

The Me Inside of Me

By

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***Free*editorial** 

I felt the eyes of the bright lights glare at me as I walked past them. It was as if they were judging me by my every movement. Their white irises shined down harshly, illuminating the near-empty corridor. I felt a tingle develop at the bottom of my spine. It unpleasantly crawled its way up my back, and I let loose a shudder, promptly regaining my composure. My heeled boots made a steady ‘clack’ against the pristine metal floor as I walked. Those were the only sounds that could be heard. No one else was awake at three o’clock in the morning. They were all nestled up in their cozy mattresses with their soft pillows. I wished to be like them, but instead of a velvet smooth blanket, the chilly cold air of the hallways enveloped me instead. The sharp and signature smell of the hallway filled my nose and cinched my nostrils. I could almost taste the chlorine on my tongue. My palms remained sweaty no matter how many times I wiped them on the smooth leather of my uniform. ‘*Clack...clack...clack*’ My boots were normally quiet whenever I walked, but now they were the loudest item in the entire training camp. ‘*Clack, clack, clack*’ I picked up my pace so I could rid myself of the piercing stares from the intense lights that lit the corridor. ‘*Clack, Clack, Clack*’ I could hear my footsteps getting louder, and louder as I broke out into a jog. My palms ached and my shoulders felt uncomfortably heavy. My breathing became jagged and uneven, whilst inhaling through my nose hurt like a sharp sting from the strong smell of chlorine mixed with the biting cold air. Sweat accumulated on my forehead, the back of my neck, my palms and my hairline. Panic set in as I

tried to make it out from underneath the watchful eye of the corridor lights. The quietness of being alone at night made the hair on my arms stand on end. I felt my chest heave up and down, as I started to get a headache. I stopped walking. My head was dizzy and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. All the while, the lights just stared at me; uncaring, waiting for me to make a move. Disregarding all manners, I broke out into a sprint and ran past hallways lined with bedrooms full of sleeping patrons.

I ran, and ran, and I didn't stop. The cold air slapped my face; meanwhile everything around me had become a silvery blur. That was all I saw. White floors, white walls, white doors and white lights. My hair was blown out of my face as I raced down the hall. I didn't stop even though my legs started to ache. I could feel the muscles in my calf cramp up; my thighs fared no better either. They burned as if they'd been set on fire. Then, I turned the corner, and stopped. I stood there, catching my breath, and let my legs take a break. As I stood rooted there, I glowered down the final passageway that led me to my ultimate destination. Forcing my feet to move again, I put one foot in front of the other leisurely; there was a significant contrast in pace from my previous mad dash. I strolled through the empty hall. Unlike all those before it, this one was entirely bare. All of the lights were in the exact same positions, but these ones shined a little less powerfully. The walls were the same spotless white; however in this corridor, there were no bedrooms behind the walls. Everything was completely bare, except for the giant double doors at the end of the hallway. As I got closer, they grew bigger, and bigger. I might've come across as cool and calm, but on the inside, it felt as if I was still running down those freezing cold, long and empty pathways that stretched on for miles. My mind

was in a daze, and my insides churned at all the possibilities that could've awaited me behind those double doors. I finally stopped in front of them. They towered over my petite stature menacingly. They were the entrance to the most feared room on the entire base camp. This entire corridor was dreaded by everyone that lived here. The doors were painted the darkest black that many humans had never even seen. Meant to represent his authoritative power on these grounds, the man behind them was feared and loved by all. Yet although dreaded, hardly anyone was ever called down to this stretch of the building. Not many people have ever been down here more than once. Mainly because a call to get your ass down here didn't always promise good news. A call to this room meant certain doom for your life on the base camp.

How lucky was I to be called down here at three o'clock in the morning?

I craned my neck upwards to take a gander at where the doors reached its highest peak. It was scarily huge, especially to my small height of only five foot two. Forcing myself to remain calm, I gave three short raps with my knuckles against the solid, oak entrance. A soft, yet firm voice called out from inside. "Come in."

I composed myself and regulated my breathing in an attempt to look professional. Grasping the metal door handle, I pushed open one of the doors with all the strength in my arms. Leaving the door ajar, I cautiously stepped into the dimly lit office. The room was large, but all the furniture and organized piles of messes made the space feel smaller than it actually was. The walls were painted a solid silver. The colour gave off an impressive aura, yet there was a refined simplicity to it all that made everything look that much

more regal. Like the Millennium Falcon. To the right, there was a couch seated against the wall. It was pitch black, like the doors, and was made from very soft leather. To my left, there were several bookshelves and cabinets lined up in a row, directly opposite the couch. Right at the entrance, there was a small, round table where a coffee pot resided. You had to be careful when you walked in, or you just might've bumped into it. Some people didn't even know it was there.

At the very end of the room, there was a set of French doors that led out onto a balcony. The view from the balcony overlooked the entire outdoor field that was used for weapons and physical training. At night, the wind would be chilly; with the coldness nipping at the tips of your fingers and toes. The trees would sway in the breeze, slowly. Their leaves falling every now and again onto the landing of the balcony. Back in the centre of the room was a table. The table was large and made of wood. It had piles of documents and files stacked up onto it, yet still managed to keep a neat and tidy look. The man that sat behind the desk was the reason for it all. He was the highest power there was on this base camp. He was the one who set every trainer, soldier, and recruit in their place. He was the reason I was awake at three o'clock in the morning.

The room was dimly lit; the only light that illuminated the office came from a small lamp on the desk. The smell of freshly ground coffee beans wafted through the air and the bitter smell awoken my senses. I stood by the door after softly closing it behind me. My hands were clasped together behind my back. My spine was straight, and my feet were poised perfectly together, side by side; this was the standard position for all of the soldiers here. I silently

awaited further instructions from the sleepy man sat in the brown, leather armchair at the other side of the table.

He rubbed his face with both of his wrinkly hands tiredly. No doubt, he didn't want to be awake at three a.m. either. "Sit down Nina" he sighed; his deep Scottish accent sounded exhausted. I took a seat in one of the two metal chairs in front of his desk. The small nameplate placed at the front of the desk read 'General Charles Griffin Jr.' It occurred to me that no matter what time of day, I'd still be dealing with the same hard-hitting General, through and through. He stared at me for what felt like forever. His face was expressionless, but his eyes bore into my soul. I tried to remain hopeful in the fact that what I'd been called down for wasn't all that bad. I quivered under his gaze and I hung my head lowly. "I'm sorry for having to call you in at this hour, lieutenant." he said, after a long period of time. "But there is a very important matter I must discuss with you. I didn't have the time to discuss it during the day with all the sergeants piling up reports for me to review. It takes too much out of me. You understand don't you?" I simply nodded my head so that small talk wouldn't ensue. I was much too tired for it. His eyes landed back on me again, and he went into another period of silence. Except, this time, I could tell that he was thinking hard. The creases on his forehead were even more prominent than usual, as he furrowed his brows. He leaned his left elbow on the arm rest of his chair and scratched his greying beard.

A man of strict rules, Charles Griffin Jr. was the highest authority figure at the Red Skull Military Home for Special Children. He was tall, standing at an impressive six foot, and strong. His body wasn't overly muscular, but he was lean and well-built. The soft features that adorned his face reflected his inner

personality. He had light brown eyes and a small button nose. His lips were often pursed into a firm, thin line. His head was straight and rectangular shaped. The hair that sat on the top was always perfectly-well groomed; it was dark brown, with traces of grey hairs blossoming from his roots. The lack of many wrinkles on his forehead might've fooled many people about his age, but the knowledge and wisdom that he possessed made him wise beyond his years. His parents created the base camp as a safe haven for kids with mythical abilities: mermaids, centaurs, imps and many more creatures lived here. Charles' father had the vision of protecting these kids, who were children of mythics and humans. He knew that society would've always seen them as freaks and monsters, no matter how much reasoning and explanation he gave. With his wife, and a team of firm supporters, he built the base camp from the ground up with his bare hands. There, he created a safe home for mythic kids away from society's eye. This camp was their entire life; they cherished it with every living moment. Now, their beloved son maintained discipline, order and peace in the military camp, even after years of his parents' passing. At the current age of fifty, Charles Griffin Jr. was the spitting image of his father before him.

The tension in the air was thick, so I decided to cut it "Have I got something on my face, sir?" I asked sarcastically with a deadpanned expression. He let out a small chuckle and shook his head, his deep laugh bounced off the walls room. "No, I was just recalling the day you first arrived here." I let out a groan of annoyance. He had explained the story one time too many for my liking.

It was a cold and chilly December night, and the tree leaves shook

profusely from the harsh wind. A pair of guards were on their nightly rounds, when they spotted an object placed at the front gates of the camp. Upon closer inspection, they discovered it was a picnic basket. Though what surprised them, was the baby that was carefully bundled up in a blanket inside. There were no trails of footsteps that indicated who had put the basket there. The guards had completely zero clues about what to do. Their only option was to bring the newborn to the doctors in the infirmary. The doctors urgently ran tests on the child to determine what physical state it was in. Meanwhile, a nurse had alerted Charles about the discovery. To say he was shocked was a definite understatement. Racing down to the sick bay, his heart pounded in his chest. After multiple tests, the doctors concluded that the child was a newborn baby girl. Their results showed that she couldn't have been more than twenty-four hours old. She was quite tiny and pale, because she was out in the cold with only a blanket. As they unwrapped the blanket from her fragile body, the unthinkable happened. Once the young child was free from her confines, the baby blue blanket dissipated and turned into teeny-tiny black particles. They circled the air and resembled a swarm of bees. Charles and the doctors stared up in shock with their mouths agape, as the baby girl was held in one of the nurse's arms. They had no idea what kind of magic they were dealing with. The black particles continued to circle around the baby girl; moments later, they stopped and spelt out a sentence right above the girl's head.

"Take care of my daughter"

The words lingered in the air for a couple of seconds; then, they disappeared into oblivion. A long silence ensued and filled the air. No words were shared between the doctors and sergeant. Everyone was too stunned by

the display of supernatural that they just witnessed. Remembering the obscure plea, it was then and there that the prized leader of the military camp decided to take in the baby girl as his own. Now, sixteen years later, and his daughter was one of the best fighters to set foot in the camp. And if you *still* can't tell, that baby girl was me.

I was undoubtedly curious about my birth parents, but I gave up trying to search for them a while back. It was virtually impossible to discover anything about them when I had nothing but the story of my appearance to go off on. I had asked the scientists in the lab to check the picnic basket for fingerprints several times. Each time, I had a burst of hope that I'd finally be able to find my parents. Each time, my hopes were crushed as the basket would come up clean of any sort of DNA. After a while, it didn't matter to me anymore. My life in the base camp had been more than fulfilling and I was grateful for every little thing that my adoptive father and other trainers had given me.

"I'd very much like to move on from that." I huffed, folded my arms over my chest, and leaned back in the cool metal chair. He smiled and let out a light laugh. "Of course darling, and there's no need for the formalities at this time of night." He said reassuringly. His smile was quick to turn into a firm thin line and I knew it immediately meant business.

"I called you down here because I have a special assignment for you." He reached down into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a beige file. I let out an enormous sigh of relief in my head. I wasn't getting kicked off the camp! I took the file from his hands and started reading the details about the assignment. "We have reasons to believe that something sinister is in the

works down at a high school here in Dayton.” He clasped his hands together on the desk and observed my reactions with a careful eye. “Our sources keep picking up readings of mysterious powers. We want you to go in and figure out what’s going on.” I snapped my head up and stared at him in disbelief. “Wait, you want *me* to take a look at it?” I was beyond stunned. Special missions carried out in the field were normally given to the older soldiers, those that were in their twenties. Butterflies began to blossom in my stomach and my breath hitched in my throat. “You - you can’t be serious.” I laughed nervously and let out a shaky smile. But when I saw the stern expression that he wore, my smile immediately dropped. Gulping nervously, I began familiarizing myself with every little detail that surrounded my mission.

I wasn’t scared because I was unconfident with myself. It was because I had never been given a mission out in the field before. No doubt, I was a great fighter; my skills in training assignments were beyond perfect. Except, I’d never had any social interaction with anyone from beyond the base camp. I guess you could call me socially awkward; the only people I’d ever interacted with were all labelled as “freaks” in the modern society. So what did that make me? Frankly, I was petrified of what lied out there in the real world. I had been cooped up in the base camp all my life. But another part of me wanted to press on. It was pushing me to go further. I knew I had it in me to go far in his business. I was far from the frail and weak child that had first arrived on that cold and chilly December night.

Over the course of the sixteen years that I’d lived in the military camp, I had changed drastically. Both in appearance and personality. Instead of being frail, I was now slender and had an athletic figure. I regularly put my shoulder-

length, straight, brown hair into a high ponytail. But now, it sat loosely on my shoulders, as I was too lazy to tie it up before I left my chambers. I was rather short for my age; my small frame only coming up to five foot two. But it often gave me an advantage during sparring sessions. Many of the new recruits often took my tiny figure for granted when they first met me. They doubted I could've done any harm to them with my size. That's why people like them always ended up groaning in pain on the floor after I kicked their butts. All of the trainers dubbed me as one of their best students. I picked up new techniques very quickly; be it a new fighting movement or learning how to use an advanced weapon. I was highly skilled in everything I did. The extra edge I possessed over my fellow soldiers gave me advantages in our everyday assignments. My movements were as fluid as ocean waves. The way I wielded my katanas was lethal and deadly, yet I moved with the grace of a ballerina.

These were the reasons why I was given a leadership position at an early age. I was made the head of my squadron when I was twelve, thus given the title of Captain Carina Griffin. I was very hard working, and determined to keep doing better and better. At the age of fifteen, I was graced with the responsibility of being a lieutenant. It was a higher ranking than my previous position of being a captain. My chambers were filled with documents, files and other paperwork from then on. Up till this point in my life, my job had been training new recruits and assessing their progress every month.

Flipping to the next page of the mission file, I absent-mindedly ran my right thumb over the scar on my left hand. It was a long and prominent scar that ran all the way from the knuckle of my index finger, till it stopped at my wrist. The fear and panic that coursed through my veins when my hand got

sliced open was embedded into my brain. The scar had been caused by a sword, and my then slow reflexes. But the natural instinct of the man that sat in front of me got me to the infirmary before the cut could get infected. I was five, at the time. It was a deep cut, and now, when I fight, I tape up my knuckles with bandages. Although sometimes, I prefer to wear the smooth black leather of my fingerless gloves.

My chocolate brown eyes strained to read the file in the dim lighting of the office. My brows furrowed as I forced myself to read clearly. Closing the mission file, I looked back up at my dad. “Do you really think I can do this?” I asked hesitantly. He smiled and took my hands in his own. “I have no doubt in my mind that you are ready for this.” He replied, reassuringly. His soft voice calmed my nerves and his face was filled with nothing but compassion. I made the decision to trust his instincts. For my entire life, I had put my faith in this man. He was nothing but caring and he was filled with the utmost of love. I like to think that he became even more grateful for everything in his life after his wife passed away in a tragic car accident last year. The two of them were wonderful parents and I viewed them as my own.

“Now, you best get back to bed.” On cue, my mouth released a loud yawn. He let out a small laugh; we stood up and made our way to the door. I wrapped my arms around his stomach and leaned my face on his torso. I heard him let out a small laugh as he wrapped his arms back around me. We stayed there in the silence, just hugging, in the comfort of each other’s arms.

“I love you dad.” I whispered. “I love you too Nina.” He kissed me quickly on the top of my head and we both pulled away. I opened the door and stepped

back out into the plethora of white hallways. Halfway down the hall, I turned back and waved goodbye over my shoulder. He smiled and gave a mock salute before closing the door behind him. Walking back down the brightly lit hallways, I inspected the file in my hands. This was the first mission I was going to carry out. Going to a high school worried me; I silently prayed that my time there would go quick and that I wouldn't have to make any close connections. I was perfectly comfortable with my little circle of unusual housemates. Tucking into bed, I let my head rest on my soft cotton pillow. My eyes fluttered close and I drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

The next day, at seven a.m. sharp, I made my way out of the main entrance of the base camp to the school bus that awaited me. It was parked right outside of the main gates. The cool morning air nipped at my nose and my teeth slightly chattered. My father and a few other of my trainers were there to meet me halfway, and say goodbye. "I know it's really stupid for me to be crying but," he laughed whilst trying to prevent himself from tearing up. I groaned at how unreasonable he was being "Dad, it's not like I'm going away forever!" I stated "Oh, buck up Charles!" I heard one of my trainers yell at my adoptive father from behind his back. He turned his body slightly, and I was able to get a good view of them. Out of all the one hundred trainers that lived in the camp, I was only trained by five. Two of which, came to see me off.

The trainer that called out to us, whose voice I instantly recognized, was the head of the fighting department. Clarice Reynolds was a tall woman, albeit shorter than her boss. She had mocha coloured skin, pitch black long hair, and the most angular face I'd ever seen. Her sharp features gave her the appearance of a cat. Not surprisingly, she actually was a were-cat. Many

people on camp considered her the most beautiful person they had ever seen. My other trainer was only a head taller than me, but his black spiky hair gave him more height. He had milky-pale skin and his smile shined brighter than looking into the Sun. Soul piercing were the only two words that could've been used to describe his eyes. They were the brightest aquamarine in the entire universe. Wilkinson Uman, Wilk for short, was very proud of his eyes, but he was even more proud of his heritage. Wilk was of Asian-Hawaiian descent, and he came from a long line of werewolves.

Walking up to us, Clarice and Wilk had knowing smiles on their faces. "You ready for your first day of school, sport?" Wilk asked. "She'll be fine," Clarice interjected "she's sixteen, for crying out loud!" she cried. "Honestly sir, I don't see why you're getting all worked up." She stated, turning to my dad. They all laughed and dad shook his head. "Of course you wouldn't understand this Clare; you haven't got a social life outside of your work anyways." Clarice grumbled under her breath whilst Wilk let out a big chortle. "Whatever, have fun in hell kid." Clarice smirked and walked away.

"Hell?" My face contorted in uncertainty and panic as my brain quivered in fear over what her statement had implied. "Hey, hey, hey," my other trainer noticed my uneasiness. He wrapped one his arms around my shoulders and pulled me in protectively. "She was just trying to mess with you. You're gonna have a great time!" His bright smile calmed my nerves down and I managed to smile through my jitters.

"Although," Wilk smirked mischievously and leaned closer to my ear "if anyone tries to mess with you, don't be afraid to knock their lights out." Like

the Cheshire cat, his grin stretched from ear to ear.

“No, no, *don't* do that. I don't want to be called in because you beat someone up!” my father protested profusely; meanwhile Wilk's grin had done anything but falter. “Oh no, trust me. It's definitely worth it.” Wilk pressed on and tried to surpass his laughter. He evidently failed, and began snickering uncontrollably. I began giggling when I saw my father's annoyed expression. “Don't you have work to do?” His expression changed in a split second, and the look on his face read pure business. The mood in the air shifted and both Wilk and I immediately ceased laughing. Gulping, my trainer ran his fingers through his spiky hair and laughed shakily. “Y-yeah I guess I should go. Tell me all about your day, okay kid?” He ruffled my hair and turned to my father “I'll just g-go now, sir” “Yes, you will.” Stated the head of the military camp, sternly; then, we watched Wilk run off in the same direction that Clarice had a couple of minutes ago.

My dad was still watching Wilk's retreating figure when I turned to him. “You really need to be nicer to your employees.” I ordered “What do you mean? I'm plenty nice to them.” He defended himself strongly, suppressing a smile. “Sure you are.” I snorted. We both looked at each other and simultaneously, we began giggling. Soon, it turned into loud laughs and chuckles. Petty arguments like this were common between the two of us. It was never anything serious, just light-heartedness.

“Now, you best be on your way.” Charles murmured. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in tight for a hug. We stood there, embracing each other, before letting go. “Have fun, yeah?” He leaned down and pecked me on

the forehead. "I love you dad." I looked up at him and he ruffled my hair with his hand. "Love you too darling." I turned around and walked down the long driveway to the main gates. Halfway down the road, I turned back and waved to my father, over my shoulder. I smiled when he lifted his right arm and gave a big wave back. His face wore a smile, but I could tell that he was trying to hide his true emotions. Turning my body the whole way round so that I was backtracking to the bus, I made a snarky comment "You better be nice to everyone!" I warned. His smile turned genuine and he let out a big laugh. "You too!" I laughed and turned back around, running to the gates. I paused in my tracks as the grand entrance opened up for me. This was the first time that I would step out of the compound. Everything about it felt unreal to me as reality sunk in. My heart pounded rhythmically in my chest, and it sounded like a base drum. The gates fully opened, and there I was. A young girl taking her first steps into the outside world. I knew not of what lied in the great, big universe. But I was determined to find out. Taking in a deep breath, I took my first tentative step outside of the base camp. Everything felt the same, but at the same time, it didn't. The life that lay ahead of me would be forever changed by this one mission. My brain told me to stick to my comfort zone and turn back to my safe haven. But after being cooped up for sixteen years of my life, my heart told me to run free and learn all the new and different things about Mother Earth.

I spotted a big bus parked at the side of the gravel road right outside of the gates. It was bright orange, and the words "School Bus" were painted in bold black letters on the side. Psyching myself up, I breathed in deeply and strode up to it. I stepped up to what I assumed was the door. The glass and metal door

was divided into two; through it, I could see the bus driver lounging in his seat, scrolling through his phone. I stood there, awkwardly, waiting for him to notice me. His eyes flickered in my direction lazily, and when he noticed me standing at the door, he yelped in surprise and jumped in his seat. Sadly, this led to him hitting his knee against the steering wheel. Hard. Wincing in pain and clutching his knee, the driver reached over and pulled a lever. The glass door slid open and I climbed into the bus, nervously. The smell of peppermint wafted all around me, and the air inside was more than stuffy. My palms got clammy and I could feel the sweat accumulating on my neck. The bus driver pulled the lever back up to close the door behind me, and it slid shut with a soft thud.

“Hi! I’m Borris. But you can call me Burly.” He exclaimed and offered me his hand, his other still rubbing his knee. I took his hand timidly. His grip on my hand was firm as he shook it up and down excitedly. “Why Burly?” I inquired. My head cocked to the right a little when I asked; Charles had pointed out before that that was a regular thing I did when I asked questions. “Oh, it’s because of my size.” Taking a proper look at him, I could tell what he meant. His body was large and round, and his arms and legs were covered with hair. His hands were large and calloused; his face was round and chubby like his body. A mass of unruly, curly, brown hair sat on top of his head. His face was unshaven and reminded me of what a homeless person should’ve looked like. “I’m gonna be picking you up and dropping you off from school from now on. That okay?” he asked and gazed at me expectantly whilst waiting for my response. “Uhm, yeah... I guess.” My voice came out much quieter than I anticipated. “Sorry, what was that?” He leaned forward, trying to

hear me better. “Said it’s fine.” I felt my throat tremor as I made an effort to speak loudly. But my words still came out shaky and dull.

“Oh, well then,” his cheery voice reminded me of a cartoon character’s. “Take any seat you’d like!” Turning to the steering wheel, he revved up the engine of the bus. I cringed in disgust as the floor of the bus was littered with chewed up gum and plastic wrappers. I grimaced when I noticed that one chair had a large sticky, drink stain deeply embedded into it. I took nimble steps down the aisle, in search for a decent seat. All of a sudden, the bus jerked forward as it started moving. I was thrown off my feet and I landed flat on my bum with a loud ‘OOF’. “Sorry!” Burly shouted and apologised from the front of the bus “Sorry about that.” I stood up jerkily and promptly brushed off the dirt on my jeans, checking in disgust if I had landed in any gum; I hadn’t, thank god. The bus began driving away from my home and I plopped down into the seat at the very back. I turned to my left and looked out the window. I watched as the base camp gradually became smaller and smaller, and after some time, it was no longer in sight.

I leaned back in my sight and sighed. I didn’t really know what to feel at that exact time. My mind was in a flurry of emotions. Quietly, I pulled out my earphones and phone from my backpack. I put my playlist on shuffle, not caring what song came on. For a long time, I just stared out the window and admired the scenery. The Red Skull Military Home for Special Children was located in the middle of a forest, I found out as we drove away from it. The forest was luscious and abundant in tall trees and beautiful flora. After 10 minutes, we emerged out of the forest and drove into a neighbourhood. All the houses were identical to each other and the gardens were all neat and clean-

cut. I felt the bus stop moving and the door opened. “Morning!” Burly sang, dragging out his ‘o’ for a second longer, loud enough for me to hear over my soft music. “Morning Burl.” A deep, melodious voice responded. I took a break from scrolling through my phone and without moving my head up, my eyes took a peek at the source of the new voice.

The voice that had just boarded the bus belonged to a tall boy. A very, tall boy. His looming figure towered over the bus’s seats. The small tuft of hazel-brown hair that he had was tousled and tumbled gracefully against his forehead. Walking down the aisle, he abruptly halted in his tracks when his eyes landed on me. I raised my head to its proper position and earned a good look at the boy’s face. His features were each soft and pleasant, and his skin was fair. But his eyes were sharp and alluring, and I felt my own pair gazing into his. My brain shocked me back to reality and I realised we had been staring at each other for a fair amount of time. I cleared my throat and jerked my head back down to stare at my phone. A deep, guttural noise that sounded like a cross between a grunt and a growl erupted from his throat. He seemed surprised to see me when he first boarded the bus, but after our little stare off, it didn’t look like he cared. He plopped down into the seat across the aisle from me. Placing his backpack on his lap, he leaned his head against the solid glass window. I sneaked a glance at him every now and again, but all the while, his eyes remained closed; he was probably taking a nap, I assumed.

One by one, more high school students boarded the bus; Burly’s cheery disposition greeted every single one of them as they stepped in. Except for the first boy, none of the others paid attention to me or questioned my presence. They all either fiddled with their phones, took naps, or chatted with their

friends. To my displeasure, the bus began to grow louder and louder. I winced in annoyance and turned the music volume up on my phone. Leaning against the firm fabric bus seat, I observed my new surroundings. The bus was now full with teenagers chatting, standing, or minding their own business. There was a group of rowdy boys hollering at each other and yowling in laughter. Girls flashed around their new and expensive luxury accessories to their friends; each one feigning jealousy over the other's items. Smaller, punier kids were harassed by the rowdier boys that hovered around them like eagles waiting for the right time to go in for a kill.

I watched on in disgust as I discovered that the stereotypes of high school I'd read in books or watched in movies, were true. I didn't see the point at being 'labelled' something in an environment where people were going to judge you nonetheless. Why should your high school experience be determined by those around you? Since the previous night when I received the mission, I was dead set on not making any connections to anyone, whatsoever. It only signified my place in the hierarchy of teens in school, which I didn't want. My only objective was to get in, find out who was being evil, report back to my dad, and leave the school. That was it. Without a doubt in my mind; I wasn't going to make a single friend. My life was already full of ups and downs. I lived in a compound full of magical creatures and unworldly beings. I trained them how to fight and defend themselves; in return, I myself was trained to be a soldier-spy. I've no idea where I came from, and apparently there was some odd magic surrounding my mysterious appearance. Petty drama in high school would not compare to my extremely unordinary life thus far.

Burly turned right, and the bus drove into the parking lot. I gazed out the window and marvelled at the enormous size of the main building. The walls were painted an inviting peach and brown. At the very entrance of the school, there was a stone wall with a metal plaque hammered in. In bold, brown letters, the plaque read 'Redwood High School'; underneath it in smaller letters it said 'Dayton, Ohio'. The bus parked in a wide open spaced carpark. Teens, everywhere, were parking their cars, chatting with their friends, or merely lounging around. Burly opened the bus doors and everyone inside began filing out. I wondered if it were rude to not wake up the sleeping boy to my right; I didn't want friends, but I didn't want to come off as heartless. My brain had a tenacious battle with itself over what to do, before I decided to wake the boy up. But when I turned around, he was already walking to the door. I scrambled to gather my bag and phone when I realised I was the only teen left on the bus. Stepping outside, I felt the scorching hot Sun blaze its rays down onto my skin. I started to sweat amply and I felt extremely warm in my clothes; hiking my bag further up my shoulder, I rolled up my elbow length sleeves and used the damp cotton to wipe my forehead. The heat was overwhelming and the scorching rays of sunshine made my body feel like melting onto the concrete pavement.

"Hey girly!" I heard Burly's sprightly voice call out to me from behind; I whirled around to face him, quizzical if he was talking to me. "To get to the office, you're gonna wanna go straight through those front doors, and keep on going until you see two glass doors with the school's mascot on them." My head cocked to the left in confusion, and my brain muddled at his words. "You're gonna need to go there for your lesson schedules." He stated. My lips

formed a small 'o' and an inaudible sound of understanding came out. Bowing my head slightly, I thanked him with a small smile and nod. In my heart, I could tell I wasn't trying to force the smile. It just came naturally.

Burly shut the bus door close and I took that as my cue to start making my way into the high school. I crossed the grand parking lot, past young adults and their cars. My skin felt like it was broiling and I had to shield my eyes from the fiery gaze of the Sun. Making it through the car park without attracting attention, I bypassed the flagpoles where the bold colours of red, white and blue adorned the Ohio state flag and Star Spangled Banner that flew high in the sky. I craned my neck and shielded my eyes to take a gander at the flags. They lay motionless and completely still under the heat. I placed my head back in its proper position and carried on walking. The nape of my neck ached from looking upwards and I went to rub it to soothe the pain; however, I pulled my hand back when it came in contact with the sheen layer of sweat that had formed. Grimacing, I wiped my hand on the rough denim of my jeans. Walking up the stairs to the front door, I was met with the large statue of the school mascot; it was directly placed behind the flagpoles. Proud and tall, the statue was of a mighty griffin standing on its hind legs. Its front claws were on display while its mouth was wide open, as if it were making a mighty roar. Glimmering in the sunlight, the bronze statue looked magnificently majestic and every tiny detail carved could've only been made by a very meticulous craftsmen. From the outline of the layers of feathers, to the indents on the claws, all the way to the ferocity in its eyes.

Snapping back to my senses, I quickly scanned the parking lot to see if anyone had noticed my foolish daze. I jogged hastily up the remaining steps of

stairs. Reaching the top, I paused to catch my breath. I breathed in deeply and pushed open one of the main doors into the high school. Cold air kissed my face as I walked in. Hesitantly, I walked through the cream coloured hallways lined with dark, dusty blue lockers. Following Burly's directions, I made my way down the halls until I stumbled upon two large glass doors; both with golden emblems of the griffin's head. '*So that's the school mascot*' I thought. I slowly opened one of the doors and peeked inside. There was a lady who sat at the front desk, furiously typing away at her keyboard, and cursing her monitor every so often. Taking a step inside, I walked up to the lady's desk and stood there awkwardly; not knowing if it were appropriate to interrupt her heated one-sided argument with the computer. She didn't notice me for a while, and I felt like an idiot for standing there like a pole; I eventually got quite fed up. I cleared my throat to grab her attention.

No response.

I cleared it again, this time even louder. She looked up from her work and noticed me standing there. "Yes? What is it?" she asked, very annoyed. "I'm a new student here. I came to pick up my class schedule." I stated, my tone of voice too sickeningly-sweet to be true. She sighed lowly and picked up the phone on her desk. She pressed a button and waited for a couple of seconds before she spoke "Sir, that new student you mentioned is here. Yes, I'll send her in." She slammed the phone back down and glared at me. "Just go through that door." she barked, whilst jerking her head to a door behind her, on my right. I let out a fake smile of gratitude and walked past her desk, internally debating over what kind of stick was rammed up her butthole that caused such a loathsome attitude. '*It's probably a two-by-four*' I thought.

The door she pointed out to me was brown and had the words ‘Principal’s office’ pasted onto the window. I knocked on the door three times with my knuckles before I heard man’s voice calling me to come in.

“Ah! You must be Carina Griffin!” exclaimed the school principal. Even though he was sat in his chair behind the desk, I could already tell that the man was born with dwarfism. Despite having the face of a grown man, his short, stubby arms were a dead giveaway. “I’m Principal Munich,” he hopped of his big chair and came over to my side of the desk. Walking up to me, he offered to shake my hand. Without bending down to his height, I took it and shook it firmly “Welcome to Redwood High.” he beamed, with a big grin. “It’s a pleasure to be here.” I choked out, trying my hardest not to fumble over my words. He walked back over to his side of the desk. “Please, have a seat.” he offered, as he hopped onto a stool, which he then used to get into his chair. Sitting down in the opposite seat, I looked around at all of his decorations. He had different coloured jerseys with the griffin emblem hung up on the walls. Pictures of different classes and sports teams were placed in picture frames, all perfectly aligned.

“It’s a pleasure to have you join us,” he cheered. “We here in Redwood find it the utmost of importance to train our students to be the best that they can be.” I simply nodded in agreement, unsure if he wanted me to join in on the conversation. “I do hope you find your time here enjoyable. We’ve had so many lovely students over the years!” Principal Munich commented and began laughing joyously. I didn’t see anything funny to be laughing about, but I joined in regardless because I didn’t want it to get any more awkward than it already was. I laughed nervously and I cursed myself for sounding so fake.

But the man didn't seem to notice my uncomfortableness. Our laughing died down at the same time, and then there was this really long awkward silence. I didn't know what to do or say, so I just sat there twiddling my thumbs. Our silence was interrupted by a loud beep that came from the printer machine behind the principal's desk.

"Here we go!" He retrieved the papers that were printed out from the machine. "This is your entire timetable, your classrooms, locker number, locker code, and here is a floor plan of the entire school." He informed as I scanned over my new information. I felt a bit overwhelmed by all the information that had been thrust upon me. "I'm sure any single one of our students will be happy to show you around on your first day." I let out a small snort "Fat chance at that." I murmured under my breath. "I'm sorry what was that?" he inquired. "Nothing!" I spat. Grinning, I put on the cheeriest voice I could muster. "I just – can't wait to get started!" Principal Munich easily bought my act, as he clapped his hands together in joy. "Oh, how wonderful! Now, you don't want to be late on your first day, do you?" he joked and chuckled heartily. I laughed along with him, inwardly praying he'd let me go. "Well, have a great day, Carina." He wished me as he shook my hand again. "You too, sir." I replied and quickly exited the room. Closing the door behind me, I breathed out a quiet sigh of relief. I shuffled through my information papers and checked my timetable. '*First subject: History. Classroom 502*' it said as I read my lesson plan aloud in my head. Looking through the glass doors, I noticed teenagers in the hallway rushing about. Glancing over at the clock on the wall, it read eight-twenty-five a.m. I started to make my way towards the glass doors, when I heard a snotty voice yell from behind me. "I

don't care if you're new, you better be not be late to class!" I rolled my eyes and walked out of the office. *'Definitely a two-by-four'*

The shrill ring of the morning bell alerted all the students to make their way to their first periods. All around me, teens were slamming lockers close and running off to their classes. Fumbling through my papers hastily, my eyes scanned for the room marked '502' on the floor plan. The number of people in the corridors rapidly declined, and I began running in what I thought was the correct direction to class.

Trying to navigate my way through the school and read at the same time did not prove effective as I came to dead ends every which way I took. After fifteen minutes, I realised that in many sections of my map, it didn't match up with the actual floor plan of the school. I was reduced to jogging down unfamiliar corridors; at the same time, I kept checking the numbers marked above each and every classroom door, which in turn indicated the class number. "499...500...501" I muttered to myself, picking up my footsteps. "502! Yes!" I quietly cheered myself for finding the classroom all on my own, even if I was twenty minutes late.

I softly knocked on the red classroom door; all of a sudden, realisation dawned upon me and my current situation, and my stomach plunged. Through the window in the door, I watched as the teacher completely halted in mid-sentence and turned to my direction. Opening the door slowly, I poked my head in first and lightly bowed it. Nimble stepping into the history class, I shut the door behind me and stood there awkwardly, wringing my wrists. Everyone's gaze followed me and I felt like a fish in an aquarium.

“I’m a new student here. Sorry it took me so long to get here. I kinda lost my way.” I sheepishly explained. I kept my eyes on the teacher, as I didn’t want to meet the judgemental stares of all the teens. “Ah! Yes! I was wondering where you were.” The man teaching the class had a loopy accent and he looked to be in his mid-sixties. He had big and poufy, grey hair that stuck up in every direction, and a similar looking moustache to match. “Well, welcome to Redwood!” he laughed loudly, his arms flailing wildly as he spoke. I didn’t even make an attempt to pretend I was excited; I had already feigned interest more times than I had liked that day. I just stood there, motionless, expressionless. The teacher detected my displeasure and he instantly regained composure. “Well then, I’m Mr. Albert and uh, you can just, uhm...sit over there.” he pointed out a seat by the window, at the back of the class. I gave him a small smile and nod, then, I made my way to the back. Every single student in the class had their eyes on me. The mantra in my head kept on repeating itself ‘*Don’t be weak, don’t be weak, don’t be weak...*’

I held my head up high as I walked past other desks. There were many boys in the class sporting jerseys like the one I saw in Principal Munich’s office. Their predatory gazes followed me like I was a prey. But I was no mere prey. I had lightning-quick reflexes. That’s why I instantly noticed when one of the boys subtly stuck out their foot, to try and trip me, as I walked past his desk. I didn’t need to look down at his foot to know it was there. Without hesitation, I simply hopped over his foot like a gazelle in the woods, jumping over rivers. I got to my desk and sat down. Two rows ahead of me, I could still see the boy looking quite surprised as he returned to what he was previously doing; which was nothing. The morning light streamed in through and perfectly illuminated

my desk. The sing-song voice of my teacher resumed and I pulled out a notebook to make it appear like I was studying. There wasn't any actual point to me studying; my goal in the school was to get in, and get out. I was only here for a mission.

The class went on agonizingly slowly, and it completely bored me to death. I tuned out whatever Mr. Albert was saying and just took down whatever he wrote on the board. In my head, I was going over strategies on how to find the mastermind behind the evildoings that the investigations team had picked up on. *'I wonder if it's the snotty receptionist at the front desk.'* I pondered *'World domination does have its effects on people.'* I silently snickered to myself and continued my drawing of a small mandala in the top corner of my page. I jolted in my seat when I heard someone repeating my name multiple times. My head snapped up so hard, I was surprised I didn't give myself a whiplash injury. Mr. Albert was peering at me over his glasses, expectantly. The class was dead silent, and the majority of students were turned around in their seats, facing me.

"I asked you Ms. Griffin, in what year was James Madison elected U.S president?" his voice remained loopy, even in its authoritative state. I sat there, as frozen as a statue; I had no idea what the answer was since I hadn't even touched the textbook. "Uh..." my voice drawled out and my brain scattered to try and come up with an answer. In my peripheral vision, I could see the girl sitting in the table next to me, reach up and cover her mouth. It looked like she was yawning, but she tilted her hand so that it wasn't fully covering her mouth, and her palm faced in my direction. Looking closer, I could see that she had written something on the palm of her hand. She forced

out a low yawn, and in that moment, she widened her palm and gave me a full view of what was written on it. Seeing as I didn't have a single clue, I decided to trust the unfamiliar girl.

"It was in..." my voice trailed off as I took one last peek at the answer on her hand, "1809." My answer borderlined on sounding like a question. I held my breath as Mr. Albert took a dramatic pause. I was beginning to question why I trusted the unfamiliar girl. Just as I was about to start scolding myself, Mr. Albert threw up his hands and yelled out a booming "CORRECT!" before promptly turning back to the chalkboard. Everyone returned to what they were previously doing and I let out a quiet sigh of relief. I turned my head properly to get a good look at the girl that helped me out. She had strawberry-blonde hair and hazel brown eyes. Although she was sitting down, I predicted that she was quite tall. That was a reoccurring trend in my life, I realised; I needed to meet more shorter people. Her skin was perfectly tan, as if she had stayed out under the Sun for just the right amount of time.

She owned soft features, but her eyes were enticing and lime green. She caught my gaze and gave me a knowing smile before returning her attention back to her notes.

At lunch, I was sceptical of using the map again since it didn't produce any good results the first time around. But in my mind, having to ask someone was far worse, so I pulled the correct information sheet out of my bag and once again, began wondering around the halls. Except this time, I was able to find my locker fairly easily. Spinning the dial to my given locker combination, the metal door opened with a sharp tug. I stood in a comfortable silence, as there

was barely anyone in the hallway with me. It was the first real silence I got since arriving in the morning, and I savoured the moment. Referring to my lesson plan, I put away whatever textbooks I didn't need that day. Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I checked my wallet, wondering if I was hungry enough to make an effort to go find the cafeteria. My locker slammed shut with a loud bang; turning to my right, I came face to face with the girl that'd helped me in class. Her sudden appearance startled me; my body lunged backwards in shock, and my mouth let out a small yelp. "Holy shit." I panted as my heart recovered from the sudden shock. "Oh my god, are you okay? I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She blurted, her face filled with concern. Her hands reached for my arms in an effort to help me stand straight again, but I flinched away from her touch and glared at her as I stood up properly. She didn't seem fazed by my reaction, but she withdrew her hands and smiled at me.

"I'm Delilah, by the way." she said. My eyes flitted up at her and I silently judged her before pulling out my wallet and recounting my money. "Anyways, I was wondering, since you're new here, if you want me to show you around?" she asked. At first, I thought she was joking. But when I saw the hopeful look on her face, I figured she was actually trustworthy. I was hesitant to accept her offer; I didn't want to be making any friends. But having someone show me around would've been a lot easier than trying myself and getting lost. It would speed up my process, and I'd know which routes to take if I were ever in a bad situation. "Fine." I answered reluctantly. She let out a squeal of delight as she grasped my hand and began pulling me down the hall. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I yelled and tugged back on my arm so that she'd stop "What are you doing?"

“I’m taking you to the cafeteria. You can’t digest new information on an empty stomach.” she insisted with a cheeky grin. “Okay, fine,” I huffed “but this time don’t drag me so hard.” I sneered. She was, once again, unaware of my subtle anger, and she began pulling me in the direction of the cafeteria.

After queuing up in the line for what felt like forever, we finally got our food and drinks. Scanning the crowded lunch room, I noticed that there weren’t any more seats available. Much less a table for the both of us. Delilah caught my worried look and she spoke in my ear, loud enough for me to hear. “I never eat in here. This place is freaking hell.” she paused momentarily before continuing, “Come on, I know a better place for us to eat at.” She swiftly started walking towards the exit without waiting for my response. I weaved in and out of a sea of students, desperately trying to avoid getting bumped into before finally making it to the door. Delilah was already there and waiting for me as I exited. I took in a deep breath of refreshing air; it was outrageously stuffy in the canteen due to the amount of people. “Trust me, it can get way worse sometimes.” she remarked, her voice soft and smooth compared to how loud she had to speak inside. “Worse?” my voice asked out shakily. She nodded her head and made a small noise of agreement. “You should see what it’s like on Taco Tuesdays. That’s when they serve rice pudding.” she explained. I let out an audible shudder at the words ‘rice pudding’. Just hearing the phrase made my mouth gag. It was because of my horrible encounters with the dish. All I’m going to say is that my dad isn’t a great cook. Delilah let out a hearty laugh at my reaction and smiled a toothy grin “You and me both, girl.” She commented. I couldn’t suppress the smile that crept up my cheeks and we were both sent into a fit of giggles.

I followed Delilah up endless flights of stairs, panting with every step I took. We walked up and up until there were no more steps to climb. Shifting her lunch tray to one hand, Delilah pushed open the green door at the landing. It opened with a small creak, leading to the rooftop of the school. Stepping back into the sunlight, I marvelled at the sight of the wide open space. There was a mini open-air shed that was covered by a small roof. It housed an assortment of various flowers and plants. "Come on!" Delilah called out to me as she made her way to the shed. I jogged to catch up with her while trying to balance the food on my tray. Upon reaching the shed, I came to a screeching halt, since there was an unfamiliar group of boys sitting at the table and eating their lunch. Delilah gestured for me to sit opposite her, next to an unknown stranger. My footsteps were hesitant and it felt like forever before I took my seat. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as Delilah tucked into her meal. Sitting next to her was a boy of average height with pale blue eyes and dusty blonde hair. He wore a black leather jacket and was about to light a cigarette, but Delilah spotted the object and snatched it out of his mouth before it did any harm to his lungs. "Why the hell do you smoke these things?" she demanded "You are aware that they're bad for you, right?" Her face contorted in the most serious expression I'd seen her make thus far. "Yes mom." His voice drawled out sarcastically and he let out a loud sigh before stealing Delilah's pudding cup. She let out a small huff but didn't make any attempt to take it back; the only thing she did was start scolding him again, which led to nasty bickering between the two.

Sitting to the left of cigarette boy was another male human. He had dark brown skin and a hideous afro haircut. He paid no attention to the arguing duo

on his right; it was as if it was all completely normal to him. He was firmly immersed in the novel he was reading: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Finally on my right, there laid a sleeping boy with his head cradled in his arms on the table. His line of sight was facing away from me so I couldn't get a look at his face. I decided it was best to just mind my own business; therefore I began to eat my sandwich in peace.

After a couple of minutes, and endless bickering about god-knows-what from the couple in front of me, I heard a groan erupt from the boy by my right "Michael, will you please tell them to shut up." He asked, without lifting his head up. "No can do," replied the boy with the horrendous haircut "they'll just keep going." He closed his book and placed it down neatly next to his lunch tray. "Hi, I'm Michael." He spoke to me. "Don't worry about Heath and Delilah over here, this is normal for them." He told me, indicating to the pairing sat in front of me. Delilah stopped explaining something to Heath midsentence, and turned to the boy that sat next to me. "Keegan! Wake up and introduce yourself!" she hissed. Keegan groaned once more in annoyance before sitting up in his seat. He rubbed his tired eyes with both of his hands, and promptly turned his head to look at me. My heart jumped when I recognized the boy; it was the one from the bus that morning. The one that grunted when he first saw me and fell asleep in his seat. His sleepy eyes widened a little when he saw me, which led me to assume that he recognized, me as well. "Oh, it's you." He deadpanned. Delilah shifted her gaze between the two of us quizzically. "You two know each other?" "Met her on the bus this morning" he answered, his eyes scanning me up and down. I glared at him, but he simply shrugged and picked at his food. "Well, that's nice."

Delilah remarked. Heath mocked her cheeriness with over-exaggeration and ended up getting punched in the chest. I couldn't help but titter at the duo's antics. Delilah sighed dramatically before facing me. I didn't meet her gaze as I was too busy eating my fruit jelly.

Suddenly, she slammed her hand down on the table; the sound echoing with a loud bang and her face looking mortified. "Oh my god! I never caught your name!" she screamed in horror. I took a break from my food and looked her in the eyes. "I didn't throw it." I coolly replied. Both Michael and Heath burst out laughing while Keegan snickered and had an amused smile on his face. Delilah was slightly red in the face and I felt a small pang of guilt when I realised I'd embarrass her. "My name's Carina." I smiled, and to my surprise, everyone naturally returned it. "It's nice to meet you all." The words escaped my mouth before I could even register them in my head. "It's an honour to meet you too, Nina." Michael replied politely. "Nina?" My voice projected itself rather softly. The only person that ever called me by that name was my father. It was sort of a special thing that only he and I shared." Delilah noticed my apprehension "Is it okay if we call you by your nickname?" she asked me. I considered it for a while before shrugging my shoulders "Yeah, I guess its fine." Delilah clapped her hands in joy. "Consider yourself lucky Nina. Most people here aren't lucky enough to make friends on their first day." Heath remarked, jokingly. Michael picked up his book again and began reading, and Heath and Delilah resumed their bickering over stealing each other's food. I turned to my right, and Keegan was picking at his food, slowly eating it. He caught me staring at him and gave me a sly wink. I felt my face heat up and I quickly turned away from his eyes. I heard him lightly chuckle to himself

beside me and it took everything in my body to not punch him. I felt a nudge at my elbow and I looked up to face Keegan. "Don't worry, I'm just messing with you." He smirked and I couldn't help but roll my eyes playfully at his antics. My eyes flitted back to his gaze and I couldn't help but admire his handsome face. From his soft brown eyes, to his cute small nose and heart-shaped lips. I noticed that he was checking me out as well and I mentally high fived myself for having such a great body. Thank god for the fighting department at base camp. Our eyes met and we both felt a little bashful for getting caught checking out one another. My mouth erupted into soft giggles and Keegan smiled shyly, mirroring my happiness.

When I reached back to the base camp that night, I reviewed my first day at Redwood High. I already hated the place because the students were all so stereotypical, and the teachers were either snotty and stuck up or overly cheerful to everyone. But I decided that having a small circle of friends wasn't all that bad. Keegan, Michael, Heath and Delilah were the perfect four.

On Saturday morning, at the end of my first week in high school, I was in the training hall reviewing recruits' performances. I watched on as young werewolves perfected shifting from one body form to the other on command. I instructed vampires on where and how to get their daily supply of non-human blood. I watched over fairies, pixies, sirens and many more. Lamenting over my life, I wondered if my new friends would turn me away and detest me if they found out what I did for a living. My mind brought up the fact that, I wasn't going to be staying long at the school, many times; but I quickly pushed that thought to the back of my mind every single time.

At noon, I began sparring practice with some of the new recruits. I stepped onto the mat with a boy that was the same height as me. His file said that he was a half-fairy; his father was of the Unseelie court. We both put our fists up and he lunged forward towards me, swinging his fists. I swiftly ducked to my right and landed a punch to the side of his guts. He wheezed and staggered back a little before charging at me again. His hands outstretched towards me and I predicted his movements. Before, he did anything else, I landed a kick to his mid-section. As he clutched his stomach in pain, I kicked his legs out from underneath him and he fell backwards onto the mat with a loud thud. "You need to work on protecting yourself, before you can learn how to fight." I told him as I helped him back up to his feet. He smiled and nodded in understanding before walking off to drink some water. "All right, who's next?"

I settled into a comfortable routine at high school. Get on the bus, go to school, study, try to look for clues about the supposed sinister plot, have lunch with my friends, study, and then return to the camp. In many ways, I still disliked the school and those in it. But Delilah and the rest of them had made my life there bearable. In the majority of my classes, Delilah was there too. Our timetables coincided almost perfectly. I did actually study in my classes. Even if I wasn't staying long, I figured there was no harm in gaining new knowledge. Except whenever we were in boring classes, Delilah and I would just pass notes and doodle over each other's textbooks.

Math was one of the classes I didn't share with Delilah. But then, I'd sit next to Heath instead. At first, I was hesitant to be near him because I was a little intimidated by his presence. But he was the only one in the class that I knew, so I gave myself no other choice. Many times, I found myself getting

hopelessly confused with all the equations; on every single occasion, Heath was there to guide me. He was actually very smart and I believed he could've gotten higher grades, especially in math, if he didn't sleep all the time in class and never pass up his homework. He tried to come off as cool and suave to the chicks around him, but every day, on the rooftop of our school, he'd be bickering away with Delilah about the most pointless topics in the universe, looking like a pair of idiots. It was highly amusing to see them go at each other's throats over useless topics. I often wondered if they were an actual married couple. They fought like a husband and wife that'd been married for at least a decade. I'd normally stay silent and eat my lunch, unless they'd ask for my opinion on something. In which case, I'd back away from their arguments and refuse to take sides.

Sometimes, I had a good book to keep me occupied. That's where I bonded with Michael; we connected over our shared love of books and music. We both enjoyed crime and thriller novels, but appreciated a good romance story every now and again. He liked to listen to different variations of jazz and pop. Michael was a delight to be around; he cracked jokes every so often that had my stomach aching of laughter. He gave insightful opinions on any problems that we all had, but sealed his mouth shut during the dumb arguments that Delilah and Heath squabbled over. And on every Wednesday, without fail, he'd bring chocolate chip cookies for us to eat during lunch. He told us they were made in his parent's bakery by him and his little five year old sister.

Then there was Keegan. Keegan was kind and caring and sweet. At lunch, he'd normally be asleep and he'd only wake up if Delilah or I forced him to eat his lunch. We'd make small talk about random topics, or comment on the

sheer stupidity of the opposite couple's fights at the lunch table. Whenever I was reading my novels, he'd be lazily reading over my shoulder; not that I minded. When he was bored with reading, he'd fall asleep whilst sitting upright. More often than not, his head would lean down onto my shoulder, and his soft brown hair would tickle my face. He'd always wake up surprised. "You should've just let me sleep on the table." he'd always insist. Each time, I'd tell him that it was damaging for his back and he'd reluctantly agree with me. He'd thank me, and the sequence would repeat itself the next day after.

Coincidentally, we shared the same last classes at the end of the day, every day. At three o'clock, without fail, he'd wait for me to finish packing my bag before we walked off to the school bus together. He never mentioned why he'd wait for me, but at the same time, I never asked. I always found it amusing how he'd follow me around like a lost puppy before we got to the bus. If I had to go to my locker, or if I wanted to grab a snack at the vending machine, he'd always tag along. We normally walked in silence without communicating to one another, unless it was when I told him I had to go somewhere other than our ride home, first. In the beginning, it was awkward between the both of us, but I soon grew accustomed to the comfortable silence that we shared. He was a very thoughtful boy. If he saw me struggling to carry my books, he'd offer to help carry them. If I had a hard time in class that day, he'd buy me my favourite snack to munch on. We shared our love for comic books and rock bands with each other every day. Our reoccurring topic of debate was whether Marvel or DC was the better franchise. In the mornings, I was the first one to get picked up by Burly and the school bus; him, the second. It was pointless to start a conversation with him that early in the morning because he would go

straight to sleep as soon as he sat down. On the rare occasions that I fell asleep on the bus, he would always wake me up and wait for me before we departed to our separate homerooms. Whenever I caught him checking me out, which was a regular thing, I'd get all red in the face; according to Delilah.

I guess you could say I had a crush on Keegan. Every shy smile meant for me made my heart jump and butterflies flutter in my tummy. Keegan and the rest of the gang didn't talk to anyone outside of the groups whilst in school. We didn't have anyone else besides ourselves. That made me feel even more special when he'd treat me a little more sweetly than he did to Delilah. Although, she never took notice; she was too busy going off on Heath. My knees quivered and my words fumbled every time he smirked at me, and my body filled with joy whenever we made each other laugh. I often wondered if he felt the same way.

This was a new feeling for me and I had no idea what to do about it.

Four months came and left in the blink of an eye. It was now July, and the end of the school year was approaching. This also meant that our junior prom was coming up. I wasn't interested in attending, but Delilah was hell-bent on making me come. "Come on Nina, you have to come!" she pleaded. Her eyes resembled that of a puppy's as they were large and round. I shook my head for umpteenth time and she slouched back in her seat, letting out a great big huff. I resumed drinking my sweet, banana milkshake and continued on with my homework; likewise, the rest of the gang either ate lunch or finished up homework together in the little diner that we liked to eat at after school, or on the weekends.

My mind was in a daze and I couldn't properly concentrate on my questions about the American Civil War. Since first joining the school, I had not found a single clue that lead me to whoever was forming their evil plan. I hadn't even picked up on what the evil plan was! Over time, I gradually became angrier at myself for not being a better spy in the field. I could only the imagine the look of disappointment in my father's eyes when I told him that I wasn't cut out for this. I figured I was better off training new recruits. Then what would that mean for my life at Redwood? I knew my dad. As soon as I told him that I wanted out of this mission, he'd pull me out of the school. I'd go back to being detained in my sleeping chambers, with random tutors coming in to teach only twice a week.

I was silently brooding in my seat when I felt repeated poking at my shoulder. Turning to my right, Keegan was poking me with his forefinger whilst staring at the flesh he was prodding. I stared at him weirdly, and he didn't stop until he looked up and saw that I was watching him. "You okay?" he leaned in and asked. "Yeah, I just," I paused to think of a good excuse "really hate history." I chuckled forcibly. He didn't seem to buy my excuse, but he let it go and stole the glass of banana milkshake from my reach. We often shared a tall drink in the diner.

"I can't believe you don't want to come. I know you don't have a date, but that's no reason to boycott the whole thing!" Delilah fussed as she carried on complaining. "Do *you* even have a date?" Michael inquired, pausing from reading his book. "No," she answered sheepishly. I briefly glanced over at Heath who sat next to her, and I could've sworn he smiled a little. "But that's not the point!" Delilah continued, "The point is that Nina is absolutely

refusing to come, whatsoever. You should at least just come to see what it's like." she pouted. "Why don't you want to come?" Heath asked me with a mouth full of fries. "I just don't like social, gatherings. Especially large ones filled with people I'm not familiar with." Delilah let out a high pitched whine which made Heath sitting next to her, wince in anger. Delilah continued to pout and plead with her puppy dog eyes. I rubbed my face with my hands and released a loud groan. "Fine," I spat "but I'm only going to come for ten minutes to see what it's like." Delilah let out her signature squeal and clapped her hands. "Yay!" she cheered "Now, you can fight off any pervy boys that try to hit on me." I stared at her with a judgemental look; as if I were to say "What the hell?". She simply shrugged, giggled meekly and resumed eating her lunch.

Two weeks later, and the night of our junior prom had arrived. At eight-thirty, Delilah texted to tell me that the night's events had just started in the school's large gymnasium. She promised to keep me updated throughout the night, and I told her I'd call when I came for a quick visit. Sitting in my chambers on the base camp, I sat at my desk, trying to figure out how to break the news to my father. I felt distraught and worried; I was petrified at what he would say when I told him I wasn't cut out to be undercover. He always had such high hopes for me. In his mind, the base camp and I were the only things more precious than his own life. It would break his heart to know that his daughter couldn't live up to the tasks he set out for her. He's told me that in the future, this base camp would most likely be inherited by me. Adoptive or not, he treated me as his own. And other than my new found friends, he was all I had in my life.

Time passed by very slowly in my room. I found myself checking my phone every three minutes or so, even though there wasn't anything new. The rhythmic ticking off the clock on my wall mocked me with every passing second. The more time went by, the angrier I became at myself. My palms became sweaty and I found it hard to breathe. In a split second decision, I decided that there was no point in waiting to tell my father. Refusing to give myself time to think, I dashed out of the safe confines of my room.

Suddenly, I found myself running back down the dreaded white halls. The lights glared at me as I passed by, just like they had countless times before. But this time, I paid them no attention. The loud ringing of my heart in my chest was accompanied by the intense sound of my footsteps running against the metal floor. Turning the final corner, my eyes locked onto the menacingly tall black doors that lead to my ultimate destination. Walking with a purpose, I gave myself little to no time to prepare for my father's reaction. I bursted into his office without so much as a warning. My dad looked up from the book he was reading and peered at me suspiciously. I panted loudly and stood there regaining my breath; I hadn't realised how tired I actually was when I was running. I held up my right hand to tell my father to wait for a moment. Then, I stood up straight, took in a deep breath, and let it all out.

"I can't do it." I announced, my voice loud and clear. "Pardon?" he asked with utter confusion plastered all over his face. "I can't do it." I repeated "I'm not fit to be an undercover agent." I explained. My father understood the gist of what I was saying to him yet he remained quietly in his seat as I continued. "I'm not cut out to be working in the field. I am probably the worst spy this military base camp has seen. It's been more than four months – really dad,

four months! – since I joined the school, and I have achieved absolutely nothing since then.” I paused from my monologue to take in my father’s unreadable expression “I have no idea what it is that I’m supposed to be looking for, exactly. And I feel like a chicken running around with it’s head cut off like some stupid idiot. And the worst part is that I *really* didn’t want to disappoint you, because without you I wouldn’t have the life that I do today. And I feel like complete and utter shit when I think about how much I’ve saddened you, and I just – I just – I just can’t do it dad. I’m not strong enough.” My voice was horribly shaky and I was on the verge of tears by the time I finished speaking. I let every thought, doubt and emotion all out of my system. A massive wave of relief washed over me like a waterfall. My father closed his book and stared at me for a long time before speaking. “Sit down, darling.” He requested. I sat down and I could practically hear the shifts and gears whirring in his head, as he looked to be deep in thought.

“Nina, I know that you know you’re not one hundred percent human, right?” I slowly nodded my head in approval. When the doctors ran their tests on me as a baby, they discovered I was only half-human. Taking in a deep sigh, he continued “Sweetheart, they’ve been able to confirm that the other half of your DNA matches with what is known as a Vila.” I sat there with a clueless expression, as I was unfamiliar with the mythical creature. “They’re like nymphs, but they possess power over the wind.” He explained “They’re female spirits that live in the wilderness, or clouds. Their voices are beautiful and they have the capability to form large gusts of wind, strong enough to carry houses. But despite their overly- feminine charm, they are very fierce warriors. The Earth is said to shake when they do battle” He had a small smirk

on his face when he mentioned the last piece of information, and I couldn't help but giggle. I felt an overwhelming amount of pride in who I was. The description of the mythical creature fitted me all too well. "Is that why there was such a bad windstorm on the night they found me?" I asked "Maybe," He answered curtly "but the doctors and scientists in the lab also seem to think that your human DNA cancels out majority of the traits that the Vilas possess." "Really? How so?" My dad laughed and it took me a second before I realised that I had cocked my head to the right. "Well for starters," my dad's voice trailed off as he looked away to his computer screen. "If even a single strand of a Vila's hair is plucked, they'd die on the spot." He said firmly. My hands subconsciously touched my head; the hair plucking death sounded horrifying. "But, I've seen your hair get plucked many times before during training, and I'm one hundred percent certain that you are, indeed, sitting in front me now. Very much alive." He chuckled loudly and I burst into laughter with him. "You're still here! Huzzah!" We both let out small little cheers and laughed some more. "I remember when I used to accidentally pluck your hair all the time while brushing it when you were younger!" We both laughed even harder than before, and I clutched my aching stomach. Our joyous voices could be heard from the end of the hall, and it lasted for a good solid minute. Our laughter died down, and I wiped away the tears that formed from my eyes. My father wore a solemn smile, and his tone of voice turned soft but serious.

"That's who you are." he said. I smiled. Knowing what my blood was truly made of made me feel happy inside. For all my life, I felt like a stranger amongst the mythics that I lived with. But now I knew that I was just like all of them. A strange warmth enveloped around me, and I gladly welcomed it.

“But there’s something more important that I have to tell you.” His face was very serious, and I recognized it as the expression he wore when he conducted meetings.

“You’re going to be extremely mad at me.” He stated. He looked very nervous and apprehensive about telling me what he had to say. I raised an eyebrow at his statement and began to feel nervous. A million thoughts ran through my head. *‘What could he possibly say that’d be so bad? I mean it can’t be that bad. Not after the good news he told me, he – ‘*

“There was never any mission.”

“What?”

My heart dropped into my stomach and the world stopped spinning around me. I don’t know how long it took me to process his words; must’ve been at least a couple of minutes. The silence in the room was deadly and not even my sharp-edged katanas could’ve cut the tension in the air.

“What do you mean there was never any mission?” My eyes fixated on him with a hard gaze. “Our radars never picked up on any evil plan. It was all a plan.” He answered. “A plan, for what?” My emotions were all muddled up in my head and I didn’t know what to feel. He let out a pained sigh; he knew he’d have to tell his daughter at some point. He just wished he’d been more prepared.

“I wanted to give you a regular life,” he took a deep breath before continuing “When I was a child, I lived the life you do now. I never left this compound, I was constantly surrounded by mythics, and my parents were

never around to spend time with me. I missed out on so many opportunities in life that would've seemed so trivial to any other regular person. I never went to a high school, or college. To be honest, I'm not one-hundred-percent sure if I'm qualified to be sat here in front of you." I could tell by the look in his eyes that he'd kept this in for a very, very long time. His voice was exasperated and his face reminded me of a ghost that was pained to walk the Earth for eternity.

"I didn't want you to feel alone." His voice cracked and he was on the verge of crying. "I knew from the moment I took you in as my own, that I'd try to give you the most normal life I could. I see you around the base camp, and I can tell you feel like a stranger in your own home." I felt something wet roll down my cheek; I hadn't realised I was crying. "I am so sorry for lying to you, telling you there was a mission when there never was one from the beginning." he carried on "I didn't know any way to break the news to you. I promise you, you are not a bad undercover agent." His right hand ran through his hair and stray tears fell of his face. "I'm so sorry." He sobbed.

Next thing I knew, I had reached over the desk and flung my arms around my father's neck. Silently sniffing, my voice came out as a mere whisper. "No matter what life you give me, I'll always be grateful for it." Wrapping his arms around my shoulders, he buried his face deep into my hair and breathed in deeply. "Are you mad at me?" his voice trembled and was barely audible as his question was filled with worry. I shook my head vigorously, "I'm not mad. But I don't want to be an undercover agent in the field." I pulled away from his embrace and I remained standing in front of his desk. "I already have all I need." We both smiled and a relaxing silence ensued.

“Does this mean I have to leave Redwood?” I asked, mentally preparing myself for the inevitable. “Do you want to leave?” He asked me. I shook head sheepishly. “Then you have don’t have to go.” he answered. My face grinned widely and I once again, flung my arms around his neck. I knocked him back his chair and he let out a small huff before rubbing my back. “I love you dad.” I whispered into his ear. “I love you too.” he replied, lovingly.

Our moment was short lived as I remembered my promise to Delilah. I pulled away hastily and threw open the door. Racing down the hall, I heard my father shout from where he was, still in his office. “Where are you going?” “School! It’s prom night!” I yelled back. Amusement and giggles laced my words and I rounded the corner, out of my father’s sight. I didn’t turn back; but if I had, I would’ve seen the loving smile that graced his lips.

Running out of the base camp gates, and I rushed through the forest as fast as my legs could take me. The moon was full that night, and moonlight was the only thing illuminating my path. I remembered the route the school bus took every morning, clearly. In no time, I escaped the forest and came upon the roads in town. Hailing a cab, I jumped in and almost tripped over my words when I told the cabbie my destination. The forest looked beautiful during the night time and as the taxi drove through town, I marvelled at the sight of the tall trees standing side by side in the distance, knowing that my home lied in the heart of it all.

Soon enough, we reached Redwood High School and after paying my fare, I ran inside. Bounding through hallways towards the gymnasium, the entire school was flushed in darkness; save for the moonlight that streamed in

through the class windows. My feet slowed down as I arrived at the prom. Clad in a pair of ripped jeans, a t-shirt, and a faded cardigan, I decided I wasn't dressed fancily enough to be granted entry. I peeked at the night's events through the small windows of the gym doors. Everyone was dancing and having a good time. Multi-coloured lights shone in every direction and there were streamers and balloons strewn across the walls. I could feel the door vibrate as the loud music pounded throughout the walls of the school. I smiled when I saw how happy everyone looked.

"Lovely evening we're having." I heard a familiar, deep voice say from behind me. Turning around, I spotted Keegan slumped against the lockers further up the hallway. "Prom date stood you up?" I asked whilst walking closer towards him. "Nah, I only came because I'm supposed to be Heath's designated driver if he gets drunk." We both chuckled lightly and I leaned against the locker next to his. His attire was smart-casual with a touch of pop that came from his black sneakers. Even in the dim light, I could tell his eyes were staring direly into mine. "I see you kept your promise to Delilah." He pointed out and I nodded my head. "Yeah, do you know where she is?" "Last I saw her, she and Heath were slow dancing together." My face contorted in disbelief and my head whipped down to face Keegan. He simply shrugged and smirked at me. He stood up and mirrored my movements; he leaned against the locker, facing me. Our bodies were several inches away from each other and faces were dangerously close. His eyes flickered from mine to my mouth repeatedly, and his body leaned in so close that I could feel the warmth radiating off of him. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. My eyes fluttered shut and my

nose tingled from the hot breath that emitted from his mouth. Craning my neck upwards, I stood on my toes to reach his height. Our noses grazed each other's and his hand reached up to cup my face, and then...

'BANG!' The gymnasium door burst open before our lips could touch. We both jumped back from the shock and I clutched my chest from the mini-heart attack. Giggling teens left the gym and ran down the hall, no doubt about to do something they'd probably regret in the morning. I was so glad that it was dark, so Keegan couldn't see how red in the face I'd become. Our bodies were still very close together. Our eyes met and we stared at each other for what felt like forever. I don't know why, but I couldn't suppress the giggles that escaped my mouth. The entirety of the situation amused me, and soon, Keegan began laughing as well. We stood there, laughing in the darkness, enjoying each other's company.

"Do you wanna go grab a milkshake?" He asked me with a small smirk on his lips. "Yeah, I'd like that." I softly replied, and we began walking down the dark hallways. We walked side by side, our footsteps falling in step together. The only sounds that could be heard were those of our shoe soles against the ceramic tiles of the floor. I felt long, slender fingers intertwine with the fingers on my left hand. I didn't look down, and I didn't look at him. The only thing I did was lay my head against his arm as we continued to walk, this time even closer than before.

I figured I would call Delilah when I reached the diner. I'd tell her that when I came, she was too preoccupied with Heath to notice me. The night was still young, anyways. There was plenty of time to come back to school after

Keegan and I had our little date. For once in my life, I wasn't nervous, nor was I scared. I wasn't worried about other people's opinions or whether they'd accept me. My entire life, I lived not knowing what I was. My entire existence puzzled me and I never felt like I fitted in anywhere. But now, I didn't care. Sure, I had no idea where I came from, but what was important was that I had a home. I had a home in my life to call my own. It was full of magical creatures, headstrong yet sensitive adults, stereotypical teenagers, and absolutely amazing friends. I didn't fret over what the future held, because for that moment and a long time after, I was perfectly content with who I was.



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