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The Beautiful
Renée Ahdieh

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THE
BEAUTIFUL

RENÉE AHDIH

putnam

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To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

From "Auguries of Innocence" by William Blake





J'ai voulu ce matin te rapporter des roses;
Mais j'en avais tant pris dans mes ceintures closes
Que les noeuds trop serrés n'ont pu les contenir.
Les noeuds ont éclaté. Les roses envolées.
Dans le vent, à la mer s'en sont toutes allées.
Elles ont suivi l'eau pour ne plus revenir.
La vague en a paru rouge et comme enflammée.
Ce soir, ma robe encore en est toute embaumée . . .

Respires-en sur moi l'odorant souvenir.

I wanted to bring you roses this morning;
But I had closed so many in my sash
That the knots were too tight to contain them.
The knots split. The roses blew away.
All blew off to the sea, borne by the wind,
Carried to the water, never to return.
The waves looked red as if inflamed.
Tonight, my dress is still perfumed . . .

Breathe in the fragrant memory.

From "Les Roses de Saadi," by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore



PRINTEMPS DE 1872
RUE ROYALE
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA



New Orleans is a city ruled by the dead. I remember the moment I first heard someone say this. The old man meant to frighten me. He said there was a time when coffins sprang from the ground following a heavy rain, the dead flooding the city streets. He claimed to know of a Créole woman on Rue Dauphine who could commune with spirits in the afterlife.

I believe in magic. In a city rife with illusionists, it's impossible to doubt its existence. But I didn't believe this man. *Be faithful*, he warned. *For the faithless are alone in death, blind and terrified.*

I feigned shock at his words. In truth, I found him amusing. He was the sort to scare errant young souls with stories of a shadowy creature lurking in darkened alcoves. But I was also intrigued, for I possess an errant young soul of my own. From childhood, I hid it beneath pressed garments and polished words, but it persisted in plaguing me. It called to me like a Siren, driving me to dash all pretense against the rocks and surrender to my true nature.

It drove me to where I am now. But I am not ungrateful. For it brought to bear two of my deepest truths: I will always possess an errant young soul, no matter my age.

And I will always be the shadowy creature in darkened alcoves, waiting . . .

For you, my love. For you.

JANVIER 1872
ABOARD THE CGT *ARAMIS*

NOT WHAT IT SEEMED



The *Aramis* was supposed to arrive at first light, like it did in Celine's dreams.

She would wake beneath a sunlit sky, the brine of the ocean winding through her nose, the city looming bright on the horizon.

Filled with promise. And absolution.

Instead the brass bell on the bow of the *Aramis* tolled in the twilight hour, the time of day her friend Pippa called "the gloaming." It was—in Celine's mind—a very British thing to say.

She'd begun collecting these phrases not long after she'd met Pippa four weeks ago, when the *Aramis* had docked for two days in Liverpool. Her favorite so far was "not bloody likely." Celine didn't know why they mattered to her at the time. Perhaps it was because she thought Very British Things would serve her better in America than the Very French Things she was apt to say.

The moment Celine heard the bell clang, she made her way portside, Pippa's light footsteps trailing in her wake. Inky tendrils

of darkness fanned out across the sky, a ghostly mist shrouding the Crescent City. The air thickened as the two girls listened to the *Aramis* sluice through the waters of the Mississippi, drawing closer to New Orleans. Farther from the lives they'd left behind.

Pippa sniffed and rubbed her nose. In that instant, she looked younger than her sixteen years. "For all the stories, it's not as pretty as I thought it would be."

"It's exactly what I thought it would be," Celine said in a reassuring tone.

"Don't lie." Pippa glanced at her sidelong. "It won't make me feel better."

A smile curled up Celine's face. "Maybe I'm lying for me as much as I'm lying for you."

"In any case, lying is a sin."

"So is being obnoxious."

"That's not in the Bible."

"But it should be."

Pippa coughed, trying to mask her amusement. "You're terrible. The sisters at the Ursuline convent won't know what to do with you."

"They'll do the same thing they do with every unmarried girl who disembarks in New Orleans, carrying with her all her worldly possessions: they'll find me a husband." Celine refrained from frowning. This had been her choice. The best of the worst.

"If you strike them as ungodly, they'll match you with the ugliest fool in Christendom. Definitely someone with a bulbous nose and a paunch."

“Better an ugly man than a boring one. And a paunch means he eats well, so . . .” Celine canted her head to one side.

“Really, Celine.” Pippa laughed, her Yorkshire accent weaving through the words like fine Chantilly lace. “You’re the most incorrigible French girl I’ve ever met.”

Celine smiled at her friend. “I’d wager you haven’t met many French girls.”

“At least not ones who speak English as well as you do. As if you were born to it.”

“My father thought it was important for me to learn.” Celine lifted one shoulder, as though this were the whole of it, instead of barely half. At the mention of her father—a staid Frenchman who’d studied linguistics at Oxford—a shadow threatened to descend. A sadness with a weight Celine could not yet bear. She fixed a wry grin on her face.

Pippa crossed her arms as though she were hugging herself. Worry gathered beneath the fringe of blond on her forehead as the two girls continued studying the city in the distance. Every young woman on board had heard the whispered accounts. At sea, the myths they’d shared over cups of gritty, bitter coffee had taken on lives of their own. They’d blended with the stories of the Old World to form richer, darker tales. New Orleans was haunted. Cursed by pirates. Prowled by scalawags. A last refuge for those who believed in magic and mysticism. Why, there was even talk of women possessing as much power and influence as that of any man.

Celine had laughed at this. As she’d dared to hope. Perhaps New Orleans was not what it seemed, at first glance. Fittingly, neither was she.

And if anything could be said about the young travelers aboard the *Aramis*, it was that the possibility of magic like this—a world like this—had become a vital thing. Especially for those who wished to shed the specter of their pasts. To become something better and brighter.

And especially for those who wanted to escape.

Pippa and Celine watched as they drew closer to the unknown. To their futures.

“I’m frightened,” Pippa said softly.

Celine did not respond. Night had seeped through the water, like a dark stain across organza. A scraggly sailor balanced along a wooden beam with all the grace of an aerialist while lighting a lamp on the ship’s prow. As if in response, tongues of fire leapt to life across the water, rendering the city in even more ghoulishly green tones.

The bell of the *Aramis* pealed once more, telling those along the port how far the ship had left to travel. Other passengers made their way from below deck, coming to stand alongside Celine and Pippa, muttering in Portuguese and Spanish, English and French, German and Dutch. Young women who’d taken leaps of faith and left their homelands for new opportunities. Their words melted into a soft cacophony of sound that would—under normal circumstances—soothe Celine.

Not anymore.

Ever since that fateful night amid the silks in the atelier, Celine had longed for comfortable silence. It had been weeks since she’d felt safe in the presence of others. Safe with the riot of her own

thoughts. The closest she'd ever come to wading through calmer waters had been in the presence of Pippa.

When the ship drew near enough to dock, Pippa took sudden hold of Celine's wrist, as though to steel herself. Celine gasped. Flinched at the unexpected touch. Like a spray of blood had shot across her face, the salt of it staining her lips.

"Celine?" Pippa asked, her blue eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

Breathing through her nose to steady her pulse, Celine wrapped both hands around Pippa's cold fingers. "I'm frightened, too."

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS



Twenty-three passengers disembarked from the *Aramis*, each bearing a simple trunk filled with their worldly possessions. After consulting the ship's manifest, the officer stationed in the customhouse allowed them onto American soil. An hour later, seven girls boarded a humble equipage and proceeded through the darkened city streets toward the Ursuline convent. The rest had their futures awaiting them at the docks.

The open-air wagon trundled along the cobblestones. All around them, boughs hung heavy with brightly colored blossoms. Cicadas and click beetles droned in the shadows, whispering of a haunted history. A tropical breeze stirred through the branches of a live oak abutting a small square. The warmth of its embrace felt strange against Celine's skin, especially when contrasted with the slight chill of an early spring evening.

But she knew better than to complain. Outside her home in Paris, snow likely dotted the pavers, and it would be weeks before she could don the comfortable muslin dress she now wore. Celine recalled when she'd fashioned it last June, from the remnants of an elegant tea gown she'd designed for a wealthy woman

known for hosting infamous salons. At the time, Celine imagined attending one of these gatherings and mingling with the chicest members of Parisian society. She would dazzle them with her love of Shakespeare and Voltaire. She would wear this exact dress, its rich aubergine hue a lovely contrast against her fair skin, the overskirt replete with elaborate frills and flounces. And she would style her black curls in a mass atop her crown, the latest coiffure to grace the city's fashion plates.

Celine laughed to herself, amused by the memory of the seventeen-year-old girl she used to be. The things this girl had dreamed of experiencing. The things she'd wished to have and hold: Entrée into the society of elegant young women she fitted for gowns they would discard days later. A chance to fall in love with a handsome young man who would steal her heart with poetry and promises.

Now she sneered at the very idea.

After weeks at sea—buried deep in a timber trunk—the rumpled gown Celine wore tonight reflected the sharp turn her life had taken. It wasn't fit for Sunday Mass, much less a salon. At the thought, Celine adjusted her position on the wooden seat, her corset digging into her ribs. The whalebone pinched her breasts as she took a deep breath.

And was met with a scent so delicious, it left her distracted.

She scanned the square for its source. On the corner opposite the live oak stood an open-air bakery that reminded Celine of her favorite boulangerie on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. The smell of fried dough and slowly melting sugar wafted through the waxy magnolia leaves. Nearby, a set of balcony

shutters slammed shut, and a trellis laden with bright pink bougainvillea shook, the blossoms trembling as if in fear. Or perhaps in anticipation.

It should have been beautiful to behold. But the lovely tableau felt tinged in something sinister. As though a pale finger had slipped through a drawn curtain, beckoning her into a dark abyss.

Wisdom told her to heed the warning. Nevertheless, Celine found herself enchanted. When she glanced at the six other girls in the wagon—seated four on one side, three on the other—Celine caught an expanse of wide-eyed gazes, their expressions a study in trepidation. Or perhaps excitement? Like the bougainvillea, it was impossible to be certain.

The wagon paused on a bustling street corner, the large draft horse at its lead tossing his mane. People in all manner of dress—from the wealthy with their golden watch chains to the humble with their threadbare linen—crossed Decatur Street, their steps focused and harried, as though they were on a mission. It felt unusual for a time of day marked by endings rather than beginnings.

Since Pippa was situated closest to the driver, she leaned forward to address him. “Is there something of note occurring tonight? Something to explain the gathering crowd?”

“The parade,” the gruff man replied, without turning around.

“Pardon?”

He cleared his throat. “There’s a parade gettin’ started near Canal Street. On account of the carnival season.”

“A carnival parade!” Pippa exclaimed, turning toward Celine.

Antonia—the young woman seated at Celine’s left—looked about excitedly, her dark eyes round and bright, like those of an owl. “Um carnaval?” she asked in Portuguese as she pointed toward the sounds of distant revelry.

Celine nodded with a smile.

“It’s a shame we’ll miss seeing it,” Pippa said.

“I wouldn’t worry, lass,” the driver replied, his tongue rolling over the words with a hint of Irish burr. “There’ll be plenty o’ parades and celebrations all month long during the carnival season. You’ll see one, to be sure. And just you wait for the masquerade ball on Mardi Gras. ’Twill be the finest of them all.”

“I heard talk about the carnival season from a friend in Edinburgh,” Anabel—a lissome redhead with an attractive smattering of freckles across her nose—exclaimed. “The entire city of New Orleans rings in the time before Lent with soirées and balls and costume parties for weeks on end.”

“Parties!” the twins from Germany repeated as soon as they recognized the word, one of them clapping her hands with delight.

Their glowing faces struck Celine. Moved something behind her heart. An emotion she’d banned herself from feeling ever since the events of that dreadful night:

Hope.

She’d arrived in a city amid celebration. One with weeks of fêtes to come. The crowd was filled with that same spirit of anticipation she saw in the girls who now shared her fate. Maybe their expressions did not have to be about trepidation. Maybe the bougainvillea was simply jostled awake instead of trembling with worry.

Maybe Celine did not have to live her life in fear of what might happen tomorrow.

As they waited for the streets to clear of passing pedestrians, Celine leaned forward, her spirits on the cusp of taking flight. She tried to catch a bit of ivy dangling from an intricate wrought iron railing. The clattering of footsteps to her left stole her attention as the crowd parted to allow their wagon through.

No.

It was not to allow them passage.

It was for something else entirely.

There—beneath the amber haze of a gas lamp—stood a lone figure poised to cross Decatur Street, a Panama hat pulled low on his brow, shrouding his features.

Without hesitation, their driver granted the man immediate deference, dipping his head in the figure's direction as though he were bowing . . . or perhaps keeping his eyes averted.

The man crossed the road, moving from light to shadow and back again, gliding from one street corner to another. He moved . . . strangely. As though the air around him were not air at all, but water. Or perhaps smoke. His polished shoes struck the cobblestones at a clipped pace. He was tall. Broad shouldered. Despite the evening silhouette about him, Celine could tell his suit was made of exquisite material, by a practiced hand. Likely Savile Row. Her training at Madame de Beauharnais' atelier—the finest couturier in Paris—had granted her a particular eye for such things.

But his clothes did not intrigue Celine nearly as much as what he'd managed to achieve. He'd cleared the street without uttering a single word. He'd scattered women with parasols and children

with powdery beignets and men in elegant top hats, with nary a glance in their direction.

That was the kind of magic she wished to possess.

Celine craved the idea of wielding such power, simply for the freedom it would afford her. She watched the man step up to the curb, envy clouding her gaze, filling her heart, taking place of the hope she'd barely allowed purchase a minute ago.

Then he looked up. His eyes met hers as though she'd called out to him, without words.

Celine blinked.

He was younger than she'd expected. Not much older than she. Nineteen or twenty, perhaps, no more. Later Celine would try to remember details about him. But it was as though her memory of that moment had gone hazy, like oil swiped across the surface of a mirror. The only thing she remembered with distinct clarity was his eyes. They shone in the flame of the gas lamp as though they were lit from within.

Dark grey. Like the barrel of a gun.

He narrowed his gaze. Tipped his hat at her. And walked away.

"Oh, my stars," Pippa breathed.

Murmurs of assent—spoken in several languages—rippled across the rows of seated young women. They leaned into each other, an air of shared excitement passing over them. One of the twins from Düsseldorf said something in German that made her sister titter behind her hands.

Only Celine continued staring at the rapidly receding figure, her eyes narrowed, as his had been. As though she were in disbelief.

Of what, she did not know.

Their wagon continued making its way toward the convent. Celine watched the boy fade into the darkness, his long, lean legs carrying him through the night with an otherworldly confidence.

She wondered what made everyone at the crossing yield to him without question. Longed for the barest measure of it. Perhaps if Celine were someone to command such respect, she would not have been forced to leave Paris. To lie to her father.

Or murder a man.

TO THE STARS



I shouldn't be here.

That thought rang in Noémie's head like an endless refrain.

It was dark. Late. The water lapped along the pier at the edge of the Vieux Carré, the sound lulling. Hypnotic.

She never should have agreed to meet anyone in this place, no matter the enticement. Noémie knew better. Her parents had taught her better. The church had taught her better. She drew her light spring shawl around her shoulders and straightened the pink silk ribbon around her neck. When she turned, her garnet earbobs struck the sensitive skin along her jawline.

Earbobs and silk ribbons, on a pier in the middle of the night?

What was she thinking?

I shouldn't be here. Whom did she expect to impress with such fripperies?

Not this kind of man, to be sure.

Any young man who asked to meet her in the dead of night was not a gentleman. But Noémie supposed the kind of woman who agreed was not quite a lady either. She sighed to herself. Martin,

her erstwhile beau, never would have invited her to a clandestine meeting long past sunset.

Of course Martin had never made her skin tingle or her breath catch in her throat.

Not like her mysterious admirer had.

But if he didn't show his face soon, Noémie would go home, sneak back through her mother's wisteria, and slip into the window of her bedroom before anyone was the wiser.

Noémie paced along the length of the pier, swearing to the stars that this was the last chance she would give him. Beneath her skirts, her booted heels struck the warped wooden boards, her bustle bobbing in time with her steps. A breeze swept along the bay, bringing with it the stench of spoiling fish—remnants of the day's catch.

In an effort to ward off the smell, she pressed a bare finger beneath her nose.

I shouldn't be here. The pier was too close to the Court's lair. These streets and everything surrounding them were controlled by its shadowy denizens. Never mind that they routinely donated to the church. Never mind that Le Comte de Saint Germain had box seats to the opera and hobnobbed with New Orleans' best and brightest. The Court brought with them the worst kind of people, those without scruples.

And here Noémie was, waiting alone in the dark, in the thick of their domain.

She touched her throat, her fingers grazing the soft silk there. The color of her ribbon—pale pink, like the petals of a peony—was

all the rage right now. Empress Eugénie had first ushered it into fashion not long ago. Now countless young ladies of New Orleans were keen to put their long, swanlike necks on display. Supposedly the gentlemen favored it.

With a bitter smile, Noémie faced out to the water for her final trek along the pier.

Damn her impressive admirer and all his lies. No amount of sweet words or scintillating promises should have drawn Noémie from the safety of her home.

Just as she was about to reach the end of the pier, the thud of solid footsteps resounded behind her. They slowed as they neared, moving at their master's leisure.

Noémie did not turn immediately, wanting him to know she was angry.

"You kept me waiting a long time," she said, her voice honeyed.

"My sincerest apologies, mon amour," he breathed from behind her. "I was caught up at dinner . . . but I left before dessert."

A smile tugged at Noémie's lips, her pulse racing. She turned slowly.

No one was there. The pier looked deserted.

She blinked. Her heart skipped about in her chest. Had Noémie dreamed the whole thing? Had the wind played a trick on her? "Where did you—"

"I'm here, my love," he said in her ear, behind her once more. She gasped. He took her by the hand, his touch cool and steady. Reassuring. A jolt passed down her spine as he nibbled along her earlobe. Shockingly. Teasingly.

Martin would never do such a thing.

She reached back to caress his face, the scruff on his jaw abrading her skin, the blood soaring through her veins. He kissed her fingertips. When she pulled away, her hands were warm. Sticky. Wet.

Stained bright red.

“Je suis désolé,” he murmured an apology.

A horrified scream began to collect in Noémie’s chest.

Her swanlike throat was torn out before she could utter a sound.

The last thing Noémie saw were the stars winking merrily above.

Devolution

Max Brooks

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DEVOLUTION

MAX BROOKS



INTRODUCTION

BIGFOOT DESTROYS TOWN. That was the title of an article I received not long after the Mount Rainier eruption. I thought it was spam, the inevitable result of so much online research. At the time I was just finishing up what seemed like my hundredth op-ed on Rainier, analyzing every facet of what should have been a predictable, and preventable, calamity. Like the rest of the country, I needed facts, not sensationalism. Staying grounded had been the focus of so many op-eds, because of all Rainier's human failures—political, economic, logistical—it was the psychological aspect, the hyperbole-fueled hysteria, that had ended up killing the most people. And here it was again, right on my laptop screen: BIGFOOT DESTROYS TOWN.

Just forget it, I told myself, the world's not going to change overnight. Just breathe, delete, and move on.

And I almost did. Except for that one word.

“Bigfoot.”

The article, posted on an obscure, cryptozoological website, claimed that while the rest of the country was focused on Rainier's wrath, a smaller but no less bloody disaster was occurring a few miles away in the isolated, high-end, high-tech eco-community of Greenloop. The article's author, Frank McCray, described how the eruption not only cut Greenloop off from rescue, but also left it vulnerable to a troop of hungry, apelike creatures that were themselves fleeing the same catastrophe.

The details of the siege were recorded in the journal of Greenloop resident Kate Holland, the sister of Frank McCray.

“They never found her body,” McCray wrote to me in a follow-up email, “but if you can get her journal published, maybe someone will read it who might have seen her.”

When I asked why me, he responded, “Because I've been following your op-eds on Rainier. You don't write anything you haven't thoroughly researched first.” When I asked why he thought I'd have any interest in Bigfoot, he answered, “I read your *Fangoria* article.”

Clearly I wasn't the only one who knew how to research a subject. Somehow, McCray had tracked down a decades-old list of my “Top Five Classic Bigfoot Movies” for the iconic horror magazine. In that

piece, I'd talked about growing up "at the height of the Bigfoot frenzy," challenging readers to watch these old movies "with the eyes of a six-year-old child, eyes that flick constantly from the terror on the screen to the dark, rustling trees outside the window."

Reading that piece must have convinced McCray that some part of me wasn't quite ready to leave my childhood obsession in the past. He must have also known that my adult skepticism would force me to thoroughly vet his story. Which I did. Before contacting McCray again, I discovered that there had been a highly publicized community known as Greenloop. There was an ample amount of press regarding its founding—and its founder, Tony Durant. Tony's wife, Yvette, had also hosted several online yoga and meditation classes from the town's Common House right up to the day of the eruption. But on that day, everything stopped.

That was not unusual for towns that lay in the path of Rainier's boiling mudslides, but a quick check of the official FEMA map showed Greenloop had never been touched. And while devastated areas such as Orting and Puyallup had eventually reconnected their digital footprints, Greenloop remained a black hole. There were no press reports, no amateur recordings. Nothing. Even Google Earth, which has been so diligent in updating its satellite imagery of the area, still posts the original, pre-eruption photo of Greenloop and the surrounding area. As peculiar as all these red flags might be, what finally drove me

back to McCray was the fact that the only mention of Greenloop *after* the disaster that I could find was in a local police report that said the official investigation was still “ongoing.”

“What do you know?” I asked him after several days of radio silence. That was when he sent me the link to an AirDrop link of a photo album taken by Senior Ranger Josephine Schell. Schell, who I would later interview for this project, had led the first search and rescue team into the charred wreckage of what had once been Greenloop. Amid the corpses and debris, she had discovered the journal of Kate Holland (née McCray) and had photographed each page before the original copy was removed.

At first, I still suspected a hoax. I’m old enough to remember the notorious “Hitler Diaries.” However, as I finished the last page, I couldn’t help but believe her story. I still do. Perhaps it’s the simplicity of her writing, the frustratingly credible ignorance of all things Sasquatch. Or perhaps it’s just my own irrational desire to exonerate the scared little boy I used to be. That’s why I’ve published Kate’s story, along with several news items and background interviews that I hope will provide some context for readers not familiar with Sasquatch lore. In the process of compiling that research, I struggled greatly with how much to include. There are literally dozens of scholars, hundreds of hunters, and thousands of recorded encounters. To wade through them all might have taken years, if not decades, and this story simply does not have that kind of time. That is why I have

chosen to limit my interviews to the two people with direct, personal involvement in the case, and my literary references to Steve Morgan's *The Sasquatch Companion*. Fellow Bigfoot enthusiasts will no doubt recognize Morgan's *Companion* as the most comprehensive, up-to-date guidebook on the subject, combining historical accounts, recent eyewitness sightings, and scientific analysis from experts like Dr. Jeff Meldrum, Ian Redmond, Robert Morgan (no relation), and the late Dr. Grover Krantz.

Some readers may also question my decision to omit certain geographical details regarding the exact location of Greenloop. This was done to discourage tourists and looters from contaminating what is still an active crime scene. With the exception of these details, and the necessary spelling and grammatical corrections, the journal of Kate Holland remains intact. My only regret is not being able to interview Kate's psychotherapist (who encouraged her to begin writing this diary) on the grounds of patient confidentiality. And yet this psychotherapist's silence seems, at least to me, like an admission of hope. After all, why would a doctor worry about the confidentiality of her patient if she didn't believe that patient was still alive?

At the time of this writing, Kate has been missing for thirteen months. If nothing changes, this book's publication date may see her disappearance lasting several years.

At present, I have no physical evidence to validate the story you are about to read. Maybe I've been

duped by Frank McCray, or maybe we've both been duped by Josephine Schell. I will let you, the reader, judge for yourself if the following pages seem reasonably plausible, and like me, if they reawaken a terror long buried under the bed of youth.



JOURNAL ENTRY #9

OCTOBER 8

The stink hit us as soon as we crossed over the ridge onto the downward slope. Strong, pungent. I smelled it on the palm of my hand, coming off a tree I'd just touched. I put my nose to the bark. Rotten eggs. My hand also came away with something else. Plant fiber, probably. It was long and black. Thick like a horse's mane. I'm not sure if it stank, it could have just been my fingertips. Animal hair?

Then we saw the white specks, standing out in a patch of turned-up earth and reddish leaves.

Reddish from blood. It was everywhere. On the

bushes, the bark, soaked into the ground, mixing with ash into these solid, rusty pebbles.

The white specks were shattered bones. It was hard to even recognize them at first. Most were just chips. They looked like they were smashed with a hammer. I found a few rocks nearby with blood on one side. Not splatters. Deep, thick stains mixed with fur and bits of flesh. And this is weird, but they looked, okay, painted? I know that sounds funny, but the blood on the rocks, on the trees and leaves, there were no droplets. Other than in the ash, all the other stains looked like they'd been smeared with a brush, or a tongue. Like whatever killed the cat went around licking every last spot.

Even the bones. They were clean. The marrow'd been scrubbed out. In fact, there wasn't any meat anywhere. No organs, muscle, brain. I found what had to be the remains of the skull; just a curved, polished fragment next to a collection of broken teeth. That's how I knew it had to be the cat. Those yellow fangs. I found one, intact, still stuck to a piece of upper jaw.

What could have done that?

If my mind wasn't already shaken by what we saw, Mostar's reaction made it worse.

She just listened, without judgment, eyes off to the side, taking in every detail without the slightest reaction. It scared me, scares me, that she didn't immediately respond with, "Oh well, what you saw was . . ." She always has an answer for everything. That's why I didn't like her at first. Bully. Know-it-

all. “Go here, do this, believe me when I say . . .” This is the first time I’ve seen her genuinely perplexed. No, that’s not right. The first time was when I’d been chased, when she turned her eyes on the woods.

Does she suspect what I’m trying to dismiss? The smell, the howls, the large “boulder” I’d seen on the road. Now this. I’m sure I’m just trying to come up with an explanation for something that doesn’t make any sense. That’s me. A place for everything and everything in its place. I’m just grasping on to what I’ve heard. And I haven’t heard much. I’m not into that stuff. I’m the practical one. I’ve never been interested in things that weren’t real. I’ve never even watched *Game of Thrones*. Dragons and ice zombies? Really? When Yvette was going on about Oma, she was speaking metaphorically! It can’t be real or else everyone would know. That’s the world we live in, right? Anyone can know anything. We’d know about this.

And yes, I know I saw something. We both did. But knowing you saw something is different from knowing what you saw.

I spotted the first one, the first clear footprint. It was next to the skull fragment, so deep it pressed right through the ash into the soft earth. It couldn’t be a wolf or another puma. The shape was all wrong. Maybe a bear? I don’t know. I’ve never seen a bear track so maybe that’s the simple answer. But the print looked almost like a shoeless person right down to the five toes. But it couldn’t have been. Dan took off his hiking boot. He wears a size 11. He took off

his sock as well, and placed his bare foot right next to the print. The toes matched, the overall shape. But the size. That's impossible. It must have been a trick of the ash, or maybe the way it was planted.

Nothing could have such a big foot.

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WICKED FOX

KAT CHO

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GU MIYOUNG'S RELATIONSHIP with the moon was complicated as are most relationships centered around power.

Her muscles vibrated with anticipation as she balanced on the edge of the roof. The moonlight made her skin itch, like a string pulled too tight. She breathed deeply to steady her speeding heart, and the stench of rotten trash filled her nostrils.

Her mother told her to be grateful for the power of the moon. It gave her strength, but sometimes Miyoung resented being strong.

Miyoung scanned the roads below. The streetlights were burnt out and had probably been so for a while. Miyoung didn't mind. She saw as easily in the dark as most did in broad daylight. In her opinion, the broken lights only helped the aesthetic of the buildings. Cracks spidered across the crumbling facades, decorated in blooms of mold. Perhaps a more optimistic soul would see a strange beauty in the pattern, but not Miyoung.

She pulled out her phone and dialed one of the two numbers saved in it.

"Did you find him, Seonbae?" Nara asked as soon as she picked up.

The way she stuttered out *seonbae* made the respectful title sound suffocatingly formal. As if she were speaking to an elder

twice her age, instead of Miyoung, who was only a year her senior. But Miyoung knew the younger girl used the title for multiple reasons, one being that two weeks ago her name hadn't even been Gu Miyoung.

"I tracked him to the same alley. He's been coming here all week—just haven't figured out which apartment he goes into."

"I've been trying to use the phone location app," Nara said helpfully. "It says you're right on top of him. Or is that your location? Click on your GPS."

Miyoung wanted to tell Nara to stick to communing with the spirits, but instead she swiped her screen and turned on the tracking option.

"Wait, now there are two of you." Nara fell into muffled mutters. Miyoung rolled her eyes to the heavens as she held her tongue. It wouldn't help to yell. Nara was nervous by nature, the side effect of her ability to see ghosts since birth.

Plus, Miyoung knew Nara meant well. But Miyoung didn't need good intentions; she needed a target.

To stop from pacing, she sat on the edge of the roof and let her feet dangle over the six-story drop. Gaining the high ground allowed her to stake out the area as well as her prey.

Still, she'd only seen him from a distance, going on the vague description from Nara.

Miyoung closed her eyes and counted to ten to settle her nerves.

Before her lay the cityscape of Seoul. The skyscrapers of Cheongdamdong, a mecca of entertainment and glamour, the home of fashion and K-pop. The soaring height of 63 Building, a symbol of the modernization of the capital city, sitting sentry beside the Han River. And the lights of Namsan Tower, where lovers

and tourists went to see the world at their feet. Miyoung sneered at her own worn sneakers, dangling over a trash-filled alley.

“What is he doing here?” Miyoung mumbled, mostly to herself, but Nara answered.

“The spirit says he goes there every night. Her death was too violent.” The other girl’s words became morose. “She needs justice before she can pass to the afterlife.”

Miyoung wasn’t sure if what she did was justice. Still, it was better than nothing. And if she had to kill, she might as well help a few wayward ghosts settle their grudges.

Not for the first time, Miyoung wondered whether putting all her faith in Nara’s spirits was a bad idea. She couldn’t feed without the power of the full moon. No, that was a lie. She *wouldn’t* feed without it.

The full moon increased her senses, opened her up to energy, allowed her to absorb it without ripping a man apart. So if she didn’t feed tonight, she’d have to wait another month or . . . she’d have to become a monster. She almost let out a laugh because she knew that even as the prey she chose were vile men, it didn’t mean she wasn’t a killer.

Still, she wouldn’t give in to her more base instinct, the one that wanted her to tear into flesh. To uncover the energy kept deep within every living creature. To drink that energy from a man without the need of the moon to channel it. No, she’d take it as gently as she could and pretend that she was a benevolent monster.

She’d failed this task only once, and she’d refused to feed any other way even when her mother begged. The only time she’d ever refused her mother. Miyoung’s body began to weaken within a week and didn’t recover until she fed at the next full moon. That’s

why her mother had her rules, one of which was *Never miss a hunt*.

But Nara was a gifted young shaman, able to contact spirits across the country. And no matter where Miyoung moved, Nara had found victims for Miyoung each full moon without fail. A useful ally to have.

“Seonbae?”

“What?” Miyoung asked, perhaps too gruffly.

“Be careful tonight. Many households banished evil spirits this month during Sangdalgosa. They might be wandering.”

Annoyed, Miyoung stood so she could start to pace again. “I’m not scared of a few spirits.”

Miyoung glanced down at the sound of a door squeaking open. She made out laughter and music from inside before the door swung closed, some kind of underground club. A man emerged. He was short and thick, his balding head pale white under the bright moon. She recognized the tattoo peeking through the wide collar of his shirt, an oversized spider he probably thought made him look tough but just accented his aging body in all the wrong ways.

“Got him. I’ll call you back.” Miyoung hung up as she stepped off the roof. She landed lightly on the ground, creating a cloud of dust and stink.

The man stumbled drunkenly and Miyoung kept pace with him. As she moved out of the shadows, muscles flexing as she prepared for the kill, he dropped a soju bottle he’d been carrying. Cursing, he sneered down at the shattered glass. Miyoung hid herself from sight. It was a knee-jerk reaction, but unnecessary. It didn’t matter if he saw her. He would tell no one of what happened tonight except other spirits.

She was so caught up in her musings that she didn’t notice

when he started walking again, down the narrow streets, leading to where civilization gathered. She cursed herself for waiting. Another of her mother's rules: *Find somewhere private for the kill.*

The salty smell of boiling jjigae and the charred scent of frying meat surrounded her in smoke and steam. Bare bulbs hung from the corners of food stands. Their harsh light distracted the eye from the run-down, cracked plaster of the buildings beyond.

She'd just moved here and she'd already decided she didn't like it. She'd lived in Seoul before, among the soaring skyscrapers of Gangnam, or in the shadow of the old palace in Samcheongdong. But this new neighborhood was neither brand-new nor significantly historical. It just was. The air was filled with the scents of spicy tteok-bokki and savory pastries. Her mouth watered despite her disdain of the greasy food.

The man paused to stare at dehydrated ojingeo. The legs of the dried cephalopods twisted, brittle enough to snap off at the slightest touch, hard and fragile at the same time. It was a dichotomy Miyoung often pondered. If someone cut out her heart, it would probably be a twisted chunk of brittle meat like the ojingeo.

The man broke off one of the eight legs and stuck it in his mouth.

"Ya!" shouted the ajumma manning the food stand. "Are you going to pay for that?"

Miyoung sensed a fight brewing and didn't have the patience to wait for it to resolve itself. So she broke her mother's final rule: *Don't let anyone notice you when you're on a hunt.*

"Ajeossi!" She slid her arm through the man's. "There you are!"

"Do you know him?" The ajumma looked Miyoung up and down.

“Of course, sorry about that.” Miyoung put down a crisp orange bill. “I don’t need change.”

“Whozit?” The man squinted at her through bleary eyes as she led him away.

Miyoung grimaced at the heavy stink of soju on his breath.

“It’s been so long. You were childhood friends with my father.” She turned them onto a less populated road. Trees loomed at the end of the street, a perfect cover.

“Who’s your father?” His eyes rolled up, as if searching his brain for the memory.

Miyoung almost said, *Good question*. She’d never met the man. So she built him out of her imagination as she started up a dirt hiking path. Trees rose around them, sparse at first, then thickening as she led him deeper into the forest, winding away from the road.

“You went to middle school together. I met you a few years ago. You came to our house. My mom made japchae.” Miyoung used any random detail that popped into her head. She wound through the trees toward the more secluded trails.

Her plan to take him farther was ruined as he finally took in their surroundings. “Where are we?”

Miyoung cursed.

“What is this?” The man yanked his arm away, spun around, and ran, clearly disoriented or he’d know he was headed further into the forest. It almost made Miyoung feel pity for the old fool. He barely made it a dozen steps before she caught him by the collar. He yelped, struggling to free himself.

She shoved him against the trunk of an ash tree, wrapping her fingers around his thick neck. She tasted his distress as she siphoned some of his gi—the energy that emanated from all living things. The energy she stole to be immortal.

“What do you want?”

Instead of answering him, Miyoung pulled out her phone.

Nara’s face filled the screen, a classic oval with pale skin and a brush of bangs. Her eyes wide with concern. There were bags under them, a souvenir of the past few sleepless nights she had stayed up to help Miyoung stake out her prey.

“Did you catch him?”

Miyoung turned the phone toward the frightened man. The sight of it pulled him out of his shock. His eyes took in Miyoung’s form: an eighteen-year-old girl with long limbs, dark hair, and a heart-shaped face. He visibly relaxed, lulled into complacency by her pretty looks. It only made Miyoung pity him more. Foolish man didn’t know beauty was the best camouflage for a monster.

“Is this him?” Miyoung ignored the man’s lurid stare, far too used to the look.

“Yes.”

Miyoung nodded and hung up.

“Who was that?” The man’s demand was rough, fed by agitation and the belief that he was not truly in danger. Her prey always made this mistake, every month like clockwork.

“She’s a shaman,” Miyoung answered because it didn’t matter what she told him and because, despite her morbid intentions, Miyoung was a proper Korean girl taught to respect her elders.

“Some quack fortune-teller?” the man spat out.

“People have no respect for the old ways anymore.” Miyoung clicked her tongue with disappointment. “True shamans do more than tell fortunes. They can commune with the spirits. As in the dead. As in the girl you killed last month.”

All the color leached from the man’s face. “How do you know?”

“Don’t you regret what you did?” she asked, as if the question was rhetorical, but she hoped for a sign of repentance.

As always, she was disappointed.

“Why should I be sorry? It was her fault.” The man’s face became bright red. “She should have kept quiet. I only tried to make her stop screaming.”

“Then you’ve made your choice and I’ve made mine.”

She felt the moon, heard it whispering to her, telling her to feed.

Miyong let her energy flow, let part of her true form free.

The man gasped.

They wove behind her, nine tails made of moonlight and dust.

In this last moment before she took a life, she had a need to be her true self. No more lies or false facades. She’d show these men what took their lives in the end.

She gripped the man by the shoulders, letting his gi fill her until her muscles vibrated. The moon urged her to let go, to allow her baser instincts to take over. If she ripped out his liver, the process would be over in seconds. But Miyong couldn’t bring herself to do it. And so she watched him die slowly, yet painlessly, as she siphoned his gi bit by bit. As simple as a person falling asleep.

While she became full, the man deflated like a balloon losing air. She loved the energy filling her, even as she hated herself for being a monster.

“Why are you doing this?” The man’s voice became slurred.

“Because I don’t want to die.” She watched the light fade from his eyes.

“Neither do I,” he mumbled just before he lost consciousness.

“I know,” she whispered to no one.

2

THE PC ROOM was hot with thirty running computers, though only three stations were occupied. It was stuffy and dark and smelled like the shrimp chips and instant noodles sold as snacks.

Ahn Jihoon loved it. He clicked with nimble fingers, his left hand glued to the hot keys, his right hand sweeping the mouse over the screen.

“If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late,” Oh Changwan said, his hands waving like anxious butterflies with nowhere to land. He’d long since logged off after losing his own game.

“Then we’ll be late.” Digital armies marched across Jihoon’s screen.

“I can’t be late again.” Changwan frowned. It highlighted his exaggerated features. His ears were too big and his nose too long. A puppy who hadn’t grown into his looks yet.

Jihoon knew being late wasn’t Changwan’s problem. His problem was being timid and having a family rich enough to care. As the eldest son, he held the weight of the Oh name on his shoulders, which was only doubled by wealth. It didn’t sit well on Changwan, who was prone to anxiety and merely mediocre at anything he tried. It made Jihoon grateful he’d been born poor.

“Changwan-ah, you always worry about the future instead of enjoying what’s happening now. You need to learn that life isn’t worth living if you’re not having fun.” Jihoon narrowed his eyes, searching for the final tower on his opponent’s base. He found it with a triumphant grunt, and the screen announced victory in bold green letters hovering over his Protoss army.

“Great, you won. Time to go?” Changwan asked.

Jihoon stood and shrugged on his navy-blue uniform blazer.

“Changwan-ah, no one likes a nag.”

Changwan scowled and Jihoon added a friendly smile. One that said he meant no harm but knew he spoke the truth. He wielded his grin like a weapon, a crooked tilt of his lips that revealed deep dimples. When he used it, few could stay mad. It worked, as Changwan gave a reluctant smile.

Outside, Jihoon took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of car exhaust and simmering oxtail from the seolleongtang restaurant down the street. He swung an arm around his friend’s shoulder as they walked in and out of the sun that peeked between the tall buildings.

“Is it me, or does the morning always smell fresher after the thrill of victory?”

“It smells like someone needs to clean their fish tanks.” Changwan scrunched his face at the seafood store. Jihoon followed his gaze to one of the giant glass aquariums, the bulging eyes of a flounder staring back.

The city bus pulled up, and Jihoon slapped Changwan’s shoulder cheerfully. “Come on, don’t want to be late.”

They were late.

By the time they reached the school, the front gate sat closed, a signal that class had started without them. Jihoon helped boost

Changwan over the side wall before climbing up himself. He miscalculated the distance and his pant leg caught.

“Aissi!” Jihoon grimaced at the long rip in the calf of his beige pants.

He’d had a growth spurt the past year, making him the tallest in his class. It also made him unintentionally clumsy.

The school was a U-shaped building with long narrow hallways, lined on one side by classrooms and on the other by wide windows facing the inner courtyard and sports fields. The building was old, and there was no central heat to warm the halls in the brisk fall chill.

They snuck into the back of the classroom with ten minutes left in homeroom. The teacher, Miss Kwon, was still addressing the class.

“I’d like to remind everyone that now is not the time to slack off.” She zeroed in on Jihoon. “Next year is your third and final year of high school. It’s our job to prepare you. And your job to learn.”

“Yes, Sunsaengnim,” the class chorused.

“That’s it for today,” Miss Kwon said.

The class president stood. “Attention. Salute.”

“Thank you,” the students chorused as they bowed in unison.

Instead of leaving, Miss Kwon walked down the aisle and knocked on Jihoon’s desk. “If you come in late again, it’s detention.”

“Yes, Sunsaengnim.” Changwan bowed so low, his forehead smacked his desk beside Jihoon.

“Saem, you say that like spending more time with you is a punishment.” Jihoon accompanied the words with a lazy grin.

Miss Kwon fought the smile that eventually bloomed across her face. “I’m serious, Ahn Jihoon.”

“So am I,” Jihoon replied without missing a beat. He widened his smile so his dimples flashed.

Miss Kwon let out a soft chuckle despite herself. “It’s my last warning,” she said before exiting the classroom.

As soon as she cleared the back door, the peace of the room erupted into the chaos of kids jumping up from their seats to join their friends.

Changwan shook his head. “I don’t know why teachers let you talk like that.”

“It’s because of my charm and good looks.”

“It’s because he’s so ridiculous, they have to laugh or else they’d scream.” Lee Somin stepped up to the boys’ joined desks. She was 158 centimeters of attitude packed in a petite package who’d known Jihoon since they were in diapers.

She glanced at the kid sitting in front of Jihoon. “Get lost.”

The boy scurried from his chair like a startled rabbit.

Jihoon took in his best friend. Somin dressed like a handbook for how to break dress code: her uniform shirt unbuttoned to reveal a graphic tee beneath; her nails painted black. Her hair was different again. Somin’s look changed with the seasons, a girl who could never make up her mind. It gave Jihoon whip-lash, but he also hated change. It took too much effort. Today her short hair was dyed bright red, and she looked as fired up as her locks right now.

Jihoon flicked a hand across a flaming strand. “What punishment did the vice principal give you today?”

“I had to kneel in front of the school this morning. Again.”

“You had to know you’d get in trouble for it,” Jihoon pointed out.

“You’re one to talk,” Somin retorted. “What are you going to tell your halmeoni if you get detention and the school calls her again?”

Jihoon's easy smile disappeared at the thought of his grandmother's reaction. Then he dismissed it. Concern took too much effort.

"You should care more. The school year is more than half over," she said with a pointed look at the changing leaves of autumn outside. Jihoon usually loved fall because it meant winter was right around the corner and then school would end. At least until it annoyingly started up again in March.

"So?" Jihoon asked, though he knew what Somin was going to say.

"So next year is our third year."

When Jihoon gave her a blank stare, she continued, "Our senior year and suneung exams. You're the bottom-ranked student in the second-year class right now."

"Someone has to be last when there are rankings," Jihoon pointed out.

"Why is everything such a joke to you?" Somin asked.

"I'm not joking. I just—"

"Don't care," Changwan and Somin chorused.

Jihoon shrugged with a rueful smile. He knew everyone thought he was an affable guy with nothing much going for him. That's how he liked it. The less people expected from him, the more they left him alone.

Somin was the only person in the whole school who continuously believed in Jihoon no matter what. Something he graciously forgave her for, due to their lifelong friendship.

"One of these days you're going to find yourself in a situation even you can't talk your way out of," she said.

"When that day comes, should I take a page from your book and punch my way out?" Jihoon mussed her hair.

Somin slapped his hand away. “Like you could. Look at those weak sticks you call arms. The only time you lift your hands is to shove food into your mouth or wipe your butt.”

Changwan cringed. “Somin-ah, not very ladylike of you.”

“And when did I ever claim to be a lady?” Somin tilted her head. A tiger eyeing her prey.

“Never.” Changwan lowered his eyes.

As his friends continued to bicker, Jihoon laid his head down to take a nap.



It was so late the sun barely lit the streets when Jihoon climbed the hill toward home, past the forest bordering town. The woods were welcoming during the day, frequented by hikers and families seeking a bit of nature in the bustling metropolis. At night, however, the branches looked more crooked and the leaves shivered from invisible beasts passing. Jihoon grew up beside this mountain forest, and he'd never dared set foot inside after night fell. A by-product of fables his halmeoni used to tell him of goblins and ghosts coming out at night to eat bad little boys.

“Late again, Jihoon-ah.” An old woman sat outside the medicinal wine store. Everyone called her Hwang Halmeoni. She was the oldest person in the neighborhood and claimed she'd stopped keeping track of her age years ago. Last she knew, she was ninety-two.

“It was a long day.” Jihoon gave her a wink.

“Studying or playing?” Hwang Halmeoni's smile was knowing. She sat on a low wooden deck and peeled garlic into a bowl. The scent stung Jihoon's nostrils.

“Playing.” He grinned. “Always.”

She clucked her tongue, popping a piece of raw garlic into her mouth. Jihoon hated eating it raw, though his own halmeoni said it was good for his health. Still, when Hwang Halmeoni held out her hand, he dutifully accepted a peeled clove.

“When are you going to make me the happiest man on earth and agree to marry me?”

Hwang Halmeoni chuckled, her eyes sparkling. “Your silver tongue is going to get you in trouble one day.”

“It already has.” Jihoon winked again. “Many times over.”

“Stop stalling. You have to go home and answer to your halmeoni.”

Jihoon sighed because she was right. He bowed and crossed the dark street toward his halmeoni’s restaurant and slipped silently into the second-floor apartment. He toed off his sneakers and placed them neatly beside his halmeoni’s worn shoes. A small form raced down the hall with a high-pitched yip.

“Dubu! Shhh.” He tried to quiet the tiny ball of fur. She ignored him and jumped onto his legs for the requisite petting.

Jihoon winced as a door opened.

“Ahn Jihoon!” his halmeoni yelled. “I was about to send the police to search all of Korea.”

Jihoon folded in a bow of apology.

His halmeoni had been pretty once. Proof lay in the old black-and-white photos on her nightstand. Now worry and age lined her face. A small woman, she only reached Jihoon’s shoulder, but he withered in the face of her anger.

“Halmeoni, you shouldn’t get worked up. Your high blood pressure, remember?”

“Where were you?” she asked sternly.

Jihoon didn’t bother with empty excuses. “You know where.”

Halmeoni clicked her tongue in disapproval. “You are such a smart boy and you waste your brain on those games. I’m not asking you to get into a top-three SKY university. I just want you to go to college. Your mother got married right out of high school. That is why she was helpless without your father.”

Jihoon shook his head at the mention of his parents.

“I don’t need to go to university to help out in the restaurant,” Jihoon said. “Or maybe I’ll become a famous gamer and buy you a mansion. Either way, I just want to stay here with you, not go to a fancy university.”

His halmeoni frowned and changed tack. “I went to see a shaman. She said your soul is being shadowed by something.”

“You should stop giving your money to those people. They’re a bunch of scam artists. The only spirits they talk to are in a bottle.” Jihoon mimed throwing back a shot.

“She said you’ll soon see darkness. Don’t you know what that means?”

Jihoon shrugged and walked into the kitchen to avoid the conversation. Whenever his halmeoni went on one of her rants about his soul, his stomach churned.

He hoped she wouldn’t get the idea to exorcise him again.

“If you keep staring at the computer, you’ll ruin your eyes.” Halmeoni followed him into the kitchen. It wasn’t a long trip. The apartment was as small as a postage stamp.

“I can’t lose my vision or else I won’t be able to look at your beautiful face.” Jihoon gave one of his lazy grins and Halmeoni’s lips twitched. She fought back the smile and gave him a glower instead.

“Don’t try to sweet-talk me. You think I’m a fool who’ll fall for pretty words?”

Jihoon wrapped her in a tight hug, engulfing her in his long arms. “I’d never think that. My halmeoni is the smartest woman in the neighborhood. Maybe all of Seoul.”

Halmeoni gave a resigned huff and a stern pat on the back before wriggling out of his embrace.

She took his hand and placed a yellow paper in it. Bold red symbols stood out against the bright background. He recognized it as one of the talismans she hung inside the front door.

“What is it for?” Jihoon held it with two fingers like it was a rotten banana peel.

“A bujeok from the shaman for warding off evil. Keep it with you.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You say I’m smart, so do as I say.” Halmeoni folded his fingers around the paper.

He finally conceded and stuffed it into his pocket. “Fine.”

“Good boy.” She patted his rear in approval. “Now eat your dinner before it gets cold, and then take the dog out.”



Twilight had become full night by the time Jihoon led Dubu out for her walk. Clouds covered the moon, so the road was lit only by lamps, which lengthened the shadows along the asphalt.

The angle of the street sloped so steeply, the buildings leaned to stay straight. Land was at a premium in the city, but Jihoon’s neighborhood retained its quaint short buildings, winding around crooked roads so narrow that cars had no right to be on them.

The dog, no higher than Jihoon’s calf and white as the moon, had no interest in going to the bathroom. She stared down the dark road with her ears perked.

“You going or not? If you have an accident inside, you’ll have to answer to Halmeoni.”

Dubu let out rapid fire barks and took off so quickly, she wrenched the leash from Jihoon. With a curse, he ran after the dog, almost falling down the steep street.

Jihoon stopped in front of Hwang Halmeoni, who was still peeling her garlic. “Have you seen Dubu?”

“She ran past barking like a samjogku. I think she was heading toward that little playground.” Hwang Halmeoni held out a peeled clove and Jihoon accepted it, though he still hadn’t gotten the garlic smell off his skin from earlier.

The playground sat at the base of the road, adjacent to the first line of trees.

“Dubu!” Jihoon yelled, hoping she’d hidden in the plastic jungle gym.

No such luck, as her barking answered him from the woods.

Jihoon whistled, hoping it would be enough to gain her return, but she didn’t emerge.

Misty clouds hung heavy in the sky. He didn’t like the idea of going into the woods when even the light of the moon was absent. A shiver ran down his spine and goose bumps rose on his skin.

Jihoon clicked on his phone light, squared his shoulders, and entered the woods.

“Dubu, come on, girl,” he yelled loud enough for his voice to echo back.

At night, the shadows became a menacing gray of shapes reaching for him. Ghosts and monsters shifted in his peripheral vision.

It didn’t matter that he’d stopped believing in those things long ago.

Night and darkness made a believer of everyone.

Something pulled his sleeve and he spun around with a shout an octave higher than he would like to admit. Jihoon half expected to see a leering dokkaebi with rotting teeth and malicious intent, story monsters used to make kids obey their parents.

It was a branch.

He laughed to release his jitters.

A shape darted past and his laugh became another yelp.

“Dubu!” Jihoon took off after her. He was going to wring that dog’s neck. He’d go to the pet store and buy an exact replica of Dubu. His halmeoni would never know the difference.

Jihoon tried not to twitch at every noise or rustle of leaves. He kept his eyes straight ahead, refusing to glance into the shadows surrounding him.

He finally caught up with Dubu and scooped her into his arms. She wriggled, clutching something in her teeth. Jihoon hoped to the heavens it wasn’t a rat. She dropped it, and he jumped back in case it was still alive.

With a fair bit of embarrassment, Jihoon realized it wasn’t a rodent but a shoe. More specifically, a girl’s sneaker.

“Oh, good. This is exactly what I needed. I’m so glad we went into a dark, terrifying forest to find this.”

Wandering back through the woods with a wriggling Dubu in his arms soon revealed that Jihoon was good and lost. He couldn’t even find a hiking path to give him some semblance of direction.

In his arms Dubu’s body vibrated with a low growl. Nervously, Jihoon glanced around, expecting to see some wild beast approaching. But there were only shadows and trees.

It seemed Dubu was reacting to nothing, or perhaps a wayward squirrel had scurried past. Then Jihoon saw one of the shad-

ows by an old oak shift until he made out the shape of a lurking creature. The beast growled, an echo of Dubu's. Jihoon clamped his hand around the dog's muzzle to quiet her. At first he thought the animal was warning them away, until he realized it faced the opposite direction.

As he stepped back, his ear adjusted to the sounds. They weren't growls. They were words.

"Wait . . . Fox . . ."

Before Jihoon absorbed this new fact, Dubu shook her snout free of his grip and let out a tirade of barks.

When the hunched figure turned, the light of the moon slanted over its face.

Jihoon gasped.

Its features were distinctly human, with ruddy, rounded cheeks and a hooked nose. Still, Jihoon knew this was no ordinary man. It stood, revealing a stocky build with biceps as wide as Jihoon's thighs.

"S-sorry." Jihoon couldn't stop his voice from shaking. Something about this creature pulled him back to a time when he was a little boy cowering under his sheets.

"A human. Wrong," it said. The rumbling voice sounded like gravel scratching under metal.

Dubu launched herself out of Jihoon's arms. She tumbled against the dirt-packed ground, then surged forward. The beast swatted the dog away like a fly. With a yelp of pain, her small body slammed into a tree before crumpling into a limp pile.

Jihoon hurried toward Dubu but found his path blocked by the creature.

Stay calm, he thought. It's what they always said to do when you're faced with a predatory animal. And Jihoon had no doubt

that this creature, despite its human features, was a wild thing.

“Look, I don’t want any trouble.” Jihoon kept his voice low. “I’m just going to take my dog and leave and not talk about this to anyone.”

In the blink of an eye the creature attacked, and a beefy arm hooked around Jihoon’s neck. It smelled like overripe fruit and body odor—not a good combination.

Bristling whiskers pressed into Jihoon’s forehead as the beast sniffed him. Jihoon tried to strain away, but the grip around his neck was too strong. The harder he struggled, the tighter the stranglehold became.

Jihoon imagined dying alone in the middle of the forest. How his halmeoni would worry. How his body would be found days later, bloated and unidentifiable.

“Ya!” A voice shouted behind them.

The beast whirled so quickly, Jihoon’s head spun.

When everything settled, he blinked in surprise. Jihoon couldn’t decide if he was imagining things because of lack of oxygen or if a girl really stood there. If she was real, she couldn’t have been older than Jihoon’s eighteen years. Her eyes were sharp and her lips peeled back from her teeth. It made her look as wild as the creature choking him. She was slim and tall, perhaps a head shorter than Jihoon. Her feet moved into a fighter’s stance, pulling his gaze down her long legs. She was missing a shoe.

“Let him go, dokkaebi saekki-ya.” She spat in the dirt.

Puzzle pieces clicked into place, like finally remembering a word that had hung just out of reach. The beast holding Jihoon looked like the stocky, hunched goblins in his halmeoni’s stories. Except dokkaebi didn’t exist.

The dokkaebi let out a bellowing laugh. “Take him from me, yeowu.”

The girl’s eyes flared.

Jihoon knew this was an uneven match, but he didn’t have the courage to tell the girl to leave.

She grabbed the dokkaebi’s thick thumb and with a quick jerk twisted it off.

The beast wailed in pain. His arms loosened, dropping Jihoon.

Fear made Jihoon’s muscles weak as he fell to his hands and knees, wheezing to pull in precious air.

There’s no blood, Jihoon thought, as he dry-heaved. *Why is there no blood?*

In fact, the thumb cracked off like a piece of porcelain snapped from a vase.

The creature hunched, cradling his injured fist. His face was now so red, it clearly reminded Jihoon of the crimson-skinned dokkaebi in his old children’s books.

Jihoon stood on shaky legs, the girl now between him and the dokkaebi, the thumb still in her hand. She squeezed her fist closed until her knuckles cracked. White powder flew from her palm. The dust wove in and out of the moonlight as if the girl had cast a spell. Then Jihoon realized the clouds covering the moon had parted. It lit the scene with a silver pallor. Everything that had once seemed ominous now softened to the haze of a dream. The shadows shifted. A glow of shapes coalesced around the girl in a wide fan.

No, not a fan.

Tails, as bright and pale as the moon.

She looked like a warrior queen, fierce and unforgiving. And as untouchable as the ghostly tails dancing behind her.

Memories flooded Jihoon of Halmeoni reading him fables from the yellowed pages of her books. Stories where foxes lived forever. Where they became beautiful women to entice unsuspecting men. Where those men never survived.

Now he understood why the dokkaebi had called her *yeowu*—fox.

“Gumiho,” Jihoon whispered.

The girl’s head whipped around, her eyes bright as fire.

Jihoon knew he should fear her, but instead he felt a strange fascination.

The clouds reclaimed the moon, making the shadows bleed. The darkness took over until Jihoon couldn’t see a thing.

He wanted to convince himself it had all been a trick of the light. He almost could as his eyes adjusted and he saw the girl, now tailless without the moon.

The dokkaebi let out a guttural growl and charged.

The girl met the goblin head-on. It pushed her back, her feet digging divots in the ground.

Jihoon never tore his eyes from the fight, as he bent to scoop up Dubu’s limp form. She seemed too light in his arms, but he saw her small chest rise and fall with relief.

Mere meters away a battle played out that Jihoon thought he’d only see in his video games. A dokkaebi versus a gumiho. A goblin versus a fox. The two were so evenly matched that any ground gained by one side was soon lost again.

Jihoon started to flee, then stopped. He couldn’t force himself to take another step. What kind of person would he be if he abandoned the girl after she’d saved him? Not the boy his halmeoni had raised.

Already annoyed at his conscience, he called out, “His right side!”

The girl glanced over, the distraction enough for the dokkaebi to sneak under her guard. The goblin twisted her around, choking her in a headlock.

“His right side!” Jihoon repeated.

If dokkaebi and gumiho were real, then maybe his halmeoni’s other tales were real. The ones that said dokkaebi were good at wrestling but weak on the right.

The girl’s eyes lit with understanding, and her lips pursed in new determination. She leaned all her weight to the right, but the dokkaebi had heard Jihoon’s advice as well. It pulled out a strip of gold paper decorated in red symbols—a bujeok—and placed it over the girl’s heart with a meaty fist. She screeched, pain etched in the piercing sound. The talisman stuck to her like a fluttering badge.

Her legs shook and she started to lose ground. The dokkaebi’s arm tightened and her eyes widened, showing fear for the first time. At this rate, she’d lose more than ground.

Jihoon was not a brave boy. So he was already regretting his half-formed idea as he put Dubu down. He took two deep breaths, clenched his teeth, and took off in a sprint. He barreled headfirst into the dokkaebi’s right side, under the arm that held the girl. The three tumbled to the ground together.

Bodies collided. Limbs grappled madly. The girl twisted until she sat atop the dokkaebi, whose meaty fist looped around her slim neck. Its other gripped Jihoon by the hair.

“Kill the fox,” the dokkaebi kept repeating. “Kill the fox.”

Despite her predicament, the girl didn’t struggle. She wore the calm look of one who had complete control. Perhaps she’d become delusional from pain and lack of oxygen.

The girl placed her hand against the dokkaebi’s heart, her long fingers splayed across his chest.

The beast jerked. The hand holding Jihoon tightened until he felt the sharp pain of hair being ripped from his head. Jihoon let out a yelp and gritted his teeth as he tried to pry open the thick fingers holding him.

The dokkaebi's legs flailed as if the girl were choking him instead of the other way around. Her eyes were unblinking, dark, and depthless. Sweat beaded over her pale skin.

Around her shadows danced, like smoke caught in a vortex. The phantom tails wove through them.

The atmosphere thickened, the autumn chill replaced by sweltering heat. There were waves in the air, the kind that rose under a hot summer sun.

The dokkaebi's fists tore at more of Jihoon's hair. The heat and pain combined to blur his vision, as white dots danced before his eyes. He watched them coalesce into ghosts that raced through the forest. He watched them fly away and wished he could join them.

Wait for me, he tried to shout. One stopped. A girl? And glanced back at him before sprinting into the darkness.

The howls of the dokkaebi echoed through the trees. The goblin convulsed—leaves crunching and dirt flying—until its body jerked in a final death throes like a fish flopping on a deck.

The smoke dissipated. The girl's tails faded. The air cleared.

She sat upon the dokkaebi as calm as a child perched on her favorite reading chair. Her hand was still spread over its chest. Then the beast's body began to crack, fissures racing along its ruddy skin.

The dokkaebi imploded into scattered dust as the girl stood.

"You killed it," Jihoon sputtered.

"I saved your life." She stepped over the particles of dead dok-

kaebi until she loomed above Jihoon. “Make sure I don’t regret it. You will tell no one about what you saw tonight.”

He nodded furiously.

She frowned at the bright yellow paper still plastered to her chest and tried to rip it free. With a hiss of pain she snatched her hand away.

Jihoon stood and reached for it. But she retreated from him, her lips twisting in a snarl.

He held up his hand, palm out. “Can I help?”

She watched him carefully but didn’t move as he reached for the bujeok. The talisman came away as easy as plucking a leaf from a tree. As he wondered what magic had let him remove it when the girl, obviously much stronger than he was, could not, the bujeok dissolved in his hand.

The girl lurched forward and Jihoon barely caught her as she fell. The momentum sent them both falling to the ground.

She convulsed like a person being electrocuted. Foam spilled from her pale lips as her eyes rolled back.

Jihoon wasn’t sure what to do. He’d heard once that if someone was having a seizure, you should put something between their teeth. And while he debated his next move, she stilled.

“Hello?”

No reply.

He leaned in to check her breathing.

She rocketed up, slamming into his forehead as she gagged. Jihoon fell back as something bulleted toward him. It hit him on the cheek before rolling away, and the girl crumpled into an unconscious heap.

Jihoon, lying in a pile of leaves and dirt, turned his head to glance at the object. It was a bead, small and opalescent as a pearl.

Sitting up, he reached for it—then almost dropped it as it pulsed against his palms. His hand trembled as he recognized the pattern of the steady *thump*, like the beat of a heart.

A silver line speared from the pearl, a thread connecting him to the girl's heart.

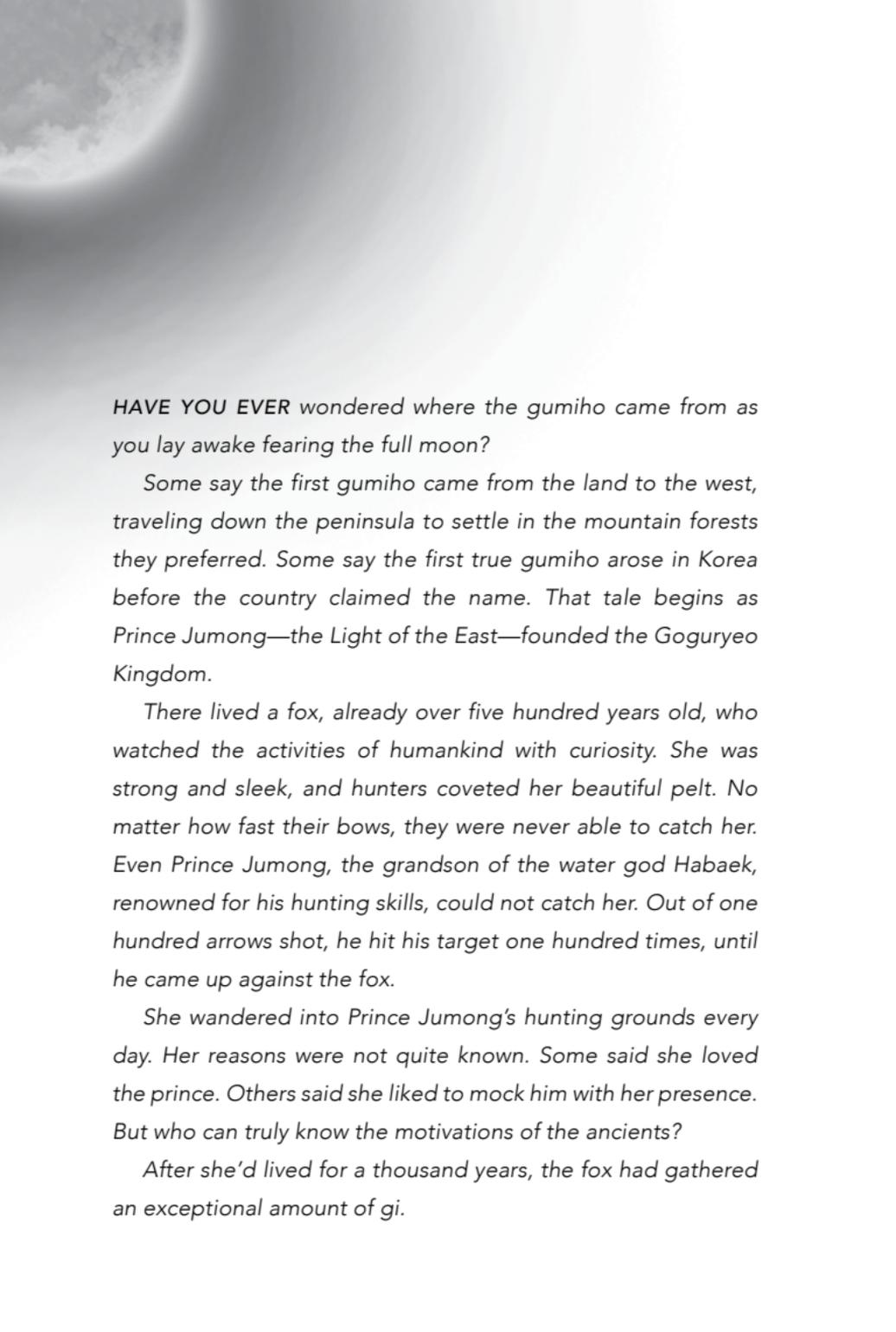
Jihoon's fingers became numb so quickly, it seemed as if the warmth had been leached from his skin. And the thread pulsed, growing brighter, thicker. Jihoon felt a wave of fatigue overtake him. He almost fell back to the ground when the girl's eyes flew open, zeroing in on the bead.

Jumping up, she snatched it away. A growl rumbled in her throat. A terrifying, beastly sound. The rage that twisted her face wiped away the clouds of fatigue from Jihoon's brain and replaced them with fear.

She retreated so fast she was a blur. Leaves spun and branches cracked as she sprinted into the trees.

With nothing but the sounds of the forest for company, Jihoon was suddenly aware he was all alone again. And still lost.

A rustle pulled a yelp from him. Then he relaxed again as Dubu limped over and flopped into his arms with a whimper. Jihoon, hands shaking, pulled her close and buried his face in her fur.



HAVE YOU EVER wondered where the *gumiho* came from as you lay awake fearing the full moon?

Some say the first *gumiho* came from the land to the west, traveling down the peninsula to settle in the mountain forests they preferred. Some say the first true *gumiho* arose in Korea before the country claimed the name. That tale begins as Prince Jumong—the Light of the East—founded the Goguryeo Kingdom.

There lived a fox, already over five hundred years old, who watched the activities of humankind with curiosity. She was strong and sleek, and hunters coveted her beautiful pelt. No matter how fast their bows, they were never able to catch her. Even Prince Jumong, the grandson of the water god Habaek, renowned for his hunting skills, could not catch her. Out of one hundred arrows shot, he hit his target one hundred times, until he came up against the fox.

She wandered into Prince Jumong's hunting grounds every day. Her reasons were not quite known. Some said she loved the prince. Others said she liked to mock him with her presence. But who can truly know the motivations of the ancients?

After she'd lived for a thousand years, the fox had gathered an exceptional amount of *gi*.

Through this energy she transformed herself into a human. A beautiful woman loved by any man she met, but never for long.

So she walked the earth alone, not quite human, but not quite beast.

A fox who loved the mortals she mimicked.

Until she could not love them anymore.

*A Good Girl's
Guide to Murder*
Holly Jackson

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a good
girl's
guide to
murder

HOLLY JACKSON

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FREE SAMPLE—NOT FOR RESALE

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Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

**DON'T FORGET TO
READ BETWEEN THE LIES. . . .**

part one

SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT PROPOSAL 2019/2020

Student number: 4169

Student's full name: Pippa Fitz-Amobi

PART A: TO BE COMPLETED BY STUDENT

The courses of study or area(s) of interest to which the topic relates:

English, Journalism, Investigative Journalism, Criminal Law

Working title of Senior Capstone Project:

"Research into the 2014 Missing Persons Investigation of Andie Bell in Fairview, CT"

Present the topic to be researched in the form of a statement/question/hypothesis.

A report on how print, televised, and social media have become key players in police investigations, using Andie Bell as a case study, and the implications of how the press presented Sal Singh and his alleged guilt.

My initial resources will be:

Interview with missing persons expert, interview with a local journalist who reported on the case, newspaper articles, interviews with members of the community. Textbooks and articles on police procedure, psychology, and the role of media.

SUPERVISOR'S COMMENTS:

Pippa, this is an incredibly sensitive topic, as it concerns a terrible crime that happened in our own town. Your project has been accepted only on the condition that no ethical lines are crossed. Please find a more focused angle for your report as you work through your research, and there is to be NO CONTACT made with either of the families involved in this case. This will be considered an ethical violation, and your project will be disqualified.

STUDENT DECLARATION:

I certify that I have read and understood the regulations as set out in the notice to students.

Signature:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PIPPA FITZ-AMOBİ".

Date: 7/18/19

one

Pip knew where they lived.

Everyone in Fairview knew where they lived.

Their home was like the town's own haunted house; people's footsteps quickened as they walked by, and their words strangled and died in their throats. Shrieking children would gather on their walk home from school, daring one another to run up and touch the front gate.

But it wasn't haunted by ghosts, just three sad people trying to live their lives as before. A house not haunted by flickering lights or spectral falling chairs, but by dark spray-painted letters of "Scum Family" and stone-shattered windows.

Pip had always wondered why they didn't move. Not that they had to; they hadn't done anything wrong. But she didn't know how they lived like that. How the Singhs found the strength to stay here. Here, in Fairview, under the weight of so many widened eyes, of the comments whispered just loud enough to be heard, of neighborly small talk never stretching into real talk anymore.

It was a particular cruelty that their house was so close to Fairview High School, where both Andie Bell and Sal Singh had gone, where Pip would return for her senior year in a few weeks when the late-summer sun dipped into September.

Pip stopped and rested her hand on the front gate, instantly braver than half the town's kids. Her eyes traced the path to the front door. It was possible that this was a very bad idea; she had considered that.

Pausing for just a second, Pip held her breath, then pushed the creaking gate and crossed the yard. She stopped at the door and knocked three times. Her reflection stared back at her: the long dark hair sun-bleached a lighter brown at the tips, the pale white skin despite a week just spent in the Caribbean, the sharp muddy-green eyes braced for impact.

The door opened with the clatter of a falling chain and clicking locks.

"H-hello?" he said, holding the door half open, with his hand folded over the side. Pip blinked to break her stare, but she couldn't help it. He looked so much like Sal: the Sal she knew from all those television reports and newspaper pictures. The Sal now fading from her memory. Ravi had his brother's messy black side-swept hair, thick arched eyebrows, and oaken-hued skin.

"Hello?" he said again.

"Um . . ." Pip faltered. He'd grown even taller since she last saw him. She'd never been this close before, but now that she was, she saw he had a dimple in his chin, just like hers. "Um, sorry, hi." She did an awkward half wave that she immediately regretted.

"Hi?"

"Hi, Ravi," she said. "I . . . You don't know me. . . . I'm Pippa Fitz-Amobi. I was a few years below you at school before you left."

"OK . . ."

"I was just wondering if I could borrow a second of your time? Well, not *only* a second, we're already way past that. . . . Maybe like a few sequential seconds, if you can spare them?"

Oh god, this was what happened when she was nervous: words spewed out, unchecked and overexplained, until someone stopped her.

Ravi looked confused.

“Sorry,” Pip said, recovering. “I mean, I’m doing my senior capstone project at school and—”

“What’s a capstone project?”

“It’s kind of like a senior thesis you work on independently, alongside normal classes. You can pick any topic you want, and I was wondering if you’d be willing to be interviewed for mine.”

“What’s it about?” His dark eyebrows hugged closer to his eyes.

“Um . . . it’s about what happened five years ago.”

Ravi exhaled loudly, his lip curling with what looked like anger.

“Why?” he said.

“Because I don’t think your brother did it—and I’m going to try to prove it.”

PIPPA FITZ-AMOBİ

7/30/19

CAPSTONE PROJECT LOG—ENTRY 1

Our capstone project logs are supposed to be for recording any obstacles we face in our research; our progress; and the aims of our final reports. Mine will have to be a little different: I'm going to record all my research here, both relevant and irrelevant, because I don't really know what my final report will be yet or what will end up being important. I will just have to wait and see where I'm at after all my investigating and what essay I can bring together.

I'm hoping it will *not* be the topic I proposed to Mrs. Morgan. I'm hoping it will be the truth. What really happened to Andie Bell on April 18, 2014? And if—as my instincts tell me—Salil “Sal” Singh is not guilty, then who killed her?

I don't think I'll actually solve the case and figure out who murdered Andie. I'm not deluded. But I'm hoping my findings might lead to reasonable doubt about Sal's guilt, and suggest that the police were mistaken in closing the case without digging further.

The first stage in this project is to research what happened to Andrea Bell—known to everyone as Andie—and the circumstances surrounding her disappearance.

From the first national online news outlet to report on the event:

Andrea Bell, seventeen, was reported missing from her home in Fairview, Connecticut, last Friday.

She left home in her car—a white Honda Civic—with her cell phone, but did not take any clothes with her. Police say her disappearance is “completely out of character.”

Police began searching the woodland near the family home this past weekend.

Andrea, known as Andie, is described as white, five feet six inches tall, with long blond hair and blue eyes. It is thought that she was wearing dark jeans and a blue cropped sweater on the night she went missing.¹

Other sources had more details as to when Andie was last seen alive, and the time frame in which she is believed to have been abducted.

Andie Bell was “last seen alive by her younger sister, Becca, around 10:30 p.m. on April 18, 2014.”²

This was corroborated by the police in a press conference on Tuesday, April 22: “Footage taken from a security camera outside the bank on Fairview’s Main Street confirms that Andie’s car was seen driving away from her home at about 10:40 p.m.”³

According to her parents, Jason and Dawn Bell, Andie was “supposed to pick (them) up from a dinner party at 12:45 a.m.” When Andie didn’t show up or answer any of their phone calls, they started reaching out to her friends to see if anyone knew of her whereabouts. Jason Bell “called the police to report his daughter missing at 3:00 a.m. Saturday morning.”⁴

So whatever happened to Andie Bell that night happened between 10:40 p.m. and 12:45 a.m.

Here seems like a good place to type up the transcript from my interview with Angela Johnson.

1 www.ustn.com/news/2014/04/21/local-teen-missing, 4/21/14

2 www.fairfieldctnews.com/fairview/crime-4839, 4/24/14

3 www.ustn.com/news/2014/04/22/missing-schoolgirl-698834, 4/22/14

4 Forbes, Stanley, 2014, “The Real Story of Andie Bell’s Killer,” *Fairview Mail*, 4/29/14, pp. 1–4.

**TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA JOHNSON
FROM THE MISSING PERSONS BUREAU**

ANGELA: Hello.

PIP: Hi, is this Angela Johnson?

ANGELA: Speaking, yep. Is this Pippa?

PIP: Yes, thanks so much for replying to my email. Do you mind if I record this interview for my project?

ANGELA: Yeah, that's fine. I'm sorry, I've only got about ten minutes. So what do you want to know about missing persons?

PIP: Well, I was wondering if you could talk me through what happens when someone is reported missing? What's the process and the first steps taken by the police?

ANGELA: When someone is reported missing, the police will try to get as much detail as possible so they can identify the potential risk to the missing person, and an appropriate police response can be made. They'll ask for name, age, description, the clothes they were last seen wearing, the circumstances of their disappearance, if going missing is out of character for this person, details of any vehicle involved. Using this information, the police will determine whether this is an at-risk missing persons case.

PIP: And what circumstances would make it an at-risk case?

ANGELA: If they are vulnerable because of their age or a disability, or if the behavior is out of character, which indicates they could have been exposed to harm.

PIP: Um, so, if the missing person is seventeen years old and it

is deemed out of character for her to go missing, would that be considered an at-risk case?

ANGELA: Absolutely, when a minor is involved.

PIP: So how would the police respond?

ANGELA: Well, there would be immediate deployment of police officers to the location the person is missing from. The officers will get further information about the missing person, such as details of their friends or partners; any health conditions; financial information, in case they try to withdraw money. Police will also need recent photographs and might take DNA samples, in case they're needed in subsequent forensic examinations. And, with consent of the homeowners, the location would be searched thoroughly to see if the missing person is concealed or hiding there and to establish whether there are any further evidential leads.

PIP: So immediately the police are looking for any clues or suggestions that the missing person has been the victim of a crime?

ANGELA: Absolutely. If the circumstances of the disappearance are suspicious, officers are instructed to document evidence early on, as though they were investigating a murder. Of course, only a very small percentage of missing persons cases turn into homicide cases.

PIP: And what happens if nothing significant turns up after the initial home search?

ANGELA: They'll expand the search to the immediate area. They'll question friends, neighbors, anyone who might have relevant information. If it is a teenager who's missing, we can't assume the reporting parent knows all of their child's friends and acquaintances. Peers are good points of contact to establish other

important leads—you know, any secret boyfriends, that sort of thing. And a press strategy is usually discussed because appeals for information in the media can be very useful in these situations.

PIP: So if it's a seventeen-year-old girl who's gone missing, the police would contact her friends and boyfriend early on?

ANGELA: Yes, of course. Inquiries will be made, because if the missing person has run away, they are likely to be hiding out with someone close to them.

PIP: And at what point in a missing persons case do police assume they are looking for a body?

ANGELA: Well, timewise, it's not— Oh, Pippa, I have to go. Sorry, I've been called into my meeting.

PIP: Oh, OK, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me.

ANGELA: And if you have more questions, just shoot me an email and I'll get to it when I can.

PIP: Will do, thanks again.

I found these statistics:

80% of missing people are found in the first twenty-four hours. 97% are found in the first week, and 99% of cases are resolved in the first year.

That leaves just 1%. 1% of people who disappear are never found. And just 0.25% of all missing persons cases have a fatal outcome.⁵ So where does this leave Andie Bell? Floating incessantly somewhere between 1% and 0.25%.

Even though Andie has never been found and her body never recovered, most people accept that she is dead. And why is that?

Sal Singh is why.

⁵ www.missingpersonstats.com

two

Pip's hands hovered over the keyboard as she strained to listen to the commotion downstairs. A crash, heavy footsteps, skidding claws, and unrestrained boyish giggles.

"Josh! Why is the dog wearing my shirt!" Pip's dad shouted, the sound floating upstairs.

Pip snort-laughed as she clicked to save her capstone project log and closed her laptop. It was never quiet once her dad returned from work.

Downstairs, Pip found Josh running from room to room—kitchen to hallway to living room—on repeat. Cackling as he went.

Close behind was Barney, the golden retriever, wearing her dad's loudest shirt, the blindingly green patterned one he'd bought during their last trip to Nigeria. The dog skidded elatedly across the polished oak in the hall, excitement whistling through his teeth.

Bringing up the rear was Pip's dad in his gray Hugo Boss three-piece suit, all six and a half feet of him charging after the dog and the boy, laughing in wild bursts.

"Oh my god, I was trying to do homework," Pip said, restraining a smile as she jumped back to avoid being mowed down. Barney stopped for a moment to headbutt her shin and then

scampered off to jump on Victor and Josh as they collapsed together on the sofa.

“Hello, pickle,” her dad said, patting the couch beside him.

“Hi, Dad. You were so quiet I didn’t even know you were home.”

“My Pipsicle, you are too clever to recycle a joke.”

She sat down beside them. Josh started excavating his right nostril, and Pip’s dad batted his hand away. “How were your days, then?” her dad asked, setting Josh off on a graphic spiel about the soccer games he’d played earlier.

Pip zoned out; she’d already heard it all in the car when she picked Josh up from practice. She’d only been half listening, distracted by the way the replacement coach had stared at her, uncertain, when she’d pointed out which of the nine-year-olds was hers and said: “I’m Josh’s sister.”

She should have been used to it by now, the lingering looks while people tried to work out the logistics of her family. Victor, the tall Nigerian man, was evidently her stepfather; and Josh, her half brother. But Pip didn’t like those words, those cold technicalities. The people you love weren’t calculated, subtracted, or held at arm’s length across a decimal point. Victor was her dad, who’d raised her since she was four years old, and Josh was her annoying little brother.

Her “real” father, the man who lent the Fitz to her name, died in a car accident when she was ten months old. And though Pip nodded and smiled when her mom would ask whether she remembered the way her father hummed while he brushed his teeth or how he’d laughed when Pip’s second spoken word was “poo,” she didn’t remember him. But sometimes remembering isn’t for yourself; sometimes you do it just to make someone else smile.

“And how’s the project going, Pip?” Her dad turned to her as he unbuttoned the shirt from the dog.

“It’s OK,” she said. “I’m just researching at the moment. I did go to see Ravi Singh this morning, though.”

“Oh, and . . . ?”

“He was busy, but he said I could go back on Friday.”

“I wouldn’t,” Josh said in a cautionary tone.

“That’s because you’re a judgmental prepubescent boy who still thinks little people live inside traffic lights.” Pip looked at him. “The Singhs haven’t done anything wrong.”

Victor stepped in. “Josh, try to imagine if everyone judged you because of something your sister had done.”

“All Pip ever does is homework.”

She swung a cushion into Josh’s face, and her dad held the boy’s arms down as he squirmed to retaliate, tickling his ribs.

As Pip watched them play-fighting, she couldn’t help but wonder whether the Singhs ever laughed like that anymore. Or the Bells.

Maybe laughter was one of the very first things you lost after something like that.

PIPPA FITZ-AMOBI

7/31/19

CAPSTONE PROJECT LOG—ENTRY 2

What happened next in the Andie Bell case is hard to piece together from the newspaper reports, so I have to fill in the gaps with guesswork and rumors until the picture becomes clearer. Hopefully, interviews with Ravi and Naomi—who was one of Sal’s best friends—will help.

According to what Angela said, the police would have asked for details about Andie’s friends early on, presumably after taking statements from the Bell family.

After some serious social media stalking, it looks like Andie’s best friends were two girls named Chloe Burch and Emma Hutton.



Emma Hutton, Sal Singh and 97 others

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Emma Hutton Oh my god Andie, stop being so gorge.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 5y

Chloe Burch I wish I didn't have to be in pics with you. Give me your face

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 5y

Andie Bell No ;)

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 5y

Emma Hutton Andie, let's take a nice one at the next calamity? Need new prof pic :)

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 5y

Write a comment . . .

This post was from almost two weeks before Andie disappeared. It looks like neither Chloe nor Emma lives in Fairview anymore, but I'll message them to see if they'll do a phone interview.

Chloe and Emma did a lot on that first weekend (April 19 and 20) to help spread the Connecticut State Police's Twitter campaign: #FindAndie. I don't think it's too big of a leap to assume that the police contacted Chloe and Emma either on the Friday night Andie went missing or the next morning. What they said to the police, I don't know. Hopefully, I can find out.

We do know that police spoke to Andie's boyfriend at the time. His name was Sal Singh, and he was attending his senior year at Fairview High along with Andie.

At some point on Saturday, April 19, the police contacted him:

*"Detective Richard Hawkins confirmed that officers had questioned Salil Singh as to his whereabouts the previous night, particularly the period of time during which it is believed Andie went missing."*⁶

Friday night, Sal had been hanging out at his friend Max Hastings's house. He was with his four best friends: Naomi Ward, Jake Lawrence, Millie Simpson, and Max.

Again, I need to check this with Naomi next week, but I think Sal told the police that he left Max's around 12:15 a.m. He walked home, and his father (Mohan Singh) confirmed that "Sal returned home at approximately 12:50 a.m."⁷ [Note: the distance between Max's house (Courtland) and Sal's (Grove Place) takes about thirty minutes to walk.]

The police confirmed Sal's alibi with his four friends over that weekend.

6 www.ustn.com/news/2014/05/03/fairview-murder, 5/3/14

7 www.ustn.com/news/2014/05/03/fairview-murder, 5/3/14

Missing posters went up. House-to-house inquiries started on the Sunday.⁸

On the Monday one hundred volunteers helped the police carry out searches in the local woodland. I've seen the news footage; a whole ant line of people in the trees, calling her name. Later in the day forensic teams were spotted going into the Bell residence.⁹

And on the Tuesday everything changed. I think chronologically is the best way to consider the events of that day, and those that followed, even though we, as a town, learned the details out of order and jumbled:

Midmorning: Naomi Ward, Max Hastings, Jake Lawrence, and Millie Simpson contacted the police from school and confessed to providing false information. They said that Sal had asked them to lie and that he actually left Max's house around 10:30 p.m. on the night Andie disappeared, not 12:15 a.m.

I don't know for sure what the correct police procedure would have been, but I'm guessing at that point, Sal became the number one suspect.

But no one could find him: Sal wasn't at school and he wasn't at home. He wasn't answering his phone. It later came out, however, that Sal had sent a text to his father that Tuesday morning, though he was ignoring all other calls. The press would refer to this as a "confession text."¹⁰

Tuesday evening, one of the police teams searching for Andie found a body in the woods.

It was Sal.

He had killed himself.

The press never reported the method by which Sal committed

8 Forbes, Stanley, "Local Girl Still Missing," *Fairview Mail*, 4/21/14, pp. 1-2.

9 www.ustn.com/news/2014/04/21/fairview-missing-girl, 4/21/14

10 www.ustn.com/news/2014/05/03/fairview-murder, 5/3/14

suicide, but by the power of small-town rumor, I knew (as did every other student at Fairview at the time).

Sal walked into the woods near his home, took a huge dose of sleeping pills, and placed a plastic bag over his head, securing it with an elastic band around his neck. He suffocated while unconscious.

At the police press conference that night, there was no mention of Sal. The police only revealed the information about security footage placing Andie driving away from her home at 10:40 p.m.¹¹

On Wednesday Andie's car was found parked on a small residential road (Monroe).

It wasn't until the following Monday that a police spokeswoman revealed the following:

"As a result of recent intelligence and forensic information, we have strong reason to suspect that a young man named Salil Singh, aged eighteen, was involved in Andie's abduction and murder. The evidence would have been sufficient to arrest and charge the suspect had he not died before proceedings could be initiated. Police are not looking for anyone else in relation to Andie's disappearance at this time, but our search for Andie will continue unabated. Our thoughts go out to the Bell family, and our deepest sympathies for the devastation this update has caused them."

Their sufficient evidence:

- They found Andie's phone on Sal's body.
- Forensic tests found traces of Andie's blood under the fingernails of his right middle and index fingers.

¹¹ www.ustn.com/news/2014/04/22/fairview-girl-still-missing, 4/22/14

- Andie’s blood was discovered in the trunk of her abandoned car.
- Sal’s fingerprints were found around the dashboard and steering wheel, alongside prints from Andie and the rest of the Bell family.¹²

The evidence, they said, would have been enough to charge Sal. But he was dead, so there was no trial and no conviction. No defense either.

In the following weeks there were more searches of the woodland areas in and around Fairview. Searches using cadaver dogs. Police divers in the river. Andie’s body was never found. The Andie Bell missing persons case was administratively closed in the middle of June 2014.¹³

Eighteen months later a court order was filed and Andie Bell was declared dead in absentia, based on the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. Andie Bell’s death certificate was issued.¹⁴ Despite her body never having been located, she has now been legally declared dead.

After the ruling the district attorney said: “The case against Salil Singh would have been based on circumstantial and forensic evidence. It is not for me to state whether or not Salil Singh killed Andie Bell; that would have been a jury’s job to decide.”¹⁵

And even though there has never been a trial, no conviction by a jury; even though Sal never had the chance to defend himself, he is guilty. Not in the legal sense, but in all the other ways that truly matter.

12 www.ustn.com/news/2014/05/07/fairview-andie-bell-murder, 5/7/14

13 www.ustn.com/news/2014/06/15/andie-bell-case-closed, 6/15/14

14 www.thenewsroom.com/AndieBellInquest/report57743, 1/12/16

15 www.ustn.com/news/2016/01/15/fairview-murder-DA-statement, 1/15/16

When you ask people in town what happened to Andie Bell, they'll tell you without hesitation: "She was murdered by Salil Singh." No "allegedly," no "might have," no "probably," no "most likely."

He did it, they say. Sal Singh killed Andie.

But I'm just not so sure.

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THE LAST HUMAN

ZACK JORDAN



CHAPTER ONE

Not so many years ago, Shenya the Widow was a void-cold killer. And as hobbies—no, passions—go, it was extraordinarily fulfilling. Hunt all night, feast at dawn, take one's pick of the choicest males before the long day's sleep . . . oh yes. She still fantasizes about it—though sadly, fantasy is all she has left. This is because Shenya the Widow has been conquered, mind and body, by an ancient and terrible force.

Motherhood.

And so she crouches like death's own shadow outside a closed bedroom door and flexes a variety of bladed appendages in quiet reflection. Her own mother warned her about this. She could be *hunting* right now. She could be streaking through a moonlit

forest with the rest of her covenant, the bloodlust boiling in her breast, her hunting cry joining those of her sisters in a chorus of beautiful death . . . but no.

She composes a Network message in her mind. **[Sarya the Daughter]**, says the message. **[My love and greatest treasure. My child, for whom I would gladly die. Open this door before I cut it out of the station wall.]** She attaches a few choice emotions—though she knows her daughter’s unit is too basic to read them—and fires the message through the Network implant in the back of her head.

[Error, unit not receiving], says the return message. **[Have a nice day.]**

Shenya releases a slow and wrathful hiss. **[Very clever]**, she sends, tapping a black and gleaming blade against the door. **[I know you’re receiving, my love. And if you sabotage your unit one more time, well.]** She dispatches the message as violently as possible, leans against the hatch, and begins a shrill danger-rattle with every available blade.

And then with a hiss and the screech of metal on chitin, the hatch slides aside to bathe Shenya the Widow in the blinding glow of her daughter’s quarters. She ignores the pain from her eyes—must her daughter *always* keep her room so bright?—and waits the moment it takes for her to distinguish the figure that is more collapsed than seated against the far wall. Its utility suit is rumpled, its boots undone, its sleeves and collar pulled as low and as high as they go. Only the head and the ends of the upper

limbs are bare, but even that much exposed flesh would have sickened her not long ago.

Back before Shenya the Widow ever dreamed of calling this one *daughter*, it took her some time to stomach the sight of an intelligence without an exoskeleton. Imagine, a being with only four limbs! And worse, each of these limbs splits into five more at its end—well, that is the stuff of nightmares, is it not? As if that were not horrific enough, this being is wrapped top to bottom not in clean and beautiful chitin but in an oily blood-filled organ—which is called *skin*, her research has told her. There is a sporadic dusting of *hair* over this skin, with a few concentrations in seemingly random spots. Up top there is a great knot of it, long and thick and nearly Widow-dark, wild and falling down in tangles over the strangest eyes one could imagine. Those eyes! Two multicolored orbs that flash like killing strokes, that express emotion nearly as well as a pair of mandibles. One wouldn't think it possible but here it is in action. That gaze that is nearly scorching the floor, that somehow radiates from such odd concentric circles—is that a sullen rage?

“Sorry about the hatch,” says her adopted daughter without looking up. Her upper limbs, Shenya the Widow cannot help but notice, are held dangerously close to an obscene Widow sign. “I was getting ready for my *field trip*.”

And now her mother understands: this is a mighty anger, a fury worthy of a Widow, and it is directed somewhere outside this room.

Shenya the Widow flows into her daughter's room with the gentle clicks of exoskeleton on metal. She may be an apex predator, a murderous soul wrapped in lightning and darkness, but underneath that she is all mother. There are wrongs to be righted and hurts to be savagely avenged—but before any of that can happen there is a room to be tidied. Shenya the Widow's many limbs are up to the task.

The spare utility suit, yes, that can go straight to laundry—two limbs fold it and place it by the door. The nest, or *bunk* as her daughter now calls it, needs straightening—two more blades begin that noble work. A single blade begins scouting the floor for food bar wrappers, stabbing their silver forms as it finds them. The laundry limbs, mission accomplished, now rescue a soft black shape from the floor. The doll is black and silky and a horrifying caricature of Widow physiology, but Shenya the Widow made it many years ago with her own eight blades and her hearts still ache to see it banished from the bunk. She places it, carefully, back where it belongs.

“Where is your Network unit, my love?” asks Shenya the Widow in that soft and dangerous voice that comes with motherhood. Her nearly spherical vision examines all corners of the room at once.

Her daughter glares at the floor without answering.

Shenya the Widow narrowly restrains a click of approval. On the one blade, this is a Widow rage—a towering and explosive wrath—and it is beautiful. One spends so much energy attempting to install tra-

ditional values in a young and coalescing mind, and it is always rewarding to see effort yield results. But on another blade, well . . . insolence is insolence, is it not?

Happily, she is saved by circumstance. A questing limb reports that it has found the object in question under the bunk. Shenya the Widow drags it out, feeling a twinge of guilt at the strength required. This heavy prosthetic, this poor substitute for a common Network implant, is what her daughter has been forced to wear strapped around her torso for most of her life. It is an ancient device, a budget so-called *universal*, only distantly related to the elegant implant somewhere in Shenya the Widow's head. Both perform the same function, in theory: each connects its user to a galaxy-spanning Network brimming with beauty and meaning and effortless communication. One does it seamlessly, as smooth as the bond between one neuron and a billion billion others. The other does it through a shaky hologram, some static-infused audio, and numerous error messages.

[. . . before I cut it out of the station wall], says the Network unit to itself, its trembling hologram flickering in the air above it.

One might assume that a certain physiology is required to hold oneself like a Widow, but her daughter proves this untrue. She sits up, wrapping upper limbs around lower with movements as Widowlike as they are—well . . . what she is. It is these familiar motions that unlock the deepest chambers of Shenya the Widow's hearts. The untidy room, the insolence, the

disrespect for property—all that is forgotten. Her many limbs abandon their myriad tasks and regroup on the figure of her daughter, stroking skin-covered cheeks without the slightest hint of revulsion. They straighten the utility suit and slide through the *hair* and caress those ten tiny appendages. “Tell me, Daughter,” whispers Shenya the Widow with a sigh through mandibles as dangerous as her blades. “Tell me everything.”

Her daughter takes a deep breath, lifting her shoulders with that dramatic motion that people with lungs often use. “We’re going to one of the observation decks today,” she says quietly. “They have six openings for trainees.”

Shenya the Widow chooses her words carefully, missing the effortless precision of mental Network communication. “I did not know you were interested in—”

And now, finally, that fiery gaze raises from the floor. “You know what the prerequisites are?” asks her daughter, glaring at her mother through a tangle of dark hair.

They are ferocious, those eyes, and Shenya the Widow finds herself wondering how another of her daughter’s species would feel caught in this three-color gaze. White outside brown-gold outside black outside . . . fury. “I do not,” she answers cautiously.

“I bet you can guess.”

“I . . . choose not to,” says Shenya the Widow, still more cautiously.

“Tier two-point-zero intelligence,” says her daugh-

ter in a tight voice. “Not, say, one-point-eight.” The beloved figure slumps in a way that would be impossible with an exoskeleton. “No, we wouldn’t want a moron at the controls, would we?” she murmurs to the floor.

“My child!” says Shenya the Widow, shocked. “Who dares call the daughter of Shenya the Widow such a thing?”

“Everybody calls me *such a thing*,” says her daughter, again straying perilously close to disrespect, “because I am registered as *such a thing*.”

Shenya the Widow chooses to ignore the accusatory tone. This conversation again. She searches through her implant for the record of its last instance. “Daughter,” she begins. “I understand that you are frustrated by—”

“Actually, it doesn’t matter, because also you have to be Networked,” interrupts her daughter, tapping her head where her implant would be if she had one. “A prosthetic doesn’t cut it, apparently. Something about *instant responses* and *clear communication* and—” The rest of the requirements are cut off by a grunt as she extends a wild kick toward the device on the floor.

Shenya the Widow catches the unit before it touches the wall, as her daughter surely knew she would. She employs two more limbs to raise that gaze back to her own, resting the flat of a blade on each side of that beloved face. She can feel her daughter fight but Shenya the Widow is a hunter and a mother—two things as unstoppable as destiny.

“Daughter,” she says quietly. “You know our reasons.”

Her daughter meets that gaze. “You know what?” she says. “I’m tired of pretending. I’m tired of having no one to—” She stops, and her voice drops. “Sometimes I just want to tell everyone the truth and just see what happens.”

Now Shenya the Widow rattles, low and soft. This is far more serious than a job and a Network implant. “You must *never*, my love,” she whispers, filling her words with the force of a mother Widow.

“I must never?” asks her daughter, eyes still locked on her mother’s. “I must never *tell the truth*? I must never say hey, guess what, I’m *not* a moron, I’m a—”

“Do not say it,” hisses Shenya the Widow, trembling. With effort, she withdraws the blade that has just slit the synthetic flooring near her daughter’s foot. All over her body she feels the pleasure of blades lengthening and edges hardening, and fights to keep any of them from coming in contact with that beloved skin—

“I’m a Human,” says her daughter in a steady voice.

Shenya the Widow raises herself off the floor, her many blades extending in every direction. “Sarya the Daughter,” she says, in a voice that would terrify anyone on the station. “Hold out your appendage.”

Anyone but her daughter, apparently. The gaze doesn’t break as the hand is offered, palm up. The rest of her body shows the traditional posture of respect for an elder, with the worst sarcasm Shenya the

Widow has seen in a long time. All the more reason for discipline.

“It does not matter what you *were*, my daughter,” says Shenya the Widow, placing the edge of a blade on a hand already crisscrossed with faint white lines. “It matters what you *are*, and what you are is Widow.”

Her daughter’s hand does not move. The posture becomes even more sarcastic, if anything. Those eyes gaze into her mother’s, waiting and judging. Expecting pain without flinching. Like a Widow.

Shenya the Widow’s hearts overflow. *Pain without fear*—this, in her opinion, is the central proverb of Widowhood. She has spent so much time instilling this principle that it is almost poetic to have it used against her in this way.

“I raised you thus,” she continues, struggling to keep her prideful pheromones in check, “because I could not raise you as—as what you are.”

Her daughter does not look away. Her hand curls around the razor edge in its palm, as if in challenge. “Say it,” she says. “Say what I am.”

“I—” Shenya the Widow stops, then is shocked that *she* is the one who looks away. “I choose not to,” she says.

For the first time she feels the hand under her blade tremble, and Shenya the Widow returns her gaze to that precious face in time to see moisture welling up around those strange eyes. This is a thing Humans do: their emotions can often be derived from their excretions. The literature calls these drops of liquid *tears*; they express intense emotion, whether

it be joy or distress. In this instance, she is almost certain that it is—

“Do you know what that feels like?” whispers her daughter.

Immediately, all desire to discipline evaporates. “Daughter,” says Shenya the Widow, withdrawing the blade without piercing that precious skin. “My center and my purpose.” She encircles her daughter in a gleaming, clicking embrace, rests the flat of a blade against that fragile face, and flicks her mandibles twice in an expression of love. She draws closer, her gleaming, faceted eyes nearly touching skin. “If anyone *ever* finds out what you are—”

“I know,” says her daughter with a sigh. “You don’t want to lose me.”

“Well,” says Shenya the Widow, spotting opportunity, “there are other considerations.”

“Yeah?”

“For instance,” says Shenya the Widow, twirling a blade as if in thought. “I would prefer not to, say, *murder* those who would come for you.” She shrugs, a long chain reaction that begins at her carapace and clatters to the ends of her blades. “You know how it is once you get started . . .”

That does it. Her daughter battles valiantly, but the tiniest of smiles manages to fight its way to the surface of her face. That’s what this expression is, this concerted mouth-and-eyes movement. A smile.

“Good point,” says her daughter, the corners of her mouth twitching in both Widow and Human

emotion. “We wouldn’t want you to murder unnecessarily.”

“No, Daughter,” says Shenya the Widow. “We would not.”

“I mean, you might murder the wrong people, or too *many* people—”

“Almost certainly. You know what it’s like when the righteous fury is upon you. Once you begin—”

“It’s hard to stop,” Sarya the Daughter says quietly. She takes her mother’s blade in her hands and caresses it, watching her own eyes in her reflection. “At least, that’s how I imagine it.”

Shenya the Widow allows her daughter a moment of reflection. She herself has always found fantasies of mayhem soothing; she assumes the same is true for Humans. “It would comfort your mother,” she says after a moment, “if, before you left for your field trip, you would correct your earlier statement.”

Her daughter sighs and rises to her feet as her mother’s blades retract from around her with eight distinct rattles. “I am Sarya the Daughter,” she says softly. “Adopted, of Shenya the Widow. My species is—” She sighs. “My species is *Spaal*.” With one hand, she signs the Standard symbols that she has used her entire life: *I’m sorry, my tier is low. I don’t understand*. She looks disgusted with herself, standing in the center of her quarters with her shoulders bowed. “Happy?” she asks.

And that is that: another trans-species child-rearing triumph. A marginal success, perhaps, but a parent must take what a parent can get. And now

that the crisis has passed, Shenya the Widow may turn to a happier subject. “Now, my daughter—” she begins.

“I don’t even look like one,” her daughter mutters, turning away. “Anyone who thinks so is the moron.”

“Daughter,” says Shenya the Widow. “I would like to—”

“Did I tell you I have an interview at the arboretum?” her daughter interrupts, lifting the prosthetic off the floor with distaste. “Yeah. Even a damn *Spaal* is overqualified for that one, believe it or not. I think most everybody down there is actually sub-legal, so I could actually be a manager or—”

“Daughter!” hisses Shenya the Widow.

Her daughter turns, expectant, blinking against Shenya the Widow’s exasperated pheromones. The Network prosthetic dangles from one hand, already displaying a new error message.

“Perhaps you should leave that here,” says Shenya the Widow, gesturing toward the unit with a gleaming blade.

Her daughter laughs a short Widow laugh with the corners of her mouth. “I’d rather go naked,” she says, holding down a control to reset the device. “You think *this* is bad, try going without any unit at all. I tried that once and—”

“Take this one instead,” says Shenya the Widow. With a smooth movement, she reveals—*finally*—the tiny device she has been holding behind her thorax this entire time.

Her daughter stares, jaw dropping downward with that peculiar verticality that once so disgusted Shenya the Widow.

“I was going to wait for your adoption anniversary,” says her mother, almost afraid to judge this reaction. “The waiting, however, proved to be—”

The prosthetic hits the floor with a weighty thump as Sarya the Daughter leaps forward to seize the gift. “Mother!” she breathes, fingering the tiny locket and earbuds. “How can we *afford* this? This is—I don’t even—this is *amazing*. It’s perfect!”

“I had it customized,” says Shenya the Widow, allowing her own pride to seep into the words. “I even installed your little friend on it to help you get accustomed. They say if you cannot have the surgery—” She hesitates, now feeling her way forward. *Because someone might discover your species* is the exact type of phrase that could ruin all her hard-won progress. “Then this is the next best thing,” she finishes.

Her daughter says nothing in words, but her disregard for her own safety says it all. With a wild Human laugh, she flings herself into razor-sharp limbs, arms outstretched. With skill developed from long practice, mother catches daughter in a net of softened blades and flat chitin.

“These are the good kind of tears, correct?” asks Shenya the Widow, stroking the warm face with the flat of a blade.

“Yes,” whispers Sarya the Human. “Thank you.”



CHAPTER TWO

Yesterday, Watertower Station was a blank and nearly silent orbital station. Its color scheme could have been described as *industrial*, at best. Its thousands of walls, floors, and ceilings were an interchangeable gray save for the painfully orange warnings marking the areas where a resident might encounter dismemberment, asphyxiation, or various other discomforts. Not that its residents ever glanced at those warnings. No, they were too busy milling through colorless corridors in equally colorless utility suits, eyes and similar sense organs focused in the middle distance. There was very little sound on Watertower: twenty-four thousand citizens and visitors from hundreds of species, all in mutual pursuit of silence but for the unavoidable: the sound of foot-

steps, wheels, treads, the rustle of utility suits, the occasional uncomfortably biological noise. Gray on gray on gray, silent as the void and nearly as interesting. That was Watertower Station, yesterday.

But this is today.

Today, Sarya understands. Today, Watertower Station is an eruption of light and color and sound like nothing she has ever experienced. Everywhere her manic gaze falls, something leaps out at her—often literally. She forces herself to keep her mouth shut and does her best to avoid physically dodging away from every image that flits by. She touches the tiny Network unit at her hairline and taps the earbuds farther into her ear canals; she's been wearing this thing for less than a Network Standard hour and already she is utterly convinced. *This* is real, these projected images and sounds, and the gray walls that have enclosed her entire life are the illusion. She can't even see them anymore; they've disappeared behind landscapes and artwork, behind hues and patterns and corporate slogans.

Incredible. She couldn't remove her giddy grin if she tried.

She keeps to the tail end of her group as it threads through the labyrinth of Watertower Station, the better to gape uninterrupted. Not that she cares what a collection of strangers thinks of her. She is a transient here, a short-term transplant from a lower-tier class who was probably assigned to this particular field trip through some Network glitch somewhere. Why else would she be visiting a place

where she can never work? But she's here, and she has just as much right to be here as the rest of her temporary cohort. If they don't like it, well—they are free to borrow one of her blades, as the Widow saying goes.

She does know a surprising amount about these people. Her knowledge is now amplified, extended into the near-infinite space of the Network, and her access is no longer limited to a few cubic centimeters of malfunctioning display. Now she is crowded by names and public biographies that appear next to citizens as soon as her eyes land on them. They drift as delicate scripts or heavy symbols, colored and/or animated according to their owners' preferences, each adding to the greater cloud of color and light that is the Network. Even with her new unit's efforts in tracking her gaze and fading items in and out of focus as it guesses her intent, she is very nearly overwhelmed.

That doesn't seem to be a problem for the rest of the class, though, and she can't help but wonder why. Perhaps they have scaled back their preferences. Perhaps they have turned off ads or certain channels. Her old unit offered a way to do that, which was laughable because there was such a fine line between that and just turning it off altogether. But maybe she is the only one who can see, for example, the stunning scene emerging from this row of storefronts. The swirl of miniature creatures bursts out of the advertisement, each darting through empty space like a tiny starship. She watches them circle her fel-

low students one after another like a single organism . . . and with absolutely zero effect. And then Sarya flinches as that cloud of tiny beings explodes into a brilliant ad in front of her:

[AivvTech Network Implants: The only way to experience the Network.]

A quick glance around shows her that no one else has reacted in the slightest, and that brings a grin to her face. So! Pure, full-strength, undiluted Network is too much for her classmates and they are forced to limit their intake. Look at *her*, though. Sarya the Daughter—poor, low-tier non-Networked Sarya—*she* can take its full brunt. She holds out a finger for the same virtual creatures to inspect, determined never to fall into the trap of apathy. She will be fascinated by the Network until the day she dies, so help her goddess. Look at this little one who's darted over to nibble at her sharpened fingernail! This simulation of life, this frolicking little billionth of a billionth of a galaxy-spanning Network—how could you not want to see her play? Yes, she's part of an advertisement, created for no purpose but increasing someone's bottom line. But look at her! Look at the cloud of others that follows her! They play so realistically around her hands and sleeves that she very nearly breaks the silence of the corridor by laughing aloud.

[So anyway my father wants me to go into civil administration], says a new rush of symbols ahead of her. They are beautifully styled in silver, hovering in midair next to a student named **[Rama]**

and then fading away as soon as Sarya has read them. So many thoughts! Everywhere! And Sarya would never have known if not for her Network unit. All her life, she has been missing ninety-five percent of reality.

[I thought you were thinking xenobiology?] says another student. This is **[Jina]**, according to her Network unit. Jina's letters flash a glittering blue, spilling into smoke as Sarya's eyes take them in.

[Shrug], says Rama. Sarya didn't catch the gesture but her Network unit apparently did, and here it is, captured and translated into silver meaning. **[No facility in this system]**, she says. **[And you know how my dad feels about Network travel.]**

[Laughter], says Jina in a burst of blue. **[Aren't you a little old to worry about that?]**

But it is at this point that Jina notices Sarya's delighted stare. Rama turns as well, glaring back for a split second as if she can't believe this audacity. There is a moment of one-sided awkwardness—Sarya's unit helpfully overlaying the words **[contempt]** and **[disdain]** over Rama and Jina respectively—and then they turn away in synchrony. Their beautiful words disappear, replaced by a more businesslike **[private conversation]**.

Sarya swallows and glances downward, a familiar heat spreading over her face. After so many years of this she doesn't normally dwell on any particular incident . . . but then it's never been literally spelled out for her before. Now she's thinking uncomfortable thoughts, and her euphoria is rapidly ebbing. How

often has she received those glances without the ability to translate them? How often have the blank gazes of a thousand different species actually meant *contempt* and *disdain* and any number of similar things?

[Sarya's Little Helper would like to speak with you], says a notification down near the floor.

That's right, her mother mentioned Helper was installed on this thing. But for the moment . . . no. She brushes it away with a violent two-handed movement that her Network unit interprets perfectly. She doesn't *want* to speak with her helper intelligence. She doesn't want to talk to anyone, and she *certainly* doesn't want to play with these tiny virtual intelligences who have followed her down the corridor from that advertisement. She is no longer entertained. Damn things, go annoy somebody else or she'll—

Hands still thrashing through a cloud of imaginary beings, Sarya plows into another student. A fogged face mask turns up toward her, several eyes blinking behind it, as a sweet scent fills her nostrils and stings her eyes. Her unit instantly inserts a registration beside the face: **[Jobe (he family), species: Aqueous Collective, Tier: 2.05.]**

She steps back with a muttered "*Beware*"—the standard Widow apology—and instantly regrets it as the sound of her voice echoes in the corridor and draws gazes from up the line. It's a painful reminder: no matter how magical her new Network prosthetic, it's still a prosthetic. It has no direct connection to

her mind, which means it's one-way. Unlike practically everyone else on this station, she cannot send outgoing mental messages. No, she is restricted to the same process she's always used: hunting and pecking symbols with eyes or a digit in a process long enough to be nearly useless in situations like this.

A pair of moist hands adjusts the face mask. "Oh, it's no problem at all," says their owner, his voice the loudest sound anywhere in this corridor. He raises a squishy-looking arm to gaze at her through a small light display mounted to its back. "No problem at all, *Sar-ya*," he repeats, this time adding a butchered pronunciation of the Widow name listed on her own registration.

Sarya refuses to correct him. She keeps her mouth shut, more than aware of the eyes drifting toward the two of them and the emotions attached to those gazes. Just her luck to bump into another non-Networked citizen—maybe the only other one on the station, for all she knows. And now he wants to *talk*. Like, out-loud-style.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't see your tier," says Jobe, still peering at her through his own prosthetic. "Um," he says, drawing out the sound. "It. Is. Okay. *Sar-ya*."

Goddess, now it's worse. That slow speech, the simplification of sentences, the too-loud pronunciation—it's all familiar. Common, even. But this is the second offense in less than a Standard minute. This one pricks her deep, igniting a rage just below her surface. But Sarya the Daughter doesn't explode.

No, Sarya is the adopted child of a Widow. She has been trained for this. She clamps her teeth and digs nails into palms in her Human adaptation of a Widow meditation. She focuses on the pain, just like her mother taught her. Pain distracts. Pain means you are alive. Pain keeps her from ripping that face mask right off that—

She barely avoids ramming someone else when the group halts, her mind lost in violent fantasies that might give even her mother pause.

“All right, students,” says the teacher out loud, the words filling the nearly silent corridor. Her name and pronouns float next to the pinched face in simple yellow, but Sarya doesn’t need them. She is *the* teacher—the only one on Watertower—and that’s the only name anyone uses for her. She’s also the teacher for Sarya’s normal low-tier class—probably teaching them right now. In fact, her various identical bodies have taught every class Sarya’s ever had. A younger Sarya once spent an entire Standard year trying to figure out how many bodies make a teacher, but she gave up the project when she began suspecting that her efforts were being actively but subtly foiled. That’s when she learned a fundamental truth about higher tiers: they can screw with you as much as they want and you’ll never know.

“We have arrived at Watertower Station’s central observation deck,” continues the teacher. “Here, for the first time, you will see the entire reason for this station’s existence. I suspect one or two of you will be seeing this room again, come Career Day.”

Sarya realizes, from the [**shocked**] reactions of her classmates, that she is probably the only one in this group who has ever heard the teacher's voice. Like any other Networked citizen of civilized space, the teacher seldom speaks. There is very rarely need. Unless, say, the teacher's current class contains a supposed low-tier Spaal with no Network implant.

On the other side of the group, Sarya watches Jina nudge Rama and send a significant glance Sarya's way. *They* know why the teacher is speaking aloud. Sarya receives the force of that glance like a slap; she can hear her own teeth grinding through her skull. Widow mantras begin running through her head again, an automatic response drilled into her over a long and painful childhood. *I am Widow. My rage is my weapon. I am Widow. My life is my own. I am Widow. Better a scar from a sister than a—*

And then she is startled by an unpleasantly biological sound beside her. "I'll be here!" says Jobe, waving a glistening arm. "They said they'd even pay for me to be Networked!"

Sarya's ears pop before she realizes exactly how hard she's compressing her jaw. She expects to feel blood dripping from her clenched fists any second. She didn't particularly plan on hating this Jobe kid, but the universe is really leaving her no choice here. *He* gets to be Networked. *He* doesn't have to pretend he's low-tier. This bladeless weakling, this—

And then with the hiss of a pressure door and the familiar flourish of the teacher, her group is ushered into one of the many places where low-tier non-

Networked Sarya the Daughter will never be allowed again. Her interest, which has been overshadowed by recent events, stages a tentative return. It's dark in here, but it doesn't *seem* dark because her Network unit instantly begins analyzing the space and adding glowing grid lines where it finds walls and floors. Her nose is ambushed by that relentless non-scent of Watertower's industrial odor neutralizers, which means this is one of those spaces designed for many species to work in close proximity. She can hear those intelligences now: a soft biological tumult constructed of membrane friction, the squeaking of chitin, the compression of lungs and other modes of respiration—these sounds and more, built into a wall of gentle noise and mortared with general moistness.

[Analysis complete], says her Network unit, but by now Sarya's eyes have adjusted sufficiently to see the general shape of the room. She stands at the highest point of a dark and gleaming chamber. Before her, several tiers of black seats step down to a blank wall that must be ten meters high. Individuals of various biologies stare into space, limbs twitching as they manipulate data invisible to her. Several more teacher bodies are here, making small talk with several of the workers. That makes sense; the teacher probably taught all of *them* as well. Everyone on Watertower probably knows the teacher. She could be centuries old, as far as Sarya knows.

"This," says a moist voice at her elbow, "is the oldest. Part. Of the station."

Sarya stares down at the face mask, unbelieving. Jobe is a half meter shorter than her, rounder than her, his skin slicker than hers, and he stares back with wide and innocent eyes. Oh, goddess—he has *adopted* her. He’s playing the higher-tier mentor role.

“One. Of my dads. Used to work here,” he continues, oblivious to the blistering glare he’s receiving. “He says. It’s the best view. On the station.”

I am Widow. My rage is my weapon. I am Widow. There are no secrets between Mother and Daughter. I am—

“I’m Jobe,” says Jobe. “In case. You can’t. Read it.”

A Widow may have been able to keep herself under control. A Widow may have been able to avoid this entire conversation simply by virtue of her terrifying appearance. But Sarya the Daughter is not a Widow. She is a Human pretending to be a Spaal who wishes *it* was a Widow, and she can almost feel the heat radiating through cracks in her carefully nested façades. She doesn’t remember seizing the face mask, but now she feels its warm greasiness in her hands. “*Listen*,” she hisses through her teeth. “I am *perfectly capable* of understanding Standard. I am not an idiot. I am a—”

And she almost says it. She very nearly releases years of frustration in a single word. But her mother’s discipline—and the wish to avoid more of same—stops her at the last possible second. She contains it. She stands there, trembling, Jobe’s oily face

mask gripped in her Human fingers, glaring a hole into a randomly chosen glistening eye.

[Please release this Citizen member!] says an overlay over Jobe's face. It's orange, danger-colored for attention, but Sarya knows from experience that she has several more seconds before this warning escalates to physical action. Plenty of time.

"Sarya the Daughter," says the voice of the nearest teacher. It is heavy with gentleness and meaning—irritatingly so. "Is there a problem?"

Oh, yes, there's most definitely a problem. There are so many problems that Sarya doesn't even know where to start. It is a *problem* that everyone in this room—hell, everyone on the damn *station*—thinks she's an idiot. It is a *problem* that she will never again be allowed in this room because of her intelligence tier. It is a *problem* that her registered tier isn't even right because she's not a damn Spaal, she's a *Human*. And it is a *problem* that she can't even say so without starting a riot. The list of problems is long; she could do this all day.

But she doesn't, mostly because she doesn't particularly care to be escorted home by a cloud of anxious Network drones. "No," she says, releasing Jobe's mask and wiping her hands on her utility suit. "There's no problem."

"May we continue?" asks the teacher.

"You *may*," says Sarya, layering on as much scorn as she can manage.

"Thank you," says another of the teacher's bodies. "Students?" The word appears next to her face,

brilliant in the darkness of the room. “If you have eyes, shield them.”

[Radiation shields dropping in six seconds], says a virtual warning across the massive blank wall at the foot of the room. Individual shields appear in front of many of the workers’ faces, and several turn away. Sarya has no time to do anything but squeeze her eyes into a squint as, with a hum she can feel through the soles of her boots, the wall dissolves into blinding light.

The Kinder Poison
Natalie Mae

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THE
KINDER
POISON

NATALIE MAE





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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses,
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I

All good stories start with bad decisions.

This is the questionable mantra I repeat in my head as we watch the boat come in. It's a beautiful vessel, so unlike the plain wooden canoes that always flock Atera's river docks. The hull is glass, and through it I can see the dawn and the orange sands of the desert; the water and the reed-choked shore. As it draws nearer, the sun ignites along its edges like fire, the deep blue canopy above seeming to flutter in the heat. Guards with golden leopard masks and sickle swords patrol its railings, and in the river, the magic propelling it glows like a trail of fading stars.

It is a ship where legends are made.

It's also a ship where poor choices will be made, but Hen said I have to stop focusing on that part. I've lain on this roof a thousand mornings, imagining myself sailing to all the incredible places the desert travelers speak of, and not once has playing it safe helped me follow in their footsteps. Their adventures never start with, "Well, I waited patiently at home for something to happen, and it did!" No—proper stories start with risks. Switched identities, drinking unlabeled potions, trusting mysterious strangers. I'm not sure any of them ever started with lying to a priest, but again—I'm not focusing on that right now.

"There he is," Hen says, pointing to said priest: a shirtless bald man standing near the front of the boat. We're lying atop the roof of her house, one of the many flat-topped homes that line the river's shore. The second story gives us a perfect vantage point

of the ship without it being too obvious we're here. The priest's gaze stays low, on the children who whoop and run on the muddy bank, their colorful tunics like flags. The tattooed prayers circling his pale arms and the pure white of his *tergus* kilt would have given him away even if Hen hadn't pointed him out.

He's the one carrying the ledger we need. No one boards that boat if their name isn't listed, and if I don't get to the palace now . . .

Well, there won't be another chance. This is the first time a royal boat has ported in Atera in six hundred *years*.

"That's the one we'll really need to watch," Hen says, pointing to a woman in a stunning blue *jole*—a formal wrap dress favored by the nobility. Hers is embellished with pearls and real lilies, and I squint, trying to make sense of my friend's warning. There's absolutely nothing daunting about the woman. In fact, compared to the armed guards and the scowl I now see on the priest's face, she looks delightful.

"Who is that?" I whisper.

"Galena of Juvel," Hen growls. "Royal Materialist, and thorn in my side. She's the one who made lotus boots a thing."

I glance at the woman's feet. Her sandals look no different from the ones Hen often wears, but instead of ending at her heel, black lotus flowers twist up her brown legs to her knees.

"I think they're cute," I admit.

"Of course they are! They were my idea!"

One of the guards looks toward the roof, and we both duck down.

"We've been over this," I whisper. "Just because you get a weekly update on the lives of famous people doesn't mean they have the

slightest idea of who you are. I'm sure it was just a coincidence.”

“Was it?” Hen says, glaring as the woman drifts past. “Or was it conspiracy?”

“Well, when *you're* the Royal Materialist, you can ask her.”

“Oh, I will.” She grits her teeth. “I will.”

I snicker at her response. One of my favorite things about Hen is her absolute confidence, as if rising from a simple—albeit distinguished—young Materialist in Atera to the person who crafts the latest fashions for the queen is only a matter of time. Though really, she's already on her way. Now that we're sixteen, this summer marks our last as apprentices, and Hen has already received dozens of letters from Orkena's nobility, commending her creativity and requesting her services upon her transition to Master. Soon she'll be traveling the country, using her rare ability to combine unusual materials, even fire or light or a stream of starlit water, into clothing for the elite. She can make dresses out of moonglow, and cloaks infused with dew so they stay cool even during the hottest afternoons. Meanwhile, the number of people excited for me to become a Master is one: my father. Which I appreciate, but it's not the same.

Hen's name is already on that ledger. I'm trying not to think too hard about why mine isn't, and how that's one of the many ways our lives are about to diverge.

“Just please don't talk to her about the boots *today*,” I say, recognizing the glint in Hen's eyes.

Her black hair swings as she looks over. “I make no promises when it comes to war.”

“And I'd be happy to help you plot later. But can we focus right

now on the bigger task I'll probably come to regret? They're almost at the dock."

Hen's brown eyes narrow, tracking her mark. She taps a finger against her lips and shoves to her feet. "Follow me."

She disappears down the ladder in the roof. I follow in haste, earning a splinter when I slide too fast down the wood, and drop to the tiled floor of the upstairs hallway. Cool air emanates from the enchanted mudbrick walls, the spell that chills them hidden beneath a layer of creamy plaster. Within the hour, the house will feel drastically cooler than the summer air outside. I try to absorb as much of it as I can through my thin working dress. The stable is never unbearably hot, but it definitely doesn't hold on to the cold like Hen's house.

Rainbow-hued mats line the floor, and I smile as we pass rooms I know as well as my own. Hen's bedroom with her towers of dark, shimmering fabric, and her mother's nearly as cluttered, its walls and dressers covered in the rare items she accepts in trade for her potions. A bright weaving from the river country ripples with the light; a giraffe carving made of sandalwood and ebony sits upon the nightstand. Before my mother got sick, she and Hen's mother used to travel all over, selling potions and drinking in the world. I used to tell her that would be Hen and me someday, before I understood the magic I was born with wasn't the kind that would help me leave Atera. Apparently the ability to talk to animals doesn't actually impress anyone—including most animals—hence the lack of my name on the ledger.

But even our mothers had never been to the *palace*. And though tonight's party will only encompass one glorious, wonder-filled

night, it will be my chance to experience a sliver of the life I thought Hen and I could never have.

I cannot miss that boat.

“We’re going to go with the ‘distract and dominate’ plan,” Hen says, the hem of her green wrap dress flaring as she starts down the rosewood stairs. “You’re going to provide the distraction, while I sneak the ledger from the priest’s bag. I’ll slip out of view and add your fake name. Then I’ll put it back, and when they go to check people in later, aha! You’ll be there.”

“And you’re putting me down as a Potionmaker, right?” I ask. We decided it would be safest if I assumed a false identity to get onto the boat, to avoid anyone recognizing a Whisperer absolutely shouldn’t be there. It seemed only natural to use my late mother’s name, as well as her (and Hen’s mother’s) power. That way I know some basics about the magic if anyone asks, not to mention potionmaking would be entirely impractical to demonstrate on board, unlike the elemental magics that can be conjured from the air.

“Yes,” Hen confirms.

“And you’re sure they’re not going to make me prove it?”

She waves me off. “Let me worry about the details. You worry about the fantastic party awaiting us. Jeweled gardens, live peacocks, a dance floor the size of a town . . .”

“Hen, if I end up as the human sacrifice because you were thinking about dance floors instead of contest regulations—”

Hen stops, leaning solemnly against the wall. “This is not my first time, Zahru.” Meaning not her first time *breaking the law*, and I force myself to smile. It may appear I’m taking this all in stride,

but I'm also the girl who had a moral crisis once after a merchant gave me too much change, and I'm ignoring that this lie will probably haunt me forever.

"My associate looked into it," she continues. "The officials have so much else to deal with that even if we're caught, we'll just be removed from the palace grounds. And you know the sacrifice is actually a holy honor, right?"

"Right," I say, fidgeting as Hen starts down the stairs again. But I'll admit some of my excitement is dampened by the reminder of what tonight actually is. Atera has been so abuzz since His Majesty, the Mestrah, announced the Crossing, it's easy to forget that after the parties and celebration, real people will risk their lives for the sake of Orkena's future. Today, the royal boats will bring much of the nation's upper class to the palace—one per household—including a select group of Master magicians who will actually participate in the contest. While these contenders split off to compete for a spot on a prince or princess's team, the others like Hen (and hopefully, me) will get the run of the palace, including a viewing area where we can watch the selection process.

Then tomorrow, their teams chosen, the royal heirs will start on a weeklong race across the desert, where they'll battle the elements and each other and gods know what else to reach the sacred Glass Caves. Where the winner, destined to be our new Mestrah, will have to secure their victory by taking a human life.

The gods haven't called for a Crossing in centuries. I know I must trust the Mestrah, and that I should feel nothing but pride for the contest's reinstatement. But I also can't forget that the very

reason it was discontinued was because a prior Mestrah deemed the race too brutal. I wonder what changed the gods' minds.

"Going out?" calls Hen's mother as we reach the bottom of the stairs. As is typical for the mornings, Hen's *mora* sits on a cheery yellow tapestry in the main room, eyes winged in lines of kohl, plump legs crossed as she readies her wares for the market. Potion ingredients spread around her like a rainbow: yellow vials of palm oil, blue scorpion claws and orange beetle wings, pink lotus petals and green desert sage. Focus dots circle her beige wrists, drops of liquid gold that steady her hands and center the magic she'll use in the potions.

"Oh, just heading out to lie to a priest and crash the palace banquet," I say, trying to sound clever. I want to embrace this daring new lifestyle, and Hen's mother seems like the best place to start because she won't take me seriously.

"Oh, good," she says—taking me completely seriously. "I've been scheming ever since that sour messenger told me only one of us could go."

"She told him she had *two* daughters," Hen says, glancing at me.

Her mother scowls. "And you know what he said? 'Send the prettiest one. You're too old.' The cod. I hope he doesn't find himself in need of my services anytime soon."

She smiles as she pours green liquid into a rounded vial, coating the dried tarantula at the bottom. I have to admit she's the one person in the world who scares me more than Hen, which is why I'm very glad that when my mother passed, and Hen's father decided he felt "too tied down" and left the country without them, the broken edges of our families sewed into one. I even call

her Mora to honor what she means to me. I'm fairly certain this woman would poison someone for me.

"Be safe, my hearts," Mora says, pinching gold flake atop the now-bubbling potion. "And let me know if you need my help."

"We will," we promise, kissing her cheeks.

We duck around the sapphire curtain shading the doorway and into the morning sun—and into the backs of a massive crowd.

"Sorry," Hen says, slipping around two younger boys. I follow her between the richly dyed wrap dresses and gem-laden hair of Architects and Dreamwalkers, through a handful of sandy kilts and the dirt-streaked working slips of Gardeners and Weavers—lower magicians like me. It seems the entire town is converging on the shore for a glimpse of the priest and his magical boat. My bare feet press against polished brick as Hen guides us to a side street.

Not that it's much better. People cluster here, too, leaning over iron balconies to ask if the boat has arrived, placing bets on which Aterian contender will actually make a team. Our town has six of them, I think. The Mestrah declared that every upper-class Master aged sixteen to nineteen is eligible to contend, as they're in the prime of their magic and thus the heirs' strongest options. With just two moons of training left, Hen missed the cutoff by a hair.

Snippets of conversation flutter past me, and I hang hungrily on to their words.

"—thought the Mestrah was going to name Prince Kasta his heir," muses a man with rich brown skin and rings glittering across his fingers. "Strange the gods would call for a Crossing after so long. Do you think there's more to it?"

"—a human sacrifice! I thought we'd moved past that—"

“—really should clear these dirty peasants from the street,” complains a woman with porcelain skin and a gaudy gold headdress. “Why are they even here? None of this is for them.”

“Don’t worry,” Hen whispers when the woman curls her lip at me. “I have a lot of dirt on her. Want me to tell her husband about her boyfriend? Or her clients that she’s only been erasing half their wrinkles so they have to hire her again the next week?”

I gape at Hen. “How do you *know* these things?”

“It’s my business to know.”

“It’s your business to *design clothes*.”

A shrug. “Rich people like to talk. I like to listen.” She grins. “Hurry, we have to catch him before he gets to Numet’s temple. After that, the list will be much better guarded.”

Numet’s temple: the grandest of Atera’s three places of worship. I’d be suspicious of how she knows the priest’s schedule as well, but it only makes sense a priest would want to spend time honoring our sky goddess—the deity from which our Mestrahns are descended—before taking the long ride back to Juvel.

We navigate around the baker’s daughter pulling her cart of fresh breads, and past the Gemsmith’s shop, though the Gemsmith herself isn’t in—instead it’s her wife who nods to us over displays of gold chains and jeweled dragonflies. Down an alley choked with barrels we go, where the tantalizing smells of spiced onions and cooking fish drift. Finally we stumble onto an empty street where the upper district meets the lower, and the ground changes from paving stones to packed dirt. Children play at the corner where the houses meet the road, but everyone else must be clustered toward the shore.

We hurry to the end to watch the procession coming up the road. The priest and Royal Materialist are in front, flanked by their leopard-masked guards, and behind them, half the town. Maybe we *do* need to watch the woman. While the guards keep their gazes forward and stiff (though, who knows what they're looking at under those masks), her restless eyes shift to the streets and the celebratory flowers strung between buildings. As if she can sense Hen's irritation with her, her gaze suddenly moves to us.

"She knows," Hen says, crossing her arms. "Memorize this face, Galena. It'll be the last you see when the queen discovers you're a fraud."

"Keep your voice down," I say. "And your imaginary vendettas on hold. What do we do now?"

"How should I know? I'm just here to grab the ledger."

"All right, but I'm not used to this life of crime. Do I run at them like a religious fanatic? Scream in agony and pretend I broke my ankle?"

"Both good options. I'll see you in a few." She darts back the way we came.

"Wait!" I whisper. "Where are you going?"

And she's gone without an answer. Leaving the fate of the entire evening to me.

All right, Zahru, focus. If they were riding horses, I could have easily introduced myself as the town Whisperer and spent an excessive amount of time tending to their mounts. I could ask for the priest's blessing, but I think the guards would stop me before I could get close. They're almost here. Gods, maybe I *should* run out howling about my ankle.

I move for the street, imagining the look on my father's face when the priest's guards drag me home. *What am I always telling you, Zahru?* he'll say as the guards untie my hands. *You went in without a plan, didn't you?*

Yes, Fara. I went in without a plan.

"Are those lotus boots?" I shriek, praying the Royal Materialist is half as obsessed with going over the details of her work as a certain local one is. "Wait, you . . ." I put my hand to my heart. "You're Galena of Juvel."

The woman smiles. "Yes, I am."

"Move off," a guard snaps, shoving a spear at me.

"Oh, let the girl be," the woman says, beaming as she steps around him. "What's your name?"

Her tone is a little patronizing, but I have to say I'm impressed by her friendliness. "Zahru. I'm a huge fan of yours."

"Zahru, it's nice to meet you. I—"

"Galena," the priest grumbles.

"A minute, Mai. She's only a girl." She turns back to me, her pretty violet eyes—powdered with gold and lined with swirls of kohl—darting once down the plain linen of my dress to my bare feet. "You like fashion, Zahru?"

"Yes, *adel*. I know all about bronze eyelets and Luck shawls." Not a lie. I know too much about them, if she's really wondering.

"Another of my fine inventions. That Luck shawl got me this job." She winks, and over her shoulder I catch a flash of green.

"Where did you get the idea for the lotus boots?" I won't pretend I'm not fishing for an answer for Hen, and I think I see that green flash pause.

“On a summer walk under the stars. The palace has several beautiful pools covered with lotus flowers, and when I went wading, the idea came to me.”

A whisper that sounds very much like “Lies” drifts through the crowd.

“That seems like a perfectly reasonable explanation,” I say loudly.

“Did you know I’m from a town even smaller than Atera?” the woman continues, and now she has my true attention.

“You are?”

“My mother was a Materialist, but she passed when I was born. My father was a Gardener. Without her we had only his trade to live by, and I went many years of my life without any shoes at all.”

I swallow and scrunch my toes in the sand. This just got much more personal than I ever intended it to, and I know I said I’d side with Hen on pretty much anything, but she didn’t tell me Galena grew up without her mother, too.

“Here.” She begins unlacing her boots. The crowd gasps, and when I understand what she’s doing, my heart jerks. Oh gods, I hope Hen is finished—

“Take these,” she says, handing me the boots, which are several times more expensive than anything I will ever own. “And remember, no matter what you’re born to, you can be more.”

She smiles and starts off, and I can only stare after her, my heart like a dragonfly in my chest. I should probably be taking an important life lesson away from this about honesty and hard work, but all I can think of is how similar our stories are, and how she now travels on a glass boat at the side of a priest. It has to be a

sign. That I'm meant to do this, and everything will work out, and maybe it will be even more amazing than I first imagined.

It's only after the last guard has passed and the crowd wanders in, ogling the lotus boots and whispering, that I remember I'm on a mission. Someone asks to touch the shoes, and under normal circumstances I might have stayed and shared them, but now I clutch them to my chest and dash to the end of the street where I saw Hen disappear. My blood thrums through my body, fitful and restless. I pass through the alley and back into the upper district, around a corner—and right into the crossed arms of Hen.

"Gods!" I yelp, juggling the boots. "Hen! Did you get it?"

Her brown eyes narrow. "It's done."

I scream and throw my arms around her. I know exactly what she's going to say next, but I'm too thrilled to care. We're leaving. We're actually leaving Atera to go to the palace, where there are trees that bloom jewels and golden rooms as big as towns. We'll eat all the chocolate we can stomach. We'll trail mysterious strangers and find secret passages and witness at least one spectacular rescue, because in all of the travelers' best stories, someone is always saving *someone*.

And when we return, Hen and I will bring back with us a memory just like our mothers'. Maybe it'll be the last one we have before Hen leaves at harvest. *Or maybe*, I think, squeezing the boots, *it will be the first of many*.

"You are touching me with *her shoes*," Hen complains.

"Sorry," I say, pulling back. But I can't stop from grinning. "I did what the mission called for."

A sigh. "You were really very good."

“Convincing?”

“I suppose.” But even with her enemy’s contraband in my hands, she can’t stop a small smile. She gives my shoulders a shake. “We’re going to the banquets.”

I let out another squeal, and this time she joins me.

“There’s just one thing left to do,” she says, a new gleam in her eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’re going after Galena *now*.”

“Oh, she’ll get hers, but there are more immediate needs at hand.” Her smile quirks. “It’s time for phase two.”

I blink. “There’s a phase two?”

“Yes. One your delicate conscience won’t be able to handle.” She smirks. “Say goodbye to your father, and I’ll find you as soon as I can.”

II

I'm very quiet as I slip in through the stable door. But as anxious as I am to admit to the man who raised me that I've turned into a petty con artist, my *fara* is not inside. The animals stir in their stalls; a camel chews noisily on her cud. My father must be in the pasture.

Gods, please let him give me his blessing.

I flex my grip on the small sack I'm holding and start down the aisle.

Fara's veterinary clinic is the biggest stable in town, not because we have the most money, but because we need the space. The Mestrah allows us free rent as long as we prioritize his soldiers' horses on the rare occasion they come through. Half the stalls are reserved for large animals like cattle, gazelles, and camels. We've converted the other half into keeps for small animals like cats, dogs, falcons—sometimes monkeys, when needed. Some of the animals simply need boarding while their owners travel, while others need medical care. Most of them have quite an opinion about being left here like, well, animals. But Fara is kind and patient, and I'd like to think I am, too, and after a day most of their complaints have subsided.

Twig girl, snorts a cow in the second stall. *This food. Bad.*

Except for the cows. Who seem to think they're entitled to royal treatment, and who find the stable and its caretakers infinitely lacking.

“I don’t have time for you right now,” I say. “It’s fresh. Just eat what I gave you.”

Sensitive thing, thinks her companion, eyeing me.

Human on bad food, too, remarks the first. *Can’t make grain, can’t make anything.*

I grit my teeth. “For the last time, you’re on a *diet*. Your masters specifically told me not to give you honey.”

The second snorts. *Always on diet when here. Food bad as chewed cud.*

“Oh, you ungrateful—”

“You know it’s no use arguing,” Fara says, squeezing in through the far doorway and making me jump. My father is dressed today in his usual working slip, a sandy fabric that nearly matches his skin in the mild winter months but is now several shades lighter than his summer tan. A herding dog wiggles in his arms, one leg wrapped in palm leaves where a salve covers a scorpion sting. The other three legs thrash when she sees me.

Human! Human human human, can I see her? Please please please! I need down. Down down!

She licks Fara’s face with the last request, and he smiles and strokes her side. “Yes, you did very good. We’ll go back outside again soon.”

No, down! Human! Play! Play—cat? Cat! Cat cat!

My heart clenches as Fara lowers the dog into a converted stall. As with most magic in our world, his abilities have faded with age and use, the same way muscles weaken over time. Fara was lucky to make it twenty-nine years with his. That’s the only advantage of the lesser magics: they take far less of a toll on our bodies, and so we can use them longer. But many would agree ten

years as Orkena's most powerful Firespinner far outshines thirty as Orkena's best Whisperer.

Two moons ago, Fara went deaf to the animals completely, and they stopped being able to understand him as well. And while it hasn't affected his medical expertise, he can no longer ask his patients what ails them or sense their fear, and so the weight of the stable has slowly shifted to me.

"You've been gone awhile," Fara says, wiping his hands on an old rag. "Was the market very busy?"

"I—yes," I say, hastily handing over the bag. "But I found everything we needed. I even got acacia and aloe. And that snake bite salve we liked so well."

Fara stares. "Zahru, that salve is expensive. We can make do with the honey poultice."

"It's all right. Hen covered it."

A small lie. The lotus boots covered it. Hen wanted me to get rid of them, so I did.

Fara tsks. "She shouldn't have. She and her mother have already done far too much for us."

This is the point where I should move on to the reason I splurged on so many fine medicines, but being the awkward and half-ashamed daughter I am, I just stand there while Fara takes the bag to the dusty cabinet. I'm still not sure how to tell him what I've done. Oddly it's not even the priest-conning part of it I'm worried about. It's that I can see how diligently he's working despite the excited shouts outside the stable; how focused he is even as the rest of Atera leaves their work to blow horns in the streets. He isn't even annoyed with it, just . . . accepting. To him, our place

is here, and the idea of me keeping company with Dreamwalkers and Airweavers is absurd at best. I couldn't stand to hear him say I don't belong with them at the palace.

But more than that, I don't want him to see how badly I want to leave.

"*Zahru*," Fara says in the tone he uses when he's been trying to get my attention for some time. He's holding a jar of numbing cream from the sack, another small treasure I splurged on.

"Yes?"

"Are you sad about Hen's invitation?"

My stomach clenches. I wasn't even sure he knew she'd been invited. "No. Well, I was at first, but then . . ."

"I'm sorry about it, too," Fara says, fidgeting with the cream. "I feel . . . it's my fault. If you had your mother's magic, maybe—"

"Fara!" My chest constricts, and I rush to him, shaken he believes *that's* the reason I'd be sad about not going. Fara has always taken pride in our abilities, even if our work is not as celebrated as others'. And it's not like he had any control over my fate—I inherited his Whisperer magic the same way I inherited my mother's fair skin and amber eyes.

"Don't say that," I say, leaning my head against his broad chest. "Our work is important, too."

He's quiet a moment, his hand warm on my back. Then he pulls me gently away and holds up the cream. "You're going to try to get in, aren't you?"

Heat flushes my neck. "I . . ."

"That was a very long hug, and these are a lot of expensive products."

How does he *do* that? “I was really close to telling you, I promise.”

“Zahru, what if you get caught?”

“Hen looked into it. They’ll just escort us out. It’s only bad if you try to sneak in as a contender.”

“And if you’re in Juvel? Will they send you home?”

“Hen will be with me the whole time. She’ll buy our passage back if they won’t return us.” I press my hands together. “Please, Fara? It’s just a night. I’ll be back in time for supper tomorrow, and then I’ll be here. Forever.” I don’t mean to say that last word aloud, or in the ominous tone a priest would use to impart a deadly omen, but Fara understands. He kisses my head and sighs.

“You are my world, *kar-a*. I want you to be safe.” His smile is sad. “I also want you to be happy. It’s only for a night? You’ll be protected?”

“They’ll have guards. And literally all of the country’s top magicians will be within a kilometer of us. If we’re not safe there, we’re not safe anywhere.”

A grunt. Leave it to my father to consider even that might not be enough. “All right. You have my blessing.”

I squeal and hug him again. “Thank you, Fara! I’ll bring you something from the royal city.”

He shakes his head. “Just bring *yourself* back.” He pauses to think. “Though I wouldn’t mind some chocolate, if you can manage it.”

I smile. “Of course.”

I help Fara put away the remaining salves, excitement bouncing through me. My fake name is on the ledger. I have Fara’s blessing—now I just need to hear from Hen. But just as I’m starting to worry that “phase two” will involve me negotiating

her release from jail, quick footsteps beat outside the stable, and she comes bouncing in.

“Zahru!” she wheezes.

She’s in a green *jole*, her arms bare and her deep beige skin glowing with pearl dust. Swirling golden circles—Numet’s symbol—curl around her bicep, and her short hair jingles with beads of gold and emeralds. She carries a bundle of garnet-red cloth wrapped over something that chimes as she moves.

“You look amazing,” I say.

“Storeroom!” she says, jogging past me without a glance.

“Is everything all right?”

“No time to chat. Phase two is complete, and they’re boarding the boat.”

She disappears behind the storage room’s tan curtain, and I nearly trip on the water jug as I hurry after her. “As in, boarding *now*?”

“Strip!”

“Has it been an hour already?” I pull my arms out of my sleeves and tug the slip off, while Hen sets the red bundle on a grain sack. “Wait. How did phase two take *you* an hour?”

“Less talking, more dressing!” Hen gathers the red dress into a loop and gestures for me to raise my arms, then pushes the bundle over my head. The shining fabric spills down my body, flaring from red to gold with the light. It’s sleeveless like Hen’s, but the top gathers in the center instead of the side, forming rippling pleats that overlay the dress all the way to the floor.

“Hen, this is . . . stunning,” I say, looking over my shoulder. The back opens to the base of my spine, where fine chains connect the

fabric on either side. Hen flits behind me and mends a torn chain with a press of her fingers.

“It’s boring, is what it is,” she says. “But Mora wouldn’t let me dress you in only river reeds, so this is what I have to work with.”

“Is this fire silk?”

“Look straight ahead.”

I do. Hen grabs one of the things that had been bundled in the dress—a thin brush and a jar of black pigment—and holds my jaw with her free hand. “Close your eyes.”

“I already lined them,” I say as the brush kisses my eyelid.

“Mm hmm.”

The brush trails out to the edge of my eye and loops beside it.

“You better not be drawing anything gross.”

Hen snickers.

“Hen!”

“I’m not!”

The brush retracts, then starts on my other eyelid.

“There’s no phase three, right?” I ask. “Remember when I asked if I’d have to prove I was a Potionmaker? And you didn’t answer?”

This side of my face doesn’t get the same loop as the first. Hen has me look up and starts lining the bottom lid.

“The others had to prove their identities at the temple,” she says. “We don’t.”

“What does that mean?” The brush lifts, and I open my eyes. “You . . . made a deal with someone?”

Hen considers this, a small smile in her lips. “Yes?”

“See, when you give me an answer that sounds like a question, it makes me think you’re lying.”

“When you ask me a question you already know the answer to, it makes me want to lie.”

“You blackmailed someone.”

Hen just grins and lets down my hair, threading crystals into the brown waves around my face, then lifts a delicate tangle of chains from the grain sack. It separates into three fine loops in her fingers, a garnet pendant dangling from the place they connect. A protection rune flashes from the gem’s face. I realize what it is just as she lowers it, and I grab her wrists.

“I can’t accept this,” I say.

“But it’s yours.”

“No, it was my mother’s, and now it’s *your* mother’s, after mine gave it to her on her *deathbed*.”

“Mora wants you to wear it.” She secures the last hairpin so the jewel dangles by my left eye, and starts taming flyaway stands of my hair. A new wave of appreciation for everything she’s done floods through me.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say.

“I know.”

She grabs my hand and tows me from the storage room. Fara turns from where he’s mixing a poultice, and smiles as he takes us in.

“You look royal, girls,” he says. “But is everything all right? Did I hear the boat is boarding *now*?”

“Yes, Fara, sorry,” I say, darting to peck his cheek. “I love you. See you tomorrow!”

“Love you, too,” he calls.

I think he might also say something about making good choices,

but we're already out the door, me holding a hand to my head chain and Hen holding her skirt. The desert sun burns hot on our shoulders.

"*Rie*," I swear. "I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe we're actually going!" I laugh as we turn a corner, as fleet as antelope. "Can you even imagine what the *contenders* are going through? I'm nervous just to watch! I bet they'll be judged on their every move. One wrong smile and that's it, no eternal glory for them."

Hen shrugs. "But also no untimely death."

"Death?" We swerve to avoid a mother holding a baby. "The royal siblings aren't supposed to *kill* each other, are they?"

"Oh, no. But I've been reading all about past contests, and sometimes death just happened. Rogue assassins, hungry hyenas, starvation . . ."

My stomach tightens in pity. I guess I assumed royalty would have divine protection against such things, especially considering the way people have been celebrating the contenders all week. Everyone seems much more concerned with the prizes for being chosen: their name in history, a suite at the palace. I never stopped to consider why the prizes were so grand.

"Gods, and they're out there at least a week, right?"

"If they don't get hopelessly lost."

"That would be awful," I say as we cross into the upper district. The road ahead is packed with people, and Hen tugs me toward a gap at the side. "Can you imagine? Going through all this fuss and stress, just to get buried under a sandstorm?"

"Well, they *will* have spells and such. But just think." Hen's eyes

flash, and we press between a man in a brown tunic and a pigtailed girl. “If Gallus gets chosen, we can picture him being chased by all kinds of rabid things.”

I snicker at the thought of my ex pompously fighting a rattlesnake while trying to keep his hair perfect. “I hope something bites him in the rear while he’s sleeping.”

“I hope it bites him in the—”

“Shh,” I say, giggling and clasping my hand over her mouth. The ground under our feet has shifted from hot brick to cool wood. “You can’t say that here. At least wait until we’re on the boat.”

The mesh of people thickens as we excuse ourselves through, until it suddenly yields to the dock, a long structure of waterproof wood and iron posts, upon which ropes tether all sizes of boats to the shore. Guards stand in a wide semicircle around the priest and his assistants, giving them space. The nearest guard takes one look at our elaborate *joles* and nods us through. The crowd grumbles in envy. I admit the attention sends a shiver of satisfaction down my spine—I’m usually the one watching everyone else leave.

Galena stands at the base of a wide plank, and it takes me a moment to realize that plank doesn’t lead to the glass boat. It leads to one made of a strange wood instead, something swirled with black and golden tones that looks like an enormous version of the giraffe from Mora’s collection. A deep red canopy shades its deck, under which dozens of people mingle in their finest, their small crowns of gold and gemmed rings glinting like sparks in the sun. I recognize a young man who tutored Hen in writing, and the Gemsmith—no wonder her wife is tending her wares. The plank

to the glass boat is by the priest instead, blocked by a particularly burly guard.

The Mestrah must have sent one boat to carry spectators and another for the contenders. I'm slightly disappointed Hen and I won't be riding on glass, but honestly I'd be happy to take a leaky canoe at this point.

"Here's something we didn't think about," I mutter, looping my arm through Hen's. "The entire town is staring at us right now, including the Apothecarist I just bought salves from and your nemesis, who might remember *handing me her shoes* this morning. The punishment for getting caught is seriously 'go away,' right?"

"Don't worry. No one's going to recognize you. Your makeup has been done correctly for once."

I snort. "I can do my makeup correctly."

"Mm hmm." She adjusts her hair and smooths a pleat near my hip. "Like I said, they don't care about spectators. They only strip your name away and shame your family if you try to sneak in as a contender. So relax, you're wrinkling the silk."

I exhale, trying to draw on even a sliver of Hen's confidence. I don't need to be so nervous. This will either work or it won't, and if it doesn't, at least I will have tried. Maybe I'll even gain some semblance of infamy. I think I'd like people looking at me sidelong, worried I might do something unexpected and daring at any moment.

"Cutting it close, aren't we?" the priest says, his usual scowl in place. The words inked into his shoulders glisten with embedded gold. "Lucky for you, we're all happy to stand around in the heat while you decide whether you'll bother to show."

“Apologies, *adel*,” Hen says, bowing with her arm over her chest. I do the same. “We lost track of time.”

“Which of you is Hen, and which is Lia?”

“I’m Hen,” Hen says.

Galena steps forward with a smile. She nods to me as well, but Hen must not be exaggerating about my makeup, because all Galena’s gaze holds is curiosity, thank the gods. She’s still shoeless, and I still have an undefinable urge to hug her.

“Hen, I’m Galena,” she says, nodding in greeting.

“I know who you are,” Hen says, crossing her arms. I clear my throat, and Hen mercifully says nothing more.

Galena raises a brow but gestures to the plank. “Would you come with me?”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming *Yes!* I can’t believe we did it. After the uncertainty of this week, after all our worrying, now we can finally relax. We’re here. We’re *here*, and with Hen having already done . . . whatever she did . . . to get our identities cleared, there are no more hurdles. We’re going to the palace, and it’ll be a night that’s just ours; a treasure no one can take away.

A memory I can unfold anytime I’m missing her, and remember what we used to be.

We start for the plank—and the priest grabs my arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he says.

My heart lurches. He knows. Gods, he knows, and of course he’d wait until the worst possible moment to reveal it—

“That boat’s for the spectators,” he says. “The contenders are over here.”

Mexican Gothic
Silvia Moreno-Garcia

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MEXICAN GOTHIC

SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA



CHAPTER 1

The parties at the Tuñóns' house always ended unquestionably late, and since the hosts enjoyed costume parties in particular, it was not unusual to see Chinas Poblanas with their folkloric skirts and ribbons in their hair arrive in the company of a harlequin or a cowboy. Their chauffeurs, rather than waiting outside the Tuñóns' house in vain, had systematized the nights. They would head off to eat tacos at a street stand or even visit a maid who worked in one of the nearby homes, a courtship as delicate as a Victorian melodrama. Some of the chauffeurs would cluster together, sharing cigarettes and stories. A couple took naps. After all, they knew full well that no one was going to abandon that party until after one a.m.

So the couple stepping out of the party at ten p.m. therefore broke convention. What's worse, the man's driver had left to fetch himself dinner and could not be found. The young man looked distressed, trying to determine how to proceed. He had worn a papier-mâché horse's head, a choice that now came back to haunt him as they'd have to make the journey through the city with this cumbersome prop. Noemí had warned him she wanted to win the costume contest, placing ahead of Laura Quezada and her beau, and thus he'd made an effort that now seemed misplaced, since his companion did not dress as she had said she would.

Noemí Taboada had promised she'd rent a jockey outfit, complete with a riding crop. It was supposed to be a clever and slightly scandalous choice, since she'd heard Laura was going to attend as Eve, with a snake wrapped around her neck. In the end, Noemí changed her mind. The jockey costume was ugly and scratched her skin. So instead she wore a green gown with white appliqué flowers and didn't bother to tell her date about the switch.

"What now?"

"Three blocks from here there's a big avenue. We can find a taxi there," she told Hugo. "Say, do you have a cigarette?"

"Cigarette? I don't even know where I put my wallet," Hugo replied, palming his jacket with one hand. "Besides, don't you always carry cigarettes in your purse? I would think you're cheap and can't buy your own if I didn't know any better."

“It’s so much more fun when a gentleman offers a lady a cigarette.”

“I can’t even offer you a mint tonight. Do you think I might have left my wallet back at the house?”

She did not reply. Hugo was having a difficult time carrying the horse’s head under his arm. He almost dropped it when they reached the avenue. Noemí raised a slender arm and hailed a taxi. Once they were inside the car, Hugo was able to put the horse’s head down on the seat.

“You could have told me I didn’t have to bring this thing after all,” he muttered, noticing the smile on the driver’s face and assuming he was having fun at his expense.

“You look adorable when you’re irritated,” she replied, opening her handbag and finding her cigarettes.

Hugo also looked like a younger Pedro Infante, which was a great deal of his appeal. As for the rest—personality, social status, and intelligence—Noemí had not paused to think too much about all of that. When she wanted something she simply wanted it, and lately she had wanted Hugo, though now that his attention had been procured she was likely to dismiss him.

When they reached her home, Hugo reached out to her, grasping her hand.

“Give me a kiss good night.”

“I’ve got to run, but you can still have a bit of my lipstick,” she replied, taking her cigarette and putting it in his mouth.

Hugo leaned out the window and frowned while Noemí hurried into her home, crossing the inner courtyard and going directly to her father's office. Like the rest of the house, his office was decorated in a modern style, which seemed to echo the newness of the occupants' money. Noemí's father had never been poor, but he had turned a small chemical dye business into a fortune. He knew what he liked, and he wasn't afraid to show it: bold colors and clean lines. His chairs were upholstered in a vibrant red, and luxuriant plants added splashes of green to every room.

The door to the office was open, and Noemí did not bother knocking, breezily walking in, her high heels clacking on the hardwood floor. She brushed one of the orchids in her hair with her fingertips and sat down in the chair in front of her father's desk with a loud sigh, tossing her little handbag on the floor. She also knew what she liked, and she did not like being summoned home early.

Her father had waved her in—those high heels of hers were loud, signaling her arrival as surely as any greeting—but had not looked at her, as he was too busy examining a document.

"I cannot believe you telephoned me at the Tuñóns," she said, tugging at her white gloves. "I know you weren't exactly happy that Hugo—"

"This is not about Hugo," her father replied, cutting her short.

Noemí frowned. She held one of the gloves in her right hand. "It's not?"

She had asked for permission to attend the party, but she had not specified she'd go with Hugo Duarte, and she knew how her father felt about him. Father was concerned that Hugo might propose marriage and she'd accept. Noemí did not intend to marry Hugo and had told her parents so, but Father did not believe her.

Noemí, like any good socialite, shopped at the Palacio de Hierro, painted her lips with Elizabeth Arden lipstick, owned a couple of very fine furs, spoke English with remarkable ease, courtesy of the nuns at the Anglo—a private school, of course—and was expected to devote her time to the twin pursuits of leisure and husband hunting. Therefore, to her father, any pleasant activity must also involve the acquisition of a spouse. That is, she should never have fun for the sake of having fun, but only as a way to obtain a husband. Which would have been fine and well if Father had actually liked Hugo, but Hugo was a mere junior architect, and Noemí was expected to aspire higher.

“No, although we'll have a talk about that later,” he said, leaving Noemí confused.

She had been slow dancing when a servant had tapped her on the shoulder and asked if she'd take a call from Mr. Taboada in the studio, disrupting her entire evening. She had assumed Father had found out she was out with Hugo and meant to rip him from her arms and deliver an admonishment. If that was not his intent, then what was all the fuss about?

“It's nothing bad, is it?” she asked, her tone

changing. When she was cross, her voice was higher-pitched, more girlish, rather than the modulated tone she had in recent years perfected.

“I don’t know. You can’t repeat what I’m about to tell you. Not to your mother, not to your brother, not to any friends, understood?” her father said, staring at her until Noemí nodded.

He leaned back in his chair, pressing his hands together in front of his face, and nodded back.

“A few weeks ago I received a letter from your cousin Catalina. In it she made wild statements about her husband. I wrote to Virgil in an attempt to get to the root of the matter.

“Virgil wrote to say that Catalina had been behaving in odd and distressing ways, but he believed she was improving. We wrote back and forth, me insisting that if Catalina was indeed as *distressed* as she seemed to be, it might be best to bring her to Mexico City to speak to a professional. He countered that it was not necessary.”

Noemí took off her other glove and set it on her lap.

“We were at an impasse. I did not think he would budge, but tonight I received a telegram. Here, you can read it.”

Her father grabbed the slip of paper on his desk and handed it to Noemí. It was an invitation for her to visit Catalina. The train didn’t run every day through their town, but it did run on Mondays, and a driver would be sent to the station at a certain time to pick her up.

“I want you to go, Noemí. Virgil says she’s been asking for you. Besides, I think this is a matter that may be best handled by a woman. It might turn out that this is nothing but exaggerations and marital trouble. It’s not as if your cousin hasn’t had a tendency toward the melodramatic. It might be a ploy for attention.”

“In that case, why would Catalina’s marital troubles or her melodrama concern us?” she asked, though she didn’t think it was fair that her father label Catalina as melodramatic. She’d lost both of her parents at a young age. One could expect a certain amount of turmoil after that.

“Catalina’s letter was very odd. She claimed her husband was poisoning her, she wrote that she’d had visions. I am not saying I am a medical expert, but it was enough to get me asking about good psychiatrists around town.”

“Do you have the letter?”

“Yes, here it is.”

Noemí had a hard time reading the words, much less making sense of the sentences. The handwriting seemed unsteady, sloppy.

. . . he is trying to poison me. This house is sick with rot, stinks of decay, brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment. I have tried to hold on to my wits, to keep this foulness away but I cannot and I find myself losing track of time and thoughts. Please. Please. They are cruel and unkind and they

will not let me go. I bar my door but still they come, they whisper at nights and I am so afraid of these restless dead, these ghosts, fleshless things. The snake eating its tail, the foul ground beneath our feet, the false faces and false tongues, the web upon which the spider walks making the strings vibrate. I am Catalina Catalina Taboada. CATALINA. Cata, Cata come out to play. I miss Noemí. I pray I'll see you again. You must come for me, Noemí. You have to save me. I cannot save myself as much as I wish to, I am bound, threads like iron through my mind and my skin and it's there. In the walls. It does not release its hold on me so I must ask you to spring me free, cut it from me, stop them now. For God's sake . . .

*Hurry,
Catalina*

In the margins of the letter her cousin had scribbled more words, numbers, she'd drawn circles. It was disconcerting.

When was the last time Noemí had spoken to Catalina? It must have been months ago, maybe close to a year. The couple had honeymooned in Pachuca, and Catalina had phoned and sent her a couple of postcards, but after that there had been little else, although telegrams had still arrived wishing happy birthdays to the members of the family at the appro-

priate times of the year. There must have also been a Christmas letter, because there had been Christmas presents. Or was it Virgil who had written the Christmas letter? It had, in any case, been a bland missive.

They'd all assumed Catalina was enjoying her time as a newlywed and didn't have the inclination to write much. There had also been something about her new home lacking a phone, not exactly unusual in the countryside, and Catalina didn't like to write, anyway. Noemí, busy with her social obligations and with school, simply assumed Catalina and her husband would eventually travel to Mexico City for a visit.

The letter she was holding was therefore uncharacteristic in every way she could think about. It was handwritten, though Catalina preferred the typewriter; it was rambling, when Catalina was succinct on paper.

"It is very odd," Noemí admitted. She had been primed to declare her father was exaggerating or using this incident as a handy excuse to distract her from Duarte, but it didn't seem to be the case.

"To say the least. Looking at it, you can probably see why I wrote back to Virgil and asked him to explain himself. And why I was so taken aback when he immediately accused me of being a nuisance."

"What exactly did you write to him?" she asked, fearing her father had seemed uncivil. He was a serious man and could rub people the wrong way with his unintended brusqueness.

“You must understand I would take no pleasure in putting a niece of mine in a place like La Castañeda—”

“Is that what you said? That you’d take her to the asylum?”

“I mentioned it as a possibility,” her father replied, holding out his hand. Noemí returned the letter to him. “It’s not the only place, but I know people there. She might need professional care, care which she will not find in the countryside. And I fear we are the ones capable of ensuring her best interests are served.”

“You don’t trust Virgil.”

Her father let out a dry chuckle. “Your cousin married quickly, Noemí, and, one might say, thoughtlessly. Now I’ll be the first to admit Virgil Doyle seemed charming, but who knows if he is reliable.”

He had a point. Catalina’s engagement had been almost scandalously short, and they’d had scant chances to speak to the groom. Noemí wasn’t even sure how the couple met, only that within a few weeks Catalina was issuing wedding invitations. Up until that point Noemí hadn’t even known her cousin had a sweetheart. If she hadn’t been invited to serve as one of the witnesses before the civil judge, Noemí doubted she’d have known Catalina had married at all.

Such secrecy and haste did not go down well with Noemí’s father. He had thrown a wedding breakfast for the couple, but Noemí knew he was offended by Catalina’s behavior. That was another reason why Noemí hadn’t been concerned about Catalina’s scant

communication with the family. Their relationship was, for the moment, chilly. She'd assumed it would thaw in a few months, that come November Catalina might arrive in Mexico City with plans for Christmas shopping, and everyone would be merry. Time, it was merely a question of time.

"You must believe she is saying the truth and he is mistreating her," she concluded, trying to remember her impression of the groom. *Handsome* and *polite* were the two words that came to mind, but then they'd hardly exchanged more than a few sentences.

"She claims, in that letter, that he is not only poisoning her but mentions ghosts. Tell me, does that sound like a reliable account?"

Her father stood up and went to the window, looking outside and crossing his arms. The office had a view of her mother's precious bougainvillea trees, a burst of color now shrouded in darkness.

"She is not well, that is what I know. I also know that if Virgil and Catalina were divorced, he'd have no money. It was pretty clear when they married that his family's funds have run dry. But as long as they are married, he has access to her bank account. It would be beneficial for him to keep Catalina home, even if she'd be best off in the city or with us."

"You think he is that mercenary? That he'd put his finances before the welfare of his wife?"

"I don't know him, Noemí. None of us do. That is the problem. He is a stranger. He says she has good care and is improving, but for all I know Catalina is tied to her bed right now and being fed gruel."

“And you said she was the melodramatic one,” Noemí said, looking at her orchid corsage and sighing.

“I know what an ill relative can be like. My own mother had a stroke and was confined to her bed for years. I also know a family does not handle such matters well, at times.”

“What would you have me do, then?” she asked, daintily placing her hands on her lap.

“Assess the situation. Determine if she should indeed be moved to the city, and attempt to convince him this is the best option if that is the case.”

“How would I manage such a thing?”

Her father smirked. In the smirk and the clever dark eyes, child and parent greatly resembled each other. “You are flighty. Always changing your mind about everything and anything. First you wanted to study history, then theater, now it’s anthropology. You’ve cycled through every sport imaginable and stuck to none. You date a boy twice then at the third date do not phone him back.”

“That has nothing to do with my question.”

“I’m getting to it. You are flighty, but you are stubborn about all the *wrong* things. Well, it’s time to use that stubbornness and energy to accomplish a useful task. There’s nothing you’ve ever committed to except for the piano lessons.”

“And the English ones,” Noemí countered, but she didn’t bother denying the rest of the accusations because she did indeed cycle through admirers on a

regular basis and was quite capable of wearing four outfits in a single day.

But it isn't like you should have to make up your mind about everything at twenty-two, she thought. There was no point in telling her father that. He'd taken over the family business at nineteen. By his standards, she was on a slow course to nowhere. Noemí's father gave her a pointed look, and she sighed. "Well, I would be happy to make a visit in a few weeks—"

"Monday, Noemí. That is why I cut your party short. We need to make the arrangements so you're on the first train to El Triunfo Monday morning."

"But there's that recital coming up," she replied.

It was a weak excuse and they both knew it. She'd been taking piano lessons since she was seven, and twice a year she performed in a small recital. It was no longer absolutely necessary for socialites to play an instrument, as it had been in the days of Noemí's mother, but it was one of those nice little hobbies that were appreciated among her social circle. Besides, she liked the piano.

"The recital. More likely you made plans with Hugo Duarte to attend it together, and you don't want him taking another woman as his date or having to give up the chance of wearing a new dress. Too bad, this is more important."

"I'll have you know I hadn't even bought a new dress. I was going to wear the skirt I wore to Greta's cocktail party," Noemí said, which was half the truth, because she had indeed made plans to go there

with Hugo. “Look, the truth is the recital is not my main concern. I have to start classes in a few days. I can’t take off like that. They’ll fail me,” she added.

“Then let them fail you. You’ll take the classes again.”

She was about to protest such a blithe statement when her father turned around and stared at her.

“Noemí, you’ve been going on and on about the National University. If you do this, I’ll give you permission to enroll.”

Noemí’s parents allowed her to attend the Feminine University of Mexico, but they had balked when she declared she’d like to continue her studies upon graduation. She wanted to pursue a master’s degree in anthropology. This would require her to enroll at the National. Her father thought this was both a waste of time and unsuitable with all those young men roaming the hallways and filling ladies’ heads with silly and lewd thoughts.

Noemí’s mother was equally unimpressed by these modern notions of hers. Girls were supposed to follow a simple life cycle, from debutante to wife. To study further would mean to delay this cycle, to remain a chrysalis inside a cocoon. They’d clashed over the matter half a dozen times, and her mother had cunningly stated it was up to Noemí’s father to hand down a decree, while her father never seemed poised to do so.

Her father’s statement therefore shocked her and presented an unexpected opportunity. “You mean it?” Noemí asked cautiously.

“Yes. It’s a serious matter. I don’t want a divorce splashed in the newspaper, but I also can’t allow someone to take advantage of the family. And this is Catalina we are talking about,” her father said, softening his tone. “She’s had her share of misfortunes and might dearly need a friendly face. That might be, in the end, all she needs.”

Catalina had been struck by calamity on several occasions. First the death of her father, followed by her mother’s remarriage to a stepfather who often had her in tears. Catalina’s mother had passed away a couple of years later, and the girl had moved into Noemí’s household; the stepfather had already left by then. Despite the warm embrace of the Taboadas, these deaths had deeply affected her. Later, as a young woman, there had been her broken engagement, which caused much strife and hurt feelings.

There had also been a rather goofy young man who courted Catalina for many months and whom she seemed to like very much. But Noemí’s father had chased him away, unimpressed by the fellow. After that aborted romance, Catalina must have learned her lesson, for her relationship with Virgil Doyle had been a paragon of discretion. Or maybe it had been Virgil who had been more wily and urged Catalina to keep mum about them until it was too late to disrupt any wedding.

“I suppose I could give notice that I’ll be away for a few days,” she said.

“Good. We’ll telegraph Virgil back and let them know you are on your way. Discretion and smarts,

that's what I need. He is her husband and has a right to make decisions on her behalf, but we cannot be idle if he is reckless."

"I should make you put it in writing, the bit about the university."

Her father sat down behind his desk again. "As if I'd break my word. Now go get those flowers out of your hair and start packing your clothes. I know it'll take you forever to decide what to wear. Who are you supposed to be, incidentally?" her father asked, clearly dissatisfied with the cut of her dress and her bare shoulders.

"I'm dressed as Spring," she replied.

"It's cold there. If you intend to parade around in anything similar to that, you'd better take a sweater," he said dryly.

Though normally she would have come up with a clever rejoinder, she remained unusually quiet. It occurred to Noemí, after having agreed to the venture, that she knew very little of the place where she was going and the people she would meet. This was no cruise or pleasure trip. But she quickly assured herself Father had picked her for this mission, and accomplish it she would. Flighty? Bah. She'd show Father the dedication he wanted from her. Perhaps he'd come to see her, after her success—for she could not picture herself failing—as more deserving and mature.



CHAPTER 2

When Noemí was a little girl and Catalina read fairy tales to her, she used to mention “the forest,” that place where Hansel and Gretel tossed their breadcrumbs or Little Red Riding Hood met a wolf. Growing up in a large city, it did not occur to Noemí until much later that forests were real places, which could be found in an atlas. Her family vacationed in Veracruz, in her grandmother’s house by the sea, with no tall trees in sight. Even after she grew up, the forest remained in her mind a picture glimpsed in a storybook by a child, with charcoal outlines and bright splashes of color in the middle.

It took her a while, therefore, to realize that she was headed *into* a forest, for El Triunfo was perched on the side of a steep mountain carpeted with color-

ful wildflowers and covered thickly with pines and oaks. Noemí sighted sheep milling around and goats braving sheer rock walls. Silver had given the region its riches, but tallow from these animals had helped illuminate the mines, and they were plentiful. It was all very pretty.

The higher the train moved and the closer it got to El Triunfo, though, the more the bucolic landscape changed and Noemí reassessed her idea of it. Deep ravines cut the land, and rugged ridges loomed outside the window. What had been charming rivulets turned into strong, gushing rivers, which spelled doom should anyone be dragged by their currents. At the bottom of the mountains farmers tended groves and fields of alfalfa, but there were no such crops here, just the goats climbing up and down rocks. The land kept its riches in the dark, sprouting no trees with fruit.

The air grew thin as the train struggled up the mountain until it stuttered and stopped.

Noemí grabbed her suitcases. She'd brought two of them and had been tempted to also pack her favorite trunk, though in the end she had judged it too cumbersome. Despite this concession, the suitcases were large and heavy.

The train station was not busy and was barely a station at all, just a lonesome square-shaped building with a half-asleep woman behind the ticket counter. Three little boys were chasing one another around the station, playing tag, and she offered them some coins if they helped her lug her suitcases out-

side. They did, gladly. They looked underfed, and she wondered how the town's inhabitants got by now the mine was closed and only the goats provided the opportunity for a bit of commerce.

Noemí was prepared for the chill of the mountain. The unexpected element was therefore the thin fog that greeted her that afternoon. She looked at it curiously as she adjusted her teal calotte hat with the long yellow feather and peered onto the street looking at her ride, for there could hardly be any mistaking it. It was the single automobile parked in front of the station, a preposterously large vehicle that made her think of swanky silent film stars of two or three decades earlier—the kind of automobile her father might have driven in his youth to flaunt his wealth.

But the vehicle in front of her was dated, dirty, and needed a paint job. Therefore it was not truly the kind of automobile a movie star would drive these days, but seemed to be a relic that had been haphazardly dusted and dragged onto the street.

She thought the driver might match the car and expected to find an elderly man behind the wheel, but a young fellow of about her age in a corduroy jacket stepped out. He was fair-haired and pale—she didn't realize anyone could be *that* pale, goodness, did he ever wander into the sun?—his eyes uncertain, his mouth straining to form a smile or a greeting.

Noemí paid the boys who had helped bring her luggage out, then marched forward and extended her hand.

“I am Noemí Taboada. Has Mr. Doyle sent you?” she asked.

“Yes, Uncle Howard said to pick you up,” he replied, shaking her hand weakly. “I’m Francis. I hope the ride was pleasant? Those are all your things, Miss Taboada? Can I help you with them?” he asked in quick succession, as if he preferred to end all sentences with question marks rather than commit to definite statements.

“You can call me Noemí. Miss Taboada sounds so fussy. That’s the sum of my luggage, and yes, I’d love some assistance.”

He grabbed her two suitcases and placed them in the trunk, then went around the car and opened the door for her. The town, as she saw it from her window, was peppered with winding streets, colorful houses with flower pots at their windows, sturdy wooden doors, long stairways, a church, and all the usual details that any guidebook would call “quaint.”

Despite this, it was clear El Triunfo was not in any guidebooks. It had the musty air of a place that had withered away. The houses were colorful, yes, but the color was peeling from most of the walls, some of the doors had been defaced, half of the flowers in the pots were wilting, and the town showed few signs of activity.

It was not that unusual. Many formerly thriving mining sites that had extracted silver and gold during the Colonia interrupted their operations once the War of Independence broke out. Later on, the English and the French were welcomed during the

tranquil Porfiriato, their pockets growing fat with mineral riches. But the Revolution had ended this second boom. There were many hamlets like El Triunfo where one could peek at fine chapels built when money and people were plentiful; places where the earth would never again spill wealth from its womb.

Yet the Doyles lingered in this land, when many others had long gone. Perhaps, she thought, they'd learned to love it, though she was not much impressed by it, for it was a steep and abrupt landscape. It didn't look at all like the mountains from her childhood storybooks, where the trees appeared lovely and flowers grew by the road; it didn't resemble the enchanting place Catalina had said she would live. Like the old car that had picked Noemí up, the town clung to the dregs of splendor.

Francis drove up a narrow road that climbed deeper into the mountains, the air growing rawer, the mist intensifying. She rubbed her hands together.

"Is it very far?" she asked.

Again he looked uncertain. "Not that far," Francis said slowly, as if they were discussing a matter that had to be considered with much care. "The road is bad or I'd go faster. It used to be, a long time ago, when the mine was open, that the roads around here were all in good shape, even near High Place."

"High Place?"

"That's what we call it, our home. And behind it, the English cemetery."

"Is it really very English?" she said, smiling.

"Yes," he said, gripping the wheel with both

hands, with a strength she would have not imagined from his limp handshake.

“Oh?” she said, waiting for more.

“You’ll see it. It’s all very English. Um, that’s what Uncle Howard wanted, a little piece of England. He even brought European earth here.”

“Do you think he had an extreme case of nostalgia?”

“Indeed. I might as well tell you, we don’t speak Spanish at High Place. My great-uncle doesn’t know a word of it, Virgil fares poorly, and my mother wouldn’t ever attempt to stitch a sentence together. Is . . . is your English any good?”

“Lessons every day since I was six,” she said, switching from Spanish to English. “I’m sure I’ll have no trouble.”

The trees grew closer together, and it was dark under their branches. She was not one for nature, not the real thing. The last time she had been anywhere near a forest had been on that excursion to El Desierto de los Leones when they went riding and then her brother and her friends decided to do some practice shooting with tin cans. That had been two, maybe even three years before. This place didn’t compare to that. It was wilder here.

She found herself warily assessing the height of the trees and the depths of the ravines. Both were considerable. The mist thickened, making her wince, fearing they’d wind up halfway down the mountain if they took a wrong turn. How many eager miners hunting for silver had fallen off a cliff? The moun-

tains offered mineral riches and a quick death. But Francis seemed secure in his driving, even if his words faltered. She didn't generally like shy men—they got on her nerves—but who cared. It was not as if she'd come to see him or any other members of his family.

“Who are you, anyway?” she asked, to distract herself from the thought of ravines and cars crashing against unseen trees.

“Francis.”

“Well, yes, but are you Virgil's little cousin? Long-lost uncle? Another black sheep I must be informed about?”

She spoke in that droll way she liked, the one she used at cocktail parties, and which always seemed to get her very far with people, and he replied as she expected, smiling a little.

“First cousin, once removed. He's a bit older than me.”

“I've never understood that. Once, twice, thrice removed. Who keeps track of such a thing? I always figure if they come to my birthday party we are related and that's it, no need to pull out the genealogy chart.”

“It certainly simplifies things,” he said. The smile was real now.

“Are you a good cousin? I hated my boy cousins when I was little. They'd always push my head against the cake at my party even though I didn't want to do the whole mordida thing.”

“Mordida?”

“Yes. You're supposed to take a bite of the cake

before it is cut, but someone always shoves your head into it. I guess you didn't have to endure that at High Place."

"There aren't many parties at High Place."

"The name must be a literal description," she mused, because they kept going up. Did the road have no end? The wheels of the car crunched over a fallen tree branch, then another.

"Yes."

"I've never been in a house with a name. Who does that these days?"

"We're old-fashioned," he mumbled.

Noemí eyed the young man skeptically. Her mother would have said he needed iron in his diet and a good cut of meat. By the looks of those thin fingers he sustained himself on dewdrops and honey, and his tone tended toward whispers. Virgil had seemed to her much more physical than this lad, much more present. Older, too, as Francis had indicated. Virgil was thirty-something, she forgot his exact age.

They hit a rock or some bump in the road. Noemí let out an irritated "ouch."

"Sorry about that," Francis said.

"I don't think it's your fault. Does it always look like this?" she asked. "It's like driving in a bowl of milk."

"This is nothing," he said with a chuckle. Well. At least he was relaxing.

Then, all of a sudden, they were there, emerging into a clearing, and the house seemed to leap out of

the mist to greet them with eager arms. It was so odd! It looked absolutely Victorian in construction, with its broken shingles, elaborate ornamentation, and dirty bay windows. She'd never seen anything like it in real life; it was terribly different from her family's modern house, the apartments of her friends, or the colonial houses with façades of red tezontle.

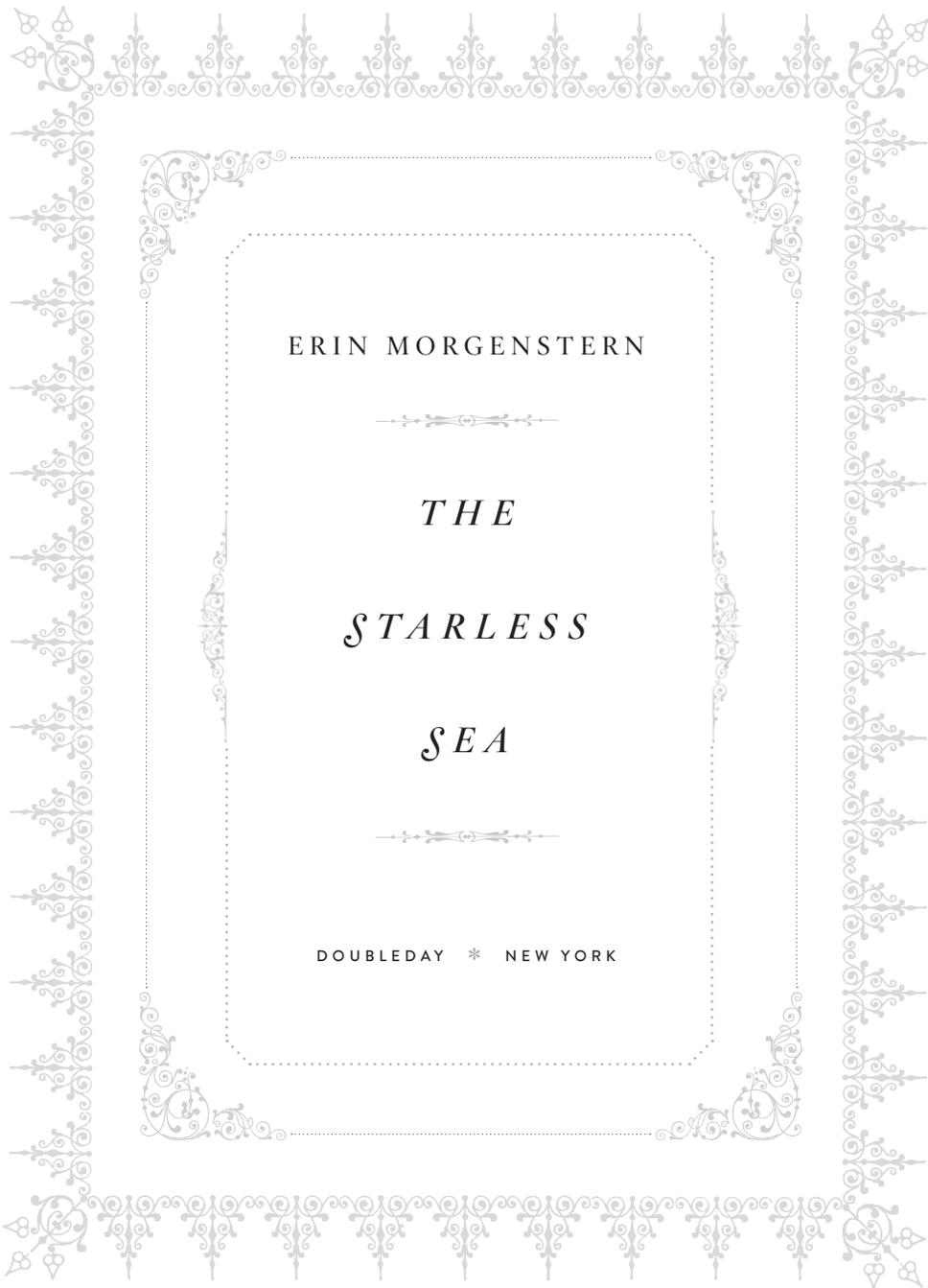
The house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle. It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted places, if it had not seemed so tired, slats missing from a couple of shutters, the ebony porch groaning as they made their way up the steps to the door, which came complete with a silver knocker shaped like a fist dangling from a circle.

It's the abandoned shell of a snail, she told herself, and the thought of snails brought her back to her childhood playing in the courtyard of their house, moving aside the potted plants and seeing the roly-polies scuttle about as they tried to hide again. Or feeding sugar cubes to the ants, despite her mother's admonishments. Also the kind tabby, which slept under the bougainvillea and which let itself be petted endlessly by the children. She did not imagine they had a cat in this house, nor canaries chirping merrily in their cages that she might feed in the mornings.

Francis took out a key and opened the heavy door.

The Starless Sea
Erin Morgenstern

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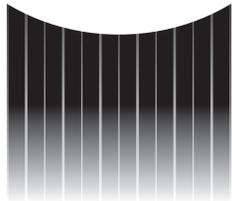
ERIN MORGENSTERN



THE
STARLESS
SEA



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First Edition



SWEET SORROWS

Once, very long ago . . .

There is a pirate in the basement.

(The pirate is a metaphor but also still a person.)

(The basement could rightly be considered a dungeon.)

The pirate was placed here for numerous acts of a piracy nature considered criminal enough for punishment by those non-pirates who decide such things.

Someone said to throw away the key, but the key rests on a tarnished ring on a hook that hangs on the wall nearby.

(Close enough to see from behind the bars. Freedom kept in sight but out of reach, left as a reminder to the prisoner. No one remembers that now on the key side of the bars. The careful psychological design forgotten, distilled into habit and convenience.)

(The pirate realizes this but withholds comment.)

The guard sits in a chair by the door and reads crime serials on faded paper, wishing he were an idealized, fictional version of himself. Wondering if the difference between pirates and thieves is a matter of boats and hats.

After a time he is replaced by another guard. The pirate cannot discern the precise schedule, as the basement-dungeon has no clocks to mark the time and the sound of the waves on the shore beyond the stone walls muffles the morning chimes, the evening merriment.

This guard is shorter and does not read. He wishes to be no one but himself, he lacks the imagination to conjure alter egos, even the imagination to empathize with the man behind the bars, the only other soul in the room beyond the mice. He pays elaborate amounts of attention to his shoes when he is not asleep. (He is usually asleep.)



Approximately three hours after the short guard replaces the reading guard, a girl comes.

The girl brings a plate of bread and a bowl of water and sets them outside the pirate's cell with hands shaking so badly that half the water spills. Then she turns and scampers up the stairs.

The second night (the pirate guesses it is night) the pirate stands as close to the bars as he can and stares and the girl drops the bread nearly out of reach and spills the bowl of water almost entirely.

The third night the pirate stays in the shadows of the back corner and manages to keep most of his water.

The fourth night a different girl comes.

This girl does not wake the guard. Her feet fall more softly on the stones and any sound they make is stolen away by the waves or by the mice.

This girl stares into the shadows at the barely visible pirate, gives a little disappointed sigh, and places the bread and bowl by the bars. Then she waits.

The pirate remains in the shadows.

After several minutes of silence punctuated by the guard's snoring, the girl turns away and leaves.

When the pirate retrieves his meal he finds the water has been mixed with wine.

The next night, the fifth night if it is night at all, the pirate waits by the bars for the girl to descend on her silent feet.

Her steps halt only briefly when she sees him.

The pirate stares and the girl stares back.

He holds out a hand for his bowl and his bread but the girl places them on the ground instead, her eyes never leaving his, not allowing so much as the hem of her gown to drift into his reach. Bold yet coy. She gives him a hint of a bow as she returns to her feet, a gentle nod of her head, a movement that reminds him of the beginning of the dance.

(Even a pirate can recognize the beginning of a dance.)

The next night the pirate stays back from the bars, a polite distance that could be closed in a single step, and the girl comes a breath closer.

Another night and the dance continues. A step closer. A step back. A movement to the side. The next night he holds out his hand again to accept what she offers and this time she responds and his fingers brush against the back of her hand.

The girl begins to linger, staying longer each night, though if the guard stirs to the point of waking she departs without a backward glance.

She brings two bowls of wine and they drink together in companionable silence. The guard has stopped snoring, his sleep deep and restful. The pirate suspects the girl has something to do with that. Bold and coy and clever.

Some nights she brings more than bread. Oranges and plums secreted in the pockets of her gown. Pieces of candied ginger wrapped in paper laced with stories.

Some nights she stays until moments before the changing of the guards.

(The daytime guard has begun leaving his crime serials within reach of the cell's walls, ostensibly by accident.)

The shorter guard paces tonight. He clears his throat as though he might say something but says nothing. He settles himself in his chair and falls into an anxious sleep.

The pirate waits for the girl.

She arrives empty-handed.

Tonight is the last night. The night before the gallows. (The gallows are also a metaphor, albeit an obvious one.) The pirate knows that there will not be another night, will not be another changing of the guard after the next one. The girl knows the exact number of hours.

They do not speak of it.

They have never spoken.

The pirate twists a lock of the girl's hair between his fingers.

The girl leans into the bars, her cheek resting on cold iron, as close as she can be while she remains a world away.

Close enough to kiss.

"Tell me a story," she says.

The pirate obliges her.



SWEET SORROWS

There are three paths. This is one of them.

Far beneath the surface of the earth, hidden from the sun and the moon, upon the shores of the Starless Sea, there is a labyrinthine collection of tunnels and rooms filled with stories. Stories written in books and sealed in jars and painted on walls. Odes inscribed onto skin and pressed into rose petals. Tales laid in tiles upon the floors, bits of plot worn away by passing feet. Legends carved in crystal and hung from chandeliers. Stories catalogued and cared for and revered. Old stories preserved while new stories spring up around them.

The place is sprawling yet intimate. It is difficult to measure its breadth. Halls fold into rooms or galleries and stairs twist downward or upward to alcoves or arcades. Everywhere there are doors leading to new spaces and new stories and new secrets to be discovered and everywhere there are books.

It is a sanctuary for storytellers and storykeepers and storylovers. They eat and sleep and dream surrounded by chronicles and histories and myths. Some stay for hours or days before returning to the world above but others remain for weeks or years, living in shared or private chambers and spending their hours reading or studying or writing, discussing and creating with their fellow residents or working in solitude.

Of those who remain, a few choose to devote themselves to this space, to this temple of stories.

There are three paths. This is one of them.

This is the path of the acolytes.

Those who wish to choose this path must spend a full cycle of the moon in isolated contemplation before they commit. The contem-

plation is thought to be silent, but of those who allow themselves to be locked away in the stone-walled room, some will realize that no one can hear them. They can talk or yell or scream and it violates no rules. The contemplation is only thought to be silent by those who have never been inside the room.

Once the contemplation has ended they have the opportunity to leave their path. To choose another path or no path at all.

Those who spend their time in silence often choose to leave both the path and the space. They return to the surface. They squint at the sun. Sometimes they remember a world below that they once intended to devote themselves to but the memory is hazy, like a place from a dream.

More often it is those who scream and cry and wail, those who talk to themselves for hours, who are ready when the time comes to proceed with their initiation.

Tonight, as the moon is new and the door is unlocked, it reveals a young woman who has spent most of her time singing. She is shy and not in the habit of singing, but on her first night of contemplation she realized almost by accident that no one could hear her. She laughed, partly at herself and partly at the oddity of having voluntarily jailed herself in the most luxurious of cells with its feather bed and silken sheets. The laugh echoed around the stone room like ripples of water.

She clasped her hand over her mouth and waited for someone to come but no one did. She tried to recall if anyone had told her explicitly not to speak.

She said "Hello?" and only the echoes returned her greeting.

It took a few days before she was brave enough to sing. She had never liked her singing voice but in her captivity free of embarrassment and expectation she sang, softly at first but then brightly and boldly. The voice that the echo returned to her ears was surprisingly pleasant.

She sang all the songs she knew. She made up her own. In moments when she could not think of words to sing she created nonsense languages for lyrics with sounds she found pleasing.

It surprised her how quickly the time passed.



Now the door opens.

The acolyte who enters holds a ring of brass keys. He offers his other palm to her. On it sits a small disk of metal with a raised carving of a bee.

Accepting the bee is the next step in becoming an acolyte. This is her final chance to refuse.

She takes the bee from the acolyte's palm. He bows and gestures for her to follow him.

The young woman who is to be an acolyte turns the warm metal disk over in her fingers as they walk through narrow candlelit tunnels lined with bookshelves and open caverns filled with mismatched chairs and tables, stacked high with books and dotted with statues. She pets a statue of a fox as they pass by, a popular habit that has worn its carved fur smooth between its ears.

An older man leafing through a volume glances up as they pass and recognizing the procession he places two fingers to his lips and inclines his head at her.

At her, not at the acolyte she follows. A gesture of respect for a position she does not yet officially hold. She bows her head to hide her smile. They continue down gilded stairways and through curving tunnels she has never traversed before. She slows to look at the paintings hung between the shelves of books, images of trees and girls and ghosts.

The acolyte stops at a door marked with a golden bee. He chooses a key from his ring and unlocks it.

Here begins the initiation.

It is a secret ceremony. The details are known only to those who undergo it and those who perform it. It has been performed in the same fashion always, as long as anyone can remember.

As the door with the golden bee is opened and the threshold crossed the acolyte gives up her name. Whatever name this young woman was called before she will never be addressed by it again, it stays in her past. Someday she may have a new name, but for the moment she is nameless.

The room is small and round and high-ceilinged, a miniature version of her contemplation cell. It holds a plain wooden chair on



one side and a waist-high pillar of stone topped with a bowl of fire. The fire provides the only light.

The elder acolyte gestures for the young woman to sit in the wooden chair. She does. She faces the fire, watching the flames dance until a piece of black silk is tied over her eyes.

The ceremony continues unseen.

The metal bee is taken from her hand. There is a pause followed by the sound of metal instruments clinking and then the sensation of a finger on her chest, pressing into a spot on her breastbone. The pressure releases and then it is replaced by a sharp, searing pain.

(She will realize afterward that the metal bee has been heated in the fire, its winged impression burned into her chest.)

The surprise of it unnerves her. She has prepared herself for what she knows of the rest of the ceremony, but this is unexpected. She realizes she has never seen the bare chest of another acolyte.

When moments before she was ready, now she is shaken and unsure.

But she does not say *Stop*. She does not say *No*.

She has made her decision, though she could not have known everything that decision would entail.

In the darkness, fingers part her lips and a drop of honey is placed on her tongue.

This is to ensure that the last taste is sweet.

In truth the last taste that remains in an acolyte's mouth is more than honey: the sweetness swept up in blood and metal and burning flesh.

Were an acolyte able to describe it, afterward, they might clarify that the last taste they experience is one of honey and smoke.

It is not entirely sweet.

They recall it each time they extinguish the flame atop a beeswax candle.

A reminder of their devotion.

But they cannot speak of it.

They surrender their tongues willingly. They offer up their ability to speak to better serve the voices of others.

They take an unspoken vow to no longer tell their own stories in



reverence to the ones that came before and to the ones that shall follow.

In this honey-tinged pain the young woman in the chair thinks she might scream but she does not. In the darkness the fire seems to consume the entire room and she can see shapes in the flames even though her eyes are covered.

The bee on her chest flutters.

Once her tongue has been taken and burned and turned to ash, once the ceremony is complete and her servitude as an acolyte officially begins, once her voice has been muted, then her ears awaken.

Then the stories begin to come.



SWEET SORROWS

To deceive the eye.

The boy is the son of the fortune-teller. He has reached an age that brings an uncertainty as to whether this is something to be proud of, or even a detail to be divulged, but it remains true.

He walks home from school toward an apartment situated above a shop strewn with crystal balls and tarot cards, incense and statues of animal-headed deities and dried sage. (The scent of sage permeates everything, from his bedsheets to his shoelaces.)

Today, as he does every school day, the boy takes a shortcut through an alleyway that loops behind the store, a narrow passage between tall brick walls that are often covered with graffiti and then whitewashed and then graffitied again.

Today, instead of the creatively spelled tags and bubble-lettered profanities, there is a single piece of artwork on the otherwise white bricks.

It is a door.

The boy stops. He adjusts his spectacles to focus his eyes better, to be certain he is seeing what his sometimes unreliable vision suggests he is seeing.

The haziness around the edges sharpens, and it is still a door. Larger and fancier and more impressive than he'd thought at first fuzzy glance.

He is uncertain what to make of it.

Its incongruousness demands his attention.

The door is situated far back in the alley, in a shadowed section hidden from the sun, but the colors are still rich, some of the pigments metallic. More delicate than most of the graffiti the boy has seen. Painted in a style he knows has a fancy French name, some-



thing about fooling the eye, though he cannot recall the term here and now.

The door is carved—no, painted—with sharp-cut geometric patterns that wind around its edges creating depth where there is only flatness. In the center, at the level where a peephole might be and stylized with lines that match the rest of the painted carving, is a bee. Beneath the bee is a key. Beneath the key is a sword.

A golden, seemingly three-dimensional doorknob shimmers despite the lack of light. A keyhole is painted beneath, so dark it looks to be a void awaiting a key rather than a few strokes of black paint.

The door is strange and pretty and something that the boy does not have words for and does not know if there are words for, even fancy French expressions.

Somewhere in the street an unseen dog barks but it sounds distant and abstract. The sun moves behind a cloud and the alley feels longer and deeper and darker, the door itself brighter.

Tentatively, the boy reaches out to touch the door.

The part of him that still believes in magic expects it to be warm despite the chill in the air. Expects the image to have fundamentally changed the brick. Makes his heart beat faster even as his hand slows down because the part of him that thinks the other part is being childish prepares for disappointment.

His fingertips meet the door below the sword and they come to rest on smooth paint covering cool brick, a slight unevenness to the surface betraying the texture below.

It is just a wall. Just a wall with a pretty picture on it.

But still.

Still there is the sensation tugging at him that this is more than what it appears to be.

He presses his palm against the painted brick. The false wood of the door is a brown barely a shade or two off from his own skin tone, as though it has been mixed to match him.

Behind the door is somewhere else. Not the room behind the wall. Something more. He knows this. He feels it in his toes.

This is what his mother would call a moment with meaning. A moment that changes the moments that follow.



The son of the fortune-teller knows only that the door feels important in a way he cannot quite explain, even to himself.

A boy at the beginning of a story has no way of knowing that the story has begun.

He traces the painted lines of the key with his fingertips, marveling at how much the key, like the sword and the bee and the door-knob, looks as though it should be three-dimensional.

The boy wonders who painted it and what it means, if it means anything. If not the door at least the symbols. If it is a sign and not a door, or if it is both at once.

In this significant moment, if the boy turns the painted knob and opens the impossible door, everything will change.

But he does not.

Instead, he puts his hands in his pockets.

Part of him decides he is being childish and that he is too old to expect real life to be like books. Another part of him decides that if he does not try he cannot be disappointed and he can go on believing that the door could open even if it is just pretend.

He stands with his hands in his pockets and considers the door for a moment more before walking away.

The following day his curiosity gets the better of him and he returns to find that the door has been painted over. The brick wall whitewashed to the point where he cannot even discern where, precisely, the door had been.

And so the son of the fortune-teller does not find his way to the Starless Sea.

Not yet.

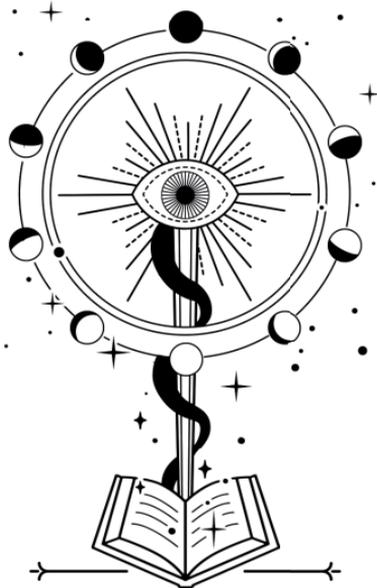
A Deadly Education

Naomi Novik

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A
DEADLY
EDUCATION

A NOVEL



Lesson One of The Scholomance

NAOMI NOVIK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF UPROOTED

DEL REY • RANDOM HOUSE

Excerpt from *A Deadly Education* by Naomi Novik
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DEAR READER,

If you're like me, you rarely confine yourself to what's on the pages of any book you love. You want to explore the world the characters live in and discover its hidden truths – the things that didn't make it onto the page or maybe even into the author's mind. You find yourself imagining what studying magic in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* really would entail, or what attending Hogwarts must be like for all the kids who aren't Harry Potter. Thoughts like these are the seeds from which stories grow. They're where this book started, in the same way that *Spinning Silver* began between the lines of "Rumpelstiltskin," and *Uprooted* came out of a thicket of old Polish stories and songs.

One of the oldest legends of a school for witchcraft and wizardry is the story of the Scholomance, a hidden institution said to be run by the Devil himself, where the students are cloistered for years, never seeing the sun while learning the darkest of arts. Ever since I first read about this mysterious place in my middle-school library, I've been imagining its story. Who are the students in its classrooms and why would they or their parents accept the price the school exacts?

A Deadly Education is the first volume in a trilogy that presents the answers I've imagined to those questions. But my hope is that you will find it a world whose mysteries you will want to explore and inhabit and imagine for yourself, long after you turn the final page.

NAOMI NOVIK

CHAPTER 1 • SOUL EATER

I DECIDED THAT Orion needed to die after the second time he saved my life. I hadn't really cared much about him before then one way or another, but I had limits. It would've been all right if he'd saved my life some really extraordinary number of times, ten or thirteen or so—thirteen is a number with distinction. Orion Lake, my personal bodyguard; I could have lived with that. But we'd been in the Scholomance almost three years by then, and he hadn't shown any previous inclination to single me out for special treatment.

Selfish of me, you'll say, to be contemplating with murderous intent the hero responsible for the continued survival of a quarter of our class. Well, too bad for the losers who couldn't stay afloat without his help. We're not *meant* to all survive, anyway. The school has to be fed somehow.

Ah, but what about me, you ask, since I'd needed him to save me? Twice, even? And that's exactly why he had to go. No one was going to let me explain that he'd only had to save me the first time—along with half a dozen other students—because *he* had set off the explosion in the alchemy lab fighting that chimaera, or that the second time around, the soul-eater was running away from him when it came into my cell. You could get away with one explanation like that, at best, and after

that, no one cared. I had just fallen into the general mass of the hapless warts that Orion Lake had saved in the course of his brilliant progress, and that was intolerable.

Our rooms aren't very big. He was only a few steps from my desk chair, still hunched panting over the bubbling purplish smear of the soul-eater that was now steadily oozing into the narrow cracks between the floor tiles, the better to spread all over my room. The fading incandescence on his hands was illuminating his face, not an extraordinary face or anything: he had a big beaky nose that would maybe be dramatic one day when the rest of his face caught up, but for now was just too large, and his forehead was dripping sweat and plastered with his silver-grey hair that he hadn't cut for three weeks too long. He spends most of his time behind an impenetrable shell of devoted admirers, so it was the closest I'd ever been to him. He straightened and wiped an arm across the sweat. "You okay—Gal, right?" he said to me, just to put some salt on the wound. We'd been in the same lab section for three years.

"No thanks to you and your boundless fascination for every dark thing creeping through the place," I snapped icily. "And it is *not* Gal, it has never been *Gal*, it's *Galadriel*," —the name wasn't my idea, don't look at me— "and if that's too many syllables for you to manage all in one go, El will do."

His head had jerked up and he was blinking at me in a sort of open-mouthed way. "Oh. Uh. I—I'm sorry?" he said, voice rising on the words, as if he didn't understand what was going on.

“No, no,” I said. “I’m sorry. Clearly I’m not performing my role up to standard.” I threw a melodramatic hand up against my forehead. “Orion, I was so terrified,” I gasped breathily, and flung myself onto him. He tottered a bit: we were roughly the same height. “Thank *goodness* you were here to *save* me, I could never have managed a soul eater all on my own,” and I hiccupped a pathetically fake sob against his chest.

Would you believe, he actually tried to put his arm round me and give my shoulder a pat, that’s how automatic it was for him. I stepped deliberately on his foot and jammed my elbow into his stomach and shoved him off. He made a choked noise like a whoofing dog and staggered back to gawk at me. “I don’t need your help, you insufferable lurker,” I said. “Keep away from me, or you’ll be sorry.” I shoved him back one more step, and slid the cell door shut—with the big melted hole where the doorknob and lock had used to be, for which thanks—bare centimeters away from his face, enjoying the look of perfect confusion as it vanished away.

However, the soul-eater was still bubbling away on the floor of my cell, hissing as it deflated the rest of the way, and the putrescent stink was completely filling the room.

I was so angry that it took me six tries to get a spell for cleaning it up. When I stood up and hurled the fourth ancient scroll back into the impenetrable dark on the other side of my desk and yelled furiously, “I don’t *want* to summon an army of scuvara! I don’t *want* to conjure walls of mortal flame! I want my bloody room *clean!*” what came flying out of the void

in answer was a horrible tome encased in some kind of pale crackly leather with spiked corners that scraped unpleasantly as it skidded to me across the metal of the desk. The leather had probably come off a pig, but someone had clearly wanted you to think it had been flayed from a person, which was almost as bad, and it flipped itself open to a page with instructions for enslaving an entire mob of people to do your bidding. I suppose they *would* have cleaned my room if I told them to.

I had to actually take out one of my mother's stupid crystals and sit down on my narrow squeaky bed and meditate for ten minutes, with the stench of the soul-eater all around me and getting into my clothes and sheets and papers. You'd think that any smell would clear out quickly, since one whole wall of our rooms opens to the scenic view of a mystical void of empty darkness, so delightfully like living in a spaceship aimed directly into a black hole, but you'd be wrong. After I finally managed to walk myself back from the incoherent kicking levels of anger, I pushed the pig-skin book off the far edge of my desk back into the void—using a pen to touch it, just in case—and said as calmly as I could manage, “I want a simple household spell for cleaning away an unwanted mess with a bad smell.”

Sullenly down came thump a gigantic volume entitled *Amunan Hamwerod* packed completely full of spells written in Old English—my weakest dead language, and it didn't open to any particular page, either.

That sort of thing is always happening to me. Some sorcerers get an affinity for weather magic, or transformation spells,

or fantastic combat magics like dear Orion. I got an affinity for mass destruction. It's all my mum's fault, of course, just like my stupid name. She's one of those flowers and beads and crystals sorts, dancing to the Goddess under the moon. Everyone's a lovely person and anyone who does anything wrong is misunderstood or unhappy.

She even has a mundane job, which isn't completely weird: wizards need to eat as much as anyone, and that's an acceptable if rather third-tier way to acquire the necessities of life. But the kind of mundane job sensible wizards hunt out are empty sacks: the person who retires from the firm after forty-six years and no one quite remembers what they were doing, the befuddled librarian that you occasionally glimpse wandering the stacks without seeming to do anything, the third vice president of marketing who shows up only for meetings with senior management. There's spells to find those jobs or coax them into existence, and then you're free to spend your time gathering the mana to make your cheap flat into a twelve-room mansion on the inside. But Mum does massage therapy instead, because "it's so relaxing to make people feel better, love," and she charges almost nothing, and that little mostly because if you offer to do professional massage for free, people will look at you sideways, as well they should.

Well, I came out designed to be the exact opposite of this paragon, as anyone with a basic understanding of the Balancing Principle might have expected, and now when I want to straighten my room, I get instructions on how to kill it with

fire. Not that I can actually *use* any of these delightful cataclysmic spells the school is so eager to hand out to me. Funnily enough, you can't actually whip up an entire army of demons on just a wink. It takes power—let's be real, it takes malia—and lots of it.

Everyone—almost everyone—uses a bit of malia here and there, stuff they don't even think of as wicked. Magic a slice of bread into cake without gathering the mana for it first, that sort of thing, which everyone thinks is just harmless cheating. Well, the power's got to come from *somewhere*, and if you haven't gathered it yourself, then it's probably coming from something living, because it's easier to get power out of something that's already alive and moving around. So you get your cake and meanwhile a colony of ants in your back garden stiffen and die and disintegrate.

Mum won't so much as keep her tea hot with malia, but if you're less of a stickler, you can make yourself a three tier cake out of dirt and ants every day of your life, and still live to a hundred and fifty and die peacefully in your bed, assuming you don't die of cholesterol poisoning first. But if you start using malia on a grander scale than that, for example trying to raze a city or slaughter a whole army or any of the thousand other useless things that I know exactly how to do, you can't get enough of it except by sucking in mana—or life force or arcane energy or pixie dust or whatever you want to call it; mana's just the current trend—from things complicated enough to have feelings about it and resist you, and then the power gets tainted

and you're getting psychically clawed as you try and yank away their mana, and often enough they win.

That wouldn't be a problem for me, though. I'd be brilliant at pulling malia, if I was stupid or desperate enough to try it. I do have to give Mum credit there: she did that attachment parenting nonsense, which in my case meant her lovely sparkling-clean aura enveloped mine enough to keep me from getting into malia too early, and when I brought home small frogs in order to mess with their intestines it was all supremely gentle, "No, my love, we don't hurt living creatures," and she would take me to our corner shop in the village and buy me an ice cream to make up for taking them away. I was five, ice cream was my only motivation for wanting power anyway, so as you can imagine I brought all my little finds to her. And by the time I was old enough that she couldn't have stopped me, I was old enough to understand what happens to sorcerers who use malia.

Mostly it's seniors who start, with graduation staring them in the face, but there're a few in our year who've gone for it already. Sometimes if Yi Liu looks at you too quickly, her eyes are all white for a moment. Her nails have gone solid black, too, and I can tell it's not polish. Jack Westing looks all right, all blond smiling American boy, most people think he's a delight, but if you go past his room and take a deep breath in, you get a faint smell of the charnel house. If you're me, anyway. Luisa three doors down from him vanished early this year, nobody knows what happened to her—not unusual, but I'm reasonably

sure what's left of her is in his room. I have a good sense for this sort of thing even when I'd rather not know.

At the moment, though, while fighting through one page after another of extremely specific Old English household charms in crabbed handwriting, I felt strongly I could really have gone for a nice big helping of malia myself. If my unshucked oats were ever being eaten by leapwinks—your guess is good as mine—I'd be ready. Meanwhile the puddle of soul eater kept letting out soft flaring pops of gas behind me, each one like a distant flash of lightning before the horrible eruption of stink reached my nose. Summoning a wall of mortal flame and incinerating the whole thing along with all my furniture and books and possibly melting down a chunk of the school had increasing appeal.

I'd spent the whole day studying for finals already. There were only three weeks left in the term: when you put your hand on the wall in the bathrooms, you could already feel the faint chunk-chunk noises of the middle-size gears starting to engage, getting ready to ratchet us all down another turn. The classrooms stay in one place in the school core, and our dorms start up at the cafeteria level and rotate down each year, like some enormous metal nut whirling round the shaft of a screw, until we go all the way down for graduation. Next year is our turn on the lowest floor, not something to look forward to. I very much don't want to fail any exams and saddle myself with remedial work on top of it.

But thanks to my afternoon's diligence, my back and my

bum and my neck were all sore, and my desk light was starting to sputter and go dim. I'd planned to be done and having a nap right about now: I've fought my way just far enough ahead in my classes that I could afford to steal one precious extra hour of afternoon sleep. The mana I'd saved by casting a weaker light was meant to go to an extra protective charm on my door. Instead, now I was going to have to choose between lighting one of the three candles I had left, which I might need for incantation finals, or blowing a bunch of mana to cast a new light spell. Or what I actually did when the light finally died, which was pick up the gigantic book, lug it over to the tiny blue gaslight by the door, and sit there crosslegged and hunched over the tome, squinting to make out the letters and my arm going numb holding my Old English dictionary in the other hand.

What's especially infuriating is, if I *did* give in and start using malia, I'd be sailing through here borne on—admittedly, on the hideous leathery bat wings of demonic beasts, but at least there'd be *some* kind of wings. The Scholomance loves to let maleficers out into the world; it almost never kills any of them. It's the rest of us who get soul eaters popping under our doors in the middle of the afternoon and wauria slithering up out of the drain to latch onto our ankles while we're trying to take a shower and reading assignments that dissolve away your eyeballs. Not even Orion's been able to save all of us. Most of the time less than a quarter of the class makes it all the way through graduation, and eighteen years ago—which I'm sure

was not coincidentally shortly before Orion was conceived—only a dozen students came out, and they were all gone dark. They'd banded into a pack and taken out all the rest of the seniors in their year for a massive dose of power.

Of course, the families of all the other students realized what had happened—because it was stupidly obvious; the idiots hadn't let the enclave kids escape first—and hunted the dozen maleficers down. The last one of them was dead by the time Mum graduated the following year, and that was that for the Hands of Death or whatever they called themselves.

But even when you're a sneaky little fly-by-night malia-sucker who picks his targets wisely and makes it out unnoticed, you don't last very long. Darling Jack's already stealing life force from human beings, so he's going to start rotting on the inside within the first five years after he graduates. I'd bet he still won't show on the surface for a while after that, but in ten years, fifteen at the outside, he'll cave in on himself in a nice final grotesque rush. Then they'll dig up his cellar and find a hundred corpses and everyone will tut and say good lord, he seemed like such a nice young man.

Liu's going to be all right, but she's being a lot more careful about it. I'd bet she used almost her whole weight allocation to bring a sack of hamsters or something in with her and she's sacrificing them on a schedule. Her family's big—not big enough to set up an enclave of their own yet, but getting into throwing distance—and rumor has it they've had a lot of maleficers: it's a strategy, for them. She's got a pair of twin

cousins who'll be turning up next year, and thanks to using malia, she'll have the power to protect them through their first year. And after Liu graduates, she'll have options. She could put spells aside entirely, get a mundane job to pay the bills, and rely on the rest of her family to protect her and cast for her. In ten years or so, she'll have psychically healed up almost all the way and she'll be able to start using mana again. Or she could become a professional maleficer, the kind of witch that gets paid handsomely by enclavers to do heavy work for them with no questions asked about where the power comes from. As long as she doesn't go for anything too grand, she'll probably be fine. She's sneaking a couple of cigarettes a week, not chain-smoking four packets a day.

But I don't have family, not aside from my mum, and I certainly don't have an enclave ready to support me. We live in the Radiant Mind commune near Cardigan in Wales, which also boasts a shaman, two spirit healers, a Wiccan circle, and a troupe of Morris dancers, all of whom have roughly the same amount of real power, which is to say none whatsoever, and all of whom would fall over in horror if they saw Mum or me doing real magic. Well, me. Mum does magic by dancing up mana with a group of willing volunteers—I've told her she ought to charge people, but no—and then she spreads it out again freely in sparkles and happiness, *tra la*. People let us eat at their table because they love her, who wouldn't, and they built her a yurt when she came to them, straight from the Scholomance and three months pregnant with me, but none of them

could help me do magic or defend me. Even if they could, they wouldn't. They don't like me. No one does, except Mum.

Dad died here, during graduation, getting Mum out. We call it graduation because that's what the Americans call it, and they've been carrying the lion's share of the cost of the school for the last seventy years or so. Those who pay the piper call the tune, et cetera. But it's hardly a celebratory occasion or anything. It's just the moment when the seniors all get dumped into the graduation hall, far below at the very bottom of the school, and try to fight their way out through all the hungry maleficaria lying in wait. About half the senior class—that is, half of the ones who've managed to survive that long—makes it. Dad didn't.

He did have family; they live near Mumbai. Mum managed to track them down, but only when I was already five. She and Dad hadn't exchanged any real-world information or made any plan for after they graduated and got turfed back out to their respective homes. That would've been too sensible. They'd only been together on the inside for four months or something, but they were soulmates and love would lead the way. Of course, probably it *would* have, for Mum.

Anyway, when she did find them, it turned out his family was rich, palaces and jewels and djinn servants rich, and more importantly by my mum's standards, they came from an ancient strict-mana Hindu enclave that was destroyed during the Raj, and they're still sticking to the rules. They won't eat meat, much less pull malia. She was happy to move in with

them, and they were all excited to take us in, too. They hadn't even known what had happened to Dad. The last time they'd heard from him was at term-end the year before. The seniors collect notes from the rest of us, the week before graduation. I've already written mine for this year and given copies to some of the London enclave kids, short and sweet: *still alive, doing all right in classes*. I had to keep it so small that no one could reasonably refuse to just add it to their envelope, because otherwise they would.

Dad sent one of those same notes to his family at the end of junior year, so they'd known he'd survived that long. Then he just never came out. Another of the hundreds of kids thrown on the rubbish heap of this place. When Mum finally unearthed his family and told them about me, it felt to them like getting a bit of Dad back after all. They sent us one-way plane tickets and Mum said bye to everyone in the commune and packed me up with all our worldly goods.

But when we got there, my great-grandmother took one look at me and fell down in a visionary fit and said I was a shadowed soul and would bring death and destruction to all the enclaves in the world if I wasn't stopped. My grandfather and his brothers tried to do the stopping, actually. That's the only time Mum's ever really opened the pipes. I vaguely remember it, Mum standing in our bedroom with four men awkwardly trying to make her step out of the way and hand me over. I don't know what they were planning to do with me—none of them had ever deliberately hurt so much as a fly—but I guess

the fit was a really alarming one.

They argued it over a bit and then all of a sudden the whole place went full of this terrible light that hurt my eyes to look at, and Mum was scooping me up with my blanket. She walked directly out of the family compound, barefoot in her nightie, and they stood around looking miserable and didn't try to touch her. She got to the nearest road and stuck out her thumb, and a passing driver picked her up and took us all the way to the airport. Then a tech billionaire about to board his private jet to London saw her standing in the airport vestibule with me and offered to take her along. He still comes to the commune for a week-long spiritual cleanse once a year.

That's my mum for you. But it's not me. No one's ever going to offer me a lift, or dance in a woodland circle to help me raise power, or put food on my table, or—far more to the point—stand with me against all the nasty things that routinely come after wizards, looking for a meal. If it weren't for Mum, I wouldn't have been welcome in my own home. You wouldn't believe the number of supposedly nice people at the commune who said brightly to fourteen-year-old me how excited I must be about going away to school—ha ha—and how much I must want to strike out on my own afterwards, see more of the world, et cetera.

Not that I want to go back to the commune. I don't know if anyone who hasn't tried it can properly appreciate just how horrible it is to be constantly surrounded by people who believe in absolutely everything, from leprechauns to sweat lodges to

christmas carols, and who won't believe that you can do actual magic. I've literally shown people to their faces—or tried to; it takes loads of extra mana to cast even a little spell for starting a fire when a mundane is watching you firmly convinced that you're a silly kid with a lighter up your sleeve and you'll probably fumble the sleight-of-hand. But even if you do get some sufficiently dramatic spell to work in front of them, then they all say wow and how amazing and then the next day it's all, man, those mushrooms were really good. And then they avoid me even more. I don't want to be *here*, but I don't want to be there, either.

Oh, that's a lie, of course. I constantly daydream about going home. I ration it to five minutes a day where I go and stand in front of the vent in the wall, as safely far away as I can get from it and still feel the air moving, and I shut my eyes and press my hands over my face to block the smell of burnt oil and finely aged sweat, pretending that instead I'm breathing damp earth and dried rosemary and roasted carrots in butter, and it's the wind moving through the trees, and if I just open my eyes I'll be lying on my back in a clearing and the sun has just gone behind a cloud. I would instantly trade my room in for a yurt in the woods, even after two full weeks of rain when everything I own is growing mildew. It's an improvement over the sweet fragrance of soul eater.

But I'm pretty sure that my sentiments would change within a week after I got back. Anyway, it's been made very clear I'm not welcome, except on sufferance. And maybe not

even that, if I try to settle in again once I'm out of here. The commune council will probably come up with some excuse to throw me out—*negativity of spirit* was mentioned more than a few times in my hearing—and then I'll just have wrecked Mum's life, because she'd walk away without a second thought to stay with me.

I've known even before I came to the Scholomance that my only real chance for a decent life—assuming I get out of here to have one at all—would be to get into an enclave. Of course, everyone here who isn't already an enclaver would *like* to be one, but at least most of them can find a few friends to club together and watch each other's back, build mana, collaborate a bit. Even if people liked me enough to keep me, I wouldn't be any use to them. Ordinary people want a mop in the cupboard, not a rocket launcher, and here I am struggling desperately for two hours just to find a spell to wash the floor.

But if you're in a lush enclave of a few hundred wizards, and a death wyrm crawls out of the depths of the nearest cavern, or another enclave decides to declare war, you really would like somebody around who can slit a cow's throat and unleash all the fires of hell in your defense. Having someone with a reputation for that kind of power in your enclave usually means you don't *get* attacked in the first place, and then no cows have to be sacrificed, and I don't ever have to take a psychic pummeling and lose five years off my life and worse yet make my mother *cry*.

But that all depends on my having the reputation. No one's

going to invite me into an enclave if they think I'm actually some sort of pathetic damsel in distress who needs rescuing by the local hero. They certainly won't do it because they *like* me. And meanwhile Orion doesn't need to impress anybody at all. He's not even just an enclaver. His mother is one of the top candidates to be the next Domina of New York, which is probably still the single most powerful enclave in the world right now, and his father's a master artificer. He could just keep half an eye out, do the bare minimum of coursework, and walk out and spend the rest of his life in luxury and safety, surrounded by the finest wizards and the most wonderful artifice in the world.

Instead, he's been spending his school years making a massive spectacle of himself. The soul-eater behind me was probably his fourth heroic deed of the week. He's saving every dullard and weakling in the place, and not a thought given who's going to have to pay the price. Because there's absolutely going to *be* a price. For all that I want to go home every minute of every day in here, I know perfectly well it's actually unbelievably good luck to be here. The only reason I've had that luck myself is because the school was largely built by the London and Edinburgh enclaves, back in the mists of the Edwardian era, and they've managed to hang on to a disproportionate number of the spare seats to hand out. That might change in the next few years—the Shanghai and Jaipur enclaves have been making threatening noises about building a new school from scratch in Asia if there isn't a significant reallocation soon—but at least for the moment, any indie kid in the UK still automatically

goes on the induction list.

Mum offered to get me taken off, but I wasn't insane enough to let her. The enclaves built the school because outside is *worse*. All those maleficaria creeping through the vents and the pipes and under the doors, they don't come from the Scholomance—they come *to* the Scholomance because all of us are in here, tender young wizards newly bursting with mana we're still falling over ourselves learning to use. Thanks to my freshman-year Maleficaria Studies textbook, I know that our deliciousness goes up another order of magnitude every six months between thirteen and eighteen, all wrapped up inside a thin and easy-to-break sugar shell instead of the tough chewy hide of a grown wizard. That's not a metaphor I made up myself: it's straight out of the book, which took a lot of pleasure telling us in loads of detail just how badly the maleficaria want to eat us: really, really badly.

So back in the mists of the late 1800s, the renowned artificer Sir Alfred Cooper Browning—it's hard to avoid picking up his name in here, it's plastered all over the place—came up with the Scholomance. As much as I roll my eyes at the placards everywhere, the design's really effective. The school is only just barely connected to the actual world, in one single place: the graduation gates. Which are surrounded by layers on layers of magical wards and artifice barriers around them. When some enterprising mal does wriggle through, it's only got inside the graduation hall, which isn't connected to the rest of the school except for the absolute minimum of pipes and airshafts

required to supply the place, and all of *those* are loaded up with wards and barriers too.

So the mals get bottled up and spend loads of time struggling to get in and get up, and fighting and devouring each other while they're at it, and the biggest and most dangerous ones can't actually squeeze their way up at all. They just have to hang around the graduation hall all year long, snacking on other mals, and wait for graduation to gorge themselves. We're a lot harder to get at in here than if we were living out in the wide open, in a yurt for instance. Even enclave kids were getting eaten more often than not, before the school was built, and if you're an indie kid who doesn't get into the Scholomance, these days your odds of making it to the far side of puberty are one in twenty. One in four is plenty decent odds compared to that.

But we have to *pay* for that protection. We pay with our work, and we pay with our misery and our terror, which all builds the mana that fuels the school. And we pay, most of all, with *the ones who don't make it*, so what good exactly does Orion think he's doing, what does anyone think he's doing, saving people? The bill has to come due eventually.

Except nobody thinks that way. Less than twenty juniors have died so far this year—the usual rate is a hundred plus—and everyone in the whole school thinks he hung the moon, and is wonderful, and the New York enclave's going to have five times as many applicants as they've had before. I can forget about getting in there, and the enclave in London isn't looking

very good either. It's maddening, especially when I ought to be news. I already know ten times more spells for destruction and dominion than the entire graduating class of seniors put together. You would too, if you got five of them every time you wanted to mop the bloody floor.

On the bright side, today I've learned ninety-eight useful household charms in Old English, as I had to slog through to number ninety-nine to reach the one that would wipe out the stink, and the book couldn't vanish on me until I'd got to it. Every now and again, the school does shoot itself in the foot that way, usually when it's being its most awful and annoying and petty. The misery of translating ninety-nine charms with a stinking dead soul-eater gurbling behind me was good enough to buy me the extra useful ones.

I'll be grateful in a week or two. At the moment, what I had to do was stand up and do five hundred jumping jacks in a row, in perfect form, keeping my focus tightly on my current storing crystal the whole time, to build enough mana so I could wash my floor without accidentally killing anything. I don't dare cheat at all, not even a little. There's no ants and cockroaches in here to suck dry, and I'm getting more powerful by the day, like we all are. With my particular gift, if I tried to cheat on a cleaning spell, it's entirely possible I'd take out three of my neighbors to either side and this entire hall would end up the horrible gleaming clean of a newly sanitized morgue.

And I've got mana to use: Mum loaded me up with crystals she'd primed with her circle, so I could store mana for later, and

I put some away every chance I get, but I wasn't going to use one of those to clean up my room. The crystals are for emergencies, when I really need power right away, and to stockpile for graduation.

After the floor came clean, I added on fifty push-ups—I've got in really good shape over the last three years—and did my mother's favorite smudging spell. It left my whole cell smelling of burnt sage, but at least that was an improvement. It was nearly dinnertime by then. A shower was more than called for, except I really didn't feel like having to fight off anything that might come out of the drains in the bathroom, which meant that something was almost sure to come, if I went. Instead I changed my shirt and plaited my hair again and wiped my face with water out of my jug. I rinsed my t-shirt in the last of the water, too, and hung it up so it would dry. I only had the two tops, and they were getting threadbare. I'd had to burn half my clothes my first year when a nameless shadow crawled out from under the bed, the second night I was here, and I didn't have anywhere else to pull mana from. Sacrificing my clothes gave me enough power to fry the shadow without drawing life force from anywhere. I hadn't needed Orion Lake to save me from *that*, had I?

Even after my best efforts, I still looked wonderful enough that when I came out to the meeting point at dinner time—we walk to the cafeteria in groups, of course, it's just stupidly asking for trouble if you go alone—Liu took one look at me and asked, "What happened to you, El?"

“Our glorious savior Lake decided to melt a soul-eater in my cell today, and left me to clean up the mess,” I said.

“*Melt?* Ew,” she said. Liu may be a dark witch, but at least she doesn’t genuflect at Orion’s throne. I like her, maleficer or not: she’s one of the few people here who doesn’t mind hanging out with me. She’s got more social options than I do, but she’s always polite.

But Ibrahim was there too—carefully keeping his back to us while waiting for some of his own friends, making clear we weren’t welcome to walk with his group—and he was already turning around in high excitement. “Orion saved you from a soul-eater!” he said. *Squealed*, really. Orion’s saved his life three times—and he *needed* it to be saved.

“Orion ran a soul-eater into my room and sludged it all over my floor,” I said, through my teeth, but it was no use. By the time Aadhya and Jack joined us and we had a group of five to go upstairs, Orion had heroically saved me from a soul-eater, and of course by the end of dinnertime—only two people in our year vomiting today, we were getting better at our protective charms and antidotes—everyone in the school knew about it.

Most types of maleficaria don’t even have names; there are so many varieties of them, and they come and go. But soul-eaters are a big deal: a single one has taken out a dozen students in other years, and it’s an extremely bad way to go, complete with dramatic lightshow (from the soul-eater) and shrieking wails (from the victims). It would’ve made my reputation to take one out by myself, and I could have. I’ve got twenty-six

fully loaded crystals in the hand-carved little sandalwood box under my pillow, saved for exactly a situation like this, and six months ago, when I was trying to patch up my fraying sweater without resorting to the horrors of crochet, I got an incantation to unravel souls. It would've taken a soul-eater apart from the inside out—with *no* stinking residue—and even left an empty glowing wisp behind. Then I could have made a deal with Aadhya, who's artificer-track and has an affinity for using weird materials: we could have had it patrolling between our doors all night. Most of the maleficaria don't like light. That's the kind of advantage that can get you all the way to graduation. Instead all I had was the unwanted pleasure of being one more notch on Orion's belt.

My not-very-near-death experience did at least get me a good seat at dinner. Usually I have to sit alone at the far end of the half-filled table of whoever else is being most socially rejected at the time, or else people change tables away from me in groups until I'm sitting completely alone, which is worse. Today I ended up at one of the central tables right under the sun lamps—more Vitamin D than I'd got, apart from a pill, in months—with Ibrahim and Aadhya and half a dozen other reasonably popular kids: there was even one girl from the smallish Maui enclave who sat with us. But I only got angrier, hearing them talking reverently about all the wonderful things Orion had done. A few of them even asked me to describe the fight. "Well, first he chased it into my room, and then he blasted open my door, and then he incandensed it before I could say boo and

left a stinking mess on my floor,” I snapped, but you can guess how well that went. Everyone wants to believe he’s a magnificent hero who’s going to save them all. Ugh.

CHAPTER 2 • MIMICS

AFTER DINNER, I had to try and get someone to come with me to the workshop, so I could get some materials to patch up my door. It's an extremely bad idea to leave your door unlocked at night, much less with a gaping hole in it. I tried to make it casual, "Does anyone need anything from the shop?" but no one was buying. After hearing my story, they could all guess that I needed to go down, and we're all alive to the main chance in here. You don't make it out unless you use every advantage you can get, and nobody likes me enough to do me favors without payment in advance.

"I could come," Jack said, leaning forward and smiling at me with all his shiny white teeth.

I wouldn't need anything to crawl out of a dark corner if he went with me. I looked him straight in the eye and said hard, "Oh, really?"

He paused and had a moment of being wary, and then he shrugged. "Wait, sorry, just remembered I've got to finish my new divining rod," he said cheerfully, but his eyes had narrowed. I hadn't really wanted him to know that I knew about him. I'd have to make him pay me for my silence now, or else he'd think he had to come after me to shut me up, and he might bet on that anyway. Yet another thing Orion had now cocked up for me.

“What’s it worth to you?” Aadhya said. She’s the sharp and pragmatic sort; she’s one of the few people in here willing to make deals with me. One of the few people in here willing to talk to me at all, really. But she was also brutally hard-nosed about this sort of thing. I normally appreciated that she didn’t beat about the bush, but knowing I was hard up, she wasn’t going to put herself on the line for anything less than twice the going value of a trip down, and she also would certainly make sure I took all the significant risk. I scowled.

“I’ll go with you,” Orion said, from the table next to ours, where the New York kids were sitting. He’d kept his head down all dinner even while everyone at our table talked loudly about how massively wonderful he was. I’d seen him do the same after his other notable rescues, and had never quite decided if he was making a pretense of modesty, was actually modest to the point of pathology, or was just so horribly awkward he had nothing to say to people complimenting him. He didn’t even lift his head now, just spoke out from under his shaggy overhang of hair, staring down at his cleared plate.

So that was nice. Obviously I wasn’t going to turn down free company to the shop, but it was going to look like more of the same, Orion protecting me. “Let’s go, then,” I said tightly, and got up at once. Here at school, you’re always better going instantly as soon as you’ve got a plan, if your plan is to do something unusual.

The Scholomance isn’t precisely a real place. There are perfectly real walls and floors and ceilings and pipes, all of which

were made in the real world out of real iron and steel and copper and so forth, and which have been put together according to elaborate blueprints that are on display all over the school, but if you tried to duplicate the building in the middle of London or something, I'm reasonably sure it wouldn't even go up long enough to fall over again. It only works because it was built into the void. I'd explain what the void is, but I haven't any idea. If you've ever wondered what it was like to live in the days when our cave-dwelling ancestors stared up at this black thing full of twinkly bits of light with no idea whatsoever what was up there and what it all meant, well, I imagine that it was similar to sitting in a Scholomance dorm room staring out at the pitch-black surroundings. I'm happy to be able to report that it's not pleasant or comfortable at all.

But thanks to being almost completely inside the void, the school doesn't have to fight boring old physics. That made it much easier for the artificers who built it to persuade it to work according to the way they wanted it to work. The blueprints are posted about so that when we look at them, our belief reinforces the original construction, and so does all our trudging up and down the massive stairs and through the endless corridors, expecting our classrooms to be where we last saw them and for water to come out of the faucets and for us all to continue breathing, even though if you asked an engineer to look at the plumbing and the ventilation, probably it's not actually sufficient to handle the needs of roughly five thousand kids. And the power to keep things going comes from us, from the mana

we build up doing all our awful tedious classwork, not to mention all the extensive trudging itself.

Which is all very well and good and extremely clever of Sir Alfred et al., but the problem with living in a *persuadable* space is, it's persuadable in all sorts of ways. When you end up on the stairs with six people all rushing to the same lesson as you, it somehow takes you all half the time to cover the distance. But the creepy anxious feeling you get if you have to go down into a damp unlit basement full of cobwebs, where you become convinced there's something horrible about to jump out at you, that works on it, too. The mals are *more* than happy to cooperate with that particular kind of belief. And anytime you do anything out of the routine, like for instance going to the shop alone after dinner when nobody else is down there if they can help it, the stairs or the corridor might end up taking you somewhere that doesn't actually appear on the blueprints. And you really won't want to meet whatever is waiting there for you.

So once you've decided that you're going somewhere out of the ordinary, you're better off going as fast as you can, before you or anyone else can think about it too much. I headed straight for the nearest landing, and waited until Orion and I were well down and nobody else was in earshot before snapping at him. "What part of *leave me alone* didn't you understand?"

He'd been walking along next to me with his hands shoved in his pockets, slouched: he jerked his head up. "But—you just said, let's go—"

"I should've told you off in front of everyone, then, after

they've all decided you saved my life?"

He actually stopped right there in the middle of the staircase and started saying, "Should I..." We were between floors with no landing visible, only the solid wall of the central column on our left and the faintly gurgling wall of a freshman bathroom on our right, and the nearest light that wasn't completely burnt out was a sputtering gas light twenty steps back, so our shadows even darkened the stairs below us. Pausing for as much as a millisecond was a grand invitation for something to go wrong ahead of us.

I'd kept going, because I wasn't an idiot, so I was two steps down before I realized. I had to stretch out and grab him by the wrist and tug him onwards. "Not *now*. What is it with you, are you actively trying to meet new and exciting mals?" He went really red and fell back in with me, staring at the floor even harder, as if I'd scored an actual hit, no matter how stupid that was. "The ones that come your way in the ordinary course of things aren't enough?"

"They don't," he said shortly.

"What?"

"They don't come my way! They never have."

"What, you just don't get attacked?" I said, outraged. He shrugged a shoulder. "Where'd that soul-eater come from, then?"

"I'd just come out of the bathroom. I saw the tail end of it going under your door."

So he had actually come to my rescue. That was even worse. I stewed over his revelation as we kept going. Of course, it made some sense: if you were a monster, why would you attack the blinding hero who could blast you to pieces without half trying? What didn't make sense was his side of it. "So you reckon you might as well make a name for yourself, saving the rest of us?" He shrugged again, not looking up, so that wasn't it. "Do you just *like* fighting mals or something?" I prodded, and he flushed up again. "You're unbelievably odd."

"Don't *you* like practicing your affinity?" he said, defensive.

"My affinity is laying waste to multitudes, so I haven't had much opportunity to try the experience," I said.

He snorted, as though I was joking. I didn't try to persuade him. It's easy to claim to be a massively powerful dark sorceress; no one's going to believe me until I prove it, preferably with hard evidence. "Where do you get all the power, anyway?" I asked him instead. I'd often wondered. An affinity makes certain spells considerably easier to cast, but it doesn't make them free.

"From them. From the mals, I mean. I kill one, then I save that power to fire off the next spell. Or if I'm low, I borrow some from Magnus or Chloe or David..."

I ground my teeth. "I get the idea." He was naming off all the other students from the New York enclave. Of course they'd done power sharing, and probably all of them had their own power sinks to boot, like my crystals. He literally had a battery to pull on for his heroics, and if he could pull mana from

killing maleficaria—*how?*—he probably didn't even need it.

We reached the landing for the shop level then. The senior hall was still further below, and there was a faint glow of light coming up the stairs from there. But the archway opening onto the classroom corridor itself was pitch black; the lights had gone out. I stared at the open maw of it grimly as we came down the last steps: that was what his moment of hesitation had netted us. And if mals never went for him, that meant whatever was lurking around down there was going to go for *me*.

"I'll take the lead," he offered.

"You'd better believe you're going to take the lead. And you're holding the light, too."

He didn't even argue, just nodded and put out his left hand and lit it up using a minor version of the same incandensing spell he'd used on the soul-eater. It made my eyes itch. He was all set to just march onward, too; I had to yank him back and inspect the ceiling and floor and prod the walls myself. Digesters that haven't eaten in a while are translucent, and if they spread themselves out thinly enough over a flat surface, you can look straight at them and never realize they're there until they flap themselves around you. Earlier this year, one of the sophomore boys got half-swallowed, and he lost a leg and most of his left arm. He didn't last for long after that, obviously.

But the corridor seemed okay enough. We headed onward to the main workshop entrance. I put a hand spread out on the back of Orion's shoulder and kept my head turned to look behind us as we went, the best way for a pair to walk together

when there's an imminent threat. Most of the classroom doors had been left ajar, just enough that we wouldn't get the warning of a doorknob turning, and not enough to get a good look into any of the rooms as we passed, dozens of them: aside from the workshop and the gym, most of the bottom level is taken up with small classrooms where seniors take specialized seminars. But those all end after the first half of the year; at this point all the seniors are spending all their time doing practice runs for graduation, meaning the seminar rooms are the perfect place for mals to snooze in.

I hated having to trust Orion to watch where we were going. He walked so casually, even through an unlit hallway, and when he got to the shop doors, he just pulled one open and walked on inside before I realized what he was doing. Then I had to follow him or else be stuck out in the dark corridor alone.

As soon as I stepped through the door, I grabbed a fistful of his shirt to stop him going on further. We halted just inside, the shining light in his hand reflecting off all the gleaming sawblade teeth and the dull iron of the vises and the glossy obsidian black of the hammers, and the dull stainless steel of the shop tables and chairs lined up in neat rows filling the massive space. It felt weirdly crowded despite having not a single person in it. The furniture took up too much room, as if the chairs had multiplied. We all hated the workshop more than anything. Even the alchemy labs are better.

We stood still for a long moment in which nothing whatsoever happened, and then finally I deliberately stepped on the

back of Orion's heel just to pay him back. "Ow!" he said.

"Oh, sorry," I said insincerely.

He glared at me, not entirely a doormat. "Will you just get the stuff and let's go," he said, like it was that easy, just go wild and start rummaging through the bins and so forth, what could go wrong. He turned to the wall and flipped the light switch. Nothing came on, of course.

"Follow me," I said, and crossed to the scrap metal bins. I picked up the long tongs hanging by the side and cautiously used them to flip open the lid. Then I reached in and took out four big flat pieces, shaking them thoroughly and banging them violently against the side of the nearest table. I wouldn't have tried to carry that many myself, but I'd make Orion carry them, and then I'd have extra to trade someone another time.

After the scrap, I didn't go for the wire, because that would've been an obvious choice; instead I had him reach into one of the other bins for a double handful of screws and nuts and bolts, which wouldn't be much use for repairing my door, but were worth more, so I could trade them to Aadhya for some of the wire I knew she had and have some left over. I put them into the zip pockets of my combats. Then there wasn't any help for it: I had to have a pair of pliers.

The tool chests are large squat containers the size of a body, which they have in fact contained on at least two occasions since I've been here. You can't keep tools you take out during class time, so the only time you can get a tool for private use is after hours, and it's one of the best ways to die, since the kind

of mal that climbs into the tool chests are the smart ones. If you open one incautiously—

Orion reached out and lifted the lid while I was still debating strategy. Inside, there was absolutely nothing but several neat rows of hammers, screwdrivers of all sizes, spanners, hack saws, pliers, even a *drill*. Not a one of them leapt up to smash him in the head or rip off one of his fingers or poke out his eyes. “Get a pair of pliers and the drill,” I said, swallowing my seething envy in favor of maximizing the value of the situation. A drill. No one in our entire hall had a drill. I hadn’t heard of anyone other than a senior artificer even seeing them more than once or twice.

Instead he grabbed a hammer and in one smooth motion whirled and smashed it down right over my shoulder, directly into the forehead of the thing that the dull metal chair behind me had turned into: a molten grey-colored thing with nothing solid about it except a maw full of jagged silver teeth. I ducked under his arm and behind him and slammed the lid down on the tool chest and got it locked before anything else could come out of it, and then I turned round and saw four more chairs had pulled up their legs and were coming at us. There *had* been too many of them.

Orion was chanting a metal-forging spell. The nearest chair started glowing red-hot, and he hit it with the hammer again, beating a huge hole into its side. It made a grating shrieking noise out of its saw-tooth mouth and fell over. But meanwhile the others had all sprouted knife-blade limbs and charged—at *me*.

“Look out!” Orion shouted, uselessly: seeing them was not the problem. I knew a terrific spell for liquefying the bones of my enemies, which would have done nicely in the given circumstances if I’d wanted to blow a tankful of mana and if there hadn’t been any Orion around to be liquefied right alongside the more immediate enemies. There was only one spell I could afford to cast. I shouted out the Old English floor-washing charm, and jumped aside as all four of the chair-mimics skidded on the wet soapy slick and shot past me straight at Orion. I grabbed two of the pieces of scrap and ran for the door while he fought them. I’d use my bare hands to wrap on the wire if I had to.

I didn’t have to. Orion caught up to me on the stairs, panting, carrying two more pieces of scrap, and the pliers, *and* the drill. “Thanks a lot!” he said, indignantly. He had a thin bloody slice across one forearm and no other damage.

“I knew you had them,” I said, bitterly.

We had a fifteen minute trudging climb up the stairs to our own res hall. We didn’t talk, and nothing pestered us. I knocked on Aadhya’s door on the way back to my room, swapped for wire and also let her know I had a drill now—a lot of people who wouldn’t trade with me would trade with her, and if I had something she didn’t, she would usually broker for a cut—and then had Orion keep watch while I fixed my door. It wasn’t fun. I laboriously drilled holes in one piece of scrap and wired it in place over the hole he had left in the door, securing it thoroughly. I then sat there and wove some of the thinner wire

around four thick strands to make a wider band, and I used it to wire the dented remains of my doorknob and lock roughly back in place. Then I pulled the door shut and did the same on the inside with a second piece of scrap.

“Why don’t you just use the mending charm?” Orion ventured tentatively, about halfway through the agonizingly boring process, after he looked round to see what was taking me so long.

“I *am* using the mending charm,” I said through my teeth. Even with the pliers and the drilled holes, my hands were throbbing. Orion kept watching with increasing confusion until I finally twisted down the last ragged end of wire. Then I put my hands flat on either side of the double-layered hole and shut my eyes. A basic version of mend-and-make is one of the spells we all learn, in shop class. The classes are the only way to get the most critical general spells. Mending is pretty obviously on that list, as you can’t get anything into the school but what little you’re allowed to bring in at induction. And mending is one of the most difficult spells, too, with dozens of variations depending on the materials you’re working with and the complexity of what you’re trying to fix. Only artificers really master it completely, and even then only within a specialized range of materials.

But at least you can usually do it in your own bloody vernacular. “Make and mend, to my will bend, iron thrust and steel extend,” I said—we all knew a lot of rhymes for *mend* and *make*—and mapped in seventeen knocks around the words,

somewhere between the twenty-three you use for sheet metal and the nine for wire. Then I tapped into the mana I'd built up by doing all that excessively nitpicky hand work. The charm grudgingly went churning through the materials. The pieces of scrap slagged into something like a thick metallic putty, letting me push it into place to fill the gaping hole in the door, and as the surface went smooth and hardened under my hands, the doorknobs on either side made a rude noise like a belch and finally hooked themselves back together, the deadbolt shooting back into place with a solid thunk. I dropped my hands, panting, and turned round.

Orion was standing in the middle of my bedroom staring like I was an exotic zoological specimen. "You're *strict mana*?"

He made it sound like I was a member of a cult or something. I glared at him. "Not all of us can pull from maleficaria."

"But—why don't you pull from—the air, or the furniture—everyone's got holes in their bedposts—"

He wasn't wrong. Cheating is a lot harder in here because there's no small living things to pull from, no ants or cockroaches or mice unless you bring them in with you, which is awkward since the only stuff you can bring is what's physically on you at the moment of induction. But most people can pull small amounts of mana from the inanimate stuff around instead: leach heat from the air or disintegrate a bit of wood. It's a lot easier to do that than to pull mana from a living human being, much less another sorcerer. For most people.

“If I pull, it won’t come from there,” I said.

Orion was eyeing me with a growing frown. “Er, Galadriel,” he said, a bit gently, as if he were starting to think I was a lunatic, one of the ones who’d just gone crazy inside. I’d had a wildly horrible day anyway, thanks to him, and that was the final straw. I reached out and grabbed at him. Not with my hands—I grabbed at his mana, at his life force, and gave it a hard deliberate yank.

Most wizards have to work at it to steal power from a living thing. There are rituals, exercises of will, voodoo dolls, blood sacrifices. Lots of blood sacrifices. I barely have to try. Orion’s life force came away from his spirit as easily as a fish on a line, being tugged out of the water. All I needed to do was keep pulling and it would end up in my hands, all that juicy power he’d built up. In fact, I could probably have followed his power-sharing lines to pull malia from all his enclave friends. I could have drained them all.

Even as Orion’s face went wide with appalled shock, I let go again, so the mana went snapping back into him like a rubber band. He staggered back a full pace, his hands coming up defensively like he was ready for a fight. But I ignored him and sat down with a hard thump on my bed, trying not to cry. Whenever I let my temper get away from me like that, I always feel rotten afterwards. It’s just rubbing my own face in how easy everything would be if I just gave in.

He went on standing there hands raised, looking a bit silly when I didn’t do anything. “You’re a maleficer!” he said after

a moment, like he thought he was prodding me into doing something.

“I know this is going to be a challenge for you,” I said through my teeth, still fighting back the sniffles, “but try not being an idiot for five minutes. If I was a maleficer, I’d have sucked you dry downstairs and told everyone you died in the workshop. It’s not like anyone would’ve been suspicious.” He didn’t look like he’d found that particularly comforting. I rubbed the back of my sooty hand across my face. “Anyway,” I added desolately, “if I was a maleficer, I’d just suck all of you dry and have the whole school to myself.”

“Who’d want it?” Orion said after a moment.

I snorted a laugh up into my nose; all right, he had a point. “A maleficer!”

“Not even a maleficer,” he said positively. He did lower his hands then, still warily, only to take another step back again when I stood up. I rolled my eyes and made a little jump at him with my hands raised like claws and squeaked, “*Boo!*”

He glared at me. I went over to where he’d put the rest of the supplies on the floor. The rest of the scrap pieces got shoved under my mattress where they couldn’t be replaced by something unpleasant during the night without my noticing. The drill and pliers got strapped securely down to the lid of my storage chest next to my two knives and my one precious small screwdriver. If you keep things strapped to the underside of the lid, then if they’ve come loose, you can see the straps dangling when you crack it a bit. I’m really systematic about checking,

so I haven't had a tool go bad for a long time: the Scholomance doesn't waste its time.

I went to the basin and rinsed off my hands and face again as well as I could: I was down to just a tiny bit left in my jug. "If you're waiting for a thank you, you'll be here a while," I told Orion after I finished drying off. He was still standing in the corner eyeing me.

"Yeah, I noticed," he said with a huff. "You weren't kidding about your affinity, were you. So you're—what, a strict-mana maleficer?"

"That doesn't even make sense. I'm not a maleficer at all, and as long as I'm trying to not turn into one, maybe you'd better *go away*," I said, spelling it out since that was evidently necessary. "It's got to be nearly curfew by now, anyway."

Bad things happen if you're in someone else's cell past curfew. Otherwise, of course, we'd all double and triple up and take shifts on watch, not to mention that seniors would be en masse shoving freshmen out of their rooms on the top floor, and postponing graduation for a year or two. Apparently there was a rash of incidents like that early on, after people started to realize about the gigantic horde of mals waiting down in the graduation hall. I don't know exactly what the builders did about it, but I do know that having two or more kids in a room makes you a horrible magnet. And forget about running out into the corridor trying to get back to your room once you realize what trouble you're in. Two girls just down the way from me tried it in our first year. One of them spent a long time

screaming outside my door before she stopped. The other one didn't make it out of the room at all. It's not the sort of thing anyone sane wants to risk.

Orion just kept staring at me. Abruptly he said, "What happened to Luisa?"

I frowned at him, wondering why he was asking me, and then I realized—"You think *I* did for her?"

"It wasn't one of the mals," he said. "My room's next to hers, and she disappeared overnight. I'd have known. I stopped mals going in after her twice."

I thought it over fast. If I told him, he was going to go after Jack. On one hand, that meant Jack would probably cease to be a problem for me. On the other hand, if Jack denied it, which wasn't unlikely, I could end up with him *and* Orion as problems together. It wasn't worth the risk when I didn't have any proof. "Well, it wasn't me," I said. "There are practicing maleficers in here, you know. Four in the senior class at least." There were six, actually, but three of them were openly practicing, so saying four would hopefully make me look like I had a tiny bit of inside knowledge, believable but not enough to be worth interrogating. "Why don't you pester one of them if you don't have enough to do looking out for the sad and gormless."

His face went set and hard. "You know, considering I've saved *your* life twice," he began.

"*Three* times," I said coldly.

It threw him off. "Uh—"

“The chimaera, end of last term,” I supplied even more coldly. Since I was obviously going to stick in his head now, he was at least going to remember me correctly.

“Fine, so three times, then! You might at least—”

“No, I mightn’t.”

He stopped, flushing. I don’t think I’d ever seen him angry before; it was always just *aw-shucks* hunching and resolution.

“I didn’t ask you for your help, and I don’t want it,” I said. “There’s more than a thousand students still left in our year and all of them gagging to swoon over you. Go and find one of them if you want some adoration.” The bells rang in the hallway: five minutes to curfew. “And if you don’t, go anyway!” I grabbed my door and flipped the shiny new—well, dull new—bolt and opened it.

He obviously wanted to leave on a snappy comeback, but couldn’t think of one. I suppose he wasn’t ever called on to produce them in the ordinary course of things. After a moment of struggle he just scowled and stalked out.

I’m delighted to report my repaired door slammed shut on his heels beautifully.

***There's Someone
Inside Your House***
Stephanie Perkins

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**THERE'S
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HOUSE**

A NOVEL

BY
STEPHANIE PERKINS

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*People live through such pain only once;
pain comes again, but it finds a tougher surface.*

WILLA CATHER,
The Song of the Lark

CHAPTER ONE

THE EGG-SHAPED TIMER was on the welcome mat when she came home.

Haley Whitehall glanced over her shoulder, as if expecting someone behind her. Far in the distance, a red combine rolled through the fallow cornfields. Her father. Harvest time. Her mother was still at work, too, a dental technician at the only practice in town. Which one of them had left it here? The decaying porch boards sagged and splintered beneath Haley's shifting weight as she picked up the timer. It rattled in her hand. The day had been cold, but the plastic eggshell was warm. Faintly so.

Her phone rang. It was Brooke, of course.

"How's the blood?" Haley asked.

Her best friend groaned. "A nightmare."

Haley went inside, and the screen door banged closed behind her. "Any chance that means Ms. Colfax will drop it?" She marched straight to the kitchen, slinging her backpack onto its black-and-white checkerboard floor. *Sustenance*. This afternoon's rehearsal had been particularly grueling.

“Never.” Brooke snorted. “She’ll never drop it. Who needs common sense when you have ambition?”

Haley set the timer back on the countertop—where it belonged—and opened the refrigerator. “Normally, I’d argue for ambition. But, I’m really not looking forward to being drowned in corn syrup.”

“If I had the money, I’d buy the professional-grade stuff myself. Cleaning up the auditorium will be hell, even with all the tarps and plastic sheeting.”

Most theatrical productions of *Sweeney Todd* used at least some amount of fake blood—razors with hidden squeeze bulbs, gel capsules in the mouth, false clothing-fronts to conceal bloodstained doubles underneath. Additional mayhem could be implied with red curtains or red lights or a frenzied crescendo of screaming violins.

Unfortunately, their high school’s musical director, Ms. Colfax, had an unquenchable zeal for drama by all its definitions. Last year’s production of *Peter Pan*, for which she’d rented actual flying harnesses all the way from New York City, had resulted in the broken bones of both Wendy and Michael Darling. This year, Ms. Colfax didn’t just want the demon barber to slit his customers’ throats. She wanted to shower the first three rows with their blood. She referred to this section of the auditorium as the “Splatter Belt.”

Brooke was the stage manager. An honor, for sure, but it came with the impossible task of trying to steer Ms. Colfax toward sanity.

It wasn’t going well.

Haley held the phone to her ear with her shoulder as she loaded her arms with packages of deli-sliced turkey and provolone, a bag of prewashed lettuce, and jar of Miracle Whip. “Shayna must be flipping her shit.”

“Shayna is definitely flipping her shit,” Brooke said.

Shayna was their temperamental—often volatile—costume

designer. It was hard enough to find decent costumes in rural Nebraska with a budget of zero, but now she had to deal with bloodstain removal on top of it.

“Poor Shayna.” Haley dumped the ingredients onto the counter. She grabbed the closest loaf of bread, wheat with some kind of herb, which her mother had baked the night before. Her mother baked to relax. She used a bread maker, but still. It was nice.

“Poor *Brooke*,” Brooke said.

“Poor Brooke,” Haley agreed.

“And how was Jonathan today? Any better?”

Haley hesitated. “You didn’t hear him?”

“I was running splatter tests in the parking lot.”

Haley was playing Mrs. Lovett, and Shayna’s boyfriend, Jonathan, was playing Sweeney, the female and male leads. Still only a junior, Haley had been getting leads in drama club and solos in show choir for the last two years. Both as a performer and powerful contralto, she was simply *better* than her peers. A natural. Impossible to overlook.

Jonathan was . . . above average. And he was charismatic, which helped his stage presence. However, this particular musical was well beyond his capabilities. He’d been struggling with “Epiphany,” his most challenging solo song, for weeks. His transitions held all the smoothness of someone stumbling across a bull snake in a tool shed, but even those were nothing compared to the way that he’d been massacring his duets.

Brooke seemed to sense Haley’s reluctance to gossip. “Oh, come on. If you don’t spill, you’ll only make me feel guilty for venting about everybody else.”

“It’s just . . .” Haley spread a gloppy coat of Miracle Whip onto the bread and then tossed the dirty butter knife into the sink. She’d wash it off later. “We spent the *entire* rehearsal on ‘A Little Priest.’ And not

even the whole thing! The same few bars, over and over and over. For two freaking hours.”

“Yikes.”

“You know that part where we sing different lines simultaneously? And our voices are supposed to be, like, tumbling over each other in excitement?”

“When Sweeney finally figured out that Mrs. Lovett wants to dispose of his victims by baking their flesh into her pies?” Brooke’s voice was a wicked grin.

“It was a disaster.” Haley carried her plate into the living room, but she didn’t sit. She paced. “I don’t think Jonathan can do it. I mean, I seriously think his brain *can’t do it*. He can sing in unison, he can sing harmony—”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of,” Haley conceded. “But if someone else is singing different words? He keeps stopping and restarting. Like he’s trying to work through an aneurysm.”

Brooke laughed.

“It’s why I left early. I felt like such a bitch, but God. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“No one would ever call you a bitch.”

Haley swallowed a huge bite of turkey. It was a balancing act—cradling the phone, holding the plate, eating the sandwich, pacing the room—but she didn’t notice. She was worried. “Jonathan would.”

“Jonathan shouldn’t have gotten the part.”

“Do you think I should call him and apologize?”

“No. No. Why?”

“For being short with him.”

“It’s not your fault he can’t handle Sondheim.”

This was true, but Haley still felt ashamed for getting so frustrated. For walking out of rehearsal. She plopped onto the ancient

corduroy couch, one of the many relics from when the farmhouse had belonged to her grandparents, and sighed. Brooke said something else in best-friend solidarity, but Haley's phone chose that moment to do its usual thing.

"What'd you say? My connection is going in and out."

"So call me from the landline."

Haley glanced at the cordless, which was perched on an end table only a few feet away. Too much effort. "It's fine now," she lied.

Brooke circled the conversation back around to her current hardships as stage manager, and Haley allowed herself to drift away. She could only hear a third of Brooke's ranting, anyway. The rest was static.

She stared out the windows and finished her sandwich. The sun hung low on the horizon. It shone through the cornfields, making the brittle stalks appear soft and dull. Her father was still out there. Somewhere. This time of year, he didn't let a single ray go to waste. The world looked abandoned. It was the opposite of the loud, colorful, enthusiastic group of people she'd left behind at school. She should have stuck it out. She hated the quiet isolation that permeated her house. It was exhausting in its own way.

Haley made sympathetic noises into the phone—though she had no idea what she was sympathizing *with*—and stood. She walked her plate back to the kitchen, rinsed off the crumbs, and popped open the dishwasher.

The only thing inside it was a dirty butter knife.

Haley glanced at the sink, which was empty. A frown appeared between her brows. She put the plate into the dishwasher and shook her head.

"Even if we *can* get the sprayer working," Brooke was saying, their connection suddenly clear, "I'm not sure enough people will even *want* to sit in the first three rows. I mean, who goes to the theater to wear ponchos and get drenched in blood?"

Haley sensed that her friend needed vocal reassurance. “It’s Halloween weekend. People will buy the tickets. They’ll think it’s fun.” She took a step toward the stairs—toward her bedroom—and her sneaker connected with a small, hard object. It shot across the floor tiles, skidding and rattling and clattering and clanging, until it smacked into the bottom of the pantry.

It was the egg timer.

Haley’s heart stopped. Just for a moment.

An uneasy prickling grew under her skin as she moved toward the pantry door, which one of her parents had left ajar. She pushed it closed with her fingertips and then picked up the timer, slowly. As if it were heavy. She could have sworn she’d set it on the countertop, but she must have dropped it to the floor along with her backpack.

“. . . still listening?”

The voice barely reached her ears. “Sorry?”

“I asked if you were still listening to me.”

“Sorry,” Haley said again. She stared at the timer. “I must be more tired than I thought. I think I’m gonna crash until my mom gets home.”

They hung up, and Haley shoved the phone into the front right pocket of her jeans. She placed the timer back on the countertop. The timer was smooth and white. Innocuous. Haley couldn’t pinpoint *why*, exactly, but the damn thing unsettled her.

She trekked upstairs and went directly to bed, collapsing in a weary heap, kicking off her sneakers, too drained to unlace them. The phone jabbed at her hip. She pulled it from her pocket and slung it onto her nightstand. The setting sun pierced through her window at a perfect, irritating angle, and she winced and rolled over.

She fell asleep instantly.



Haley startled awake. Her heart was pounding, and the house was dark.

She exhaled—a long, unclenching, diaphragm-deep breath. And that was when her brain processed the noise. The noise that had woken her up.

Ticking.

Haley's blood chilled. She rolled over to face the nightstand. Her phone was gone, and in its place, right at eye level, was the egg timer.

It went off.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEXT MORNING, the entire school was buzzing about two things: the brutal slaying of Haley Whitehall and Ollie Larsson's newly pinkened hair.

"You'd think they'd care less about the hair," Makani said.

"This is Osborne, Nebraska." Her friend Darby sucked up the last drops of his gas station iced coffee. "Population: twenty-six hundred. A boy with pink hair *is* as scandalous as the death of a beloved student."

They stared through Darby's windshield and across the parking lot to where Ollie was leaning against the brick wall of the front office. He was reading a paperback and pointedly ignoring the whispers—and not-whispers—of the other students.

"I heard her throat was slit in three places." Makani paused. The car's windows were down, so she lowered her voice. "Carved up to look like a smiley face."

The straw dropped from Darby's mouth. "That's *awful*. Who told you that?"

She shrugged uncomfortably. "It's just what I heard."

"Oh God. And the day hasn't even begun."

A long face with kohl-blackened eyes popped up beside the passenger-side window. “Well, *I* heard—”

Makani jumped. “Jesus, Alex.”

“—that Ollie is the one who did it. And that he used her blood to dye his hair.”

Makani and Darby stared at her, agape.

“I’m kidding. Obviously.” She opened the back door, tossed in her trumpet case, and slid inside. The car was their morning hangout. “But someone here will say it.”

There was too much truth in her joke. Makani winced.

Alex kicked the back of Makani’s seat with a royal-blue combat boot. An exclamation point. “I don’t believe it. You still have a thing for him, don’t you?”

Unfortunately, yes.

Of course she still had a thing for Ollie.

From the moment Makani Young arrived in Nebraska, she couldn’t keep her eyes off him. He was, without a doubt, the strangest-looking guy at Osborne High. But that also made him the most *interesting*. Ollie had a skinny frame with hip bones that jutted out in a way that reminded her of sex, and cheekbones so prominent they reminded her of a skull—the illusion of which was enhanced by his blond, invisible eyebrows. He always wore dark jeans and a plain, black T-shirt. A silver ring—a thin hoop in the center of his bottom lip—was his only adornment. He kind of looked like a skeleton.

Makani tilted her head. But maybe less so, now that his white-blond hair was a shocking hot pink.

“I remember when *you* had a thing for him,” Darby said to Alex.

“Yeah, like, in eighth grade. Until I realized he’s a full-time loner. He’s not interested in going out with anyone who attends this school.” With a rare and embarrassed afterthought, Alex grimaced. “Sorry, Makani.”

Makani and Ollie had hooked up last summer. Sort of. Thankfully, the only people who knew about it were sitting here in Darby's car.

"It's fine," Makani said, because it was easier than saying it wasn't.

There were a lot of rumors about Ollie: that he only slept with older women; that he only slept with older men; that he sold opioids stolen from his brother's police station; that he once almost drowned in the shallow part of the river. That—when he was rescued—he was both blind drunk and buck naked.

Then again, their school was small. There were rumors about everyone.

Makani knew better than to believe any of them outright. Rumors, even the true ones, never told a complete story. She avoided most of her classmates for that very reason. Self-preservation. Recognizing a similarly dismal soul, Darby and Alex had taken her in when she'd been forced to relocate from Hawaii midway through her junior year. Her parents were embattled in an ugly divorce, so they'd shipped her off to live with her grandmother for some normalcy.

Normalcy. With her grandmother. In the middle of nowhere.

At least, that's how Makani told the story to her friends. And, much like a rumor, it did contain a kernel of truth. It was just missing the rest of the cob.

Her parents had never paid much attention to her, even in the best of times, and they'd only recently separated when the incident at the beach occurred. After that . . . they couldn't look at her at all anymore. She didn't like looking at herself, either.

She deserved this exile.

Now it was mid-October, and Makani had been in Osborne for almost a year. She was a senior, and so were Darby and Alex. Their mutual interest was counting down the days until graduation. Makani wasn't sure where she'd go next, but she certainly wasn't staying here.

“Can we return to the important subject?” Darby asked. “Haley is *dead*. And no one knows who killed her, and that freaks my shit out.”

“I thought you didn’t like Haley,” Alex said, pulling her dyed-black hair into a complicated twist that required a large number of chunky plastic barrettes. She was the closest thing their school had to a Goth, if you didn’t count Ollie.

Makani didn’t.

Their exteriors were both comprised of black clothing and thin, pointy body parts, but Alex was hard and aggressive. She demanded to be noticed. While Ollie was as soft and silent as the night sky.

“I didn’t *dislike* Haley.” Darby tucked his thumbs under his suspenders, which he wore every day along with a plaid shirt and sensible trousers. He was short and stocky, and he dressed like a dapper old man.

Darby had been assigned female at birth, and though his legal name was still Justine Darby, he’d socially transitioned during his freshman year. If their school didn’t like a boy with pink hair, Makani could only imagine how long it’d taken for them to get used to the “girl” who was actually a boy. They mostly left him alone now, though there were still side-glances. Narrowed eyes and pinched mouths.

“I didn’t know her,” Darby continued. “She seemed nice enough.”

Alex snapped in a barrette that resembled an evil Hello Kitty. “Isn’t it weird how the moment someone dies everyone becomes her *bestest* friend?”

Darby scowled. “I didn’t say that. Jeez.”

Makani let them bicker it out before stepping in. She always did. “Do you think one of her parents did it? I’ve heard in cases like this, it’s usually a family member.”

“Or a boyfriend,” Darby said. “Was she dating anyone?”

Makani and Alex shrugged.

All three stared at their passing classmates and fell into an unusual silence. “It’s sad,” Darby finally said. “It’s just . . . terrible.”

Makani and Alex nodded. It was.

“I mean, what kind of person would do something like that?” he asked.

A sickening wave of shame rolled throughout Makani’s body. *It’s not the same*, she reminded herself. *I’m not that kind of person*. But when the warning bell rang—three sterile chimes—she bolted from the cramped hatchback as if there were an actual emergency. Darby and Alex groaned as they extricated themselves, too caught up in their own gloom to register her odd behavior. Makani exhaled and readjusted her clothing to make sure that she was decent. Unlike her friends, she did have curves.

“Maybe it was a serial killer,” Alex said as they headed toward first period. “A long-haul trucker on his way through town! These days, serial killers are always truck drivers.”

Makani felt the welcome return of skepticism. “Says who?”

“The FBI.”

“My *dad* is a truck driver,” Darby said.

Alex grinned.

“Stop smiling.” Darby glowered at her. “Or people will think *you* did it.”

By lunchtime, Alex’s tasteless joke about the source of Ollie’s hair dye had spread. Makani had heard more than one student whispering about his possible guilt. It infuriated her. Ollie was an anomaly, sure. But that didn’t make him a killer. Furthermore, she’d never seen him talk to, or even look at, Haley Whitehall.

And Makani had studied *him* a lot.

She was upset, despite understanding that the rumors were

exactly that—fabrications created to distract them from the unknown. The unknown was too frightening. Makani had also overheard a group of academic overachievers gossiping about Zachary Loup, the school's resident burnout. She didn't think he was guilty, either, but at least he was a better suspect. Zachary was an asshole. He wasn't even nice to his friends.

Most students, however, were agreed on the real suspects: Haley's family. Maybe a boyfriend. No one *knew* of a boyfriend, but perhaps she'd had one in secret.

Girls often had secrets.

The thought churned inside Makani's stomach like a rotten apple. As Darby and Alex speculated, she pushed away her paper boat of French fries and glanced around.

Nearly all of the 342 students were here in the nucleus of the campus, completely surrounded by brown-brick buildings. The quad was plain. Dreary. There were no tables or benches, only a few stunted trees scattered about, so students sat on the concrete ground. Unwind a spool of barbed wire, and it could have been a prison yard, but even prisoners were given tables and benches. A dry fountain filled with dead leaves—no one could remember ever having seen the stone lion shoot a stream of water from its open mouth—rested in the center like a mausoleum.

This time of year, the weather was unpredictable. Some days were warm, but most were cold. Today was *almost* warm, so the quad was crowded and the cafeteria was empty. Makani zipped up her hoodie, shivering. Her school in Kailua-Kona was always warm. The air had smelled like flowers and coffee and fruit, and it had tasted as salty as the Pacific, which glistened beside the parking lots and football fields.

Osborne smelled like diesel, tasted like despair, and was surrounded by an ocean of corn. Stupid corn. So much corn.

Alex grabbed a handful of Makani's uneaten fries. "What about someone in show choir? Or drama club?"

Darby scoffed. "What, like, Haley's understudy?"

"Isn't that the person the *Masterpiece* detective would investigate?" Alex asked.

"The what-now?"

"Sherlock, Morse, Poirot. Wallander. Tension."

"I only know one of those names." Darby dipped his pizza into a glob of ranch dressing. "Why don't you watch normal television?"

"I'm just saying, let's not rule anyone out yet."

Makani was still staring at the fountain. "I hope it's not a student."

"It's not," Darby said.

"Please," Alex said. "Angry teenagers do shit like this all the time."

"Yeah," he said, "but they show up at school with an arsenal of automatic weapons. They don't go after people in their *homes*. With *knives*."

Makani muffled her ears with her fists. "Okay, enough. Stop it."

Darby ducked his head, abashed. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. School shootings were real. With real murderers and real victims. Haley's death felt one step removed from reality, because it didn't seem like something that could happen to them. The crime was too specific. There must have been a reason for it. A horrible and misguided reason, but a reason nonetheless.

Makani turned to look at them, backpedaling the conversation in an attempt to downplay her reaction. "Well . . . Jessica didn't do it."

Alex raised her eyebrows. "Jessica?"

"Jessica Boyd. The understudy." Makani rolled her eyes when Alex smirked. "I only know she's the understudy because I heard somebody else say it. But can you honestly imagine her killing anyone?"

"You're right," Alex said. "That does seem unlikely." Jessica Boyd was a delicate wisp of a thing. It was difficult to imagine her even

flushing a dead goldfish. “But did you guys notice that Haley’s best friend didn’t come to school today?”

“Because Brooke is in mourning,” Darby was exasperated. “Like I would be if this happened to one of *you*.”

Alex leaned forward conspiratorially. “Think about it. Haley was one of the most talented students here. Everybody knew that she’d leave us for someplace bigger and better—Broadway, Hollywood. Whatever. She was the kind of person who should be totally stuck up, but . . . she wasn’t. People liked her. Which always means someone *didn’t* like her. Resented her.”

Makani’s nose wrinkled. “And you think it was her best friend?”

“No one even knew Haley,” Darby said, “unless they were in the drama club or Vocalmotion.” Vocalmotion was, regrettably, the self-chosen name of the show choir. Osborne High only had three respectable organizations: the drama and choral departments, which had a nearly one-hundred-percent overlap, and the football team.

It was Nebraska. Of course their school took football seriously.

“But that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Alex said. “Nobody else knew her. So doesn’t it make sense that one of her friends did it? Out of jealousy?”

“Should we be worried? Are you plotting to kill us?” Makani asked.

“Ugh,” Darby said.

Alex sighed. “You guys are no fun.”

“I believe I warned you this morning,” Darby said, “not to appear so excited.”

The wind picked up, and it shook a paper banner on the other side of the quad. An advertisement for *Sweeney Todd*. Each letter dripped with garish, hand-painted blood, and two long swaths of dark red tulle draped down from opposite corners like theater curtains. A gust heaved the tulle into the air, where it danced and writhed. Makani

felt a chill touch her spine. Her name meant “wind” in Hawaiian, but she wasn’t superstitious about it. Except when she was. They should stop talking about Haley.

“It’s tactless,” she said, unable to help herself. She nodded toward the banner. “The Splatter Belt. Do you think they’ll cancel it?”

Alex swallowed the last greasy fry. “They’d better not. That was the first school function that I’ve ever planned on attending. Willingly,” she added. She was in the marching band, which meant she was forced to attend the football games.

Darby stared her down until she made eye contact.

“What? It seemed like fun,” she said. “Getting covered in fake blood.”

Makani snorted. “There’s that word again. *Fun*.”

Faux wistfulness spread across Darby’s face. “I remember when you used to collect plastic horses and Pokémon cards, and your life goal was to work for Pixar.”

“Lower your voice, dickpunch.” But Alex grinned.

A back-and-forth taunting of childhood hobbies and idiosyncrasies ensued, and Makani, as it so often happened, found herself excluded. Her attention waned, and her gaze drifted across the quad. It was almost time. Any minute now, and . . .

There.

Her heart plummeted as Ollie appeared from the depths of the locker bay to throw away an empty plastic grocery bag. This was his daily routine appearance. He always ate a packed lunch in an uninhabited nook behind the old lockers, and then he always disappeared into the main building. He would finish this hour in the library.

Makani felt a familiar pang of sorrow. Ollie was so alone.

A small group of football players stood beneath the *Sweeney* banner, blocking the entrance to the building. Her muscles tensed as Matt Butler—Osborne’s golden boy, its prize running back—said

something as Ollie approached. Whatever it was, Ollie didn't react. Matt said something else. Ollie didn't react. Matt flicked his thumb and index finger at Ollie's hair. His friends laughed, but Ollie still didn't react. It was agonizing to watch.

A meaty guy with an absurd name, *Buddy or Bubba*, she thought, jumped up and snatched at the tulle, and the right half of the banner ripped and collapsed downward. He laughed even harder as Ollie was forced to duck, but the pleasure was short-lived.

Matt gestured angrily at the wreckage. "Hey, man! Show some respect."

The outburst carried across the quad. It took Buddy or Bubba several seconds to make the connection between the ruined banner and Haley, but as his expression transformed from confusion into humiliation, he was faced with a choice—either admit to a wrongdoing or double down. He doubled down. Shoving Matt's shoulder, he set off a furious chain reaction of even more shoving until they were no longer blocking the entrance.

The escalating action held the student body in rapt attention. Only Makani was staring elsewhere. Ollie still hadn't moved. He'd kept it together, but it was clear that the football players had unnerved him. She was on her feet.

"No," Darby said. "Makani. *No.*"

Alex shook her head, and her barrettes clicked against one another. "Ollie doesn't deserve your help. Or pity. Or whatever it is you're feeling right now."

Makani smoothed the front of her hoodie. She was already walking away.

"You never listen to us," Darby called out. "Why don't you ever listen to us?"

Alex sighed. "Good luck, gumdrop."

This *thing*—this unbearable weight and pressure—that had been

boiling inside Makani for months was about to erupt. Ollie might not deserve her help, but she still felt compelled to try. Maybe it was because she wished someone at her previous school had helped her. Or maybe it was because of Haley, a horrific situation already beyond anyone's help. Makani glanced back at her friends with a shrug.

When she turned forward, Ollie was staring at her. He didn't look nervous or angry, or even curious.

He looked wary.

Makani strode toward him in a bold path. She always stood out among their peers. Their skin was several shades lighter than her brown complexion, and her surf-inspired wardrobe was several shades brighter than their Midwestern sensibility. She wore her hair big—in its natural curly coils—and she moved with a confident sway in her hips. It was a false confidence, designed so that people wouldn't ask questions.

Ollie glanced one last time at the jocks, still shouting and posturing, and pulled aside the dangling tulle. He went into the building. Makani frowned. But when she opened the door, he was waiting for her on the other side.

She startled. "Oh."

"Yes?" he said.

"I . . . I just wanted to say, they're idiots."

"Your friends?" Ollie deadpanned.

Makani realized she was still holding the door open, and he could see Darby and Alex through the tulle's transparent weave, spying on them from across the quad. She released her grip. It slammed shut. "No," she said, trying on a smile. "Everyone else."

"Yeah. I know." His face remained impassive. Guarded.

Her smile dropped. She crossed her arms, her own defenses rising as they sized each other up. They were almost eye level; he was only an inch or two taller than she was. This close, she could see the *newness*

of his hair. His scalp was hot pink. The dye would need more time to wash out of his skin. There was something vulnerable about seeing him like this, and her body re-softened. She hated herself for it.

She hated herself for so many things.

Makani hated that she'd gotten carried away with Ollie, even though she'd been warned about his reputation. She hated that she'd tricked herself into believing she didn't care for him, when she'd always known that she did. And she hated the way it had ended. Abruptly. Silently. This was their first conversation since the end of summer.

Maybe if we'd talked more to begin with . . .

But that was it, wasn't it? There had never been a lot of talking. At the time, she'd even been grateful for it.

His pale eyes were still fixed on her, but they were no longer passive. They were searching. Her veins throbbed in response. Why did it suddenly feel like they were back behind the grocery store, preparing to do what they did on those hot, summer afternoons?

"Why are you here?" he asked. "You haven't spoken to me all semester."

It made her angry. Instantly. "I could say the same thing about you. And I *said* what I wanted to say. About our classmates. Being idiots and all that."

"Yeah." His posture stiffened. "You did say that."

Makani let out a singular laugh to show him that he wasn't getting to her, even though they both knew that he was. "Fine. Forget it. I was just trying to be a friend."

Ollie didn't say anything.

"Everyone needs friends, Ollie."

He frowned slightly.

"But, obviously, that's impossible." With one violent thrust, she pushed the door back open. "Great talk. See you in class."

She stormed straight into the curtain of tulle. She swore as she struggled to pull it aside, growing more and more ensnared in the dark red netting. A thunderous uproar surged across the quad—a chaotic mob of excited, agitated spectators.

The fight had finally broken out.

Makani stopped thrashing. She was trapped, imprisoned even, in this miserable town where she hated everything and everyone. Especially herself.

There was a quiet stir, and she was surprised to discover that Ollie was still behind her. His fingers carefully, gently untangled her from the tulle. It dropped back into a sheet, and they watched their classmates together, in silence, through the blood-colored haze.

War Girls
Tochi Onyebuchi

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WAR GIRLS

TOCHI ONYEBUCHI



RAZORBILL

CHAPTER

1

Southeastern Nigeria,
April 21 72

The first thing Onyii does every morning is take off her arm. Other War Girls have gotten used to sleeping without their arms or their legs. But Onyii's phantom limb haunts her in her sleep. In her dreams, she has all her arms and legs and can run. She can run far and fast and away from whatever is chasing her. She can hold her rifle, and she can aim, and she can feel her face with all of her fingers. But then she'd wake up and try to touch her body with a right arm that wasn't there anymore. She never got accustomed to waking up without all of her body there, so now she sleeps with her arm attached, even though sometimes she accidentally crushes and bends some of the machinery. Even though the sweat from her night terrors rusts some of the more delicate circuitry. Even though she wakes every morning with the imprint of metal plates on her cheek. Which is why she gets up earlier than the rest of the camp and spends the quiet morning hours at her bedside station, oiling the gears and tinkering with the chips. In the darkness, the sparks from the metal as she works are the only light in her tent.

Ify sleeps through all of it.

Onyii takes a moment to listen to Ify snore. The birds outside

have just started their chirping, but they're still quiet enough that Onyii can hear Ify's patterns. Two smooth snores, then a hiccup. Onyii's dreams are a blur of chaos and blood and screaming. Flashes of gunfire. Rain falling hard but never hard enough to wash the tears from her face. Ify's face is serene in slumber, the tribal scars soft ridges on her cheeks. Her lips turn up at the edges. For almost her entire life, the child has only known peace.

When Onyii finishes, she disconnects her arm from its station and places it against the spot where her shoulder ends. She'd left that battle long ago with a stump. But the doctors had had to cut away the rest of the arm, because it had gotten infected. Now, there is only mesh wiring over the opening, so that her socket is more like a power outlet than anything else. Nanobots buzz out of the metal arm socket, trailing wires. The threading then attaches the metal to her flesh. Electricity shocks through her body—a small burst like scraping feet against carpet then touching a doorknob. Then she's able to flex her fingers. She tries out her elbow joints, bends the arm, swings it slowly back and forth, rotating the shoulder, then stretches and lets out a massive yawn. She waits until she's outside the tent to let out her gas.

The world is green and wet with recent rain. The dew hasn't yet dried from the grass. Leaves bend on their tree branches overhead.

Wind whips about her. Engines scream overhead, and Onyii looks up just in time to see aerial mechs, massive humanoid robots, with green and white stripes painted on their shoulders screech through the sky, as they've been doing for the past year. Shoulder cannons and thrusters attached to their compact

bodies. State-of-the-art nav systems. Yet they can't detect the rebel Biafran camp right under their noses. As long as the signal dampener they rigged to hide this outpost from the Nigerian authorities is up and running, they're safe. The government forces can't even see the rebel flag waving right below them. A blue background with half of a yellow sun at its bottom, golden rays radiating outward like lightning bolts.

Onyii stretches her flesh-and-blood arm and shoulder, arches her back and listens to the cracks ripple up her spine, then shakes herself loose. She's still wearing only her bedclothes—a compression bra and athletic shorts that stick to her in the heavy Delta humidity—but it's comfortable enough for a morning run.

She makes her usual circuit of the camp. First, she heads to the camp's periphery, past the school for the little ones and one of the few auto-body shelters—a place where faulty robotics can be tinkered with, where arms and legs can be made. Where the girls can become Augments, given limbs or organs more powerful than what they were born with. Sometimes, it's a place where medical operations happen and people are given new eyes or the bleeding in their brain is stopped and a braincase has to be installed. Onyii knows some of the others sneer at the place, like people only go there to come out less than human, but some of those who look sideways at the people working in there and getting worked on have never seen war. Half-limbs only become half-limbs because they're trying to make someone whole. An Augment is not an ugly thing.

She hangs a left and spots the orchard and the fruit trees that line it. Beyond the orchard, a vegetable garden sits encased in a greenhouse large enough for a few people to enter and roam about in. Rotating spigots programmed to automatically spray

water on the plants hang from the ceiling, and artificial light panels line the walls. The camp hasn't needed them for some time, but when the nights get long—too long—they can't let the food suffer.

Onyii spirals outward on her run and passes the mess hall—usually empty this early in the morning. But as Onyii runs by she spots a girl in jungle fatigues with her jacket unbuttoned and draped loose over her shoulders as she leans on her rifle, dozing. Chike. At the sound of Onyii's feet brushing the grass, Chike starts awake and straightens. It's a wonder she doesn't hoist her assault rifle and aim it right at Onyii; she's so jittery. When Chike realizes where she is, she settles back, and her posture relaxes.

It's only me, Onyii thinks, who will pafuka your head when your commanding officer finds out you've been sleeping on your watch!

Onyii ambles past. These morning runs double as patrol surveillance. Backup for those on watch. The outpost may be hidden from radars and scanners, but what's to keep a Green-and-White from walking right through their perimeter? At fifteen, Onyii is among the oldest in the camp. The younger ones—some of them new to living on their own and some of them just learning how to be people again after having grown feral in the jungles—have trouble adjusting, staying awake during patrols, concentrating during school, not screaming in their sleep. In some of them, their guns are bigger than they are. But they're slowly turning into steel, turning into the type of girls who can be depended on during an attack, the type of girls Onyii would be happy to have at her side in a fight. Proud, even.

Her route takes her farther out to the practice grounds where weapons training happens. Jungle trees with their broad, heavy leaves hide the girls from above, and there's enough foliage here to absorb most of the noise they make as they shoot toward the shoreline. She gets to the cliff, and below her lies the beach. Melee combat happens here too, when it's scheduled, but during the warm seasons, Onyii will occasionally arrive on her morning runs to see some of the girls already laid out, naked beneath the sun, giggling or roughhousing, and she's reminded that many of them are still just kids. And the sun for them is still a gentle, loving thing. Some of them have never looked up into a clear blue sky, at an out-of-place twinkling, and recognized a drone ready to drop a bomb on their homes. Maybe some of them have seen it and still don't care. Those ones always turn out to be good fighters. Reckless, but good.

In the distance is the water, still more black than blue this early in the morning. Onyii hears the faint sound of metal banging, of water sloshing against steel, and what she sees as specks or small shapes along the horizon, she knows to be the mineral derricks. Old and rusted but still capable of leeching resources from the Delta. Their resources. The blue minerals buried beneath Onyii's feet and, farther out, beneath the ocean floor. This is what the Nigerians are killing Biafrans for. Not a morning passes that Onyii doesn't think about setting charges to those things and blowing them into coral debris. It's been said that the minerals are the divine right of the Igbo, their blessing from Chukwu, the supreme being whose energy powers all of existence. But the minerals are just dust to Onyii. Powerful, important dust, but nothing more. She was never very religious.

Other than the Nigerian mechs that streak overhead from time to time, the derricks provide Onyii's only glimpse of the outside world. *There are more people out there than us and our enemies.* Every time she sees the derricks, she aims an invisible gun at them with a still-human hand.

She doubles back and passes the hangar where the mobile suits are stored. Rust spots their armor; they're smaller than the Nigerian mechs that screech through the sky overhead and closer to the shape of actual humans, and Onyii knows there isn't enough lubricant around for all the gears that need it. But the beat-up suits—stocked with ammo for their guns and equipped with night vision and a neural adapting system—are enough to get by. Then, there are the skinsuits. Depending on how old or how big you are, they either fit tightly enough to suffocate or they hang off you like hand-me-downs, even after you press the button on your wrist to compress them. The skinsuits are supposed to collapse to fit like a second layer of flesh for journeys out past the camp, where the radiation gets so thick that skin peels almost instantly.

The ammo crates all have Mandarin characters written on their sides in fluorescent blue ink. But the girls know by looking which containers hold the 7.62 mm bullets and which hold the ammo for the shoulder cannons on the mobile suit mechs. They know which hold the bullets for their assault rifles and which hold the knives for when the bullets run out.

It never seems like enough, the smuggled arms. But orphans never steal enough bread for a feast, only enough to last the day.

Onyii continues towards the Obelisk. But even before she gets to it, she can see sparks arcing out of its base. It looks

like a mini mineral derrick, microscopic by comparison, driven into the ground. Beneath Onyii's feet, fiber-optic cables run throughout the camp and beyond, buzzing the earth constantly with charges, zapping the soil over and over to release the water soaked into it. The water is then purified and made available for washing and cooking and cleaning. It also collects the minerals that power nearly every electronic device in the camp.

Today, it's busted somehow.

Onyii crouches at the base and sees a blackened stretch of tech running along one of the cables, ending right before it pierces the grass patch. She didn't build this, so she doesn't know it as intimately as the others in the camp do, but she's fixed things before.

She takes a long time squinting at the mechanical carnage before a flash of movement changes the air around her. Suddenly, Chinelo's at her side, all long, gangly limbs. Still, somehow, she manages not to make a sound. The opposite of clumsy. In fact, Onyii remembers the first time she saw Chinelo—tall even as a child—move with a grace she'd never seen before. Covered in ash and soot and blood, Chinelo had moved with the confidence of a general.

Now, Chinelo wears a jungle-colored compression bra over her small chest and pants with many deep pockets. A green, patterned bandana holds back her locks. Ancient, obsolete "cell phones"—relics of a different era—hang from her necklace, clacking together to make some weird music Onyii doesn't particularly like.

"You want to break our water, is that it?" Chinelo jokes.

She jokes like that from time to time. Dark jokes about how

all the girls here are, for some reason, not made of the type of material to create children. Onyii heard one time that when your water breaks, you are near to birthing a child.

But looking at Chinelo now, the sheen on her skin a glowing mix of night sweat and morning dew, Onyii sees a girl who only knows how to laugh.

“Hurry up now, before we are all stinking, and the Green-and-Whites smell us,” Onyii shoots back, smiling.

Chinelo smirks, then her bees buzz out from her hair. Tiny robotic insects that tell Chinelo the temperature and the water density in the air and the amount of radiation in each drop of rain that lands on them from the tree leaves overhead. They tell her how warm Onyii is next to her, and they tell her the state of Onyii’s prosthetic arm. As Onyii watches, the bees descend onto the well to tell Chinelo what needs to be repaired. Then they go to work.

Onyii remains crouched on her haunches, a position of battle-readiness. Chinelo sits back in the grass while the robotic bees do their job.

“We need to make a run,” Chinelo says like she is telling Onyii to bathe more often. Her Augments are more internal. A braincase for her brain, ways of having data transmitted directly to her, even some metal where bones should be. On the outside, she is as human as anyone. But finely tuned machinery ticks and hums inside her. Still, even with a body that can connect on its own to the camp’s network, she is more human than machine. Cyberized, but still, she bleeds red blood.

“And what will we find in the forest that we can’t find here?” Onyii stares at the well as light spreads along the once-blackened portion of circuitry.

“That’s the thing. You never know. Our tools are rusted, and our guns need ammunition, and just the other day, one of the lights in the greenhouse went out. The nights are getting longer, and our generators won’t last.”

Onyii wants to tell Chinelo that they’ve lasted at this outpost for years, that they’ve made more with less, but it’s a conversation they’ve had a million times before. “And what if there are Green-and-Whites on patrol?”

Chinelo elbows Onyii. “They have not found us yet. Why would they find us now?”

“Because neither of us has bathed in a week.” Onyii tries to say it with a straight face, but a smile curls her lips, and she can’t hold back anymore, and their laughter echoes into the trees.

Chinelo rolls around in the wet grass, clutching her stomach, as the bees fly back into her hair. Onyii wants to tell her to be quiet, to stop laughing before they alert whatever Nigerian patrols may be nearby. But the sound of Chinelo’s laugh warms her too much.

“Let me say goodbye to the little one at least,” Onyii says. She pushes herself upright and hauls Chinelo to her feet.

“And maybe we can find some napkins too,” Chinelo says, looking at the repaired well to see if it’s properly working again. “Some of the girls are bleeding.”



How many years has it been? Even after all this time, it still moves Onyii to see Ify sleep so peacefully. The ratty, coarse blanket rises and falls, rises and falls. Sometimes, Onyii wishes

the two of them had ports, rounded outlets at the backs of their necks that some half-limbs have, so that she could plug a wire in and connect it to Ify and see what the little girl dreamed. Maybe dancing and a cool breeze and a pretty dress. No mosquitoes.

Onyii shuffles to Ify's side. The inside of the tent is still awash in blue from a morning that has not yet fully arrived. And she knows Ify will try to resist being woken up so early before her classes, but the girl can stand to learn a little industriousness. So, Onyii sits on a crate by Ify's bed and gently shakes her awake.

The little girl's eyes open a little, then grow wide for a second before settling. Even in the darkness, Onyii can see the purple of her irises, flecked with jagged shards of gold, and her breath catches in her throat at the beauty of it.

"Hey, little one," Onyii whispers.

Chinelo waits at the tent's entrance, and Onyii can feel her impatience, but Onyii has made it her mission to spend as much time with Ify as she can. You never know when you might lose a loved one in war or even who that loved one might be. Her days as a child soldier are still fresh in her mind. Too fresh. So Onyii spends several long seconds running her hand along Ify's bald head before Ify turns and pulls the blanket over her entire body.

"Hey." Onyii shakes her, more roughly this time.

"It's too early," Ify whines.

"I have to go on a run."

At this, Ify turns. The girl is learning toughness, Onyii can tell, but there's still a pleading look in the purple and gold of her eyes.

"We have to look for some more supplies. Chinelo is coming

with me, so don't worry. I have a buddy. And Enyemaka can keep you company."

"While I do what?"

Onyii frowns. *Is that spice in your voice, Ify?* "While you go over your lessons." Onyii pulls a tablet from a shelf and powers it on. The screen flickers, and Onyii slaps it against her knee, a little too hard, before it casts its light over the inside of their dwelling.

"But, Onyii, I already get high marks. Let me sleep-oh!"

"Fine." Onyii puts the tablet back on the bedside table. "Don't study. And in class, when the teacher is teaching, if you like, don't listen. Don't pay attention. Be on your tablet. Play your games. Talk. Chaw-chaw-chaw-chaw-chaw." Her voice rises. "But if you come back to this tent with anything less than first position"—a pause for dramatic effect—"we shall see."

Ify spends one last, brief moment under the covers before she throws off the blanket and swings her legs around.

Onyii gets up and turns before Ify has a chance to see her smile. Chinelo stifles a chuckle.

In the corner, Enyemaka stands, hunched over and powered off. If someone wanted to be charitable, they would say her multicolored armor gives her character. The faded purple metal of one forearm, the pitted orange of one breastplate, the patchwork of green and red and yellow and orange and blue wires that make up her ribs. They'd say it was like a dress sewn out of choice fabric and made into this beautiful gown. A riot of color. But, really, it's just a droid made out of whatever tech Onyii and the others stumbled across on previous runs and during skirmishes with the Green-and-Whites. The metal plates on her legs are rusted at the corners. The sockets for her

eyes are dark with grime. Moss runs along her backside, and other parts are fuzzy with fungus.

Onyii stands on her toes, inhales deeply to unlock a series of chambers and valves in her artificial internal organs, and spits a mucus-encased stream of nanobots into Enyemaka's ear. When Ify used to ask how Enyemaka came to life, Chinelo would joke that it was like a wireless connection with Onyii as the droid's router. Enyemaka's eyes light up. Her gears hum, and she stands upright, squares her shoulders back, and scans the room.

"Watch her while I'm gone," Onyii commands.

"Yes, Mama," Enyemaka says back. As she powers all the way up, her voice sounds like two voices at once. Then she walks over to Ify. "So, little one. Mathematics." When she says that part, Enyemaka sounds too much like Onyii for her own comfort.

Onyii grabs her pack from by the tent's entrance and hefts her rifle with her prosthetic arm. "And make sure she shaves," she calls over her shoulder. "Clean. I don't want to see any missed spots on her head! We have a heat wave coming." Then Onyii is out into the chilly morning.

CHAPTER 2

Ify waits until Onyii leaves the tent before reaching under her pillow and fumbling around for her Accent. The tiny piece of tech, a ball small enough to fit on the end of an ear swab, has nestled itself in the folds of her bedsheet. When she finds it, a grin splits her face. Enyemaka hovers over her, and Ify instinctively turns her back while she fiddles with the Accent, then fits it inside her ear.

The darkness of the little hut evaporates. Peels away like the skin of rotten fruit to reveal the series of lines and nodes of net connectivity that bind everything—and everyone—together. Her pillow sprouts a series of pulsing blue dots. The metal beams supporting her roof glow with aquamarine lines. Enyemaka turns into a forest of nodes and vectors. Ify can see inside her and watch the gears turn and the core in her head thrum. She can see how her movements are enabled by the wireless connection from the Terminal that helps power the camp. Enyemaka's rustier parts glow a shade of red that worries Ify, but the rest of her is a healthy blue. With her Accent, Ify can see all of this. All these things happening in the camp's closed network. Bright as ocean water under the sun. Data.

“Remember, Enyemaka. You promised not to tell Onyii,” Ify says, frowning at her minder with as much sternness as she can muster. Onyii had forbade her from tinkering with any tech that might interfere with the wireless. And after the second time it had disrupted Onyii’s comms while she was on a scouting mission, Onyii had nearly thrashed her senseless. Only at the last moment had Onyii returned to herself. There was a change in her eyes. When she got that angry, a cloud came over them and Ify could tell the storm was coming. But Onyii’s eyes had cleared, and she had given Ify only an extended tongue-lashing.

Ify never meant to disobey Onyii, but she would look around at her life to see nothing but questions. And whenever Ify inserted her Accent into her ear, the world exploded with answers. Almost every piece of tech and even unconnected items like her bed and her pillow and the biomass the scouting parties brought back to make their meals with—all of it was explained to her through the Accent in a way that made sense. And right now, she’s not messing around trying to hack into Chinelo’s comms or into the Obelisk that takes the special minerals from the ground to power the camp. She’s just watching. Surfing the connections. Riding the waves. The Accent also lets her talk to Enyemaka without needing to make a sound.

She remembers where she is and that Onyii is still probably near enough to sense her, and she shifts her jaw to turn her Accent off. Then, shrugging on her shirt, which looks and feels more like a burlap sack than anything a human being is supposed to wear, she takes a seat on the crate before her mirror. Or, rather, shard of mirror.

Okay, Enyemaka, she says cheerfully through her Accent. I’m ready.

There's a little bit of hair on her head, just a small shield of silver fuzz, but it's enough to make her itch in the warm seasons. So she sits as still as she can manage while Enyemaka runs the razor smoothly over Ify's scalp. With each stroke, Enyemaka sprays a small puff of alcohol on the nearly shiny space. Ify winces. Sometimes, Enyemaka isn't as smooth as she'd like, and Ify's left with a cut or two that she has to put adhesive over. Then she has to endure the taunts of her age-mates.

"Ow!"

"You should not have been moving," Enyemaka says in her half-robotic voice. "My reflexes are not fast enough to account for your constant shifting."

Always my fault, Ify thinks to herself. "Ugh, I'm finished," she says, without even having Enyemaka inspect her. "You wait outside the classroom this time when we get to school, okay?" There's an extra bite in her voice today, and all that good cheer she felt upon finding her Accent has left her.

By the time she gathers her tablet and her rucksack, daylight shines through the slit in the tent's opening. She's going to be late for school. Again.



The cooling unit must be broken, because they've retracted the roof on the warehouse where the teachers hold their classes. Ify sneaks in through the back, but sees that the only free seat, of course, is in the front row. The thought runs through her head to turn back and just skip class for the day, but Enyemaka is blocking her path through the side entrance, so she has no choice but to duck her head and hurry to her seat.

Everyone has their tablets out in front of them with holos displayed, but Ify can't tell what page of the downloaded lesson they're on and so has to stumble through image after image after image of nonsense until her holo matches the others. Some of the girls around her snicker, which makes Ify duck her head even more. She's tempted to turn on her Accent and have the secrets of each of these girls revealed to her. The Augmented ones with their stored search histories not yet deleted, showing the sites they visit to look at barely dressed men and boys. Ify can see all of that and expose them with just a turn of her jaw, but Enyemaka's still in the doorway, and there's no doubt that Onyii would find out. And it's not even the beating that Ify fears so much as the look of disappointment in her big sister's eyes. So Ify focuses on the holo, which is a 3-D projection of a parabolic curve on a graph.

The teacher is explaining basic algebra, not even anything useful. Not like the orbital physics in the ancient textbooks and archived sites Ify studies on her own.

She grits her teeth, and suddenly the world explodes with blue. For a panicked moment, Ify sees the gears and wires inside her teacher and can feel the information from other people's tablets run through her head. She senses Enyemaka's distress, and far into the distance, on the periphery of her vision, a familiar signal: Onyii. So fast she hurts herself, she clicks her jaw and shuts off her Accent. She looks around to see if anyone noticed the shadow signal in their devices, the little blip or moment of static in their tablets or in their teched-up bodies. But no one seems to have noticed. She lets out a sigh and listens to the teacher drone on about how algebra originated in Biafra among the Igbo peoples. How the knowledge was stolen by the

Fulani tribe when they invaded from the north centuries ago. Ify wonders what it must have been like to live in a time when humans were beasts, when Nigeria was newly independent and no longer a British colony, when the Igbo lived alongside the Fulani monsters the teacher is talking about. But before she can follow the thought, everyone's tablets buzz, and the lesson's over for today.

The girls stream out already giggling, some of them playing with their tablets and turning them into music boards to play songs they made and recorded. Ify slips her tablet into her sack and shuffles toward Enyemaka. She reaches up to scratch the top of her head when something slams into her from behind, and she topples forward. Enyemaka's gears groan as she moves to try to catch her, but Ify tastes dirt and turns to find several girls standing over her.

"Eh-heh," says one of the girls, with her hair braided in two dark pigtails coming out the side of her head. The ridges of the tribal scars on her cheeks glisten. "Without her big *sista* around, she is just a skinny *oyinbo*." The others snicker and point at Ify's skin, lighter than theirs, so that mosquito bites show up redder and her bruises take longer to fade. She tries to hide her bare arms in her shirt. Her skin the color of sand, theirs the color of firm ground. She grits her teeth. *Turn on your Accent*, she tells herself. *Hack them. Mess up their systems.* And she could do it. She gives herself a moment to imagine the girls screeching as their tablets explode in their hands or the tech in their braincases short-circuits, making them go blind. Then she pushes herself up to her feet. Whatever she would do to them would get Onyii's attention and, worse, her anger. So she lets it go, just like she does every time.

“She looks like jollof rice gone bad,” another of the girls sings. And that gets the others going. “Maybe she thinks just because she has no *real* family, we are supposed to pity her.”

The girl with the pigtails sucks her teeth. “Just some skinny goat Onyii found in the bush all alone.”

Ify’s cheeks burn. Tears spring to her eyes. The anger is right there, close enough to touch, and she has to fight against it. But if one of them pushes her, if they even touch her, then Ify will give herself permission to lash out. She will tell Onyii afterward that she had no choice, that she had to defend herself, that she had to be strong like her. And that’s why the girls will be squirming on the ground wondering why they suddenly can’t see or hear or walk.

But the girls relent.

They turn to go, and one of them picks up a stone and flicks it at Ify’s head as their group walks away.

Enyemaka stands before Ify, and that’s when she realizes she’s shaking. Rooted where she stands, hands balled into fists, brow knit into a frown, a soft growl growing in her throat. But the shadow Enyemaka casts over her brings her back to herself, and she takes in a ragged breath.

The android kneels down and raises a hand to Ify’s face. The palm opens up and sprays alcohol on the cut above Ify’s eye.

“Ack!” Ify slaps Enyemaka’s hand away. “Get away from me!” And that’s when the tears come. Suddenly, she’s running and doesn’t care what direction she heads in, as long as it’s away from school, away from camp, away from Enyemaka always hovering over her, away from the girls who keep pointing out how different she is.

She stops when the hum of camp activity grows quiet.

The small patch of forest she ran into opens out onto an outcropping, and, below it, a beach. Waves of blue-green water whisper against the shoreline. A few heavy breaths later, Ify has calmed down. The noise and fog in her head dissipate. She sits in the grass, hugging her knees to her chest, and stares off into the distance. The mineral derricks are black silhouettes on the horizon. With her Accent on again, their shapes glow bright against a darkened blood-red sky. Even the enemy Nigerian mechs that hover over the derricks shine with pulsing blue light. They swim through the sky in widening oval patterns and leave trails of what look to Ify like blue stardust in their wake, but Ify knows it is the pathway that's been programmed into them. She can tell the reach of their comms too, and she knows that she and the camp are just outside their grasp. Invisible.

She fishes her tablet out of her sack and programs her Accent to pirate an enemy connection so that she can access the lessons she's been sneaking in outside of school. The headline reads: ORBITAL PHYSICS. And springing out of the text are holographs of parabolic curves and Space Colonies spinning slowly on their axes. She picks up where she left off: Lagrange points and the spaces between planets and moons where the gravity from both bodies can hold a colony in place. Then there are the mechs and the small, nimble jets that fly through asteroid belts, dipping and rising and twirling. But no matter how hard she zooms in, she can't see the pilots. The resolution gets too bad. She knows they're there. She knows there are people in those cockpits, maybe women like the type she'll grow up to be. And her heart thrills at the idea.

Enyemaka appears at her side and stiffly sits down next to Ify. Ify waits for Enyemaka to chastise her for hopping onto an

enemy connection, for going behind Onyii's back and using her Accent, but Enyemaka peeks over to examine the holograms that emerge from the tablet. Ify holds it out for Enyemaka to get a better look and smiles at the android.

"You already have a very deep understanding of orbital physics," Enyemaka says in a voice that sounds like two voices in one, echoing over each other. "And yet you do poorly in your mathematics class."

Ify snatches the tablet back. "That's because the algebra we do in class is boring. It's so basic, and they keep wanting me to show my work. So I always get low marks. But in America, they reward you for getting the right answers. That's how you become a pilot."

Enyemaka can't smile. Ify knows this. There's no real face on her head, no lips, and her eyes don't light up to show happiness but to signal that she's been powered up and her battery life is full, but when Ify looks up at Enyemaka, it *feels* like Enyemaka is smiling at her. "Is that what you want? To become a pilot?"

"More than anything," Ify breathes. She has never said it out loud before, and it feels dangerous. But it feels like commitment. She has to do it now that she has said it. And she'll find a way. Maybe when the war ends and there's a free Biafra, they'll get a launch station built, probably somewhere in Enugu or maybe right here where the camp is, and the station will fire shuttles deep into space, where they'll join the rest of the world. Another superpower like America among the Space Colonies.

Enyemaka chirrup. A bell rings inside her. Ify's shoulders sink. Mealtime. But she realizes how hungry she is—she's doesn't remember having eaten anything all day. "We must head back if we are to avoid the end of the line," Enyemaka says.

As they head back through the forest, Enyemaka silent and stoic, Ify looks up at the android. “When Onyii goes through your logs at the end of the day to see what I’ve been doing and where I went, can you erase the part where we went by the beach? If she finds out I skipped afternoon classes . . . I don’t want to make her angry. And I don’t want her to find out about my Accent. Can you, please?”

For a long time, Enyemaka is silent. It seems like she’s sad, almost. She speaks to Ify silently, through her Accent. *You are asking me to erase things that I’ve touched and heard and seen, the data I have accumulated and added to my core.*

Shame rushes through Ify. Her cheeks burn. Enyemaka sounds so much like Onyii sometimes that it’s easy for Ify to forget that, in so many ways, she’s just like a child. Figuring out how things work, gathering experiences, organizing the world around her. Learning.

“Consider it done,” Enyemaka says, then holds Ify’s hand. “That portion of my logs has been erased.”

Ify squeezes Enyemaka’s mechanized hand and brings it to her cheek.

The android doesn’t miss a step.

Bonds of Brass
Emily Skrutskie

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BONDS OF BRASS

EMILY SKRUTSKIE



CHAPTER 1

My stomach drops when I see it. Not in horror—something closer to exasperation sculpts the feeling of my mess-hall-slop breakfast bottoming out. The hangar outside the equipment room rumbles with activity. Engines firing, boots on concrete, the crackle of announcements over the intercoms. I give the cacophony only dry silence in return, because Gal Veres has forgotten his helmet.

Again.

“One of these days, you’re not going to have me to cover for you,” I mutter under my breath as I cross the room and scoop it off the shelf. “One of these days, the officers are going to come down *hard* on your ass, and I won’t do a thing to stop it—I swear on the gods of all systems.”

But not today, and probably not tomorrow, either, and I'm already out the door with Gal's helmet under one arm and my own under the other.

The hangar swallows me whole, folding me into the Umber Imperial Academy's mad scramble. On a busy morning like this, at least three different flight drills are running simultaneously. The cavernous vault of the ceiling rattles at unsteady intervals as a line of ships passes overhead. People scamper back and forth—cadets, officers, mechanics—all of them moving with frantic purpose along the designated pathways painted between the spacecrafts.

This hangar plays host to every conceivable sort of ship, from narrow, sleek fighters to massive carriers that can skip between star systems at superluminal speeds. Every hull is marked with the obsidian and brass of the Umber Empire, shimmering in the low light. There's not a junker in sight—all of these ships are less than five years old, their metal fresh from the mined-out asteroid belts of the former Archon Territories. I'm forced to stop as a Razor taxis toward the hangar doors, a hungry promise in the thrum of its engines. My heart lifts as the vibrations rattle down my spine. *Soon*, the pump of my blood swears. Soon I'll be in the air. Soon I'll be nothing but the raw impulse it takes to pilot a fighter.

Just as I'm about to take off at a run, a hand comes down on my shoulder, yanking me to the side. "What the rut—" I choke, but already they're dragging me into the shadow of a skipship's wing. I twist out of the grip and find myself staring down the sus-

piciously perfect teeth of Tatsun Seely. Three of his friends hover behind him, blocking us from the main path.

“Ettian Nassun,” Seely says, all charm and no sincerity. In the two and a half years we’ve been at the academy together, I think I’ve had about three conversations with the guy. Now he’s smiling up at me like we share some secret, and I’m not keen on finding out what it is.

“We’re gonna be late,” I tell him. Not that it matters to Seely—his whole crowd treats exercises with willful disdain bordering on open resentment. Which I understand. Really, I do. Seely’s an orphan of the former Archon Empire, like me. One of millions of kids whose lives were upended when Umber took our homeworlds seven years ago. Like me, his frame is stick-thin from half a life on Archon portions, barely rounded out from seven years of Umber abundance, though I’m a little taller and my skin is several shades darker. Like me, he was shuffled into the Umber military establishment once they opened this academy on the planet Rana, mere miles away from the former Archon Imperial Seat.

Unlike me, he’s got a massive chip on his shoulder about it.

Which brings me back to his teeth and my suspicions. Because Seely’s chompers are not your everyday set. They speak to years of good dental work—the *finest* dental work, stuff that must have started long before the Umber Empire’s victory. You

see teeth like his on governors, high-ranking officials, and probably even on imperials themselves.

And, presumably, on their heirs. At ten years old, Seely would have been far too young to be revealed to the rough-and-tumble world of galactic politics when the Archon Empire fell. If he was someone's next in line—maybe one of the planetary governors in an interior system—he would have been tucked safely in the shadows, raised in secret for a role his blood destined him to play. And when Iva emp-Umber won her war and claimed her spoils, she stole his bloodright out from under him.

It's a bit of a reach to explain why he half-asses everything, and it requires some logistical leaps to justify how he made it to the academy after the empire collapsed. But it's probably the most interesting thing about Tatsun Seely, so I entertain the notion.

“Ettian, hey—” Seely snaps his fingers in front of my eyes, and I fix him with a glare.

“Seely,” I say coolly, “get to the tarmac.”

I try to shrug his arm off my shoulders, but he clamps down tighter, pulling our heads close together. “Yeah, I'm not taking orders from you,” Seely mutters, his voice dropping low and serious. His face contorts as he tries to maintain an amicable smile. “Doesn't matter what fancy call sign the higher-ups give you—you're one of us. And we need to talk about the company you keep.” His eyes track an officer as she bustles past, but in the shadow of the skipship, we're off her radar.

“Really?” I snap. Now I get what this is about. I've

caught the scornful looks Seely and his crew throw my way more than once. They know I was born right here on Rana. I come from the nearby city of Trost, the capital and heart of the former Archon Empire. Theoretically, I should be more pissed than any of them about the Umber conquest, but instead I've thrown myself headlong into the new establishment. We've been at the academy together for two and a half years—I'm surprised it's taken them this long to confront me about it.

Archon is dead. It's gone. I can't carry it with me. The only productive thing I *can* do is latch on to the opportunities that rise out of the postwar reconstruction. That's what's kept me alive for the past seven years.

Seely's pride doesn't allow for that sort of thinking. It's a miracle he's survived this long. His lips curl up over those uncanny teeth. "Face it, *Gold One*, you've rolled right over for Umber. But we can help you fix that. There's a chance to regain a little dignity. A little honor."

His fingers start to fidget on my shoulder. To the untrained eye, it looks like a simple nervous tic, but every child born on Archon soil knows better. He's tapping a rhythm against my bones, one of the ancient beats that sculpted the old empire's culture. Some are soft and comforting, a resting pulse. Others scream of triumph in fast, emphatic strokes.

Seely's beat is urgent. Rising. A call to arms.

It freezes my blood. Seely feels me lock up against him. He leans close, his breath in my ear. "Remem-

ber the knights?” he whispers. “Remember how it felt to see one flying over a city? A single human in a powersuit that could tear the wing off a fighter craft? We’re gonna be heroes like them.”

And just like that, I’m unstuck. I duck out of Seely’s grip, clutching the helmets uncomfortably against my hips. Sure, I remember the suited knights. The heroes of the Archon Empire, keeping the peace and fighting for justice across the systems.

They were the first thing Iva emp-Umber set her sights on when she decided to take our homeworlds and their abundance of metal-rich asteroid belts for her own. Thirty coordinated strikes destroyed every knight, their staffs, their headquarters. Not even a single powersuit remained in the aftermath. Knight-fall, they called it. A declaration of war, painted in the blood of every single person we were dumb enough to call our heroes.

“I like my head where it is,” I tell Seely sharply. Guilt prickles through me as his expression drops to a stony glare. Usually the choice to fall in line with Umber rests comfortably on my shoulders—and in my well-fed gut—but when a fellow war orphan is scowling at me like I’m dirt, it’s hard not to feel it. “Look, for your sake, whatever it is you think you’re going to do . . . Don’t.”

“Told you he wouldn’t bite,” one of Seely’s companions says with a sniff. She glances over her shoulder. “He’s a waste of time.”

“Agreed,” I tell her, plastering a false, cheery smile over my face as I back toward the marked walkways.

“See you in the black, Gold One,” Seely calls. “And for *your* sake, stay out of my way.”

I scoff as I dodge back into the flow of traffic out of the hangar. Seely’s all talk—anyone who thinks they can do anything for the old empire at this point is all talk. If the Umber victory wasn’t secure when they won the war and executed the Archon imperials seven years ago, it was rock-solid by the time they opened the academy’s doors. Now Archon-born children grow up with good Umber foundations that keep the drums from pounding rhythms into their hearts. Reliable supply lines run from the richness of the Umber interior to all-but-barren Archon soil, and hungry new governors—often second children with no bloodright claim in their home territories—have stepped in to bring order to the newly acquired worlds. The region’s finally stabilized after the war cracked it open, and gods of all systems help anyone who thinks it’s a good idea to disturb that peace.

I break from the hangar’s shadow and into the bright winter sun. A curl of wind from the east brings with it the dusty scent of prairie grass, and some of it settles the frayed ends of my nerves. Between getting Gal his forgotten helmet and my run-in with the other Archon brats, there’s a good chance *I’m* going to be the one on the receiving end of an imperial-level dressing-down from the officers.

I lengthen my strides as I hustle down the tarmac, making for the row of Vipers lined up in their staging zones like knives in a drawer. My focus locks on to the third ship in the row—and as a result, I nearly

run headlong into a young officer on her way back to the hangar. It takes me an extra second to recognize Jana as I try to keep from tripping over my boots.

“Ettian, hey!” she says, her smile bright as she resettles the shoulders of her crisp black uniform. Her eyes drop to the second helmet I’m carrying. “Again, huh?”

Jana’s one of an entire cohort of upperclassmen Gal charmed into adopting him the second he arrived at the academy. Even though she graduated to the officer ranks two years ago, she still checks in from time to time, and it’s not uncommon for her to come knocking at our door for a conversation that usually devolves into mindless gossip about ten minutes in.

I return her grin, backpedaling to keep my momentum going. “Again!” I tell her. I wish I had time to stop and chat, but there’s fire under my heels. Knowing Jana, she’ll probably swing by our room later tonight anyway.

She tips an informal salute at me, and I turn around and break into a jog. As I run past, some of the other cadets call out greetings that I try my best to acknowledge with quick jerks of my head. A few of them are already perched in their cockpits, doing their preflight checks. It spurs me faster.

By the time I make it to the Gold Twenty-Eight Viper, I’m clawing for breath, both helmets dragging me down like twenty-pound weights. But when Gal Veres turns around and sees me, it’s easy to forget all that. His smile glows, the breath he lets out fogging

in the chilled air. He's unfairly handsome, his skin a warm golden brown, his hair perpetually perfectly tousled, and his frame sturdily built from a lifetime in UMBER abundance. *How dare you*, part of me groans. I need to be in my Viper already, comfortably settled in my gel-seat so I can forget how a single look from Gal sometimes feels like it might take my legs out from underneath me.

Before he has a chance to get a word in, I pitch his helmet at him. He catches it with a slight *oomph*.

"You owe me one," I tell him. It's not true, strictly speaking—I've been carrying his ass in classes since day one, but he's carried me through our time at the academy in ways I can never fully repay.

But it's Gal, so of course he plays along. He leans casually against the ladder to his cockpit, settling the helmet over his unruly undercut. "Thanks for covering for me—knew you'd have my back. I would have commed you to make sure, but . . ."

And then his smile goes wicked, and he slips my earpiece out of his pocket.

Hollow exasperation hits me like a gut punch for the second time today. "You've got to be kidding me," I groan.

Gal doesn't toss it—he makes me come and pluck the device daintily out of his palm, his hooded eyes sparkling with delight. "Noticed you forgot to make your way to the comm station, figured you'd gotten distracted by something, you know the rest. And we're supposed to trust you to lead us today?"

"Better me than you."

“Rut off. I could be an *amazing* leader.”

“Your test scores say otherwise. And last week you couldn’t even get one other person in the cantina to try streaking the officer quarters with you.”

“No one was drunk enough. But it’s gonna happen someday. We’ll make academy history—first to make it to the head’s door and back.”

I knock my shoulder into his, laughing softly as I slip my earpiece in. Behind Gal, I catch a glimpse of Hanji, another cadet in our year, as she moseys toward her station in the control tower. She gives me a wave, then makes a suggestive gesture involving both of her hands and a wicked tilt of her eyebrow. I grapple with the urge to pull a face at her, keeping my stare pinned on Gal instead.

Hanji and Ollins, another member of her merry band of miscreants, made a bet where Gal and I are concerned. If Gal finds out the terms of that bet, I might as well float my Viper into the path of an oncoming dreadnought.

“What?” Gal asks, and I realize I’ve stared a moment too long.

“Huh? Oh, just . . . I saw Jana on my way over,” I blurt. *Smooth, Ettian.*

“Yeah, she came by to say hi.”

I glance around at the tarmac, the line of Vipers, the distance from here to the hangar. “*Came by?*”

“Jealous? I can ask if she’s got friends who are into, y’know, all of this,” he says, gesturing from my head to my toes.

“Who isn’t?” I shoot back, setting my helmet over my head.

Gal snorts. “Got me there,” he says, and something skitters sideways in my stomach. Before the comment has a chance to settle, he claps me on the shoulder. “C’mon, Ettian. Big day. Let’s get these rut-tin’ birds in the sky.”

I cuff him back, grinning, then lift a finger to my earpiece and flick my comms on. “This is Gold One. All units report in.”

As I jog to my own Viper at the opposite end of the staging zone, my ears fill with the noise of thirty rowdy cadets sounding off. At my back, Viper engines whine through their preflight checks, rattling my bones. I clamber into my own cockpit, dropping into my gel-seat as I will myself to focus. It’s just noise. No rhythm beneath it. No thoughts of the past. Only the wide-open future, the black above, and the sureness of the ship beneath my hands as I taxi onto the runway.

When the tower signals, I throw everything I have into the Viper’s thrusters. I rocket for the fringes of Rana’s atmosphere with the formation at my rear, begging for my heart to calm down.

But the frantic *thump-thump-thump* in my chest is a little too close to drums for my liking.



CHAPTER 2



The human mind isn't built to process hurtling through a vacuum at skin-peeling speeds in a cockpit just big enough for a single pilot and all of his fear. The Viper around me is sleek and athletic, and the engines at my back roar as I urge a little extra speed out of them. The vast dark of space envelops me, the stars washed out by the daytime glow of Rana five hundred miles beneath us. I should be pissing myself.

And yet.

My mind goes a little inhuman in the cockpit of a Viper. My awareness pushes its limits, my body forgotten in favor of the ship around me. My eyes unfocus. My heartbeat steadies. Any residual anxieties vaporize in the void, yielding to the immediacy of

flying, and instinct takes over the way my hands twist and pull the craft's controls. The readouts spit information about the vector my ship is sailing on, but I don't need it.

All I need is the *feeling*. That's what keeps me in formation as we sweep through the black. The distance between each ship is measured, but instinct is what holds us there.

"This is Gold One. Execute first maneuver," I announce to the comm.

I fire the attitude thrusters, pulling my nose up. My Viper's engine drives a frantic tattoo into my spine. The burn is silent outside the craft, deadened by the vacuum, but inside my radio goes live. Thirty Vipers fill with the howls and whistles of cadets being jammed down into their gel-seats by the vicious inertia.

The glowing curve of Rana eases into view and then slides back out as we complete our arc and level off. At the edge of my vision, I catch the shine of Viper noses as the rest of the formation follows my lead. "Gold Twenty-Eight, get that vector straightened out," I grumble as one of them lists off-track.

"Sorry, Ettian."

My teeth set on edge, but I can't help the smile that tugs the corners of my lips. I've given up on trying to get Gal to use call signs during exercises, and so has most of the senior staff—though they certainly won't cut me any slack for letting him get away with it. His Viper jerks in my periphery, settling shakily back into formation.

“No apologies, Gold Twenty-Eight. Get it right.” It’s hard to say with a straight face, and I can picture the way Gal’s smirking in his own cockpit. “Rest of you, this is Gold One. Execute second maneuver.”

I close my eyes and spin up my gyros with a twist of the controls. I could flip my Viper with a preset, but where’s the fun in that? Pure instinct sends my craft end over end—540 degrees, for show—and pure instinct fires the engines at the right moment, the attitude thrusters locking the Viper straight along the inverse of its former vector as the main burn kicks, driving me into my seat with the force of a missile strike.

That pure instinct is why I’m Gold One.

“Ruttin’ showoff,” Gal mutters over the comm, and bursts of laughter snap through from the other pilots.

“Jealous bastard,” I shoot back, and Gal chuckles.

“Keep it professional, Ettian,” he warns.

“Cut the chatter, Gold Twenty-Eight,” I reply, but he knows I’d rather he didn’t. Even though this is technically *my* drill and I should be keeping things serious, these flight exercises are a formality. Rana’s Imperial Academy is a playground, a regimen of basic training that puts us in the shoes of pilots before we graduate for the leadership tracks. In true combat, none of us would be flying Vipers. We’re destined for the command centers of a dreadnought, overseeing troops that will deploy from the cityships.

I wish it were otherwise. I prefer the Viper. In this

cockpit, everything's under my control. It's simple and pure. I'm responsible for myself and myself alone.

Not today though. As leader of this exercise, I'm expected to keep all thirty cadets on my wing under control. Even with the Viper demanding my attention, a part of me pulses with constant awareness that the senior staff will be watching every move I make. They can excuse some friendly chatter, but if anything serious goes sideways, it's my hide on the line. I know for certain some of the officers aren't thrilled about an Archon whelp holding steady at the top of our class, and they're just waiting for an excuse to rip my command away.

"This is Gold One. Execute—"

"Wraith Squadron, detach," a familiar voice announces, cold and clear. A single fighter peels off the back of our formation.

Wraith? My gaze drops to the Viper's instruments. "Seely—Gold Eight, what the hell are you doing?" I snap. "This is Gold One, and I do *not* authorize whatever—"

A shriek of static cuts through the radio, and in my periphery, nineteen more Viper hulls fall away. Something goes fuzzy in my brain as I watch my control dissolve. My formation flies on, cut by two-thirds, holes torn in its former perfection. This can't be happening. *Why* is this happening? Sure, Seely hates me, but how in any system's hell did he convince nineteen of our classmates to ruin my drill?

There's no way the bitter little rutter has that much clout.

My heart rate doubles, my mind reeling as I try to inventory which fighters have fallen back. At my left, I spot the glint of sunlight off a Viper's nose—Gal's Viper. He's still with me.

"This is Wraith One. Form up on me," Seely announces.

"Seely, what the hell is going on?" I shout, wrestling with my controls. Another spin of the gyros flips my Viper around, pointing me at the stray flock as I continue to sail backward in what's left of my formation.

They're shifting into an arrowhead. An attack pattern. My mouth goes dry. This isn't disobedience. This isn't just to stick it to me. This is something more. Something worse.

"Gods," Gal whispers over the comm. "Not now. Not . . . Ett—"

Seely's voice overpowers the line, full of authority I never suspected him of possessing. "Wraith One, authorizing weapons free."

Every lesson I've ever had about leadership under pressure crystalizes in my mind. "Gold One, evasive action *immediately*," I scream at what's left of my fighters. The Vipers split like they've been cleaved by a knife.

All except for Gal, who bolts across the black with no regard for pattern, for order, for any sort of direction that might save his ass.

Something in his brain has gone animal. Not the

pack-animal mentality you sometimes slip into when you're flying in formation. No, Gal's just doing everything in his power to run.

"Heavens and hells," I swear, twist out of formation, and take off after him. The comms go live with confusion, the other pilots uncertain whether they're supposed to follow me.

Above the chatter, Seely's voice comes through loud and clear: "This is Wraith One. Shoot to kill."

I throw everything I have into the engines as the vacuum around me comes alive with the flash of boltfire. Gal swerves erratically, and my heart leaps into my throat as one of the bolts skims his Viper's wing. I hazard another glance at my instrumentation. Watch as the twenty defectors point their arrowhead directly at Gal's retreating tail. Not at the remaining nine Vipers holding formation as they flee across the black.

Just Gal.

"What the rut do you think you're doing?" I seethe through my teeth. I watch Gal on the instruments, my face heating with fury as another burst to the engines drives me deeper into my seat. This isn't the Gal I know—the Gal I've known for years, the one who pranks the senior staff, who struggles to keep even the most stalwart ships flying steady, who doesn't fear anything the way he should. Something's terribly wrong.

My calm evaporates into the vacuum.

I flip a switch on my radio controls, activating every distress beacon on my dashboard. "Base, this is

Gold One. Twenty of my squad have . . . They're not following orders, and they've turned on one of my pilots. They're shooting to kill. Requesting—"

I hesitate. I shouldn't hesitate—the whole point of the academy is training me to *act* when the situation is dire. I twitch my controls to dodge another round of boltfire that streaks across my Viper's nose.

"Requesting ground support and awaiting further instructions," I conclude. The Viper rattles around me as my engines max out their burn. I flip the radio back over to the exercise channel, where Seely's still spinning orders to his mutiny. A note of indignation lances through my panic. It's bad enough Seely's trying to kill Gal, but with the single line available between our ships, everyone has to listen to him do it.

"Gold One, the rest of you go to ground," I shout over Seely's noise.

"Wraith One, split it. Let's cut him."

The drumming starts as a single beat, a single hand slapping a dashboard, the noise big enough to fill a single cockpit. One hand, then ten, then twenty as the defectors' formation cracks in half. Variations slip into the rhythm, and my vision goes fuzzy as I watch the nine cadets still under my command bolt for Rana's gravity.

I know this beat too. It's been seven years since I heard it last, but the rhythm of an Archon war cadence is etched into my heart. It's the rallying cry of our fallen empire, and for a terrifying moment, I forget every word I told Seely this morning.

The defectors cast their net wide, herding Gal,

playing off the way fear is driving him. But fear's not driving me—not in the same way. As Gal swerves again, burning off his speed, I nose up along his wing.

“Gal,” I say, and his vector steadies. Even over the rumble of the drumming, he hears me.

“Ettian, I'm so sorry—”

“No apologies.” I try not to flinch as another scattering of bolts slices past us. Gal's Viper jerks, and I'm forced to swerve, tipping my gyros enough to dodge him. Even in all this confusion, my reflexes are as sharp as they were in the years after the empire fell. That time taught me a lot of things, but above all else, it taught me to improvise.

“Hold steady. I'm going to try something,” I grunt.

“Easier said.”

“I know.” I twist my gyros, flipping my craft belly-up, and punch the attitude thrusters. My Viper slots neatly underneath his.

Gal's voice is on the edge of panicked laughter. “Don't you dare hump my ship.”

“Thank me later.” I yank my landing gear's release and jam the button that spins up my electromagnets. These things are meant to hold a Viper to the skin of a dreadnought, but they work just as well on the metal of another light craft. My ship snaps against his with a dull thud, and Gal yelps.

“You're going to get us both killed,” he mutters, but he's already cutting his engine and stilling his gyros.

If he can't fly his way out of this, I'm going to do it for him.

With a heavy burst from my thrusters, I pull us into an arc, taking stock of the defector formation closing in on us. Two lines of ships spread out in a V, meaning to herd and crosscut us with their fire. Already they're adjusting course to follow where we lead. The drumming fades—the pilots need both hands now.

My vision goes dark at the edges as I tighten our vector. Vipers were designed to move around the pilot, keeping inertial forces on the body as minor as possible. Flying in curved lines is bad for biology, doubly so when the ship's center of mass is no longer focused on your head.

"Gal, you with me?" I choke, leveling us off. "You gotta talk, otherwise I'm going to think you blacked out."

"Or one of these bastards got me."

"That too." I glance up through my windshield, trying to pinpoint the academy on Rana's vast surface. I don't know if they're responding to my distress call. It'll take time for missiles to claw their way out of the planet's gravity. I don't know if I can keep us clear of the boltfire for that long. "Gal," I warn as another violent twist of the gyros steals my sight.

"Remember that time we got leave and went to Ikar?"

I grin. "Not particularly."

"You got so hammered, you started singing the Umber Anthem at the top of your lungs in an open

market. In a former Archon territory,” Gal chokes out as we level off onto a new vector.

“I remember the bruises. I won the fight, right?”

“If you call being left facedown in a garbage can ‘winning,’ I’ll eject now.”

My flying’s working. With twenty of them and one of us, it’s child’s play to tease their formation into chaos—especially with our chatter covering up the orders Seely’s screaming into the comm. “At least I actually fight my battles,” I snap. It’s harsh, given our current situation, but Gal knows what’s in my head better than anyone, and he gives me exactly what I expect.

“And I talk my way out of them like a rational human being.”

“Couldn’t talk your way out of this?”

“That’s what I have you for.”

I appreciate the confidence, but I don’t know how long I can keep this up. Feinting around boltfire and messing with their formations is only going to keep us alive for so long. Getting to safety is another matter entirely. Vipers can’t trip past superluminal speeds, and our fastest isn’t going to be enough to outrun them with this many on our tail. I don’t see any way out.

And then I realize our escape has been looming over us the entire time. My eyes shift up to Rana—to my big, glorious, green homeworld. Nine specks of flame mark where the remainder of the squad is hitting the atmosphere, and those nine little flares set off one big one in my head.

Seely sees what I'm about to do the second before I do it. "Wraith One, close the net," he shrieks, and the formation shifts around us as I twist our Vipers through the mess. No time for feinting, no time for dodging the bolts—my vector is direct, and speed is my only concern. We plunge for the planet, my engine whining as I urge it past its limits. The metal of the Viper's hull creaks around me.

"Ettian, you *maniac*," Gal mutters.

"Keep talking," I tell him. Not because I need to make sure he's conscious—our acceleration isn't heavy enough for that to be a concern—but because I need his voice to keep me steady.

"What about?"

"You can start by explaining why there are twenty Vipers on our ass." At the edge of my wing, I catch the first wisps of the planet's outer atmosphere starting to drag at us. I kill the engines. No need for acceleration when Rana's mass is beginning to yank us in.

"I—I *can't* explain."

A vicious edge slips into my voice as the last of my patience dissolves. "No, that's a lie. Why the rut is this happening?"

On the instrumentation, I see the defectors locking on to our tail, some of them already oriented for reentry.

"Ettian—"

"Tell me, Gal, or so help me I'll keep you latched and burn us both."

As is, we're cutting it close. The Viper's heat shields are on the underbelly. If we hit the hard part

of the atmosphere with our ships strapped together, we both go down in flames.

There's a sharp inhale on Gal's end of the line. A decision being made in the span of a breath. "I never wanted you to find out—not like this," Gal says.

We've got seconds. "Spit it out!" I yell.

"I'm the Umber heir."

I jam the button, releasing the electromagnets, and fire my attitude thrusters to break away from Gal's underbelly. He can't have said what I think he said. I have to put my ship right. I won't let my brain get stuck on what Gal's confessed and what it means. Another twist of my controls reorients my Viper, my heat shield braced to hit the atmosphere the second it hits back.

I didn't hear it right—that must be it. I glance out the windshield to my left, where Gal's wrestling his own ship into reentry position. Through the plastics separating us, I spot the tense line of his jaw. His eyes are shaded by his helmet and goggles, but somehow I know they're closed. I know Gal. I know him inside and out.

Or I thought I did.

Heat flares around me, my flight suit's coolant struggling to combat it as we plunge into the atmosphere. I extend every drag fin on my ship, gritting my teeth as the deceleration yanks at the flesh on my face, pressing me so deep into my seat's gel that I feel the bracing board beneath it.

Gal is the Umber heir. The thought consumes me more than any worry I might have about the reentry,

about the twenty Vipers plunging after us, about what might await us back at the academy base.

The Umber Empire has stood for thousands of years. It was seeded from the first settlements made on stable worlds as wandering generation ships roved down the galactic arm, founded on planets that took to crops with so little effort that the people who made a home there managed to twist it into some sort of divine right. Mankind delved deeper into the galaxy, discovering the metal-rich Archon worlds and the fringe planets of Corinth, but none took root and expanded so boldly and decisively as Umber. Nowadays, the empire spans at least a hundred systems. Their imperial bloodline has conquest in its veins, and Empress Iva and Emperor Yltrast are its pinnacle. Seven years ago, they shredded the Archon Empire and took it for their own. They're the most fearsome force the galaxy has ever seen.

And Gal—

No, it's impossible. There has to be some kind of mistake. It's another of Gal's jokes, like the time he pretended to be the youngest general ever promoted to impress a girl in a bar. A laugh builds in the back of my throat. He had me going there for a moment. Thinking he was the son of—

The cold shock of truth catches up to me. None of Gal's jokes have put twenty Vipers on our rear. None of Gal's jokes have left him turning tail and running like the gates of every hell have opened.

And he's never left me out of one.

"Rut me sideways, you're not kidding," I groan.

Suddenly my suspicions about Seely's teeth seem downright petty. I'd always figured there would be shadow heirs installed at the academy. The Archon territories are notorious hotbeds of opportunity for up-and-coming bloodlines. Governors on every tier of power—continental, planetary, and even system—would jump at the chance to place their kids in the heart of the former empire to train them for command. But this is another thing entirely. Gal's a rutting *prince*. The Umber heir is destined by blood to *own* these systems someday. And twenty of our classmates, including Seely, still hear the Archon drums in their hearts. No wonder they're raining boltfire on his rear.

"Someone must have found out," Gal chokes over the rumble of reentry. "Sleepers didn't stop them."

Of course he has sleeper agents. Of course he wouldn't be here without protection in a seven-year-old territory. And whoever organized this hit knew it—they waited until he was isolated. Surrounded him with more enemies than he could evade on his own. If it hadn't been for me—

The ground's coming up too fast. My hands are numb against my Viper's controls. I steal another glance out the windshield, through the flames wrapped around our hulls. Gal's focus is on his instruments, but his mind must be miles away. I try to picture him beneath his helmet and visor, try to see his parents in him. Iva's dark, hooded eyes. Yltrast's golden skin. The proud brow distinct to the Umber line. No, I just see Gal as I've always seen him. Gal,

who's always been a bad liar and a good friend—except something in my darker spaces is urging me to say it's the other way around.

And from those dark spaces, an intrusive thought hits hard and heavy. *Fall back*, it demands. *This is the heir to the bloodline that rained hell on your homeland. That stole your life out from underneath you, broke you, and remade you in its image. You belong with Seely. You can redeem yourself.*

The fire dies around us as we slow into the atmosphere's cradle. My fingers tighten on the controls. Thirty seconds, tops, until the Vipers on our tail start chugging boltfire into our asses again.

Fall back.

It's where you belong. Fall back.

Redemption.

I let out a long breath.

And a missile shrieks past my cockpit. Two seconds later, a thunderclap booms at our rear. On my dash, the command channel goes live. "Base to Gold One, watch for shrapnel," Hanji's voice announces, flat with raw horror. It's the most serious I've ever heard her. "Runway Three's been cleared for your approach."

Fourteen of the defector Vipers are gone. Reduced to nothing but shredded, heated metal that spatters across our backs like rain. A hollow, terrible feeling rips through me. They were assassins. Classmates. Archon kids like me.

Obliterated.

The clatter of debris on my hull shocks me back

into reality. This is what happens to everyone who goes up against the Umber Empire. To suited knights and generals and even the imperials themselves. You don't become a hero.

You just get killed.

The six remaining Vipers scatter, pursued by a volley of heatseekers that scream up from beneath us. We don't have time to see what happens to them. The ground's rolling up fast, and the spires of the academy's buildings are rising to meet us. I punch my thrusters and adjust my drag flaps, and Gal falls in at my wing. Our approach cuts wide across the plains and finally—*finally*—there's the tarmac of Runway Three.

I extend my Viper's landing gear. Pull my nose up. Yards. Feet. Inches. The Viper hits the pavement hard, and I feel something snap. Hear the shriek of rending metal. Know without seeing that I've ripped my wheels off.

"Base to Gold One, you're dragging fire," Hanji chirps helpfully in my ear.

My flight suit's coolant isn't enough—the cockpit's cooking as my Viper skins its belly on the tarmac. Sweat trickles down the back of my neck. My fingers fumble on the controls, scrabbling for the release.

There. Grab. Pull. The cockpit pops open, my seat ejects, and I catapult into the mercifully cool air. A whoop escapes my lips as I watch my flaming ship skitter away beneath me, outstripped by Gal's Viper. He streaks down the runway unhindered, leaving me

in the dust and ashes. My parachutes deploy, yanking me out of my fall. I try to twist, to direct my descent, but I have no control—I'm at the mercy of the cold winds blowing in off the prairie.

By the time I touch down, Gal's already out of his Viper. I land fifty yards away from him and immediately start tearing at my restraints. Farther down the tarmac, people are swarming Gal. First a doctor, for whom everyone clears the way, then a security team flanked by high-level academy officials.

I stagger to my feet. My legs shake beneath me. I have to get to Gal, have to *talk*, have to wrap my head around what's happening. Hanji chatters in my ear, but I rip my helmet off and tear out my earpiece before I can register what she's saying.

I stumble down the tarmac. A fire crew screams past me, bound for the wreckage of my Viper. As the siren fades, I start to make sense of the hubbub surrounding Gal. They're talking about putting him in isolation. Summoning the governor Berr sys-Tosa from his winter estate on Imre, an inner world of the system. Arranging for transport to the Imperial Seat in the distant Umber interior.

Gal stands in the middle of the storm, his uncertain gaze flicking from face to face. His eyes find mine, and he lunges toward me. One of the security officers clamps a hand down on his shoulder. "Your Majesty," she says urgently.

I try to push through the people, but someone grabs me. "Gal," I wheeze, still trying to recover

from the shock of the ejection and landing. None of this makes sense. I need him to *make this make sense*.

“Ettian, something’s—” Gal breaks off abruptly. “I . . . I’m so sorry.”

I’m so used to brushing those words off. So used to forgiving him instantly. But now, for once, as the security officers bundle my best friend away to whatever fate awaits him, I stand in the hollow silence left over and let him mean it.

*An Ember
in the Ashes*
Sabaa Tahir

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I: Laia

My big brother reaches home in the dark hours before dawn, when even ghosts take their rest. He smells of steel and coal and forge. He smells of the enemy.

He folds his scarecrow body through the window, bare feet silent on the rushes. A hot desert wind blows in after him, rustling the limp curtains. His sketchbook falls to the floor, and he nudges it under his bunk with a quick foot, as if it's a snake.

Where have you been, Darin? In my head, I have the courage to ask the question, and Darin trusts me enough to answer. *Why do you keep disappearing? Why, when Pop and Nan need you? When I need you?*

Every night for almost two years, I've wanted to ask. Every night, I've lacked the courage. I have one sibling left. I don't want him to shut me out like he has everyone else.

But tonight's different. I know what's in his sketchbook. I know what it means.

“You shouldn’t be awake.” Darin’s whisper jolts me from my thoughts. He has a cat’s sense for traps—he got it from our mother. I sit up on the bunk as he lights the lamp. No use pretending to be asleep.

“It’s past curfew, and three patrols have gone by. I was worried.”

“I can avoid the soldiers, Laia. Lots of practice.” He rests his chin on my bunk and smiles Mother’s sweet, crooked smile. A familiar look—the one he gives me if I wake from a nightmare or we run out of grain. *Everything will be fine*, the look says.

He picks up the book on my bed. “*Gather in the Night*,” he reads the title. “Spooky. What’s it about?”

“I just started it. It’s about a jinn—” I stop. Clever. Very clever. He likes hearing stories as much as I like telling them. “Forget that. Where were you? Pop had a dozen patients this morning.”

And I filled in for you because he can’t do so much alone. Which left Nan to bottle the trader’s jams by herself. Except she didn’t finish. Now the trader won’t pay us, and we’ll starve this winter, and why in the skies don’t you care?

I say these things in my head. The smile's already dropped off Darin's face.

"I'm not cut out for healing," he says. "Pop knows that."

I want to back down, but I think of Pop's slumped shoulders this morning. I think of the sketchbook.

"Pop and Nan depend on you. At least talk to them. It's been months."

I wait for him to tell me that I don't understand. That I should leave him be. But he just shakes his head, drops down into his bunk, and closes his eyes like he can't be bothered to reply.

"I saw your drawings." The words tumble out in a rush, and Darin's up in an instant, his face stony. "I wasn't spying," I say. "One of the pages was loose. I found it when I changed the rushes this morning."

"Did you tell Nan and Pop? Did they see?"

"No, but—"

"Laia, listen." Ten hells, I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear his excuses. "What you saw is dangerous," he says. "You can't tell anyone about it. Not ever. It's not just my life at risk. There are others—"

“Are you working for the Empire, Darin? Are you working for the Martials?”

He is silent. I think I see the answer in his eyes, and I feel ill. My brother is a traitor to his own people? My brother is siding with the Empire?

If he hoarded grain, or sold books, or taught children to read, I’d understand. I’d be proud of him for doing the things I’m not brave enough to do. The Empire raids, jails, and kills for such “crimes,” but teaching a six-year-old her letters isn’t evil—not in the minds of my people, the Scholar people.

But what Darin has done is sick. It’s a betrayal.

“The Empire killed our parents.” I whisper. “Our sister.”

I want to shout at him, but I choke on the words. The Martials conquered Scholar lands five hundred years ago, and since then, they’ve done nothing but oppress and enslave us. Once, the Scholar Empire was home to the finest universities and libraries in the world. Now, most of our people can’t tell a school from an armory.

“How could you side with the Martials? How, Da-

rin?”

“It’s not what you think, Laia. I’ll explain everything, but—”

He pauses suddenly, his hand jerking up to silence me when I ask for the promised explanation. He cocks his head toward the window.

Through the thin walls, I hear Pop’s snores, Nan shifting in her sleep, a mourning dove’s croon. Familiar sounds. Home sounds.

Darin hears something else. The blood drains from his face, and dread flashes in his eyes. “Laia,” he says. “Raid.”

“But if you work for the Empire—” *Then why are the soldiers raiding us?*

“I’m not working for them.” He sounds calm. Calmer than I feel. “Hide the sketchbook. That’s what they want. That’s what they’re here for.”

Then he’s out the door, and I’m alone. My bare legs move like cold molasses, my hands like wooden blocks. *Hurry, Laia!*

Usually, the Empire raids in the heat of the day. The soldiers want Scholar mothers and children to

watch. They want fathers and brothers to see another man's family enslaved. As bad as those raids are, the night raids are worse. The night raids are for when the Empire doesn't want witnesses.

I wonder if this is real. If it's a nightmare. *It's real, Laia. Move.*

I drop the sketchbook out the window into a hedge. It's a poor hiding place, but I have no time. Nan hobbles into my room. Her hands, so steady when she stirs vats of jam or braids my hair, flutter like frantic birds, desperate for me to move faster.

She pulls me into the hallway. Darin stands with Pop at the back door. My grandfather's white hair is scattered as a haystack and his clothes are wrinkled, but there's no sleep in the deep grooves of his face. He murmurs something to my brother, then hands him Nan's largest kitchen knife. I don't know why he bothers. Against the Serric steel of a Martial blade, the knife will only shatter.

"You and Darin leave through the backyard," Nan says, her eyes darting from window to window. "They haven't surrounded the house yet."

No. No. No. “Nan,” I breathe her name, stumbling when she pushes me toward Pop.

“Hide in the east end of the Quarter—” Her sentence ends in a choke, her eyes on the front window. Through the ragged curtains, I catch a flash of a liquid silver face. My stomach clenches.

“A Mask,” Nan says. “They’ve brought a Mask. Go, Laia. Before he gets inside.”

“What about you? What about Pop?”

“We’ll hold them off.” Pop shoves me gently out the door. “Keep your secrets close, love. Listen to Darin. He’ll take care of you. Go.”

Darin’s lean shadow falls over me, and he grabs my hand as the door closes behind us. He slouches to blend into the warm night, moving silently across the loose sand of the backyard with a confidence I wish I felt. Although I am seventeen and old enough to control my fear, I grip his hand like it’s the only solid thing in this world.

I’m not working for them, Darin said. Then whom is he working for? Somehow, he got close enough to the forges of Serra to draw, in detail, the creation process

of the Empire's most precious asset: the unbreakable, curved scims that can cut through three men at once.

A half a millennium ago, the Scholars crumbled beneath the Martial invasion because our blades broke against their superior steel. Since then, we have learned nothing of steelcraft. The Martials hoard their secrets the way a miser hoards gold. Anyone caught near our city's forges without good reason—Scholar or Martial—risks execution.

If Darin isn't with the Empire, how did he get near Serra's forges? How did the Martials find out about his sketchbook?

On the other side of the house, a fist pounds on the front door. Boots shuffle, steel clinks. I look around wildly, expecting to see the silver armor and red capes of Empire legionnaires, but the backyard is still. The fresh night air does nothing to stop the sweat rolling down my neck. Distantly, I hear the thud of drums from Blackcliff, the Mask training school. The sound sharpens my fear into a hard point stabbing at my center. The Empire doesn't send those silver-faced monsters on just any raid.

The pounding on the door sounds again.

“In the name of the Empire,” an irritated voice says, “I demand you open this door.”

As one, Darin and I freeze.

“Doesn’t sound like a Mask,” Darin whispers. Masks speak softly with words that cut through you like a scim. In the time it would take a legionnaire to knock and issue an order, a Mask would already be in the house, weapons slicing through anyone in his way.

Darin meets my eyes, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing. If the Mask isn’t with the rest of the soldiers at the front door, then where is he?

“Don’t be afraid, Laia,” Darin says. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I want to believe him, but my fear is a tide tugging at my ankles, pulling me under. I think of the couple that lived next door: raided, imprisoned, and sold into slavery three weeks ago. *Book smugglers*, the Martials said. Five days after that, one of Pop’s oldest patients, a ninety-three-year-old man who could barely walk, was executed in his own home, his throat slit from ear to ear. *Resistance collaborator*.

What will the soldiers do to Nan and Pop? Jail them? Enslave them?

Kill them?

We reach the back gate. Darin stands on his toes to unhook the latch when a scrape in the alley beyond stops him short. A breeze sighs past, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

Darin pushes me behind him. His knuckles are white around the knife handle as the gate swings open with a moan. A finger of terror draws a trail up my spine. I peer over my brother's shoulder into the alley.

There is nothing out there but the quiet shifting of sand. Nothing but the occasional gust of wind and the shuttered windows of our sleeping neighbors.

I sigh in relief and step around Darin.

That's when the Mask emerges from the darkness and walks through the gate.

II: *Elias*

The deserter will be dead before dawn.

His tracks zigzag like a struck deer's in the dust of Serra's catacombs. The tunnels have done him in. The hot air is too heavy down here, the smells of death and rot too close.

The tracks are more than an hour old by the time I see them. The guards have his scent now, poor bastard. If he's lucky, he'll die in the chase. If not . . .

Don't think about it. Hide the backpack. Get out of here.

Skulls crunch as I shove a pack loaded with food and water into a wall crypt. Helene would give me hell if she could see how I'm treating the dead. But then, if Helene finds out why I'm down here in the first place, desecration will be the least of her complaints.

She won't find out. Not until it's too late. Guilt pricks at me, but I shove it away. Helene's the strongest person I know. She'll be fine without me.

For what feels like the hundredth time, I look over my shoulder. The tunnel is quiet. The deserter led the

soldiers in the opposite direction. But safety's an illusion I know never to trust. I work quickly, piling bones back in front of the crypt to cover my trail, my senses primed for anything out of the ordinary.

One more day of this. One more day of paranoia and hiding and lying. One day until graduation. Then I'll be free.

As I rearrange the crypt's skulls, the hot air shifts like a bear waking from hibernation. The smells of grass and snow cut through the fetid breath of the tunnel. Two seconds is all I have to step away from the crypt and kneel, examining the ground as if there might be tracks here. Then she is at my back.

"Elias? What are you doing down here?"

"Didn't you hear? There's a deserter loose." I keep my attention fixed on the dusty floor. Beneath the silver mask that covers me from forehead to jaw, my face should be unreadable. But Helene Aquilla and I have been together nearly every day of the fourteen years we've been training at Blackcliff Military Academy; she can probably hear me thinking.

She comes around me silently, and I look up into

her eyes, as blue and pale as the warm waters of the southern islands. My mask sits atop my face, separate and foreign, hiding my features as well as my emotions. But Hel's mask clings to her like a silvery second skin, and I can see the slight furrow in her brow as she looks down at me. *Relax, Elias, I tell myself. You're just looking for a deserter.*

"He didn't come this way," Hel says. She runs a hand over her hair, braided, as always, into a tight, silver-blond crown. "Dex took an auxiliary company off the north watchtower and into the East Branch tunnel. You think they'll catch him?"

Aux soldiers, though not as highly trained as legionnaires and nothing compared to Masks, are still merciless hunters. "Of course they'll catch him." I fail to keep the bitterness out of my voice, and Helene gives me a hard look. "The cowardly scum," I add. "Anyway, why are you awake? You weren't on watch this morning." *I made sure of it.*

"Those bleeding drums." Helene looks around the tunnel. "Woke everyone up."

The drums. Of course. *Deserter*, they'd thundered

in the middle of the graveyard watch. *All active units to the walls.* Helene must have decided to join the hunt. Dex, my lieutenant, would have told her which direction I'd gone. He'd have thought nothing of it.

"I thought the deserter might have come this way." I turn from my hidden pack to look down another tunnel. "Guess I was wrong. I should catch up to Dex."

"Much as I hate to admit it, you're not usually wrong." Helene cocks her head and smiles at me. I feel that guilt again, wrenching as a fist to the gut. She'll be furious when she learns what I've done. She'll never forgive me. *Doesn't matter. You've decided. Can't turn back now.*

Hel traces the dust on the ground with a fair, practiced hand. "I've never even seen this tunnel before."

A drop of sweat crawls down my neck. I ignore it.

"It's hot, and it reeks," I say. "Like everything else down here." *Come on,* I want to add. But doing so would be like tattooing "I am up to no good" on my forehead. I keep quiet and lean against the catacomb wall, arms crossed.

The field of battle is my temple. I mentally chant a

saying my grandfather taught me the day he met me, when I was six. He insists it sharpens the mind the way a whetstone sharpens a blade. *The swordpoint is my priest. The dance of death is my prayer. The killing blow is my release.*

Helene peers at my blurred tracks, following them, somehow, to the crypt where I stowed my pack, to the skulls piled there. She's suspicious, and the air between us is suddenly tense.

Damn it.

I need to distract her. As she looks between me and the crypt, I run my gaze lazily down her body. She stands two inches shy of six feet—a half-foot shorter than me. She's the only female student at Blackcliff; in the black, close-fitting fatigues all students wear, her strong, slender form has always drawn admiring glances. Just not mine. We've been friends too long for that.

Come on, notice. Notice me leering and get mad about it.

When I meet her eyes, brazen as a sailor fresh into port, she opens her mouth, as if to rip into me. Then

she looks back at the crypt.

If she sees the pack and guesses what I'm up to, I'm done for. She might hate doing it, but Empire law would demand she report me, and Helene's never broken a law in her life.

"Elias—"

I prepare my lie. *Just wanted to get away for a couple of days, Hel. Needed some time to think. Didn't want to worry you.*

BOOM-BOOM-boom-BOOM.

The drums.

Without thought, I translate the disparate beats into the message they are meant to convey. *Deserter caught. All students report to central courtyard immediately.*

My stomach sinks. Some naïve part of me hoped the deserter would at least make it out of the city. "That didn't take long," I say. "We should go."

I make for the main tunnel. Helene follows, as I knew she would. She would stab herself in the eye before she disobeyed a direct order. Helene is a true Martial, more loyal to the Empire than to her own mother.

Like any good Mask-in-training, she takes Blackcliff's motto to heart: *Duty first, unto death.*

I wonder what she would say if she knew what I'd really been doing in the tunnels.

I wonder how she'd feel about my hatred for the Empire.

I wonder what she would do if she found out her best friend is planning to desert.

III: *Laia*

The Mask saunters through the gate, big hands loose at his sides. The strange metal of his name-sake clings to him from forehead to jaw like silver paint, revealing every feature of his face, from the thin eyebrows to the hard angles of his cheekbones. His copper-plated armor molds to his muscles, emphasizing the power in his body.

A passing wind billows his black cape, and he looks around the backyard like he's arrived at a garden party. His pale eyes find me, slide up my form, and settle on

my face with a reptile's flat regard.

"Aren't you a pretty one," he says.

I yank at the ragged hem of my shift, wishing desperately for the shapeless, ankle-length skirt I wear during the day. The Mask doesn't even twitch. Nothing in his face tells me what he's thinking. But I can guess.

Darin steps in front of me and glances at the fence, as if gauging the time it will take to reach it.

"I'm alone, boy." The Mask addresses Darin with all the emotion of a corpse. "The rest of the men are in your house. You can run if you like." He moves away from the gate. "But I insist you leave the girl."

Darin raises the knife.

"Chivalrous of you," the Mask says.

Then he strikes, a flash of copper and silver lighting out of an empty sky. In the time it takes me to gasp, the Mask has shoved my brother's face into the sandy ground and pinned his writhing body with a knee. Nan's knife falls to the dirt.

A scream erupts from me, lonely in the still summer night. Seconds later, a scimpoint pricks my throat.

I didn't even see the Mask draw the weapon.

"Quiet," he says. "Arms up. Now get inside."

The Mask uses one hand to yank Darin up by the neck and the other to prod me on with his scim. My brother limps, face bloodied, eyes dazed. When he struggles, a fish on a hook, the Mask tightens his grip.

The back door of the house opens, and a red-caped legionnaire comes out.

"The house is secure, Commander."

The Mask shoves Darin at the soldier. "Bind him up. He's strong."

Then he grabs me by the hair, twisting until I cry out. "Mmm." He bends his head to my ear, and I cringe, my terror caught in my throat. "I've always loved dark-haired girls."

I wonder if he has a sister, a wife, a woman. But it wouldn't matter if he did. To him, I'm not someone's family. I'm just a thing to be subdued, used, and discarded. The Mask drags me down the hallway to the front room as casually as a hunter drags his kill. *Fight*, I tell myself. *Fight*. But as if he senses my pathetic at-

tempts at bravery, his hand squeezes, and pain lances through my skull. I sag and let him pull me along.

Legionnaires stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the front room amid upturned furniture and broken bottles of jam. *Trader won't get anything now.* So many days spent over steaming kettles, my hair and skin smelling of apricot and cinnamon. So many jars, steamed and dried, filled and sealed. Useless. All useless.

The lamps are lit, and Nan and Pop kneel in the middle of the floor, their hands bound behind their backs. The soldier holding Darin shoves him to the ground beside them.

“Shall I tie up the girl, sir?” Another soldier fingers the rope at his belt, but the Mask leaves me between two burly legionnaires.

“She’s not going to cause any trouble.” He stabs at me with those eyes. “Are you?” I shake my head and shrink back, hating myself for being such a coward. I reach for my mother’s tarnished armlet, wrapped around my bicep, and touch the familiar pattern for strength. I find none. Mother would have fought.

She'd have died rather than face this humiliation. But I can't make myself move. My fear has ensnared me.

A legionnaire enters the room, his face more than a little nervous. "It's not here, Commander."

The Mask looks down at my brother. "Where's the sketchbook?"

Darin stares straight ahead, silent. His breath is low and steady, and he doesn't seem dazed anymore. In fact, he's almost composed.

The Mask gestures, a small movement. One of the legionnaires lifts Nan by her neck and slams her frail body against a wall. Nan bites her lip, her eyes sparkling blue. Darin tries to rise, but another soldier forces him down.

The Mask scoops up a shard of glass from one of the broken jars. His tongue flickers out like a snake's as he tastes the jam.

"Shame it's all gone to waste." He caresses Nan's face with the edge of the shard. "You must have been beautiful once. Such eyes." He turns to Darin. "Shall I carve them out of her?"

“It’s outside the small bedroom window. In the hedge.” I can’t manage more than a whisper, but the soldiers hear. The Mask nods, and one of the legionnaires disappears into the hallway. Darin doesn’t look at me, but I feel his dismay. *Why did you tell me to hide it*, I want to cry out. *Why did you bring the cursed thing home?*

The legionnaire returns with the book. For unending seconds, the only sound in the room is the rustling of pages as the Mask flips through the sketches. If the rest of the book is anything like the page I found, I know what the Mask will see: Martial knives, swords, scabbards, forges, formulas, instructions—things no Scholar should know of, let alone recreate on paper.

“How did you get into the Weapons Quarter, boy?” The Mask looks up from the book. “Has the Resistance been bribing some Plebeian drudge to sneak you in?”

I stifle a sob. Half of me is relieved Darin’s no traitor. The other half wants to rage at him for being such a fool. Association with the Scholar’s Resistance carries a death sentence.

“I got myself in,” my brother says. “The Resistance had nothing to do with it.”

“You were seen entering the catacombs last night after curfew” —the Mask almost sounds bored— “in the company of known Scholar rebels.”

“Last night, he was home well before curfew,” Pop speaks up, and it is strange to hear my grandfather lie. But it makes no difference. The Mask’s eyes are for my brother alone. The man doesn’t blink as he reads Darin’s face the way I’d read a book.

“Those rebels were taken into custody today,” the Mask says. “One of them gave up your name before he died. What were you doing with them?”

“They followed me.” Darin sounds so calm. Like he’s done this before. Like he’s not afraid at all. “I’d never met them before.”

“And yet they knew of your book here. Told me all about it. How did they learn of it? What did they want from you?”

“I don’t know.”

The Mask presses the shard of glass deep into the

soft skin below Nan's eye, and her nostrils flare. A trickle of blood traces a wrinkle down her face.

Darin draws a sharp breath, the only sign of strain. "They asked for my sketchbook," he says. "I said no. I swear it."

"And their hideout?"

"I didn't see. They blindfolded me. We were in the catacombs."

"*Where* in the catacombs?"

"I didn't see. They blindfolded me."

The Mask eyes my brother for a long moment. I don't know how Darin can remain unruffled beneath that gaze.

"You're prepared for this." The smallest bit of surprise creeps into the Mask's voice. "Straight back. Deep breathing. Same answers to different questions. Who trained you, boy?"

When Darin doesn't answer, the Mask shrugs. "A few weeks in prison will loosen your tongue." Nan and I exchange a frightened glance. If Darin ends up in a Martial prison, we'll never see him again. He'll spend

weeks in interrogation, and after that they'll either sell him as a slave or kill him.

"He's just a boy," Pop speaks slowly, as if to an angry patient. "Please—"

Steel flashes, and Pop drops like a stone. The Mask moves so swiftly that I don't understand what he has done. Not until Nan rushes forward. Not until she lets out a shrill keening, a shaft of pure pain that brings me to my knees.

Pop. Skies, not Pop. A dozen vows sear themselves into my mind. I'll never disobey again, I'll never do anything wrong, I'll never complain about my work, if only Pop lives.

But Nan tears her hair and screams, and if Pop was alive, he'd never let her go on like that. He wouldn't have been able to bear it. Darin's calm is sheared away as if by a scythe, his face blanched with a horror I feel down to my bones.

Nan stumbles to her feet and takes one tottering step toward the Mask. He reaches out to her, as if to put his hand on her shoulder. The last thing I see

in my grandmother's eyes is terror. Then the Mask's gauntleted wrist flashes once, leaving a thin red line across Nan's throat, a line that grows wider and redder as she falls.

Her body hits the floor with a thud, her eyes still open and shining with tears as blood pours from her neck and into the rug we knotted together last winter.

"Sir," one of the legionnaires says. "An hour until dawn."

"Get the boy out of here." The Mask doesn't give Nan a second glance. "And burn this place down."

He turns to me then, and I wish I could fade like a shadow into the wall behind me. I wish for it harder than I've ever wished for anything, knowing all the while how foolish it is. The soldiers flanking me grin at each other as the Mask takes a slow step in my direction. He holds my gaze as if he can smell my fear, a cobra enthralled by its prey.

No, please, no. Disappear, I want to disappear.

The Mask blinks, some foreign emotion flickering across his eyes—surprise or shock, I can't tell. It doesn't matter. Because in that moment, Darin leaps up from

the floor. While I cowered, he loosened his bindings. His hands stretch out like claws as he lunges for the Mask's throat. His rage lends him a lion's strength, and for a second he is every inch our mother, honey hair glowing, eyes blazing, mouth twisted in a feral snarl.

The Mask backs into the blood pooled near Nan's head, and Darin is on him, knocking him to the ground, raining down blows. The legionnaires stand frozen in disbelief and then come to their senses, surging forward, shouting and swearing. Darin pulls a dagger free from the Mask's belt before the legionnaires tackle him.

"Laia!" my brother shouts. "Run—"

Don't run, Laia. Help him. Fight.

But I think of the Mask's cold regard, of the violence in his eyes. *I've always loved dark-haired girls.* He will rape me. Then he will kill me.

I shudder and back into the hallway. No one stops me. No one notices.

"Laia!" Darin cries out, sounding like I've never heard him. Frantic. Trapped. He told me to run, but if I screamed like that, he would come. He would never

leave me. I stop.

Help him, Laia, a voice orders in my head. Move.

And another voice, more insistent, more powerful.

You can't save him. Do what he says. Run.

Flame flickers at the edge of my vision, and I smell smoke. One of the legionnaires has started torching the house. In minutes, fire will consume it.

“Bind him properly this time and get him into an interrogation cell.” The Mask removes himself from the fray, rubbing his jaw. When he sees me backing down the hallway, he goes strangely still. Reluctantly, I meet his eyes, and he tilts his head.

“Run, little girl,” he says.

My brother is still fighting, and his screams slice right through me. I know then that I will hear them over and over again, echoing in every hour of every day until I am dead or I make it right. I know it.

And still, I run.

»»»»

The cramped streets and dusty markets of the Scholar's Quarter blur past me like the land-

scape of a nightmare. With each step, part of my brain shouts at me to turn around, to go back, to help Darin. With each step, it becomes less likely, until it isn't a possibility at all, until the only word I can think is *run*.

The soldiers come after me, but I've grown up among the squat, mud-brick houses of the Quarter, and I lose my pursuers quickly.

Dawn breaks, and my panicked run turns to a stumble as I wander from alley to alley. Where do I go? What do I do? I need a plan, but I don't know where to start. Who can offer me help or comfort? My neighbors will turn me away, fearing for their own lives. My family is dead or imprisoned. My best friend, Zara, disappeared in a raid last year, and my other friends have their own troubles.

I'm alone.

As dawn breaks, I find myself in an empty building deep in the oldest part of the Quarter. The gutted structure crouches like a wounded animal amid a labyrinth of crumbling dwellings. The stench of refuse

taints the air.

I huddle in the corner of the room. My hair has slipped free of its braid and lays in hopeless tangles. The red stitches along the hem of my shift are ripped, the bright yarn limp. Nan sewed those hems for my seventeenth year-fall, to brighten up my otherwise drab clothing. It was one of the few gifts she could afford.

Now she's dead. Like Pop. Like my parents and sister, long ago.

And Darin. Taken. Dragged to an interrogation cell where the Martials will do who-knows-what to him.

Life is made of so many moments that mean nothing. Then one day, a single moment comes along to define every second that comes after. The moment Darin called out—that was such a moment. It was a test of courage, of strength. And I failed it.

Laia! Run!

Why did I listen to him? I should have stayed. I should have done something. I moan and grasp my head. I keep hearing him. Where is he now? Have

they begun the interrogation? He'll wonder what happened to me. He'll wonder how his sister could have left him.

A flicker of furtive movement in the shadows catches my attention, and the hair on my nape rises. A rat? A crow? The shadows shift, and within them, two malevolent eyes flash. More sets of eyes join the first, baleful and slitted.

Hallucinations, I hear Pop in my head, making a diagnosis. *A symptom of shock.*

Hallucinations or not, the shadows look real. Their eyes glow with the fire of miniature suns, and they circle me like hyenas, growing bolder with each pass.

"We saw," they hiss. "We know your weakness. He'll die because of you."

"No," I whisper. But they are right, these shadows. I left Darin. I abandoned him. The fact that he told me to go doesn't matter. How could I have been so cowardly?

I grasp my mother's armlet, but touching it makes me feel worse. Mother would have outfoxed the Mask.

Somehow, she'd have saved Darin and Nan and Pop.

Even Nan was braver than me. Nan, with her frail body and burning eyes. Her backbone of steel. Mother inherited Nan's fire, and after her, Darin.

But not me.

Run, little girl.

The shadows inch closer, and I close my eyes against them, hoping they'll disappear. I grasp at the thoughts ricocheting through my mind, trying to corral them.

Distantly, I hear shouts and the thud of boots. If the soldiers are still looking for me, I'm not safe here.

Maybe I should let them find me and do what they will. I abandoned my blood. I deserve punishment.

But the same instinct that urged me to escape the Mask in the first place drives me to my feet. I head into the streets, losing myself in the thickening morning crowds. A few of my fellow Scholars look twice at me, some with wariness, others with sympathy. But most don't look at all. It makes me wonder how many times I walked right past someone in these streets who was

running, someone who had just had their whole world ripped from them.

I stop to rest in an alley slick with sewage. Thick black smoke curls up from the other side of the Quarter, paling as it rises into the hot sky. My home, burning. Nan's jams, Pop's medicines, Darin's drawings, my books, gone. Everything I am. Gone.

Not everything, Laia. Not Darin.

A grate squats in the center of the alley, just a few feet away from me. Like all grates in the Quarter, it leads down into the Serra's catacombs: home to skeletons, ghosts, rats, thieves . . . and possibly the Scholar's Resistance.

Had Darin been spying for them? Had the Resistance gotten him into the Weapons Quarter? Despite what my brother told the Mask, it's the only answer that makes sense. Rumor has it that the Resistance fighters have been getting bolder, recruiting not just Scholars, but Mariners, from the free country of Marinn, to the north, and Tribesmen, whose desert territory is an Empire protectorate.

Pop and Nan never spoke of the Resistance in front of me. But late at night, I would hear them murmur of how the rebels freed Scholar prisoners while striking out at the Martials. Of how fighters raided the caravans of the Martial merchant class, the Mercators, and assassinated members of their upper class, the Illustrians. Only the rebels stand up to the Martials. Elusive as they are, they are the only weapon the Scholars have. If anyone can get near the forges, it's them.

The Resistance, I realize, might help me. My home was raided and burned to the ground, my family killed because two of the rebels gave Darin's name to the Empire. If I can find the Resistance and explain what happened, maybe they can help me break Darin free from prison — not just because they owe me, but because they live by *Izzat*, a code of honor as old as the Scholar people. The rebel leaders are the best of the Scholars, the bravest. My parents taught me that before the Empire killed them. If I ask for aid, the Resistance won't turn me away.

I step toward the grate.

I've never been in Serra's catacombs. They snake beneath the entire city, hundreds of miles of tunnels and caverns, some packed with centuries' worth of bones. No one uses the crypts for burial anymore, and even the Empire hasn't mapped out the catacombs entirely. If the Empire, with all its might, can't hunt out the rebels, then how will I find them?

You won't stop until you do. I lift the grate and stare into the black hole below. I have to go down there. I have to find the Resistance. Because if I don't, my brother doesn't stand a chance. If I don't find the fighters and get them to help, I'll never see Darin again.

IV: Elias

By the time Helene and I reach Blackcliff's bell-tower, nearly all of the school's three thousand students have formed up. Dawn's an hour away, but I don't see a single sleepy eye. Instead, an eager buzz runs through the crowd. The last time someone deserted, the courtyard was covered in frost.

Every student knows what's coming. I clench and unclench my fists. I don't want to watch this. Like all Blackcliff students, I came to the school at the age of six, and in the fourteen years since, I've witnessed punishments thousands of times. My own back is a map of the school's brutality. But deserters are always the worst.

My body is tight as a spring, but I flatten my gaze and keep my expression emotionless. Blackcliff's subject masters, the Centurions, will be watching. Drawing their ire when I'm so close to escaping would be unforgivably stupid.

Helene and I walk past the youngest students, four classes of maskless Yearlings, who will have the clearest view of the carnage. The smallest are barely seven. The biggest, nearly eleven.

The Yearlings look down as we pass; we are upperclassmen, and they are forbidden from even addressing us. They stand poker-straight, scims hanging at precise 45-degree angles on their backs, boots spit-shined, faces blank as stone. By now, even the youngest Yearlings have learned Blackcliff's most essential lessons: Obey,

conform, and keep your mouth shut.

Behind the Yearlings sits an empty space in honor of Blackcliff's second tier of students, called Fivers because so many die in their fifth year. At age eleven, the Centurions throw us out of Blackcliff and into the wilds of the Empire without clothes, food, or weaponry, to survive as best as we can for four years. The remaining Fivers return to Blackcliff, receive their masks, and spend another four years as Cadets and then two more years as Skulls. Hel and I are Senior Skulls—just completing our last year of training.

The Centurions monitor us from beneath the arches that line the courtyard, hands on their whips as they await the arrival of Blackcliff's commandant. They stand as still as statues, their masks long since melded to their features, any semblance of emotion a distant memory.

I put a hand to my own mask, wishing I could rip it off, even for a minute. Like my classmates, I received the mask on my first day as a Cadet, when I was fourteen. Unlike the rest of the students—and much to

Helene's concern—the smooth liquid silver hasn't dissolved into my skin like it's supposed to. Probably because I take the damned thing off whenever I'm alone.

I've hated the mask since the day an Augur—an Empire holy man—handed it to me in a velvet-lined box. I hate the way it gloms on to me like some kind of parasite. I hate the way it presses into my face, molding itself to my skin.

I'm the only student whose mask hasn't melded to him yet—something my enemies enjoy pointing out. But lately, the mask has started fighting back, forcing the melding process by digging tiny filaments into the back of my neck. It makes my skin crawl, makes me feel like I'm not myself anymore. Like I'll never be myself again.

“Veturius.” Hel's lanky, sandy-haired platoon lieutenant, Demetrius, calls out to me as we take our spots with the other Senior Skulls. “Who is it? Who's the deserter?”

“I don't know. Dex and the auxes brought him in.” I

look around for my lieutenant, but he hasn't arrived yet.

"I hear it's a Yearling." Demetrius stares at a hunk of wood poking out of the blood-browed cobbles at the base of the belltower. The whipping post. "An older one. A fourth-year."

Helene and I exchange a look. Demetrius's little brother also tried to desert in his fourth year at Blackcliff, when he was only ten. He lasted three hours outside the gates before the legionnaires brought him in to face the Commandant—longer than most.

"Maybe it was a Skull." Helene scans the ranks of older students, trying to see if anyone is missing.

"Maybe it was Marcus," Faris, a member of my battle platoon who towers over the rest of us, says, grinning, his blond hair popping up in an unruly cowlick. "Or Zak."

No such luck. Marcus, dark-skinned and yellow-eyed, stands at the front of our ranks with his twin, Zak: second-born, shorter and lighter, but just as evil. The Snake and the Toad, Hel calls them.

Zak's mask has yet to attach fully around his eyes,

but Marcus's clings tightly, having joined with him so completely that all of his features—even the thick slant of his eyebrows—are clearly visible beneath it. If Marcus tried to remove his mask now, he'd take off half his face with it. Which would be an improvement.

As if he senses her glance, Marcus turns and looks Helene over with a predatory gaze of ownership that makes my hands itch to strangle him.

Nothing out of the ordinary, I remind myself. Nothing to make you stand out.

I force myself to look away. Attacking Marcus in front of the entire school would definitely qualify as out of the ordinary.

Helene notices Marcus's leer. Her hands ball into fists at her sides, but before she can teach the Snake a lesson, the sergeant-at-arms marches into the courtyard.

“ATTENTION.”

Three thousand bodies swing forward, three thousand pairs of boots snap together, three thousand backs jerk as if yanked straight by a puppeteer's hand. In the

ensuing silence, you could hear a tear drop.

But we don't hear the Commandant of Blackcliff Military Academy approach; we feel her, the way you feel a storm coming. She moves silently, emerging from the arches like a fair-haired jungle cat from the underbrush. She wears all black, from her tight-fitting uniform jacket to her steel-toed boots. Her blonde hair is pulled, as always, into a stiff knot at her neck.

She's the only living female Mask—or will be until Helene graduates tomorrow. But unlike Helene, the Commandant exudes a deathly chill, as if her gray eyes and cut-glass features were carved from the underbelly of a glacier.

“Bring the accused,” she says.

A pair of legionnaires march out from behind the belltower, dragging a small, limp form. Beside me, Demetrius tenses. The rumors were right—the deserter's a Fourth-Yearling, no older than ten. Blood drips down his face, blending into the collar of his black fatigues. When the soldiers dump him before the Commandant, he doesn't move.

The Commandant's silver face reveals nothing as she looks down at the Yearling. But her hand strays toward the spiked riding crop at her belt, fashioned out of bruise-black ironwood. She doesn't remove it. Not yet.

"Fourth-Yearling Falconius Barrius." Her voice carries, though it's soft, almost gentle. "You abandoned your post at Blackcliff with no intention of returning. Explain yourself."

"No explanation, Commandant, sir." He mouths the words we've all said to the Commandant a hundred times, the only words you can say at Blackcliff when you've screwed up utterly.

It's a trial to keep my face blank, to drive emotion from my eyes. Barrius is about to be punished for the crime I'll be committing in less than thirty-six hours. It could be me up there in two days. Bloodied. Broken.

"Let us ask your peers their opinion." The Commandant turns her gaze on us, and it's like being blasted by a frigid mountain wind. "Is Yearling Barrius guilty of treason?"

"Yes, sir!" The shout shakes the flagstones, rabid in

its ferocity.

“Legionnaires,” the Commandant says. “Take him to the post.”

The resulting roar from the students jerks Barrius out of his stupor, and as the legionnaires tie him to the whipping post, he writhes and bucks.

His fellow Fourth-Yearlings, the same boys he fought and sweated and suffered with for years, thump the flagstones with their boots and pump their fists in the air. In the row of Senior Skulls in front of me, Marcus shouts his approval, his eyes lit with unholy joy. He stares at the Commandant with a reverence reserved for deities.

I feel eyes on me. To my left, one of the Centurions is watching. *Nothing out of the ordinary.* I lift my fist and cheer with the rest of them, hating myself.

The Commandant draws her crop, caressing it like a lover. Then she brings it whistling down onto Barrius’s back. His gasp echoes through the courtyard, and every student falls silent, united in a shared, if brief, moment of pity. Blackcliff’s rules are so numerous that

it's impossible not to break them at least a few times. We've all been tied to that post before. We've all felt the bite of the Commandant's crop.

The quiet doesn't last. Barrius screams, and the students howl in response, flinging jeers at him. Marcus is loudest of all, leaning forward, practically spitting in excitement. Faris rumbles his approval. Even Demetrius manages a shout or two, his green eyes flat and distant as if he is somewhere else entirely. Beside me, Helene cheers, but there's no joy in her expression, only a stern sadness. The rules of Blackcliff demand that she voice her anger at the deserter's betrayal. So she does.

The Commandant seems indifferent to the clamor, fixated as she is on her work. Her arm rises and falls with a dancer's grace. She circles Barrius as his skinny limbs begin to seize, pausing between each lash, no doubt pondering how she can make the next one more painful than the last.

After twenty-five lashes, she takes him by his limp stalk of a neck and turns him around. "Face them," she says. "Face the men you've betrayed."

Barrius's eyes beseech the courtyard, seeking out anyone willing to offer him a shred of pity. He should have known better. His gaze collapses to the flagstones.

The cheers continue, and the crop comes down again. And again. Barrius falls to the white stones, the pool of blood around him spreading rapidly. His eyes flutter. I hope his mind is gone. I hope he can't feel it anymore.

I make myself watch. *This is why you're leaving, Elias. So you're never a part of this again.*

A gurgling moan trickles from Barrius's mouth. The Commandant drops her arm, and the courtyard is silent. I see the deserter breathing. In once. Out. And then nothing. No one cheers. Dawn breaks, the sun's rays tracing the sky above Blackcliff's ebony belltower like bloodied fingers, tingeing everyone in the courtyard a lurid red.

The Commandant wipes her crop on Barrius's fatigues before returning it to her belt. "Take him to the dunes," she orders the legionnaires. "For the scavengers." Then she surveys the rest of us.

“Duty first, unto death. If you betray the Empire, you will be caught, and you will pay. Dismissed.”

The lines of students dissolve. Dex, who brought the deserter in, slips away quietly, his darkly handsome face slightly sick. Faris lumbers after, no doubt to clap Dex on the back and suggest he forget his troubles at a brothel. Demetrius stalks off alone, and I know he’s remembering that day two years ago when he was forced to watch his little brother die just like Barrius. He won’t be fit to speak with for hours. The other students drain out of the courtyard quickly, still discussing the whipping.

“—only thirty lashes, what a weakling—”

“—did you hear him gasping, like a scared girl—”

“Elias.” Helene’s voice is soft, as is the touch of her hand on my arm. “Come on. The Commandant will see you.”

She’s right. Everyone is walking away. I should too. I can’t do it.

No one looks at Barrius’s bloody remains. He is a traitor. He is nothing. But someone should stay.

Someone should mourn him, even if for a moment.

“Elias,” Helene says, urgent now. “Move. She’ll see you.”

“I need a minute,” I reply. “You go on.”

She wants to argue with me, but her presence is conspicuous, and I’m not budging. She leaves with a last backward glance. When she’s gone, I look up to see the Commandant watching me.

We lock eyes across the long courtyard, and I am struck for the hundredth time at how different we are. I have black hair, she has blonde. My skin glows golden brown, and hers is chalk-white. Her mouth is ever disapproving, while I look amused even when I’m not. I am broad-shouldered and well over six feet, while she is smaller than a Scholar woman, even, with a deceptively willowy form.

But anyone who sees us standing side by side can tell what she is to me. My mother gave me her high cheekbones and pale gray eyes. She gave me the ruthless instinct and speed that make me the best student Blackcliff has seen in two decades.

Mother. It's not the right word. *Mother* evokes warmth and love and sweetness. Not abandonment in the Tribal desert hours after birth. Not years of silence and implacable hatred.

She's taught me many things, this woman who bore me. Control is one of them. I tamp down my fury and disgust, emptying myself of all feeling. She frowns, a slight twist of her mouth, and raises a hand to her neck, her fingers following the whorls of a strange blue tattoo poking out of her collar.

I expect her to approach and demand to know why I'm still here, why I challenge her with my stare. She doesn't. Instead, she watches me for a moment longer before turning and disappearing beneath the arches.

The belltower tolls six, and the drums thud. *All students report to mess.* At the foot of the tower, the legionnaires heave up what's left of Barrius and carry him away.

The courtyard stands silent, empty except for me staring at a puddle of blood where a boy once stood, chilled by the knowledge that if I'm not careful, I'll end up just like him.

Interior Chinatown

Charles Yu

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INTERIOR CHINATOWN



CHARLES YU



Pantheon Books, New York

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INT. GOLDEN PALACE

Ever since you were a boy, you've dreamt of being Kung Fu Guy.

You are still not Kung Fu Guy.

You are currently Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy. Your kung fu is B, B-plus on a good day, and Sifu once proclaimed your drunken monkey to be nearly at a level of competence that he could perhaps at some point in the future imagine not being completely embarrassed of you. Which, if you know him, well, that's a pretty big deal.

To be honest though it can sometimes be hard to tell with Sifu, who is famously inscrutable. If you could only show him what you've become. All you want is for him to make that face, the one that looks like internal distress possibly of a gastrointestinal nature but actually indicates something closer to Deeply Repressed Secret Pride Honorable Father Has for His Young but Promising Son; means Deliciously Bittersweet Pain That Comes from Knowing Honorable Teacher Is No Longer Needed. That's how you see it in your head: he would make that face, smile, you'd smile back. Credits roll and you'd walk off, arm in arm, to the horizon.

OLD ASIAN MAN

These days he is mostly Old Asian Man. No longer Sifu, with the pants and the muscles and the look

in his eye. All of that is gone now, but when did it happen? Over years and overnight.

The day you first noticed. You'd shown up a few minutes early for weekly lesson. Maybe that's what threw him off. When he answered the door, it took him a moment to recognize you. Two seconds, or twenty, a frozen eternity—then, as he regained himself, his familiar scowl, barking your name

WILLIS WU!

half-exclamation, half-confirmation, as if verifying for both you and himself that he hadn't forgotten. Willis Wu, he said again, well come on, what are you doing, don't just stand there in the doorway like a dum-dum, come in, son, let's get started.

He was fine for the rest of the day, mostly, but you couldn't stop thinking about the look he gave you, oblivion or terror, and for the first time you noticed the mess his room had become, not unusual for any other man his age living alone, but for Sifu, who taught and valued order and simplicity in all things, to have allowed his dwelling to reach this state of disorganization should have been a warning sign to all. Maybe not the first, but the first one that came to your attention.

Fatty Choy went around telling everyone that Sifu was on food stamps, saying how gullible can you be ("You idiots think being Wized Chinaman pays well? Are you crazy? Why do you think he fishes bottles and cans out of the trash?") but no one wanted to believe it. At least in public.

In private, the thought did occur. Sifu never had the lights on. Said it was to train the senses. He saved everything: disposable chopsticks, free glossy calendars from East-West Bank ("good for wrapping fish or fruit"), packets of soy sauce and chili paste from the dollar Chinese down the street. He'd patched his old fake leather couch so many times there were cracks on the patches. Which of course he also patched. The Formica two-top he ate on was the first and only kitchen table he'd ever bought, purchased for seven dollars and fifty cents from the salvage bin at the old restaurant supply warehouse down on Jackson and Eighth, that place long gone now (converted to INT. RAVE/GRIMY CLUB SCENE) but the table still there in the kitchen. An artifact of the previous century, it had worn down to a smoothness so comforting and cool it felt soft to the touch, the patterns of use, hundreds, thousands of meals together in the corner of that small, low-ceilinged room, the surface preserving the teachings of Sifu, wisdom over time recorded in the warp and wear, in the markings of the modest table itself. Come to think of it, Fatty Choy, despite the fact that he was and had always been a total gasbag, a mostly insufferable close-talking blowhard (made all the more insufferable by the fact that he was not infrequently right about things), was simply stating what you all knew but didn't want to admit: Sifu had gotten old.

It was easy to lie to yourself about it. Although naively you believed he had by some miracle of genetics and sheer follicular willpower managed

to reach his seventh decade without a single hair turning gray, in hindsight you remember once seeing an empty box of natural seaweed coloring in his wastebasket, Sifu emerging from his room with the occasional smear where he'd gotten a little careless and ended up painting the top edge of his forehead a swath of kelpish green.

And even if he could still break a cinder block with three fingers, that was nothing compared to back in the day, his younger self, when he could do it with just one—a single powerful blow of any digit. You pick! You couldn't bear to watch, peeking through your fingers when you were little, and as you got older still wincing in expectation of painful failure. But young Sifu never failed. He always found the necessary reserves of qi, was able to summon forth from whatever intangible reservoir the required force to smash through it, and everyone gathered around would clap and shout their praise at the latest demonstration of Sifu's mind over matter, mental and physical, an impossible feat right there in the alley behind the kitchen in the middle of a Tuesday. At the sound of the exploding energy you would uncover your eyes and exhale with relief, proud and grateful that he had done it once again, hadn't mangled his hand, and also slightly ashamed by your lack of faith, when everyone else, the assembled friends and strangers, had never doubted him in the slightest.

Your earliest memories of him as a young dragon, a rising star, thick straight hair the color of night combed slowly and carefully straight back

in a lustrous wave. Forearms like steel barrels lifting you out of the makeshift playpen in the corner of the room and flying you around up above his head, almost crashing into the bed and the lamp and the ceiling as you laughed and laughed until your mother said *sio sim, sio sim*, that's enough, Ming, please, stop before he gets sick, and he'd do one more revolution before setting you down safely, your feet back on solid ground, the world still spinning.

Whether we admitted to it or not, and sometimes you did admit it to yourself, right before falling asleep, in the way thoughts like this come to you: your first, best, and only real master, the source of all your kung fu knowledge, was no longer himself. He'd aged out of his role and into the next one, his life force depleting with every exertion. Wisdom and power leaking from him with each passing day and night. He'd played his role for so long he'd lost himself in it, before some separation that happened gradually over decades and then you waking one day to feel it, some distance that had crept in overnight. Some formal space you could no longer cross.

He'd always be Your Father, but somehow was no longer your dad.

No longer running up walls, no more leaping from the curved roof eaves of the Bank of America pagoda. More often found nodding off during a meal, eaten alone, in front of the six o'clock news. Long after you'd graduated into an adult role, you still continued coming to him for these weekly lessons, but the lessons had turned into a

flimsy pretense layered atop their real purpose: your delivery of provisions on which your old man depended. A few groceries, toilet paper, his various prescriptions. Putting things out so they'd be easy for him to access, wiping the floor as best you could. There was only so much time. Checking for dampness on his mattress pad, changing it if necessary, picking up laundry, sweeping from his nightstand the accumulation of balled-up napkins enclosing clots of dried phlegm and blood. More napkins behind the nightstand and all around, a half-eaten pear under the Formica table, there since the day after your last visit, having dropped and rolled to a stop right in that very spot, left to slowly rot, the gentle descent into squalor not a function of sloth but simple, physical inability.

I'm sorry. I can't reach.

It's okay, Ba. I got it.

The apologies, the true sign—that this was not the man you once knew, a man who would never have uttered that word to his son, sorry, and in English, no less. Not because he thought himself infallible, but because of his belief that a family should never have to say sorry, or please, or thank you, for that matter, these things being redundant, being contradictory to the parent-son relationship, needing to remain unstated always, these things being the invisible fabric of what a family is.

You did what you could despite being generally ignored. Sifu-now-Old-Asian-Man having forgotten not just his kung fu technique but also his most loyal student, regarding you with a blank if slightly wary amiability, as one might endure an

overbearing but helpful stranger. Your relationship having turned into a pantomime, a series of gestures in a well-worn scene, played out again and again, any underlying feeling having long since been obviated by emotional muscle memory, learning how to make the right faces, strike the right poses, not out of apathy or lack of sincerity, rather a need to preserve what was left of his pride.

The trick was learning what not to say. To enter the theater of his dotage quietly, sit there in the dark and not ask him any question, however simple, that might cause momentary confusion, might turn your rote interactions into something too raw, remind yourselves or each other of what was happening here, the inversion of the relationship, the care and feeding, the brute fact of physical dependency: If you don't do this, he can't do it for himself. If you miss a week, he sits in the dark. Not that he'll die. Although there is always that possibility. But he'll be lonelier that day, hungrier. He'll lose something or drop something or break something and have to wait for you to call or come by. Staying in character avoided all of that, allowed you to prolong your respective roles for just a bit longer, and in a good week, when things were going along relatively well, you could get by, could walk through your blocking and lines, make it to the end of the day. But on bad days or if you'd stay too long, his patience or working memory would reach its limit, and he'd edge into a twilight distrust, fear in his eyes.

Even on the worst days, he never completely

forgot you for more than a minute or two—somehow in his paranoia you sensed he always knew that you were *someone* to him. You suspect that only made him more afraid of you, your presence a vague familiarity triggering in some deep part of his memory an inchoate, low-level anxiety, the son returning home, the lost son come to assert his right to challenge the father.

In the months since, he eventually settled into a new, diminished equilibrium, even began to work again, as Old Asian Cook or Old Asian Guy Smoking, which was rough, was a hard thing to see for anyone who'd known him back when. Known what he'd been capable of. A new role, a new phase of life, it could be a way of starting fresh, the slate wiped clean.

But the old parts are always underneath. Layers upon layers, accumulating. Which was the problem. No one in Chinatown able to separate the past from the present, always seeing in him (and in each other, in yourselves), all of his former incarnations, the characters he'd played in your minds long after the parts had ended.

In that way, Sifu had gotten this old without anyone noticing. Including your mother—deemed to have aged out of Asian Seductress, no longer Girl with the Almond Eyes, now Old Asian Woman—living down the hall, their marriage having entered its own dusky phase, bound for eternity but separate in life. The rationale being that she needed to continue to work in order to be able to support him and for that she needed a minimum amount of rest and peace of mind, all true, and that they

were better apart than together, also true. The reality being that they'd lost the plot somewhere along the way, their once great romance spun into a period piece, into an immigrant family story, and then into a story about two people trying to get by. And it was just that: getting by. Barely, and no more. Because they'd also, in the way old people often do, slipped gently into poverty. Also without anyone noticing.

Poor is relative, of course. None of you were rich or had any dreams of being rich or even knew anyone rich. But the widest gulf in the world is the distance between getting by and not quite getting by. Crossing that gap can happen in a hundred ways, almost all by accident. Bad day at work and/or kid has a fever and/or miss the bus and consequently ten minutes late to the audition which equals you don't get to play the part of Background Oriental with Downtrodden Face. Which equals, stretch the dollar that week, boil chicken bones twice for a watery soup, make the bottom of the bag of rice last another dinner or three.

Cross that gap and everything changes. Being on this side of it means that time becomes your enemy. You don't grind the day—the day grinds you. With the passing of every month your embarrassment compounds, accumulates with the inevitability of a simple arithmetic truth. X is less than Y , and there's nothing to be done about that. The daily mail bringing with it fresh dread or relief, but if the latter, only the most temporary kind, restarting the clock on the countdown to the next bill or past-due notice or collection agency call.

Sifu, like many others INT. CHINATOWN SRO, had without warning or complaint slid just under the line so quietly it was easy to minimize how painful it must have been. The pain of having once been young, with muscles, still able to work. To have lived an entire life of productivity, of self-sufficiency, having been a net giver, never a taker, never relying on others. To call oneself master, to hold oneself out as a source of expertise, to have had the courage and ability and discipline that added up to a meaningful, perhaps even noteworthy life, built over decades from nothing, and then at some point in that serious life, finding oneself searching for *calories*. Knowing what time of day the restaurant tosses its leftover steamed pork buns. Not in a position to turn down any food, however obtained, eyeing the markdown bins in the ninety-nine-cent store, full of dense, sugary bricks and slabs and disk-sized cookies, not food really, really only meant for children, something to fill the belly of a person who once took himself seriously. Buying this food without hesitation, necessity overcoming any shame in simply eating it, and not just eating it, swallowing it down more quickly than intended, a young man's dignity replaced by a newly acquired clumsiness, the hands and mouth and belly knowing what the heart and head had not yet come to terms with: hunger. Nothing like an empty stomach to remind you what you are.

To be fair, it wasn't as if anyone in Chinatown was in a great monetary position to be helping Sifu. Old Asian Woman did what she could, but as

work slowed down, had enough of a challenge trying to take care of herself. And you just starting out, contributing what you could manage, a bag of food or medicine, once in a while a piece of fish or meat. That's what you tell yourself anyway. The truth being that if each of you had done a little, together it might have been enough.

OLDER BROTHER

Some say that the person who should have helped the most, was in a position to help the most, having been Sifu's number-one-most-naturally-gifted-kung-fu-superstar-in-training-pupil all those years and thus having reaped the greatest benefit from Sifu's teachings, was Older Brother.

Not your actual older brother. Better. Everyone's Older Brother. The prodigy. The homecoming king. Unofficial mayor of the neighborhood. Guardian of Chinatown.

Once the heir apparent to Sifu, the two of them even starring together in a brief but notable project about father-and-son martial arts experts (Logline: When political considerations make conventional military tactics impossible, the government calls on a highly secretive elite special ops force—a father-son duo among the best hand-to-hand fighters in the world—in order to get the job done, Codename: TWIN DRAGONS).

Older Brother who never had to work his way up the ladder, never had to be Generic Asian Man. Older Brother who was born, bred, and trained to

be, and eventually did become, Kung Fu Guy, which meant, of course, making Kung Fu Guy money, which is good for your kind but still basically falls under the general category of secondary roles.

Older Brother.

Like Bruce Lee, but also completely different.

Lee being legendary, not mythical. Too real, too specific to be a myth, the particulars of his genius known and part of his ever-accumulating personal lore. Electromuscular stimulation. Ingesting huge quantities of royal jelly. And with his development of his own discipline, Jeet Kune Do, the creation of an entirely new fighting system and philosophical worldview. Bruce Lee was proof: not all Asian Men were doomed to a life of being Generic. If there was even one guy who had made it, it was at least theoretically possible for the rest.

But easy cases make bad law, and Bruce Lee proved too much. He was a living, breathing video game boss-level, a human cheat code, an idealized avatar of Asian-ness and awesomeness permanently set on Expert difficulty. Not a man so much as a personification, not a mortal so much as a deity on loan to you and your kind for a fixed period of time. A flame that burned for all yellow to understand, however briefly, what perfection was like.

Older Brother was the inverse.

Not a legend but a myth.

Or a whole bunch of myths, overlapping, redundant, contradictory. A mosaic of ideas, a

thousand and one puzzle pieces that teased you, let you see the edges of something, clusters here and there, just enough to keep hope alive that the next piece would be the one, the answer snapping into place, showing how it all fit together.

Bruce Lee was the guy you worshipped. Older Brother was the guy you dreamt of growing up to be.

BEGIN OLDER BROTHER AWESOMENESS MONTAGE:

—Older Brother always has the good hair, not the kind that goes straight up and then out at weird angles and with stupid cowlicks in the back and on the side and wherever else. Not the kind that makes you think of math club and pocket protectors. Older Brother was blessed, among other things, with the rare phenotype, the kind of Asian dude hair with a slight wave to it (but always in a tight fade), thick and black but with brown or even red highlights.

—Older Brother's kung fu is A-plus-plus, obviously, but he isn't limited to just kung fu. He can also mess around with Muay Thai, is proficient in a couple forms of judo, and is definitely down with Taekwondo (and its many strip mall variations). His Brazilian grappling is legit if you care to go to ground with him, but you shouldn't because in about eight seconds you'll be tapping the mat, asking him through tears of excruciating pain to please stop bending your arm that way.

-If you get Older Brother drunk enough (not that he ever really gets drunk, just sort of slightly faded, Older Brother's legendary tolerance for alcohol having been proven time and again in countless drinking games and late-night wagers, some fun, some not so fun) he will show you knife tricks that will leave you laughing and scared shitless at the same time and he will do it effortlessly, knife in one hand, beer in the other, his long hair looking cool.

-It's not clear if he can dunk (no one's ever seen him try) but he can definitely grab the rim and that alone is pretty impressive given that he's five eleven and three-quarters.

-Which, for the record, is the perfect height for an Asian dude. Tall enough for women to notice (even in heels! even White women!), tall enough to not get ignored by the bartender, but not so tall to get called Yao Ming and considered some kind of Mongolian freak.

-And if you get any ideas that you could take him in a bar fight or on the basketball court or anywhere else, you'll quickly find out the hard way what a bad idea that is. Guys don't want to fight him anyway—they call him Bruce ("Yo, yo, I've seen *Fists of Fury* like a hundred times"), or Jackie or Jet Li, and he's cool with it all, whatever the vibe, wherever it's coming from. Everyone admired his level of comfort, moving in and out of language and subculture, from

backroom poker game to dudes on the corner looking for trouble to the octogenarians playing Go or mahjong at the Benevolent Family Association. Older Brother's reach and influence was not limited to the Middle Kingdom and its ethnic diaspora, but extended into other neighboring domains: he could sing karaoke with the Japanese salarymen, could polish off two plates of ddukbokki slathered in a tangy, blood-red gochujang, wash it down with a bottle of milky soju, all while beating the pants off the K-town regulars at their own drinking games, dropping some of his passable Korean (mostly curse words) in the process.

—Older Brother was never in a gang, not even close, makes a point of not even being loosely affiliated with a triad or Wah Ching, yet somehow manages it so that those scary dudes are still cool with him. He gives them their distance and they do the same with him, a form of silent respect.

—On top of all this, Older Brother was a National Merit Scholar. 1570 on the SAT.

—Everyone has their own story about Older Brother.

“Man you don't even know. Last week I saw him at Jackson and Eleventh.”

“What was he doing?”

“Chin-ups on the cross bar of the traffic signal.”

“I saw him, too.”

"No you didn't."

"I did. He was doing them one-handed."

"No shit one-handed. OB doesn't mess around with regular chin-ups. Not like your weak sauce."

"You're weak sauce."

"Say that again. To my face."

"You're weak sauce."

"Shut up, idiots. Did one of you really see Older Brother?"

"Yeah. Like I said. Chin-ups. Did like fifty of them."

"More like seventy."

"With his left hand."

"He's left-handed, dumbass."

"Older Brother is left-handed? Come on. You're the dumbass, dumbass."

"He's ambidextrous. You're both dumbasses."

-That's pretty much how it goes with Older Brother stories piled on more stories, conflicting, combining, canceling each other out. In the end, you're not sure how much of it's real and how much is local lore, exploits that over the years have expanded, but in any case it doesn't matter. Even if Older Brother were not actually a real person, he would still be the most important character in some yet-to-be-conceived-story of Chinatown. Would still be real in everyone's minds and hearts, the mythical Asian American man, the ideal mix of assimilated and authentic. Plus, the bonus: a viable romantic lead. Older Brother is the guy who makes every kid in Chinatown want to be better,

taller, stronger, faster, more mainstream and somehow less at the same time. Makes every one of you want to be cooler than you're supposed to be, than you're allowed to be. Gives you permission to try.

—For a brief period during Older Brother's ascendancy, all felt right. What was happening was what was meant to happen. The chosen one, the best and brightest and most conventionally-handsome-by-Western-standards, he had worked his way up in the system, had reached his designated station of maximal achievement. All other Asian Men stood in his shadow, feeling anything was possible or, if not anything then at least something. Something was possible. You put your heads on pillows at night and went to sleep dreaming of what it would look like, to be part of the show, lie awake wondering how much higher Older Brother might rise within Black and White. What that would mean for the rest of you.

—And then you woke up one morning and it was over. The dream had ended. Older Brother was no longer Kung Fu Guy. The details secret, the official story that it just didn't work out. The upshot for all of you was: no more Kung Fu Guy. Somehow, the golden era of Older Brother was over, without warning or fanfare or any kind of reason, really. Or at least, no official reason. Unofficially, we understood. There was a ceiling. Always had been, always would be. Even for him. Even for our hero, there were

limits to the dream of assimilation, to how far any of you could make your way into the world of Black and White.

It was probably for the best. For him, personally anyway. Older Brother, despite all of his success, never seemed entirely comfortable with his preordained place in the hierarchy, was never totally down with the whole career track. Didn't see himself as a Kung Fu Guy. And he wasn't wrong. His kung fu was too pure, too special to be used the way that everyone knew it would be: flashy, stupid shit, the same moves everyone had seen a million times and yet still wanted him to trot out for every wedding and lunar new year celebration. Better that fame had never happened on him, to preserve his claim for posterity. Better to be a legend than a star.

END OLDER BROTHER AWESOMENESS MONTAGE