where all the cars are parked. How much did he see? He doesn't seem freaked out by the fact that Jordan threw me fifty feet through the air. I'm guessing he didn't see Jordan snap Paige's neck. There are screams and people fleeing the warehouse, but Eli probably assumes it's from the riot. Not from Jordan picking his army of the damned.

Eli pops the back of his Jeep open, and I sit on the bumper, fighting off the ache in my head. I glare at the warehouse, a little pissed that I didn't get a kill in. Dad's going to be disappointed. And I can already imagine the smug look on Jordan's face.

"Here, let's clean that blood away." Eli wipes at my temple with a cloth.

I don't know if he's looking for an explanation, but I feel the need to give him one. "I, uh, fell."

"Nasty cut. Maybe you should lay off the punch; it makes you clumsy."

I can't help but laugh. However, my laughter dies down when I hear the sirens. Usually, Jordan and I are long gone before the police or ambulances show up. We're normally really good at clearing out in time so that we're not connected with any deaths. And before any angels show up. But here I am, sitting on the rear bumper of a car, not five hundred feet from where the bloodshed took place. Of course, there's the chance that Jordan eliminated the damned souls and cleared them from the scene without anyone witnessing. I hate to admit it, but he's pretty good at that. Still, I don't want to take any chances.

“Maybe we should get out of here. You know, so we don’t get busted.” I tilt my head, wondering if the coy act would sway him.

“You need a ride?”

I nod, jumping off the car. He smirks, pushing the button on his fob. I climb into the passenger seat and swipe hair away from my forehead, wincing because I forgot I was injured there. As soon as we’re strapped in, Eli speeds away, over the train tracks and onto the main road.

“Where to?”

“Ash Road. Number six.”

He nods and takes the next left. We’re quiet for a while, then he switches the radio on. Ironically, *Highway to Hell* plays just as we pull onto my street. Eli stops the car in front of my house but doesn’t turn off the engine. I mean, why would he? It’s not like we were on a date or anything. It’s not like I expect him to walk me to my door. He just yanked me from a possible death a la speeding train, that’s all.

“Thanks,” I say as I open the passenger-side door.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m a fast healer.”

He laughs. He thinks I’m joking. “See you in school.”

“Yeah, see you.” Wow. When did I become so lame?

I force myself not to watch his car as he pulls away.

When I walk in the door, I hear humming. Jordan’s already home. He walks into the living room pulling on a sweat jacket. He’s already changed his clothes. How long has he been home?

He smirks at me. “What an invigorating night. That rush was just what I needed.”

I point to his neck. “You missed a spot.”

He checks his reflection in the mirror by the front door, smirking as he wipes the blood away.

I let myself fall on the couch and start taking off my shoes. "So how many?"

"Five. No witnesses. No trail. Perfection as usual."

"Congrats."

"How about you?"

I scowl and shake my head.

"Not even that guy who pulled you off the tracks? I thought for sure you would have stabbed him on the spot."

I train my eyes on the ground. I'm furious at Jordan, but I'm also confused. Why didn't I take Eli down? It didn't even cross my mind. I had the perfect opportunity. I had a weapon. The train rushing by would have provided cover. No one would have heard or seen the kill. So why didn't I do it?

"So, five to zero. Tough luck, kiddo. Better luck next time." With a devilish wink, Jordan saunters back to his room.

In my mind, I think up a hundred different ways to hurt him. But I'm too weighed down by depression and confusion. Wanting to forget the whole night, I click on the television and let myself get lost in a horror movie.

* * *

"How's your head?"

I look up from the lunch table to see Eli. His expression is a mix of concern and amusement. I guess it's because I blew him off this morning when he waved at me in the hall. I only did that because I can't seem to stop thinking about him, and that makes me apprehensive. What is it about this guy? I'm both freaked out and fascinated that he saved my life. Like I deserve to be saved or something.

"It's fine. Thanks."

He pulls out the chair next to me and slides into it. I can literally feel all eyes on me. Including Jordan's. I clench my fists and force myself to stay calm.

"Looks like it's already healed."

I fake a smile. "The wonders of makeup."

"Hmm." He looks around at the empty seats at my small table. "You always eat alone?"

Not today, apparently. "I haven't exactly made a lot of friends." And I don't intend to. I'm here for an army, not a bunch of clingy BFFs. And definitely not for a boyfriend.

"Well, the people in this town take a while to warm up to strangers. Hang in there."

I don't respond. It's because he's looking at me so intensely I don't know what to say. I never noticed before how his eyes sparkle when they catch the light, or the way his shirt tightens around his shoulders when he leans on the table.

"You hear about the missing students?" he asks.

I force my most sympathetic face. "Yeah, horrible news. I hope they find them."

"It would be a miracle if they found all five. Well, six, if you count the guy who went missing last week."

I take a bite from my sandwich, studying the way the soggy tomato clings to the lettuce. "Maybe they ran away." From my brother. Before he killed them.

His brows lower. "I guess it's possible."

"It happens, yeah."

He nods slowly, staying quiet for a moment. "You going to the game tonight?"

He must mean the football game. At first I think of telling him no, that I'm busy, just so he'll leave me alone. But then I remember my mission. There will be tons of easy pickings at the game. "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Cool. Maybe I'll see you." He stands, flashing me a

small smile, and walks out of the cafeteria.

I use my demonic powers to give everyone staring at me a quick headache. Nothing major; just enough to make them concentrate on something else.

The problem is I can't concentrate on anything else. For the rest of the day. When I get home from school I jam my earbuds in and try to let music drown out all thoughts. I fall asleep—and thankfully, I don't dream about Eli—and wake just in time to get ready for the game.

I'm surprised to find Jordan waiting for me in the living room. "Want a ride?"

"Are you serious? What's the catch?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "No catch. Just thought it would be fun."

I study him. Maybe he's giving me a chance to catch up, just so he can go ahead and pull some stunt to rocket him into the lead again. Whatever the reason, I can't pass up a ride to the game, so I follow him out to the car.

Jordan hums all the way to the football stadium, which aggravates me, but I'm too frustrated to tell him to shut up. I just know he's got something up his sleeve. His smirk tells me he's cooked something up and he can't wait to shove it in my face.

As we pull into the parking lot, I glare at him. "You're in a good mood."

He chuckles as we get out of the car. "Just feeling the rush. I, uh, added two to my tally after school today."

I grind my teeth together. That certainly explains his mood. "Don't get sloppy, Jordan. You'll set off the angel alarms."

"I never get sloppy, Jessie." He laughs under his breath as he saunters ahead of me to the stadium. Suddenly, two girls race out to him, lashes batting and outfits tight. Two, not four, like before. I wonder if the

missing girls are part of his tally.

Instead of following Jordan to the bleachers, I stand near the entrance, close enough to see the field and the cheerleaders, but not where anyone can really see me. The team is huddled behind a huge banner, ready to burst through and get the crowd rowdy.

The PA system kicks to life, the feedback making me wince. I almost ignore the speech, until the announcer changes his tone.

“Before we bring out the team, the staff and student council wish to have a moment of silence for the missing Whitfield High students. We pray that they will soon be found and returned safely to their families.”

The crowd hushes. Looking around at all the bowed heads and frowns makes my stomach churn. One familiar face stands out as I peruse the bleachers. Eli. He doesn't see me. When he lifts his head, I almost wave at him. But then something clicks into place. He's a distraction. He's keeping me from my mission. It's almost as if Jordan has deliberately set it up so I fail and he succeeds. That would be so his style. The jerk.

I turn away from the game, away from Eli, away from the entire school, and stomp toward the road. I'm not going to let my jerk of a brother get the upper hand.

* * *

Jordan cocks a brow at me as he comes to the breakfast table. “You disappeared last night, sis. Did you come home to sulk?”

“No, I had things to do, so I did them.”

“Do tell.”

The front door opens, interrupting our conversation. It's Dad. Perfect timing; I want him to hear what I have to

say too.

“Hey, Dad,” Jordan calls out, grabbing a coffee cup from the cupboard. “Didn’t expect you so early.

Dad, in his suit and tie and perfectly shined shoes, takes the coffee cup from Jordan and slides it under the dispenser of the espresso machine. “Finished a job early. Came to see if my spawn have made any progress. The circles of Hell aren’t going to rule themselves, you know.”

Jordan looks smug. I continue to eat my eggs, letting him speak first.

“I’m at eight,” he says, adjusting the buttons of his shirt cuff. “Nice, clean, kills. Well, except for the car crash. But all in all, pretty good for a week’s work.”

Dad nods at him. “Bravo. What about you, Jezebel?”

Jordan smirks and shakes his head, no doubt ready to taunt me. He turns away and grabs another coffee cup.

I simply smile at Dad. “Ten.”

Jordan drops the cup, and it smashes to pieces on the ground. “Ten? But—How? When?” He knows I’m not lying. He’d be able to sense a lie with his powers.

I dab at my mouth with a napkin and stand to bring my plate to the sink. “I told you I had things to do. The teenagers were too easy, and you seemed to have that covered anyway. I needed a challenge. So I dolled myself up and headed out the Gear Shift—it’s a biker bar out on Route Nine. It was pretty easy to lure a couple guys out of the bar. But two turned into ten. I do believe that is an all-time personal record. A couple of slashed throats, snapped necks, fatal stabs to the chest. When I left, it looked like a gang fight gone terribly wrong.”

“Impressive,” Dad says, bowing his head to me.

“Thanks.” I give Jordan the same smug look he gave me the day before. “I’m going to go take a shower now. Oh, and, brother dear, you might want to close your mouth;

you'll attract flies."

* * *

The doorbell rings just as I add ground beef to the sizzling pan. At first I ignore it and continue cooking, but when the bell rings a third time, I grumble and turn the burner on low. If it's a solicitor, he's in for a Hell of a sales visit.

Peeking out the front window, I spot Eli. What's he doing here? Doesn't he have anywhere interesting to be on a Saturday evening? I contemplate not answering, but my curiosity gets the best of me and I open the door. A part of me is glad Dad and Jordan aren't here.

A ghost of an expression passes over his face. I'd say it was relief, though I don't understand the grounds. I clear my throat and try to act like his unexpected visit doesn't faze me. "Hey, Eli. What's up?"

"You disappeared from the game before I got a chance to talk to you. I guess I was a bit worried, what with all the missing students. I swear I'm not stalking you. I was just worried. And since I don't have your number, I thought I'd stop by."

Oh. My chest feels funny. I never had someone worry about me. It makes me feel weird. Not a bad weird, just ... different. "I'm fine."

"I see that." His smile vanishes, replaced by a frown. "Is something burning?"

Besides my cheeks? "Oh, I'm cooking."

He doesn't wait for an invite, but walks in after me and into the kitchen. "Didn't know you were into cooking."

I stir the sizzling meat, turning the stove back up. "It's not like it's a hobby or anything. I'm just comfortable around a stove. Or a grill." Or, you know, the blazing fires

of Hell.

"A grill, huh? Maybe we should throw a little barbeque together sometime. I make a pretty mean burger."

I bite back the huge smile that fights to come out.

"That would be fun."

The click of the front door extinguishes my smile.

"Something smells good." Jordan raises a brow at me as he enters the kitchen. "I didn't know we had company."

I cast a quick look at Eli, then concentrate on the frying pan.

"Jordan this is Eli. Eli, this is my twin brother Jordan."

"I didn't know you were twins. That's cool."

Jordan and I exchange a look.

Eli lets out the tiniest of laughs. "It's not cool?"

I blink stoically at my brother. "Oh, sure. It's the best."

"So, Eli," Jordan says, scratching his brow, "what brings you over?"

I force myself not to look at Eli. Instead, I add garlic powder to the meat.

"I just wanted to stop in and say hi to Jessie."

"How sweet." Jordan's voice is laced with acid. "Does anyone know you're here?"

What the Hell? Does my brother not think that's a strange question to ask? I glare at him.

"Um, what?" Eli asks.

Jordan laughs. The sound of it fills my mouth with the taste of bile. "What I mean is are you expected anywhere, or are you staying for dinner?"

Jordan catches my eye and subtly gestures to the block of razor-sharp knives on the counter next to me. I clench my jaw but don't move.

"Oh," Eli says. "I'd have to check to see if my mom has anything planned."

Jordan rolls his eyes at me and walks over to the

knives. The steel blade makes a sliding *ching* noise as Jordan pulls one knife out of the block. He hands it to me, the corner of his mouth turned up. "You'll need this, won't you?"

My hand grazes the handle of the knife. I take it from him and grind my teeth. He snickers and takes a step back. I hold the knife pointing up at chest level and glance at Eli. Then I turn toward the cutting board and start cutting up a tomato. What's wrong with me?

"He, uh, can't stay." My mind is racing for an excuse, but I know it wouldn't do any good to lie. Jordan would sense it. "It's family night, remember." I stare him down and dare him to contradict me.

Jordan narrows his eyes at me but keeps the smile on his face. "Right. Family night. I forgot." His gaze shifts to Eli. He clicks his tongue. "It's a damned shame, isn't it, Eli?"

A wrinkle appears between Eli's brows. "It's fine. Another time."

"You hear that, sis? Another time." Jordan shakes his head at me as he leaves the kitchen.

I set the knife down when I finish cutting the tomato and turn to give Eli the fakest smiles I can conjure. "It was nice of you to check on me, Eli, but my dad should be home soon, and he's not a big fan of me letting anyone he doesn't know into the house. So, um, not that I'm kicking you out or anything, but ..."

Eli laughs. "No problem. I understand."

"Yeah?"

"Of course. I'll see you in school on Monday."

I walk with him toward the front door, my heart feeling a thousand times lighter than it did a moment ago. "Yeah, see you."

When I shut the door behind Eli, I find Jordan

standing in the middle of the living room, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Well, well. Someone’s got a little crush.”

“Shut up, Jordan.”

“It’s so obvious, sis. Plus, it’s the only plausible explanation for what just happened in there.”

I scoff and stomp into the kitchen. He follows.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He grabs my wrist and turns me to face him. “Then why can’t you collect him as one of your damned? It would be so easy to do.”

I yank free from him. “Don’t tell me whom I should collect. I decide whom to damn for my army. You worry about your own damned nation.”

He pushes my back by my shoulders until my back smashes against the fridge. “You’d be wise not to forget what we’re doing here, Jezebel. This isn’t some game. Dad is looking for leaders. Royalty. Someone fit enough to rule over a circle of Hell. If you’re not fit enough to do that, he can just as easily get rid of you.”

I gasp as he releases me and backs away. My skin feels like it’s boiling, and my stomach is twisted in a million knots.

He scoffs. “You can forget family night. I’m not hungry.”

I wrap my arms around my stomach as he marches out and slams the front door behind him.

* * *

Dad and I eat alone, and I don’t mention Jordan’s absence or the visit from Eli. I’m totally conflicted by the whole ordeal, and all I want to do is get the kitchen cleared and lock myself in my room. I don’t even understand what

I'm feeling. I just want to go to bed and not think about it anymore tonight.

Music in my ears and my phone in my hands, I beg for my brain to go numb so I can get back on track. As I scroll, an image pops up that makes me stop. It's a group photo of some school club. I stop because Eli is in the picture, but I recognize a few of the others. Three of them are currently reported as missing, but I know they were killed by Jordan.

I stare at the picture realizing that Eli knew these kids. He interacted with them, probably on a daily basis. And now they're dead—or missing in Eli's eyes—and Eli doesn't know how to mourn. Now the fact that he came to check on me makes more sense. He doesn't want to lose anyone else.

My heart feels weird. There's a strange sharp pain in it, like ... like I actually care that he's sad about these people. Like I'm actually sad that he can't see them anymore. Like I'm unhappy that Jordan has made Eli sad by killing his friends.

For some reason, it makes me think about all the people I've killed. How all their friends must feel, and their families. The pain and suffering they are enduring.

I sit up to wipe something wet off my face and realize I'm crying.

What is this?

Do I actually feel bad for being responsible for all those deaths? What is happening to me?

I throw my phone on my bed and charge out of my room. I need to get out of here. I need to take a walk and clear my mind. I decide to go for a run. Maybe there's a lack of oxygen to my brain. Once I get outside and get my blood pumping, I'll be able to think more clearly.

My plans are thwarted, however, when I walk

downstairs and find Dad standing by the fireplace, talking to Jordan. Dad's sharpening his knife, leering at me.

Jordan told him about Eli, I'm sure of it.

"Ask her yourself," Jordan says.

I hold my breath until Dad speaks.

"So, Jessie, darling. What's the story with this kid from school?"

"There's no story."

"Jordan says you think you're in love with him and it's stopping you from doing your job."

I click my tongue. "No! It's not like that. I'm not in love. Come on. You know Jordan gets his kicks off of telling unfathomable tales."

Dad shakes his head slowly. "He's not lying. I'd be able to tell, remember."

I huff through my nose, clenching my teeth. I cross my hands over my chest. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Fine." Dad holds the knife up to the light, running a finger along the edge as if checking its sharpness. "I'm sure you'll prove it to me. Kill the boy."

I narrow my eyes. I still can't find it in me to do Eli any harm. I don't understand it, but I just can't do it. Still, Dad won't accept another answer, so I give it to him. I'll have to take the chance that he'll sense my lie as nervousness.

"I will."

* * *

My head is telling me to beat Jordan at his own game. If Jordan's so fond of ball gowns and blood stains, then that's exactly what I should shove in his face. Though my logical side has already come up with a plan to win Dad's approval, I can't help feeling like my heart isn't totally in it. Despite my confusion and lack of enthusiasm, I

force myself to listen to my logical side and carry out my task.

Luckily, our school is all about dances. In fact, even though the homecoming dance was just a few weeks ago, the Harvest Moon Ball is coming up next week. Talk about a cornucopia of ball gowns. And just so I can't back out of my promise to Dad, I walk up to Eli when I see him in the hall and ask him if he'd like to go with me to the dance. Though my gut tells me I've got this one in the bag, I still feel flushed and excited when he says yes.

I'm so confused right now. On the one hand, my plan is working. Eli and I will go to the dance, I'll take him out, just like Dad wants, and I'll gather a few more damned for my army before we leave this place and head to the next. On the other hand, I really do want to go to the dance with Eli. I want to dress up and spend time with him, laugh and dance and forget who I am, just for one night.

Or maybe ... maybe I won't kill him just yet. Isn't greed supposed to be an attribute of a demon? Can't I be greedy and spend time with him if I want?

Plus, the thought of slaughtering anyone at the moment is giving me a sick feeling. I can't explain it. Ultimately, it's not what I want to do anymore. So why should I have to?

As the week goes by, Eli and I exchange small talk in the halls and occasionally at lunch, but we don't really bring up the dance other than arranging what time he'll pick me up. I keep wondering if Eli will like the way I look in my dress. Part of me is telling me I should be planning my attack, selecting the perfect method for killing my victims and figuring out what to do with the bodies afterward. Instead, I'm actually enjoying seeing Eli every day.

I have a pinch of fear in the back of my mind that Jordan will suddenly murder him unexpectedly—though I

know he probably won't. He'd get more of a kick out of seeing me suffer by killing him myself. So when I do see Eli, alive and thriving, walking up to me in the halls or approaching my table at lunch, I'm filled with relief. With joy. With peace.

One day before the dance, the realization of what I'm supposed to do hits me. My stomach is so cramped I can hardly walk straight. I fight off the pain, telling myself I should just get over it, do my job—my job that will last an eternity—and forget any feelings I think I might have for Eli. He's just a human boy, after all. I'd be stupid to think I could really have any kind of future with him. I'm just blinded by hormones and confused by his flattery. It's an illusion. I know that. I should block out the emotions and do what I have to do.

Relieved that the school day has ended, I freeze in the hall on the way to my locker. The principal, the superintendent, and my Chemistry teacher stand in front of my open locker and watch me approach. Their faces are drawn with frowns and scowls. What are they doing? Why are they looking at me like that? And why is my locker open?

"Jezebel, is this your locker?" The principal rests his hands on his hips. He knows it's my locker, I can tell. So I just nod. My Chemistry teacher hands him a small, brown paper bag and pats him on the back. He lets out a heavy sigh. "Please follow me to my office."

I clench my books to my chest and do as he says. I want to use my powers. I should give him a sudden headache, make him feel sick so he has to leave, or something. But I can't do anything. I freeze.

When he closes the door of his office and takes a seat at his desk, I ask, "What's this about?"

"We received an anonymous tip about the drugs

you've got in your locker."

My eyes widen. "Drugs? No, I don't do drugs."

He drops the brown paper bag onto his desk. "Sorry, but we found them. Maybe you're not doing them yourself, but you might be selling. Either way, I have no choice but to suspend you from school."

Normally, this wouldn't bother me. But the Harvest Moon Ball is tomorrow. And if I'm suspended from school, I can't go to the dance.

"Mr. Harveston, you've got to believe me; that's not mine. I've been set up."

"Jezebel, you have to understand the situation I'm in. I have to set examples for the student body. If drugs are found in someone's locker, then that person needs to be suspended. I can't just let someone off the hook because they tell me the drugs aren't theirs or that someone else put them there."

He's looking at me like he really believes they're my drugs. I guess my black clothes, dark lipstick, and boots don't help my defense. To him, it makes sense. There's no use even debating with this guy.

As I gather my things from my locker, I spot Jordan down the hall, standing by the door to the teacher's lounge. He smirks at me and shakes his head. I should have known he set me up. What the Hell? He must have heard I asked Eli to the dance. He's so determined to derail any plan I make just so he can stay ahead. What a jackass. My jaw set, I slam my locker door and stomp past him and out of the school.

* * *

From the living room window, I watch Jordan, in his tuxedo, load up cans of gasoline into the back of his car.

So he's going to burn the dance down. Typical. But his death count will escalate immensely. And make my mere kill of ten look bad.

How pathetic of me to just sit at home, moping. But a part of me is relieved. I don't know if I can bring myself to kill Eli. I don't know what it is about him, but I can't find it in me to harm him in any way. Or anyone, for that matter. Whatever has happened to me, it has sucked away all my willpower to kill.

The more I think about it, I'm not really into it any of it anymore. What am I even doing? What is life? What is Hell? What does it matter? I'm tired of it all.

If I can survive tonight and we don't have to move, maybe I'll still have a chance with Eli. Maybe I can leave Dad and Jordan, run away, and take Eli with me.

I just hope he didn't find another date to the dance; if Jordan is torching the school, I don't want Eli to be there. I'm tempted to text him, but I don't know what I would say. It was hard enough finding the words to break off our date. And even then, I hung up on him before the conversation got too involved.

I try to distract myself by catching up with the latest vampire show on television, but my mind still drifts back to the dance. Jordan is probably preparing to off the entire cheerleading team as we speak. Getting a thrill of hearing them scream before he douses the building in gasoline.

What am I doing? I'm not going to just wait here until I hear the sirens of fire trucks. Jordan thought he was being smart by blocking me off from any kills, but who's to say I can't do the same to him? Who's going to stop me from going to the dance and stopping Jordan's attack? I'm just about to grab my shoes when I hear the doorbell ring.

My hand flies to my mouth when I open the door to Eli.

“Hey,” he says, standing with his hands in his pockets on the front porch.

“I ... didn’t expect to see you.”

“Well, you didn’t tell me a lot about what’s going on last time we spoke. I figured this approach usually works best when I want to find something out.”

I look at the clock. It’s only been an hour. I’m sure Jordan will take his time to carry out his plan. Jordan’s the type to enjoy every second of it. Maybe I could talk to Eli for a minute or two. I have missed him.

I give him a sideways smile. “Want to come in?”

“Sure.”

I run my fingers through my hair as he joins me on the couch in the living room. “You’re probably wondering about the suspension.”

“It did cross my mind, yeah. So ... drugs?”

I shake my head. “It was a setup, believe me.”

He studies my face. “I believe you. Do you know who it was?”

My gaze hits the floor. “I have an idea, but no proof. Not much I can do about it now though.”

“What did your dad say about it?”

I take a deep breath and rub my hands down the thighs of my jeans. “You know how parents get.” He can take that however he wants. I can’t tell him that Dad actually laughed and high-fived Jordan.

“I could care less about missing school. I just really, uh, wanted to go to the dance tonight.”

“It’s a shame. I would have loved to see you in your dress.”

I avert my eyes. I never knew flattery would make me feel this way. If Dad was here, he would tell me to kill him now. It would be the perfect opportunity. But I just want to talk and laugh some more.

“I have it upstairs. I could ... put it on.”

His smile brightens the room.

“I’ll be right back.” I go upstairs and dig my dress out of the closet, then slide into it in six seconds flat. I quickly dab on a little lipstick and mascara. Telling myself to calm down, I sweep my hair up and clip shiny pins into it. The only thing missing are my shoes, but Hell, there’s no such thing as perfection.

As I descend the stairs, I hold my breath. I’m anxious of what Eli will think.

At the bottom of the stairs, I do a slow twirl for him. The red satin shimmers and sways, catching the light as it hugs me in all the right places. The smile on his face tells me he likes it.

The next thing I know, Eli takes out his phone and selects a song to play. I bite my lip as he holds a hand out to me. I place my hand in his, warmed by his touch, and we dance.

“This is even better than being at the dance,” I whisper.

He pushes a stray strand of hair away from my cheek. “Yes, it is.”

Our eyes lock, and suddenly we’re not dancing anymore. The room disappears as he tilts his head toward me, tipping my chin up with his finger until our lips touch. I thought the fires of Hell were hot, but they’re nothing compared to this kiss. The way his mouth fits with mine, the way his hands slide down to my hips and pull me closer, I’m surprised our clothes haven’t burned off our bodies from the intensity of heat.

How could I ever think of harming him? All I want to do is hold him forever and keep him safe.

The front door suddenly bursts open, and I take a step back, gasping when Jordan enters the room. He’s

covered in soot, and there's a small gash over his eye. He's practically snarling at me.

"I think you misunderstood, sis. You're supposed to kill him, not kiss him. Maybe you just need someone to show you how it's done."

* * *

Without another word, Jordan rushes forward and throws a hard punch to Eli's jaw. Eli, startled, barrels back into the coffee table and tumbles to the floor. But surprisingly, he's back on his feet before Jordan can deliver a kick to his stomach.

"Take it easy, man." Eli holds his hands out in front of him, backing away from my brother. "We don't have to do this."

"Oh, but you're wrong." Jordan charges him again.

Eli shifts to the left and manages to catch Jordan's arm, twisting and pushing until they both crash into the couch, sending it sliding back on the floor. Eli punches Jordan in the stomach, then gets to his feet. Jordan glares at Eli, then raises his hand in the air, using his demonic powers to send Eli soaring backward. Eli hits the sliding glass door at the rear of the house. The glass cracks. Jordan darts toward him and delivers a flying kick to Eli's ribcage. The glass shatters, shards scattering, and Eli falls through to the back patio.

Jordan pounces and repeatedly punches Eli in the face. I'm screaming at the top of my lungs for him to stop. Then, to my relief, Eli hurls Jordan off of him using his feet, so that Jordan tumbles off of him over Eli's head. They both get to their feet in the back yard.

Jordan raises his hand again, about to use his powers once again, when I rush toward him. I jump on

Jordan's back and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him away from Eli. Jordan hunches over swiftly, thrusting forward so that I lose my balance and am flung over his shoulder. I scrabble to my feet and charge him again.

Jordan pushes me back by my shoulders. I grab his wrist and throw a punch, but only scrape his chin. Jordan turns, escaping my grasp, then his leg comes up and the heel of his foot swings around, striking me forcefully in the ribs. I hear a crack. The air rushes from my lungs as I crash to the hard ground. I can barely move. Everything in my vision has doubled.

My eyes finally focus when I hear Eli grunt. Jordan is holding him by his shirt and punching him in the jaw. I try to crawl forward, but every inch I move aches.

A pair of shoes move by my head. I look up to see Dad, arms by his side and fists clenched.

"Dad." The word is barely audible. No one hears me.

Dad only glances at me for a second before landing his gaze on Jordan. "Finish him."

I try to make a sound, to tell him to stop, but I don't have any air in my lungs. Jordan smirks at me.

"My pleasure." Without a second's hesitation, Jordan pulls his knife out of his back pocket, flips it open, and thrusts it into Eli's side. He holds it there for a moment, teeth bared and eyes trained on Eli's, before he twists it and yanks it out with brute force.

Oh, God!

A muffled moan escapes his lips, then he hunches over and drops like an anchor to the ground. Jordan, breathing hard, approaches me, his knife shimmering with Eli's blood. I think he means to kick my face in.

"Oh, sis. You'll never learn, will you? You can't beat me."

I try to catch my breath, to move, to feel anything, but

I can't. I cringe, waiting for Jordan's assault, when I suddenly hear a thump behind him. What was that?

Over his shoulder, a spark of light illuminates, growing brighter by the second. A hand appears on his shoulder. Jordan is shocked. As am I. Dad is sprawled out on the ground, completely still. And Eli is glowing.

Eli looks Jordan in the face, eyebrow cocked, and shakes his head. With one swift move, Eli thrusts Jordan into the air. Jordan, shrieking into the night, flies with lightning speed into the side of the house, cracking the siding on the second story. He plummets down and crashes into the grill before crumpling to the ground.

I look up at Eli.

"What—?"

He holds a hand out to me. "Jessie. You don't belong here. Come with me."

My eyes go to his chest, to the spot where Jordan's knife pierced him. But there's nothing there. He's completely unharmed.

"Eli?"

"It's Elijah, actually."

Elijah. The name of an angel. Suddenly the pieces all come together.

"All you have to do is take my hand." Even his movements seem surreal. Like he's being moved by the shear force of grace. "You can leave them behind. You can leave it all behind. Be with me instead."

I search his eyes, unable to understand. "What's this all about?"

"Salvation."

My throat goes dry. "Heaven?"

He grins. "Not yet. First, we get away from here." He signals to my father. "Away from them. Try life without killing for a change."

I swallow. "And then?"

"And then we'll see. But you have to decide now."

I take one last look at my brother. His chest rises and falls, but otherwise he doesn't move. Yet. My father stirs, and my breath hitches. I have to decide fast.

I turn back to face Eli ... Elijah. There's something in his face that makes me want to trust him. That makes me want to go with him. There's nothing else I want. No ruling over a circle of Hell. No nation of damned to call my own. No more hurting others. Just him. And peace.

I place my hand in his. He smiles, and a warmth travels from his touch, coursing through my body. I feel different. Something has changed. I feel ... saved.

Elijah pulls me to stand. No, not to stand; to soar. He wraps me in his arms and we fly, breaking through the clouds. And everything around me fades into a bright, white light.

A TURN ON THE ICE | Victoria Gilbert

A missing chapter from [CROWN OF ICE](#), told from Kai's perspective

* * *

No one understands my need for solitude.

Sitting at the edge of a frozen lake, I slouch down on the rough wooden bench and silently curse the shrieks rising from a cluster of skaters. The noise drifts over me, muffling my thoughts like a heavy fall of snow. I lift my head, tearing my gaze from the figures I've scratched onto a page of my leather-covered notebook. So close to solving this equation, so close—yet I must lay down my pencil.

"Kai, you promised." Franka Lund, one of Gerda's younger sisters, skates toward me, halting her glide by grabbing my knees. She leans forward until her golden braid tickles my bare right hand. Gerda will fuss at me for not wearing my glove, but it's impossible to write equations with my hand encased in wool.

I flick the braid away as if it were a horsefly. "Give me a minute."

"Hey." Franka slides back and fixes me with her bright blue stare. She narrows her eyes as her lower lip rolls into

a pout. Franka is beautiful, and knows it. She and her twin, Nanett, only twelve, already incite young men to fight for a chance to partner them at village dances.

Personally, having lived next to the Lunds for many years, I'd rather wrestle a polar bear than spend much time with the twins. Yes, they're lovely to look at, but if I want to admire beauty I'll take a walk in the high meadows in the spring. At least the wildflowers don't demand constant attention.

I close my notebook with a sigh. "I know I promised. Just let me lace my skates."

"You should've already done that. The ice is getting crowded now. We won't have room to really spin." Nanett steps forward. The mirror image of her sister, her glare matches Franka's exactly.

I consider for a moment the probability of having twins. *There must be an equation for that ...*

My reverie is broken by Nanett's whining. "Could've been ready to go as soon as we got here, instead of just sitting there, scribbling those numbers. What good is that, anyway?"

Years of practice have taught me to ignore such questions. "It won't take long. Besides, Gerda isn't here yet." Sliding my notebook and pencil into the inside pocket of my felted wool coat, I survey the two bright faces before me. If I consider them dispassionately, I can admire their lovely features, but that only goes so far. I'd rather bask in the warmth of Gerda's honest smile than dance attendance on the twins.

I chide myself for my unkind thoughts as I tighten my skates. Franka and Nanett are young, perhaps they'll grow out of their vanity. Anyway, they're no worse than most people in our village, old or young. The truth is, I prefer struggling over equations to hunting or fishing, or even

dancing. No wonder most girls think I'm boring as old shoes. I can't expect my scholarly pursuits to attract many village girls, though Gerda doesn't seem to mind my obsessions.

As if conjured by my thoughts, Gerda appears, plopping down on the bench beside me. "Twins bothering you?" Before she leans over to lace up her skates she casts me a grin.

I catch the twinkle in her blue eyes. Looking her over, I note how Gerda's heavy jacket exaggerates her plump figure. Gerda's told me she wishes she were taller, claiming her lack of height combined with her curvy figure makes her appear dumpy as a sack of grain. But that's nonsense. She isn't beautiful, like the twins, but she's pretty enough, especially when the cold air heightens the color in her lips and cheeks. I smile and bump her arm with my elbow. "When don't they?"

Gerda sits up, tucking her amber braids under her blue wool hat. "Sorry I'm late, but Nels Leth had hitched up a wagon and offered me a ride."

I grin as I pull on my right glove. "No worries. And I'm sure Nels was just hanging about, waiting for you, before he even considered skating today."

The color deepens in Gerda's round cheeks. "Nonsense. Now, where's your cap? You know you must cover your head in this weather."

"Yes, must protect his brilliant mind." Franka shares a smirk with Nanett before gliding to the edge of the lake. Somehow she manages to make the word "brilliant" sound like an insult.

"Better a brilliant mind than an empty one," snaps a voice behind me.

I glance over my shoulder and spy Gerda's fourteen-year-old sister, Varna. She's wearing heavy boots instead

of skates.

Striding to the edge of the lake, she flaps her hands at the twins as if shooing chickens. “Swan off, Franka, and do your little spins. You don’t need Kai to partner you. I’m sure some other boy will be glad to oblige.”

Varna looks nothing like her sisters, which is her great misfortune. She has a field mouse’s small, dark eyes, and hair as dull and brown as that creature’s fur. The distinguishing feature of her narrow face is her nose, which is long and boasts an unfortunate hook. Gerda may be merely pretty, compared to the beauty of the twins, but Varna is downright plain. A starling among goldfinches.

Still, there’s nothing dull about her mind. “Surprised to see you here, Kai. Thought you’d be buried in your books, with you trying to get into university and all.”

“I’m not just a house mouse, you know. I actually spend a great deal of time outside, helping with the mill.” I meet Varna’s serious gaze and hold it. “Which is as much your family’s business as mine.”

Varna kicks a loose stone onto the ice. Her gaze follows the pebble as it skips over the frozen lake. “Since I’m not likely to inherit it, what’s that to me?”

“Varna!” Gerda rises to her feet and steps onto the ice. Spinning around to face us, she casts a frown at her sister. “You needn’t be rude.”

“Oh, Kai doesn’t care, do you, Kai? He likes plain speaking.”

The last thing I need is to be caught between Varna’s claws and Gerda’s soft paws. “Well, yes ...” I stand and push off from the shore. Gliding in a wide circle around Gerda, I notice Franka and Nanett have already found partners to twirl and spin them on the ice. Of course—there’s probably a line. “You aren’t skating, Varna?” I call out.

She shakes her head. "Not interested in breaking my legs, thank you."

I know there's more to it than that—probably a fear she'll end up skating alone, while other girls find partners. But I won't say anything about that. No need to be cruel.

Varna turns and trudges down the path that leads into the forest bordering the lake.

"Off to learn more healing skills from Dame Margaret, I bet," observes Gerda, as she skates closer and takes holds of my proffered arm. "I don't know what she'll do when the old lady dies." A shadow dims her bright eyes. "Which might be soon, from what I hear."

"Perhaps another healer will come our way," I reply, as we glide, arm in arm, to the center to the lake. "Until Varna's old enough to take over the job, I mean."

Gerda dips her head, hiding her eyes. "Perhaps."

"Are you seriously worried about Varna?" I bend forward and tilt my head until I can glimpse Gerda's face. Startled by her grim expression, I lighten my tone. "Why? She's tough, and the most sensible of all of you."

"Not really. She just pretends." Gerda straightens and stares out over the lake. "But let's enjoy this day. The weather is perfect and we have a few free hours before I need to help Mother with the evening meal."

Dear Gerda, always thinking of others. I pull her a little closer to my side before we glide off to join the cluster of skaters.

As we cut smooth lines and curves into the ice, I glance down at Gerda's face. She's smiling again—that warm smile that transforms her from ordinary to lovely. A skater glides past us, turning his head sharply to stare. Nels Leth, of course. He's been pursuing Gerda since she turned fifteen, but Gerda seems oblivious to his attentions.

Because she loves you.

I lift my head and survey the far shore, where our jointly owned mill rises, ghostly gray against the ice blue sky. I know our parents want us to marry, and I suppose that makes sense. It would consolidate our business interests, and ensure income for both families into the future. It's a very logical plan ...

So it should appeal to you.

But it doesn't, and I don't know why. I tighten my grip on Gerda's well-bundled waist. It isn't because of Gerda—she's the only girl in the village I would ever consider marrying.

It's just ... I don't want to marry anyone. I don't want to be shackled, like my father, with a wife and child. Forced into mindless labor just to put food on the table. I want to go to university and learn everything I can and then learn more. I want to travel—to see all the amazing things I've only read about up to now.

You want to be free.

It's true. I can smile and nod when our families talk of marriage, but I can't lie to myself.

As we skate closer to the mill, a strange noise rises from a tangle of dead grasses at the shoreline. It sounds like an animal in distress—some type of dog, from the whining and sharp yips piercing the clear air.

"Stay here," I tell Gerda, as I release my hold on her.

She protests, but can't skate as fast as I can. I reach the shore in several long glides, and when I turn to urge Gerda to stay back, a strange gust of wind rolls out from the shore and drives her back toward the crowd. Just as well—I need to examine this anomaly on my own.

As I approach the tangle of grasses a figure steps forward, moving closer as I pull apart the weeds to uncover the source of the sounds.

"What have you found?" asks the stranger.

It's a girl's voice. As I stare at her she adjusts the hood of her cloak until it shadows her face.

"A wolf. Just a baby. All on its own, poor thing." I bend down and pick up the pup, cradling it gently.

The wolf whimpers and strains against my arms. His gaze is fixed on the young woman.

"He seems interested in you. I'm sorry, I don't think I know you, miss." I narrow my eyes, hoping to study her more closely. "And I know everyone in this town."

"I'm just passing through." She turns her head to avoid my gaze. "What should we do with him, do you think? The pup, I mean. It seems a pity to leave him here on his own."

"Well, I'd take him home, but my father would have my hide." I stroke the pup's head. "We've a few sheep, you know, and chickens. Our dogs would probably try to kill it, anyway. They're pretty territorial – don't like other dogs about, and as for a wolf ..."

"Yes, that might be a problem." The girl moves a little closer. "I may be able to help."

A tingling sensation tickles the back of my neck. Something about this young woman isn't right, isn't normal. "How's that?"

"I have a sleigh. Rather fast, and quite capable of crossing the fields beyond the village. If you came with me—you and the wolf pup, I mean—I could take you somewhere he'd be safe."

"On his own? This little guy?" I clutch the pup tighter. "I don't think he'd survive out in the wild."

I know where there's a pack that might take him in. High up in the mountains." The girl tosses back her hood and stares directly into my eyes.

Her hair, springing about her face in soft curls, is so pale it appears white. Her sharp-featured face is the color

of newly fallen snow, and her eyes are cold and clear as ice. There's no color to her, yet somehow she radiates power, like the white flash of lightning.

I gasp, almost dropping the pup, who barks and nips at the air.

"Who are you?" I shake my head to clear my thoughts, but there's something in her face that draws me in, something infinite and unfolding, like the vast expanse of a glacier. "Do you really know the whereabouts of a wolf pack?"

"Yes, I do." She presses her gloved fingers against my coat sleeve.

I shiver. Her touch sends a river of ice coursing through my veins.

But it's alright. Don't remove your hand.

"And you can carry us there?"

"I can." She slips one hand through the crook of my elbow. "My sleigh's just over there, behind the mill."

I follow her blindly as she leads me away from the shore.

As we reach the ponies the wolf squirms and breaks from my hold. Leaping to the ground, the pup bounds into the sleigh.

"You see—" the stranger tightens her grip on my arm "—he wants to go." She turns to stare into my eyes. "And you—you want to come with us."

To travel far away. Across oceans of snow. To learn, to understand what power illuminates those icy eyes. To stay by her side, forever.

"Yes, I ..." I rub at my forehead with my free hand. "I do, I think. But, it doesn't make sense, really ..."

"You do want to save the pup, don't you?" She yanks off one glove and touches my face with her bare fingers.

So cold, yet a touch that burns like metal newly

forged.

“Of course.” I clutch at her hand, but it’s like thrusting my fingers into the fire.

I swiftly drop her hand as Gerda’s voice shatters the silence.

“Kai! Kai, where are you?”

The young woman backs away, slumping against the side of the sleigh.

“I’m here.” My first words come out as a whisper, but I raise my voice as I speak again. “For some reason, I’m here.”

You must walk away. Back to Gerda. Return to reality, to what you know.

But there’s something I must do first. I glance at the stranger, who’s pulled up her hood and turned her face away. “Will you still take him, the pup? Will you find little Luki a home?”

“Luki?” The word is edged with ice.

I smile. The drifts of confusion have melted from my mind. “His name. It’s Luki. At least it should be.”

It’s strange, how I want to keep staring at the young woman, even though my thoughts are now clear, are again my own.

She lifts her chin and meets my enquiring gaze without hesitation. “Very well, Luki it is. And I shall find him a home, never fear.”

There, I have done my best for the pup. Now I must leave.

You must go. Before you don’t want to leave. Before you cannot.

I hear Gerda calling me once more, and turn my back on the stranger to follow the sound of my friend’s voice.