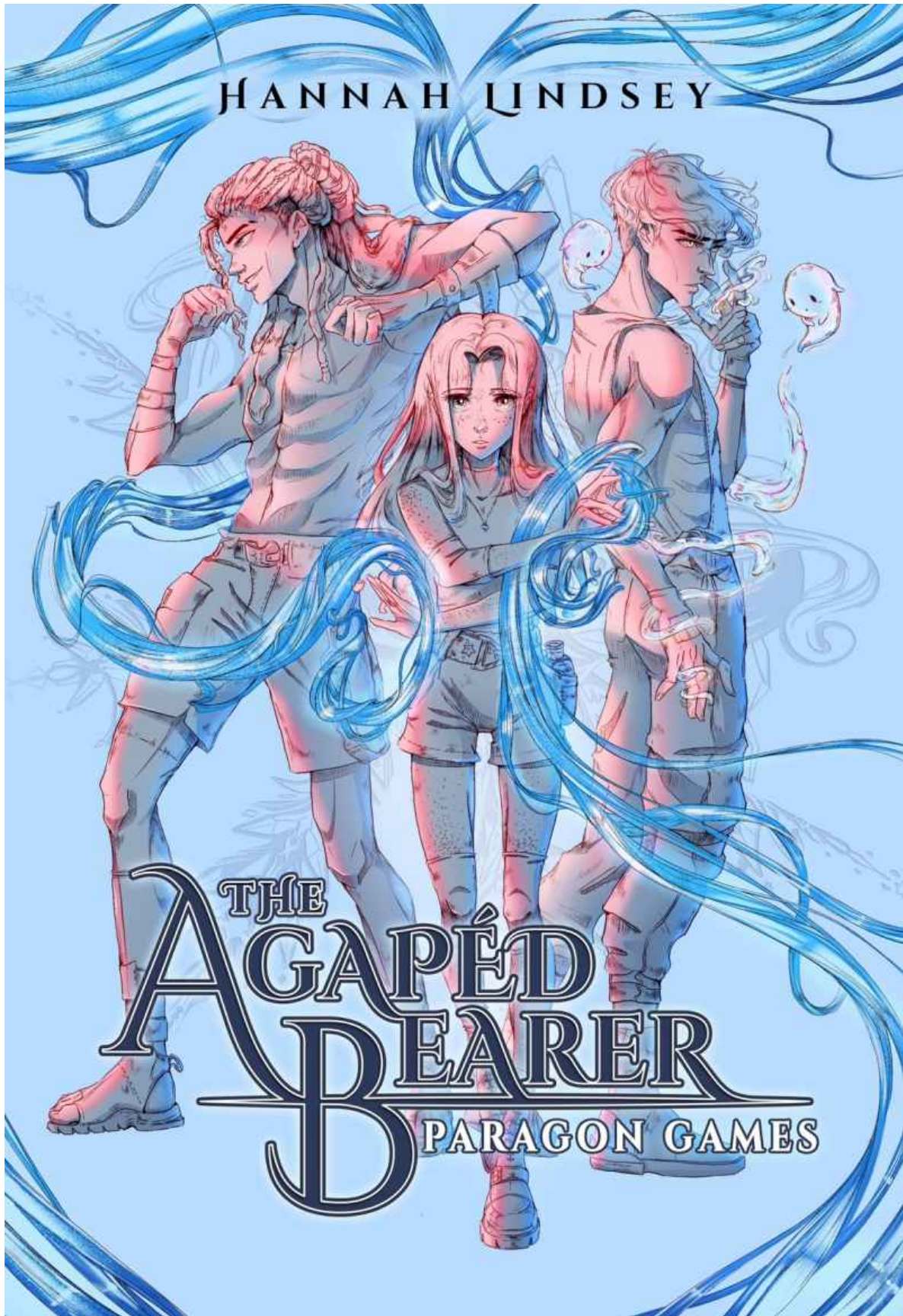




HANNAH LINDSEY

THE
**AGAPÉD
BEARER**
PARAGON GAMES

HANNAH LINDSEY



OceanofPDF.com

The Agapéd Bearer

Paragon Games

Hannah Taylor Lindsey

Starnate Publishing



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For those who feel like they don't belong, May this book be your home, full of Hunters and magic and stars.

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PART 1](#)

[1 Flying Paper Star](#)

[2 Sibling Squabbles](#)

[3 “No.”](#)

[4 Flying for Fizzy Rock Water](#)

[5 Be Safe](#)

[6 The Game Keeper](#)

[7 Visit from a Hero](#)

[8 The Emership](#)

[9 Rumors and Magic on Deck](#)

[10 Icy Rescue](#)

[11 Swelterplum Popper Challenge](#)

[12 Nuoljian Secret](#)

[13 In the Alley, in the Court](#)

[14 “Where’s Lisa?”](#)

[15 Gaius? Scared?](#)

[16 Abduction](#)

[17 The Dark Sages](#)

[18 Nightmaring](#)

[19 Sugar and Hysteria](#)

[20 I Choose...](#)

[21 “Would you do it?”](#)

[22 Reno](#)

[23 Sky Valley, Tuukweald](#)

[24 First Day and Dúlaman](#)

[25 “Why aren’t you a Hero?”](#)

[26 Painful Shockers](#)

[27 “Gaius is going to kill me.”](#)

[28 Vicissitude](#)
[29 “Then, you can’t.”](#)
[PART 2](#)
[30 The Games Begin](#)
[31 A Room Full of Fighters](#)
[32 Challenge 1](#)
[33 “What’s Your Wish?”](#)
[34 Alone](#)
[35 An Unhealable Wound](#)
[36 What is a Muck Man—](#)
[37 Reprisal](#)
[38 Vaenes and Maalisons](#)
[39 Team of Two—Plus Tuff](#)
[40 Icy Depths](#)
[41 The Thousand-Year-Old Tale](#)
[42 A Bloody Spar](#)
[43 “She’s a living corpse!”](#)
[44 Solicitude](#)
[45 Wrong Answer](#)
[46 Heartfelt](#)
[47 He and I](#)
[48 The Deal](#)
[49 “Because I am the Agapéd.”](#)
[50 The Wysh](#)
[51 A Nuoljian Gift](#)
[Acknowledgement](#)

PART 1

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1 Flying Paper Star

“Tuff... I’m about to lose it.”

It was night 92, and I was surprised I hadn’t already lost it. I sat alongside my orange glainie, a memory sprite, as he perched his round seven-inch body on the window seal near my elbows. We were staring up at the stars like usual as my digital clock ran past midnight on Earth. Took every bit of my magic-filled, sane heart not to burst through the glass and jolt toward the starlit sky. Patience—I began to *loathe* that word, and all the unheard wishes tagged along with it.

Just like every summer night in 2011, we waited for a magical sign, a Keeper, or even a fallen star to signal my return to the magic world. I began to see permanent nose smudges on the window pane after the first month of agonizing waiting; even Tuff left his own stubby fingerprints. Both our hopes were dwindling. I thought I would never have wished for summer to hurry up, but now, I was *begging* for the season to fast-forward.

Tuff’s diamond, embedded onto his spherical body like a magical backpack, lit my freckled face with a tangerine glow as he turned toward me.

“*Hoot-hoot!*” His encouraging little whistle was the cutest thing, and he couldn’t be more right.

Another sigh seeped through my lips, causing a blur of clouds to form on the window from my warm breath. “*I know they haven’t forgotten about me, but it’s officially been three months to this day.*” I pinched my lips together before blurting, “How long is this going to *take?*”

A pinpoint dot of light *zoomed* across the sky.

Our faces pressed on the window, my nose and cheeks squished so hard my eyelashes flickered against the glass. *Could that be it?*

After a moment of waiting, nothing but silence followed. My fingers ran through the scalp of my long hair before bunching up the brunette waves in defeat, and my eyes sagged. I released another deep breath as my glainie whistled a saddening *whoot*.

Nothing but another normal, boring, magicless shooting star...

After the Wishing Star release around early May, Lady Ariela said I should take a break from training and enjoy relaxing back home. *Who said*

practicing magic wasn't relaxing? I honestly couldn't think of a better way to spend summer than flying around planets and moving rocks with magic, all the while fighting monsters with a Keeper and Prince by my side. Everyone—including all the celestial Guardians and Keepers of Stars—said my heart needed a break from magic even though I didn't think so. I mean, sure, I defeated a hundred-year-old dark Mystic and almost died—but that didn't mean I wanted to take a vacation from magic training. No matter how much I wanted to disagree, I couldn't say no, especially to Gaius. If he said I needed rest, then I *really* needed rest.

So I rested... *mostly*. Unless Mom was at work, then I'd stay in my room, making it snow on my bed from the water I would manipulate from the running sink. I also discovered I could heat water as well, meaning I never had to suffer a lukewarm shower again. If the weather was clear in the mornings, I would run out to the woods and practice my terrain magic. Had to admit, I was getting pretty skilled at splitting branches off of trees with nothing but pebbles—even shooting a rock all the way through a pine's trunk like a bullet. Maybe that was something most terrain Mages could do, but I was proud. It was as close to magic training as I was going to get on Earth anyway.

The one magic I couldn't practice very well—the one I desired most in the whole world—was flying. Floating around in my room was fun for the first couple of nights, but I wanted to be soaring in the clouds again. That sensation of freedom, the drop of my heart when I would start free-falling, was something I kept dreaming of each night—another reason why Tuff and I scouted the skies through my window, in hopes of a sign from Gaius, Kamari, or the Guardians... yet nothing ever arrived.

It wasn't like I never tried to go back to Calendula or Boolavogue—I really did! Back in May, I evanesced to Planet Zena, just once, and the moment my foot stepped onto Kamari's asteroid, she belted out, “*Na so—yo best be restin' and not returnin' just yet! Dey will let yo know when to return, abi!*”

The thing was... *how was I to know when that was?* For a court of magical beings, *none* of them knew how to give proper instructions. So, here I was, August 2nd, running out of patience and my hidden stash of Oreos as I sat quietly in my bedroom with my magical, whistling pal, waiting in hopes of a sign from my silent teachers. Could be waiting for a star to fall, a magical creature to pop out of nowhere, or even for a portal to

reappear back in my purple suitcase (the one I had before expired *again* without warning). *I just hope they don't show up at my—*

“Lisa! Are you awake yet?”

My eyes jolted open at the sound of Mom yelling through my closed door. *Wait—when did I fall asleep?* I looked at my alarm clock and immediately fell out of bed at the nightmare displayed in green on its digital face. With summer done and school starting, I completely forgot to reset my alarm.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was already seven?” I yelled back, frantically grabbing clean clothes. *I knew I should have laid out my outfit on my bean bag last night!* “You know how important today is—I still need a shower!”

The moment I shot out of my room and toward the bathroom, Mom was standing there, brushing her teeth—hair already clamped back with her makeup finished for work. She wore a loose pastel green blouse and creamy slacks that were tight at her thin waist. The summer sun glossed her tan skin, making her even more beautiful with a healthy glow; I was jealous. I tried to tan myself and ended up sunburnt three times, receiving more families of mocking freckles in return.

So, she woke me up after already getting ready herself!

“I just thought you were trying a new sleeping schedule,” she said as I rushed past her in our bathroom, toothbrush still scrubbing away at her straight teeth, morphing her words; I understood her perfectly, though. The room was narrow, but we were small, so it was easy to run past Mom without knocking her face-first into the sink. “Wait—how is it my fault you slept in?”

I jumped in the shower before whipping my clothing off and throwing my pajamas over the curtain rod onto the floor. “Because you’re my mom,” I rushed, “and you should care about your daughter’s reputation—I can’t show up the first day of high school looking like I just rolled out of bed!”

Mom laughed before spitting her toothpaste into the sink. “Well, I think you look gorgeous either way. Be downstairs in twenty or I’m leaving your sleepy butt.”

Feeling Mom’s smirk burn through the polyester cobalt curtain, I shouted, “MOM—don’t you dare leave me! I still need breakfast!”

“Make it nineteen, then.” She laughed again, closing the bathroom door the moment I shut off the water.

Today was huge—probably the biggest day for any teenager on Earth. It was the first day of high school and not just any high school; it was John Belle High, the first all-choice school in our county. Back in 2007, it opened, and all the surrounding towns were sending their kids there. New desks, new gym, new football field, new teachers—who *wouldn't* want to go there? Now, almost 700 students were enrolled, and Jenny Kim, Lily, and I were three of them.

The new school was bigger than any school I had been to before, and there would be more people I didn't know. Looking my best mattered. I was never too concerned about the way I looked... until now. Until the thought of high school boys and cheerleaders and their thoughts invaded my mind. In the teenage world, first impressions meant everything, and no way was I about to be labeled as gross for going to school with oily, knotted hair simply because I overslept. Kids were mean in middle school; had to be ten times worse in high school, especially one where I only knew a handful of people.

I quickly threw on my straight-legged jeans, a simple black shirt with a scooped neckline, and red Vans—brand new that Mom found on sale for the start of the new year. After adding the palest face powder to the purple rings under my eyes, I took a good look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Not a scar to be seen, though there were plenty there—all concealed with the Eternling bracelet Inna gave me last year. Never had to worry about Mom or my friends seeing all my obscure marks from surviving death. Each night, I slept with the dainty string around my wrist; made being a normal girl on Earth a whole lot easier.

I bolted downstairs and grabbed a pre-packaged pastry from the pantry right when Mom honked on the car horn. My hair was still soaking wet, faint drops soaking the passenger's seat as I jumped into the car, so I had to improvise. I rolled down the window as we started driving off, letting the draft of the car dry my hair—the caramel ringlets forming quite easily. *Thank you, warm summer breeze.* Mom laughed at me, only because she would do the same thing when she was late to work.

Anxiety and excitement blended together in my throbbing heart at the sight of the foreign trio of double-door entrances. I'd fought monsters and ghouls, but nothing was as scary as walking into a new school with kids

my age who looked like grown adults. You'd think being around Hunters for a year would've helped my self-consciousness, constantly smelling like dirt and sweat in front of warriors and the Prince. Nope. No magic in the world could help my sheepish heart, and I really, *really* needed Confident Lisa to stop snoozing and wake up.

"Bye, sweetie! Have a great first day!" Mom said as I started walking toward the entrance. *Please, please, please let this be a good day.*

...

It was now Fourth Period, the last class of the day... and I didn't have a *single* class with Lily or Jenny Kim—all except for lunch, which only lasted twenty-five minutes. I knew a couple of kids in Honors English but not well enough to sit with them and start talking comfortably. Pretty sure I only said three sentences during Geometry and only two during Personal Finance. I hated my shy nature, the pathetic emotion branded on my soul. *Hopefully, P.E. will be better.*

The moment I stepped foot in the gymnasium, it was nothing but sophomores and a couple of juniors. To make things worse, all the girls looked to be on the cheerleading team, and I only knew that because Lily made Junior Varsity over the summer and couldn't stop talking about *everyone* on the team. That wouldn't have been a big deal—Lily said they were all friendly—but they were popular and looked like models; I, on the other hand, was the palest kid in every class, the only brunette covered in freckles, and the only one who didn't have the curves to earn a single glance from any boy.

Sure, in middle school, I hung around the so-called popular kids... but our middle school was a puddle of water compared to the ocean I was in now. Talking with the glitzy, perfect bodies and faces was impossible without Lily being there with me. *I thought this was an all-grades class, so where are the freshmen?*

Mr. Gutts—the beefy soccer coach who had a shirt too small for his muscles—had us all file into the P.E. classroom, saying we would spend half the time in class learning with him and the other half doing physical exercise. As he began to put us in assigned seats, I sat next to the first familiar face I had seen outside of Jenny Kim and Lily. She had glasses with a messy braid in her ashy brown hair, and wore similar clothing to mine, making her the most approachable girl in the room. She wasn't perfectly put together and didn't stand out like the cheerleaders, but neither

was I. Her last name had to begin with an “r” or “s,” but that was all I knew of her.

Right when I plopped my backpack down next to my desk, the girl smiled at me and said, “Hi, I’m Mary. We’re in the same homeroom, right?” She had more confidence than I would ever have—starting the conversation first before Mr. Gutts even finished calling roll.

I whispered back with the same friendly grin, “Yeah, I sat near the window when Ms. Jamieson made us all stand up and sit in our assigned seats. I’m Lisa, by the way.”

“Glad to see I’m not the only freshman here,” she said, taking out her notebook and mechanical pencils. Her voice was soft and sounded very northern, not local or the typical Jersey accent. *Maybe she’s new to the city or just moved to the state...*

“I know, right? I thought I walked into the wrong class, even though there is only one P.E. class.”

“Me, too!” Mary quietly chuckled.

It was a relief in my heart to know I didn’t end the day on a bad note and, instead, left it with a new friend.

When the final bell rang, I waited outside in the pool of students who were too young to drive to school. Lily stayed after for cheerleading along with Jenny Kim who had basketball conditioning. She made Junior Varsity for the girls’ basketball team; I wasn’t surprised, though. In middle school, even the teachers bragged about her skill in their gossip circles.

Lily, on the other hand... “shocked” wouldn’t be a decent enough word to describe my reaction when she said she was one out of the *three* freshmen who made the cut. Her bubbly personality must have played a big part because her back handspring, which she showed me more than I ever wanted to see, was a little weak. I was just glad they both were happy... and that Mom did *not* force me to do any school sports.

Mary came out and joined me as we both waited for our moms. We exchanged phone numbers when I saw Mom’s white Corolla pull up blasting Aerosmith with the windows rolled down. Stares from other students pelted her car; my lips pursed so tight. Her vehicle was the *only* one jamming in the car riders line. Always the only one, even after one teacher asked her to stop (obviously, that didn’t work).

I immediately jumped in and waved bye to Mary before we drove away.

“Aw—you already made a new friend?” Mom squeaked, way more excited about Mary than I seemed to be. “I am so happy, and you were freaking out over nothing this morning.”

“Her name’s Mary—wait, did you think I wouldn’t make friends or something?” I retorted.

“Can’t a mom be excited about her daughter’s first day of high school?”

I laughed. “If I was starting kindergarten, then yes, but back to the questio—”

“Okay—I’m just glad you have other friends outside of your ‘Lily and Jenny Kim’ group, that is all. Branching out, not being super shy. Makes a mother happy seeing her daughter happy, especially one as great as you—oh, I need to run to the store before we get home. Can you make sure I have my wallet in my purse?”

I reached in the back for her tan bulky bag, scoffing. “How can you go the whole day at work and not remember if you brought your wallet—”

“The same way you can go to school and forget homework.”

True, true. “Okay—I guess that makes sense.” I pulled out her pink wallet and saw no credit cards, just forty dollars in cash. “You have forty bucks.”

Mom, like a kid, said, “Sweet—we are eating *good* tonight!”

She then turned up the music, cranking up “Livin’ On the Edge” before driving toward the city and suburbs.

...

Later that night, after eating fried chicken and waffles—Mom’s new splurge meal obsession—and doing the dishes, I made my way to the laundry room to collect my clothes. It wasn’t a clear night, but the stars could still be seen peeking behind the blue clouds. Cicadas sang in the trees while lightning bugs danced on our lawn through the view of the window.

Every time I went into the laundry room, chills swam up and down my arms from excitement. Here, in this exact spot, was the night I saw the Wishing Star fall, the Agapéd Magic slam into my backyard. My whole life changed that day, which was a little over a year ago, proving that magic *did* exist along with a whole other universe of people and creatures.

Even then, as I took my clothes out of the dryer, reminiscing, I swear I saw another light flying right toward me... *wait...*

I blinked—blinked twice—

I thought I was having a Deja Vu moment—spotting another glowing orb pass by the window—but it was real! A small blue light the size of a tennis ball came zooming down like a firework, but it didn't land in my backyard. No celestial plumes trailed it, and it stayed small. But, it kept soaring and soaring until—

It *hit* the window with a chiming *ding* like a pebble being tossed against thin glass.

My shoulders jerked, and I dropped a T-shirt onto the floor. This light wasn't a magical animal, star, or stone, and it kept tapping against the window—knocking, demanding entry.

I leaned over the washing machine. *What in the world...?*

A small glowing origami in the shape of a blue star fluttered against the window like a cosmic June bug. I had never seen magic like that before and couldn't help but gaze at it.

Well, it kept tapping, and that's when I realized the paper star was trying to get inside—get to *me!*

My eyes widened as my jaw dropped. *This has to be it! This has to be from the Guardians or Gaius!*

It kept dinging and dinging against the pane, its paper edges as hard as ice. The thing was going to burst right through the glass if I didn't get to it. That could not happen—not with Mom in or out of the house. Would be impossible to explain the reason for a crackled hole.

I ran out of the laundry room and straight through the kitchen when my feet came to a brisk walk. Mom sat at the dining table, paying bills on her computer. Rhythms of anxiety started adding a faster beat to my heart. I knew I couldn't open the backdoor. She would see the strange origami star and discover magic—not the way I would ever want her to find out.

Being as inconspicuous as possible, I strolled along our fake-tiled kitchen floor, barefoot, until I paused behind her. When I glanced at the window of our backdoor, there was the paper star. It was following me, still bumping against the door and creating a quiet tapping.

A tapping that was *sure* to grab *her* attention.

Before Mom looked up to see the ruckus, I ran upstairs—darting for my bedroom, assuming the dainty origami would follow. My hand swung the door open and slammed it shut, and my eyes went straight for the window above my nightstand.

The paper origami was fluttering right outside.

I beamed with a glimmer in my eyes as my heart soared at its first sight of magic in three months. I fumbled over my backpack and tossed pajamas before reaching the glass pane.

Tuff came out of hiding to join me unlatching the locks on the window rail.

With a click and a clack, I jolted the window open. The origami glowing star bulleted inside my room—breaking a hole in the screen panel of my window. *Well, a busted screen is easier to explain than shattered glass.*

The magic paper star flew straight into my hands, sparkling blue and icy cold. Tuff perched on my head as I pinched the sides of the glowing paper—the thrumming of my heart rushing like ocean waves—causing it to start unfolding all by itself. As the last magical crease unfurled before me, the paper stopped glowing and became nothing but a thick piece of parchment, slightly torn on the right side. It was no bigger than a notecard with two short sentences written in handwriting I had eagerly missed:

Tomorrow at SUNRISE, meet in the forest of your backyard.

See you soon.

– G

Blood cascaded through me as a starry galaxy of wonder and awe swelled my chest. My life was starting again—the life that gave me passion, friends, and the most beautiful gift of all: magic. I kept rereading Gaius’ handwriting and started flying with Tuff in my room—spinning and dancing in the air from all the joy of knowing my magic life was beginning in less than twelve hours. *Yes, yes, yes, yes, YES!*

I rushed past my door and stood at the top of the stairway, almost crashing into the banister. “Mom—is it okay if I ride with Lily to school tomorrow?”

Mom, still sitting at her computer in the dining room, leaned back and casually answered, “Um, is there a particular reason why you—”

“I have her textbook—her mom offered—can I, *please?*” I lied in haste, knowing good and well I had zero classes with Lily and *zero* intentions of going to school tomorrow. Magic was on the line so a little white lie to Mom did not matter at that moment.

She turned her attention back to her computer, answering with just as much enthusiasm as the first time, “Sure, that is fine.”

I’m glad she didn’t turn to look at me a second time; no way would she have believed my overly joyful smile was due to the fact I was giving Lily a book.

I dove into my bed like a dolphin crashing through sea billows, cuddling Tuff and pressing his little warm tummy against my chest—pure, mystifying bliss painted all over my face and his.

My magical life is finally happening again!

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2 Sibling Squabbles

I was up before the sun the next morning, running on four hours of sleep and the sparkling thrill of adventure. Gaius' note said to meet at sunrise, but I knew I would have to be a *little* late; I had to make sure Mom saw me go to “school” with Lily first, and that happened a bit after the sun was above the trees.

I made myself school-ready with sneakers and a loose t-shirt, including my backpack full of notebooks and pencils, and waited downstairs in the living room for Mom to head off to work.

My legs were restless, my smile giddy. Magic was just minutes away, and I couldn't contain my excitement any longer, barely hungry enough to finish off my slice of peanut butter toast.

Mom grabbed her keys, took her precious time to find her phone in the kitchen, and then went through the laundry room.

A couple more minutes...

I ran to the living room—watched as her white Corolla backed out of the garage and curved across the street.

Almost through the clear...

Warm headlights soon faded between the bushes and trees until all evidence of her watching eyes was gone.

It's time!

I became lightning, bolting to my bedroom, changing out of school clothing like a maniac, and putting on my EverWake garments. They still fit pretty loosely, not surprising though; the feminine gene was taking its time warming up to my kid-like body. Most freshmen girls seemed to hit a mighty growth spurt over the summer, actually fitting into women's clothing. I didn't mind too much, though. I liked what I saw in the mirror for the most part—magic scars and all.

I grabbed my Echo Ring from the nightstand drawer and adorned my left index finger with it. I wasn't planning on using the magic ring that morning... because I *couldn't*. The ring—the Time Keeper's precious magic inside of it—had stopped working. I tried back in June, but it spun around like a normal fidget ring, making a cute dinging sound and nothing more. I never dropped it or banged the green and white crystals on its metal face

against any piece of furniture, which meant someone had to have turned off its doppelganger properties.

The Guardians were *really* making sure I rested during my summer vacation.

Scratchy, dry grass skidded across my ankles as I ran toward our backyard forest. The summer breeze brushed through my hair, tangling up my brunette waves and making me less presentable, and I didn't care one bit about running into spider webs or hordes of gnats. I knew someone magical was waiting for me in the midst.

Will it be Gaius? Maybe Kamari? Wouldn't be surprised if it were—

The moment the last green tree branch veered away from my view, I saw the strawberry-haired Keeper standing six feet before me. Aqua blues and ocean emeralds glistened off her leotard, all underneath silk and sheer fabric that decorated her hips and shoulders. No scissors had touched her three-foot-long hair, perfectly sculpted in a wavy intricate braid, and her smile was more radiant than her ocean home.

"Inna!" I shouted as I ran up to her, giving her the biggest hug.

She returned the long-awaited embrace with just as much enthusiasm, scents of sea salt and citrus wafting around her body. "Lisa—my goodness it has been far too long! You still look as beautiful as ever—growing into a fine young lady, I see."

Tuff came out of hiding and cuddled up to Inna's face. He missed seeing my mentor just as much as I did.

"Glad to see you as well, Tuff." Inna smiled as my sprite tinted her cheeks with glainie dust.

"With Gaius' handwriting," I began, "I figured he was the one coming here."

"He did send the blynk—the folded, enchanted letter—but got caught up with the Guardians. Asked me this morning to come and get you."

"Asked?" I chuckled, knowing that wasn't the case.

She playfully rolled her ocean eyes. "Ah—'*told*,' is more like it. Seems he still does not know the true definition of what a 'favor' is even after 700 years of being a Keeper. Now, come. He and the Guardians are waiting for us in Haim Gana."

I happily took her escorting arm as her other hand produced cobalt rivers of flowing magic. Fist clenched and mind focused on the ethereal

realm, Inna gripped the blue magic, and it began to glow even brighter. With a punch to the air, the evanesce power burst, and we began to teleport to the home of the Guardians.

Chimes and claps of thunder lasted only for a second, soon replaced with the echoes of gentle humming winds. My eyes opened to view one of the lands I missed. We were standing at the entrance of the Elysium—Ariela's sacred domain and home of the family of Guardians. Peace and serenity were the aromas, charming my senses as Inna guided me down the marbled doors and through the white-arched gateways of the celestial manor. We walked by the statue of the man defeating the shadowing darkness and turned left, going over the viaduct and straight toward the golden meeting room. Nerves tightened around my bones, but in a good way—a way that made my heart race with anticipation.

As we neared the golden door, nagging voices penetrated through the stone walls, unfamiliar and quite loud. It definitely wasn't Gaius or the Guardians; the noise sounded old and without much care for kindness or elegance.

“Ah...” Inna muttered, “seems Sera and Idan are here.”

“Who are they?” I asked. The names sparked a sand grain-sized memory, but I couldn't put my finger on where I had heard them before...

Suddenly, the squeakier, feminine nag sniped through the crack of the door, “*A wee child, Dayasheel—aye, there be not enough words in all time to describe how I feel toward your ignorant behavior. Our magic, taken for granted, that is! You pure bloke of a Guardian!*”

Inna crinkled her face. “Um, I'll have them be the ones to tell you that, though you will be in for an earful.”

“Why—what did I do?” I said to her, doe-eyed.

“Honestly, nothing more than what you were asked of, but to them...” A shrug. “Well... you'll see.”

Inna grabbed the golden handle of the meeting room door and pulled it open. The white round stone table was now gone, but the pink upside-down tree still shone brightly, dangling on the ceiling, its petals delicately falling onto the golden floor. All armchairs were missing, too, replaced with creamy couches and royal seating, spread around the room and occupied with familiar celestial beings.

Six of the seven Guardians were all casually sitting and watching the show in the middle: Dayasheel being scolded by two decrypted, uptight

siblings in cloaks no taller than me. Never, *ever*, had I expected a scene quite like this.

Even with the gold-freckled court, my eyes couldn't help but stare directly at the muscly gardener leaning against the wall. His arms were crossed, and he looked exceptionally happy watching a Guardian getting berated by an old woman and her brother. Out of everyone in the room, I missed spending my magic-filled days with him most of all; hoped he felt the same.

Haim Gana's light lit up my and Inna's silhouettes, and every stare turned toward us. I was going to run straight to Gaius, but the old man and lady started marching toward me—furrowed brows and wrinkly skin showing no signs of joy.

The horsey woman was short and skinny, the most terrifying grandma I had ever encountered. “Aye, you the new Agapéd Bearer, girl?”

The abrupt question threw me off, so I answered timidly, “Um, yes, ma'am. That's me.”

She then magically summoned an odd leafy fan into her bony hand and gave me a good *whack* on the head—one that *hurt* and left a red nick on my forehead. I didn't even know this woman!

I had no response; never before had I been whacked by an old lady.

“Sera, you can't just be hittin' the Agapéd like that!” the old man chimed in, snatching her fan and saving my head from another good beating. He looked right at me. “Forgive my dear sister—would you please clarify to us the purpose of our magic bein' used on Earth in the form of a tiny ring?”

A light bulb flicked on inside my head. The two rambunctious siblings in front of me were *the* Sera and Idan—the Time Keepers. Ariela, Dayasheel, and Gaius mentioned their names only once; no surprise I didn't remember them. Seeing the situation more clearly knowing their true identities, it seemed the two wizened Keepers finally found out about Dayasheel's invention... and that it was given to a child from Earth.

No one else in the room bothered to interfere, so I answered, “Well, I had to finish my training here, and, uh, I needed a way to finish school as well... so Dayasheel made the rings with The Sublimity Charm in them for me so I could—”

Idan immediately turned around and charged at Dayasheel. The walking wrinkled man had *speed*! He gave some hardy whacks to the

Guardian's golden shoulders with his sister's fan. "You blunderin' fool! You mean to tell me our magic was wasted so the Agapéd could attend somethin' as trivial as Earthian studies?"

Fair-skinned and black-haired Dayasheel, not bothering to counter the hit, tensed up his shoulders—evading the blows as much as possible. "Idan, please—Lady Ariela insisted as I've mentioned before. Lisa needed —"

Sera came roaring in to join her brother's scolding. "She be needin' better excuses besides the half-witted ones comin' out your mouth!"

Guardians are over the Keepers, right? So, how in the world are they letting two tiny, gray-haired siblings push them around and mock Ariela's methods?

"Time be but a gift, and you used it for childish things—makin' doubles and splittin' souls for a wee bit of frivolous school work!" Sera continued, grabbing her fan back from her brother and giving more burly whacks.

Emunah ascended out of his chair, gray hair tied back and black beard perfectly shaped, cloaked in a robe of gold and deep blues, and came toward the two grumpy Keepers. "Miss Sera, Mr. Idan, I can assure you that Lisa—"

Sera gritted her yellowing teeth at the Guardian, fan in hand, fraying frizzy strands of her hair whipping around. "I don't wanna hear it unless you be wantin' the same treatment!"

Emunah lifted his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay—it was all for the purpose of good, I can assure you." He jerked his chin in my direction. "That little lady you just greeted with your beatings followed the rules of The Sublimity Charm exactly, so no need to prolong this petty quarrel any longer."

"Oh, *I'll* be the one who says when this needs to start n' stop, you bloke!" Sera retorted.

With the crazy Keepers occupied with Emunah, Inna and I snuck around Dayasheel and over to Gaius. No one else in the room seemed to enjoy the feud as much as he did. His burly smile was wide, trying to hide underneath his short facial hair, but it was no use. When his green eyes finally met mine, I couldn't help but grin, too.

"Seems you got your wish," I whispered toward the muscular gardener, remembering what he asked for a year ago on top of

Boolavogue's mountain the day I received the rings—the day I met the Sonons and lost my first spar against the Prince.

Gaius chuckled under his breath in a quiet, deep voice. “Seems so. Good to see you again, bright and well, though maybe not so well after that gimpish slag from the old git.” That brogue accent of his peeked through the latter of his sentence. His voice was nothing but memories before today. I had missed it.

“I’ve been slagged harder by you and Ekron during spars, so I’m perfectly fine.” I slipped a laugh. “Is this why you sent Inna to come and get me?”

He leaned in, freshly cut wood scenting his trench coat like always. “I couldn’t afford to miss this squabble.”

“How long have they been going at it?”

“Let’s just say they already took a good beating on Vilmad before Dayasheel showed his guilty self.”

Off to the darkest corner of the room sat a solemn shadow of Vilmad, mouth shut and voice silenced. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected someone to be in control of his actions, all except for—

As delicate as dropped rose petals—through the same golden door—an angelic lady with yellow silk wings came swooping. All forms of arguing stopped. Even my thoughts couldn’t freely wander. She was dressed in an exquisite gold gown made from the threaded fabric of the sun, pure, regal radiance. Glass heels hugged her delicate toes, and starlit diamonds were on every piece of jewelry, complimenting her coppery skin. Her hair was poofy, tight with ringlets, and her eyes shimmered beneath the circlet nestled on her forehead.

Beauty wished to glisten as brightly as she did, for Lady Ariela was a star in Elysian form.

In her commanding yet gentle voice, Lady Ariela said to the two siblings, “Dear Sera and Idan, I apologize for my tardiness and any misunderstanding that may have followed.” She then looked right toward me. “Miss Lisa, would you mind joining me for a moment? It is an honor to see you once again.”

I walked over to Ariela as the Time Keepers backed away from Dayasheel and Emunah. They didn’t bolt out in rants or start nagging the Elysian; they were shy, like a couple of toddlers being called downstairs for a good scolding. Strangest couple of siblings I had ever seen.

Ariela looked at the Time Keepers and continued, “Now, I called you both here for good reasons with no intentions of malice toward my Guardians. Dayasheel was under my orders—which you both wholeheartedly agreed to as well—to make Miss Lisa the Echo Ring infused with The Sublimity Charm. He crafted it with her magic pulse in mind, and Lisa did not think twice about breaking any of your rules of soul duplication. So, why the bickering?”

The two siblings were prideful and did not want to admit their actions were wrong. Idan stepped in first with a casual excuse. “Aye... well... he didn’t tell us she was a child—”

Sera continued to finish his sentences. “And children of Earth no nuttin’ about our magic—”

“So perhaps...”

“... we got a little too...”

“... carried away.”

Ariela fixated on them, her amber eyes telling the siblings to look in my direction.

Idan nudged Sera’s arm, and she tried her best to make eye contact with me. “Look... we are sorry for actin’ out...” she mumbled.

Sera then hit her brother in the stomach, and he apologized in haste. “Yes, we are terribly sorry...”

Even though it was the most bizarre apology I had ever heard, I accepted it.

“That’s okay,” I said smiling. “Thanks for letting me use your magic. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I would have been prepared enough to stop Saraquel’s magic without it—”

It was as if I said a magic word because the two siblings came right up under my nose; they smelled like lilies and worn leather. *Do they not know what all I’ve done? Are they really that scary to talk to that even giving news about Darkness from the Guardians was too much of a task?*

“You bested the Fallen?” Sera spoke with awe in her voice.

“All by yourself?” Idan added.

“I mean, I did have some help—”

Ariela stepped in, interrupting my claim. “Lisa destroyed my fallen brother’s magic in less than a year’s time—heart in all.”

Sera put her hand on my forehead, right where she whacked me. “Dayasheel!” she yelled in a raspy voice. “Why you lettin’ me whack our

Agapéd like that? You want me to look like a wee fool in front of Lady Ariela—do ya?” Her eyes glared at me again, and her hand started to glow green.

In moments, my forehead felt better. *Is she healing me with her time magic?*

Idan grabbed my hand and bowed, his palm very wrinkly and cold. “Miss Lisa, it seems my sister and I have underestimated you and are most utterly ashamed. Our magic is in good hands—mighty good hands, at that. Whatever you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Flustered, I humbly responded, “It’s okay. You really don’t have to apologize. I was just doing my job—but thank you.”

Vilmad clicked his tongue and finally spoke up from the corner. “Oh, thank goodness that is over... *Finally*, we can continue the purpose as to why we called you up here.” His voice I didn’t miss one bit.

Idan turned to Vilmad, his smile thinning. “Aye, and what that be?”

“Well, for one, we asked you to *restrict* the magic on the Echo Ring so Lisa couldn’t access its power during her resting period, but you *failed* to return the charm. Lisa, did you happen to bring the ring with you?”

Vilmad was now out of his chair and walking swiftly toward me. His hair was still straight and long, waterfalling down his spine, touching the back of his long ivory robe. That same solemn glare was still plastered on his thin face.

I took off the Echo Ring and cradled it in my palm. *Glad I brought this—could have mentioned that in the blynk, though...*

Sera and Idan looked down inside my palm. “Aye, that be an easy fix,” Sera proclaimed. The little old Mage extended her wrinkly finger toward my ring, pointing her fingernail as if it were the end of a wand.

Shots of green magic burst from her fingertip, and the Echo Ring instantly chimed and jiggled, giving a quick flicker of invisibility. The magic was back inside instantly!

So cool!

“Wow... thank you, ma’am,” I said to her, sliding the ring back on my left index finger and down to the knuckle.

“Now, what be the second reason if that were the first?” Sera asked Vilmad.

Lady Ariela answered for him. “I would like you to gift the memory of this location to Lisa so that she may evanesce here freely.”

My eyes widened. I knew the Keepers were in charge of time, but I never considered memories to be a part of that.

“That be all?” Idan asked Ariela.

“All indeed,” she confirmed.

Idan nodded at his sister before staring at me underneath his unbrushed eyebrows. The Time Keeper held up his palm toward my forehead, and his eyes began to glow as white as the moon. His hand emitted a glow of misty blue, and I felt a cold chill inside my head as his magic penetrated my thoughts. I closed my eyes. Not even a second later, I knew the *exact* location of Haim Gana; truly, it was an odd place to put a magic realm.

“There,” Idan said, his eyes now back to a muted gray. “She be as bright as a glint with that memory now—won’t ever miss a landing when evanescin’ here, I can assure you.”

Ariela smiled at the two and said, “Thank you both. Your work is much appreciated, and I can assure you your magic is in good hands.”

“Aye,” the siblings said simultaneously. “Til next time.” They then both evanescenced away.

Every Guardian in the room, including myself, released a deep breath.

Ariela took my hand as Gaius and Inna came over toward me. “Now, with my agenda completed, it is time I handed over the rest to Gaius,” she said. “Being that Saraqiel’s vessel was defeated and no other sightings of my other brethren have been unearthed, you are free to continue to study magic under his guidance—unless you prefer someone else.”

I hastily shook my head and answered, “I like the teachers I have now. They’re pretty great.”

“I am glad to hear. May The Light be with you as you continue your venture of becoming a powerful Mage, dear Lisa.”

The golden Elysian then dismissed herself from the room, the Guardians trailing behind.

Emunah gave me a nudge on my shoulder before he left. “Now that you can evanesce here, I assume you won’t be needing any more Ingress-Egress Draughts?”

My glowing suitcase was great and all, but evanescing was much more convenient. I nodded my head, “Thank you, Emunah, but yeah, I

don't think I will need another one of those potions."

He gave me a wink before he and Vilmad departed from the room—pleasantly surprised to see them getting along.

Inna left not too long after, leaving Gaius and me alone. Before he could get in a word, I happily expressed to my brawny teacher, "So, does this mean I will be getting a flying instructor next?"

He huffed. "Going up and down—I can teach you that much. Seemed to me, you already had a good grasp on the technique last I saw you. So, no." Gaius smirked and held out his arm. "Grab on. We have an important meeting to get to before your training starts."

I grasped his bicep. "We? With who?"

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3 “No.”

The moment my fingers tightened around his arm, Gaius used his other hand to punch the air full of evanesce magic. Thunders and swirls of lights flashed, fading fast and revealing a wide-open landscape—another familiar sight. Below were small brick homes, rolling fields of cattle, and apple orchards sprinkled with buttery sunlight, the flourishing beginnings of the massive Kingdom.

Boolavogue was livelier than I remembered, or maybe I had been in Keyport the whole summer that I had forgotten there could be more than a handful of people strolling down paths and old towns. But, its beauty—that hadn’t changed. Each leaf, flower, and ripe crop soaked up the summer sun like a gallant royal garden.

Gaius continued, squinting from the just-risen sun. “King and Queen Sonon. I mentioned you were coming today and said I would only meet now.”

I laughed, squishing the cliffside weeds with my boots. “When you say *now*—”

“Means when I feel like arriving.”

I still remembered the mountain path well, all its rooted dirty holes and lingering trees, the Veradome secret entrance steps behind us. The farms seated at the bottom were the same, too, just with refurbished siding and a fruitful supply of wooly cattle. Sweet scents of apple wafted through the mountain breeze as we descended the trail, and I could have sworn I heard a Gora bear growling down below—beckoning for an early lunch.

“What do you think this meeting is about?” I asked.

“Don’t know.”

“Will I still be training here? To become a Hunter, I mean? You think it’s about that?”

“Yes, and it could be, but that is not the only training you will be doing this time around.”

Curiosity lifted my brows. “Am I going to be learning something *new—is it more magic powers?*”

A short laugh fell between his breaths as the birds chirped. “Thought having four types would be enough for you.” He kept his gaze on the trail

ahead. “Lisa, I am not sure how long the Agapéd will stay with you—could be a lifetime—so it’s good for you to know other jobs that require your magic skills other than fighting off fiends. There are Hunters for those who need beasts killed and Treasurer Hunters for those who need expert cultivators for magic glintz and ore. But for Mages and Mystics who can’t fight or hunt and still need help, that’s where Charmers come in.”

Squirrels began to make a light ruckus in the trees above us as Gaius continued. “Charmers are typically apprentices to Menders—healing Mages and Mystics—and Mixtitians—potion makers. If there is an ingredient for medicine or for a potion that they are unable to acquire, they will hire a Charmer to explore whatever depth or kill whatever beast comes their way to find the item. Why they aren’t called Hunters is because not every quest for an ingredient is as simple as ‘kill and report back.’ Some require negotiation, patience, and magic—which not all Hunters possess.”

Gaius then looked down at me, the morning sun turning the loose strands of his wavy hair into copper thread. He kept smiling, lingering a bit longer at me, as if I were about to leave again for who knew how long. “And that’s what you’ll be doing.”

Throwing a magical job on me on my first day back was normal behavior from the Keeper of Stars. Honestly, being a Charmer sounded exciting. I was finally going to be helping people with my magic.

Almost skipping down the mountain trail with my hands behind my back, I swayed side to side, prodding, “So, I’m guessing I’ll be a Charmer for the Veradome, then?”

“No. You’ll be a Charmer for me.”

I almost tripped over a loose stone in the ground at the sound of me working *for* Gaius and not *with* him.

“But, you’re *Gaius*! You are *way* better at finding ingredients—wait, why do *you* need a Charmer anyway? I thought you made potions for the Veradome as part of your job, not for fun.”

“You want the job or not?”

“Of course, I do—I am just saying—”

“We will start first thing tomorrow, then...” Gaius reached into his coat pocket as the trees began to steer clear of the trail, pulling out something forgotten. In his broad hand, the thing was small, a child’s first pocket knife if anything; to me, it was a beautiful gift I had lost months ago.

The purple gem sunken into the hilt was freshly shined, and the Khooni Neelam Pine blade was perfectly sharpened. He placed the beautifully crafted dagger back into my hands. “Here.”

My spirit soared because my precious gift was not missing in the rubble of battle!

“*Valor!* I thought I lost it the night we fought Ecuras!” I exclaimed, admiring my dark purple weapon.

“I went back out, reworked the forest, and plowed the ground when I saw it lying there. I also went ahead and buffed out the chips and shined the heartwood gem, making it as good as new again.”

“I can’t believe it—thank you so much for finding it!”

“Just don’t lose it again.” He smirked down at me as we came up to the bridge to cross over to the Inner Kingdom.

We meandered our way through the bustling royal town, seeing many Hunters walking around and a couple of Gora bears with them as well. My heart started fluttering, hoping to see Caelum during our meeting. I missed him—not in a weird way, though—just as a friend and a fun sparring opponent. *Yeah... just a friend...* My summer afternoons were quite boring without him showing off his magic and wanting to learn more about my Earthly life. Hopefully, Ekron would still let me train with him.

Once we reached the castle’s front gate, the colossal stone doors with the Kingdom’s emblem etched onto the front—a sword behind the face of a roaring Gora bear—Gaius and I were happily greeted by the Captain of the Guard, Arond. He was the one guard who could easily shake the Keeper’s hand and give a laugh or two. His beard was whiter than I remembered, but his spirit was still just as calm and burly.

“Quite late for you, isn’t it?” Arond said to the Keeper of Stars, eyes wrinkled and squinted from smiling, leading us into the courtyard and past the white fountain.

“Not sure what you mean, Arond,” Gaius replied. “Said I would be coming today, so here I am.”

The old Captain made a hardy grin amid a hushed laugh. “Guess I am just used to you being up with the sun and not after it, anytime you’re with the lass, Lisa, that is—good to see you again, little lady.” I smiled back before glancing toward the stone pathway in the open garden. “I assume your meeting with our King and Queen is on good terms?”

“Don’t know,” Gaius answered casually. “Given that you’re the one escorting us must mean I’m doing something right.”

“I’ll take a Keeper’s compliment in any form. I will say, after your show of the Wishing Star release, our kingdom has flourished with many Hunter requests—keeping us Captains on our toes with slagers wanting to join every corps and troop. The King’s request to invite all neighboring towns was a mighty risk, and it paid off. Been spreading the word all around about how grand Boolavogian Hunters are and their show of the starry magic.”

It wasn’t the King’s idea to invite the town but Gaius’—never intending for it to boost the reputation of the Kingdom. The Keeper just didn’t want to draw attention to us during our battle. However, being that someone as high-ranked as Arond believed the small lie meant the King and Queen kept everything secret, which is what we wanted. If the whole Kingdom found out a dark Mystic was attacking the Keeper of Stars during a festival, panic would’ve been the only thing people yelled and screamed over, not the stars.

Instead, it seemed like our battle with Ecuras never even happened inside the Kingdom’s walls.

We soon approached the giant Throne Room doors where two guards were already prepared to escort us inside. Each soldier grabbed a handle and pulled, their muscles straining, opening the entryway just enough for me and my brawny mentor to waltz in.

Everything looked the same: polished decorative flooring of creams and slate grays, white-columned walls embedded with clear glass windows—the view of the mountains and training ground peering through—the walnut vaulted ceiling three stories high, and two extravagant thrones on top of a dais occupied by a gallant husband and wife.

Queen Leonora smiled as we walked in, wearing a light summer dress colored in warm blues and whites. Her dark hair was perfectly styled with her circlet, half-braided and half-loose skirting down her back, complementing the three braids in her husband’s shoulder-length main.

King Bolthor sat mightily on his throne, matching his wife in deep hues, just with more leather straps and bracers—a “Royal Hunter’s Garment” one could call it. He wasn’t grinning like the Queen, but something about his stoic face did look a bit softer than usual.

Is that... a smile?

The closer we came to the middle of the room, Queen Leonora stood up and began walking toward me. “Ah—my dear Lisa and Gaius. It is truly a pleasure to have you join us here today.” She then approached me and clasped my hand in hers, which was odd. *Aren’t I supposed to be the one doing the honoring, not the other way around?*

She continued her warm welcome as she guided me and Gaius closer to the thrones. I knew the Queen to be kind, but this was getting to the point of being very kind. “Lisa, I know it is your first day back in Boolavogue, and I am forever grateful to you and Gaius for taking time out of your schedule to meet with us. With all that has happened throughout the last season, we had something of paramount importance to discuss with you, which needed to be addressed as it pertains to your Hunter training.”

Gaius and I stood at the base of the dais as the Queen ascended back to her throne... and my heart throbbed. *Is this good news? Will I still be training with Cal? Or what if it is bad—what if I’m not with Ekron anymore? Or worse: my restricted Hunter license expired and I have to do it all over again! Please don’t be that!*

Silver, sapphire chains rattled on the King’s belt as he straightened his back. He looked directly at me with his hazel eyes and spoke with a deep, echoing voice, “Lisa... Leonora and I welcomed you into our home as a guest and as a favor from a Keeper himself a year ago. Since then, you’ve shown exceptional growth as a Hunter prodigy and even more so as The Light’s next Chosen... taking on a task that, in turn, saved the stars and most importantly to me, my family and beloved home... and we could not be more grateful.”

My eyes widened, even more than they already were. *A compliment from the King! What is going on right now?*

King Bolthor continued, his lips still thin and barely visible underneath his black beard. “Lisa Robbie, you defeated a threat, faced calamity without backing down, and came out of battle shining despite being a mere child who had no reason to save a people that wasn’t your own. In light of every detail, Leonora and I have discussed this intently during your absence and would like to offer you a gift.... One of which you wholeheartedly deserve...”

I took a big gulp; never in my life had a gift been this hyped up for me, and my palms started to get sweaty from all the jitters.

“Lisa... with my name and crown as King of Boolavogue, I would like to bestow upon you the noted title of ‘Hero’ and for it to take into effect starting today... if you choose to accept.”

The walls around me disappeared as my mind could only focus on the gift King Bolthor had just given me. *Hero. A Hero. A real Hero—this is actually happening!* Everything I had been working toward—all the days and nights practicing magic and fighting monsters, getting blistered and bloodied from countless training—had just been given to me before I even had a chance to start my second day of high school. *I’m not dreaming! I’m awake, being offered the name “Hero” right here in a castle!*

The moment I learned of Heroes—right in the middle of my best friend’s bedroom nonetheless—was what sparked my passion for growing stronger in magic. It gave me meaning, not just learning magic because I was told to; I was learning it to save the world and to help those in need... and because Valhalla really wanted me to become one. *She has to be smiling down on me right now, ready to yell at me if I even think of refusing this offer.*

There was no doubt in my heart. This was what I was made for, and I was ready—

“She declines.”

All the glimmer of the royal room extinguished in my eyes.

My lungs inhaled, but the breath stayed lodged in my throat.

Unblinking, I slowly leered up toward Gaius after hearing the worst two words come out of his mouth—mostly because the King asked for *me* to respond and not him—and readdressed his abrupt answer. “No?”

He crossed his arms. “No.”

The voice I once grew to love was now nothing but a grim echo in the pristine hall... and I could not *believe it!*

The nerve of the Keeper! He knows how much this means to me, so why on the planet did he just say no?

And I wasn’t the only one shocked by the Keeper’s opinion.

The King and Queen sat dumbfounded on their thrones. No one refuses a gift when the giver is standing directly in front of you, especially if that person is the *King!* He and his wife took time out of their day to meet with us, all in hopes of offering their respect for me and Gaius saving the Wishing Stars and the Kingdom... and he told them no without any remorse hinted in his words.

What is Gaius thinking? I wish he would have discussed it with me first, before putting words in my mouth that I *clearly* didn't agree with.

King Bolthor readjusted himself in his chair, jaw tight with eyes pointed sharply toward Gaius. It was evident His Majesty was agitated, but my mentor showed no signs of fear. "I understand you are Lisa's guardian as she lives in the Kingdom... but by what *right* do you have to answer on her behalf?"

Gaius staidly explained to the King, "The offer is appreciated, but everything that comes with the title of 'Hero' is something Lisa can't take on just yet. She is young and naïve about our worlds, and she still has a lot of training to do when it comes to magic as well as combat. Once her name goes on the record for nations to summon her as Hero, there is no going back, and they will expect her skill to be on par with the rest, even if her magic outmatches most. Speaking on behalf of the Guardians and Lady Ariela—the world isn't ready for the Agapéd Magic to reveal itself if we can help it."

The room absorbed Gaius' logical comment like water to a sponge, soaking in the realization that, even though I technically "saved the world," I was still just a kid with a lot to learn.

King Bolthor scratched his bushy, beaded beard. "I see... Still, this is Lisa's right and choice..." He then looked toward me. "What is your answer, Lisa?"

Before, I would've said yes in a heartbeat, but after getting my head out of the clouds... I realized I knew nothing of what being a Hero truly meant. *Will I even be able to train as a Hunter anymore? Is this a life-long job? Will I have to move away—I'm not even old enough to drive! I can't even win a match against Gaius, so how can I expect to save a whole country?*

I was given a dream in the form of a king's word... but I didn't feel as if I truly deserved it just yet. During the battle with Ecuras—the whole reason for the gift of being a Hero—I didn't do much. Gaius fought him; I was thrown off a cliff. Gaius weakened his magic; I just covered his back. Sure, up in the sky, I made the finishing blow, but the Keeper was the one who sliced him in half. And to top it off, I almost died.

Died.

That moment... Everything was dark—asleep but without dreams. I don't even remember anything except waking up in his arms. The

brokenness on his face—his burly cheeks stained red from tears and blood, lit up orange from Tuff’s glow. Gaius... he was heart-shattered, and I only saw the remnants of it before he started smiling again. It was an unnerving feeling I had never seen before in anyone besides myself when I lost Valhalla. I truly didn’t think the Keeper had an emotion that could scar my heart with just a glance, and never did I wish to inflict that pain on him again if I could prevent it. And that meant staying alive. Staying safe.

I started fidgeting with my fingers as I answered King Bolthor’s question, taking time with each word. “Being a Hero is something I’ve been wanting since I first heard about them in this world. It’s what led me to train here with your Hunters and grow strong as a Mage...” My smile dissipated as my eyes shifted toward the King’s shiny boots. “But, I don’t feel ready enough to accept your offer... because it wasn’t just me who saved your kingdom; Gaius did most of the battling, and I wouldn’t even be here without him. I still have a lot to learn.” A deep breath came and left. “So, no, sir, I can’t accept the title.”

Saying no was like biting my tongue over and over again, and I was nervous they would be upset or angry, possibly telling Gaius and me to leave.

The King stood from his throne. *Here it comes...*

Gold on his belt jingled as he said, “Then... we welcome you to continue your stay here if you so desire.” His words were strong, parting the foggy tension in the room. Agitation of the rejected gift lingered in the latter part of his speech, and I could tell he wished I accepted it. But... he wasn’t angry.

He... he isn’t upset? I’m not in trouble for saying no, and I get to continue my training here! Thank GOODNESS!

A sigh of sweet relief purged from my lips as I tilted my chin down. “Thank you, sir.”

King Bolthor walked toward us, heading for the door, and stopped near *me*. Scents of oak and apples left him with a swoosh of his shoulder cape—too pleasant for the ironhearted King. There was no grin, but there also was no grimace upon his face as he breathed, “You will not receive this offer from me again. Under the Laws of Heroism, I can but only gift you the title once. So... do great things, Lisa Robbie, under the name of our kingdom.”

His tone—a stoic grace, rigorous like the mount his castle nestled upon. It was a demand to do well. A *demand*, all without a smile.

I swallowed his words, my mouth now dry. “Yes, sir—Your Highness.”

As the King opened the heavy Throne Room door with the power of just one arm, a commotion of scuffed boots rang through the other side.

Out from underneath Bolthor Sonon’s arm, a rambunctious little girl bolted into the Throne Room followed by a frantic woman’s voice quietly pleading, “Oh please, no—I’m sorry, Your Majesty—Celine, stop—I’m so sorry—”

“*Lisa!*”

The Kingdom’s little princess, dressed in a knee-length light blue summer gown and brown boots loosely tied around her ankles, gunned across the floor and straight into me. Her tiny arms wrapped around my waist hard, squeezing me tight. “You’re finally back! It’s not been the same at *all* since you’ve left, and you’re not allowed to leave again—no girls to talk to or anyone to interpret Honey’s thoughts,” she loudly exclaimed.

When she released her hug, it was easy to tell that Celine Sonon had grown a lot in just the three months I had been away. Her short brown hair now swayed past her shoulders, and her height almost reached my collarbones. Still, baby facial features gave her all the cuteness a daughter of the Queen could ever need, especially with that unchanging, thunderous spirit of hers—acting more like a rowdy Hunter than a quiet princess.

Queen Leonora rose out of her throne and scolded, “Celine—”

“I waited until Father opened the door just like you said!” The Princess clung to my hand when she refuted. “Your meeting is done, right?”

King Bolthor still held the door as he said over his shoulder, “She did as she was told, Nora. Can’t say she didn’t listen.” And he left the Throne Room.

I held back my snort, pulling in my lips. Seemed as if the King had a bit of humor in his rugged heart after all.

The same scared and apologetic voice spoke again after bowing toward the exiting King, and it was from a young lady with silky black hair tied up in a messy bun. “Queen Leonora—I am so sorry! She was so excited and wouldn’t pay attention unless she saw Miss Lisa—please forgive me—excuses don’t fix problems—oh, I should’ve held her hand or something—”

Queen Leonora, knowing Celine's behavior, quickly calmed down the frantic woman and strode off of the dais. "Aurum, you are fine, my dear. No harm was caused, so please don't beat yourself silly over the actions of my daughter."

Next to the frantic lady, a familiar face peered out from behind the door. Dark walnut locks made up his wavy hair, the ends brushing his forehead and grazing the top of his eyebrows, thick and silky like chocolate coffee—that boyish fluff now diminishing. He seemed taller than I remembered in his buckled Hunter boots, standing near the nervous lady by the door. Still, the charcoal shirt and brown shorts around his tan body were dirtied like usual, evidence of a day spent on the training grounds. Stretching wide at the sight of me was his smile, maybe a bit more radiant than I recall, complimenting the gallantry of the Throne Room.

Prince Caelum wasn't a little boy anymore, truly looking more and more like a chivalrous prince. More handsome. *Much* more handsome.

I scanned him one last time, noting the tallness of his fifteen-year-old frame. He *did* grow... and it wasn't fair. *Am I the only one who didn't hit a growth spurt this summer or something?*

"So the meeting is done, then?" Cal asked his mom in a new, deeper voice, entering the Throne Room anyway.

"Well, now, it seems to be," Leonora Sonon said with sharp tilts of her chin, shaking off the abrupt annoyance her children caused. She strutted toward the party in the middle. "Aurum, would you mind joining for a moment? I would like to properly introduce you to Lisa and Gaius." The Queen then turned toward me and the Keeper. "Do you both still have a moment?"

Gaius' face said no with his pinched lips and solemn eyes, but that didn't stop the Queen from bringing over the frazzled lady. "I would like to introduce you to Aurum Ludibloom, Illusionary Magic Maven, and Caelum's Fysiks mentor as of last month. She is from the nation of Leyadin, among our sister planet Bruin, and has also worked as a Treasure Hunter before becoming an Illusionary Magitinerant—a highly requested Maven amongst many cities. We are honored to have her working here with Caelum."

Aurum was cloaked in a white scholar robe, a long flowing dress girded with a fat leather belt snatched around her small waste. Two large pockets were latched onto the sides of the belt, thin sketchbooks and an

assortment of pencils filling each one. She had a pair of reading glasses stashed in her bun of messy black hair, allowing her blue eyes to show off beneath her eyelashes. Her face was timid, and her hands bony, but she looked kind with her makeupless face and dainty features. To say she was a powerful Mage was surprising, but then again, I was just as tiny and could crack boulders without breaking too much of a sweat.

The Maven bowed toward Gaius and me as if we were royalty. “It is such a pleasure to meet you both, especially you, Mr. Gaius, sir. The Prince has acclaimed his first-hand knowledge of Illusionary magic to you, and I have never seen someone improve so much with just a single book—you are truly a blessing—a magnificent Mystic I must say.”

Instead of rejecting Maven Aurum’s remark, Gaius said, “I am just glad the Prince has a well-renowned Mage to learn from instead of just scribbled text. A pleasure to meet you as well.”

Queen Leonora interceded, “With Aurum being a Magitinerant, she is quite busy with other students across the globe and is unable to take her studies outside of the classroom. So, I was hoping you could have Caelum rejoin you and Lisa on your hunts if that is alright with you?”

Hearing the idea of Cal and me working together again boosted my spirit, and in turn, my confidence as well. I couldn’t help myself. “I’m actually training to be a Charmer for Gaius—I’m sure Caelum could join in and help, too!”

Maven Aurum’s eyes glistened. “Really? That would be splendid and most beneficial—would look good on a future king to have been both a Hunter and a Charmer at such a young age—but that is just me, speaking freely.”

“I couldn’t agree more!” the Queen happily said. “Gaius, if you do not mind, have Caelum work as a part-time Charmer for you as well until Wishing Star cultivation begins.” Her words were kind, but still, it was a *command*, not a question. There was no refusing Her Majesty.

Gaius placed his brawny, callused hand hard on my shoulder, saying through gritted teeth. “We are looking forward to it.”

When I looked up at his eyes, I could tell he was done with the meeting and *done* with more royal babysitting requests. I didn’t know why he was upset; he seemed to enjoy Cal’s company over the past year—slaying monsters alongside me, making his Veradome work easier.

“Now, let us discuss scheduling, given that...” Queen Leonora’s voice began to trail off as Cal nudged my arm and pulled me a couple of inches away from the circle, making sure even Celine couldn’t hear what he was about to say.

“Hey, glad to see you back here where you belong, Earthian,” he jokingly whispered in a more mature voice.

I couldn’t stay focused on his bright hazel eyes for long, staring at his cheekbones instead, in fear of making my heart beat faster—blazing my face with pinks. It had been a while since we last talked. Guess that explained the nerves—and the fact he was a prince. Sometimes, I would forget, especially when he was dressed like he was today: heroically dirty. “Glad to be back,” I whispered with a grin.

“So... did you accept the title?”

“How did you know? Thought it was a secret meeting.”

He smirked with a sway on his heels. “Kind of a perk of being a prince, Lisa. You get to know things when it involves Keepers and the Agapéd... So, you a Hero or not?” I shook my head, lips pulled in, and Cal retorted quickly, “You *mad*? Why did you say no?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think I deserved that title when Gaius did most of the work.”

“Well, Lisa, you are insane—the first person I’ve ever known to turn down a Hero title.”

“I know, I know. But that means I get to finish becoming a Hunter here with you.”

Cal’s whisper broke. “You’re still gonna be training here?” I nodded my head, and he smiled. “Okay, I guess saying no wasn’t so bad—we gotta tell Ekron.” The Prince then split the circle of women and Gaius. “Mother, can I take Lisa to tell Ekron she’s staying?”

“Well, I suppose that is fine if Gaius is okay—” the Queen began but was cut off by the Keeper himself.

With his arm already out and ready to evanesce his escape, Gaius immediately responded, “I’ll be taking my leave now since you no longer need me. Lisa...” He turned his peridot eyes toward me as the blue magic began to fill his hand. “Meet me tomorrow at the Hearth before dawn. Don’t be late.”

Just like that, Gaius was out of the Throne Room before I could blink, not caring if his abrupt exit was rude or not. Meetings were not his

thing—*people* were not his thing—always causing him to talk more in thirty minutes than he would in an entire week. His confidence I envied. Never would I dare leave a Queen’s conversation without being royally dismissed.

Cal playfully hit my shoulder. “Come on! Gotta hurry before Ekron fills up his team without you on it!”

What—‘team’? We have teams now?

I followed the Prince down the halls of his castle home, and the closer we came to the ground level, the more the halls seemed to be filled with fancy guests and Hunters. The Sonon’s home was typically quiet, the training grounds being where the commotion radiated. Curiosity kept my eyes and ears alert, so I knew something was stirring in the air.

“What is this team you’re talking about with Ekron? Does it have to do with what Captain Arond said—about more Hunters wanting to train here?”

He smiled back at me, eager. “Since the star release, more and more Hunters have been wanting to come here, but we can’t just accept anyone who wants to fight beasts. We used to, but there is only so much room here in the Kingdom, and only a few Captains to go around. So, Father decided to try something new—met with the Royal Court and Captains last week to discuss it—and we are expanding to guilds now!”

Cal was beaming, but I had no clue what a guild was.

He noticed my lack of excitement and replied, “Guilds, Lisa... like ‘Hunter guilds’...” My face was as confused as before. “You know, G-U-I-L—”

“Just because you spell it out for me doesn’t mean I’ll know what that means!” I laughed hard at him.

“Sorry—thought those Guardians would have taught you that.”

“You gonna tell me what it is or not?”

The subtle pink in his face began to glow as we descended the stairs to the main training grounds—the scents of sweat and mountain soil greeting us harshly. “A Hunter guild is like a small Hunter agency made purely out of whatever Hunters come wandering in and want a stable job. A lot of big cities will have a guild or two where citizens come and send in requests, but they are just independently owned; you can never know what type of Hunter you’ll truly get. So, we are expanding to have our own guilds. Gonna send out some Hunters all around the world to live in cities

under Boolavogue's name. Right now, a couple of Captains are assembling teams to go out and talk with smaller, independent cities and provinces in hopes of them joining our guild alliance."

"So, Ekron is having a team of his own, then?"

"Yeah—he's definitely gonna want you: a Starnate Mage who saved the kingdom—"

"*Shh*—" I came closer to him and cut off his words. "Not everyone is supposed to know that, Cal!"

He laughed it off as the sun hit our skin and our heels dug into the dirt of the Hunter grounds. "And no one does—don't worry. Your secret is still secret here."

The bodacious chatter and grunts from training Hunters were now all around us. Every practice rink and flattened field from both the Men's and Women's Troops was packed with new and old Hunters—grinding out their attacks with intense combat, listening to the commands of their Captains. Wooden and steel swords clashing with harsh chimes of magic traveled through the mountain air like a loud, noisy song; I loved it. Being back in Boolavogue was nothing short of exciting, and I couldn't wait to start sparring again—all the blood, sweat, and magic that came with it.

Ekron's Laze came into view, one of the few that was orange and not the traditional muted blue. Two familiar rowdy Hunters were chit-chatting at the entrance.

"Aye—now that be a sight for sore eyes!" said the skinnier one. It was Erin, worn out before the sun was even high in the sky but happy to see me again. His brown hair was still shaggy, going past his ears in straight thin waterfalls. I didn't see why he refused to tie it up or chop it off—the front ends blocking his field of vision constantly. He never complained about his hair though... and that was the *only* thing he never complained about. That and me. He was kind and charismatic, and whenever he was with Cal, laughter always followed.

"Little lass—our Earthian has returned!" Amos bellowed next. His red beard burned a hardy hue in the summer heat, almost matching his sunburnt nose. He extended his arms and gave me a burly hug, lifting me off the ground and squeezing my body like I was a little kid. More muscle than fat was around his arms and torso—the hug proving my assumption to be true—giving him a husky build. He was the opposite of Erin in

personality and appearance other than the same height, which made them perfect Hunters and friends.

It was nice being missed by him and Erin, though I could've done without the smearing of Hunter sweat all over my body from Amos' hello.

"Can't just go off and leave us with Ecky like that!" Erin said. "Captain's been beating us cruel without you here."

Amos agreed in his rugged voice. "He's always nicer on us when the Keeper's student is around—"

"And you sure knew how to put Princy in his place, too."

"Finally gonna see some real magic instead of that frilly invisible stuff—"

Cal bolted in, "If it's so boring, why do you always insist on watching my spars when your lessons are over, then?"

"Because it's better than watching Amos doze off in the Laze—did you know he sleep talks? The red-haired git can't even take a nap without mumblin' about vorrgs—"

Amos threw his arm at Erin's gut, causing the skinnier Hunter to bend over and hug his abdomen—catching his breath. He ignored Erin's pain and remark, continuing, "You gonna still be training with us, Lisa, or you leavin' us for the Women's Troop?"

I responded, giggling under my breath at Erin in pain, "Well, I think I'm still training with Cal, so I assume I'm still with you all here."

"Hah—good to hear. You wouldn't wanna be stuck with *them* anyways—"

"*What you have against girls, Amos?*" a snarky woman's voice said from behind Cal and me. When I turned around, a short, toned, and tan female Hunter was coming toward us. Her lips were tiny and almost nonexistent when she smiled, but her thick head of dirty blonde hair made up for her femininity—all tattered and ruggedly braided like a warrior. She looked to be in her early or mid-twenties, same age as the two men.

"I'll let you know when I see one!" Amos joked back at the female Hunter. "What are you doing over here anyway? Thought you were with Captain Clover?"

"You not hear? I'm part of Ekron's recruitin' team now," she said to Amos, hands on her curvy hips.

Erin whined, "*Naff it*—you mean we're stuck with *you*, now?"

“Better than being stuck with the *old* gits—I don’t know why you’re complainin’!”

“Should be actin’ more like a *lady*”—Erin mimicked a curtsy, giving “lady” a girlish flair with his voice—“around the Prince and the Keeper’s student—if that’s even possible for you!”

The blonde huntress gave Erin a *whack* to his stomach for the crude remark; the poor guy couldn’t catch a break. She resumed her composure and scolded him and Amos. “If they’ve been around you lot, they’ve seen more *ladylike*”—she mimicked Erin’s mimic of a woman—“behavior than they probably ever wished for.”

She then turned toward me. “Sorry ‘bout that. Pleasure to meet ya, Earthian—oh, not sure if you like bein’ called that or not—just don’t know your proper name.”

I giggled as she stuck her scratched-up hand out to shake mine. Up close, the blonde Hunter was very pretty even with battered, mud-stained pants and dirty leather boots. “It’s Lisa, but I don’t mind the nickname. Nice to meet you, too, uh—”

“Sana Chamomile—though, just Sana is fine. Never ‘San’ or ‘Cam’ if you can help it. I saw you last year when you slagged Otrera—put her in her place. She scampered off like the rat she was when she lost—ran all the way to another Hunter agency on the other side of the continent. So, I thank you, Lisa.” A dip with her chin. “Captain Clover won’t admit it, but I saw the old bag of bones crack a smile when that scabby girl left the troop.”

My eyebrows arched high along with the corners of my lips. Sana Chamomile’s adoration for me was surprising—she was a stranger after all—and that grin on my face soon cemented in the direction of the Laze’s dirty floor.

Cal, his height matching Sana’s, looked at her and asked, “Where is Captain Ekron by the way?”

“He’s out by the practice rink, givin’ a couple more spots away on his team—needs a good mix of the Men’s and Women’s Troop. Heard he’s almost full.”

The Prince rapidly turned to me. “We better hurry.”

Cal and I left the trio of Hunters and maneuvered our way through tents, tools, and random wooden debris before making our way to Ekron’s practice rink. Right on the wooden loft that overlooked the small arena, staring down at some old notebook, was our bald Captain. His summer

Hunter wear wasn't too dirty, consisting of a simple rolled-up gray shirt and tactical brown jeans with matching Hunter boots. Multiple burnt-umber straps hung on his belt and clung to his brawny, middle-aged back, stocking his sheathed swords and daggers. His brunette goatee was braided into two pieces like normal, similar to the King's style and much of the other male Captains.

And when he heard a duo pair of teenage shoes running across the gravelly dirt, a warrior-esque smile drew across his face.

"*By the morn*—I wasn't expecting to see such a fair sight today!" Ekron said in his cheery, rugged voice.

"Aw, didn't know you missed me that much, Captain?" Cal joked with a gleam in his eye.

Ekron shook off the comment with tilts of his chin. "I meant the fair young *lady*. Lisa, what brings you here today? Thought you hung up your Hunter duties."

Cal quickly whispered in my ear, "Oh, yeah. Ekron knew about the 'secret meeting.'"

Of course, he did—my business is hardly kept secret around here...

I fiddled with my fingers. "Oh, well, uh, you see—"

"She said no," Cal butted in.

A disappointing sigh emerged from my lips. "... yeah."

"*But*, she still is gonna train with us—with you, per Mother's request—and we were hoping you could make some room on your recruiting team for Lisa to join?"

Ekron's hazel eyes became two crescent moons. "I won't lie... I was saddened when I thought I would be losing you as my student. One of the best I've ever known to teach. But, I am happy—never thought I would be for someone *not* accepting the role of a Hero, so I have no choice but to bring you back into my troop with open arms. Can't let the other Captains or ranked Hunters take you in. A Mage like you, Lisa—my, there is no other more coveted prodigy Hunter in the whole camp. I'd be a fool to send you away, even to the Women's Troop. Consider it done, My Prince—Lisa will be a part of our recruiting team and continue to train alongside you."

Cal and I celebrated with smiles, thanking our Captain immensely. My heart and soul were ecstatic—feeling alive and like I'd returned home. I never thought I would be missed this much by anyone; I was only gone for the

summer after all. All the kindness and partial fame from the Hunters and Guardians was something I had to get used to all over again.

Caelum turned to me, a hand shoved in the pocket of his shorts. “So, you wanna go see the Gora bears before I have to start magic training with Maven Aurum? Honey’s fur needs to be brushed. She’s fluffier than a cloud right now.”

My mouth was open, ready to wholeheartedly say yes when I remembered I had a strict schedule I had to stick to and no doppelganger to help me out with it today.

I paused before answering, “She sounds cuter than usual, but I kinda have to be home... like right now, or else, Mom will freak out. Sort’ve skipped school to come today—”

“Tomorrow, then? After your whole thing with Gaius?” His words were eager, and for some reason, stars lit up in my chest.

“For sure!”

He started backing away, keeping eye contact with me. “Well, guess I’ll see you then. Glad to have you back, Lisa.” That pearly white smile of his ended our time together before he went running toward his castle home.

I quickly dismissed my dazed look and readied myself to evanesce away, my freckled cheeks growing warmer by the second.

Why the heck is my face all hot—I better not be blushing—it’s just Cal!

4 Flying for Fizzy Rock Water

“Let’s do this, Tuff!” I happily whispered to my glainie early the next morning.

With the sun still sleeping behind our backyard forest, I jumped from my bed and slid on my Echo Ring—ready to summon my Lisa doppelganger for the first time in three months. After doing the whole “living two lives” thing last year and coming out completely fine, I had only excited butterflies fluttering in my gut—constantly thinking about what all Gaius had planned for my first Charmer job.

I still wasn’t sure why he needed a Charmer. The job sounded fun... but it was Gaius—the toughest guy I knew. If he needed *my* help getting ingredients for his potions, then the magical items must have been beyond tricky to find, required a boulder to be moved, or, worst of all, involved terrifying creatures he wanted me to fight myself. He had a knack for dangerous things, and this new idea of training would no doubt be full of it. The problem was that Gaius’ definition of danger was not like mine or anyone else’s. Fighting a vorrg to the Mystic was as simple as crushing an ant.

I just hoped that my first job today would be less lethal and more on the magical, safer side of things.

Tuff perched on top of my head as I extended my fist out in front of me.

Okay—just a swoosh and a three-second push like normal...

My thumb spun the ring on my index finger. Cold chills sprawled down my knuckle, and my heart pounded twice as fast as the white and green crystals sparkled coolly. Ethereal sand surrounded the dark metal band, shooting forward in a whirling spiral. Chalky clouds formed a silhouette of five-foot-three in front of me, and in the blink of an eye, it turned into freckled, pale flesh—wearing my same outfit: an oversized T-shirt with black track shorts that had a paint stain on the side.

My fist lowered, and my shoulders dropped the moment I saw my doppelganger looking as excited as I felt.

I put my hands on my hips. “Been a while, me?”

My replica mimicked my stance. “Yep. Still as trippy as ever, right?”

“Definitely.” I began to change into my Boolavogue garment while dupla-me searched for a school outfit in the pile of clothes near the closet. “Oh, still meet me by the back door after dinner in six days so we can exchange memories, okay? And wear the duplicate pajamas—”

“You didn’t have to tell me,” my look-alike said, grabbing my favorite pair of straight-legged jeans. “I already knew—”

“It just helps to reiterate it. You just focus on *school* and try not to let me look like an idiot when running around in gym class.”

“I promise,” duplicate-me replied.

As my doppelganger went to the bathroom before Mom woke up, I held out my fist and summoned my evanescent magic.

In moments, I was back on the clifftop in front of the Veradome’s secret entrance. Boolavogue’s sun was just beginning to seep through the misty clouds, a sight I dearly missed, gilding the land with warming ambers. Early farmers were harvesting their crops, galasi airships were circling the castle perimeter, and Hunters saddled on Gora bears were riding the trails. A perfect summer morning—

“You’re late.”

I jerked my shoulders at the manly voice breaking the humming of the dawn, given the fact I thought I was alone basking in the lush scenery. With my heart on fire from the jumpscare, I turned around to find Gaius waiting for me, standing with his arms crossed right next to the hidden entrance. He was dressed in short sleeves with melancholic eyes, which meant he was either excited, tired, happy, or annoyed; wished his emotions were easier to read. One thing was for sure though—

“You said *dawn*, right?” I questioned, gesturing to the *dawn* sky behind me. “Isn’t that what that is?”

“*Before* dawn. As my Charmer, paying attention should be as simple as breathing; as my Mage prodigy...” He extended his arm, which I grabbed onto. “I’m just glad you came at all. Ready for your first job?”

I smiled wide. “*So ready!*”

We evanescenced to Gaius’ mysterious location, and my hair was immediately blown off my shoulders by an intense breeze smelling of salt and dandelions. Harsh ocean waves crashed below, the rumble beneath the soles of my shoes jolting my eyes open. Not even six feet in front of me,

shrouded beneath the overcast sky, was a gaping sea, stretching infinitely like an endless scroll of watery blue.

We were standing on a grassy cliff, a colossal one, at that; we had to be at *least* 1,000 feet above the waves. The mountain's edges were nothing like Boolavogue's topography. These steeps were abrupt, crisp, and jagged as if someone just cut down the sides with a sharpened butcher's knife.

It was incredible! I didn't even know mountains could be that close to the ocean!

Another mighty breeze blew in, brushing the soft green tendrils against my legs, tickling my shins and calves. The grass behind me unfurled like a lush blanket, rolling down the treeless fields behind us, morphing from dark emeralds to warm sage greens. No homes or abandoned buildings were anywhere in sight; the same went for people, too—a transcendent solitary atmosphere all around.

When Tuff joined us on my shoulder, Gaius breathed in the mountain air as if it were the most pleasing scent in the world—releasing it in a hefty exhale. “You hear that?” he said. His cheeks were peachy even with his tanned gardener skin, and his smile was nothing but pure bliss. I had only ever seen that face of his when he was in the staritorium.

Guess he really likes it here... “Hear what?”

“Exactly. Nature at its finest.”

I chuckled under my breath. *He really likes plants, rocks, and dirt more than people.*

“So, what are we going to be doing here?” I asked.

“Today, you will be assisting me as Charmer, but first, I want to see how strong your magic is. Last I saw you, *resting* was your agenda...” Gaius looked over his shoulder at me. “Which I doubt you did.”

He's right.

As if he read my mind, he smiled down at me and continued, “You've got a perfect jumping point. No others around. So... let's see it.”

I stood still. “See... what?”

“See you fly.”

My freckled cheeks tugged a smile. “You mean... I can just fly... like *fast* and however far I want? Right out there?”

“Down to the waves or up in the clouds—I wanna see your heart take flight. Unless you've forgotten how.” He shrugged.

I started to loosen myself up, rolling my shoulders, stretching my arms. “Trust me—I’ve been waiting for this all summer. Get ready to be impressed.”

“Nothing too flashy, though.”

I backed up far to get a running start. “Can’t promise you that.”

I gazed ahead. Blood pumped—magic gunning through my veins like the celestial life of a star. The far horizon of the ocean and the massive drop-off from the cliff didn’t scare me, even though I knew the fall was deadly—waves roaring gallantly, the rocks pointed sharp. But, I could not wait to jump.

My magic bones were about to be released from their slumber—tired from just sleepwalking around in my room, floating only pebbles and droplets of drain water all summer. No more confined spaces. No more hiding my magic. The time for waiting was over.

I looked at Tuff, ready to join me in the sky, and told him in my mind, *Let’s freaking do this.*

I ran and ran, the edge nearing, and right when my foot hit the grassy rim, I *dove*. I free-fell toward the ocean, feeling the salty wind cut through my clothing and hair, but I wasn’t scared. I was lionhearted as if fear was nothing but a friendly face.

Time to fly!

As if I was born with invisible wings, I shot off the draft of the ocean—soaring forward with ease above the raging waters. The breeze didn’t hurt my eyes either thanks to a magic perk the Agapéd gifted me: glossed-eyed (discovered it back home when I was blow-drying my hair one summer’s day). I could swirl around at high speeds without the wind cutting my pupils—never needing goggles or wind gear to fly freely. It was no breathing-underwater perk, but it was better than nothing.

I twisted and turned, rolling around in the air like a cosmic eagle. I flirted with the waves below, smiling wide as fish began to follow my flying shadow. Every nerve in my body was stationed on cloud nine—no, better! I was *home*, as if being in the air was where my soul was meant to be.

Arms tucked tight, I bulleted upward with Tuff trailing behind, leaving orange dust behind in his flight path. Ten, twenty, fifty—a hundred feet in the air was nothing but a short distance for me. *I’m faster than I*

remember, or is it that I'm growing stronger? I dove through the clouds, my clothing getting misted with their cold dew.

My mouth had been open when I jolted through, and I accidentally caught a taste of one of the clouds. Flavored just like cold rainwater—very refreshing. *I can't believe I just ate a cloud!*

Tuff swirled around my body, whistling a happy tune.

“So, this is what it feels like to be you, huh?” I said to my sprite.

“Whooooot!” he saluted.

I whisked my way back toward Gaius, the man appearing as small as an ant from where I was floating. *Bet that magic show impressed him.*

I landed with ease as he crossed his arms, strands of my hair patterned in knots.

“Not bad,” he said. “Seems your magic is growing stronger, which is good for me.”

“Thanks, but why’s it good for you?”

“Because...” Gaius then opened his orbkit with a swipe of his tan hand, projecting its magical pockets in the air, cluttered with jars, potions, and other weird trinkets. “Now, you’ll make a perfect Charmer for me. Glad you got that flying skill. Will make getting ingredients a whole lot easier.”

I flicked my eyes. *Ah, of course, this place wasn't just for my test flight...*

Gaius finally selected one of the orbkit’s pockets and out popped a leather bag, hammer, and chisel. He placed the worn-out tools and satchel in my hand. “I need you to get me a couple of mataalilytes.”

“A what? Is that some type of rock?”

“*Geode* is the correct term, and they are sometimes referred to as ‘glimmer bortz.’ They form at the basin of these cliffs, and the linns where the water glows green. Normally, it would take me all day: making rooted ladders and swinging on vines. With you and your flying magic, this should be a breeze.”

“Okay, so what do they look like?”

Gaius started walking toward the edge of the cliff, and I followed. “Milky glass crystal with a green glowing liquid inside. They range in different sizes—just grab the ones with the most magic.”

He made it sound as normal as finding a seashell on the beach. “How will I know which ones have the most magic? Do I break them?”

Gaius scoffed. “*Break them?* A poor Charmer you’d be.”

“Then, how do I know which ones have the most magic?”

“You can see it. Their surface is thin like molten sugar, making it easy to see which ones carry higher amounts of Mataalixer—the glowing fizzy liquid inside. Just do *not* break them—not even a crack or the air bubbles will pop and the magic won’t work. Chisel them out of the rockface, wrap them with the scarves in the bag, and *carefully* bring them back up to me. Simple enough for your first job.”

What dictionary is he reading where chiseling breakable rocks—sorry, “geodes”—is defined as “simple?”

I said, squinted up at his face, “So... just curious, but what will you be doing while I go rock hunting?”

He finally found the perfect patch of lush green grass and took a big lounge in the pasture. “What old men do best: relax. Give me a shout if you need help.”

Even though Gaius looked like he was in his mid-to-late thirties, it seemed his now-700-year-old mortal heart tired him out more. He worked all day and night, and adding me into the mix of his Keeper job didn’t help with his rest. Yet, he still gave his time to me, and I loved that—treating me more like a favorite student than some famed “Agapéd Bearer” as the Guardians did. So, I didn’t mind doing all the work. Glad to see him getting sleep—the first time ever to be honest. With his eyes dozed off, he wasn’t as brutish or intimidating as he normally looked.

Tuff floated next to my head as I wrapped the satchel across my body. “Alright, I’ll be back soon,” I told Gaius, and I flew off the cliffside and hovered down to the crashing waves below.

I glided near the base of the cliff, right where the water met the rockface. *No glowing rocks here.* Floating above the water, I went down further, avoiding the thrashing sea as I took my time examining each crevice, crack, and chink. Nothing but boring black rocks and some loose seagrass. Minutes kept flying by and still *nothing*. *Am I missing something? What if they are underwater or camouflaged? I thought glowing rocks next to glowing water would be easier to find than this...*

Out from the corner of my eye, a wave dissipated away from the mountain, revealing something shiny. Could’ve been just the sun reflecting off the wet surface again, but I hovered over to the cleft still, and when the wave receded, I saw a green glow coming through. *Please let this be it!* I

willed the water to move away so I could peep inside the thin mountain cleft. My jaw dropped.

Glowing mint geodes were being rained upon by a small underground luminescent waterfall, all of which were shaped like pointed cylinders. The only way in was through the pocket-sized fissure in the mountain, impossible for anyone but Tuff to get through... if you weren't a terrain magic Mage, that is.

"Stand back, buddy," I told Tuff as I placed one palm forward, facing the small hole. I closed my fingers and tensed them up, and with one big release, I opened the hole wide enough for me to casually walk in.

The floor was slick from the ocean's splashes, so I took a couple of steps mixed in with light glides as I approached the requested items. I stuck my nose right up to the glimmer bortz. There was actual liquid inside—glass jars filled with sparkling green soda! *Magic is so cool!*

I went to pick up the biggest one, but it was stuck—glued to the mountain by some gravelly chunks. *I see why Gaius gave me that hammer and chisel now.* I reached into the bag and took out the Keeper's tools; never held instruments like this, nor had I ever excavated anything in my life. *Oh, please, don't break.* I held the chisel at the base of the glimmer bortz and gave a steady *tink* to the top.

Instant shatters.

My lips thinned. The things were very fragile. When the liquid poured out, it sounded like a can of soda opening and all the carbonation being released... as well as my high hopes for a quick and easy job.

Looking at Tuff, I softly said, "If Gaius asks... we didn't break a single one. Got it?"

He gave a hefty nod of his entire body before rejoining me in the collection process.

...

Not sure if thirty minutes or two hours had passed, but my back was in cricks, and my knees snapped like twigs when I finally rose to my feet. Tuff and I worked together to make sure we didn't break any more glimmer bortz... *after* shattering four more. For the record, one was not my fault; Tuff just thought he was strong enough to wrap one in a scarf all by himself. Ended poorly—but after a while, I finally got the hang of it, carefully chiseling the gritty glue away from the glowing geodes before wrapping them away into Gaius' leather bag.

I made sure to close the cavern hole with my magic before flying back to Gaius, who was still lying down in the green grass fast asleep. *The man takes his naps very seriously.*

Using his magical sixth sense, Gaius opened his eyes before my feet even made contact with the ground.

“Good nap?” I asked, watching as he rubbed his face and swam his hands through his hair before sitting up.

He ignored my remark and went straight to the point. “How many mataalilytes did you find?”

I carefully handed the bag back to him. “Ten small ones and seven large ones... is that enough? I can go find more if it’s not.” *Please say it’s enough.*

As his hands carefully rummaged through the bag, checking the glowing stones, he took out the biggest one and unwrapped it. He examined the front and back, shook the rock, and admired its glossy planes.

“You did well. Any problems with the cultivation?”

Broke a couple, dropped the magic liquid on my shoes, slipped on the rocks, let a ditsy sprite handle the expensive-looking geodes—

“Nope—went just as planned.” As Gaius stood to his feet and put the satchel back in his orbkit, continuing to hold the largest glimmer bort, I asked him, “What do you need these rocks for, anyway? For potions or charms or something?”

“Well, first... I will sell the small ones. Will make a decent profit off the lot thanks to you.”

Uh—I better be receiving some sort of compensation since I did everything...

He smirked. “Second... we’ll use the bigger ones to help you with your training.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Really? How?”

“See inside?” Gaius held up the geode in his hand. “That’s Mataalixer—the pure stuff—and it creates a defensive shell against magic, but only with those who share from the same liquid. It creates a type of bond with the drinkers so that they can’t be penetrated by the other’s magic. Perfect for sparring with other Mages and Mystics; able to get in practice without hurting the other.”

“When you say ‘drinkers,’ I am assuming you mean us... and when you say ‘practice without hurting the other,’ you mean me and you

sparring... like right now?” Puzzle pieces began to fit together, revealing what Gaius was saying.

Like a toothpick, Gaius put the long glimmer bort in his hands and snapped it in half—clean cut and not spilling a single drop. Each piece was like a small teacup, and when Gaius poured half the liquid into the empty shard, fizzy bubbles popped in the air... and my gut had a strong feeling of what he was about to ask. *He cannot be serious right now—*

He smirked while handing me the other geode cup of fizzy magic water. “Yep. Drink up.”

And of course, he’s serious.

I took the magic shot glass in my hand—bubbly and glowing, smelling like cave water; not pleasant. Gaius and I made eye contact before chugging the drink simultaneously. The Mataalixer tickled my throat as it went down and didn’t taste as bad as I thought, and my stomach felt... good, which I also wasn’t expecting.

Gaius threw the empty shard to the ground. I copied him. He made a brawny grin before popping his elbows and fingers. “Alright, we have about twenty minutes before the effect wears off, and I want to see how strong your magic has gotten in battle.”

“And what exactly is the effect again?”

“You can punch, rock throw, water pulse—any physical or magic forms you hurl at me won’t hurt, and vice versa. Mataalixer is a class of a magic drink—knowing exactly what’s a hit and what’s just loose debris. We will just be thrown around like a couple of slagged dolls, but that doesn’t mean the ground can’t hurt you. So, be careful to not fall too much because I won’t be going easy on you.”

I smiled back, maybe a little too cocky. “So, I can hit you as hard as I want... and you’ll be fine?”

“Attempt to hit, but yes. That’s how it works.”

“And we’re starting now?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t hesitate for a single moment. I lifted my foot and stomped hard like an elephant to the dark soil below, shooting a six-foot pillar toward Gaius’ chin.

He went *flying*, slipping and sliding across the dewy grass. He easily caught himself after the second roll, and not a scratch, bruise, or broken nose came to his face from my hit, as he said. The only thing that did hurt

him was the mocking mountain he used as his landing pad, covering his pants in grass stains and scrapes along his forearms.

“What’s that you said about ‘attempt to hit’ you?” I laughed at him.

Two things in the world that made Gaius happy were woodworking and magic. Though, once he stood to his feet, a charming and thrilling smile spread on his face—proving to me that there was definitely a third thing to add to that list: magic sparring with me. I was honored and ready to take him down.

I immediately flew toward him like a plane, ready to land a punch with my fist, but my leg was suddenly grabbed by a huge root. Looking at Gaius, he moved his hands to the left and *slung* me toward the ocean with his Living-Earth magic. Rolling like a tumbleweed in the wind, I started falling toward the waters below without a sense of direction. When my brain stopped spinning, I caught myself and hovered over the waves. *I feel completely fine—I love this fizzy elixir!*

Our battle officially began after our first warm-up punches, my soul on fire and raring to go. With the ocean at my disposal, I manipulated the water and created a thin cyclone of catastrophic waves that swirled around me in ribbons. When I flew up over the rim of the cliff, I spun my body around and engulfed Gaius in my raging rapids, to which he followed up with mounds of grassy vines shooting toward me like snakes—making this the most epic and fun battle I had ever been a part of.

We continuously went back and forth, wrestling the other down with our fists of earthy matter and bursts of magic. He would jab my stomach with balled-up weeds, sending me soaring across the mountain, and I wouldn’t feel a scratch. I would follow up with icicles to his chest, which tore up his shirt but refused to penetrate his skin. He would soar on vines; I would run on air. He would trap my arms in thorns; I would freeze his legs with ice—never once getting hurt by one another’s magic. Sweat coated our arms and backs, but I didn’t want to stop, the languor impossible to hate.

To mark the end of the spar, I decided to give Gaius a purely magic-fueled punch. I flew around him, avoiding his bullets of thorns, and balled up my fist—feeling the Agapéd in my heart power up my muscles. I knew when I released the blow I would be drained dry, but so would Gaius; he had no chance of blocking my attack.

I evaded his thorns and landed on the ground, sprinting fast for the Keeper. After winding up my arm—not holding anything back—I let my

fist *fly*.

My hand made contact with him, but my brawny instructor used both his arms and bawled up his *own* magic in his palms. *He caught my punch with a perfect block!* The force was so powerful from my blast that stormy winds rushed past Gaius, blowing his hair and the tall grass all around him while he stood stoic in the dirt. He didn't budge, rooted to the ground.

That was all I had. I completely fell to my knees, breathing hard and sweating profusely. "Dang, it... thought for sure... I was gonna win. How'd you do that?"

Gaius squatted on my level. He was also breathing hard from the fight, just not as exhausted as me—not fair. "You're not the only one who can strengthen their muscles with magic... but I have to say..." He smiled. "You did well. Had to put forth some of my best tricks to keep up with you."

I beamed with satisfaction hearing Gaius' compliments. "Have to admit... that was the most fun I've ever had with magic. Can we do it again soon?"

Gaius tittered, giving a hardy pat on my shoulder that shook my whole body. "Sure thing... Now, come on. Camdenrod is near—a small town and trading mart I trust. We'll sell the lot you collected of the mataalilytes and head back home."

He stood up as if we were going to *walk* there, which concerned me. "Are we not evanescing there?" I asked, my legs barely able to rise off the ground.

"That block I had to make with my hands to absorb your punch and not topple took all the magic out of me. Plus, there's an avelift nearby that rides straight through the town."

A part of me didn't believe that one block took *all* his magic. Gaius was too strong for that.

My breathing was still hoarse. "Okay, but... can I just have like one second... I don't think my legs can walk just yet."

Gaius didn't listen to my request. Instead, he turned his back toward me and said, "Grab on," insisting on giving me a piggyback ride to the avelift station.

Even though I was fourteen, I felt like a little toddler on Gaius muscly back: safe, secure, and as light as a feather.

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5 Be Safe

We didn't spend long at Camdenrod—a more modernized version of Calendula—thanks to Gaius. I liked peering through the vendors and fawning over the unusual fruits and snacks, but the Keeper of Stars did not; he wasn't much of a window shopper.

But, if I lingered with my nose stuffed inside a bucket of glintz or with my eyes glued to a rack of Hunter clothing, he stood close by. His green eyes were watching me, which was kind of odd. The man normally let me roam while he waited outside of shops or on the curbs of sidewalks—avoiding people. I had been away for months, and this was our first day together, so maybe this was his way of missing me: being my bodyguard. I didn't mind. He stayed silent, never pressuring me to leave if I found interest in one of the merchant's items.

The ten mataalilytes were sold for 250 credits each at a small glint shop. I was no “magic world money expert,” but I knew that was a lot, given the fact that a normal cotton shirt for a girl like me was around 16 credits. *I see why Gaius said not to break any... that was fragile gold down in that cave!*

As we left the bricked vendor shop of glintz, Gaius' agenda complete, my stomach growled. “Can we get some food while we're here?” I asked.

“I can cook us something,” he said, the midday sun lighting the busy street of the cobble-stoned town.

My lips pouted as I eyed a shop over my shoulder. No words came from my mouth, but Gaius stopped in his tracks. “Fine. Just this once though.” He immediately headed for the eatery behind us.

I wasn't even begging this time. I raised my eyebrows, biting back a smile.

We sat down on the outdoor patio and ordered the same thing: a roast beef sandwich with a side of potato soup. The only difference was Gaius demanded his be made perfectly. I suppressed my chuckle as the hostess stiffened up and headed back into the shop. The Keeper didn't care if his clothes were ruined or if I rummaged through his magic study without

permission, but add too much garlic to potato soup, and he's a five-star critic.

Our seating was on the edge of the deli's concrete deck, an iron fence between us and the sidewalk and a bench on the other side. Two men—both appearing to be Hunters not of Boolavogue, proving to me that Camdenrod was not near the Kingdom—sat down on the bench. I wouldn't have noticed or cared about their whispers, but their topic was intriguing. And Gaius had stepped away to talk with the chef about why our food was taking so long.

"Aye—another sighting of those things," the black-haired one said to his friend, the back of his head facing my shoulder. He unfurled a newspaper, pointing at something on the page. I couldn't see what—didn't dare turn my face to let them know I was eavesdropping. "You think they're human?"

"Why do you care?" his Hunter colleague asked, dark-skinned and tall, counting the foreign money in his hand—compensation from their hunt no doubt. "They won't come for us."

"Yeah, but what if Captain makes us kill them? It says they're untrackable."

"Anything is trackable—"

"Nuh-uh—not when they use Darkness," the black-haired one sniped, his voice turning hasty compared to his friend. "Says they come out of shadows and just snatch you up—"

"Would you stop worrying? Here." He finished counting the money and gave the Hunter half of the deck of cash. "Get us some food—"

A woman came running by, bronze-skinned with coppery hair, right up to the men. "Are you Hunters?" she asked, worried in her voice, and they nodded. "There's a pack of bilefiends down by the river of my house. Do you mind helping me out—I can pay you double. Please?"

The woman was beautiful, and the male Hunters already had a "yes" lodged in their throats before she even offered to pay more for their slaying skills. The moment they left, silence befell the eatery as the patio door opened. And Gaius walked out with our plates—the hostess nowhere to be found.

"What did you do?" I asked, a smile spreading.

Gaius was not pleased one bit as he sat the food down. Everything looked delicious, the soup steaming and the cheese between the meat and

bun of the bread oozing blonde rivers. “Simply demanded to know why it took them so long to slab beef on a bun and ladle soup into a bowl.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me guess, we can never come here again after today?”

He took a slurp of his soup. His nose immediately scrunched. “Wouldn’t want to. Gits can’t make soup properly.”

I took a sip of mine. It tasted great, velvety with the potatoes cooked perfectly. “Tastes fine to me.”

“That is because you haven’t had mine.”

I huffed, fighting back another laugh. The man’s stubbornness had no limitations.

On the bench behind the fence, my eyes noted the newspaper the Hunters were looking at. I reached over, being careful not to scratch my forearms on the spiked pegs of the railing, and grabbed it. There was no picture, but the words “SHADOWED AGAIN” ran across the top in black ink.

“Gaius,” I began, turning the two-page newspaper to face him, “what’s this? While you were inside, some Hunters were talking about these shadowy things that are untraceable.”

He took the paper, glancing at it for maybe a second. “Things you don’t need to worry about.” He then folded it and shoved it into his pants pocket.

That wasn’t an answer I wanted or thought he would give. “What do you mean? Are they creatures or something?”

“They aren’t creatures. Just sods in cloaks who take pride in crime.”

Ah. Magical criminals.

My elbows propped on the table, holding the roast beef sandwich inches away from my mouth. “You mean, like, dark Mystics—or whatever they’re called? Ones meant for Heroes to fight?”

Gaius drank his water and nodded, examining his surroundings, noting every person that walked by. “There are things out there you’ll need to watch out for.”

“I know,” I said casually, taking a bite. “That’s why I have you... to train me to fight those types of things.”

I thought my confidence in him would make him smile. It didn’t. He still kept sweeping over every alley, window, and wary eye that passed by the eatery. Solemn and alert.

I turned to look in his direction. I saw nothing worth noting. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said with a shake of his head and continued to eat, changing the subject matter to be about me and what I did during the summer.

...

We soon made our way back to Calendula. I had missed the cobbled-stone streets and bustling life of all the Veradome workers; the city was a second home to me, after all. We walked our way back down to Gaius’ magic wooden door with all the star engravings, opening it to reveal his domain of solitude. The greenhouse on the right was still the same, as well as his half-buried cottage on the left, but in the middle, the practice area was extended by *a whole football field’s length!* The trees that were once behind the small circular training area were completely gone—pushed out of the way so only dirt and grass remained.

“Whoa—what happened to the trees?” I asked.

“You’ll need a bigger space to practice, so I moved them over to the right and flattened out the rough patches of soil.”

I huffed in amazement. “The fact you can just ‘move them all over’ whenever you want—you make it sound so easy.”

As we were headed back into his woodfire-smelling home, Gaius said to me, “You know... back at the castle, you could’ve said yes if you really wanted to.”

The Keeper so casually said that bold statement as if it were nothing but pointless small talk—throwing me off guard and causing me to almost trip over my own two feet walking down the stairs. “*What*—but you said *no!*” I squealed.

“Yes, but it still was your choice.”

My mind could not comprehend what he was trying to say even with his short sentences. “Then, why did you answer for me?”

“Because you had no idea what a Hero was and I knew you would’ve just said yes without giving it a second thought...”

He wasn’t wrong.

Gaius continued his explanation, taking out the leather bag of leftover glimmer bortz and putting it on his cluttered dining table. “Plus, I believe it to be true: You still have a lot to learn, and the world doesn’t need to know the Agapéd is back yet. Being a Hero is not just a title but a whole

way of life. Everyone will know who you are, expect you to be the best, and determine where you'll go, who you'll fight, and where you'll live. And it's not a job for kids your age. Not even for someone ten years older than you..."

He sighed, eyes up toward his ceiling. "I know Bolthor was treating you like any other Mage who risked their life to save his people, but he knows what a Hero is. What they do. He shouldn't have offered you that title until you were ready. You deserve to enjoy the rest of your adolescence without all that stress if you can help it... That's just my opinion, one I find to be correct but, still, just an opinion."

Like always, Gaius was right, and our spar today proved it. Even though I was stronger, I still had more I needed to work on... and I liked the life I had; getting to train to become a Hunter was all I wanted to focus on... as well as this new Charmer position.

As I was looking down at the floorboards, pondering on Gaius' proverbs about Heroes, his hand reached out in front of me with a bag of junk.

"What's this for?" I asked, seeing a lot of empty bottles inside. Some were metal flasks, some made of frosted glass, and some had corks and handles. There were even some as small as a thimble.

"You're gonna be a Charmer for me, and you'll need these. Stow them away in your orbkit and hand some off to the Prince, too. I'll be sending you both off on jobs more often, and it's easier if you already have all the supplies you'll need."

I started smiling—never thought a sack of bottles would insight adventure into my heart.

"One more thing..." Gaius then reached into his pocket and took out a thin light purple titanium rectangle. He handed it to me in between his fingers like a playing card. "Your share for today."

I picked up the metallic card and flipped it over. Displayed in a faint green glow was, "Lisa Rae Robbie. Magic Credit Chip." The purple edges were smooth, and there was a section for someone to scan the side with an MC reader. The best part, and what completely shocked me, was the balance.

My gosh—I'm filthy rich!

"833 credits! You're giving me 833 *credits—actual money?*" I shouted, feeling like it was Christmas morning in the Keeper's warm

cottage. “You sure I can have this?”

“You worked hard, didn’t complain, and gave me a good run for my magic during our match. I’d say you’ve earned every credit.”

Jumping up and down, I ran up and hugged him tight. “*Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!* What am I gonna buy—*Ah!* New clothes for sure, probably better boots—maybe another dagger—a *magic weapon!* *Wait*—this is real money right and not some type of magical savings bond?”

Gaius laughed and beamed his green eyes at me. “Yes, Lisa. It’s all real. Spend it on whatever you want—just, not a pet. I already have to deal with Tuff’s orange dust staining my towels...”

Tuff, floating by my side the entire time, took offense, but Gaius didn’t care. The Keeper looked right at my sprite. “And a permanent orange spot on the new couch where he naps... So, no pets.”

“Don’t worry. Tuff is plenty enough for me.”

I was beginning to make my way to my greenhouse bedroom right past Gaius’ kitchen when he said, “Lisa... one last thing.”

I turned around.

Seriousness overshadowed his face, the smile underneath his beard gone. “With your magic... I know it’s fun—flying around, creating ice, and moving earth—but don’t show it off too much. In Boolavogue, it’s fine; they’re good, the Hunters. Outside, though... having more than one type of magic gets you recognized and... look... just be safe, okay?”

Gaius was an odd man. First impression: a bear had less grimace in his eye compared to him. He didn’t care what people thought of him, and he didn’t know the difference between a favor and a command. Emotions found it hard to show across his face, and I never knew a simple “good job” could mean more from his mouth than any compliment in the world. Gaius did what he wanted and when he wanted... and yet, he was still somehow the kindest man in the world. He hated—okay, maybe too harsh of a word—he *strongly disliked* being around anything that talked... but he spent the whole day with me.

The Guardians gave him a hard time, but he still put up with them because of me. Saving me from magic beasts wasn’t ever an issue for him, and he was always calm when I would come in with an array of scratches and magical scars—giving me weird medicine and not scolding me. He never raised his voice at me and didn’t mind my curiosity—as far as I knew anyway. But, the best thing about him was that he was always there; no

matter what trouble I got myself into or if I just needed some advice for something I didn't even know I needed advice for, he was there. I liked being his student and being in his home, too.

I gently smiled. "I promise."

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6 The Game Keeper

When Gaius said he would call Cal and me on Charmer missions, I expected it to be timed out, planned carefully, and during decent hours of the day. I don't know why I thought that; it was *Gaius*, after all.

For the past two weeks, the Keeper of Stars would interrupt whatever it was the Prince and I were doing and demand we get his magic items. Blynk after blynk after *blynk* he would fly our way—didn't matter where: training with Ekron, eating lunch with Inna, hunting monsters with Amos and Erin, and even during the night when I was already in my pajamas ready for bed. Gaius did not care. I never thought paper origami stars could cause both anxiety and excitement all at the same time.

Despite the sporadic times of the jobs, I still loved it, and Cal did, too. We ventured toward places I had never been before, gathering bubble-like flowers inside test tubes, lounging under fire-red trees just to see if some spicy sap would drip down from their branches, and patiently waiting for guttates to lay their eggs on the petals of roses—though I accidentally sneezed on a couple, which caused them to crack (Gaius doesn't know that). Being a Charmer and Hunter prodigy was turning out to be something I really enjoyed, a job I could see myself doing for a while, even for a fourteen-year-old girl.

Today, however, it was quiet and meant solely for lessons with Inna.

"You are a natural-born ice skater!" Inna shouted toward me from the concrete shore on the Aquanaeum. Her long strawberry hair was braided loosely, flowing in the summer breeze.

I was in the middle of Mantene's waters, keeping my balance and pushing forward on the ice below me. Inna had me practice my "ice skating" again, and I had to admit, I was getting rather good at balancing on moving ice.

"Okay, this time I want you to freeze the water *as* you are skating across—making thin strips of frozen land beneath your feet with each new stride instead of creating a circular flooring. Don't forget to arch the water below with your magic to propel you further!"

"Yes, ma'am!" I unfroze the water ahead of me, bent my knees, and envisioned myself skating on solid ice. The water beneath my frozen blades

pushed me off as I used my magic to freeze the waves below—moving with the current of the ocean. It felt incredible—almost as fun as flying. I zoomed forward, keeping my body bent low to stay balanced along the frozen riptides. Instead of using my legs to turn, I was able to curve the ocean’s currents to create inclines—it was like a magical frozen skatepark on the waters.

Snow-capped waves shifted with me as I made my way to dock on the concrete. A rather peculiar sight appeared: the burly Keeper of Stars striding across the loading area of the Aquanaeum. Never had I ever seen him in Mantene, which led me to believe something good was coming out of it... or another Charmer mission.

Gaius watched as the snowy billows lifted me and splashed me on the concrete pier, the ice melting and reverting back to warm, salty ripples. No wobble came to my legs—perfect balance for a perfect landing. He stretched a subtle smile beneath his trimmed brown beard. “Seems your water manipulation is improving.”

He had been smiling a lot more lately, well, more than I remember from last year. I returned the grin, jetting the water off of my body and clothing. “Thanks, sir, but I didn’t expect you to be watching my lessons today.”

“Then, it is a surprise to us both,” Inna said, hands on her hips, the morning sun making her wetsuit glisten like sapphires. “What brings you here so early? Is something wrong with the last batch of seeds I dropped off, or did you just want to check on Lisa’s training?”

“Neither.” His green eyes peered my way. “I’m cutting your lesson short because we are going to the Hero’s Arena in EverWake.”

I didn’t know what a hero’s arena was, but the trip to EverWake made my heart jump. “What’s that? Is it like a place where Heroes gather? Are we gonna meet some actual Heroes?”

“EverWake...” Inna said with a suspicious tone. “I can’t recall the last time you ventured out to planet Gadot—what’s the occasion?”

“Zephan ordered a batch of mataalilytes for his players.” He tilted his chin down to me again. “So, I figured I could make this a part of your Charmer job—dealing with customers like him. Plus, I think it’s about time for you to see what real magic gladiators can do.”

Is he for real?

I ignored the fact this was a Charmer mission and let my mind focus on the latter of his statement. “You mean... I’m going to see Heroes in action—like using their magic and everything?”

“That is what the Heroes Games are for, so we better get going before the end of the first half.” Gaius held out his arm for me to latch onto.

“Wait, is it like a *sparring game*?”

“Yes.”

My fingers were hovering over his thick forearm when my heart started to feel guilty for leaving Inna behind. “Can Inna come, too?”

“I don’t think—”

“You really would invite me?” Inna turned toward me with stars in her eyes, surprised I even bothered to ask. Guess it wasn’t every day she was invited to go on adventures.

Gaius, trying to get our attention, started prying into our conversation. “This is meant—”

“Well, of course!” I said to her.

Inna hugged me tight. “Then, I’ll come!”

“—for Lisa...”

I gave my annoyed mentor my begging eyes once more, clasping my hands together. “*Please*, Gaius, can Inna come, too?”

The defeat was evident as Gaius rolled his eyes. “Guess it’s fine—let’s go.”

He quickly evanesced us away to EverWake.

When the thunder and blue lights ceased, the chatter of people departing from The Landing surrounded us like rain during spring. Didn’t take me long to realize we weren’t at the familiar merchant strip. This landing terminal was more open, and many of the buildings were shorter—still crowded, just fewer skyscrapers. When I gazed off to the left, there was an avelift waiting at the end of our platform. My eyes followed its magical path. It soared toward a giant stadium. I had never seen such a large arena—I’d never seen *any* arena, for that matter. Mom and I were not even close to what one would call sports enthusiasts.

And yet, I couldn’t look away from the stadium. “We are going *there*?” I beamed, running in front of Gaius, who was walking toward the monorail.

“That we are.”

Inna stayed close to her centuries-old friend, both of whom hid their appearance with their hooded cloaks and casually watched me act like a toddler seeing the world for the first time. “So, tell me,” she began to say to Gaius, “why go to the trouble of talking with Zephan during a tournament when you could’ve met him after the matches were finished? You aren’t one for a sporting event, Gaius.”

The tall Mystic looked at me before back at Inna. “Thought she would enjoy it, that’s all—and I do like the Heroes Games when played correctly.”

She giggled. “I’m starting to enjoy this new ‘Mortal Heart’ Gaius. He should come around more often.”

Gaius led our way, moving quickly through the crowd even though I wanted to take my time. Every face, stone, building, and railing was amazing to me—magical or not.

Being that he was walking so fast, Inna stayed behind with me, sticking rather close. “You know,” she quietly said, making sure the brawny Keeper could not hear, “he really missed you while you were gone.”

I crinkled up my smile, surprised. “Why do you say that?”

“When you left, all he did was work—staying to himself and hardly speaking a word—and then, suddenly, you return, and he’s off to watch a game amongst a sea of cheering fans. I’ve known him for far too long, and he isn’t the type of man to *do* stuff...” Her eyes smiled, and I followed their path to the avelift doors ahead of us; Gaius was already making his way inside, avoiding all eye contact from strangers. “Especially if it involves crowds.”

I let loose a small laugh. “You’re right about that... but if he missed me so much, then why didn’t he let me come visit during summer?” A *valid question*. I would have loved to spend the days with him at the Veradome, reading his books and exploring new magical towns.

Inna showed the hosts of the avelift her Keeper COIN, the flower chain latched onto her dainty belt that glowed pink with her touch, granting us entry into the magic monorail. “You needed rest, Lisa—”

“I could’ve rested here,” I interjected as my foot stepped past the sliding doors.

“We both know that could never happen when surrounded by magic at every corner.”

True.

Her pink lips glistened from the morning sunlight beaming through the giant monorail windows. “I’m sure it was hard for him, too.”

“Figured he’d enjoy being alone for a bit, not having to worry about training me or making meals for two.”

She sighed, cupping my shoulder. “One day, when you have someone to look after and care for, you’ll understand why he did what he did.”

I looked over at Gaius.

He was beside a window with a horrid view—stuck near the emergency exit—with his hand grasping the overhead railing. It seemed that most of the padded seats were a little too small for his muscular frame. He was avoiding all the stares nosy children sent his way and didn’t bother to respond to a kid who asked him about his plant weaponry belt. As he turned my way, he did change his expression; he gave a faint grin.

Inna and I sat down on the padded bench with Gaius’ arm hovering above us.

“Hey, Gaius,” I asked as the avelift jolted away, “are we meeting up with Zephan here or something—like, are we gonna all watch the games together?”

He scoffed. “Never would I ruin your first experience of a Heroes Games match by having that git sitting with us.”

Inna let down her hood, fixing the pink wisps of her braided hair, completely unfazed by Gaius’ rude remark. “I take it... you haven’t met Zephan yet, Lisa?”

Last year, when I saw Ecuras in Fladden and told the Guardians about it with the help of Tuff, Ariela mentioned this so-called Zephan. Gaius only gave me a brief summary of him, saying that Zephan’s Keeper magic could sense the most powerful Mages and Mystics all over the galaxy. He never sensed the Fallen Elysian Magic on Kalm since Ecuras hid parts of it in that strange stone. Gaius also said Zephan could tell what a person’s heart was experiencing and how strong their magic was with just a glance. Honestly, he sounded pretty cool even if Gaius didn’t like him.

I shook my head softly. “No, I haven’t.”

Inna continued, “Well, Zephan is the owner of the Heroes Games, so he will be there watching the games, just not *with* us.”

“Whoa—really?” My eyebrows furrowed. “But, I thought EverWake was mostly run by the Magic Embassy and not involved with

anything the Guardians or Keepers did?”

“The Heroes Games aren’t run by the Magic Embassy, nor are they strictly independent since this is for mere entertainment in the eyes of most. Though, the Embassy does own the land and sponsor many of Zephan’s players, so he does have to play by their rules more times than not.”

“So, why is a Keeper in charge of some games? Just kinda seems odd for Ariela to want that.”

Sunshine gleamed through the avelift’s window, sparkling Inna’s ocean eyes as she smiled at me. “The games are a way for Mages and Mystics from all galaxies to come together and show their magic strength. It may seem strange, but that is what Lady Ariela wanted when she chose Zephan as the Keeper of Knowledge—I mean ‘Game Keeper’ as he prefers to be called this century.”

It still seemed strange to me. “What type of Keeper is Zephan, then? Like, I know he can sense super powerful magic, but what’s the purpose of the games for his ‘Keeper Magic’?”

“He was one of the last chosen Keepers,” Inna explained. “With his abilities, Ariela was able to bring together nations in the Heroes Games because his magic would decide who would fight purely based on the strength of their magic, not their background or wealth. In a world obsessed with magic, many people believe it should be controlled and given only to the powerful and those with high social standing. So, with Zephan’s help, he can show everyone that magic is for every heart, no matter what planet they are from. It’s a way for magic to bring people together rather than reap wars and desire for control.”

“Are there multiple games or just this one in EverWake?”

“You’ll find a lot of battle arenas across the worlds, some working under Zephan’s hand while others built purely for Man’s entertainment. The latter is nothing more or less than fist fights—hardly any true chivalry involved.”

“I see. Is the one we are going to a big deal, then?”

“Don’t know,” Gaius finally added to our conversation. “We will just have to wait until we get there to find out.”

I grinned before staring back out the window.

The tram came closer and closer to the arena. Saying it was massive was an understatement, and we weren’t even on the ground yet! There were mobile shops around the perimeter, almost like a tailgate during football

games. When our avelift did finally land, I stuck close to Gaius and Inna. The crowd was the biggest I had ever seen... though I didn't have much to compare it to other than a summer crowd at Six Flags. Getting lost would be as easy as closing my eyes for no more than two seconds.

Once on the ground, we joined the line of people toward the ticket booths, Gaius parting the waves of crowds with his brisk strides. I gazed up toward the concrete stadium. A giant would feel small compared to the man-made mountain. Flags and banners decorated the walls with warm colors, and dramatic, bombastic music swept the air, pooling in with the chatter and excitement. Magical fireworks made by charmcasters floated around like streamers, sending glowing dust on top of the heads of the game watchers. I even noticed many families dressed in coordinating colors with face paint along their cheeks and arms, matching the banners and flags we passed. *People dressing up to support their favorite teams just like the fans do back on Earth—so cool!*

Gaius showed the ticket man running one of the several booths his Keeper keychain—a bit more coppery than Inna's and with an emerald flower. Immediately, the worker gave us three tickets to one of the VIP sections. *I've missed these Keeper perks.*

Past the line of concession stands and Heroes Games merchandise, we went down a clean hallway and up a glass elevator. Once the descending walls around the windows turned from concrete to open air, the entire gaping arena was in view, and my heart began to soar.

There had to be at least enough seats for 70,000 people! All the white concrete benches circled around the stadium, most of which were filled with cheering people except for a couple at the top where the sun shone brightly. As we rose to one of the highest floors, a perfect view of the arena was laid bare: the battlefield.

It wasn't made of grass or a boring slate of land; it was a large ovular platform raised with a thin ravine of water surrounding twenty feet below it. Four entrances led toward the middle, which was where the main fighting took place. I guessed it was a "time-out" or something similar, given the fact there were no players on the planked, scuffed-up floor. I had never seen flooring like that either—not sure if it was tile, wood, or just some form of glossy dirt. But, *man*—everything was just so spectacular. I couldn't believe magic sports even existed and to this extravagant standard.

As the elevator opened, the chatter and laughter continued as we made our way to our seats. We went to a section with padded chairs, armrests, and a perfect view of the arena. I felt like a celebrity in the box seats and couldn't help but stand right near the railing.

In moments, a booming announcer came on the speaker with quirky enthusiasm, *"I wanna see those sparks flying and charms winding, for here comes your players—ready and steady for the second half of the games! If they weren't beaten up and body bound to the ground from the first half, then as sure as I'm loud, they will be stretched to the limits—but that's what we came here to see! First up on our battle rink spar match is none other than Legend Loxas!"*

Floating high above the battle rink were four magical projections showcasing live footage of the game. The glowing screens were *huge*, similar to Tuff's memory magic, but didn't block the view of the game below. Viewers even in the highest seats could see all the details of the first contestant. He was tall, tan, muscular, and, oddly enough, only wearing shoes and pants. Every muscle on his chest and abdomen was rippling and glossy with oil and sweat. *Guess they can wear as much or as little as they want in the games.*

The announcer continued, *"Up against the chiseled giant is the star-shooting rookie of the year—Reno Otyamu!"*

Out of the opposite end of the rink was another man, though he was much younger and very lean like an Olympic swimmer. He had long dreadlocks and a happy smile when his dark-skinned face was shown on the magic monitors. They both were very opposite in physique, and Reno looked like he could snap with just a punch from Legend.

I sat at the edge of my seat, right in between Gaius and Inna, and asked, "How do these Heroes Games work?"

Inna answered, "It can vary, but for normal Heroes Games, they are divided into halves. In the first half, all twelve fighters compete in a series of challenges. They can range from group battles, monster battles—like the training you do with Ekron—and whatever other odd string of games Zephan has up his sleeve. Six of the twelve will be eliminated, ending the first half. For the second half, it is purely one-on-one spars. Could be traditional spars like you've experienced where one needs to capture the opponent's garment; sole-survivor spars, like the one we are about to see, where the player just needs to stay inside the rink to win; binding spars,

where one wins if they can cuff or restrain their opponent to the ground for longer than seven seconds—depending on the arena’s rules.”

Inna gave a deep sigh. “And last is gallant spars, where you lose if you tap out or are unable to battle. You won’t see gallant spars here. It’s more of an unorganized way of battle than a dignified game... and one I personally don’t like. Then, those remaining six will spar until there are only three left, and then, those three will battle all at once until there is one winner.”

“*Whoa*—I can’t believe I’m going to see actual Heroes use magic!” I beamed, my hands underneath my thighs, legs swinging back and forth.

Gaius made a hushed laugh. “They aren’t Heroes yet,” he said. “Takes more than a single win to be labeled a Hero.”

“So, these are just normal Mages and Mystics? Could they become Heroes if they do well?”

“Possibly, though I doubt it. Look.” Gaius pointed his chin and eyes to Legend Loxas. The tan blonde-headed contestant was bouncing up and down, hyping himself up. “Him—won’t make it past Reno in the first three minutes. Poor stance and even worse charisma. Most of all, just outmatched.”

“But, he’s so *big* compared to Reno! You really think Reno will win?”

Gaius leaned over to me, smirking. “Here, it’s all about one’s magic strength and skill. Reno’s got bags of it.”

Inna giggled and crossed her legs. “Your knowledge of the competitors is quite impressive. When did you become so interested in the games?”

He slowly rolled his eyes toward his strawberry-blonde friend. “I just pay attention—I don’t know why you keep acting so surprised with me lately.”

She shrugged. “Just a different side of you, that’s all.”

The edges of the ring began to glow a faint white, filled with magic dust around its perimeter. Legend and Reno walked inside the ring, standing fifty yards apart. The stadium then set off a canon of sparks, and the magical match started. Both men shot toward each other at high speeds when Legend made golden water out of thin air! He raced on the yellowed waves, sending a riptide of sunlit water right toward Reno. *That’s*

phantasmal water magic! I can't believe how powerful he is. Wonder why Gaius thinks Reno will win?

Without a hint of fear in his steps, Reno jumped high in the air as if his body had no weight at all. When Legend's wave came crashing upon him, Reno soared the yellow water's draft, brushing past the riptides like a piece of paper riding the wind. As if that wasn't impressive enough, he floated right next to the beefy Mystic and pounded the ground with a force four times his size—causing the floorboards to break and splinter the air with deadly confetti. One second he was weightless and the next as heavy as a Gora bear!

Legend wobbled on the ground due to the reverberation of the smash but burst out sharp strings of golden rapids in an instant.

Reno willed his body to become as light as air again, evading the sharp strings of the golden waves—clear of Legend's body once again. I didn't know what Reno did, but when he punched the beefy opponent's body with his fists, it was as if he stunned him. One, two—three quick jabs to the ribs, and Legend couldn't stand on his left leg. *What did he just do—I have never seen a punch do that to a man.*

Reno didn't hesitate. He jumped in the air and swung his leg toward Legend's abdomen. When his skinny leg hit his opponent, it should've snapped off like a noodle. Instead, it made a huge thud—as if he swung a car straight toward a tree—and thrust Legend out of the rink, right into the gully below. The match was over in less than three minutes just like Gaius predicted.

My heart never cared for sports until then. The Heroes Games were utterly incredible!

...

The last match came, and it was Reno versus G-lad versus Aloeus. Sole-survivor was the spar, and to be honest, G-lad didn't stand a chance. Reno and Aloeus were the crowd's favorite and could easily out-magic G-lad; he was strong with his water freezing but not strong enough. I had high hopes for Reno, but Aloeus had something the other opponents lacked: body fat and *pounds* of it. He was thick and mighty like a bear, easily six-foot-five inches, and weighing well over 300 pounds.

"Not sure how this is going to go," Gaius said as I handed him some of my candy. Inna had gone up to the concessions to get us a snack a while ago since I didn't want to waste a second of the game to join her. The candy

she picked out was called Rooties—coated in red chocolate with bursts of cookie butter and crunchy pretzel pieces inside.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, leaning against Gaius’ arm to hear him over the chants of the crowd, sucking on the chocolate coating of the candy.

“His fighting style won’t work against him.”

“What about his magic—that super strength thing he does?”

I gave Gaius another rootie, surprised the man who typically despised chocolate was asking for more when he answered, “He has one of the two types of Gravitia magics. You’ve seen one before. Kamari has Gravitia Axis magic, and Reno has Gravitia Density magic—being able to make parts of his body change the push and pull of gravity.”

“Oh, so he can turn gravity off for himself?”

Gaius nodded his head right at the moment Reno and Aloeus threw G-lad out of the rink. The crowd instantly roared and cheered. “It’s a rare magic he’s got... and hard to control. But, the kid seems to have mastered it.”

It was now down to Reno and Aloeus, but Reno didn’t look too good. When the screen panned to him, he was breathing hard, his dark skin glossy with waterfalls of sweat. But, he still kept smiling.

Aloeus stomped hard on the ground and bolted toward Reno. As the rumbling bear of man ran forward, he summoned the steel beams from underneath the stadium to his hands. He molded them with his magic to form large cannon balls and shot them toward Reno. Luckily, he dodged them easily, using his gravity magic to lighten his weight so he could ride the draft. Each ball of steel thudded against the stadium walls, leaving basketball-sized indents in the concrete.

Aloeus was smart. He knew Reno would use the wind to his advantage and quickly summoned his steel wads—jolting them back like a yo-yo. With his magic, he manipulated the metal to latch onto Reno’s legs, throwing him to the side. Reno retaliated and made himself heavy again to avoid being overthrown.

I gripped my padded seat as he rolled near the edge—so close to falling off. He should’ve broken a leg from that jolt, but his magic prevented him from being a sweaty ragdoll.

When Aloeus met his opponent again, Reno jabbed him hard with his elbow and fist, but it didn’t work. Aloeus’ fattened skin was far too

dense for Reno to land any paralyzing shot to his muscles; it was armor perfect for Reno's demise. Aloeus then punched Reno hard and summoned more steel beams, grabbing onto Reno's arms and legs.

With a dramatic swing, Aloeus tossed Reno into the ravine, claiming victory.

Down below, some Mystics were moving the water away so Reno wouldn't drown as the announcer kept celebrating Aloeus' win.

I sunk back in my chair. I hated that Reno lost. He had the coolest magic out of all the contestants and looked like a real Hero in the rink.

As the announcer concluded the game, Gaius grunted and stood up. "Let's get this over with," he said without a smile and started walking off.

Inna and I followed Gaius down another hallway, opposite the VIP crowd. I couldn't stop rambling about how amazing it was to see all the fighters as we went down another elevator. Inna didn't mind listening as Gaius led the way, smiling at my enthusiasm and my dreams of becoming as strong as they were.

We reached one of the lower levels, and immediately, my eyes couldn't focus. Right in front of us—beautiful, handsome, and beaming with gallant smiles—were the contestants. Some were with reporters boasting about themselves, especially Legend; some were posing for photographers, Aloeus being the main Mystic under the spotlight; others were simply plain relaxing, but I didn't care—I still thought it was amazing!

I bit back my smile as best as I could. *Lisa, do not fangirl right now! Keep your cool!* But it was hard not to, and Reno—he just *had* to be somewhere, probably eating some regal meal or being bombarded by fans.

"Follow me," Gaius said, paying no mind to any of them. Paying no mind to *me* wanting to roam, and we walked past the mighty competitors and straight toward a large blue door. Both of my Keepers paused to talk with the bodyguards about entering, but then—right in the corner of my eye—I saw *him*.

Reno Otyamu, he was getting bandaged up in the room across from me.

It's fate—don't freak out, Lisa. He's just an average guy with superpowers—

I halted and glued my eyes on him. His face was handsome—beyond it—even with his front dreads a bit frizzy and cheeks bruised. One

nurse had healing magic and boosted his stamina, allowing Reno to breathe easier again, causing him to smile. Causing my jaw to gape.

Suddenly, he looked over at the door, at *me*, and waved with his good arm, showing off his pearly white teeth.

That was it—my fangirl heart couldn't contain itself—and my legs just started walking on their own.

Before I knew it, I was at the medic's door—not being stopped by any guards or my nosy Keepers—and made a slight bow. “You—you were amazing out there, Mr. Reno. I have never seen someone fight as well as you did—I really thought you were going to win.” My voice was very quick and girly, and I probably sounded so silly, but I didn't care.

Instead of shooing me away, he smiled back and said in a kind voice, “Well, I thank you for that. Aloeus was a strong opponent; I promise, next time, not to disappoint you and shoot for a win.”

No doubt—stars were swirling around in my eyes, and my cheeks had to be pink. *He talked to me—*

“*Lisa,*” Gaius hissed from the hallway, causing me to jerk my shoulders.

I quickly turned to find him and Inna beginning to walk through the blue door.

My head flashed toward Reno one last time. “Gotta go—you just—*gah*—you were just so freakin' *awesome!* It was great meeting you, Reno—Mr. Ota—uh, Reno, sir!” I babbled worse than a clogged shower drain, my face overheating far too quickly, but Reno didn't laugh.

“Appreciate it,” he said back before my eyes left the room.

I caught up with Inna and Gaius, smiling nonstop. *He noticed me. He actually noticed me and said 'hi'.*

Inna giggled when I came near. I didn't care if I looked ridiculous; I had just met my first-ever celebrity *and* had a conversation with him.

I was so busy replaying that one-minute meeting with Reno over and over again in my mind that I didn't focus on the room Gaius led us to. It was large, the back wall completely made of a window that overlooked the arena. There was a bar in the corner, lots of gray velvet lounge chairs, and sleek black metal incorporated into every piece of furniture. The floors, glass tables, bar stools—everything was sparkling clean but lacking character, even the people; no smiles, plainly dressed, and simple hairstyles. All except for one.

He stood near the wall-to-wall window, talking with five other boring men and women, wearing a slimming violet suit and black necktie. His hair was a voluminous blonde and went to his collar bones, slicked back on the right side to show off his duo of silver earrings. He had a pointy nose and pointy chin, matching his pointy eyebrows that were clean-cut. The way he was chatting with his audience showed he was in charge, even though he looked Inna's age, keeping eye contact with each person and a constant self-assured smile.

As if he knew I was thinking about his peculiar purple suit, the blonde man gazed right at me. His eyes were hazel, thin, and seemed to always be looking down on those below him, never revealing the entire pupil. To my surprise, that was the direction Gaius was leading us toward.

The blonde man then dismissed himself from his suited audience and opened the door to his right. We never said a single word, but the man gestured for us to follow him. Inside was a lavish office with a huge window of the arena outside, matching the same view from the lounge area. A desk sat against the wall with a couple of plush lounge chairs surrounding a redwood coffee table. The decor wasn't as boring as the previous room, filled with a couple of expensive vases and paintings, including a bookshelf filled with trophies and golden artifacts. It was the most extravagant office I had ever seen... but not as magical as Gaius' or the Guardians.

As the blonde man led us four inside and shut the door, he spoke. "Inna, Gaius, it is a pleasure to see you again." He had a slick voice and was very articulate. Quite alluring.

Inna responded, "Likewise."

"Been quite some time. A day at the games? Most unlike you, Gaius—but I do hope you enjoyed the show."

"You know why I'm here," Gaius said in an annoyed tone. The burly gardener swiped his orbkit that hung around his neck. Out popped a bag of mataalilytes, landing delicately in his calloused hands. He then handed me the thick bag of geodes, jerked his head in the man's direction, and crossed his arms.

Silence, the attention now on little me with the sack of clinking rocks of fizzy water. My doe eyes grew wide as I looked up at the handsome blonde man. I was waiting for Gaius to say something, but nothing. He remained as still as a grimacing statue without any direction of what I should say.

Given the tensity and the fanciness of the man, I assumed he was Zephan, cueing my Charmer job to commence.

My mouth was small as I lifted the bag to the assumed Game Keeper, saying the most basic sentence for an exchange of goods. “As requested for you—the, uh, glimmer bortz.”

The man in purple did not take the bag, leaving my arms to grow weary from holding the rocks. He instead stared at me standing in between Gaius and Inna. *Wait—this is Zephan, right?* Embarrassment kicked in way too fast, and my cheeks warmed.

Then, he spoke, “Lisa, am I correct? I do not believe we have been formally introduced—”

“Lisa, this is Zephan,” Gaius hurriedly responded, eying the Game Keeper.

“Ah, well it is a pleasure to finally meet you, Lisa,” he said and extended his slender hand to take the bag from me, only he didn’t grab it. Yellow dust began to faintly veil the bag of geodes, and as the Game Keeper’s hand lifted high, the bag followed. It floated out of my palms, blanketed in glittery pollen, and hung in the air by its thick drawstrings as if it were on an invisible coat rack.

His hand extended again as the sack of rocks floated by his head. I gave him a handshake, embarrassed that my hands were sweaty compared to his. “Nice to meet you, too, sir,” I replied.

Gaius, not wanting to hang around any longer than necessary, quickly held out his MC Chip. This one displayed “Veradome” in silver on the front. He gave it to me and said, facing Zephan, “4,000 credits as usual.”

I clasped the cold metal card in between both of my thumbs and looked up at Zephan.

The blonde Mystic reached inside his chest pocket and took out a dainty golden MC Chip—sleek and glossy just like his hair. “First training and now hiring the Agapéd to do your work? I’m quite surprised with you, Gaius. Didn’t think you’d be the type to care for our vanquisher of Darkness—”

“Just pay her,” Gaius grumbled.

I extended the Veradome card to Zephan, but the moment the credits were just about to transfer with just a touch, the Game Keeper sniped his

away, a tease. The golden chip stayed nestled between his fingers and close to his chest—pausing the transaction.

“Lisa, I must thank you properly,” he said, and Gaius’ eyes pelted the blonde man’s skin with bullets of fire, but Zephan was unfazed, “for stopping the Fallen and saving the Wishing Stars. I know the Guardians doubted your power, but I can tell...” A quick glance at my heart and then back up to my eyes. “You are stronger than they have seemed to let on. They should really put more faith into your abilities.”

Did he just read my heart?

Gaius stepped one foot forward, a brawl brewing in his fist, but Zephan quickly diluted the situation by putting his card on the Veradome’s MC Chip in my hand—transferring the money. His squinted hazel eyes examined every freckle on my face as he said, “My players thank you and the Veradome for your service—”

My brawny teacher quickly snatched the MC Chip and put it back into his pocket, cutting off Zephan’s words as he turned around. “Let’s go.”

Inna had common courtesy, unlike the gardener. “Today was a pleasure, but Lisa and I still have lessons we need to continue. Until next time, Zephan.”

Zephan didn’t care whether or not Gaius was leaving. “Please do visit again, perhaps on an off day—when *Lisa* is not doing your Charmer business, I should say. I think she wouldn’t mind seeing the strength of my entertainers every once in a while when the games aren’t in session.”

I was about to respond to the wonderful invitation, but Gaius quickly retorted in his same annoyed tone. “She’ll pass.”

“Feel free to use our evanesce landing if you don’t want to fight the crowd at the public transit—”

“Got it!” Gaius shot before leaving the room.

I felt rude not saying anything, so I hurriedly responded, “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Zephan.”

“Hope we meet again soon, Lisa,” he said with a grin right before the door shut with us three in the crowded lounge room again.

Out of the view from the Game Keeper, I turned to Gaius; he was ready to be home. “How come you don’t like Zephan?” I asked.

Gaius didn’t answer, keeping his long strides fast as he went toward the evanesce landing sigil Zephan mentioned.

Inna leaned near me and answered for him. “He just hates having his heart read.”

“Is that true?”

Gaius kept walking forward but responded, “That... and I just can’t stand the pompous cod.”

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7 Visit from a Hero

“I understand the point of the exercise, Captain... *but why couldn't you make Lisa be the damsel in distress instead of me?*” shouted Erin, blinded, tied up, and surrounded by Ekron's magical summons of vorrgs.

“Because this is her and the Prince's lessons... and being in distress is something you've mastered,” Captain joked back, making me and the other male Hunters laugh on the sidelines.

The weather was still hot and humid in Boolavogue, and Ekron had finished early morning training with the Men's Troop. It was now mine and Cal's turn. With our lesson being “save the damsel; kill the monster,” Ekron needed volunteers to play the damsel... to which no one raised their hand, so he picked Erin. The skinny Hunter was sleeping in the Laze when he grabbed him, bound him, and tossed him to the rink for the Prince to save.

It was a new training exercise for Cal and me, having us practice killing a dark magic beast while protecting a bystander simultaneously. Hunting wouldn't always mean things would go as planned, and Captain wanted us to be prepared for anything, especially if that meant someone like Erin being in the way.

“But was the pink bandana necessary?” Erin griped about the binds and handkerchief Captain made him wear.

“I agree!” Amos shouted next to me. “He's already *damsel* enough without it!”

“*Don't you lot have anything better to do?*”

The Prince took his stance in the rink as Ekron used his magic to move the three purple vorrgs. They were snarling and beefy, ready to take down Erin if Cal couldn't finish them off in time.

“Hey, Captain,” the Prince shouted to Ekron, “do I really have to save him?”

“*Naff the sun*—what do you mean ‘have to’?” Erin whined as the vorrgs drew closer to him—drooling their glowing spit from their gnarly mouths. “You better save me—I'm a citizen of your *kingdom*! Captain—*deduct points from his score!*”

Our bald teacher smiled, ignored his student's demand, and announced, “*Start!*”

Cal shot off the dirt, using his Fysiks magic to create invisible staircases in the air. The small crowd of Hunters and I cheered, watching our Prince use his magic well and avoiding the leaps of Ekron's beasts.

One of the vorrgs gunned toward Erin's throat, causing the "damsel" to scream and tense up like a scared child.

Cal immediately took action. He created a Fysiks shield right in front of the dark magic hound, and when it tried to pounce on Erin, it hit the opaline wall *hard!* The vorrg whimpered as it fell on its side.

"Maybe a little less *block* and a little more *killing*, *Your Highness!*" Erin shouted while attempting to crawl away like an inchworm. The vorrg began rising to its feet again.

With his elegant way of fighting, Cal swooped down at one of the other vorrgs—cutting the nape of its neck. *One down!* He spun around and used his magic to create unbreakable, invisible bracers around his arms as the second vorrg came toward him with its sharp teeth. It bit down on Cal's magic, causing a burst of crackling light to hurt the vorrg, which Cal used as an advantage. He took his sword and easily cut the second vorrg's throat.

The third vorrg—the one closest to Erin—jolted toward the bound Hunter. Erin scooted away on his back, making a girlish squeal. We all started laughing again, seeing as Captain was right about Erin being a master of distress.

With his sword held tight, Cal ran up to Erin, grabbed the skinny Hunter by the neck of his clothing—throwing him out of range of the vorrg—and aimed his sword toward the beast. He evaded the monster's right attack with a swift spin before releasing a swing to its dingy neck.

Ekron's three beasts were defeated, the damsel saved, and Cal beamed with satisfaction. We all clapped—our Prince proving to be one of Ekron's best prodigies and representing the Sonon name well.

"Excellent work, My Prince," our Captain congratulated Cal, "especially with your magic, using it as a wall of defense. Seems Maven Aurum's lessons are proving to be beneficial for you."

"Thank you, Captain," Cal said, sheathing his sword and wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Joy! Now, would someone care to untie me?" Erin squirmed on the ground, still bound in the pink bandana.

No one moved, not Amos or even his own instructor, so I decided to be his savior.

He saw me coming, and his beardless face smiled, radiating like the sun above. “Bless you, Lisa. Could you tell the Prince to maybe *not slag me aside so hard next time?*”

Cal laughed. “Maybe if you were a cuter damsel, I would!”

As I freed Erin’s hands and legs, Captain Ekron turned to me. “Alright, Lisa. Now that the Prince is finished with his exercise, let’s begin yours—”

“Captain—a word from the King’s Court,” a burly voice came from the sidelines, interrupting my teacher. We all turned to see one of the guards demanding Captain Ekron’s presence.

“I see—go ahead and take a break with the Prince, Lisa. We will resume lessons when I return,” Captain told me before following the guard.

With Ekron busy, Cal, I, and the others walked back to the Laze, grabbing some water and apples to eat as we waited for our next task. I enjoyed being with all the Hunters and was glad they treated me as an equal—for a Hunter, anyway. I used to be scared of them; they were all grown men, after all. After a year of training with Ekron, smelly boys and random wrestling on the Laze floor became so routine that it was comforting.

I still didn’t talk much or start conversations very often, and I *never* joined in on their bets of “who can get Ekron irritated the quickest,” doing more laughing and listening, but they still made me feel included. Back on Earth, that wasn’t something I was used to, constantly feeling like I needed to blend in and yet wanting to be seen as unique at the same time. Being a teenager shouldn’t have been as tough as being a Hunter, yet I felt wanted here—never fearing judgment because my hair was messed up or because I didn’t know all the proper names of swords and daggers.

The guys in Ekron’s troop... They made me feel more like a younger sister, if anything. I never had that before, and it warmed my heart—another home away from home.

Sitting down, chuckling about silly Hunter stories, I noticed many people gathering outside the tent. It wasn’t unusual to see Hunters and guards walking around, mainly before noon, but the *Women’s Troop* crossed over.

Something big was happening.

Sana and a couple of friends from the Women’s Troop came over to our Laze since they were part of the forming crowd.

“Aye, what’s going on out there?” Amos asked Sana as she passed by the tent, making her stop in her tracks. “Another spar against the Men and Women’s Troops?”

“Nah—a Hero is here, didn’t you know?” she responded, her dirty-blond hair in a duo of messy braids, and we all widened our eyes—shocked. Me most of all. “He’s all the way from Planet Bruin—not sure about the country, though.”

“What’s he doin’ here for?” Erin asked.

“Probably just browsin’ around for some weapons or just to show off.”

“What’s his name?” Amos asked next.

“I don’t know—you stopped me before I could get a look at him to find out.”

My eyes must have been sparkling because Cal looked over at me and asked, “You wanna go see him?”

I nodded my head so fast it could’ve snapped off.

Sana saw my reaction and invited Cal and me to join her, causing nosy Amos and Erin to tag behind.

The excitement of seeing a real Hero made me walk faster, catching up to Sana, who led the way. *Wonder what he’s like? Will he be handsome? Glowing with magic? Covered in battle scars? Maybe even have a cool set of armor or uniform!*

The crowd formed near the edge of Captain Clover’s area, right on the brim of the Women’s Troop’s main Laze.

But, I was so short I couldn’t see anything, and Sana noticed.

“Come on, Lisa. Us girls can get a better view over here,” she said to me, making my heart happy she even remembered my name. I had only talked to her that one time before, a couple of weeks ago; she was far too pretty and warrior-esque to walk up to and start a conversation with. I honestly didn’t think someone like her would care about a little girl like me not being able to see over the sea of curious Hunters.

Cal stayed with Amos and Erin while Sana guided me toward a part of a weapon repair tent with a sturdy roof. I followed her footsteps as we climbed to the top of the weaponry hut, assuming we were allowed to sit up there. Once perched high enough, the chiseled Hero was in sight, and he was far more gallant than I expected him to be. In fact, I had seen him before in a *Chevaliers*’ issue.

“That’s Gladius Snow!” I announced, remembering his copper shoulder-length hair. He wore a glistening tunic and navy boots, both shiny and lavish.

“You know him?” Sana asked.

I shook my head, still staring at him and the silver metal vining around his right arm, “Oh, no. I’ve just seen his picture. Never met him or seen a real Hero in person before.”

All the Hunters were around him, wanting autographs, asking him his kill count, and pandering to him with questions about why he was there. I, too, couldn't help but admire him. *Wonder what his magic is like?*

As if the universe heard my thoughts, one male Hunter wouldn’t stop begging him to show off his magic, and it worked. Gladius Snow had everyone stand back, grinning handsomely as if he perfected the smile, and started balling up blue lightning in his hands—*real phantasmal lightning!* He spun it fast, making the air around the crowd pull inward toward his palms, and with a dramatic move of his arms, he released it into the sky! The air *boomed* with thunder as the radiant blue strobe rose above the clouds. Gladius Snow stood proud on the ground as the crowd cheered for the celebrity’s show. His magic was powerful; I could feel the rumble from the wooden planks Sana and I were sitting on—*not even close to the ground!*

Seeing him—a real Hero—made me question whether or not I was on his level. *I can move boulders, slice cliff sides, make my heart glow—I can even fly, so was the King right? Am I really as strong as Gladius Snow—a real genuine Hero?* But the more I saw him—chatting with the crowd, not self-conscious of his appearance, beaming with muscles, not affected by the hundreds of eyes watching his every move—the realization of how unworthy I was kicked in. I was a tiny girl who couldn’t even talk to stinky, sweat-cologned Hunters without them talking to me first. Even if I was stronger than Gladius Snow... there was *no way* I could ever be as confident as he was.

“He’s amazing...” I trailed off with my words, making Sana chuckle.

“Should be. He won the Paragon Games three years ago, the only reason why I remember his face.”

“What’s the Paragon Games? Is it like the Heroes Games?”

“Sort’ve. Every year, the ones in charge of the Heroes Games—that Game Keeper and his stiff—pick a planet to host the Paragon Games. You don’t sign up to join or win some lottery to be selected; it’s whoever has the strongest magic on the planet, at least, that is what they say.”

“Whoa—so it could be anyone who gets selected?”

Sana extended her legs, crossing her ankles. “It can’t be just anyone. If you’re a designated or veteran Hero, Lionheart, or Warrior, or working for the Heroes Games as a hired player, you’re not in ‘the pot,’ I guess you could call it—can’t be a criminal either, but that’s a given. It’s more like discovering the undiscovered magic of the worlds.”

“But how do they know who has the most powerful magic on the planet?”

“The Game Keeper knows, not sure how—you probably know more than me from the rumors I’ve heard, being that Keeper of Stars’ pupil ‘n all. Says he just uses his powers to sense all the magic on the planet, picks the strongest Mages and Mystics who have the most powerful magic, and ‘draws their name out.’ You know what I think?” She huffed, rolling her hazel eyes. “I think it’s a load of barf—pure vomit if I ever saw one. They just pick whoever has the most recognition or is lined up for inherited greatness—even him.”

Sana pointed her chin at Gladius Snow, the man still being praised and adored by Hunters. That smile of his never ceased. “Before he won the games, he had already been training with some other big Hero who probably told the Heroes Games agents about Gladius and threw his name at the top. Got himself first and not, but a month later, his face was plastered on all news boards.”

Gladius spun three baseball-sized orbs of lightning in the air, juggling them with only the twiddling of his fingers. Magic fizzed and crackled, bound to his body. He made the deadly power bend beneath him. Magic in his hands was effortless.

I crisscrossed my legs. “I take it... you don’t like the games then?”

She snorted as her voice grew loud again. “You kiddin’—slaggin’ and magic fights full of nasty brawlers is what I love! I’ll watch a good spar between Mages and Mystics any day of the week, especially if they look as good as him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Sana, seeing her go from bashing a magic sport to loving it the next second. She made me feel more

comfortable, the first time a female Hunter took the time to bond with me, so I had one last question to ask... One I felt silly for not knowing.

My eyes wandered to the heads of the Hunters below. “So... if winning the games and being super powerful makes you a Hero like Gladius... what’s it take to be a Lionheart?” Valhalla had mentioned the title before: the hardest and most valuable form of a Hero there ever was.

Sana didn’t say I was stupid for not knowing common knowledge about their celebrity world. She answered happily and seemed to enjoy being the wise one in our conversation. “When you’re a Hero, it’s engraved on your forehead—metaphorically speakin’, of course—and *everyone* knows you. You get it by savin’ a town or provin’ you’re powerful enough to stop a giant, and it can only be given by your ruler, a Lionheart, or a group of titled leaders.” Sana smirked as a breeze came by and messed up her blonde hair; she didn’t seem to mind—it was already messy to begin with. “For a Lionheart, it’s engraved on your soul...”

She leaned in closer as if her wisdom was something not to be heard by those below us. “You have to have already been a Hero and saved a whole lot of nations from dark magic—somethin’ that should take a whole *army* to do—to get that title. I’ve never met one before, but I heard King Bolthor was offered the title once.”

I was floored, turning my attention away from the lightning Hero and straight to Sana’s tan face. “What? Really? What happened? Why would he not take the title?”

Sana scooted even closer to me, her kneecap almost touching mine. “The old Captains say he refused it so he could marry the Queen. Gave up the famed Warrior life for a gallant royal one, a true love’s tale, or somethin’ like that. Bet a lot of people were riled up about it since she was the heir to Boolavogue and he was a brutal Hunter for another province. Imagine leaving a Hunter nation to become King of one that was your rival. That’s what he did—Bolthor Sonon. I’m glad, though. Nothin’ beats Boolavogue when it comes to powerful Hunters, thanks to the King.”

Cal’s dad... is on the level of a Lionheart? No wonder Cal was so nervous about his magic not being Bloodborne and why he was terrified to talk to him like a father.

There was a hefty yell that bellowed from below us. “*Aye, you two!*” We looked down to see Amos gesturing for us to come down.

He continued his shouting. “Ekron’s having a meeting with his recruiting team. Needs us down there pronto!”

“We hear ya, we hear ya...” Sana responded before we both tailed behind Amos, leaving our rooftop seats from the Hero show.

Captain Ekron stood on the wooden platform around his practice area, which was directly next to the Laze and a couple of weaponry stations, the other members of his recruiting team surrounding him.

Once Sana, Amos, and I joined in, there were fifteen Hunters—most of whom I didn’t know the names of. We’ve had three meetings before... but all their names were so weird I couldn’t remember a single one. I just made mental nicknames in my head and hoped they would reintroduce themselves to me later... and I was still waiting.

“Alright, alright—if you would try to behave like normal Hunters and less like a pack of vorrgs, we can get this started promptly!” Ekron raised his voice, making the snickering stop and *shushing* begin.

“We finally goin’ somewhere, Captain, or still just wadin’ in the muddy waters?” the male Hunter behind me shouted. He was the one I called “Brightbeard” because he always had gold beads going down the middle of his long, black beard.

Ekron smiled and stated, “Our wadin’ time is through. Seems the King and his court are sending us out for our first recruit mission—heading north to the province of Nuolja. We don’t normally slay arctic monsters, and their people have not made their way here for proper training. Setting up a guild there would benefit both sides. Wouldn’t mind a couple of Hunter prodigies coming back with us either, just as long as their leaders cooperate with our guidelines. If you know of Nuolja, you’ll know it’ll be a cold one. Glaciers and tundra are its foundation, so I suggest stocking up on thick coats, necrosteel weaponry instead of steel swords, and your snow boots before we leave.”

Sana spoke up, “How long we stayin’ there, Captain?”

Another Hunter next to Cal—the one I named “Blue Scar” because he had a huge blue scar across the side of his tan head, from his left temple down past his ear—shouted next, “And when’s departure?”

“We will leave in four days, meeting here at the Laze *early*. If you’re late, you might as well scale Boolavogue’s Mount and make camp before Captain Clover or Captain Arond finds your lazy stock. We will lodge on their land for five days if everything goes well. And for everyone’s

personal well-being,” Ekron eyed all the male Hunters, “please take full use of the baths on the emership as a couple of the Kingdom’s Menders and culinary staff will be taking the venture with us.”

“What if that’s just my natural scent, Captain?” Brightbeard joked, making all of us dirty hunters giggle.

“Then I suggest learning to sleep on the deck of the ship because there is no way I’m letting you sleep anywhere near my quarters,” our Captain returned the comment, our laughs continuing. “With all that said, you are dismissed. Men, be back here for afternoon lessons. Lisa and Prince Caelum, we will resume your—”

Ekron’s words stopped mid-sentence as a blazing blue blynk zoomed by his face. The bald man’s eyes followed the sporadic flight pattern of the magical origami letter, causing all the attention to be turned away from the meeting... and to me.

I didn’t even have a chance to process my first recruiting mission because of the incoming star-shaped blynk, knowing it had to be from a certain Keeper who didn’t understand proper etiquette.

With its magic speed, the paper star maneuvered through the recruiting team and struck me on my left cheek, giving me a paper cut with its star-bit points. I was used to getting random notes flown at me, but not during meetings. Not with adult Hunters around.

Everyone stared at me as the blynk lost its momentum and landed in my palms, wanting to know what was going on. Ekron was used to seeing Cal and me getting magical requests from Gaius, not the others, though. They were all smiling at me, curiosity swimming in their eyes. My stomach churned having burly Hunters interested in my other life: a Keeper’s Charmer for random ingredients he can’t seem to ask for at a better time of day.

Trying to act like their stares weren’t intimidating, I pinched two of the many pointed appendages to watch it unfold.

Ekron finished concluding the meeting. “Ah, it seems we will have to pick up our training tomorrow for you both then, am I right?”

Inside was my next Charmer mission:

Come to the Hearth and pick up the basket of
MICROGUPS.

TRADE THEM at Fladden at BARQ'S for
VIVAROOT SEEDS.

Ask for GIBS. He'll trade with you.

He doesn't like me.

Take Caelum.

— G

As I silently read Gaius' name, another fluttering sound came toward our team.

The Prince wasn't paying attention—too busy trying to walk toward me and seeing what my errand was—when another blue-starred blynk came jetting by, striking him so hard it almost knocked him over.

Many Hunters laughed, seeing a piece of paper topple their King's heir. To be fair, Gaius really put his brawn into these notes—buckets and buckets of it with magic jetting out the pointed seams—and shot them as fast as bullets... though, with mine, he seemed to be *slightly* more gentle.

Ekron sighed as Cal caught his balance and picked up the note that dropped to the floor. "I will take that as a yes..." He sighed. "Tell that Keeper of yours he isn't the only one with students in need of training, would ya, Lisa?"

"I'll try, Captain." A kind lie. I couldn't tell the Keeper "no" to save my life.

Amos and Erin moved to the front of the circle that formed around Cal and me.

"What's he want?" Erin asked Cal, perching over his Prince's shoulder.

No "let me see what they taste like" notions.

— G

"It was *one time!*" Cal voiced, crinkling the note, but Amos snatched it from his hands before Cal could throw it away. Amos and Erin laughed so hard they almost couldn't stand, causing some other Hunters'

curiosity to peek at the note. In moments, nearly all of the recruiting team started chuckling at their Prince for being an intrusive child.

“Lisa, can we leave now?” Cal muttered to me, the embarrassment kicking in and causing his eyes to stare at the rickety floorboards.

I smiled at him and held out my arm for him to grab onto.

Ekron lifted a corner of his bearded lip and said, “Try not to lose our Prince while you’re gone, little lass,” and gave me a wink.

With Cal’s arm escorted in mine and all our team watching, I happily responded, “I promise, sir.” I then evanesced the two of us away to the secret entrance of Calendula.

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8 The Emership

“You think I look okay?” I asked my self-appointed arctic fashion guru, Tuff. He was sitting on my bed, making a glittery orange stain on my pillow. Luckily, his sparkly soot was easy to clean with a damp cloth, so Mom never found the tangerine powder.

“*Fwoot hoot*,” he whistled as I modeled the new winter coats in front of my Earthian bedroom mirror.

I sighed. “You said that about the last *four* outfit combinations, Tuff. I need you to be honest. Do I look more like a real Hunter in this dark purple one or...” I wobbled over to my cluttered bed and grabbed the cream-colored coat I bought from a shop in Boolavogue a few days ago. “Do you think *this* one is better since it has the Kingdom colors on it?”

In the most genuine confidence, Tuff floated in front of me and the jackets. He glanced fervently, squinting so hard that each little black dot he had for eyes turned into m-dashes upon his magical face. A stare to the left and a stare to the right. He bent his little nubs for arms by his sides and announced in a mighty whistle—

“*Flooot!*”

I rolled my eyes and hastily removed the purple jacket, throwing both coats into my suitcase. “You can’t say you love both—I knew I should’ve asked Inna.”

“*Hootwhoooot...*”

I smiled and playfully touched Tuff’s tummy—chin—chest—the area below his mouth (he was completely round), as he continued to fly in the air. “I knew you wouldn’t lie. I just don’t want Ekron’s team to look weak because of me. They are expecting fierce Hunters, so I somehow have to do that with a face this girly and a body this small, which is why the outfit is important... I just hope this all goes well...”

Using more than half the money I saved from my Charmer position, I bought an array of new clothing for Nuolja. I had never been anywhere where snow was typical throughout the year, nor had I ever bought any winter clothing that wasn’t just made for snowball fights and sledding. Saying I was anxious was an understatement.

Nerves and jitters were the new unwanted guests that I couldn't get rid of, constantly reminding me that I'd be living with Hunters overnight for almost a full week. I already was nervous about slumber parties with Lily and her friends—being around new girls, worrying if they would think my pajamas were weird or if they would play “Truth or Dare,” and embarrassing myself. Now, I'd be surrounded by men I couldn't remember the names of and women who had probably never worried about their outfit choice in their life, not to mention I'd also be the youngest and scrawniest one there.

Why can't this be as carefree as staying the night at Gaius' home? Staying with him was easy. He cooked my meals, stayed out of my room, made me feel safe, and was easy to talk to. Not once did he care if my pajamas were mismatched and had emblems of stars all over the pant legs, or that my hair was messy in the mornings because he had a brunette shrub on top of his head, too. With the Hunters, my only friend was Cal—a boy. I'd have to room with a girl—if I would be rooming with anybody at all—and *that* was scarier than visiting a new land covered in glaciers.

My anxiousness went through Tuff's mind, and he perched on my shoulder, reminding me he would be by my side the entire time. His little spurts of encouragement helped tremendously. Didn't know what I'd do without him.

...

The aurora in Boolavogue was always beautiful: misty mountains, blue hills waiting for the yellowing sun to paint them green, cattle mooing near the apple orchards, and a less-crowded Kingdom. Going through the half-asleep inner city, I immediately went to Captain Ekron's training grounds. Many Hunters were already there; some trying to sneak in naps before Ekron showed up; some with large duffle bags of clothing, making me question if I should've brought something similar instead of my purple suitcase; most being quiet and saying “good morning” as I joined the group, huddled in the summer breeze.

As I stood near Amos, who was talking with Brightbeard, someone came up from behind me and nudged my arm. My heightened nerves couldn't prevent the girlish squeal that left my throat.

A familiar laugh sounded. “Sorry, didn't mean to scare you—thought you were more awake than that.”

It was Cal. His fluffy hair was slightly wet, probably from a recent shower, and his breath smelled like apples—the first time I ever saw the early-morning version of the Prince. *Wonder if that's Boolavogue toothpaste flavor or if he just likes apples for breakfast?* It was quite refreshing since I usually was around the sweaty, midday version of him. And my heart started pounding as he stepped closer. *Why is he so cute right now—*

I blinked, flicking away my embarrassment as best as I could. “I was just thinking about the trip... and I *am* awake. I actually like waking up early. Where’s all your stuff?”

“In my orbkit.” Cal displayed his forearm between us, showing off the thick leather band around his left wrist. An aquamarine gem was embedded in the strap no bigger than a dime, a very minimal design but worked perfectly for a prince. “I opted out of a necklace like yours.”

“Too girly for you?”

“I was gonna say...” He paused and found his words somewhere in the sky behind me. “Actually, yeah. Not my style. Looks good on you, though.”

I could feel my face turning pink, and I dug my eyes into the ground. *Heart, you stop that! It isn't even a real compliment!*

“*Hunters!*” Ekron shouted, stopping all conversations and whatever peaceful sleep some Hunters were encapsulated in on the wooden benches. Our Captain was dressed in grays and browns, his goatee braided into two strands that almost touched his collarbones. Still, not a single hair on his head. “Glad to see you all here, bright and early. For our expedition, as stated, we will be taking an emership instead of evanescing there or using an avelift. Showing up in a grand gesture is what makes us Boolavogue Hunters... and we are taking a couple of Gora bears with us; it’s easier to bring them along on the ship. So, with all that said, let’s head down to the moorings. The skyloes and acemen will lead you to our vessel, and for first-time flyers... hope you aren’t scared of heights. Hug your stock yourself, for I will not be the one to comfort you.”

Forgetting the nervousness of the trip, my mind focused on the words “height” and “flying,” causing my mouth to smile and eyes to sparkle.

I turned to Cal. “We’re taking a *flying ship*? The same ones that hover over Boolavogue?”

We trailed behind the Hunters ahead, and Cal said, “We are flying, but it’s not on those; they are just galasicrafts—security vehicles that only fit a couple of guards. We are taking an emership—wait, you’ve never been to see the emerfleet?”

I shook my head. “Seems *someone* didn’t think that was important on my castle tour last year.”

“For the record, Honey and the Gora bears are *way* better than some rickety ships.” He then rolled his eyes, facing the backs of those in front of us. “But with you and your magic obsession, you’re probably gonna love it.”

The sun had just begun to peak over Boolavogue’s mountains and cobble-stoned city when we started our descent to the moorings. Once out of the front castle gate, we took the pathway that led right, descending low but not off the mountain. A long street of stone I had never been down before.

I stuck close to Cal, excitement bubbling up inside my gut. I was about to see a magic airship. *How does it fly? Will it be floating when we get there? Can it sail on water as well?*

Fifteen minutes of walking passed, and we came to the bottom of the summit the castle stood upon. I had never been on that side of the mountain. Dewy grass trailed along the perimeter of the declining stone walkway, and the barren ravine surrounding the Inner Kingdom could still be seen off to our left. The gentle, lemony rays of the sun weaved between the fields, seeping through the washes of clouds. Everything was quiet—far from the city and Hunter training grounds—until the grassy cliff became ridged and produced man-made railings on the side. Men shouting nautical terms and clanking metal broke through the silence, echoing through the gorge and toward the farmlands beyond.

Our stone pathway turned a corner of the mountain, and up ahead were the moorings. I was expecting to see a dock or runway. Nope. Their moorings were part of the mountain—actually *inside* the massive rockface. I counted six docking stations, each hole at least 200 feet high. They had to have used terrain Mages and Mystics to chisel those fissures—no way could an explosion or pair of tools do something that precise. The giant mountain cubicles looked like someone carved out perfect archways—just like a pumpkin carver would with a Jack O’ Lantern’s eyes—and put a prized glowing white ship inside.

Captain Ekron led us to the moorings in the mountain—my first close-up of an emership. Fancy boats on Earthian TV and in textbooks had nothing on these—emerships were *huge*, a magical version of Italian tall ships, only without the rafters of cotton sails. The white and bronzed vessel was fastened to the floor, the emerald metal detailing the railings and around the window frames. A colossal glowing rock with protruding hooks anchored the ship so we could all get on at the top. The deck was wide with a vast cabin underneath, and a small hut sat near the back, most likely where the cockpit was or the pilot's seat.

"We are actually riding on one of those?" I blurted to Cal with my eyes sparkling.

"Yep!" He smiled back, shoulders squared, standing proud of his Kingdom's vessels. "Honestly, I prefer flying on these rather than taking an avelift. You get your own bed, lounge room, and meals prepared on hand."

I noticed there was no sail or even a pair of magic wings. "What makes them fly? Some type of magic fuel or flight charm?"

"Depends on the emership. For us in Boolavogue, we have plenty of Treasure Hunters who search for wind glintz and aerorosin." He pointed to the back of the ship, where some workers carried glowing buckets of cerulean oil. "That is what that blue liquid is, magical engine fuel. It is what flies these ships and is used in other aircrafts around the galaxies. Sometimes, Mages or Mystics with wind or Gravitia magic will float the ship... but only for shorter distances."

I could not stop smiling. "This is probably the coolest thing you've ever shown me."

"Don't let Honey hear you say that."

"Wait—she's coming?"

"Of course! Why would I not bring my bear on our mission?"

This day just keeps getting better and better!

As we walked onto the deck, taking a flight of stairs like I had seen people do when boarding an airplane, I noticed the Gora bears entering through the bottom cabins. There were two brown bears and Honey, the lone white oversized mammal, all coming aboard with us. Never thought I would fly on a ship with pampered bears, let alone be on a ship in general.

"Alright, if I can have your attention!" shouted Ekron, trying to command his wandering Hunters from investigating the ship—me included. "Before I hand over the command to our aerial captain, I want to go over

procedures. First, there are eight vacant cabins. Women, take the first floor. Men, we will take the second—three to a room, by the way.”

Amos started to ask, “Captain, is it okay—”

“No, you may *not* room with me,” Ekron shot him down quickly, already knowing what his Hunter would say. “You sleep talk, Amos, so you’ll be needing to find someone else to entertain through the night.”

All of us Hunters started laughing as Amos stood dumbfounded.

Our Captain continued, “Second, you are not to leave this ship until it lands—no chancers or attempts of impressing others with your idiocy of ‘let me see how far I can lean over’—I’m looking at you, Erin. Last, when we land in Nuolja, remember you are representing Boolavogue and the King and Queen. You are dependable Hunters looking to expand our practice. Visit on your own time if you wish to blag about or act a class of a fool—*again*, looking at you, Erin.”

“*Naff it, Cap—I’m not the only gimp here!*” Erin whined.

“Nice to see you finally acceptin’ it!” Sana said from beside me. A hushed surge of brawny chuckles followed.

Captain smiled and concluded, “Rules of the ship will be given to you by Diver Vaas, your emership aerial captain. Obey him as you would me and any other of your superiors.”

Diver Vaas then stepped up, gray-haired with a zipped pale blue and white uniform. Around him stood the crewmen, which I was guessing to be the so-called “skyloes” and “acemen” Ekron mentioned earlier.

“You all seem like a good lot, so I won’t make this too long,” Diver Vaas began in a raspier voice than Ekron. “For those who are new, I will introduce our crew if you have any issues or problems during our voyage. The skyloes are my extra hands helping me navigate through the currents of the clouds; find them dressed in full-on blue if you need assistance. For mechanical issues, see the acemen. They ensure our vessel runs smoothly, continuously checking the aerorodin levels and fixing any problems that may occur outside of the ship. Easy to spot them; they will have goggles strapped to their brows. Last thing: the weather shows clear for the morning, so we should touch down in Nuolja’s port in about five hours. We will have the mantle encasing the ship, so you’re free to move about the cabins and deck during the entirety of the flight. Are there any questions?”

A woman with silky black hair next to Sana, who I learned was named Kelm due to Sana having to wake her up constantly before our trek,

raised her hand and asked nervously, “How high will we be in the air?”

Proudly, Diver Vaas answered, “If the clouds stay high, we will reach approximately 500 meters.”

Kelm pulled in her lips and squealed, her hand slowly retracting, quivering. “Aye... thanks, Diver Vaas...”

Guess even adult Hunters fear something as simple as heights.

We took a tour of the ship, starting with the deck. Most of it was very open, like how I pictured most boats, but it was odd not to see a single sail or cloth parachute attached to a mast. Near the edges and in the center were benches, a food bar, peculiar doors locked to the floor, and not a single harnessed chair with seat belts to be found. I did see a lot of handlebars and places to grab onto, but that was it when it came to safety. When Diver Vaas said we could move freely, he meant it... including falling over with the slightest turn. *Maybe there’s some type of gravity effect...?*

Down below were the cabins, very snug and comfy with triple-layered bunk beds in each room—fitting three Hunters perfectly.

We paused to pick our rooms—cueing my nervous system to shake all my bones. *Who am I gonna stay with? I don’t want to room with someone who doesn’t like me. I also don’t want to be picked out of pity. I would rather sleep with the bears or out on the deck—*

“Aye, Lisa! You can bunk with me and Kelm if ya like.”

Blessing me with peace in the form of unsophisticated Hunter talk was Sana. Being picked to room with—I had never had that happen before. In school, I was never picked first in groups, chosen to sit in the middle of my friends, or even selected first in a dodgeball match in P.E. class (didn’t mind that, but it would have been nice not to be picked close to last every time). Feeling second best was normal for me... and hearing someone as pretty and skilled as Sana choose me made me feel special.

“I would love that,” I smiled back, tagging behind her and Kelm.

After seeing the kitchen, the communal baths for both men and women, and the den for the Gora bears—warm, blanket-filled lodging already covered in shedding bear fur—we all stood on the deck, ready to start flying.

I was a window seat type of girl without fear of heights, so I ran straight to the ship’s bow. My blood pumped faster as excitement filled my veins, the thrill of my first sky voyage about to begin. Captain Ekron joined

me along with Cal as Diver Vaas made his way up to the bridge (the little two-story room at the back of the deck, right above the cockpit).

With two fingers gunning his throat, a charm encased Diver Vaas' voice, making it boom like an intercom as he announced, "Be the sun shining bright on us today—if you'd be so kind as to lend me your ears, Hunters, we will be taking off shortly. For your safety in the disembark, care to find a seat or stand near the railings. Grip tightly unless you enjoy a slag from the aerorosi's boost and a jolt of blunderin' magic. *Acemen—bouse the kedges and drift her from port.*"

When the magic of the boat activated, the floorboards down to the deck's paint breathed as the wind glintz began to make the vessel hover. Every wooden plank and glossy piece of metal churned and rattled, the brawny power of magic taking command. It felt just like a rollercoaster getting ready to incline into the sky, and my heart was ready for the exhilarating plunge.

Acemen strapped on their goggles and used ropes to propel down toward the kedges—*real* boat anchors shaped to look like giant sapphire gems. The men weighed anchor, swinging along the hull of the emership like flowing branches of a willow tree, causing me to lean over the edge to watch their trapeze act. *That looks like so much fun!*

"Steady her, crew, and glide her for takeoff."

The ship began floating slowly out of the mountain's mouth, flying above the forest below. I was on my toes, leaning over the edge, not caring how giddy I looked compared to the other Hunters. *We are actually floating in the air!*

"Skyloes—spark the mantle."

Starting from the stern, a rippling film of magical glass formed over the boat, encasing us inside like a bubble. Once I heard it lock with a deep chiming sound, I couldn't help but touch it—seeing if it was the same material as the one at the Aquanaeum. I glanced at Ekron; he wasn't looking. I leaned forward two feet and poked the transparent screen, feeling its cold, rubbery texture. *It is the same!* No matter how much I tried, my finger couldn't penetrate the mantle.

"Kindle the engines and release the airrudder. Let's see her blue fins fly!"

Echoes of waves crashing against stars began to roar from the engines. I turned around toward the stern, hands gripped tightly along the

boat's edge, and saw blue mist emitting a charging light from the dual motors—the aerorodin burning brightly! The fuel smelled like rainwater with a mix of hot sugar, wafting around us as we hovered, much more pleasant than what came out of a car's muffler. *How can it make the sounds of waves crashing without us even being in the water?*

Below the stern, the scaled wings of the rudders unfurled in silky billows. I leaned over just a bit more to sneak a peek at the ship's trailing fins. It was well worth it. Airrudders stretched far down, the length of a blue whale, and swayed back and forth with the captain's orders. They were beautiful, like paper-thin dragonfly wings made with the sheen of opals.

"We have an all-clear. Set sail for the sky!"

The throttle of the engines lit up bright, the sea of the heavens roaring below our feet, and we were *off*. We shot into the morning sky with speeds matching the avelifts and faster than any bird. I looked over at Cal. We ascended into the dawn, continuously glancing back and forth between the Kingdom below and the clouds ahead. The mantle covered the intensity of the wind but let gentle gusts of the cool breeze seep through just enough to blow the wisps of my brown hair. Flying hundreds of feet above the ground wasn't new to me, but something about being on a magical boat ride in the clouds made my heart relive the thrill of freedom all over again.

9 Rumors and Magic on Deck

The weather shifted after the four-hour mark, bringing in a cold breeze and dense clouds. We all changed into our Nuoljian coats and fuzzy boots, gathering on the top deck around the emership's firepit—all except for Kelm; being on deck terrified her, so she stayed in the room, sleeping the whole time. Cal also brought up Honey from the den, and he, Amos, Erin, and I nestled up against her furry belly while the other Hunters sat more closely to the flame pit. With most of us there—including Captain Ekron—we exchanged our best and worst Hunter job stories. I did more listening than talking, though, smiling and laughing along at all their magical lives.

“So what's Nuolja like, Captain?” the girl I nicknamed “Cheeky” asked (her rosy cheeks always stood out, even with dirt or soot on her face from training). “Surprised you've never been there before.”

Our Captain, sitting two people from the right of me, smiled and answered, “You lot act as if I've explored the world. I'm just a Hunter, same as you. I've never been there, only because they are a very private people. Never once seen a Nuoljian outside of their province during my ventures either. Their towns are small—no surprise why they said yes to our invitation of a possible guild alliance—and little is known of them.”

“I heard they got weird magic up there,” said Brightbeard.

“What you mean by ‘weird’?” Sana questioned, sitting directly across from me and the firepit.

“Rumors saying some of their people need magic to live.”

Erin interrupted the conversation, fingers brushing back his shaggy hair. “What—you mean their heart can't pump blood without magic?”

“I don't know—said it was rumors.” Brightbeard turned to Ekron. “Have you heard of magic like that, Captain?”

Ekron leaned back on the bench and stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. “I've come across a few who were infected with a magic illness, needing rare medicine from even rarer herbs. That's nothing new... but those infected with dark magic... I would say, for a cure, you would need a grand amount of purifying magic. Living and breathing, though... never heard of a human heart needing magic for that.”

As Ekron spoke, I started thinking if I had ever read anything about a magic like that in Gaius' books... and I hadn't. Either the rumors were lies or I was about to see a magic not even the Keeper of Stars knew about—pretty cool.

From behind our Captain, a tall, lean aceman approached, standing straight and attentive with his goggles strapped to his forehead. "Captain Ekron, sir," he began, and all our eyes went to him. "Diver would like to speak with you on the bridge."

Ekron didn't ask any questions and left with the crewman.

Even though everyone around, besides Cal and me, was in their twenties—*adults*—they all scooted in closer to the fire. Secrets were ready to be spilled like kids during a sleepover when their parents had left for the night.

"Aye," Erin said to no one in particular, his eyes cocking side to side, "you heard of those Hunters comin' over to our continent speakin' of those shadows stealin' Mystics?"

Sana shook her head, doubt swimming in her hazel eyes. "What you talkin' about—"

"It was *Mages*, not Mystics," short brown-headed Kite (that was his real name, which is why I easily remembered it) corrected.

Erin sat up straight, defensive. "It was *both*, then—"

"You gonna tell me what you're blaggin' on about?" Sana demanded.

"Shadow Stealers, they're calling them," Brightbeard said, the three beads in his long goatee shimmering brightly in the morning sun. Even though he was one of the older Hunters on our recruiting team, his tone oozed the curiosity of a nosy teen. It reminded me of myself. "Those creatures—figures in hoods or whatever magic they are—are being spotted all over the world, not on our continent, though. No one knows what they are—"

"But, they come in the shadows and take things—even takin' people," Erin butted in. "Heard some Hunters talk about it when I was at the border with Ecky three weeks ago. It was in the local reports and everythin', but then, *whoosh*—hushed up no quicker than a summer storm."

Cheeky asked, eyebrows furrowed, "You mean near Camdenrod?"

With that one word, my eyes widened, but luckily, everyone was so captivated by Erin's gossip that no one noticed the shock on my face. The

report Erin mentioned—that was the newspaper I saw when I was with Gaius at the deli, no doubt about that. During our time there, the Keeper acted odd, staring at every detail after I showed him the article. I honestly didn't think anything of it. He said not to worry, so I believed him. The man could probably take on an army and somehow survive with all four limbs still attached. *So, what really are these Shadow Stealers to make a Keeper on edge?* It sounded a bit... too far-fetched. An exaggerated rumor.

"Shadows do not *steal* people," a male Hunter said, one whom I didn't know. He was one of the official Hunters in our group, the oldest, it seemed, and one who had been on many hunts outside of Boolavogue. "Sounds more like a cry for attention or a couple of rogue teens trying to run away. It happens."

"Could be dark magic," a woman Hunter said at the opposite end of me, near Sana. All eyes turned to her and her coppery hair. "Shadows, blackness, darkness—could have been mistaking it—"

"Then, explain the people goin' missin'!" Erin slammed down like a mighty fortress.

"You sure they aren't in Nuolja?" another female asked, hugging her knees on the bench. Her worried tone matched the same emotion I was trying to not show.

The oldest male Hunter swatted the worry in the air. "Doubt it. Would have heard something by now." He turned his dark eyes in my direction, staring at Cal. The Prince was still sitting by me, his arm almost brushing against my shoulder. "Does King Sonon know anything about them, Prince?"

Cal slowly shook his head and paused, thinking about what to say. Only a few of the Hunters asked Caelum royal-family questions. *Never* did they ask about the King. "This is the first I've heard about them." Somber toned. I could tell he didn't like feeling ignorant about something in front of his citizens.

Amos, who was to the right of Erin and two spots away from Cal, said, "Same for me—Erin, you're just believing some lies—"

Erin pushed Amos' burly arm, attempting to wrestle him. "*Naff it—you gimp—*"

"Aye," Kite interrupted, staring behind Honey—the bear still being our fuzzy couch cushion. "Is that a *star* flying against the ship?"

"That ain't no star! Stars ain't *blue*," Sana uttered.

“Then, you tell me what that is if it’s not a star—it’s glowing and flying right toward us.”

We all turned around to see what Kite and Sana were arguing about. Flying fast in the sky and glistening blue, keeping up with the speed of emership, was a blynk. I saw why Kite thought it was a star. Its pointed edges and speed were unearthly... and the only origami shape Gaius knew how to create.

“Nope, that’s a blynk right there!” Amos said, smiling. “We all know who that is for.”

Guess my Charmer job never rests.

The blynk started hitting the magic mantle like a supersonic beetle, demanding to get inside the protective screen. Cal and I jumped up off of Honey and were about to rush over to the flying origami when suddenly—

POP! It burst right through the magical veil!

Amos laughed beside Cal and me. “Only the Keeper of Stars would find a way to break through a magic mantle with nothing but paper.”

“What—you mean a *real* Keeper?” a male Hunter murmured.

“Where’ve you been? They *work* for him—the Prince and Lisa,” I heard Sana answer.

The flying blue blynk zoomed straight into my hands while Sana further explained our apprenticeship, causing all Hunters to watch me intently. The linen letter was small and revealed the Keeper’s handwriting.

Cal leaned in close, knowing he probably was involved with the job as well, and we both silently read it together:

You’ll be in Nuolja, so I want you to collect
some EDURPLUME.

Find it on the waves of FYRNUHAURA. Can’t
miss it.

You’ll need to fly to reach it, so don’t be seen.

Go at night and stay safe.

Caelum may join if you like.

– G

I scrunched up my nose, trying to pronounce the two foreign magic words quietly, “What’s, uh... ‘fur-nah’... ‘or-rah’?”

“Don’t know,” Cal said, taking a seat by Honey again.

I did the same, my eyes still glued to the paper. “Didn’t even say how to catch them either... no surprise—”

“*There’s another!*” I heard a Hunter shout, but I was too focused on reading the note to notice who it was.

Dashing through the once impenetrable magic mantle was a second blue blynk, slightly bigger, faster than the last.

Cal held out his hands and caught it before it hit me. I smiled, appreciating him for saving me from another gashing paper cut.

As he pinched the sides to open the blynk—forgetting the stares of the Hunters and Captain around us—I reread my note and said aloud, “What are we supposed to put it in, anyway?”

With a plop and unexpected force, a *huge* glass jar with a leather harness and clasp on the lid magically dropped out of the blynk Cal unfurled. The absurdity was a shock to the Prince, causing him to catch the jar awkwardly and fall forward before it could crash on deck.

Hunters started laughing while I sat amazed. *What kind of charm lets a piece of paper carry a four-gallon jar all the way into the sky? I thought only orbkits could hold large objects.*

Cal sat back up and grabbed the note off the floor, leaning close to me so I could read:

Store the EDURPLUME in here.

– G

“Guess this answers your question, Lisa,” Cal said and put the jar between his legs as he bundled back against Honey’s furry belly.

“I didn’t know Keepers had Charmers,” Kite announced, putting a knitted hat over his short brown hair. “Guess it makes sense for a Prince, though—Your Highness.” He tipped his bare chin toward Cal.

“What you talkin’ bout?” Erin butted in. “It’s all Lisa, I’ll tell you that. She’s got *two* types of magic. Slags the Prince with it all the time.”

“That’s not *all* true,” retaliated Cal. “Lisa’s got *four* types of magic.”

Oh, my heart dropped down to the depths of my stomach, and I pulled my knees to my chest and loosely wrapped my arms around my shins, trying to make myself small. As if that would've stopped the stares.

Having Non-Living magic and Water Manipulation was no surprise; watch one spar with Ekron's beast magic, and anyone could see me battle with both. Understanding Honey's thoughts and the rest of the Gora bears wasn't too much of a big deal either, so I didn't mind him blurting that, but *flying*—that was a secret. Though... I forgot to mention it to Cal...

Gaius did say not to show off *outside* of Boolavogue, and the Kingdom was well-trustworthy. The skyloes and acemen were also a part of the nation, as well as Diver Vaas. *Maybe them knowing wouldn't be a bad idea... and being seen as cooler than the Prince would be pretty enjoyable...*

More Hunters rumbled with awe in their voices, fascinated by the phenomenon that was me: the Earthian with four types of magical powers.

"You've got *four*? Didn't even know that was possible!"

"Little lass has got more magic than Captain and the King!"

"You've been holdin' out on us, Lisa!"

"How'd an Earthian get four?" Cheeky asked through the midst of questions.

Before I had time to freak out and come up with a lie that covered up my Agapéd secret, Cal interjected, "Starnate, of course! Right, Lisa?"

What Cal said wasn't a lie, but it also hid the truth. *Thank you, Cal.*

I nodded my head, smiling softly while still gripping my shins. "Yeah, just kinda fell from the sky like they normally do."

"By the morn—I've only seen you fly those rocks and water. What other magic you got stored in that little body of yours?" Blue Scar asked, sitting next to Brightbeard.

Again, Cal jumped to answer first. "She can talk to animals, believe it or not!"

I quickly fixed Cal's answer. "No—actually, I can just understand what they're thinking."

A bundle of *whoas* came from the Hunters, making my self-esteem rise as high as the emership, and I extended my legs from their huddled position.

"Can you prove it, then?" Cheeky asked, her face as rosy as ever. "You know what Honey's thinking over there?"

I admit, I let a Gaius smirk slip through my lips as Cheeky wanted proof of my skill.

Throughout the time we were outside, I heard everything Honey thought. She wanted apples; she thought the other two bears downstairs were snoring too loud; she didn't mind being in the air. But, I knew the Hunters wouldn't believe any of that as "proof." Had to find another way to confirm it to them... then, I heard Honey tell me something that almost made me chuckle.

"Well..." I said, staring at the firepit, "she thought it was funny when Erin slipped and fell in the emership's bear den when he and Amos were trying to sneak more treats to the bears. They didn't want anyone to find out... but when they came up here, Honey could smell the treats still stashed in their pockets."

As the faces of the sneaks turned red, Cal quickly reached into Erin's pockets and grabbed out crumbles of bear biscuits, causing laughter to emerge from the group. "*You vorrgs*—no wonder she wasn't hungry!"

Erin reacted, "Lisa—"

"Sorry—I just was stating a fact."

"Aye, Lisa! You're amazin'!" Sana said, forearms bracing her knees. "What else you got up your sleeve?"

The Prince couldn't contain his excitement and announced, "She can *fly, too!* Never seen anything like it!"

Those were the magic words that made every eye widen. I strictly kept flying to my Charmer jobs or during practice with Gaius, only using terrain and water magic during training. Not even Amos and Erin knew about it, the two always watching my lessons with Ekron when they weren't on hunts. Gaius mentioned flying was rare a while ago, and he was right, like usual. I had never seen another Mage or Mystic fly—just Kamari; even then, that was her Gravitia magic. If there was one type of magic that could impress even a Mage and Mystic, it was soaring through the air.

"Crack on with that—you serious?"

"Never seen a Mage fly before!"

"How fast can you go?"

The Prince became my spokesperson and started answering all the Hunters' questions for me. "Fast as an avelift—bet even faster than this ship!"

"Naff it, really?"

“You have to show us, Lisa!”

“Come on, please, little lass!”

I wasn’t a competitive person or thrived off the praise of proving to be the best. When it came to magic, however, my personality changed—only *slightly*. For the first time, I was seen as the interesting one in a group. The one who everyone thought was cool.

Their adoration boosted my spirit as if embarrassment was not a possibility. They wanted to see a flying Mage, and I could not bear to let them down, but there was a problem—

“Captain said no chancers, *remember*,” Sana said and looked at Erin as if he was the sole participant in the desire for the magic show.

“For us—the non-flyers.” Erin pointed his hands to me when he said, “Lisa wouldn’t *die*—nothin’ for Ecky to worry about. Plus, I bet he would like to see flight magic, too.”

Amos crossed his arms with a smirk. “You gonna ask him, then?”

Erin’s mouth turned as small as a pea. “Easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission—and it’s up to the one with the magic.”

All stares returned to me, only this time with a querying hope. No one disagreed with Erin’s poor wisdom because they all wanted to see if what Cal said was true. They wanted to see me fly, even if that meant getting a verbal lashing from Ekron and Vaas. Sure, there were rules on the ship... but those rules were in place because toppling over the ship’s railing certified death and Vaas getting fired from his Diver position. Me—I was the exception: I would be just fine.

Blue Scar grunted and griped, “Aye—but the mantle.” Our eyes looked up at the force field casing the ship. We saw the blynks fly through, but those were paper and covered in Keeper magic. “Even if Lisa wanted to show us, she can’t get through that.”

My eyes flickered, confidence taking control over my body. I swiped my orbkit, knowing exactly what pocket to pick through, and held up the key to solve their problem.

“I, uh, actually have a bracelet that breaks through magic mantles,” I said, cupping the Aquanaeum’s blue wristband. I glanced up. All their faces glowed with excitement. “I could jump and fly through. No problem.”

Cal turned to me as many of the Hunters shifted in their seats. “Lisa, you serious?”

“*Pfft*—” Erin’s mouth flapped. “Come on, Princy. You really think Ekron will kick the Keeper’s student off his team for showin’ us what a bit of her magic can do?”

For the first time, what Erin said made sense because everyone, including the older Hunters, sat in silence with their eyebrows raised in agreement. I was the most powerful Mage in the whole Kingdom, whether or not I felt it, and Ekron did know I was offered the title of Hero, meaning he *knew* about me saving the land. He also knew I was the Agapéd... and knew of Gaius’ stubbornness. Getting rid of me would look bad on him, and never would he go up against the 700-year-old gardener.

Little me, sitting against Honey’s warm belly, had the upper hand to stretch the Hunter boundaries.

“Would be quite interesting...” Brightbeard turned to the oldest Hunter.

The oldest woman, probably around twenty-eight years old, also toyed, “And Captain isn’t back yet...”

Everyone was on the edge of their seat, silently provoking me to let loose on my magic, holding back their galvanic smiles. Never in my life have I had a team of young adults dare me to do something—let alone a group of any age looking forward to me showing off a skill. Ask me to speak in front of a crowd, and I’ll tense up; ask me to sing solo during karaoke, and I’ll grow as shy as a bird; ask me to join a group project in school, and I’ll let you walk all over me if it meant I didn’t have to interject my thoughts.

If the situation involved using magic, like this one, all fear-ridden and self-conscious emotions were pushed aside.

“Okay.” I latched on the bracelet, it magically tightening around my thin wrist. “I’ll do it.”

We all snuck to the back of the ship, gathered in the shadow under the bridge and out of any nosy worker’s line of sight, including the missing captains. The aerorosi burned beneath us, but in the middle was a clear engine-free area, a perfect jumping-off point for me. All the Hunters gathered around, even the ones who weren’t as thrilled about breaking the rules; they weren’t about to miss the once-in-a-lifetime show, even if it meant getting in trouble.

The weather was cold, but my heart remained fiery. I hadn’t flown in a couple of days, and being that high up was electrifying—sending

goosebumps from my neck down to the soles of my shoes.

Some of the Hunters leaned over the edge. Their faces instantly paled. Down below was nothing but miniature trees, rocks, and snowcap mountains for miles—all a 10,000-foot drop away—and many began to see the situation for what it was: a group of nosy Hunters agreeing to send a little girl overboard to potentially fall to her death.

I, though, didn't see it like that. I was about to dive head-first into clouds—icy ones filled with snow. *This is going to be so cool!*

"Aye, you *sure* this is a good idea?" I heard Blue Scar say when he looked down to the death valley below.

"Yeah, like, what if Ekron finds we murdered the Keeper's student?" Brightbeard added on. "Or worse: the King finds out—"

Erin jerked his chin toward me, unwavering by their negativity. "We ain't *murderin'* her, ain't I right, Lisa?"

As I gave Cal my jacket to hold and threw my hair up into a ponytail, preventing any added weight and hair from hindering my flight, I nodded. "I won't die. I promise."

"See," Erin said. "Just *trust* her—"

"It ain't that we don't believe Lisa," Sana said, leaning against the railing with sagging eyes and crossed arms. "It's that we are the *adults* in the situation, and if Captain caught us—caught *you*—sendin' over a little girl, he would send *our* stocks overboard. Got that?"

"Ah—you're just dressin' up your doubt. Lisa is about to prove to you why she is the best and *way* better than all you women in the Troop, and *you* can't handle it." Erin knelt down, letting me use his shoulder as leverage. Amos joined in, and both of my Hunter brothers held my ankles and calves as I stood on the railing. The shaggy-haired, cocky Hunter wasn't finished. "Now, you can run off and miss this world-shatterin' record of a Mage out flyin' an emership, just as long as you don't go off and tell the Captain—"

"*By the MORN—*" roared an angered, baffled voice from the far right shadow of the bridge. All our backs stiffened, and I was thankful Amos and Erin held my legs tight. The jump from *his* voice would have sent me falling, a whiplash I didn't want to endure without prepping my flight magic first.

Ekron, followed by Diver Vaas and a couple of acemen, stomped toward us. His chest puffed. His jaw clenched tight—an outraged look I'd

never seen from our Captain before. I'd say he was so shocked by the situation, by his own Hunters, that he didn't know how to react or what emotion to show other than a grumbling of words. In his eyes, he saw a group of adults chucking me to my death. "I leave you lot alone for *five minutes*, and you're tossing over our youngest Hunter—"

"Captain Ekron, sir—" Brightbeard interjected, his face nervous, matching the rest of the Hunters' expressions.

Ekron didn't let him finish. He darted for Erin and Amos. "There better be a class of an explanation for why you have Lisa clasped between your grimy arms?"

Right as Ekron came for them, a vorrg to its prey, I whipped my head. It was evident Ekron was kinder to Cal and me, and I couldn't let the men take all the blame.

"They just wanted to see me fly, sir," I quickly said, staring at Ekron with my doe eyes.

All stopped—Ekron, as well as Diver Vaas and his lingering crewmen, pausing at my words.

Our bald Captain squinted at me, huffing. Those hazel eyes of his scanned my freckled cheeks. "Fly?"

Like before, no one knew of my flight powers except for Cal. Ekron included.

I pulled in my lower lip. "Mhm."

Ekron glared at his recruitment team. Many of them found parts of the ship more interesting to look at, not daring to stare into the angered Captain's face. Even the Prince focused on the shininess of the floorboards.

Before our boiling Hunter Captain could speak, Diver Vaas said, "I didn't know you had such a Mage on your team, Ekron." He wasn't as upset, even though this was one of *his* rules we were about to break.

A whispered laugh puffed from our Captain, and every Hunter released the breath he or she held. Ekron looked at me again as I stayed balancing on the railing. "I didn't know either."

"It was our idea." Shakiness filled Cheeky's words. "We all just wanted to see Lisa's magic."

The others began apologizing, too, but it wasn't their fault—

"It was me, sir," I finally admitted, my voice now the sole echo amongst the billowing hum of the emership. "I'm sorry, I just... I didn't want to let them down."

Ekron stood still. He scratched his jawline and chin underneath his braided beard, thinking hard with a wrinkled forehead. Stoic and silent.

Two footsteps came from behind him, and Diver Vaas padded our leader's shoulder, ruffling his winter coat. "My vessel's rules are meant for one's safety, but... that only pertains to those who can't sprout wings and soar with the clouds. And I never have seen a Mage fly before in all my sixty years of livin'. If you're brave enough to jump, little lass, then I'd be honored to see such a magic—if your Captain allows it." He winked.

Ekron rolled his brawny eyes until they peered at the Prince. "Just don't go telling your father on me, Your Highness. I kind of like being stuck with you lot, even when you about give me a heart attack." He slipped a grin toward me. "You promise you won't go dying on me now, Lisa?"

I nodded quickly. "I promise, sir."

He gripped Amos' shoulder. "Then, just this once, let's see a Mage out fly an emership."

Everyone cheered, giving nudges and friendly punches to each other, excited to see their Captain break the rules for magic.

Diver Vaas leaned over the railing close to Cal and Ekron. He eyed the aerorodin jetting from the engines and the speed at which the clouds passed by. "I'm sure there will be a push of the wind once you sail off," he warned.

"Got it," I confirmed.

"And stay clear of the engines as well."

"Yes, sir." I took a deep breath and looked down at Amos and Erin. "You can let go now."

The two confident Hunters suddenly turned nervous, making eye contact with each other, waiting to see who would let go of me first. Maybe, for them, magic was hard to trust... or because I was so small and never showed off before, they had a hard time believing I would be fine. Their concern was sweet and appreciated, but magic was easy to trust for me. I was as sure as the sun rising every morning that I would be fine.

"You ain't gettin' all soft, are you?" Sana sniped, staring at the ginger-bearded and the shaggy-haired men latched onto my legs.

"Sorry for havin' a *heart*! Like to see *you* in this same situation," Erin scolded the blonde Hunter.

After another moment, Amos and Erin took a deep breath and let go, leaving me to balance on my own. As I stood high above the Hunters, Cal

said with boldness. “Show ‘em what you got, Lisa.”

His courage in me left my heart fluttering. I gave him a nod, and with a leap of faith, I jumped forward and broke through the mantle with ease—immediately hit with pounds of rushing wind, sending me behind the ship faster than I expected.

It. Was. Absolutely. *Amazing!* Diving through the clouds—free-falling fast—I soaked in the exhilarating cyclones of cold wind, like rays from the sun. It fueled my body and made my heart joyous.

Once a few seconds passed, I decided it was time to outrace an emership. I pulsed my magic through my body, feeling it rumble through my veins and around my bones. Then, with a push from the magic in my heart, I used the air as leverage to begin flying. In my mind, I was invincible in the sky—swear I could take on a jet plane with my speed!

Looking up, the blue rudder of the flying beast swayed beautifully.

I wanna touch it.

I flew fast in the cold wind, keeping up with the speed of the boat—right under the blue tail fin of the emership. Avoiding the engine’s aerorosi heat, I danced with the magic airrudder, and when it came close enough to my hands, I touched it. It was *cold*—a curtain of icicles.

I could’ve explored every nook and cranny of the underside of the boat, counting its windows and seeing if any wind glintz were lodged into the vessel, but I had forgotten about the Hunters. They saw me jump and never resurface. *Probably should head back up to the crew before they think I’ve died and Vaas and Ekron lose their jobs... or their heads by the King’s hand.*

Jolting off the draft of the rudder, I jetted upward and twenty feet away from the hull. As cold beams of the sun broke through the clouds, the eyes of Hunters spotted me—a thin girl soaring through the sky as if it were as easy as running down a hill. They all had gathered on the ship’s main deck, cheering and clapping, baffled that I was keeping up with the emership’s speed—Diver Vaas included.

I couldn’t stop smiling, even with my legs about to freeze off. Their care and amazement of me fueled my confidence like no other; never knew a couple of shouts and burly laughs could make me feel so good.

When my fingers turned purple from the arctic current, I knew I had to land. With one more good climb up the ship’s draft, I flew to the top and

straight into the magic mantle. I hit the brakes of my flying, creating invisible skid marks in the air above deck.

Each Hunter applauded as I landed, circling me with hefty pats on my back like a winning athlete of a championship game.

“That was amazing!”

“You made the ship look slow!”

“Where’ve you been hidin’ this Mage, Captain?”

“I can’t believe that just happened!”

Hearing them all hover over me like a celebrity was strange, but for the first time, I truly enjoyed it. Truly loved it. They applauded me like I was extraordinary, and it wasn’t just the magic. It was *Lisa* out there—being brave and jumping right off the edge without an ounce of fear. Me, breaking the rules. Me. Lisa Robbie was cool—unique—worth a smile and a pat on the back. I didn’t have that on Earth, but with the Hunters, I did. Their happiness warmed my heart; I just wish it would’ve warmed up my arms, too. It was *beyond* cold in the sky, and I didn’t notice how iced-up I was until my teeth started chattering.

Being a caring prince, Cal quickly noticed my freezing arms and wrapped my jacket back over me. “Lisa—you are incredible!”

“Th-thanks,” I smiled back with my pink and freckled cheeks. “Have to admit, th-that was the funnest thing I’ve ev-ver done.”

A brawny build came toward me, Ekron, noting the pink of my nose and chattering of my teeth. He placed his burly hand on my shoulder. “You are a magnificent Mage, Miss Lisa...” His tone lowered as did his hips, leaning closer to me. “Just be sure not to show off too much around Nuolja. And don’t let those Hunters talk you into risking your life to fulfill their chancer spirits again, alright?” Gentleness and care oozed off his words, and a grin appeared. “Gonna shock this old man’s heart if I ever see you about to jump to your death again because of this lot.”

I hugged my body tight, lingering on his words. “I promise, Captain.”

As we returned to our spots near the fire pit, a town of white and crystal blue began to appear miles ahead, just below the snowy clouds.

10 Icy Rescue

Green did not exist in the Nuoljian lands as we began our descent toward the frosty town. Mostly brown rocks made up their foundation with patches of cultivated areas for winter crops. Mountains were prevalent but bare, only blanketed with snow; not a single tree sprouted from their cliff faces—the first time I had ever seen a hairless bluff.

Going further down through the clouds, the houses became visible. They were small, most being one story tall from my perspective, and wooden, but not like log cabins; more like sunken cottages, buried to keep warm, roofs that hit the ground toward the back. Some were scattered with lots of acreage, having farmlands of wooly black sheep and fishing ports. Others were in tight neighborhoods with a maximum of twenty homes at a time. *Never seen a province this barren before.*

A large cloud cleared ahead, letting the noon sun gleam brightly over the snow-dusted foreign land. Diver Vaas announced, using his magical intercom charm, “Have a seat or secure your hands tightly to the railings, for we are clear to begin landing. *Welcome to Nuolja!*”

With all the clouds parted away, we dipped further, and ahead was an arctic island—the capital of Nuolja.

It was nothing like the little neighborhoods we had just flown over. A homely winter wonderland, laced with creamy snow and sprinkled with orange streetlights, was on a slab of land surrounded by the darkest blue water I had ever seen. Behind the island packed with homes sat a massive glacier—at least, I believed it was a glacier (I'd never seen one in real life to know if that was ice or just some sort of blue rock).

“*Acemen—ready to moor her down!*” Diver Vaas called. “*Loose the anvils and be ready to drop anchor when you see their signal!*”

Us Hunters waited patiently, all huddled up. Captain Ekron made his way to the middle of our pod, his coat unzipped and bald head hatless, acting as if the arctic cold was nothing but a lukewarm breeze. “Alright—I need you to pay attention. I will not repeat myself again. When we arrive, be respectful and strong; we are Hunters, not barbaric tourists. Tuuli and Jellal...”

“Captain!” the oldest female and male Hunters announced in our group, finally giving me names with faces.

“Since you both have been licensed Hunters the longest, you will join me at the meeting with the Court of Partisans. Prince Caelum, you’ll come, too; would represent the Kingdom well for Nuolja’s court to see that the King’s son is also a Hunter prodigy and invested in politics.”

My eyes widened in our huddle. *What—Cal isn’t gonna be with me?*

Excitement turned into anxiousness, knowing I wouldn’t have him next to me—not in a weird way either; he was just a part of my comfort zone. Doing my Charmer jobs, he was there; going on monster hunts, he was my partner; wandering through Boolavogue, he was my guide. If Gaius wasn’t with me on a magical quest, Cal was. Being alone wasn’t the issue either. I was used to that when going to EverWake for clothing or to the Elysium to find the Guardians. It was the fact that I was in a new town and didn’t have my closest friend to tour it with... or help me discover what in the *world* Fyrnuhaura was.

Ekron continued, “The rest of you lot, feel free to go about the town and see if you believe this will be a good place to start a guild alliance. Stay in groups, go by yourselves—I don’t care. Just don’t cause trouble.” He leered at Erin and Amos. “That includes tossin’ Lisa out into who-knows-where—”

“We already apologized, Captain,” Erin said, to which Amos smacked him hard in the gut. The skinny Hunter grunted and hugged his abdomen.

“Yes, Captain,” Amos hurriedly remarked, ignoring the fact it was *everyone’s* fault. It all worked out in the end, though.

Ekron rolled his eyes and finished. “Meet back at the emership before midnight; we don’t need wanderers after gloaming in an unfamiliar land. Are we clear?”

“*Aye!*” we responded, dismissing our quick meeting.

In Boolavogue, the emerships were fastened in caves, standing upright on the rock—more like a plane being stored in a warehouse, if anything. Here, they did what ships do: make port in water. Diver Vaas summoned his skyloes and acemen to gird the airrudder back into its folded home under the stern and shut off the aerorosin engines, allowing the wind glintz to float the ship down as the kedges dropped into the water. A large

splash was made by the bear-sized anchors when they hit the blue lake, confirming our flight was a success.

Kite and Brightbeard went to help with the Gora bears as I stuck close by Sana and Kelm since Captain took my royal best friend away. Some Nuoljians waited for us below the ship, bundled up and warm, their attire similar to what I and the others were wearing. Thick coats wrapped around the civilians' arms and torsos with plenty of dark leather straps and buttons to prevent any heat from leaving their bodies. A couple of girls wore thick scarves that covered their mouths and necks, and the boys seemed to enjoy wearing cotton headbands to keep their ears warm.

One thing about all their clothing was there was no fur—faux or natural; it was replaced by black wool. The tops of their boots had cozy puffs of charcoal sticking out, their jackets were lined with it, and most of their gloves or hoods had black stitched throughout.

“Hallo—hallo! Welcome, Hunters!” I heard a man say ahead of us, guiding our Captain and us off the emership. He sounded rugged and kind, but I couldn't see his face, one of the negative perks of being the youngest Hunter in training. And the dock was very narrow—no way I could push through the Hunters to get a view. “I am Vyrdir—a Friend of the Partisans. Though, for today, I am your mere welcoming guide. We are truly honored to have such a mighty kingdom come and visit us. I hope you enjoy Nuolja, a home away from home, I will say. If you would be so kind as to follow me as we head to our capital, Reylja. Once over the bridge, if you, Captain, would come with me to the Lodge—where our meeting will commence—”

“Of course, Vyrdir,” Ekron interjected as the dock finally ended with its last plank being halfway buried into the rocky ground. “Tuuli, Jellal, and Prince Caelum will be joining in, as well.”

“Stunning, I say—the rest of the Court will be thrilled to hear the Prince will join. A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness.”

By the time Cal returned Vyrdir's greeting, we stepped off the dock and onto the frosted land, following Vyrdir toward the long, snowy bridge to Reylja. The small crowd that waited for our arrival also followed. They either seemed shy or just weren't used to visitors; only smiles and more “hallos” quietly uttered from their mouths.

Following along the bridge, I was finally able to see Vyrdir. He was warm inside his navy blue jacket, having puffs of black wool sticking out of his earmuffs. He and Ekron were the same height, though Vyrdir could pass

as taller due to his thick, styled black hair. He was smiling, a good sign for a friendly, possible-guild ally.

The island of Reylja—it was ruggedly beautiful, cozy, and quieter than Boolavogue, which might have had to do with no tall buildings for voices to bounce off of. All the shops and homes were very compact, everything so squished that there had to be thousands of people living in the small capital. Streets were curved and narrow, only big enough for people and a single Gora bear to walk down, and every little alley that wasn't near a burning lamp or chimney was flecked with snow.

The cold weather made smells hard to notice, but wood burning and grilled fish were the easiest to catch on to. Though it was freezing, being around the shops—whose doors were wide open—and lit-up homes made it warmer in the streets. Cold drafts were blocked from the homes, fire pits were on every corner, and I swear the ground was toastier, too. *Maybe there's some type of magical soil that warms the towner underneath but lets the snow still settle...* Kids and adults began to remove their hats and gloves, and many noses were not a sharp pink from the frigid breeze.

And I noticed something very peculiar.

Ekron said these people are private and don't expand—never having visitors... So why are there two different types of people here?

Every other person we passed—exactly half the citizens—was similar to Vyrdir and us Hunters: natural-colored hair, primarily different shades of dark brown. The other half... well, they had *white* hair. Not gray from age or some bad platinum box dye from the store; they had hair as frosted as the snow beneath our feet. I thought it must be only the adults—dying their hair as a cultural thing—but no. *Babies* wrapped in thick black wooly blankets had full heads of snow-white hair.

When I took a good look at the crowd to my left—one filled with a mix of brown and white hairs—I realized they *were* from the same tribe. Their eyes were *all* a polar ice blue, matching the still waters around Reylja. Even their skin tones were all very tan. Compared to me, everyone was tan (a slice of white bread would look toasted next to my glowing legs), but Nuoljians were all the same rich shade. Seeing only hair being different was odd, but I was only used to Earthian life, so their traits could've been seen as normal on planet Kalm.

As Ekron, his trio, and Vyrdir left for the meeting—continuing to trek north toward the highest building on the island—we Hunters went to

explore the city. We split into two groups naturally. Those I followed were Amos, Erin, Sana, Kelm, Brightbeard, and Kite.

...

The sun leisured high in the sky for quite a while by the time we took a break from exploring the middle of town. All the shops were small, which made their inventory appear fully stocked. Erin complained about his cold hands more than a grown man should. We found a couple of glint shops with pocket-kettle stones (small, nickel-sized glintz that you keep in your hands or coat pockets to stay warm). Weird not to see any glinted weapons hanging on the walls, mostly warming tools or fishing gear. *Guess they don't have many Hunters in demand for equipment... or dark magic creatures simply can't get to the island.*

A few residents talked with us, telling us the best places to see. We stopped at a small stand to get cocoa, but I was disappointed they didn't have marshmallows. When I asked, they had no idea what I was talking about, including the Hunters. A white-haired band of teenagers, who made the mistake of thinking Sana and Erin were dating, hurriedly told us about The Chigs before Sana threatened them with her fists. Apparently, The Chigs was Nuolja's frozen beach where many unies gathered... and none of us knew what those creatures were. That became our next destination.

We followed the directions of the teenagers: Walk down Miry Street, cross the bridge to the outer land leaving Reylja, turn right at the ice fishing shop, and follow the shoreline. Seeing the frozen patches of water and icebergs meant we were there. When we arrived, it was far prettier than I expected. The shore was flat, scattered with frosted gray and white pebbles, a beautiful contrast to the dark blue waters. Quiet waves hugged the crest of the cold beach, and parts of the lake were frozen farther out. Some were even sturdy enough to walk and play on as I saw a couple of kids slipping and sliding on the floating icebergs.

Then, we saw *them*—out in the waters and squatting along the shore and floating ice: the unies. Each uny looked like a cuddly white penguin with the face of an owl. They stood no higher than my kneecaps. Creamy, pudgy, and stout, with incredibly short feathers, they most likely had blubber underneath it all to keep warm. Small caramel-colored freckles splattered under their marble eyes, on their cheeks, and along their chests. All I wanted to do was wrap one up in my arms and hug it; they were just so cute!

“Is that the unies?” Erin asked, sounding quite underwhelmed with his hands shoved into his coat, holding two pocket-kettles each. “Thought they would be monsters—*gah*, shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.”

“Not sure why you thought a terrifying monster would be called somethin’ as gimpish as ‘uny,’ Erin,” Sana said, her accent very scattered and unfurled.

“Or *why* you thought those kids would send visitors to monsters,” Kelm quietly added.

“We’re *Hunters*—how was I supposed to know?” Erin whined.

“I rather like them,” Amos said.

“Quite dotish, I say,” Brightbeard murmured.

I wanna touch one.

A squeamish chirp sounded, and when I realized the uny closest to us said she was hungry for a meaty treat, I had to grant her wish. “Amos,” I began, “do you still have those bear treats you kept in your pockets?”

He chortled under his breath, stretching his red beard with a guilty grin. “Wish you never told the Prince about Erin and me sneakin’ down in the den, but it was a good laugh. Yes, I still have some.” He reached into his pocket and took out a pale fish-smelling treat.

The unies around didn’t like the kids running after them, so I knew I had to be calm when approaching.

Slowly walking and squatting down on my feet, I began to make for the uny. The Hunters watched me intently as I tried to approach the arctic bird, silently taking mental notes. I broke the cookie in half and held it out, waving it around to get the bird’s attention.

With its marble-sized hazel eyes, the uny saw me. She was instantly enticed and unafraid. *Oh, please come closer—you’re just so freaking cute.*

Waddling hesitantly, I heard her say to herself, “Is it a trap? It smells good—can I trust this human?”

I smiled and placed part of the cookie down on the rocks, inching away to allow her to try the treat with my hand near.

Instantly, she came for the crumb, taking a bite. She loved it. She wobbled right over to me, darting for the second half of the treat, and ate it clean out of my hand. The uny let me pet her feathers, telling me she liked the warmth of my fingers on her back.

I can’t believe this is happening!

“Aye—Lisa’s got one that let her touch it!” Sana announced to the others.

“No surprise—first talking to bears... and now birds,” Kite said.

Amos slowly came over and knelt, too, along with Brightbeard, happily joining in on the free petting zoo.

“Lisa, how’d you do that without talking to it?” Brightbeard asked, feeding the uny another one of Amos’ Gora treats.

I smiled and continued to pet the bird. “She just told me she was hungry, and I thought a Gora treat would be something she’d enjoy.”

Erin took a treat from his pocket—one the Prince missed when he proved I could read Honey’s mind—and went to try my method on another uny. It would’ve worked, but the birds he went toward were not in the mood to be petted... probably should have told him that in advance. When he crouched over to their little pod, they instantly rushed off—surfing on their tummies—but one stood its ground. It threatened Erin’s skin by pecking vigorously at his hand.

“*What did I do wrong?*” Erin hastily shouted, running away from the angry bird.

I laughed. “That one is a male!”

“*Well, so am I—what does that have to do—*”

“*Means you interrupted his flirtin’ with the other birdy ladies, you pale sod!*” Sana shouted back.

“*You lie!*”

Sana looked at me, and I bit back my laugh as I shrugged.

The uny started flapping its wings, making Erin squeal and the Nuoljians around stare. “*Would ya quit, you little runt! I am not your competition!*”

That was it for me and the Hunters. We laughed too hard, and Sana huffed and yelled, “You’re lookin’ pretty *bird-like* to me with all that slippin’ and slidin’ you’re doin’ on the ice.” It was true, Erin made the rocky sand seem like the pebbles were nothing but tiny ice cubes.

Breaking the joyous occasion and through the quiet breeze, a hushed cry in the distance was made, yelling, “*Someone help me!*” It was so far away that not everyone heard it, but because the unies nearby had superior hearing, they chattered about the distress.

My eyes shot toward the lake, and out on the ice were three kids. Two were fine, but the little girl stood on ice that was seconds away from

shattering. I saw four more kids, most likely their friends, running down the shoreline, grabbing the attention of some of the adult Nuoljians.

Cracking like glass, the ice below the little girl started to thin too quickly, and she stood motionless in fear of it collapsing altogether.

Us Hunters stood up from the ground, as did many of the anxious Nuoljians. The two friends of the scared girl were safe, trying to find something for her to grab onto, but their iceberg started floating back to shore.

My eyes looked up and down The Chigs. No one around shot forth magic or had a boat at the ready; only frantic gasps and cries were being made, wishing for someone to help her. That girl was about to dive into a frozen abyss... and I couldn't stand by and watch that happen.

My first reaction was to fly right over to her, but then I heard Gaius' voice telling me to be careful with my magic. A life saved is worth the risk, but I was clever; I didn't need flight to save that girl. With all the water around me, I had more than enough elements to warp at my command.

I ran straight for the lake.

The moment my sprinting feet hit the still waves, I froze the water's surface with each push and stride—ice skating at high speeds toward the scared girl. The wind was freezing and forceful—causing me to remove my knitted toboggan and shove it into my jacket, fearing it being lost to the depths below—but caring about my well-being was not an option.

As if someone had taken a hammer to the frail ice, it *cracked* deep below the girl. She wobbled over, screamed, and cried even louder. I knew there wasn't much time.

Quick as I could, I leaned forward on my frozen skate path and slammed my hands on the water. Roads of ice zoomed toward the little girl, hardening the crackling slate she stood on.

She fell to her knees—thankfully, not into the water.

Her frightened eyes fixated on me as I zoomed over, and she instantly bombarded me with a hug, though it was more of a grip for dear life. Her tan cheeks were red from the cold, and her brown hair was in two loose braids, soaked from the icy splashes and her sobs.

I never had a child cry on me, so I tried to calm her down as best as I could. "Hey, it's okay! You're safe now. You see? I made the ice hard again. It won't break, I promise."

"That was *awesome!*" a boy shouted from behind me.

“You just flew right over the water using ice!” another young voice joined in.

I looked away from the still-crying girl toward the voices and saw her friends on another iceberg. Two boys, one with white hair and one with walnut brown, saw my rescue. Both were smiling, happy to see their friend safe and saved in a flashy way.

“Vonny—are you okay?” the brown-haired boy shouted at us.

She still had my waist gripped tightly as she nodded in reply. Fast beats were coming through her chest, and I could tell she was still scared.

I looked down at her as my tangled brown hair drifted over my shoulders and smiled, hoping to give her some peace. “Vonny? Is that your name?”

She turned to me and answered timidly after a sniffle, “Mhm.”

“I’m Lisa. You can trust me, okay? Are those your friends?”

“One’s my older brother, Deyter... and that’s Klay... we were just playing like normal... I promise I thought the ice was stronger...” Her voice was so tender and gentle, nothing like the cry she uttered moments ago.

“That’s okay. Now it is perfectly stable, see?” I gave a hardy stomp on the ice. “Stay close to me, and I’ll get you back to your friends.”

I pushed my hands forward slowly, watching my magic make a sturdy frozen pathway from our little ice island to the iceberg.

Vonny was hesitant to cross, but the boys seemed to trust me wholeheartedly—jumping off and slamming down on the icy trail as if it were made of stone. Each boy looked about nine or ten, while Vonny seemed to be around six years old. *Surprised to see kids this young jumping around on a frozen lake all by themselves. Kinda poor parenting, but that’s just my opinion...*

“Whoa—you came from that flying ship this morning, didn’t you?” Klay said with awe in his eyes. His chalky-white hair was straight and went past his ears.

I nodded to the lively white-haired boy, to which brown-headed Deyter interjected, “Thanks for saving my sister, uh—what’s your name?”

Vonny—having a surge of confidence after being next to her brother’s side—answered for me, “Her name’s Lisa.”

“How’d you sail across the water like that—do you have Frost Craft or Water Creation or something?” Klay asked in a rambunctious tone.

“Never seen someone like you use magic!”

“You made it look easy and everything!” Deyter added.

I was flattered. “It’s Water Manipulation magic, actually. Just freezing the waves as they pushed me forward. Nothing too difficult.”

“Well, if it’s *that* easy, think you could make another one of those ice bridges for us to cross back over to shore?” Klay practically challenged me.

I wasn’t about to let the spunky kid’s hopes down. Placing my feet on the edge, I casually stuck out my hands again, gracing the tops of the cold waters and shooting a large, hefty ice bridge toward shore.

“*Knall*,” both boys said simultaneously as I finished my frozen runway. Never heard that word before, but I guessed it was their way of saying ‘cool’... at least, I hoped so. I really didn’t want a group of kids thinking I was lame on the first day here.

I crafted my ice bridge with rough ridges to avoid any slips into the water from the kids, though the way Deyter and Klay ran across, it seemed not even my magic was preventing them from horseplaying.

While little Vonny stuck by my side, small ripples thumped the frozen bridge. It wasn’t anything too exceptional, but until then, I hadn’t seen a single wave come rumbling along the waters—

As quickly as I noticed the waves, a giant dorsal fin burst out of the cold water—six feet in front of Deyter and Klay—*smashing* my frozen path into icy pieces. That fin was *enormous*, definitely not from a whale or giant shark; it was scaled like a colossal sailfish, having to be at least five feet long and two feet wide. For it to break the ice, that fish had to have skin as tough as stone, and for it to be that big, these waters had to run miles and miles deep.

Before I had time to react, the impact of the mammoth fin shook my ice road, causing me and Vonny to wobble, but that wasn’t what concerned me. Deyter and Klay had the full force of the breakage and didn’t just lose balance.

Both boys slipped into the freezing water—right where the monster fish was lurking.

“Vonny, climb onto the iceberg, okay?” I told the scared Nuoljian, creating an unpretty staircase made of ice so she could make it across.

The fish disappeared into the darkness, which made the situation even scarier, not knowing where it was or if it would attack again. I skated

toward the boys in the water as fast as I could. Klay was closest, so I grabbed him first, pulling up the soaking-wet, shaking boy.

“Here.” I willed another long pathway to the iceberg where Vonny was. “Stay with Vonny—”

“It’s coming again!” shouted Klay, and my head whipped around. “Deyter, look out!”

The fin broke through the water’s surface, coming toward Deyter like a shark on the hunt.

My mind was about to pulse my magic through my fist to form an ice spear when—*fwoosh*—a pearly blanket came zooming through the sky, aiming right for the dorsal fin. It barreled through the harsh breeze as if shot from a crossbow, morphing from a flowing mist to a sharply pointed spear—glowing white.

Water and frost stopped swirling in my hand as I watched the peculiar material. Never had I seen a ghost before (never believed in them, to begin with), but if I were to make an assumption, that was exactly what that flying magic cloth was.

Like a harpoon, the magic cloth punctured the fin of the arctic monster.

Black globs of blood splattered from the hit, and the beast flailed chaotically before diving back to the depths below. That blood soon turned to dark glitter before fading into the sky and sea. A dark magic sea creature, *not* an animal. *Guess it came toward us because it smelled my magic or maybe Tuff floating in the sky... or the kids if there is magic in their blood.*

As quickly as it attacked, the iridescent spear shot out of the cold depth and formed into a long ribbon. No specks of black blood tainted the ghostly magic as I watched it wrap around Deyter, lift him out of the water, and safely drop him near my feet. The boy’s coat was thick, swallowing up all the glacial water, but the magic ribbon made him look weightless.

Before the frosty cloth flew away, it stopped before me and transformed again, only this time, it had a face. It was utterly adorable. The nine-inch spirit wisped like a floating bubble filled with snowy smoke, creating faint rainbows in its belly from the refracting light. Purple dots, the size of breath mints, made up its eyes, and its little nub for a tail glowed a pearlescent blue. Its body was one part, with little stubby arms like Tuffs and no waist, neck, or legs. It was unlike anything I had seen before—even smiled at me as its cheeks turned peachy.

It's like a celestial ghost. Is it... a good magic creature, then?

I didn't have time to thank the little guy before it flew back to shore and straight to the hands of some white-haired Nuoljian.

Wait—I swear that was a magic creature. Was it really that boy's magic?

My mind quickly returned to reality as I noticed Vonny climbing down my makeshift staircase to go to her brother and Klay. Both boys were quivering from the cold.

"Hey—I can warm you up, okay?" I said to the boys. "Just hold still."

Shuddering in their boots, both boys turned to me, cheeks bitten pink by the cold. Their sharp blue eyes were still shaken even though they tried to act bravely. I pinched the air with my hands, moving my arm back and letting my magic slurp all the water out of their hair, clothes, and shoes. I then took turns holding their hands, heating the humidity in the air to warm their palms.

"Whoa..." they both said together, dropping their jaws when they saw their fingers turn from purple to a rosy tan again.

Vonny held out her hands as well, so I went ahead and warmed up her little fingers. "Thanks for saving me..." she quietly said to me, making me grin.

I remade the icy path once again, watching as all the Hunters, Nuoljian kids, and a couple of other locals came to greet us. This time, the boys were more careful about running ahead without me by their side.

"What was that thing?" I asked the boys.

Deyter, the brown-headed one, answered first. "An inarimar. They are *huge* but normally don't break the surface like that—"

"If it weren't for my brother, we'd all be dead—did you see the fin on that thing?" Klay interjected.

"Lisa coulda stopped it!" Vonny remarked, but my mind was more focused on what Klay said.

"So, that little misty creature was your brother's magic?" I asked, putting my knit hat back on my head and covering the knotted mess.

He huffed as if I didn't know common sense. "Yeah—you never seen fauna magic before?"

I shook my head. I thought there was only elemental, phantasmal, and base magic... *Is there really a fourth type?*

“Thought you were some expert Mage or something? Seems not,” Klay continued, a bit of pride in his voice.

Should be a bit kinder to the girl who saved his life...

Deyter hit his friend in the arm. “Dude—sorry about him, Lisa. You are amazing at magic, something he wishes he was—”

“I didn’t say she was *dumb!*”

“You *implied* it—”

“*Hey!*” a girl’s voice shouted.

Ahead, the group of kids sprinted toward the shoreline, Deyter and Klay running to join. Vonny still didn’t trust the ice, so she stayed near me. When I reached land, all the kids surrounded me, jumping up and down and reenacting the whole chaotic scene again; they were quite a theatrical bunch.

I didn’t think I deserved all the praise and owl-eyed glances—honestly, I didn’t do much; freezing water and ice skating were just some beginner stuff Inna taught me.

Seeing them all happy, though, made me joyful as well. I had never saved a human life before, and my heart was at ease. Like it was doing what it was made to do. The Agapéd proud to be living in my chest.

The Hunters and three Nuoljian adults also came over, acting courteously toward me.

“Lisa—you were like a true Hero out there!” Blue Scar said, smiling big with his square jaw and patting me on the back.

“You were amazin’—when did ya learn how to freeze ice and skate on it like that?” Sana asked, but I didn’t get a chance to answer.

“Some creature that was! Ain’t ever seen a fish smash through ice,” Amos added to the constant string of awe.

“You think Captain’s gonna make us try and slag one of those while we’re here?” Erin said, suspicious and wary.

Too many people were talking that all I could do was stand there, hoping someone would take the attention off of me for a moment. All I wanted to do was find Klay’s brother and thank him for saving—

“Hey,” a low, gentle male voice said behind me.

I turned to see a white-haired Nuoljian standing beside Klay and the kids.

My heart fluttered. *Oh, he is very handsome...*

The teenage boy was young but definitely older than me, with short polar-ice hair and the same crisp aqua eyes as the rest of the town. A navy blue shirt wrapped tightly around his torso underneath his unbuttoned gray coat, showing off his lean, muscular frame. His chin pointed like a diamond with no facial hair to be seen, and he was very tan like the rest of his province, tall, too; every teen and adult here was taller than me, though.

“Thanks for saving Vonny and my brother. I was supposed to be watching them—just didn’t think they would go that far out,” he said in a matured voice.

Instead of saying the proper response to “thanks” like a normal person, my magic-obsessed mind focused on the fact that he said he was Klay’s brother, which meant one thing.

“That was your magic, then? The little misty-ghost thing?”

Well, that sounded intellectual. Way to go, Lisa—embarrassing yourself in front of the cute boy.

He chuckled, his smile stretching far. “Yes, though, it’s not a ghost; just a type of fauna magic from widmoos.”

Everything he said made no sense to me, and I wanted to know more, but the Hunters approached him quickly and interrupted our conversation.

“Aye—you a Hunter?” Amos asked Klay’s older brother.

“Can’t say that I am—”

“You should be with a magic like that,” Sana barged in. “Didn’t even need to see the creature to take it down.”

“Those things come around here often?” Kite asked, making his way next to Sana.

The white-haired teenage boy responded, “They normally stay low to the lake floor unless there is a magic creature nearby for them to eat—”

“*Speaking of eatin’...*” Erin skirted his way into the conversation. “You think you could point us to a grill or scrán—preferably, one with more meat and less veg?”

I thought the teenage Nuoljian would’ve been overwhelmed by the brutish adult Hunters bombarding him with tourist questions, but he smiled it off and stayed calm. “For saving my brother and his friends, I’d like to treat you to a meal, if that’s alright? My family owns a midday pub—guess you would call it a grill or scrán where you’re from. Best wood-fired fish and lamb around.”

Klay's brother said every Hunter's favorite phrase: free food.

We all happily accepted his offer with mouths drooling, following him back toward Reylja.

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11 Swelterplum Popper Challenge

Kite and Brightbeard continued to talk with the Nuoljian teenager up front (still never figured out his name and was too shy to ask), and the rest of the Hunters stayed in the middle of our broad tourist line. I, on the other hand, was in the back with the kids... not by choice. *Guess this is the price I pay for being the youngest.*

All six kids followed us to the island capital as well, rambling about the most random things: who was taller, which glint was better—Deyter’s ember glint or Klay’s light glint (I said Deyter’s since Klay was being a bit of a snob about his)—whose parent had the better job, and many complaints about their studies and growling stomachs. I learned more about the kids’ lives than I wanted, but I didn’t mind after a while; they were funny and a nice change from Hunter talk.

Blackened fish and charred wood were the first smells of Klay’s family eatery. The worn sign hanging above the double doors had “Rovo’s” painted elegantly in red, bold strokes. On the outside, the restaurant was very rustic with plenty of rigid planks and frosted windows. Some Nuoljians were chatting out in the cold, holding meaty kabobs on the front deck, giving us a wave and friendly smiles.

Klay’s brother led the way inside, and wow! It was surprisingly warm. The architecture was strange, unlike any restaurant I had seen before in America or Boolavogue. Walls weren’t pointed or had caverns for employees to sneak off to—domed and designed to create an open floor plan. The kitchen sat snugly in the middle, with tables and seating arranged all around the perimeter. Chefs used giant grills, slapping on fish, lamb, onions, and other unfamiliar vegetables—creating a savory, caramelizing aroma. Bar stools circled the kitchen and cooks, letting the customers watch the food being made before their eyes.

The heart of the restaurant—in the center of the grills, chefs, cutting areas, fridges, and sinks—was the giant wood-fired furnace, the warming belly of the eatery. Its chimney reached high, right through a hole carved in the squished-cone roof. I watched as two cooks shoved orders of fish subs

and grilled lamb flatbreads into the furnace, sizzling the cheese and vegetables on top to make each entrée smoky and cooked to perfection.

“Please take a seat over here—I’ll tell my family about today and get you set up,” Klay’s brother said to us as we made our way further inside.

Most of the restaurant was dimly lit, but the windows and the hole in the ceiling made it bright enough to see where to talk and dark enough to hide any strange stains on the wooden floor.

The table we were at was long, sturdy, and *old*—worn out from its popularity amongst the town. The cushion on my stool was busted, and Erin’s didn’t even have one; none of us cared, and I personally liked the character. I was a fan of old, beaten-down restaurants. In my experience, they always had the best-tasting food.

The kids were about to join when Klay’s brother stopped them, commanding, “Nope—out. Even you, Klay. Hydi is waiting for you all back at the school.”

“But, we want to stay!” said Yavin, his name I learned, also having white hair.

“We don’t wanna go back to study!” complained Ryme, hair similar to Yavin.

Klay, trying to be slick since he was the owner’s son, too, threw up a charm. “Come on, *Ayker*—we had a long day and some of us almost died.” He rolled his blue eyes to Vonny. “We all like being here, chillin’ about—we won’t cause trouble.”

Oh, so Ayker is the widmoo Mystic’s name...

“What’s this I hear about trouble?” a woman with long, snowy hair stuffed into a messy bun, questioned, emerging from the dimmest section of the restaurant. She was tall and curvy, carrying some empty glasses. With one look, she made worry infiltrate the eyes of every child. *Odd. She looks really kind to me.*

“Oh—Mom, we were just leaving—saying ‘bye’ to the Hunters from Boolavogue. Bye, Hunters! Bye, Lisa!” Klay quickly turned to his friends and started running away whispering, “Come on, before she finds out about us on the iceberg.”

Ayker and Klay’s mom turned toward us rowdy bunch and smiled big with an even grander voice. “Well, it is a pleasure to meet you all—glad

to see you enjoying Reylja. The name's Yuna Rovonami, and I see you've already met my two sons."

Leaning close to her ear but still loud enough for us all to hear, Ayker suggested, "Think we could give them a meal on the house? They helped save Vonny from falling into the water, and I think they should see what makes Rovo's cuisine the best in town."

Mrs. Rovonami took no hesitation with her answer. "Why of course! Honored to have you here and for choosing us to be your early dinner host for this evening! We don't get guests here very often—a treat. I'll get you set up real nice. Ayker, come with me and grab some drinks for the Hunters."

All of us started cheering for the blessings in white hair as we waited for our local food.

...

"Mrs. Rovonami—you have glazed this fish with the liquid of a sunstone, for it has warmed me down to my soul," Amos said to Ayker's Mom, patting his husky belly as he finished the blackened swordfish clean off his plate. His adoration was one of the many compliments the Hunters had given to the Nuoljians of Rovo's, mine included. I never had swordfish before or even dreamed I would like it fired with fruit. My tongue was burned from the first bite, but I didn't care; Rovo's was one of the best seafood restaurants I had ever experienced in my whole life!

Looking around, the Rovonami family had an array of rustic decorations hanging on the walls, most of which were old ice fishing equipment and shelves filled with their antique jugs for hot cider. There was one section that stood out the most, having a spotlighted plaque reading "Swelterplum Popper Champions." Below it was another plaque, larger with names and corresponding dates carved into it.

"Aye—what's that over there?" Sana asked Ayker, looking at the same Swelterplum Popper Challenge section of the wall. "Some type of race for eatin'?"

"Sort of," he answered, refilling Kelm's glass of water. "It's more of a challenge of strength and endurance, rather than who can eat the fastest. We aren't believers in gorging, but we *do* like to test the limits of heat."

A "challenge" was another favored word amongst Hunters, and Ayker just introduced a new game to us all.

“Nuoljian, you have intrigued our ears,” Amos said to Ayker, crossing his arms, grinning. “What do you have to do to win?”

“For the challenge, you need two players, and all you have to do is eat more swelterplum poppers than the other.”

“That’s it?” Erin spouted, baffled by the simplicity of the challenge. “Why *I* could do that easy.”

Mrs. Rovonami came to the table, giggling. “Have you had a swelterplum before, Hunter?”

“No, ma’am—how bad can it be?”

“Well, normally, we just zest its skin on top of our dishes, just for a good kick; for the challenge, we add the juice and ground-up seeds as well—cooking it all up into a fiery-red sticky sauce before mixing it with our fried lamb poppers. It’ll heat up your bones faster than an oven, I’ll tell ya that.”

Erin’s face didn’t waver a bit. He crossed his arms and said, “We’re Boolavogue Hunters; a wee bit of spice is but salt in our mouths. I’ll take your challenge.”

Sana laughed hard, cackling like a crazy woman. “*You*—by the morn, Erin, you can’t even defeat a pack of vorrgs by yourself, always needin’ Amos to back up your sorry stock. You think you can handle somethin’ like this?”

“If it’s so easy, then let’s make it official, aye?”

All our eyes narrowed in on Erin. We all knew what he meant by “official,” and it made the challenge more interesting.

Kite came in and remarked, “You want to make this a Men’s versus Women’s Troop challenge?”

“Aye.”

We turned our eyes to Sana and Kelm, the only two girls on the Women’s Troop in our pack. Honestly, we hadn’t seen a good challenge amongst both troops in a while. The last one was a simple arm-wrestling match that happened at midnight over some baked pie; Blue Scar won that. This challenge, though, was much more interesting since Erin never—and I mean *never, ever*—challenged for the Men. One, because no one thought he had a chance at winning anything. Two, because... well it was *Erin*; his best attribute was complaining and being ignorant when it came to women. He wasn’t one for volunteering—knowing good and well there were better-qualified Hunters out there for just about anything.

Erin prodded with a leer beneath his shaggy hair, “*If* they are up for it?”

Kelm hung her silky black hair behind her dainty ears and turned to Sana before the blonde Hunter could respond. In her calm voice, Kelm said, “I accept.”

Sana slid back into her chair like a queen seeing her most trusted huntress about to win the battle. “Hah—you don’t stand a chance, you gimp. Kelm’s got the taste buds of a steel sword; no heat is too hot for her.”

Erin looked a little worried as I noticed his leg shaking up and down under the table. *Guess he thought Sana was gonna challenge him. This should be interesting.*

Amos turned to Erin and whispered, “You sure you can do this? I or Kite could take your place—”

“*Mrs. Rovonami—send out your hottest creation yet!*” Erin belted, full of confidence like I had never seen before... and to be honest, I wish he took Amos up on his offer.

Minutes later, Ayker and his mom came to our table and served up the Swelterplum Popper Challenge in the most unusual way. There were only about fifteen poppers, each being a burning red color the size of a meatball and glistening in a sticky sauce—all stacked into a boat made from a hollowed-out *red* pineapple. No forks or other utensils were placed in front of Kelm and Erin either, meaning it was meant to be messy.

Mrs. Rovonami cleared her throat and announced, “Alright, Hunters. What you have before you is our lamb poppers smothered in our swelterplum fiery sauce, sitting in the core of the Nuoljian scarlet pineapple. Its sweet juice will be the only savior for your tired tongues as you will not be given any skyr or other sour creams for dipping. Whoever can eat the most without taking a sip of milk”—Ayker brought in two enticing jugs of full-fat milk, placing them in the middle of Erin and Kelm —“will be the winner, engraving their name on our plaque of champions.”

“Let’s make this more interesting, what you say, Kelm?” Erin jollied, forearms barred on the table with the meal in between.

Brightbeard butted in, “Erin, I think you should—”

“If *I* win, you women have to wash all our clothes during this whole trip—*all* of them at that—stock-girdin’ briefs included.”

Sana scoffed and spoke for Kelm. “Well, if we win—which we will—then *you* have to be our wenches for a whole day while we’re here, for

anything and *everything* we want.” Sana then looked at me. “Except for Lisa—she’s a girl and had no choice but to be stuck with you lot and doesn’t deserve the same fate.”

I released a deep breath. *Oh, thank goodness—Erin has no chance of winning this challenge, and I thought I was about to be punished for something I didn’t even want to happen.*

Kite pleaded next. “Erin, do not say—”

“Deal.”

With the male Hunters doubting Erin’s abilities, the Swelterplum Popper Challenge began. Kelm pulled back her black hair and led the way. Two bites into the first popper and her cheeks were already turning red, but she forced her emotions to remain melancholic—making it seem easy for us around.

Erin was next, popping the entire fried lamb bit into his mouth. One chew in and his eyes widened, which followed up with him quickly swallowing the spicy meat before it had time to resonate longer in his mouth.

This method continued for a while, causing many of the customers to come and watch as only six poppers remained in both pineapple dishes.

Both Hunters were sweating and trying to fight back their tears—not even being able to wipe their eyes in fear of penetrating their pupils with the spicy sauce that covered their fingers. Kelm had her free hand clenched tight as Sana kept hyping her up, while Erin was pounding the table, trying to see if physical pain would distract his taste buds from the burning sensation.

We all were curious as to how spicy the sauce was, so Mrs. Rovonami gave us each a popper to try, only she put some skyr on the side (surprisingly similar to yogurt). When I tried a tiny bite of the fried lamb, the sauce *burned—how can something be this spicy and allowed for consumption?* It was like ants biting my tongue, and if it weren’t for the skyr, I would’ve started crying on the spot. *How in the world is Erin keeping up with Kelm right now?*

Soon, demise crept in like falling snow, slowly piling up fast and *all* on Erin. Kelm had just finished her tenth one, receiving a hearty cheer from the women in the crowd.

Amos looked at Erin. “Erin—you *got* this—you can’t lose. I can’t afford another servitude under Sana.”

“I don’t know, man,” Erin whined, his hair sticking to his sweating forehead. “*Aye, it burns Amos—*”

“*Suck it up you git. You’re the one who got us into this mess—*”

“I can’t feel my tongue—what if it’s permanent—and the jar of white deliverance is mocking me—*I can’t—*”

“*Erin, no—*”

I had never seen a skinny man move so fast in my life.

Erin dove for the jar of milk like a starving animal, chugging the glass down. Milk sluiced down his clean-shaven face and onto his coat as the male Hunters gave no applause—sitting solemnly in their seats with a disappointing grunt.

With Kelm as the winner, Sana and the crowd cheered loudly, me included. Being with the Hunters was incredible fun, and the fact I didn’t have to be punished for being on the losing team made it even better. As for the guild alliance part of it all, Nuolja seemed perfect. They had monster problems we could help with, great food, and the citizens seemed to enjoy our presence.

During the cheering, I peered over at Ayker and his mother, for no particular reason other than being nosy. Ayker was smiling quite big, creating blue crescent moons with his squinted eyes, the corners of his lips stretched wide. It was hard to not stare at him, especially with how handsome he looked when he was happy. He had a very pleasing smile—

Lisa, stop! You are here as a Hunter! Focus.

12 Nuoljian Secret

It seems that Gaius has asked me to find a magic element that doesn't exist... I'm a Charmer—not a Treasure Hunter!

After Kelm took home the gold for the Women's Troop and carved her name onto the plaque, she and Sana demanded that the male Hunters carry them back to the ship. They also floated around the idea of ice fishing—but for the *men* to do all the work of learning the process and for the women two to simply spectate. Seeing Hunters become fishermen—catching creatures instead of slaying them—sounded fun, but I had to decline; there was a more pressing matter at hand I needed to accomplish before nightfall, in fear of a certain Keeper getting upset with me.

The problem was—as I went around talking with the shop owners and food vendors—*no one* knew anything about Fyrnuhaura or Edurplume; it was like speaking a foreign language to the Nuoljians. I asked the shoemaker down Juri Street if he knew of them, but he said no. The town square had a couple of older adults around, so I asked them; they all chuckled before giving the same saddening response. I asked a couple of fishermen by their port on the west side of town; I learned everything there was about the Nuoljian Tuna (apparently they can range from dark blue to silver depending on their diets) but nothing about the Keeper's request.

Is Gaius playing a game with me, or is this just so rare that only a 700-year-old Keeper would know of it?

By the time the sky started dimming, I had made it back to the middle of Reylja with no luck. On the bright side, I now was an expert on the town's layout—never needing a Nuoljian to guide me in the right direction again.

As I made my way past Hot 'n Sweet, the hot cocoa stand, I saw the same group of kids from The Chigs. They smiled, and the dark-haired kids ran toward me while the white-haired ones seemed to move a bit slower—sluggish. *Guess school is tiresome for them, too...*

Vonny and Ryme hugged me around my waist while the rest stood and made small talk with each other. Even though they were just kids, I was happy they enjoyed my company.

Since I had no luck finding Gaius' items with adults, I thought to ask them. I had already hit rock bottom, so there wasn't anything else they could say that was worse than "I don't know."

I looked at Klay, Deyter, Yavin, and Rey—they were the oldest of the six—and unfolded Gaius' note, pointing to the foreign words. "Hey, do any of you happen to know what Fyrnuhaura and Edurplume are?"

They furrowed their brows. Klay answered first. "Nuh-uh—what is it supposed to be?"

Dark-haired Rey hit Klay in the arm. "That's the whole reason she's asking us!"

Deyter countered next with a follow-up question, "Do you know anything about it?"

I shook my head. "Nope, but I guess you can find it at night since that's what my instructor said to do."

Yavin took command as the group leader and announced, "We will help you figure it out, Lisa. You can count on us."

Well, it can't hurt for them to try. I'm having no luck as it is anyway.

...

In the span of fifteen minutes, I discovered I could go lower than rock bottom.

The group of kids was eager to assist but *constantly* came running back to find me needing help pronouncing the words. I had to tell Yavin and Klay *five times* it was pronounced "fern-uh-or-rah" and *not* "free-or-nahs" while continuously holding the hands of both Vonny and Ryme because they found my presence "magical." Kids are cute and fun, but I quickly learned I shouldn't have let them help me with my Charmer job. *I see why Gaius wasn't a fan of babysitting me and the Prince a year ago... this is beyond tiring.*

While I was holding the hand of Rhyme—the white-haired girl too tired to run with Vonny—and making sure Klay wasn't hopping along the tops of the wooden fences *again*, I turned around to find Ayker coming out of a small medical shop that had windows closed tightly shut. He threw his jacket back on but still didn't fasten the buttons. His sharp, icy eyes appeared more tired than before, drained. *Guess his mom had him working a lot in the restaurant... or is he sick, since that is a doctor's office?* I squinted at the store. *That is a medic's shop, right?*

“I see you got called to be their watcher for the afternoon—sorry about that,” he said, smiling away his tiredness.

I blinked and giggled, surprised a handsome boy even cared to talk to me with a bunch of kids latched to my arm. “It’s my fault, really. I asked them to help me find something—actually... do you happen to know what this is?”

I let go of Vonny’s hand to pull out the letter from Gaius. Pointing to the capitalized words, I continued, “I’ve asked all over, but no one seems to know what either of these are.”

Ayker looked down at the note. “Think maybe this Gaius could be wrong about where to find this stuff?”

What I would’ve given to hear Ayker say that in front of the Keeper’s face, questioning the stubborn man’s knowledge like that.

I held back my laughs. “I don’t think he’s wrong, but maybe it could be called something else. My instructor likes to use the old magic-given names for everything.”

Ayker grinned and reread the note as the rest of the kids regrouped. “‘Waves’ and ‘night’...” After a couple of seconds of silence, his cheeks perked up. “Ah! I see why no one knew what it was because we call Fyrnuhaura ‘winterdaze.’”

The kids all *aahed* as if it was completely obvious.

“Why didn’t this Gaius just say it was winterdaze,” Klay said with a cocky smile. “Everyone knows what that is.”

“He shoulda been more clear,” Rey said.

“Yeah, your instructor doesn’t know the real name of it,” little Ryme added to the string of unintended insults.

“*Group of kids making me feel dumb and in front of a cute boy*”—*checking that off the list of “Situations I Never Want to Happen to Me”...*

Ayker handed me back the note, white hair shining. “Winterdaze is the glowing river of waves that show up in the sky. Looks just like an ocean of sparkling blue and green light floating right above the town. It only happens late at night, when the stars are out and the clouds are gone. Tonight would be a good chance for you to see it. For the Edurplume...” Ayker squinted his eyes, “I don’t really know what that is, but I am guessing it’s what you call its pieces of the light—the ribbons of the waves, that is. But, I never heard of someone collecting it, though.”

“Well, if you knew my instructor, then you would know this is one of the easiest of the many tasks I’ve been told to do.” I put the note back in my pocket. “Where’s the best place to see the winterdaze?”

Klay jumped in before his brother could respond. “*Oh!* Definitely behind the Lodge! The ground is higher over there, and you get a *huge* view of the lake, too! If you let me, I can show it to you, Lisa.”

Ayker sniped, “Klay—there is no way Mom would let you stay out past dark without me being there—”

“I won’t be alone—Lisa will be there!”

“Well, then I’m coming, too!” Deyter announced next, which followed up with all the kids asking to go. Even though their help before wasn’t the best, leading me to the spot was better than me trying to find it all by myself.

I interjected, “I don’t mind them coming—if that’s alright? I can keep an eye on them.” *But, I would love it if you came, too.*

“You’re pretty bold to take on a task like that,” Ayker said, “but if you’re fine with it, then, by all means, take them with you. It’ll give their parents and mine a break for the night. Good luck, Mage.”

I pinched a smile and waved bye. *Wished he was coming—Lisa, stop it! This is for Gaius, not for the attention of the boy with icy hair.*

...

“Klay, you sure this is the right spot—looks kinda boring to me,” Rey asked as we all sat on the edge of a snowy rock behind the Lodge that night.

“I don’t know why you guys doubt me and my secret location skills—just give it a couple of minutes. The winterdaze will be here right over our heads,” Klay reaffirmed.

The sky was silent and dark, the weather extremely cold. There was no sign of the winterdaze like Klay promised. It was only around 9:30 p.m., according to Yavin—the only kid smart enough to bring a clock with him, and that included me—so I only figured it would take more time.

“What do you have to do with the lights, Lisa?” Vonny asked, snuggling up close to my side to keep warm.

“I have to collect its waves, I am guessing. Have to put them in here.” I quickly swiped my hand in front of my orbkit and out popped Gaius’ jar with the leather strap. Since it was so heavy, it plopped on the snowy ground below the low ledge we were on, standing upright between my legs.

Orbkits must've been rare or possibly mythical in Nuolja because all six kids were just as fascinated with the jar as my magic.

"Whoa—how'd you do that?" Deyter asked, struck with icy stars in his eyes.

"Oh—it's through this." I displayed the glowing azure charm of my necklace in my palm. "It's a magic locket. It lets me carry all my things, so I don't have to lug it around in a bag or across my back."

"Knall—Lisa, you're the coolest Mage I've ever met!" Ryme said in her chipper voice, her hair as white as the snow below.

A tranquil stillness enveloped the surroundings as a soft green glow began to illuminate the sky, delicately painting the snow and water ahead.

"It's happening—see, I told you this was the most perfect spot!" Klay announced.

One by one, the kids' faces shot toward the starry sky, and when I looked up... I saw a sea made of stardust. Neverending ocean waves of liquid emeralds and sapphires unfurled hundreds of feet up in the sky—glowing like bioluminescent ruffles of green and blue water. I had seen outer space outside of Kamari's house, but this Fyrnuhaura was an arctic light beauty. When the billows of the watery magic crashed into each other, there was no sound, only dewy dust splashing and falling onto the ground before disappearing into the snow like rain. Though I had never seen the Northern Lights on Earth before—only in books and movies—the winterdaze reminded me of that... only ten times prettier.

My mouth stayed gaped with my awestruck eyes—never letting a blink go by in fear of missing out on these celestial lights.

Magic is so amazing...

I knew I had a job to do, but I sat on the ground with the kids for a bit longer, admiring the floating sea of magic, not caring how cold my thighs were on the rocky ledge. After a couple of minutes, sounds of crunching snow began to appear from behind us.

Klay immediately shot up off the ground. "Ayker—you're not here to send me home, are you? The lights just showed up!"

"No, just here making sure you told Lisa the truth." He then looked at me, frays of his messy white hair absorbing the glittering lights. "Surprised you believed what my brother said. Kind of a risk, if I say so."

Though he looked rather attractive under the night sky, my nerves weren't too jittery around him. Perhaps it was the magic of the winterdaze

keeping parts of my heart captive—keeping it calm—the only red blooming on my cheeks being from the cold air. I giggled. “It was a better idea than me trying to find the lights myself.”

Ayker came closer. “Care if I join? I felt bad for leaving you to watch my brother and his friends, seeing as you’re a guest of our town.”

“Oh, sure, but it’s really no problem. They’ve been nice to me, and this spot is perfect...” I began to shuffle my jar with my feet as I scooted over. “The winterdaze is so beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Ayker sat beside me while Deyter moved away to sit next to Klay. Being up close to the tan, icy-haired boy, I noticed how blue his eyes really were as they reflected the fluorescent, glittery ocean perfectly above our heads. It was almost... surreal how rich the color was, as if magic was swirling inside the iris. Back on Earth, I knew some girls at school would fawn over boys older than them, especially if they looked like Ayker: tall, very tan, blue-eyed. He probably had a girlfriend here; it would be odd if he didn’t... but I never saw one. He was with the kids the entire day and with his mom, too.

Even though Ayker had the bluest eyes I had ever seen, they still didn’t persuade me into some love trap. I was more of a “smile” type of girl. If a boy smiled a lot, I thought it was cute; it meant he was happy. Seeing that attribute in a boy at school or anywhere was rare. Seemed most of the teenage boys I knew would rather play the cool guy or the lone wolf, so I didn’t really get too obsessed with them like Lily did at school. Magic was more important to me, for now, anyway.

With Ayker being near me and no Hunters interrupting us, I wanted to procrastinate my Charmer duties a *little* bit longer.

I put my hands in my jacket pocket. “Ayker, you said your magic was called fauna magic, right? I never heard of that before and was wondering what that means?”

He grinned. “Honestly, I didn’t know much about it until six years ago when my magic became stronger. Some scholars who work with the Court of Partisans—our governing officers at the Lodge—did a checkup on magic and helped me discover what mine was. Apparently, it’s a branch of elemental magic since elemental means part of the physical world. I’m able to use the magic gifted to me by the widmoos, a type of magical wisp that lingers in forests way beyond our borders.”

So I was right—it was a magical creature!

His magic captivated me. “So, you get to use the power of the widmoos? Can you create them, or is it more like you summon them out from the magic in the air?”

Ayker placed his palms up. Suddenly, a white glow swirled around his wrists, transforming into two translucent glowing sprites. Each looked the same as the one that punctured the fin of the inarimar—as cute and misty-bubbled as ever—smiling underneath their violet gumball eyes.

“I’m no creator, but I can call out to them with my magic—like pulling them out from invisible portals from the sky, I guess. These two, though...” Ayker paused as the two wisps danced in a circle above his hand. “They stay with me at all times, letting me use their powers. Widmoos can morph their bodies, turning into things like that harpoon I made to scare off the inarimar. They are also great company when I have trouble falling asleep.”

Hearing him say that reminded me of Tuff, and I turned exceptionally girly as I squealed, “That’s crazy because I actually have a sprite who helps me fall asleep when music doesn’t seem to work, too.”

In an instant, Tuff appeared his little orange self between Ayker and me, letting his stubby legs dangle off my shoulder; he had been there the entire time.

“Wow, I’ve never seen anything like that.” Ayker stared into Tuff’s black eyes.

One of Ayker’s widmoos circled Tuff, morphing to his shape: plump and round. Tuff whistled—saying hi—to which the widmoo followed up with its speech—happening to be the sound of someone wiping a window with a water-soaked towel. It was cute, but I thought Tuff’s whistling was better—to which, he agreed.

“His name is Tuff, and he’s a glainie—a memory sprite. They are extremely shy, but this little guy wanted to thank me for saving his village last year, so he made a bond with me. He follows me everywhere. I make him stay invisible in big crowds... and I think you can see why.”

Ayker and I noticed all six kids were around us with noses inches away from my glowing friend in my lap.

“What is that thing?”

“Is it like a magic ball—wait, it has eyes—is it a creature, then?”

“It’s so *cute*!”

Tuff immediately flew into my hands after Ryme tried to grab him, staining my fingerless gloves with his glowing soot.

“Tuff, it’s okay. They are friends,” I reassured him.

Before Tuff freaked out completely, both widmoos whispered to my glainie, making a quiet string of glass-cleaning noises. Tuff whistled, saying they wanted to play with him.

Never had someone or something asked Tuff to play, and my heart was so happy. I felt like a proud mom, having a kid asking my child for a playdate.

I glanced at Ayker. “Is it okay if Tuff plays with your widmoos?”

Ayker’s blue eyes widened. “Wait—can you understand him? He only gave you one whistle?”

“Well... he’s a memory sprite, so our minds are linked. I can understand everything he’s saying.”

Ayker laughed, showing off his handsome smile. “Didn’t even know there were creatures out there that could bond with a human without fauna magic, especially one that talks with you.” He then sent out his widmoos to fly above the snow, right near the edge of the sapphire lake.

Tuff followed the foggy creatures, making all six kids run and attempt to catch the three glowing orbs like oversized fireflies.

It was now just the two of us on the ledge, sitting on the cold, frosted rock, the winterdaze swelling with iridescence over our heads. Getting to Gaius’ job was going to happen soon, but then, Ayker turned to me. “Sorry, but your name’s Lisa, right? Just heard Klay mention it before running off with Deyter and his friends.”

Wow... Wait to go, Lisa—never even introduced yourself, and you’ve been talking the whole time with him...

I pinched my lips, hiding my embarrassment, and nodded. “Mhm.”

“So, *Lisa*, how come you came with those Hunters from Boolavogue? You just seem pretty young to be tangled up with a bunch of monster killers.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Actually... I *am* a Hunter—well, a provisional-licensed one. Won’t be an official one until another year if I pass all the exams.”

“*Knall*—how old are you?”

I looked down at the snow, fidgeting with my fingers. “Fourteen.”

“Ha—Boolavogue is crazier than I thought, letting kids battle beasts at your age.”

Wished I could’ve told him a Keeper made the Queen train me with the men, but I thought that should stay secret... and I wasn’t *that* young. *He can’t be older than eighteen... right?*

“I’m just a friend of the King and Queen, so I train with their son when I’m not practicing my magic.”

Some bickering penetrated the beautiful, arctic silence—all coming from Vonny and Klay fighting. It seemed that Vonny wasn’t shy around Klay, treating him as she did with Deyter. Through the rocks and sloshy snow, they both ran over to us.

“Lisa—you’re way stronger than Ayker—tell Klay that!” she yelled toward me in the sweetest way possible.

Klay butted in, not caring that Vonny was much younger than him, “*Nuh-uh*—my brother is way more powerful than Lisa—tell her, Ayker. All Lisa did was just a little ice skating compared to you *slashing* that fish.”

“*Lisa’s better—she saved me!*”

“You’d be dead without Ayker—he’s got armies of magical creatures up his sleeves, *and* he’s got the biggest signet out of the whole province!”

My ears perked up at the strangely specific word choice Klay shouted. I quickly interjected into the kids’ dispute, “What’s a signet?”

Ignoring my question, Klay turned to Vonny and shouted, “*Ha—proves my point!* Doesn’t even know what a signet is—means Ayker *is* more powerful.”

“Okay—Klay,” Ayker said, “it doesn’t matter who’s more powerful. Lisa saved Vonny’s life first, so... *for today*, let’s just say Lisa is.”

Vonny stuck out her tongue before running back to join the kids who were all still chasing Tuff and the widmoos.

Klay whined, letting out a huge exhale, “*Okay...* Lisa, today, you win—but tomorrow, my brother reigns the best.”

Never would have guessed these two were brothers, Klay being the King of Obnoxiousness and Ayker being so humble.

With the kids gone again, I asked, “What did Klay mean by you having the biggest ‘signet’—like some magic locket or emblem?”

His eyes drifted toward the ground, the snow shimmering from the Fyrnuhaura’s glow. The smile Ayker once had wasn’t as bold, and he

looked rather grave. He adjusted his position, putting one leg closer to his chest and letting his other leg hang off the edge of the shallow step. His foot touched the ground easily, whereas mine could almost dangle if I didn't sit right on the rocky rim.

"So it's true, then..." he began. "You don't have signets on your body to tell you how strong your magic is?"

My emotions matched his, and I was deeply enthralled by his question. "No... but that's what's normal—finding out your magical strength based on experience and practice... You're saying here in Nuolja, you have, like, markings or birthmarks that tell you how powerful of a Mage or Mystic you'll be?"

"Lisa, how much of Nuolja do you know about?"

I paused for a moment. "Not much, only that your people are pretty small, staying here in the arctic and not mixing with other countries."

"Ah... so not much. Well, you seem kind, and if the Court of Partisans accepts your offer for a possible guild alliance, you would need to know this about our people... though it's not something we often share with short-term visitors."

About to be told a Nuoljian secret made me turn my body toward Ayker, crisscrossing my legs in the snow—forgetting all about the jar below the edge and Gaius' mission.

"I've never left Nuolja—most people haven't unless they're a part of the Court or are a fisherman. Here, we are all Nuolja and have been for centuries. No one here is an outsider or has intermarried with another culture. It's not that we think we are better—please don't think that; it's just that the Court Law has always said our magic must stay bound to our land and not be mixed with another's blood."

I didn't know much about magical governments besides Boolavogue, so I didn't interject with a question about his Court Law. I stayed silent, listening.

"You probably have noticed that our people here either have brown or white hair. It's not just some random gene; it's a distinction. Brown hairs are normal, like any human, having a heart that beats with blood to keep it running. The others—like me—are born with white hair. Our hearts need something called 'omrivim,' sometimes referred to as 'lifeforce.' In Nuolja, that word means 'life-giver' and is a type of magic our body needs to survive."

He brought both legs back down to hang over the frosted rock's ledge, rubbing his hands on his pants to warm them. "There isn't anything magical about our hair color... but for the white-haired, if you're born with a *signet*, you're what's called a Vit. It's not a derogatory name. It just means people like me have magic."

With only a couple of sentences, Ayker made my mind race a mile a minute. I had never heard of such an aggressive gene that determined one's ability to live with blood or to live off of magic. The Guardians never mentioned it in their lessons. Neither did Gaius. *Guess those rumors Brightbeard mentioned were true after all...*

"You mean, not everyone here has a magic pulse?"

He swatted the air. "It's not that—I should have worded it better, sorry." His body turned toward me, foggy mist puffing from his warm breath. "See, the normal Nuoljians with dark hair can never be born with any type of elemental or phantasmal magic. The only thing they can create is omrivim, which happens to be what we white-haired and Vits need to survive."

I was very curious now. "How does this lifeforce magic—the, uh, omrivim—work? Does your heart really not pump blood?"

"There's veins and arteries—everything a body needs to work... it's just that our hearts have this third, invisible hole that constantly needs magic to work. We need omrivim for survival, or our hearts can't continue to pump blood throughout our bodies. For it to be injected, a brown hair just needs to have the same blood type as us and inject their blood into our bloodstream."

I fixated on my fingers, putting the pieces together about the Nuoljians. "So... I guess that's why you can't even leave your town... you need their magic *with* a certain type of blood to live... sounds kind of expensive to buy something as precious as life."

Ayker spoke confidently, "Oh, we don't pay with money. We sell our magic instead."

My voice was sharp. "Wait—what? Sell? You sell your magic?"

"Maybe selling isn't the best choice of words. You see, all white hair Nuoljians are gifted with the ability to have vast amounts of magic. Being born with a signet—making you a Vit—lets everyone know your magic type and how much of it. For us, our magic continues to grow stronger—replenishing fast daily. So, in exchange for omrivim from the other

Nuoljians, we put our magic in glintz—letting them use our magic since they have none themselves.”

I never knew magic could be transferred into glintz, and I didn’t know there was such a thing as gifting away magic... and it sounded wrong. It wasn’t like trading a good you made with a merchant; you were selling a part of your body for others so they wouldn’t feel left out of the magic loop. Nothing about it sat right in my stomach.

“It’s more like sharing—”

“—in exchange for not dying!” I interjected. “What happens if a Vit doesn’t have enough magic... or what if it’s just a normal white hair Nuoljian who has none to give...” My face wasn’t losing contact with Ayker’s blue eyes. “Do they not get any omrivim?”

Ayker paused, letting me know my assumption had to be true. “If a white-haired doesn’t have magic to give, they need to work hard and buy their omrivim, which is quite expensive. If one is unable to purchase enough or a Vit refuses to give magic...”

He couldn’t keep eye contact with me any longer, staring at the kids still playing with our creatures. “They get really weak... and, well, after a couple of weeks or even days later...” His tone lowered. “They die.”

My eyes wouldn’t blink after hearing the sad truth. My heart ached for the Nuoljians. No one should be bound to magic to live, and no one should have to buy their life by getting their magic stripped away from them—even if it replenishes. To think there were Nuoljians out there right now, worrying if they had enough money or magic to buy them more time for living, sent spikes of needles crawling up my back.

Ayker must have seen my pitying look since he quickly explained with a forced grin, “It doesn’t normally happen. Many Vits will give their magic away to those who share the same power...” that sorrowful look came back, “... if they can find a medic who will do a transfusion without magic as payment.”

My eyes then went toward the kids playing. “Klay said you are powerful, though, meaning you don’t have to worry about that, right?”

He wasn’t cocky when he answered. “Mhm. I’m the only one with fauna magic here. If my magic wasn’t strong, I’d be walking on a brittle bridge daily—hoping it would stretch out far enough to fill enough stones to pay for my omrivim.”

“And you can tell your strength based on your signet, right?”

“Yeah.”

I squinted at his tan face, noting his narrow jawline and blemish-free cheeks. “So, it must be pretty big, then—like a giant birthmark?”

His eyes glanced off to the right, gesturing near his shoulders. “All on my back... like a weird white-stitched tapestry. It goes from the bottom of my neck down to my lower spine—expanding past my shoulder blades. Mom said she thought my skin was peeling off when I was born. My signet was that big. Having one larger than an average person’s hand is not normal, and my family knew that. They tried to hide it for a while, but once word got out to the Court, I had to start giving a lot of magic away in the form of glintz and absorption stones.”

He tittered but out of pity for himself, I believe. “I am a valuable export, I guess you could say. Luckily, my family still got to keep some of the profits. They were able to afford that restaurant because of me and don’t have to worry about omrivim deficiency anymore.”

Memories of earlier that day popped up. I saw him coming out of a medic shop when I was with the kids searching for Fyrnuhaura—looking weak. He was there... giving away his magic. And his family was living off him selling his body away—it just was too unsettling to me.

“You shouldn’t have to give away your magic. It’s yours—you were born with it and should get to keep it.”

Perplexity consumed Ayker’s face. “If you’re born with powerful magic, you should give it away and share it with those who don’t have it—that’s what we do here. Having something that powerful in your body isn’t safe. I don’t see anything wrong with it if it makes those without magic happier.”

“But, it’s *you*. Magic is part of your heart...” I looked down, noticing my fingers turning even pinker from the cold. “I don’t see why you should be forced to sell it. Just like life, magic is a gift and should be treasured. You shouldn’t feel guilty for having lots of it, just like you shouldn’t feel guilty if you’re the best singer, artist, or musician. You should use it for good instead of giving it away to those who don’t know how to use it—honing it, and becoming a master of it.

I took a deep breath as I felt my heart fiddling about, trying to close the lid of overflowing emotions. “For me, I hope to grow stronger so I can save those who are unable to save themselves, and so far, it looks like my magic is doing a pretty good job at it.”

I glanced over at Vonny. She ran happily with her friends—acting like she had never been in danger earlier today.

Ayker sat quietly... for a lot longer than I expected.

Did I say something wrong—I just upset him, didn't I? Maybe I somehow made him question his morals—please don't let him be mad at me—should've kept my mouth shut like I normally do...

He leaned back on his palms, glancing up at the winterdaze. “You know... I never thought of it that way... I always thought Heroes were just snobs who cared about power, which is why they never offered to give away their strong magic as we do in glintz. But, after hearing you... I guess there can be some Mages and Mystics who can use all their magic for good...” His polar-ice eyes smiled while a huge wave of the winterdaze crashed silently above us. “You're pretty strange, Lisa—the good kind of strange, though.”

I think that was a compliment...

His eyes went to my knees and my boots. “Don't you have to be collecting that weird Edurplume stuff from the winterdaze soon?”

My mind was in a whole other world as Ayker talked with me that I had forgotten about my entire reason for getting my hands and thighs frozen in the snow. “Oh—yeah. Kind of important...”

At that moment, I remembered an important detail of Gaius' Charmer request: not being seen flying.

The waves were high up... *really* high up... and the kids and Ayker only knew I could manipulate water. Showing them I could fly would mean exposing my magic as being even more powerful than they thought it was. Still... after getting to know them all and Ayker trusting me with the Nuoljian secret, I thought having them see me with another type of magic wasn't a big deal. *They are just kids, after all, and Ayker seems really kind...* We also were in a secluded area away from town, and I couldn't see the task taking more than a few minutes.

Break the rule of flying in a foreign land... or disobey Gaius' Charmer request...

Since Gaius had to interrupt official Boolavogue business to get me to do this request meant he really wanted this Edurplume stuff.

Breaking the flying rule was the better choice, and it wasn't *technically* a rule; it was a suggestion made by the Keeper in a spur-of-the-moment conversation in his living room.

I grabbed the jar and put the leather strap through my neck and arm like a side-shoulder purse. “Since you told me the secret of your town... I’ll let you know a secret of mine.”

Ayker raised his dark silver eyebrows. “Really? Better than that orange sprite?”

I nodded. “Let’s just say my magic is also pretty powerful. It lets me not only move water but also...” As my words trailed off, I showed off a little bit with my flight. I started floating in the air—a solid two feet off the ground before continuing my secret. “Lets me fly, too.”

Ayker’s jaw dropped, and he jumped off the ledge as I began to soar in the air—feeling the cold arctic breeze brush my cheeks with streaks of ice. “*Knall—you’re actually flying!*”

My cheeks unintentionally blushed when I finally rose higher than my tall Nuoljian friend. Some of the kids below started shouting, saying how awesome I was being able to float like the widmoos and my orange sprite. They even gasped as I swam through the winterdaze and gathered the magical ribbons—the Edurplume—into the jar. I admit to diving like a dolphin a couple of times, just to splash some stardust on their little tan faces.

Is it wrong for me to feel good after showing off to a couple of kids... eh, I guess it doesn’t matter—I love flying too much to care.

13 In the Alley, in the Court

“You mean those lights last night—*that’s* what Gaius wanted us to catch?” Cal asked during our midday stroll through Reylja.

“Pretty sure he meant for ‘me’ to catch it and for you to ‘come if you’d like,’” I corrected. “Would be pretty hard for you to fly up there... seeing as you can’t.”

It was another sunny and cold day in Reylja for us Hunters, and I was happy that Ekron didn’t need Cal for the morning. It allowed me to show him around and catch him up on what happened yesterday. I mentioned the lake incident, my *slight* heroism, the giant fin that broke through the ice, and Ayker’s magic. Topped the whole story off by ending with the Swelterplum Popper Challenge. Cal laughed hard at that, showing off his perfect smile.

“I wondered why Erin and Amos avoided the women all night—what I would give to have been there for that. *Way* better than my day—stuck with a meeting with a bunch of old guys.”

We passed the cocoa cart, where I waved to the lady at the front window, seeing as she remembered my face. “What all did you do?”

“Literally everything you didn’t. Took a tour of the Lodge and met the Court of Partisans—most of them, anyway. Ekron’s face was more pleasant to look at, which is saying something. Then, we took a trek by the mountain and around the ports... Lisa, you don’t understand how much better it is to just be here with you.”

I knew Cal meant that in a not-being-in-a-meeting-is-better sort of way... but a part of me imagined he meant that in a Lisa’s-company-is-better way instead. Made me smile to believe that to be the truth.

Before I blushed like an idiot, I asked him, “Did you happen to talk about guilds while you were with them—the whole point of the mission?”

“No—and Ekron tried.”

“What—why not? All the Nuoljians we met yesterday seemed to enjoy our company, and talking about guilds was no secret. Why was it so hard for Ekron?”

A confident smirk. “See, Lisa, being a Captain or part of the Royal Court means you can’t just barge in with demands. Nuolja has no Hunters

on command, isn't used to visitors, and, from my experience yesterday, isn't one for change either. Ekron is kind of..."

"... buttering them up?" I finished his sentence.

Cal laughed. "I guess something like that—if the butter was tasteless, claggy, and wrinkly like all those old partisans' hands—"

"*Ew*—why did you have to add *those* details to my statement?" I joked back with him.

As we walked through the narrow alleys between the string of homes down Juri Street, bitter, sniping talk grabbed our attention. Our joyous conversation ceased. The voices we heard turned out to be frustrated kids, and we couldn't help but be intrigued.

We stopped in our tracks at the exit of the alley, seeing as two brown-headed boys were talking down toward two smaller white-haired ones. None of the four were the kids I met yesterday, which was good; I would've hated seeing them picking a fight after growing fond of their spirits.

The white-haired boy with shaggy hair spoke up, scared and agitated. "I already gave you another firestone—if I take anymore from Dad, he'll—"

"He'll what? Just make more? Sounds fine to me," the boy with his walnut hair stuffed inside his knitted hat responded. "Last time I checked, our parents got in trouble for not collecting enough of your Vit's stones when they gave you lifeforce."

The other brown-headed boy—looked to be his twin—expounded on his remark. "They were being too nice, and we suffered for it—couldn't get us a ride to the trading post 'cause we didn't have any firestones to exchange for copper—"

"So *you* both will give our parents back what is rightfully theirs."

"Or we'll just tell our parents you've been getting more omrivim from some other family—"

"You can't do that!" the smallest boy with white hair, wearing a jacket too big for his arms, shot back to defend his friend.

The twin with his hair stuffed into his hat got into the oversized-jacket boy's face, whispering just loud enough for Cal and me to hear. "Watch me... you little leech."

A red flame the size of a quarter appeared in the hand of the Vit with the shaggy hair. Like shooting a pebble across the road, the little Nuoljian

flicked the tiny flame at the brown-headed boy's face—slightly burning the side of his cheek.

Before the bossy twins could say anything, the little fire Mystic declared, “Don't call us leeches, you *nothings*...”

The bullies soon became the victims. Each twin stepped a foot forward as if they were about to pummel the two Vits, but the shaggy-haired Nuoljian held up another flame—a larger orb of fire than the last—ready to let it loose when they all suddenly stopped.

Given that the twins were facing our direction, their eyes finally made contact with the silhouettes of Cal and me. They were caught and immediately started running, causing the white-haired Nuoljians to see what frightened them. As soon as their blue eyes met ours, they fled as well.

I never thought about the consequences of having half the citizens rely on others for magic and half being jealous and angry that they do not. On one side, there were people who didn't have the possibility of being born with elemental or phantasmal magic, unwillingly bound to take care of those who did. The other half saw their life in the hands of the other, constantly having to please them if they wanted omrivim to live, and yet, *they* were the powerful ones—the ones who could surf on water or create fire from thin air.

Each person in Nuolja couldn't truly live a peaceful life—stuck on this frozen island because of some weird heritage. They saw magic as a burden. Something I had loved since day one, they saw it as a product to sell in order to keep living or a way to blackmail others into giving more magic than requested... and that left me disheartened.

Still peering down the alley, Cal muttered, “Never seen kids argue like adults before... what do you think that was about?”

I wasn't surprised Cal didn't know the Nuoljian Secret, as Ekron couldn't even talk about something as simple as guilds with their government leaders. I told him what Ayker told me and included the bit about signets, too... but I didn't tell him about Ayker's being the biggest. Not sure why... but that seemed something too personal to say, even to my best friend.

“You know... I saw an emblem inked in white on Yaeger's neck—one of the partisans—but just thought it was some type of Nuoljian body art...” Cal noted as we walked along the port side of town, watching the fishermen return with buckets of fish. “Never heard of someone being born

with a marking to judge their magic... Never even heard them mention magic while we were out yesterday, now that I'm thinking about it."

"Weird, right?" I interjected. "I thought the same thing—everything is really hushed here, or it's just so normal that no one talks about it... you think Ekron knows and didn't say anything?"

"Probably... he's pretty good when it comes to figuring out things like this—not letting even the smallest detail pass by."

As we headed toward the heart of Reylja, a crowd formed toward the end of the street, right past the afternoon vendors.

Up ahead was Ekron, riding high on top of one of the brown Gora bears with Vyrdir walking by his side. He smiled big and still refused to put a hat over his shiny head. *How is he not cold?* Using his talent of finding Cal and me without even trying, our Captain's eyes darted in our direction within less than two seconds of us showing up in his path.

He hobbled off the saddle and came over to Cal and me, the Nuoljians awestruck by the giant bear. "Good afternoon, you two—been trying to track down you both, actually," he began, ignoring the many stares from the crowd. "Had to grab my Gora bear to come and find you—seeing as a crowd would attract your attention." He was right. "The Court of Partisans wishes to invite all the Hunters from Boolavogue over for a welcome feast tonight, regretting they weren't prepared for so many of us yesterday evening. I already caught the lot of our team out ice fishing, seeing as the Women's Troop won a very..." his wrinkled eyes met mine, "... peculiar challenge yesterday, as I've been told."

I couldn't help but softly laugh. "Sorry you had to miss it, Captain. It was pretty funny to watch."

Ekron smiled. "Glad that you're enjoying it here, Lisa, and that the Hunters are treating you kindly. Now, as I was saying—be back at the emership before six so we can all go to the Lodge together. I trust you both to make it on time, but the others—I know they would blag about if I weren't there to watch them like a couple of toddlers."

"We will be there," Cal answered.

Ekron winked before jumping back onto his fluffy Gora bear.

...

Warm yellow and orange lights flickered throughout the capital as we Hunters went from the emership to the Lodge. Passing through the entire town was the only way to the government building. We cleaned up nice and

wore our best winter garments (threw on my plum coat for the night's feast) in preparation, and I wasn't too nervous. After being in meetings with the Guardians and in front of King Sonon, a court of Nuoljians couldn't be that bad.

Non-slick stone guided us up toward the entrance of the Lodge. It stood high, overlooking the city—the largest building on the island, having boulders as black as charcoal making up the bottom foundation while ascending to a smooth white texture toward the top—three stories high. The entrance doors were wooden and glazed, two doormen opening them up for us—smiling and greeting us.

A first step in, and Nuoljians were already offering to take our coats—never had that happened to me before. When Mom went to her coworkers' parties to which their kids were invited, everyone threw their coats on a random bed or chair. When the middle-aged lady offered to take mine, I was shy before saying, "Sure," watching as she hung it with the others on the wall.

We walked down the cabin-like hallway into a large, open room with an angled ceiling. Vaulted beams of dark wood held the roof together, and a large iron chandelier hung in the middle—right above a long, low-rising rectangular table. *Pillows* surrounded the wooden dining slab, not a chair to be seen. I thought it was strange since, at Rovo's, we sat in booths and stools. *Guess in Nuolja, sitting on the floor is actually customary, or maybe it was just a government-dinner thing...*

With all fifteen of us Hunters and Ekron standing at the opening of the giant room, a group of eight individuals appeared off to our right—the Court of Partisans. Two were women, and six were men—all dressed in navy blues, purple, and black wool. Vyrdir left us as our guide and joined the string of adults, creating the Nine Partisans.

Cal was right about most of the Court being old, but three men looked around Gaius' age—his *mortal* age, not Keeper age.

"Warm evening to you, Hunters! Glad to have all of you here to join us in good tidings and to take part in a true Nuoljian feast," an old white-haired Nuoljian announced. He was in the middle of the government party. A white neck tattoo was etched on his neck, underneath his ear, spiraling into geometric shapes down into his thin winter jacket. "I'm Yaeger Yorin, Deliberator of the Court. Here with me are the other members: Vyrdir—who

you have already been acquainted with—Hyanuh, Kleyv, Ryn, Nabryum, Setzyr, Blythe, and Yawn.”

Though most of the names didn’t remain in my memory, I felt a giggle trying to force its way through my throat as the last name was mentioned on Yaeger’s long list.

We shook the hands of all Court; some Hunters said “hello” with a firm handshake; some—being Tuuli, Brightbeard, and Blue Scar—took the time to add more to the one-word sentence; for me, I stood next to Ekron and Cal at the end of the line, letting them do all the talking instead.

The member of the Court named Setzyr came to me next. He was one of the younger partisans, hair dark and tied in a low ponytail, no mustache or beard on his face, with notable muscles beneath his jacket and loose shirt. I only remembered the details and blue of his eyes because he was the only one who decided little Lisa Robbie needed a chat.

He extended out his hand. “You’re quite young to be a Hunter,” Setzyr said to me. His voice was smooth and not raspy like Yaeger’s. “Can’t see a child being selected to come along to a foreign land unless they were exceptional at their craft. What is your name, miss?”

He let go of the handshake as I responded, “Lisa, sir.”

“Are you part of the Royal Family like young Prince Caelum?”

Before I could answer, Ekron stepped in from my left side. “Lisa is a dear friend of the King and Queen. She is a fine Hunter *and* quite a talented young Mage, proving very skilled as she has slain many dark magic creatures alongside Prince Caelum.”

Ekron really beefed up my resumé with how he worded my accomplishments. I sounded like a triumph, though I definitely would disagree. I could put on a pretty good sparring match with Cal, using magic in ways he had never seen before, but it was nothing to fawn over. I was decent at everything, and Ekron just told this Setzyr guy I was more than that... which I kind of liked.

Setzyr’s squinted eyes widened, the corners of his lips teasing a smile. “Magic *and* skilled in combat—I see your kingdom is far more impressive than I first thought. What type of Mage are you, if I may ask?”

With that question of his, my heart doubled in beat. *What do I say? Do I just lie or only say one—*

Ekron placed his hand firmly on my shoulder. “She’s a Water Mage—a fine one at that. I believe you have a couple of Water Mages in Reylja.

Vyrdir showed us the fishermen Mystics using that power to reel in their catches of the day. Was something of a fascination.”

Cal was right about Ekron, noticing all the little details of our stay. Our Captain knew my secret about being the Agapéd Bearer, and it was no random lie he told Setzyr. Ekron talked with us Hunters last night, hearing our thoughts on the village and seeing if building a guild would be something the town needed. That all led to Amos and Sana telling of my heroism—using my magic to save Vonny’s life.

Ekron knew the Nuoljians saw me freeze the waves and figured the Court would’ve heard about that incident—visitors saving children with magic—so he picked the smartest lie *and* turned the conversation back around to focus on Reylja’s people.

Thank you, Ekron.

Setzyr finally looked away from me. “Thank you—we offer many opportunities for Mystics and Mages to use their magic to keep our land running smoothly and profiting mightily.” He looked back down at me again. “Pleasure meeting you, Miss Lisa.”

Dinner arrived shortly after: a buffet set with gray plates and food patterned all around. Grilled lamb, seasoned with pepper and some blueberry-tasting sauce, was one of the main entrées. A platter of fish topped with lemon was also an option, though it looked almost raw; I avoided that at all costs. Side dishes of roasted peppers, brown rolls, purple carrots, and sweet onions were on smaller plates—even had some mini mushroom skewers coated in oily pesto; I filled my plate up with those. Our dining jars were frosted, so there was no need for ice when they poured our glasses with water. The servers offered hot coffee on the side, but I declined; I hated the stuff—gross bean water that needed pounds of sugar for it to taste tolerable.

While Ekron, the Court, and a couple of other Hunters sat away from the entrance, I sat at the exact opposite end of the table with the same crew from yesterday. Being at the end was my choice. No way was I sitting next to the Court of Partisans, even if Cal was over there. The Hunters were better, laughing and joking about their lives and the strange things they saw in the town.

I was having fun listening to Cheeky and Amos’ conversation about their hunt near Fladden, so much so that I casually asked, “Could you pass me the butter, Brightbeard?”

I thought nothing of it... and that was the issue.

Brightbeard did a double take and looked at me with a startled smile, to which Amos and Cheeky's story stopped. "Did you just call me *Brightbeard*?"

Oh, my cheeks turned fiery red. I immediately apologized while the Hunters around me started laughing at my mistake. "I'm sorry—it was just a nickname I mentally gave you because I, uh... well, I couldn't remember your real name. You just, uh..." I pointed to the invisible beard on my face as I hastened my words. "You wear those gold beads in your beard—I'm sorry. "

Amos, sitting next to me, snorted with a belly laugh. "Little Lisa—didn't know you had a knack for nicknamin'. I like that better than Jeovini, anyway. Mind if I call you that, too?"

The man I called Brightbeard smiled big, replying, "Never much cared for my name anyway. I'll take it, Lisa."

"Do you happen to have one for me then?" Cheeky asked, her elbows perched on the table, leaning in. She was sitting across from me.

I would never have guessed my secret nicknaming would have been exposed—especially with the Hunters *enjoying* it. I glanced at her, still a little embarrassed, and said, "Cheeky... since you have the rosiest cheeks of us all—"

"*Cheeky!*" Amos belted, pointing his mushroom skewer at her. "I like it!"

Her cheeks grew rosier as she smiled back at me. "Ten times better than Corrida—Lisa, I thank you." She then took turns eyeballing the four other Hunters around her. "From now on, my name is changed—unofficially, but *officially* in my mind *and* in yours from today on."

"Aye, Lisa—what about Kite?" Sana began, after taking a massive gulp of water, "You picked somethin' out to match his boring face?"

"Actually, no... his name was easy to remember," I answered, fidgeting with my fingers underneath the table.

They all laughed, causing the other end of the table to shoot glares at us. Sana didn't care, though, teasing Kite. "*You hear that?* Even your name is boring enough to remember!"

I rebutted quickly, "No, no, no—it's not like that, I promise!"

Kite, with his simple smile and simple short hair, softly laughed, "Don't worry, Lisa. I know you didn't mean it as Sana put it."

Imagining a life with genuine friends was nothing unusual... *right*? Bet a lot of students at my school thought the same: what it would be like to go on trips with peers who cared about you, laughed with you, and explored new things with you. Or maybe kids my age didn't need to imagine it; they've already gotten enough friends to fill a party room. I had three—Jenny Kim, Lily, and Mary... and even then, they weren't as fun as being with the Hunters, a band of young adults who found joy in picking on a Captain and being amazed at my magic.

That dinner was fun—one of the best I had in quite a while, though Rovo's had *way* better food. No way was I saying that to the Court.

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14 “Where’s Lisa?”

Darkness veiled the town by the time we left, though Ekron, Cal, Tuuli, and Jellal stayed; the Court wanted to talk with them, probably about the guilds. The other Hunters returned to the boat while I veered off behind the Lodge to Klay’s perfect spot. I needed more Edurplume from the winterdaze. After about twenty minutes of waiting in the snow with Tuff, the ethereal lights at last reappeared.

Flying through the sea of magic above, I gathered enough glowing ribbons to fill Gaius’ jar. *Wonder what he is gonna use this for... Maybe he will let me keep some...*

I continued my flight to the boat. Almost all Hunters were huddled near the fire pit. A couple of Gora bears were with them also, eating late-night snacks of apples and fish, keeping the Hunters warm with their fluffy fur. Instead of joining them, which looked fun, I flew to the vessel’s stern, where it was dark and peaceful—a perfect view of the winterdaze. After a long day of being around people, I slid my back against the boat wall while cradling Tuff—watching the free glowing light show in calming silence.

Not long after the lights in the sky faded to only stars, loud footsteps and rumbling voices echoed from the dock near the bow. I didn’t leave my spot. Figuring it had to be some late-night spar, I remained seated with Tuff.

“Where’s Lisa?” I faintly heard, the first clear set of words amid the commotion.

The voice was angry, so I stood up, but before I could walk around, I heard the voice grumble again but with more fierceness. “*Where is she, Amos?*”

“I don’t know, Captain,” I heard Amos say from the front of the ship, alarmed—very unlike his cheery behavior.

“Something the matter?” Diver Vaas’ voice spoke next, coming out from the top of the bridge.

Suddenly, a boy came running around to the back of the boat. The yellow and orange glow from the fire pit followed the edge of the emership, lighting up Cal’s face; he wasn’t smiling.

“She’s here!” the Prince shouted to his left.

Brisk sounds of boots came hurtling toward Cal, and Captain Ekron appeared, causing Tuff to turn invisible again. Our Captain's face was upset—the kind of upset that wasn't sad but greatly disturbed. Bitterly angry.

Diver Vaas peered down below and saw us three, reiterating the question Ekron failed to answer. “Captain, what be the rush?”

Ekron didn't shout when he looked up at our emership pilot. He furrowed his brow and said with heavy seriousness, “We are leaving now.”

When Diver Vaas widened his eyes, I did, too.

“How soon can you have the ship ready for departure?” Ekron asked, still in his low, hassled voice.

The emership captain did not question Ekron. “I'll have to load the aerorodin, get her gliding, and have the acemen rundown the boat before we can set an all-clear. Maybe in about thirty minutes if the weather stays on our side.”

“Thank you, Vaas.”

As Diver Vaas began to gather his crew, shouting a bunch of emership terminology toward the skyloes and acemen, some Hunters became curious and followed Ekron's steps.

“Captain, what's going on?”

“We leaving already?”

“Did the meeting not go well?”

For the first time, Ekron shooed his Hunters away—sent them off like a bunch of kids sticking their noses in adult business. “Ask Tuuli and Jellal—I will regroup with you all in a moment. Just *stay* on the boat.”

“Sorry if I worried you,” I apologized without knowing what I did wrong.

Ekron escorted Cal and me back into the shadow of the bridge, right where I was sitting moments before with Tuff. He skimmed over my covered arms. “Lisa, did anyone try to touch you or make you use your magic?”

The question was bizarre, but I answered honestly. “No, sir.”

“Did anyone, including outside of our time at the Lodge, ask you about your magic in any way?” He lowered his voice. “Or about the Agapéd Magic?”

The nerves in my chest tightened. “No, sir... what's going on?”

Ekron sighed in relief, though his face still looked as beset and unsettled as before. “At least that worry is now gone. I didn't mean to alarm

you, truly. Prince Caelum was in the meeting, and the other Hunters will hear this from Tuuli and Jellal, so you deserve to know as well. We will not be allying with Nuolja.”

What?

“Four of the nine members seemed to support the idea of guilds from our kingdom, but the other five only agreed on two terms. One, they would be in charge of what Hunters were trained and hired. Two, they would refuse any of their people from entering into Boolavogue. Since the vote was not unanimous, I tried to spark a deal, offering to have some of our Captains stay in Nuolja to train their people...”

Ekron turned his gaze to Cal. “This is when I spoke privately with the three head Overseers, so this is something not even you have heard yet, Prince.”

Skyloes and acemen ran through the ship, moving metal and revving up magic, but Cal and I stayed utterly focused on Ekron.

“The three Overseers were against me from the start and agreed to have some of their people trained under our leadership *if* we offered them magic from our strongest Mages and Mystics in the form of absorption stones.” Our Captain’s speech turned sour, as if he hated the taste of his own words. “You both may have noticed that this town runs heavily on magic, more specifically on glintz. Well, their glintz aren’t natural. They are absorption stones—not from magic-dense caverns, mines, or fallen stars. The magic is from the people *themselves*. In our kingdom, like many others, this is a controversy and viewed as immoral, which is why I asked if anyone tried to take magic from you—both of you.”

Ayker told me of the stones but not that *all* of them were from people. My pocket-kettle glint that was stuffed in my jacket—it had magic from a civilian inside it. My gut twisted in knots. Still, perplexity overtook my mind and caused me to ask a question. “Why is it bad? Won’t our magic just reset like it normally does after using a bunch of it?”

Ekron’s hands cupped mine and Cal’s shoulders. “You both get weak after using a lot of magic, right?”

We nodded our heads.

“Now, just imagine feeling weak every day without a say in the matter. Imagine being unable to battle beasts or soar in the sky because your neighbors need your magic to lust, laze, and leisure around—using *your* pulse as a marketable good. You are confined to a system where you can

never grow stronger, all because someone saw you as a walking credit dispenser...”

He paused with weariness in his eyes. “I know this is tough to hear, but that is what they wanted, and it’s how their province survives day in and day out. Your pulse is not a ware; it is a part of your soul. *You* determine what you do with your soul, not a businessman or pack of partisans. We will have no part in that... and that is what I told the Court.”

Our Captain had never spoken to us like that, resolute and as if he was talking to someone twice our age. And not once had I ever seen him so worried before.

During his talk, I couldn’t help but think of Ayker, his family, and all those kids. *This is normal for them... they believe this way of life is fine...* All those little Vits—Klay, Ryme, and Yavin—felt sick each week. *What if the brown-haired people feel the same when they give away their omrivim? What if they feel sick, too?*

During the whole summer, the Guardians and Gaius let me rest when I used up so much magic defeating Ecuras. They never pressured me to head back to Calendula or Haim Gana to continue training, even though I really wanted to. They also never forced me to go beyond my limit; it was all on me if I almost passed out from not listening to Gaius’ commands to rest.

Yet, those kids, the parents, the elderly—every single person in Nuolja experienced a day or more of sickness every *week* because of their weird magic heritage... and I bet those people in the Court didn’t have to give up their magic. Bet they just profited off of them, living life as normally as possible while their citizens were indebted to their neighbors...

Nuojla... I was beginning to love the town and its beautiful night sky, making friends easily and seeing the cute unies on the frozen beach. I wish we could have stayed to help them... but I knew that was impossible after hearing everything Ekron said.

“I won’t be telling the rest of the crew about Nuolja’s profiting venture of the absorption stones, seeing as it only concerns the both of you... and because you both have guardians who are a head above me.” He patted our shoulders. “Now, you both go ahead and settle into your cabins while I regroup with Diver Vaas.”

Before Ekron moved away from our faces, my heart couldn’t contain itself any longer, jolting forth a burning question. “So, there isn’t

anything we can do to help them?”

Our bald and beard-braided Captain focused on me without a smile. “Seeing hurt that isn’t ours to fix is hard to bear. It’s a burden you do not need weighing down your heart, Lisa. All we can do is take away the knowledge we’ve gathered and use it to benefit our kingdom, being thankful for the life we are given under the reign of the Sonons.”

In six hours, we had safely made it back to Boolavogue with no alliance with the Nuoljians.

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15 Gaius? Scared?

Since our team left earlier than expected, our landing time was moved to the early hours of the night, around 3 a.m. Honestly, I could have just evanesced back to Gaius' home, but I was a part of Ekron's team. If everyone else had to fly home, I would, too. Bunking with Kelm and Sana was fun. They didn't snore, so taking a long nap was no problem. By the time we landed, I was wide awake.

The problem was that Gaius had no idea I was returning home early *and* at such a late hour. He didn't have a cellphone (no one did on this planet), and he never taught me how to make a blynk, so no communication happened. Then again, it was *technically* my home, too, and Gaius would sometimes be awake at night in his study. *Probably won't be a big deal if I show up unannounced; he's used to me coming home late if Ekron holds up me and Cal during lessons... though it's never been after midnight before...*

When we landed in the Kingdom and everyone went their separate ways back home, I evanesced to the secret entrance on the hilltop of Boolavogue. Walking through the Veradome at night was freaky. Nothing was scary about plants and pink-petaled trees until darkness created shadows on the walls like monsters. Luckily, Tuff lit our path all the way toward the Hearth.

In fear of creating eerie creaks down the wooden steps of the Keeper's half-buried cottage, I floated down the stairs instead. All the lights were off. The chimney fire had been out for quite some time. *Never seen this place so quiet before.*

In Gaius's home, the kitchen, dining room, and living room were all in one ample space. Off to the right was the study door, and in that room was Gaius' bedroom; never been in there, but I knew that's where he slept. My bedroom was through the laundry room, which happened to be near the fridge—opposite Gaius' study and quarters.

Landing on the floor, only making a whisper of a creak on the wooden planks, I turned left toward the fridge and the laundry room door, about to grab the bronzed handle. *Lisa, have to admit, that was your best sneaking down the stairs yet—*

“Why are you here?”

My soul left my body at the most brooding voice my ears had ever fallen prey to hear. I jumped in place, squealing as Tuff flew off my shoulder to hide in my hair, and cautiously turned around. Nerves strangled around my bones, and my heart pounded like a bass drum. The voice was unrecognizable—sounding sleepy and echoing like a monster in a cave.

Holding a yellow light glint in the darkness of the living room was a brawny man wearing a snug tank top and loose sweatpants. The soft glow from the stone wasn't bright enough to light the room, but it sure did show me the man's piercing green eyes... which happened to be frightened and as spooked as me.

Seeing as it was Gaius who gave me the worst scare of my life, I responded in a hush, "Sorry—gosh, you scared me. Thought you were a burglar."

"No thief could enter here. Why are you back early?"

As Tuff revealed himself again, I could see Gaius' full frame. Held tight in his hand—the one next to his right thigh, not holding the light glint—was a *dagger*.

I gasped and furrowed my brows at him. "Then, *what's* the *weapon* for?"

Gaius went to the dining room table and lit the unorganized set of candles with a firelily he had growing next to it. His magic made the petals bloom sparks just for a moment.

"There are far worse creatures out there than petty thieves," he said, placing glint and weapon on the table. "Now, back to my question—"

"Well, our trip to Nuolja didn't go well. Not going to be making any guilds there, Ekron wanted to leave as soon as possible. I didn't mean to scare you."

Gaius used his hand to wipe his face and rummage through his wavy hair. His eyes reverted back to their sleepy state.

I really did wake him, didn't I... how did he even hear me?

Instead of returning to bed like a normal man who discovered his home wasn't invaded, Gaius straightened his back. "Did you happen to get the Edurplume from the Fyrnuhaura?"

"Oh—yeah!" My fingers waved in front of my orbkit, and out plopped the jar. I caught the glass container of glowing sea ribbons and held it like a giant trophy. "One giant jar of Edurplume, just like you asked."

Catching it was *amazing*, Gaius—flying through the sky of sparkling waves—so pretty. It was worth being out in the freezing cold temperature.”

He smiled at me as he took the jar from my hands. “Glad it wasn’t too much trouble for you to find.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “Actually, it *was*. No one knew what that stuff was because you used some old name for it. They call it ‘winterdaze.’ Might wanna put that in your books—and I ended up having to ask kids for help—*kids*, Gaius. Luckily, they knew the best spot to catch it.”

He placed the jar on the table, admiring it, and said in a low voice, “I told you not to be seen flying.”

I took a deep breath. “I know, but they were just *kids*, and I needed the help... I promise no adult saw me.”

His body turned to the giant cluttered cabinet of his dining room. He began looking through a random drawer. No scold or anything came from him, which meant he didn’t mind... I think.

More clatter came from the drawer, his hand rummaging through, and I asked, changing the subject, “Why did you need me to catch this, by the way? Is it for a potion or used in a charm?”

“Nope.” He then found a jagged purple stone from the cluttered drawer. “I’ve just never seen it before.”

“*What*—you’re serious?” I asked in shock.

“Ice and I don’t get along. No trees. No roots. Bringing my plants there would cause them to die. Plus, entering the land legally would involve me talking to people.” He smirked. “And you know I don’t favor that. Getting that high up is quite difficult, too, and I wanted to add this element to my glossary. It only started manifesting a little over a century ago. At least, that was what I speculated.”

I smiled wide while Gaius unlatched the jar. “You mean *I* helped *you* find something you’ve *never* documented?”

Another grin he gave before slightly nodding his head, making me feel more accomplished as a Charmer than I ever had.

Gaius commenced his weird plan with the unopened jar of Edurplume and purple rock. He blew out the candles and walked to the center of his living room, jar and stone in hand.

“What’s the rock for?” I asked, Tuff perching himself on my shoulder.

“It’s a Gravitia absorption stone found in asteroids with high sources of Gravitia magic. Have it absorb a magical element...” Gaius then pulled out a string of Edurplume, it moving like sparkling smoke, and folded it against the stone. Like a vacuum, the stone absorbed it quickly, emitting the same blue and teal radiance. “And it will gravitate more toward it.”

Gaius commanded one of the hanging plants in his living room to grasp the Gravitia stone. Leaves and stems pulled it towards the wooden beams until the glint was perfectly buttoned in the center of the ceiling. The Keeper then reached into the jar and grabbed a handful of the Fyrnuhaura’s rivers, and with a mighty scoop, Gaius slung the ribbons into the air.

Instead of falling to the ground or wisping around like loose steam, the Edurplume extended across the length of the ceiling. The waves of the winterdaze engulfed the top of the room above us, rolling and rippling beautifully as it did in Nuolja—all in the comfort of the Keeper’s home.

“Wow—it looks just like it did in the sky,” I uttered, staring at Gaius’ majestic ceiling.

The once sleepy man crossed his arms in a peaceful daze. “I’ll give it a try in the staritorium, seeing if its waves help the nocturnal species... might help the Wishing Stars, too.” He then began to dismember the Gravitia stone from the ceiling, which made the Edurplume follow his trail.

I helped him put the glowing ribbons back in the jar while he went into his study to grab something. When he came back, he was holding his emerald MC Chip. “Here, let me go ahead and give you your payment for the Edurplume,” he said.

I hesitated. There was something else I wanted besides more credits. “Actually... do you think I could have that Gravitia stone and a couple of pieces of the Fyrnuhaura instead?”

The room went still. I was pretty sure Gaius gave me an odd stare, but I was too nervous to look, playing a staring game with the jar of magic and his home’s floorboards. I had never asked for something like this... and it seemed I shouldn’t have, judging by the unwanted silence lingering in the room. *Are Charmers not supposed to ask for magic as compensation, or is Gaius still mad that I went flying and was seen by the children—*

My worries were interrupted by his tan hand reaching toward me, the Gravitia stone nestled in the center of his palm. “It’s yours, then. Only take a third, though.”

A smile of relief swept over my face. I began to gather my portion of the Edurplume inside a smaller jar. Feeling the cold glitter of the ribbons with each scoop of my hand, I remembered one other thing I wanted to ask him—*needed* to ask him; something that seemed practical to avoid any more miscommunications and soul-leaving scares.

“Gaius,” I hastily uttered by the laundry room door. “Do you think you could teach me how to make a blynk?”

With one hand holding the large jar and the other on the magic study door, he answered sleepily, “I’ll leave the charm book out on the potions table for you tomorrow. Goodnight. Get some rest.”

...

Inna could not stop laughing at the thought of Gaius being scared of little me creeping down the steps of his home. The venture in Nuolja ended early, so with my free time, I asked to practice with the Keeper of Stars at her ocean home, though we spent more time laughing on the concrete deck of the Aquanaeum. Our feet waded in the salty water as the sun beamed, and I swear I heard the starfish stuck on the rim of the stone dock giggle at my story, too.

“In all my years of knowing him, never would I have imagined him being scared of someone sneaking into his home,” she laughed as we continued our break from underwater geyser training (pulsing the water underneath our heels to propel us forward like a submarine). “You’re bringing out sides of him I didn’t know existed. I thank you for that, Lisa.”

As we both giggled away, a small blue light buzzed across the sea and toward me. Another star-shaped blynk bolted into my palms, getting a little soggy from my ocean-sprinkled hands.

Inna sighed. “You’ve only been back for one day—seems he knew we were talking of him, then. Guess our lesson will be cut short today?”

URGENT

Veradome needs me to gather more Enkurious algae, so I need you and Cal to go out and buy me more FIRELILY SEEDS before dark.

Go to HYLDAVAN, far south of Mantene (Cal
will know where it is).

Don't buy the purple seeds. Red is fine, but
black is better.

I'll reimburse you.

Meet Cal at the avelift in Mantene once you've
read this.

– G

*He couldn't have waited until after lunch? Well... at least Cal will
be with me.*

I stood up and answered Inna. "Yeah. I'll see if I can come tomorrow
to practice some more."

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16 Abduction

In Hyldavan, the buildings were pastel brick, tall, and bunched together. The streets seemed to get narrower the further down the road of merchants we went, a couple of thin trees and wildflowers planted on the corners. People dressed in warm summer clothes surrounded us, buying cold treats amid their magic shopping list agendas. After Cal and I purchased the firelily seeds—only black and red ones, of course—I asked him if we could stay a bit longer, seeing as Hyldavan had an odd purple ice cream I was dying to try.

“Well, if we are staying, then I want to buy some Evanesce petals,” Cal said as he walked by my side.

I huffed. “Why? You know I can just evanesce us anywhere freely.”

“And you think *I* don’t want to as well?”

“Okay, I see your point. Aren’t they a little expensive?”

Cal chuckled, avoiding bumping into a string of kids running past a jeweler. “Lisa, Lisa, Lisa. I don’t see how you keep forgetting I’m a prince.” The way he sang my name—I had to bite down an all-too-giddy smile.

I playfully hit his shoulder and looked ahead at the frozen treat stand. “Then, great *Prince*, how ‘bout *you* buy me my purple ice cream, too—seeing as it isn’t a problem for you?”

After Cal took me up on my offer—buying me the most delicious violet ice cream and waffle cone treat, tasting of vanilla and coconut—we walked down a narrow alley to purchase the Evanesce petals. The shop was small, with a wobbly door that rang a bell when we opened it. Cases were shut tight with a key and filled with magic potions, balms, pastes, and rooted plants. I recognized a couple (Gaius had many in his own home) but couldn’t tell what they were without a label; the Keeper could, though, even with just a glance or whiff from his nose.

Behind the old wrinkly vendor were the Evanesce petals. A single one cost a whopping 1,200 credits! My mouth wanted to drop to the floor, but I didn’t want the vendor to know how naïve I was when it came to magical currency.

Cal ended up buying five blue, lollipop-slanted petals, and the merchant put them in a little red pouch the size of a chest pocket. He didn't haggle the price or ask if there was a discount or BOGO sale; he accepted the costly offer and smiled before leaving.

"I can't believe you just paid that much for some petals," I said, making sure the entrance door to the shop shut behind us.

"What do you mean? That was a *steal*—this stuff normally is 2,400 credits in EverWake," Cal uttered, his shoulder almost touching mine as we continued through the empty sunlit alleyway.

"You're *joking*? Gaius let me eat a whole handful of those things for a week straight until my body naturally absorbed the magic."

He scoffed. "Well, we can't *all* have Keepers with a magic garden by our bedside every night—"

"But you're the Prince—"

"And you're the most powerful Mage of all—slags the prince title easily." As we were about to leave the narrow street, Cal looked down at his wrist and clicked his tongue. "Ah—I forgot my orbkit. Can you put the Evanesce in yours for me? I don't want to lose them."

"Sure," I replied, swooshing them inside the charm. "You still need to buy something else while we are here?"

"Nah—just *really* don't want to go back to training with Ekron. He was *not* in a good mood... since..."

Whirs of the alley morphed into white noise in my head, smearing away Cal's words. Something putrid and foreign wafted around me, like wet wood and swamp water. My foot shifted—my weight wobbled. *What the—*

Then, fog and blurred shadows blanketed my mind, oxygen leaving my body. My head felt as heavy as a dumbbell when I turned to Cal. I couldn't tell if he was swaying or if it was me, but focusing... thinking... Nothing was happening.

As brief and silent as a wink, darkness enveloped my entire body. I couldn't tell if my eyes were shut, if I had fallen, if Cal was next to me anymore, or even if I was still in the town of Hyldavan. Haziness covered all senses and alertness, making my body a limp and helpless plush doll. The only sounds my ears seemed to remember were thunder before I was alone in a bed of darkness.

...

Am I... lying down...?

My sense of touch woke up before my mind.

Something of leather restrained my hands and bound me to the cold table I was on. Hair fell off my shoulders and got tangled in my orbkit necklace, proving I was lying on my back and still wearing the same clothing. My eyes were shut, too weary to move, a drowsiness like I had never known before, making me realize the pit of darkness was just the shade of my closed eyelids... the question was why.

Then, my ears regained their sense of hearing. Murmurings of people were around me—not many, though. Their voices soon began to make sense as I heard them say a familiar word.

“... check... Prince will be second... finish her first...”

“... lock it... why not... We’ll be back...”

“... Okay...”

My mind was now fully awake.

And I was petrified.

Chills scattered down my legs like hordes of ants, my heart about to implode from how fast it was racing. I knew if I opened my eyes, something terrible would happen—I didn’t have to see to know I had just been kidnapped and bound to some table. My body was also exhausted, as if I hadn’t rested or eaten in a week. If I flinched or caused a commotion, whoever or whatever was in the room would notice. Remaining silent was my best option—mute with my eyes shut. But closing out fear—that was impossible.

What’s going on?

Clicking noises, like sounds of glintz rubbing together, emerged ahead of me, near my feet.

I slowly squinted my eyes, hoping whoever was near me faced a different direction... and that’s when my fear turned into a maxed-out trepidation.

I was in a dark stone room with no windows, only lit by a couple of light glintz hanging from the ceiling. The interior was like an old concrete basement—a dungeon at the belly of a castle—with no paintings, plants, or chairs. Unfamiliar lab equipment surrounded the table I was on, potion sets on every old shelf, and a huge wooden desk at the far end, but the corners were too dark to see—all except for the magic screen and standing instrument to my left.

A four-foot-tall podium with a glowing rock perched at the top was next to me, magenta swimming around the stone like glittery ink. The magic moved slowly and reminded me of the Edurplume that floated around the Gravitia glint in Gaius' home. This magic, however, rang familiar to me with its warming purple colors—like the Agapéd Wishing Star I saw in my backyard last year.

There were a couple of glowing wires—clear as plastic—with the same purple glitter running through them, both connected to the podium. The tubes went into the magic screen. I wouldn't say it was a computer or monitor; it was more celestial, like the same projection Tuff's memory power would produce.

Tuff—*where is he? W-why can't I hear him? Where am I?*

My squinted eyes veered farther down, and facing the magic screen was a figure—a person dressed in a robe with a hood. The cloak was black and purple, having lots of straps and pockets—a glinted dagger attached to the belt. To say it was a man was just a guess since I couldn't see his profile. Black shadows, swirling around like smoke, created a mask over the person's face, concealing any form of identification. A power—a mist of shadows.

Every ounce of breath in my lungs halted, clogging up in my throat. *The Shadow Stealers. No—no this... this can't be happening! They aren't on the continent—that's what the Hunters said!*

At that moment, the shadow-masked figure gasped at the screen. I didn't know why, mostly because I was still trying to hide the fact I was awake with my squinting eyes.

"This... I have to tell him," the figure said in a muffled voice, shutting off the screen.

Him? Who is this him?

He then shuffled out of the room, leaving me alone.

My eyes shot open, owl-eyed and in haste.

I don't have much time—I have to find Cal and evanesce away from here!

I attempted to sit up, failing. My wrists were bound tightly by thick leather straps. Only my shoulder blades could rise off the surface. The same went for my ankles. The Shadow Stealers made sure I couldn't escape, even removing my boots. *Escape*—that was the only thought blaring through my mind.

To my left were bottles of liquid, one as clear as water.

I'll just move my fingers and whip some frozen ice shards over he—

I tried to move the water... but nothing happened.

Not a smidge or speck of liquid flew.

Not even a ripple or gloss of ice appeared.

I could feel a burning in my throat. *Maybe it's not water after all—that would explain it...* I then looked at the floor; it was made of stone. Moving my fingers again, I tried to lift the rock, but the results were the same.

Nothing.

Fear became a fire that blazed in my chest—drying my mouth, turning me hoarse—and my heart throbbed like a boiling train engine.

My magic... where is it?

Panic came fast, bringing buckets of cold sweat that soaked the back of my neck, my hair sticking in matted patches. *Why can't I use my magic? Did—did that hooded guy nullify it? Or worse... did he steal it—is that even possible?*

I could hear footsteps coming down the hall. I had to act fast. *They couldn't have stolen my magic—that's impossible, right? It's bound to my heart! They just couldn't! I have to get out of here and find Cal right now!*

At that moment, I refused to stay silent or believe my magic was gone; the Agapéd was too strong for it to be stolen like loose pocket change. Using what little strength I had left, I powered up my fist as if I were going to throw a killer magic-filled punch—believing that petty Shadow Stealers couldn't take the celestial pulse entwined with my soul. My muscles tensed, and I could feel my fingernails digging into my palm as my fist clenched tighter.

Footsteps kept coming closer.

And no magic or supernatural strength was happening.

Come on, Lisa—just do something!

I clenched harder—teeth grinding and skin chafing against the leather. Knuckles turned white, crackled with pink wrinkles of my skin.

The footsteps kept coming.

Just DO SOMETHING, HEART—

Suddenly, a powerful glow started to emit from my clenched fists. Purple, iridescent flames—something I wasn't expecting and had never seen before—flared and embered around my skin. The hue—my body

produced the same glowing lights back when I fought Ecuras, but it was nothing like this. Not *fire*. Magenta blazes were all around my hand, throbbing through my palm and crawling around my fingers. The leather straps around my hands burned, but I was unharmed. The only red marks appearing were from the leather rubbing against my wrists.

What type of magic is this? I didn't care. It was burning the leather—tarnishing my shackles.

Metal jingled on the door latch.

I pulsed the fuchsia flares more, and in mere *seconds*—

Singe! The leather straps disintegrated into ashes, only leaving the hot metal chains. My hands were free. One quick glance and my wrists were fine; no burns or blisters or marks of blood.

Was that... was that a new power?

When I touched the chains once attached to the leather bands, they were hot iron grills, a sweltering dim orange. *I guess the flames can't hurt me, but whatever absorbs the heat reacts like any typical fire.*

There was no time to celebrate; I still needed to free my ankles, find Cal, and get my magic back—

The doors slammed open, and two shadow-masked figures appeared.

"She's awake!"

My fight-or-flight mode kicked in. I didn't know how to use my new magic, but that didn't stop me. Swinging my free arms forward, I pushed a wall of purple flames toward the shadow-masked figures as hard as possible. It was a forceful avalanche of magenta magic, so strong that when it made contact with the figures, they yelled and fell back. *Thud—thud*—their heads hit the stone wall like a hammer to a nail, harsh and unsettling.

They dropped to the floor, and their robes flamed, *boiling* their shadowy skin. They should've been screaming, but they remained silent. Unconscious with pink and purple fire eating up their robes.

My magic—I never experienced such power—but I didn't have time to fawn over it. I immediately freed my ankles from their leather bindings, turning the straps to ash in a matter of seconds.

Someone must have heard them shout and seen the flames in the room—I don't have much time. I had to find my magic those Shadow Stealers stole.

In a panicked haste, I glimpsed over every spot in the room. Nothing came close to saying “Lisa’s magic stored here!” *Come on, where would it*

My head whipped toward the weird rock connected to the screen. No voice spoke to me, but its glow matched my flames. So, I took a chance at it.

I wobbled off the table—still weak and feeble—snatched up the rock propped on the pedestal, and proceeded to shake and bang the stone against the table. I looked like an idiot amid chaos, especially since *nothing was happening!*

Magic, it’s me! Just absorb back into my body, please—

“What’s going on!” I heard down the hall.

More were coming.

The two guards I heavily burned were on the floor, but one ended up evanescent away... which reminded me of the new contents of my orbkit.

My magic isn’t working right, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use these!

My heart rattled as I swiped my blue stone locket, popped one of Cal’s petals into my mouth, and chewed it up, tasting its grapey almond flavor. I was in the midst of putting the glowing rock into my orbkit when the doors swung open again.

Another Shadow Stealer came into the room, darkness concealing his face, too, only he had a weapon drawn. It was a glove with dark magic glowing around: a black lightning. He aimed his clenched fist at me.

Dark violet bolts shot from his glove, but I ducked just in time. The blast hit the wall like a firework, crashing and exploding glass bottles to the floor, rumbling the room—juddering my heart.

I was scared—fear shaking my bones as I felt the stone floor slam against my kneecaps—but my goal to escape with the Prince kept me straight. I was not going to hide; I was fighting back.

Whatever magic was in that glove took a couple of seconds to power up again, so I took advantage. My bare feet briskly padded toward the tall-hooded figure, and with one whirl of my arm, a fiery blade of purple flames flew. The iridescent blazes were wild—uncontrollable—and bulletted toward him, hot enough to char skin on the spot. My wave of fire tore at the masked figure with force, sending him *flying* against the stone wall to my left.

Judging by his wails and tattered robe, I must have done some harsh damage—more than I expected. *This magic—it's crazy tough.* But, I didn't care how shredded the cloaked man was. Cal—I needed to find him.

There were no directions to go by when I exited the room. Not like I had time to read a map anyway; more Shadow Stealers were probably coming. Being sneaky was out of the picture, too, as pink flames were still in the room—the *only* color in the dungeon-esque hall.

So, I ran to the right, my feet getting scratched on the stone floor while my hand still held the impenetrable rock possibly filled with my magic.

The hallway was a broad, never-ending stretch of black rock, swimming with darkness and small light stones in the ceiling. A hallway with no love. Closed doors patterned the walls, nothing else; no pictures, plants, or even a window in sight. It was like an archaic prison. *Where am I?* Finding Cal would take ages, and I didn't have long. If those guys could take my magic away, I had to stop them before they got Cal's.

Recklessness became my strategy. These Shadow Stealers were evil, and I had fire on my side. Burning a couple of doors down seemed like the right way to go. Using my free hand, I tensed my muscles and swirled a flaming tornado of purple down the hall, watching as it *bolted* out from my palm. Flares slithered like a fiery snake, burning the wall trimmings and causing each door to swing open with heated force. My floor-to-ceiling flames blocked the entrances, preventing the evil Mages and Mystics from leaving unless they wanted to get burned themselves, but it allowed me to see inside.

Door one, no Cal. Door two, the same. Doors three, four, five—
Where is he?

Still running—not catching my breath—I sent another tornado of flames down the hall. Pinks and purples doused the floor, the entire hallway now covered in my fiery magic, the stone flooring acting as coal for my strange power to cling to.

My breathing rasped. I could feel my weariness beginning to take its toll. Dirt and crust from the ground tarnished my feet as I ran across my purple flames with no burn on my skin. I shot my eyes back and forth from each room. More hooded figures kept appearing behind my walls of magic, unable to get through the flames. *Come on, Cal—where are you?*

A figure evanesced out of a room in front of me, only he moved in shadows, not glowing blue glitter. *What kind of teleporting is that?* He tried to hit me with another type of dark magic bomb, but I shot a firecracker of flames at him, blowing up his shadowed face—my flames wild like a rabid lion. His body recoiled into the fire on the ground. Screams followed, but I didn't dare look back.

The same happened a couple more times, but my magic was tougher. Fuchsia streams of fire were the perfect defense, causing the figures to wail the moment they tried to walk across the river of blazes. My attacks toward the ones who teleported in the hall weren't very stable, bursting out of me in rambunctious spirals, and each drew out a lot of strength that my body wasn't used to. Strength my body didn't have due to those shadowy abductors. I knew I was minutes away from collapsing.

Just then, the first double-doored room appeared on the left, the only duo-entrance I had seen. *This has to be it!*

My aching arm slung the door open as my head whipped around the room.

There was Cal—lying motionless on a metal table and about to be bound tight by a single shadowed man.

My mind was angry and scared. My purple flames beyond chaotic, seething with power. I hated every single one of those Shadow Stealers, this one most of all. They captured me, disrupted my magic, and stole the Prince of Boolavogue. Punishment was coming, and I didn't care how—blazes and burns and all.

The cloaked kidnapper didn't let me take another hoarse breath and instantly manifested a dark magic spear into their hand, throwing it at me like a harpoon powered by rays of a starless sky. I ducked down and *slammed* my hands on the ground. Pink fire slithered toward the figure as I heard the shadowed spear vanish with crackles of lightning. In two heartbeats, my blazes climbed up the hooded figure, searing the hem of their robe, boots, and skin of their shins—their legs igniting in an instant. The figure didn't scream, but I heard a manly grunt as he tried to fan out the fire with his magic.

Punching the kidnapper would have felt good—would have been appropriate, seeing as he was about to hurt my best friend—but I set aside my selfish desires and went straight to Cal.

All I have to do is just touch him, and we can go!

I grabbed his arm, stuffing the glowing stone in my shorts pocket to free my hand to evanesce. *To the secret entrance, to the secret entrance, please!*

Right as the blue rivers flowed into my fist, something sharp pierced the middle of my spine—as agonizing as getting slit with a dagger right in the center of my back. Pain made me collapse over Cal, a small pathetic yell squealing out of my dry throat, but I didn’t let it stop my magic. Nothing else mattered. I was getting us home, and I was saving my best friend.

Jabbing the air hard and clutching Cal’s arm tightly, my lips biting back the slit I felt stretching across my spine, I held on until Boolavogue soil was beneath us.

Roaring flames of the dungeon diminished, and mountain grass greeted our backs with a thud when we landed in front of the secret cliff top entrance. Twigs snapped beneath us, mud splattering down our arms and legs. Boolavogue’s skies were raining heavily and drenching our clothing—a summer storm. It could have been hailing down ice or boiling hot, and I wouldn’t have cared because we were safe and out of the hands of the shadowed abductors.

Gravelly, sore breaths sawed out of me. My body shook with aching shivers down to the soles of my bare feet. The magic I used overdid me, given I was already weak before I even produced one purple flare. Evanescing was the last straw, though resting was not an option.

I turned my head over as my chest puffed in and out, my hair now mucky and patterned with wet knots.

Cal still wasn’t moving.

No—no, no, no, no—

I quickly rolled my body over to him, watching the rain hit his tan cheeks and make his fluffy hair straight.

“Cal! Cal, wake up!” I started gasping, my voice weak, lightly hitting his face to see if a little force would cause his body to awaken. “Cal, you gotta wake up—come on!”

Some raindrops started seeping into his closed eyes, and I saw him squint hard at the displeasure. My face lit up with smiles; never thought seeing Cal in discomfort would make my heart joyous, but he was alive.

Silent relief transformed into tears in my eyes as I was finally able to save a friend from sheer death.

The padding of wet grass and sloshing mud came running up the hill.

“I found them!” a man’s voice shouted.

Turning my weary eyes toward the trail, four men dressed in pale blues and white appeared, water sluicing off of them. One was silver-haired Captain Arond.

All my strength was used to save Cal, and seeing a rescue come in the form of Boolavogue guards gave my heart peace.

The soaking-wet saviors rushed over just as my head collapsed against Cal’s forearm. As the rain continued to soak our clothing, my mind finally rested. The Boolavogue guards picked us up like limp dolls and carried us back to the castle.

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17 The Dark Sages

The King, Captain Ekron, and Arond stood against the wall in the Caregiver's Wing while the nurses tended to Cal and me. Relief and worry was rare on the stoic men, but it was evident today, their stares unblinking.

Lila, the royal family's head nurse, and her two assistants were by our bedside as Cal and I recovered, giving us remedies for our low temperatures. Whatever was used to knock us unconscious sucked the breath right out of our lungs.

Cal woke up soon after me without a scratch on him. I was glad. However, I had a deep lash under my forearm—up underneath my vezper scar. Fortunately, Lila's healing magic quickly healed the incision and a few bruises on my heels from running barefoot.

Even though we weren't gone for long, the castle searched frantically for us, which was odd. We vanished out of thin air, silent and unnoticed, as subtle as loose dandelion wisps in the breeze. For all they knew, we were off on one of our usual adventures.

"How did you know we were missing?" Cal asked, sitting fully awake on the cot next to his mother. His voice was placid, drowsy.

The Queen was the opposite. She had not left his side since Arond and the guards brought us to the room. Dark brown hair frayed in her braided updo, her usual golden sapphire-embedded circlet nowhere to be found—it was as if she ran all across the castle as well. She held her son's hand tight. I could tell she had been crying with the amount of red still blotching her face.

"Gaius came and informed us," Queen Leonora began in a low tone, staring into her son's eyes, "saying that you vanished in some dark portal. I'm just glad you are alright, Caelum, and you, too, Lisa."

I immediately straightened up. "But how did he know—"

An orange ball of light came hurtling toward me from the opened nurse's door, hooting a worrying song. My arms spread wide as I caught Tuff, feeling his warm round body and little sprite tears rub against my freckled cheeks.

Hefty, squeaky steps followed, and my brawny instructor swooped into the caregivers' room next. Rain drenched his entire body, his muscles

showing through the soaked shirt underneath his trench coat, waves in his hair dripping rainwater. Relief flushed his green eyes.

“Tuff came to me, showing me his memory of you being shadowed away,” Gaius said and came right toward me. He sat on the stool near my cot, scanning my body repeatedly, water trickling down his jaw and through his facial hair.

Before he could say anything, I hurriedly asked, “What’s ‘shadowed away’? Is it, like, evanescing?”

The King, adorned in royal blues and his bladeless sword latched to his lavish belt, decided to answer for Gaius, standing near the wall with Captain Arond and Ekron. “Dark magic... concealing yourself in shadows to escape... It’s a high power to learn... and illegal.”

Gaius focused on me again, those eyes of his unable to relax properly, checking every inch of me for wounds or scratches. I didn’t like seeing him worried. Hated it, actually.

Though it wasn’t my fault for being captured, guilt began to pick up speed, coursing through my veins and toward my heart like a raging river. Like with Oogleyear last year, I dragged the Prince into a mess of dark magic. *Why is it that when Cal is with me, bad things seem to follow...*

“Tell me what happened,” Gaius said to me. The whole room began to stare in my direction, Cal included. All in attentive silence.

Tuff floated into my palms as I sat crisscrossed on the mud-stained blanket. “We were just walking in Hyldavan, getting the seeds as you asked. One second, we were coming out of a shop, and the next...” I crinkled my forehead, staring at the cot’s knitted blanket. “I woke up on this table... Cal wasn’t there with me... just these guys in cloaks—”

“Did you happen to see their faces?” Gaius asked quickly.

I shook my head. “No, sir... they had this weird type of... uh, shadowy mask covering their whole face... I can have Tuff show you...” I looked back to the Keeper, seeking permission. “Is that okay?”

King Bolthor then walked toward my bed, hovering at the edge, the silver and gold chains jingling on his belt. He was intimidating with his thick beard and fierce hazel eyes, as broad as a mountain, but that same troubled look I saw in Gaius was blanketing his entire face. The King’s worry for his son was not nearly as plain as Leonora’s or Gaius’s, but it was still there. “Show me.”

All the new faces in the room terrified Tuff, but being back with me gave him courage. By touching his little hands and making them glow, Tuff imported all my memories into his gem. He then projected his orange memory magic into the air, replaying the abduction.

The moment the stone on the podium and my purple flames burned the leather restraints, Ekron breathed, “How is that possible? Lisa’s magic pulse should have been absorbed in that stone—she should be—”

“—powerless.” Gaius finished.

I turned my head quickly. “What—what do you mean?”

“Magiblood-trading—the act of taking one’s magic pulse and putting it into a magiblood absorption stone,” the Keeper answered, his eyes still watching the screen. “That is what was in that stone... or what should have been—leaving you without any magic. You gaining a new power means it didn’t work.”

My face drooped down to the blanket of the cot, fearing everyone in the room would see my soon-to-be watery eyes. *My magic... I should have lost it... That’s a thing? That can actually happen?* I began to think of my water, terrain, Animalian, and flight powers, remembering they still weren’t working. My cheeks turned hot, and my nose faded pink as a new fear festered. *Please tell me my magic isn’t gone...*

As the situation continued, many nurses looked uncomfortable watching the flashbacks. I was barbecuing cloaked figures while trying to escape, not something anyone should experience. Since Tuff wasn’t there, everything was from my perspective—a first-person view of the terror. Gaius’ jaw tightened each time those cloaked men threw attacks at me, and I swear I saw the plant in the corner sprouting thorns.

The last thing Tuff showed was us landing on the mountain, and the caregivers’ room grew still. Only the patter of rain on the two windows could be heard.

Queen Leonora spoke up first, tears in her eyes as she hugged her teenage son, “Oh, my prince—I am so glad you are okay.”

Captain Arond turned toward his king. “They look to be the Dark Sages, Your Highness, seeing as magiblood-trading is their main focus. Them being in Hyldavan is unusual—being so close to the coast.”

Dark Sages...?

“Did they happen to know...” Ekron looked at me, the rest of the room’s stares followed. Words halted in his throat.

“No,” Gaius said. “Lisa’s identity is kept secret.” My mentor refrained from saying the Agapéd, since both nurses were not a part of the magical loop. Those green eyes flicked toward my face, wanting confirmation.

I nodded quickly. “No one knows. I promise... but Caelum and I were talking about our magic after we left one of the shops. Maybe they heard...” My eyes were on the cot’s fabric again. “I’m sorry.”

King Bolthor furrowed his bushy brows, causing his face to turn angry. In his solemn, commanding voice, he said to his silver-haired Captain of the Guard, “I want you to gather the scouting troops and alert the neighboring Thanes... I want these criminals hunted down and eradicated from our kingdom.”

Captain Arond bowed. “Yes, Your Highness.” He and Captain Ekron then left to fulfill their king’s orders.

“Bolthor, is it really Dark Sages—out near our nation?” Queen Leonora asked, shaken.

“What are Dark Sages?” Cal murmured. “Is it those Shadow Stealers the Hunters have been talking about?”

King Bolthor, arms still crossed, looked at his son and nodded. “They are an evil cult who use Darkness to devour magic into absorption stones through blood extraction... selling one’s life to corrupt buyers or to use for themselves... Not like glintz. Not simply the essence of magic, but your blood and pulse.” The sapphire chains that dangled off his wrist guards jingled as he walked closer to Leonora and Cal. “They aren’t known to cross over into our nation, let alone the continent. What they do... is inhumane... being captured by them should mean death...”

His Majesty turned to me. My breathing stopped. “And you somehow managed to survive and bring back my son. Lisa... I am once again indebted to you... and I can assure you they will pay for what they have done.”

My heart should’ve overflowed with gratitude from the King’s kind remark, but instead, fear kept it bound in chains. I couldn’t shake that my magic was all messed up and possibly gone forever.

“Gaius...” I said, cracking my voice and forgetting the nurses and three-fourths of the Sonon family were in the room, “I can’t... I couldn’t get my magic to work... I tried moving the stone floor in that room, b-but

nothing happened. I don't know what the flames were... but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fly o-or do anything..."

Grabbing my shoulder with his calloused hands, he broke me out of my pit of panic with a question. "Do you still have that stone?"

I reached for my pocket. "Mhm... I didn't know what it was, but it looked like my magic. Is that what's in there?"

Gaius examined it for a couple seconds. "This is full... but you produced flames and were still able to evanesce with the petals... It doesn't make sense to me." He then let a soft grin peak through his beard, giving my heart a glimpse of relief. "Your magic is not lost, just stuck inside here. You were smart to grab it, given your naïvety and dire situation. You'll be alright, Lisa."

The Keeper stood up and turned toward King Bolthor. I did the same, my strength returning to normalcy. "I need to take Lisa. Thank you for your help, Bolthor."

As King Sonon nodded, Queen Leonora briskly walked over to Gaius and grabbed the Wishing Star gardener's hands. Her eyes were just as glossy as mine. "Gaius... I can't thank you enough—you and Lisa both—for bringing Caelum back home to us safely. You've been nothing but a blessing for our kingdom. I can promise you that these fiends will be found out and grated by the hand of my blade."

After the Queen's teary gratitude, Gaius evanesced us away to Haim Gana.

...

Going down the halls of the Elysium, we soon found Lady Ariela alone inside the Onsen (the room with a giant hot spring against the wall) and told her everything, though the Keeper did most of the talking.

"This is the stone," Gaius uttered in his deep voice as he placed the absorption stone in Ariela's glistening palm.

She held it with two fingers as one would when admiring a perfect seashell found on the beach, gazing at the faint magenta glow.

"Lisa..." Lady Ariela said to me while still analyzing the rock. "You said a new power came to you in the form of purple flames, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am," I quietly responded.

She turned her golden face toward me, her head-to-toe wings fluttering like a beta fish in slow motion. "This stone does contain your magic pulse. The secretion was successful, as all the magic you've learned

so far is contained inside. But what failed to be extracted was the Agapéd itself; it is still inside your heart, something the Dark Sages were unaware of. Given all that has happened, I believe the Agapéd devised a defense mechanism. Your body was threatened—the Agapéd in your heart—and it reacted by giving up all your magic to save itself from being absorbed and, in turn, gifted you phantasmal power for protection.”

Ariela then grabbed my nervous hand and smiled. “The Agapéd is growing stronger in your heart, Lisa. It wants you to keep fighting, for it is not finished with its purpose just yet...” Her soft grin faded. “However, that doesn’t mean you’re out of danger. What happened to you is the first I’ve encountered in all my thousand years of living when it comes to magiblood stones... which doesn’t mean it will happen again.”

“You mean... I could still lose my magic?” I whimpered in fear. “But how did they even steal it?”

The golden, copper-skinned Elysian grasped my left arm and gently turned it to reveal the vezper mark. “There was an incision here, wasn’t there—before someone at the castle tended to your wounds?”

I nodded my head, to which Ariela continued. “The difference between ordinary absorption stones and magiblood is the extraction. Pulsing magic into an absorption stone only absorbs the power, like how an object absorbs the heat of a flame but not the flame itself. If a magiblood stone cuts your skin—as one did below your scar—the stone will then absorb the blood connected to the magic. With enough blood and time, it will extract whatever magic is inside the victim—including their magic pulse—until there is none left in their soul... never allowing them to perform or learn magic again...”

She flicked her eyes toward Gaius. “The only time this didn’t happen was with Ecuras, am I correct? The night you two fought him and vanquished Saraqiel, he used a stone like this?”

Gaius nodded his head. “He was able to wield the Fallen even after vast amounts of it were in the stone. Able to destroy it with ease.”

Ecuras—he had a stone like this?

The Elysian pondered the information before rubbing my arm delicately with her thumb. “Magiblood stones are permanent with their extraction... but I am forever grateful the Agapéd prevented you from losing your Starnate pulse altogether, Lisa.”

Standing next to me and facing Lady Ariela, Gaius asked, “Can you extract Lisa’s magic from the stone?”

“Using and breaking a stone is very different from the other and will produce two different effects. Anyone with a magic pulse can use the power in a stone, hence why it will not work for you right now, Lisa. They *cannot*, however, take the pulse for their own with just a squeeze of their thumb, forcing their magic pulse to bond with the one in the stone. It must be released, which is why—as Gaius said—we need to break it.”

We followed her toward the edge of the hot spring, her golden dress and wings rippling like sunlight along the glossy floor, and she began to manipulate the hot water with her magic. A string of blue flowed out and into her palm, morphing into a floating orb of warm waves.

“To break an absorption stone is a tricky task, being that its surface is as hard as a diamond, and there are only two ways to do so. The first—how the Dark Sages can go about stealing magic pulses—is through Darkness. This stone, like most, is made from dark magic, so if one were to harness the power of darkness—as Ecuras did last year—one could easily break down the barrier. The other and more difficult choice to break the stone is by using its counterpart: opposite magic. So, to break something of darkness, it must be cleansed with light. Lisa, you remember this spring, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am... the Guardians use it to cleanse themselves from dark magic,” I answered, watching the swirling water in her palm and the stone in the other.

“Precisely, and it will also break this stone.” Lady Ariela placed the stone in my palm. She swirled the water until it started glowing as white as a star, forming it into a sharp spear of liquid. With force, she jammed the rock with the water, avoiding any lashes to my hand.

Instantly, the rock sparked, cracking in two. Magenta magic began flowing out of it like ribbons of light, making its way into my chest and back home to my heart.

Whoa—that feels so weird... like I’m whole again.

“See if it worked,” she asked me.

I shifted my eyes toward the bath and moved my hand above it. Turning my wrist, I saw a ball of water come out of the hot spring. My eyes almost produced tears as marbles of liquid zoomed through the air in a circle before I returned them back to the spring. The happiness I felt was

honey to my tongue, the sweetest relief and joy I never wanted to lose again.

My arms wrapped around the Elysian's waist, feeling the warmth of her chest and the song of her beating heart. "Thank you, Ariela... Thank you so much."

Not sure if she had ever been hugged before since her arms took a second before wrapping around my shoulders and cradling my head. Once she accepted my gift, I felt her cheeks perk up with a smile as her face rested on my head. "You are welcome, dear Lisa."

Before Ariela left the Onsen, she said to me, "The flames the Agapéd produced... it may or may not return to you again. The Agapéd is still unpredictable, and what happened to you, Lisa, is a phenomenon. When one loses their magic pulse to a magiblood stone, they normally are without magic for the rest of their life." She gave me one last smile. "I'm just glad you were fortunate enough to still wield yours. Stay safe for me, okay?"

Hearing what she said, I truly hoped that wasn't the case. I felt pretty powerful beating up those Dark Sages with my purple flames and really didn't want it to be a one-time thing.

"I promise," I concluded with a dip of my chin, and both I and the Keeper of Stars began to make our way toward the exit of the Elysium. *Walking*, something he never did here. Normally, Gaius would evanesce freely in Haim Gana even if the Guardians were trying to hunt him down and demand he listen to whatever it was they blabbered about.

He had something on his mind. The silence during our walk proved it.

I didn't mind. My heart was still shaken up by the whole situation. Never imagined I'd be kidnapped... and even worse, I never thought my magic could be stolen. Replaying the scenario in my head—I couldn't believe I made it out. *Will they come for me again? Would I make it out a second time?* Losing my magic was already scary enough, but I never considered that my life was also at stake. It was a new phobia penetrating my heart... one that I knew would never go away no matter how much I wanted it to.

While walking next to his side under the lavish colonnade near the main entrance of the Elysium, purple petals trailing through the sunny

breeze, I fidgeted with my fingers and quietly asked, “Gaius... those Dark Sages... do you think they will find me again?”

We approached the top of the stairway entrance, looking out toward the flourishing fields of Ariela’s realm, the three Guardians’ homes nestled in the floral land.

In a temperate tone, he assured me, “Seeing as you escaped and brought a king into the situation... I doubt they will try anything else. Even if they did, I won’t let them near you, Lisa.”

Gaius’s words slowly settled down my heart. “Thanks.... I guess I just needed reassurance that I was fine.”

This was typically when Gaius would say, “You ready to go home?” but he didn’t. He stood still in deep thought, losing the grin he once had—arms not in their habitual crossed position.

His muscular frame kneeled, and he gazed at me, visibly bothered. Concerned fogged his green eyes as he softly said, “Lisa... I am sorry about today. I shouldn’t have sent you and Caelum to Hyldavan.”

The apology shocked me. Never once had I heard Gaius blame himself for something like this—something that wasn’t even in his control. He told me a year ago that Darkness would always find a way to hurt those who followed The Light, so he had no reason to feel guilty for what happened to me.

“It’s not your fault... it was no one’s fault,” I said, grinning to soothe his worry. “Like you said... Darkness will always come for me. I can’t help that. But because you taught me to fight and think cleverly, I was able to escape... and you said you would be there for me if they ever tried anything again... So, *I* should be the one thanking *you*, actually.”

A breathy laugh whispered out of the Keeper’s mouth as he nudged my shoulder. “Where did you learn to become so wise?”

“Been living with you for a year—just comes naturally now.”

Gaius resumed his happier self, which was only a simple grin and towering stance, and extended his palm toward me. “I want you to rest at home for a couple of days. Would be good for you... after all that’s happened. Your body needs rest, and I know you’ll get more of that on Earth with your mother.”

I sighed and watched as he clutched his fist of evanesce magic. “I promise to rest,” I said moments before the evening sun appeared, and I was back in the forest of New Jersey.

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18 Nightmaring

“I’ve been searching for you—now, the Prince is next—”

Slam! Crack!

My eyes jerked open. Waterfalls of cold sweat seeped into every seam of my oversized T-shirt and mattress. The ceiling was not the stone room of the Dark Sages. The walls were patterned with photos and posters, not vials of glowing liquid and magical equipment. No men robed in shadows were anywhere to be seen, though the clothes hamper sticking out of my closet played tricks on my mind. Most importantly, my body wasn’t in the hands of a stranger, slammed against the wall with a *crack* in my spine. In that dream, I died—

I gave my face a hardy rub with my palms and fingers, stretching my freckled skin to make sure I was in control of my own body. A deep breath raked out of me.

Another nightmare. I wish I could’ve said it was a relief—being *alive*—but having my dreams infected with Darkness was not something I enjoyed. Waking with my heart rattling against my ribs and jutting fear into my veins—I hated it. Hated it so much.

The marring dreams of the past had stopped for a while, the ones with Ecuras and the night Valhalla died. Tuff had done his job well, sleeping with me and giving me peace in the form of magical memories. Fighting creatures every week with Gaius and Ekron helped my fears subside, getting my body used to the thrill of danger. After a while, my subconscious faded away from terrors. Even my doppelganger slept soundly when Tuff was away with me at Gaius’ home.

But this was my fourth night back on Earth since Gaius sent me away to rest. The *fourth*. The nightmares shouldn’t have been waking me, drenching my back and dampening my knotted hair. I even slept with my earbuds hooked up to my MP3 player, having it shuffle through Mom’s 80s love ballads.

My fingers touched my ears. The tiny earbuds were still inserted but completely silent. I dug my hand underneath my pillow and pulled out my black MP3 player. I clicked it. Nothing—out of battery. Not surprising. The thing was old, and I desperately needed a new one—an *iPod*, specifically—

but I didn't have enough allowance saved up. And asking Mom for a new one was difficult; she had too many bills to pay.

A hushed laugh left my mouth as I stared at my dead music player in the middle of the night. *I have 1,000 credits and can buy all the swords and daggers I could want, but I don't even have \$30 of Earthian money in my department store wallet...*

I sat up and looked to my left. Away from me was my glainie, rolled off to the edge of the bed, probably avoiding my sweaty self. He wasn't glowing, staying partially invisible in case Mom came in. Only his faint orange diamond could be seen peeking out of the covers. I pulled back the blanket just enough to see his face. The two black dots he had for eyes were thinned, shut tight. A deep sleep.

I released a hot breath... but the memories of the Dark Sages kept flashing with every blink. Darkness plagued *me*—the Agapéd Bearer, its *eradicator*. I defeated one of the Fallen, and yet, a simple failed kidnapping had me up in the middle of the night, looking to my glainie for comfort. Pathetic—me having nightmares. King Sonon wanted to make me a Hero, meaning I'd have to go through turmoil like this on a weekly basis. If he could see how mentally weak I was, I doubt he would have ever considered that title for me. Doubt anyone will ever again.

Another blink. The shadows of dark magic still lingered. My hand clasped my forearm, the arm that was scratched with the magiblood stone.

I know it's a dream but—but what if—

It was crazy, but I *had* to make sure. My dreams had meant something in the past, so I had to make sure my magic was still working.

A half-full plastic water bottle was perched on the edge of my vanity. I already had a habit of not finishing my food (unless it was dessert), including sugarless drinks. At that moment, I was thankful for my poor housekeeping attributes.

Sitting crisscrossed on my bed, I flung two fingers toward the water.

Winter filled every particle inside that bottle until all the water was as hard as an iceberg.

"Thank goodness..." I breathed, my heart slowly resuming a normal rhythm.

"Whooooot...." a sleepy whistle hummed.

I turned my head, finding Tuff curious why I was awake.

"Sorry. Just had a nightmare," I whispered to him.

He flew his sleepy self over to my face, whistling to me about how sorry he was for not making the bad dreams disappear.

My palms became his landing platform. “It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t even be having nightmares in the first place...”

“*Whoot whoot?*”

“Because I’m the Agapéd Bearer and training like a Hunter. You don’t see people like Gaius having nightmares, do you? And I doubt Ekron or Cal have them to the point they wake up all sweaty...” I lowered my hands onto my lap, Tuff still nestled in my palms. “What’s gonna happen if I do become a Hero one day, when I see *worse* things like people *literally* dying in front of me or being torn apart.”

Tuff flew in front of my nose, waving his stubby arms like a drama teacher. A chorus of whistles and hoots began. It was a good thing Mom was asleep because I was having an unprompted glainie concert in the middle of my bed.

When he spoke about me saving Cal and how heroic that was, not backing down and defeating all those Dark Sages with my fire, I couldn’t help but grin. He then told me how powerful I was, showing off muscles that neither he nor I had; I giggled. His encore ended with the sweetest whistle: *Everybody gets scared, even Gaius.*

I tilted my head to the side, gazing at my bright and hopeful memory sprite. “How is it you can be confident like this, but when Celine comes to hug you, you treat her like a vorrg and fly away—”

A warm glow seeped through my door—the hallway light turned *on*.

Tuff made himself scarce as footsteps approached my bedroom entrance.

Mom definitely heard me talking, but why on Earth is she awake?

Well, Mom didn’t knock, but she did stand outside my door, probably curious as to why I was talking. She knew I didn’t sleep talk, and I really didn’t want her to think I developed that habit. Kind of embarrassing, even if she was my mother.

I released another breath. “I’m awake,” I said, all tiredness gone from my tone.

And Mom came right on in. She wore blue pajama shorts and an oversized navy T-shirt, the very touristy one with “I love New York” on the chest where “love” was a faded heart. Her caramel hair was in a low

ponytail, not as knotted as mine, trailing down her shoulders. I was jealous of how pretty she still looked, even after rolling around in her bed.

I spoke first to avoid any odd questions that involved woodland whistling. “Why are you awake?” I asked, a smile tugging my lips.

She swallowed a yawn before coming near my bed and plopping herself down on the edge. “Had a bad dream, and I couldn’t go back to sleep. Then, I heard you talking...” Her blue eyes stared at me, laughter flocking behind those lashes.

I rolled my eyes. “I had a bad dream, too. It helps to talk out loud.” *And listen to my glainie sing about my heroic acts.*

“Did you listen to my music—told you it helps?”

I reached near my pillow for the MP3 player. I waved it around like a playing card. “I did. It just keeps dying. I’ll save up for an iPod soon so this doesn’t happen again.”

Mom stared at my mini music player as I gently tossed it between us. I continued, being nosy and curious. “I’m surprised you’re awake, though.”

“Well, when I dream about you being hurt, it wakes me up.”

A bad dream about me, too—how ironic...

Mom knew nothing about what transpired four days ago, yet her words pricked my heart. Guilt swam all through my bloodstream. I didn’t do anything wrong—it was her dream world, after all. But the fact that something *did* happen, the fact I was hurt and almost lost forever, and she would never know, tightened my breath and strained my throat.

Right now, she was sitting there, freaking out over something that wasn’t real, when in actuality I was almost taken away... and she wouldn’t have known. It was one thing to disappear on Earth... but across the galaxy? She’d be clueless—her daughter dying trillions of miles away by figures in shadowy masks, probably being told by a Guardian in gold or by Gaius.

Mom was telling me about her dream, but I didn’t hear a single word over the roaring blame throbbing in my chest and ears. Seeing her happy I was alright... That it was just a bad dream caused me to clench my fists, pulling a bit of my blanket in. *I’m not letting myself get captured again—not letting myself die and leaving Mom alone.*

“What was yours?” she asked.

I stared at her for a second before putting the pieces together of what she meant. “Oh, just had a dream I was, uh, taken away by some bad guys”—I blinked rapidly—“from my video game.”

She rubbed my kneecap. “Those are the worst to have—but I’m glad it’s not real.”

Darts of more shame flung into my chest, making it hard not to frown.

Mom stood up, stretching her back and redoing her low ponytail. “Well, you’ve got school, and I’ve got work in...” Mom squinted at my digital alarm clock. 4:11 a.m. blared in bright green. She sighed heavily. “Only 3 hours... I’ll see you in the morning, sweetie. Sleep well.”

I watched Mom shut the door, waiting for her bare feet to pad their way to her room. When the latch of her door knob stuck in place, Tuff emerged from my clothes hamper, glowing orange and looking as ditsy as ever.

The moment he flew over to me, a sharp pinching sensation nicked at my spine. I clenched my jaw, almost biting my tongue from the abrupt pain, and rolled my shoulders as if that would help loosen the ache. It wasn’t an inflamed muscle. I knew exactly what that felt like. This was different, like a cheese grater skirting over the skin of my spine. In a matter of seconds, the pain was gone.

What the...

“Hoot?”

“I don’t know,” I said to my worried glainie. “Just got this pain all of a sudden.”

“Whoohoooot?”

“No, it’s not from sleeping on my MP3 player,” I said, my eyes squinting at his orange body floating in the air. I tried to reach for the spot, to scratch it off or see if there was pain. When my fingers traced my back, there was nothing. No scratch or tender bruise.

I remembered getting hit in the spine by that Dark Sage, but the nurses healed all my wounds—anything bloody or purple. There also weren’t any lashes torn through my jacket when I last checked.

A memory resurfaced. I clicked my tongue and raised my eyebrows. “Ah, it’s probably from when I landed on the ground after evanescing with Cal when we escaped.” I looked at Tuff; he still was glittering with concern. “No need to worry, bud,” I said before clasping him between my hands,

feeling the warmth of his magical body. I made him cuddle up with me under the covers. “Now, no more rolling away. I don’t care how sweaty I get. You stay close to me so I’m not tired at school tomorrow *or* when we see Gaius.”

“*Hoot hoot!*” Tuff saluted, ready to commence his Sandman duty.

I closed my eyes, cuddling him, the pain in my back gone—as if nothing had even happened. “And give me the daydreams about flying this time, please, when I’m impressing Ekron and all those Hunters.”

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19 Sugar and Hysteria

After everything that transpired with the Dark Sages, Gaius forbade me and Cal from going off on our own again, meaning our Charmer job was now supervised by the Keeper himself... as well as every other outing that wasn't in Boolavogue or EverWake. At first, I didn't mind. His bouldering presence gave my heart security, and the fear of being kidnapped again didn't cross my mind every second.

Now, a month later, everything was back to normal, yet the Keeper was still on his toes—as if the Sages were around every corner I walked past.

Overprotection was not something I grew up with—Mom being as lean as a wet noodle. I think she didn't want to end up like Grandma: suffocating in all negative forms of the word. Mom told me Grandma would always be harsh on her and Aunt Genn (Aunt Genevieve was too hard for me to pronounce as a toddler, and the nickname stuck). New music was considered bad, new clothing was raunchy, and new friends dressed in all black were never to be trusted. She never gave a chance at the word “maybe” or the phrase “I'll think about it.” Mom ended up with a distant relationship with Grandma by the time she had me. I know she didn't want that to happen in our home.

Luckily, Gaius was the good kind of protection—the quiet but lethal kind—though he genuinely didn't need to be. For weeks, Boolavogue sent out guards to patrol and alerted nearby provinces about the Dark Sages, but nothing ever came up. I thought that was a good thing, vanishing as normal criminals do.

Since Gaius disagreed—never admitting it outwardly—I got to spend more time with him... and discover how far he would go to do something for me. It was quite an amusing game. Got him to go into town in Calendula for dinner four nights ago—that was a first—and convinced him to take me and Cal to Mantene so I could show the Prince the Aquanaeum's magic walls.

Testing the limits of Gaius the Bodyguard was fun... and today was another perfect chance to see how far he would go for me and the Prince.

When the sun was high, we evanesced near the entrance of Rudlin—another small town in Boolavogue, far out in the outskirts away from the Kingdom. Like always, we were not informed about the details of our job, even though the Keeper was right between us. The only thing Gaius told us was to hold a bag of Piperfreeze seeds.

“What’s so special about Piperfreeze?” I asked, twirling the bag and making it flip in the air.

Gaius immediately clasped the bag, a silent command to *stop doing that*. “Piperfreeze is a pepper that can reduce the pain of ice-inflicted magic when used correctly in a potion. For a Mender, it is a necessity to have. They prefer the seeds over the fruit. Better to have the whole plant than the tangible bulbs.”

Realization set in. “So... you’re gonna make us sell them for you today, am I right?”

“As a future King,” Gaius said, peering down at Cal, “being able to trade and make connections is essential.” He then looked toward me. “I only received a fair price last time you sold for me. You need to work on your negotiation skills.”

“I can’t help it that I get nervous...” I muttered softly, feeling Cal’s subtle laugh like a spotlight on my back.

We reached Main Street, Rudlin, filled with people, smells of wax candles and strong spices, and many indoor Hunter shops. Tall street lights lined the streets, not lit since it was still bright and sunny, and brick homes painted the corners of each block with reds and grays. A few trees and shrubs were placed between the buildings and around the concrete walkways, growing a bit chaotically, unlike the Inner Kingdom’s foliage.

“Have you been to Rudlin, Caelum?” Gaius asked.

“No, sir, but I believe Maven Aurum went here not too long ago. There’s apparently a good treasuring shop here,” Cal answered.

“What’s a treasuring shop?” I added.

Cal leaned over, looking past Gaius’ frame. “Treasuring shops collect a lot of charts and tracings for Treasure Hunters. There aren’t many around Boolavogue; at least, that’s what she told me. Even though she’s mostly a traveling Fysiks instructor, she still likes to collect as many maps as she can. Her office in the castle is full of them.”

“How are your lessons going?” Gaius asked him.

“Good, sir. Maven Aurum says my magic is growing stronger. I can create swords out of my Fysiks power now.” Cal returned his gaze toward me. “Did you ever get your purple fire to work again?”

I scrunched my lips, staring ahead at the pathway lit up by the sun.

No matter how hard I tried, my purple flames never resurfaced. Before bed, whether on Earth or in Gaius’ house, I tried to make the purple fire appear every night, but all I got were pink palms from clenching my fists too hard. Not even Gaius could get my flames to work, though he only tried to help me with it *once*. He said, “If it’s not meant to be, stop forcing it.” I *loathed* that answer.

Having fire burst out of my hands and feet and then disappear the next second was like getting a Christmas gift and then having it snatched back while hearing, “*Gotcha!*” Was it greedy? Maybe—but the Agapéd knew my love for magic, so I didn’t understand why it gave me phantasmal flames and then stripped it away before I even had a chance to use them properly.

Gaius assumed my sour face meant he was supposed to answer for me. “We’ve stopped trying—it might just be a defense her magic made when it was threatened—”

“It’s gonna happen!” I interjected before muttering, “Just is taking its precious time.”

Cal let out another laugh as we turned a corner and onto a cobblestone walkway.

Up ahead was a medical shop called “Remedies.” Gaius had us stop outside the entrance. A two-story brick building was squished between an antique shop and a bakery. Cracks sprawled along the right side of the front door, but the shop owners tried their best to cover it up with ivy; I kind of liked the organic look.

With his arms crossed and standing out of view of the store’s window, our mentor instructed, “I want to see how you do on your own. Lisa, ask to see Mender Roo. Caelum, you ask to see Mixtitian Oolung. Mention you’re from the Kingdom and are working as Charmers; don’t mention me.”

I chuckled. “They don’t like you or something?”

“Lisa. Focus—”

“Sorry...” I trailed off, suppressing a smile. *Guess I was right.*

Gaius continued, “After that, use your judgment on what you believe to be a good deal and negotiate with them. These seeds are rare in this part of the planet, and these Mystics *do* need them; don’t let them play you for a fool...” A few bystanders passed us by with nosy glares, not minding their business. To be fair, it was hard to ignore a giant man glaring at two teenagers, and Gaius took note. “And don’t take too long.”

“Yes, sir!” Cal and I said, and we both entered the shop.

The old door didn’t ding upon entry, but we were immediately greeted with a waft of cold, earthy air. Along the brick walls were many capsules of pills, vitamins, tea leaves, and brightly colored syrup bottles. All the healing potions were locked tight behind the welcome desk, which was occupied by an old woman.

We did as Gaius said, asking to see the specified Mystics and mentioning we were from Boolavogue. The old woman happily sent us in the right direction. I went upstairs while Cal continued toward the back. *Please let this Mender Roo be nice and not hate teenage girls.*

I walked up the creaking steps, not a single picture hung along the walls or even a plaque for the “Best Mender in Town.” *Are these Menders legit... Shouldn’t a magical doctor’s office have at least one customer?*

Three rooms were at the top, one labeled “Mender Roo.” *Weird—reminds me of doctor’s offices in America... just without the beige walls and lollipops at the front desk.*

The door to the Mender was shut, a giant lock on the outside—weathered silver and needing to be replaced. I was about to knock when the latch clicked loudly and unlocked, followed by a burly, raspy voice. “Got something for me? Come in.”

I swallowed a big gulp. *Okay, Lisa, just pretend you aren’t terrified and that you’ve haggled before—should be easy.*

I opened the door and puckered up the courage to speak before seeing the Mender’s face. “Hi—I’m Lisa, and I brought you...” I began, but my mind could not focus on speaking any longer.

Bottles were brimful with floating pink clouds, bubbling honey, flickering flies, and various powdered sands—all arranged by size along the Mender’s walls, instantly capturing my interest. Under the shelves of magical potions was a table containing medical instruments. Most of the tools were sparkling clean with a glint attached, seeming to be used for

injecting fluid. I assumed the others—shiny metal tools and bandaging—were for examining one’s temperature or heart rate.

On the far end was a silver sink and an exam table for a patient—padded with a rubbery red cloth. Next to that was a rustic desk lit up with an old lamp and many trinkets piled high, happening to be where the Mender was.

Mender Roo—old as dirt with his gray hair tied half in a thin ponytail—was hunched over, making a paste on his desk with a mortar and pestle. When he turned to see why I stopped my sentence, his wrinkly, beady eyes behind his round spectacles were not thrilled or interested in a long conversation.

He looked me up and down. “Viviann at the front playin’ a joke or somethin’?”

Judging by his demeanor, Mender Roo was not the friendly type, taking his work very seriously and hating teenagers bothering him. *I don’t think haggling will be easy with this old man...*

In my timid voice, I walked further into the room and quickly corrected his assumption. “Oh—no, sir! I’m a Charmer from the Kingdom. I came here to see if you would be interested in some Piperfreeze seeds...”

My curious mind could not help itself, focusing more on the Mender’s glowing vials and jars than on my duty as a Charmer. My words trailed off again.

The Mender turned in his squeaky chair to face me head-on. “You payin’ attention, girl?”

I quickly snapped out of my magic obsession, bowing slightly toward the Mystic. “Oh, sorry, sir—I just have never seen magic ingredients like yours before—sorry.”

Crap—I said sorry twice! He’s not gonna take me seriously now, sounding like a babbling idiot—

“Lisa, right?” the Mender interrupted my thoughts.

I stood upright again. “Yes, sir. Lisa Robbie.” I was surprised he remembered my name through all the rambling.

Mender Roo rose to his feet, his knees cracking like glow sticks. He began to walk over to the yellow jars I was staring at. “You never seen flaxenevits before? Ain’t nothin’ to stare about.”

“Oh... how do they move like that, then?”

Mender Roo scoffed. “*How*—that’s just what they do. You said you’re a Charmer and don’t know that... guess it makes sense, seein’ as you’re younger than most.”

Being perceived as dumb was not a part of the plan for the day, so I hurried to the point. “Sorry, sir. I am not from around here. Still learning about magic ingredients.”

The Mender came right over to me before rolling his eyes; he smelled like musty water and rosemary. “You said you’re from the Kingdom—should see these in every Mixtitian’s shop up there.”

This is not going well... time to switch to honesty mode and not “the Gaius way.”

“Actually, I’m from Earth...” I fiddled with the pocket of seeds in my hands, twirling the string stitched to the opening. “I have just been living in Boolavogue for a year. I’m trying to learn as much as I can, though...”

He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Earth? Hm... odd. Nonetheless, I don’t need any Piperfreeze seeds.”

Before he began to walk back to his chair, I took one last notice of the wall, and right next to the yellow jar was an ingredient I was familiar with. One that Mender Roo happened to be running low on.

Gaius, please don’t be mad at me for what I am about to do...

“Well... what if I got you something you *did* need?” He continued to his chair, not looking at me. I still kept my confidence. “I see you’re out of Enkurious algae, and I know you need that to make your anesthetics. If you buy my seeds, I could get you more of those?”

Please, please, please, please, say yes.

Back in his seat, Mender Roo turned to face me. He took off his glasses and put one hand on his hip, using the other to prop his chin before giving another breathy scoff. “*You?* Young lady, even if you knew where to find that water weed, you can’t hope to stop—”

“I’m a provisional licensed Hunter and Mage in training, too, sir. I can assure you I’m fully capable of getting that ingredient...” My heart pumped out a bucket full of courage for my negotiation skills to emerge. “Plus, I can get it to you for a better price than any merchant around... only if you buy all my seeds for the day.”

I didn’t care if I sounded pushy. I was not about to leave here and tell Gaius I failed, especially since Cal would probably do well. *Never*

would I have heard the end of that.

Mender Roo didn't yell or get angry. He smirked, resuming his slouching position. "From Earth, living in Boolavogue, a trained Hunter, *and* a Mage... I'd think you were blaggin' little lady if it weren't for that steady heartbeat of yours."

My eyes grew wide. *Can he sense my heart rate? Does he have some type of super-hearing or something?*

The old Mystic grinned again before continuing, "How many seeds you got?"

I smiled and began to open the pouch. Took me a second to count them all, but I answered as quickly as I could. "Seventeen, sir."

"Hm..." Mender Roo glanced at his almost empty jar of Enkurious algae. "You get me two more jars that size of the algae, and I'll buy all those seeds for 1,200 credits."

One thousand two—Lisa, do not act surprised at the amount!

Though I didn't know the price of the seeds, I did know the price it would take to get that algae—not to mention how many swamp mites I would have to fight through to get it. "What would you say to 2,000?"

He tapped his chin with his long fingernail before his wrinkled cheeks tugged a grin. "You seem to know your worth, girl." He stood back up with fewer cracking noises, still uneasy to hear. Once he made it two feet in front of me, he held out his bony hand. "We have a deal."

Maybe I smiled a bit too big because Mender Roo made another breathy laugh as I shook his hand.

"Thank you, sir! I promise to get you the Enkurious algae by no later than next week. You have my word."

With another smile, I left the Mender's room and headed back outside, finding Prince Caelum and Gaius waiting.

"Caelum, let's start with you," Gaius began as we walked underneath a tree next to the corner of the street.

The Prince smiled proudly before answering, "Say I did well. Sold all seeds for 1,525 credits—earned some good points with the Kingdom, too."

"Good work." Gaius then turned to me. "Lisa, what about you?"

Cal flicked his brows and threw that smug gaze my way, arms crossed like he won the illegitimate competition of "Who Can Out-Sell the Other." Nothing about this was a game, especially in Gaius' eyes.

But if that's how he wants it...

"Read it and weep, Princy." I held up my MC Chip, displaying my number, smiling with more snark than I ever had before. "2,000 credits."

"*Naff it, Lisa!*" Cal grabbed my credit case. "How'd you get him to pay that much?"

I snatched it back from the Prince's perfect hands. "It's called 'negotiating'—something you need to get better at, it seems."

"Have to say..." Gaius began, "I'm impressed." I turned my face toward the Keeper, starstruck with his adoration for my success. An eyebrow of his rose. "What did you have to offer in return?"

How did he know?

The worn stone ground was where my face found comfort as staring into the Keeper's green eyes was now impossible.

Hesitant, I replied, "I might have said... I would get him some Enkurious algae if he bought all my seeds." Gaius released a huge sigh, to which I hurried my explanation. "But he *really* needed some more, and I don't mind helping him! Was that a bad thing?"

With his calloused hand, Gaius grabbed my shoulder. "You did fine, Lisa. But don't think I'm helping you with the algae—"

"I got it. Don't you worry."

Gaius smiled down at Cal and me before starting to walk off. "Come on—let's head back to the Kingdom. Lisa, you can help me with the Veradome before dinner."

Heading home to Gaius' cooking was great—he was a fantastic chef, after all—but after a long day of Charmer work, I wanted something sweet, and it seemed Rudlin had granted my untold wish.

After a couple of minutes of walking, through a broad alley was a restaurant—one I never knew existed outside of Calendula. The front door was bright with blues and had a giant window to the left where I could view the familiar fruity drinks from a block away.

My feet stopped, and my eyes gawped at the sign above the entrance, which proudly read "Luca's" in glowing letters.

There is more than one Luca's—chain restaurants exist across the galaxy?

Noticing I wasn't by his side, Cal turned around. "Lisa, what are you—"

"They have a Luca's!" I exclaimed, wide-eyed and mouth in awe.

“What’s a ‘Luca’s’?”

I snapped my head toward the Prince and knew instantly I had to take him there. “The best place in the world! They make these drinks that are works of art and covered in sugar and whipped cream. I thought it was only in Calendula—never knew there would be more. You *have* to try their drinks, Cal. It will blow your mind!”

By that point, Gaius had heard the whole conversation and approached me, arms crossed as usual. We now were the only ones standing on the path, people passing us by and still sticking their noses in our business.

I put on my baby-doll eyes and looked up at the Keeper of Stars. “Gaius, can we *please* stop here and eat some—”

“No. We are leaving.” He proceeded to walk away.

Hm—bet he thinks that will stop me.

I knew how good those drinks were—hadn’t had one in over a year—and there was *no way* I was letting the Prince go another day without trying a sip of paradise in the form of liquid sugar. And we *were* in a new town... and the sun *was* beginning to set...

Grabbing Cal’s forearm and walking toward Luca’s, I exclaimed, “Okay—I’ll see you when I get back home, then!”

My foot didn’t even make it down the block before Gaius’ shadowing frame caught up to us. When we reached the door, the Keeper’s muscly hand grabbed the handle as the bell chimed and smells of sugar wafted out.

With his eyes piercing my soul, he uttered in a deep voice, “Make it quick.”

...

“Quick” found a new meaning as Gaius, Cal, and I sat at the juice bar, watching the sugar barista create over twenty delicious concoctions.

From the outside, Rudlin’s Luca’s looked very small, but the layout was long and branched out toward the back—filled with laughter and happy, sugar-filled customers. Booths were against the wall, high-top chairs sat underneath pink and orange lamps, and a circling juice bar stood in the back where we ended up sitting. Televisions, similar to flat screens I would see back on Earth, hung above the juice bar and sporadically along the walls, filling up any empty conversations with magical news.

Though Cal didn't seem to have as big of a sweet tooth as me, he still ordered a masterpiece of sweetness: the Midnight Sky. The barista brought out a tall glass filled with blueberry and grape juice that looked like outer space, the bottom layer nothing but thick, sweet cream. A purple mound of fluffy foam with a glass straw stuck right down the middle balanced on top of the small ice cubes. When Cal gave it a twirl, a lavender nebula of sugar was formed. I even saw a speck of awe swimming in Gaius' eyes from the cosmic art—though I doubt he'd admit as much.

I ventured out and tried their milk tea called Mender's Moxie. The barista served the drink in a jar with a cork on top. It looked like an Erlenmeyer flask I would see in my science class. The bottom of the tea was filled with tapioca pearls and strawberry milk. Resting on top was sweet black tea, and when I shook it up, the bubbles *sparkled*—glimmering in the air like fizzy soda when I popped the cork off! With one sip, that drink soothed every sugar drought in my tummy and became my new favorite beverage.

"That was the best drink I've ever had—how have I not heard of this place before?" Cal exclaimed, about to finish his last couple of sips.

I also ordered some chocolate-covered oranges and gobbled one up. "That's because you didn't have *me* around."

Gaius was hunched over on the juice bar as I sat between him and the Prince. He didn't talk much, but he also never forced me to leave; to me, that meant he enjoyed the simple milk tea he ordered and that the atmosphere was *tolerable*. The Keeper grinned at my remark as I took another juicy chocolate orange from the plate. "Can't see how you can eat that much sugar."

I giggled. "I think it's an average amount. You just don't like sugary things."

Cal laughed hard. "Lisa—you just slagged that drink like it was water *and* asked for a side of more sweets!"

"I can't help it—everything here is *so good!*"

While both Gaius and Cal were in disbelief at my sugar consumption, the barista changed every television station to the same channel. It was a type of sports newscast with three people sitting around a glossy table. The decor was clean, resembling the architecture from EverWake and the lounge area at the Hero's Arena.

Gaius did not own a TV. Even when I stayed with the Balthiers, Valhalla

and I never watched anything on theirs since she was more fascinated with my life than any person I had ever met. Was odd being in a magical land with customers glued to television screens like in America. The only difference here was that every single person was enthralled in whatever was broadcasting—senior adults and kids included.

Cal stretched a gallant smile, and before I could ask what was so special about the program, he nudged my arm and said, “Check it—they just announced planet Kalm as the next host for the Paragon Games!”

I glanced at the screen, seeing “KALM ANNOUNCED AS HOST PLANET” scrolling along the bottom of the broadcast. My mind took a second to dig through its pile of magic memories, finding the one where Sana mentioned the games. “Oh, these games are like a big deal, right?”

“Especially now—Kalm hasn’t hosted in four years.”

Some customers began to pile behind us, trying to watch and listen to the broadcast.

I continued, “What’s different about these games compared to the normal Hero’s Games—the magic battles, I mean?”

“Instead of a single game, it’s divided into multiple games and takes weeks. Given that it happens only once a year, I’m guessing the Game Keeper and those in charge make it longer to earn more money. As far as battles go, they are *tough*! Takes spars to a whole other level, and the winning prize is always something jacks expensive—something magic-involved or lots of money. It changes every year.”

“So, what’s gonna happen since the planet is chosen—the Game Keeper picks the contestants, right?”

Cal was about to answer, but right as his mouth opened, his eyes looked directly at Gaius; mine followed. “Mr. Gaius, you know how he does it. I mean... he’s a real Keeper, right, so you know him pretty well?”

Gaius—to my surprise—seemed to care about the Paragon Games and listened to our childish talk... or he just loved to hate on Zephan.

With his arms crossed on the bar table, Gaius tittered before answering in a deep voice. “Wish that wasn’t the case, but yes, I do. He doesn’t pick the contestants; he likes the game too much for something predictable. The magic he has lets him know who is most powerful on a given planet. For the Paragon Games, he creates a hive—an illusionary pot with all eligible names of each resident of the planet—and lets his magic decide who will be selected. It takes months of magic strength to create, and

he makes a show of it, but..." Gaius looked back up toward the TV, "I might watch it this year."

My mouth turned small as I leaned close to Gaius, my gut a bit uneasy. "So, does that include me, 'cause—you know—the Agapéd is the most powerful?"

He joined in the whispering, his breath smelling like sugar for once in his life and not that robust mouthwash he always used. "No. First, your magic is the most rare *because* it can be the most powerful. You're strong, but not that strong yet." I pouted and earned a huff from the Keeper. "Second, it's for residents of Kalm. You're from Earth. So, even if your Starnate heart were on the same level as these players, you wouldn't be chosen."

"Well..." I crossed my arms, my voice loud again. "It still sounds like fun—don't know why you doubt my strength."

"That's because you've never won a spar against me."

"Or me," Cal blurted—an unnecessary strike to my heart.

Both my hands flailed. "Let me enjoy my dessert in *peace*, please!"

The male announcer on the screen began to say the first fighter. It was some lady named Impa Helsinki. They even showed her picture, the location she represented on Kalm, and her age—happening to be forty-two. She looked old for a contestant, and I wasn't the only one thinking that.

"*Aye—she's got a lot of muscles for bein' that old!*" I heard some man shout from behind, followed by more unflattering chatter.

I leaned closer to Cal. "I take it that's not normal?"

The Prince instantly transformed into my giddy magical gamemaster, explaining the Paragon Games' rules to me. *Didn't know he was so into this sport, or am I clueless as to how popular this game really is?*

"Every person selected can't be a Hero, Lionheart, working for the Hero's Games as a paid player, past participant, or a retired Hero—probably some other conditions in there as well," he said. "With all that in consideration, normally, people her age have already done all those things if they are that powerful. Must have gotten her magic late or something."

The next fighter was announced: a dark-skinned woman with just the name Bless, being thirty-five years old.

"How come they don't mention their magic?" I asked, seeing as I thought that was the whole point of the games.

Cal scoffed. “And give away their *one* advantage—come on, Lisa! If you were gonna battle against me, would you tell me all your moves?”

“I see your point.” I popped another chocolate-dipped orange in my mouth when the next player was announced: a tan, beefy man, age thirty-four. “How many contestants are there?”

“Twelve. You’ll also notice they announce them chronologically by age.” Cal glued his eyes to the television. “That guy looks pretty tough. Wonder what his magic is?”

More people kept piling in but not asking for drinks. All eyes and ears were on the players being revealed.

I took another bite of my juicy chocolate-covered orange slice. “So, most or all of these are Starnate, then?”

“Would have to be, but I’m just guessing.” The next fighter was announced, and his image made Cal smack my shoulder, nearly causing me to choke on the fruit in my mouth. “*No way! That’s Setzyr!*”

My eyes shot to the screen after swallowing the orange, seeing a familiar man who took my memories for a ride. With his thick head of black hair tied back in a ponytail was the tan Nuoljian from the Court of Partisans—his name scrolling across the bottom of the screen reading “Setzyr Tzelem, 32, Nuolja.”

I furrowed my brows and turned my face toward Cal quickly. “But I thought he couldn’t have magic—only that omrivim stuff? The lifeforce magic?”

Cal looked right at me, inches from my face. His breath smelled sweet. “Guess they can still get Wishing Stars like anybody else. You’re proof of that.”

Ayker never mentioned that... Wonder if it’s news to him, too...

“You know him?” I heard Gaius’ deep voice from amongst the many noises hovering around the restaurant.

As the Paragon Games’ hosts continued announcing more contestants, I told Gaius about Nuolja’s weird magic secrets.

The Keeper didn’t seem surprised by the Nuoljians’ genetics and absorption stone selling, but then again, he never let emotions break through his trimmed beard or green eyes very often. He did listen intently to my poor summary of the arctic people, so I was at least expecting an eyebrow raise. Nothing but a simple thinning of his lips, the I’m-paying-attention-to-your-story smile from the Keeper.

“She’s only 23—looks more like a child!” a man barked from behind me, ending my history lesson to the Keeper.

I glanced at the TV, and a mauve-haired girl’s picture with a big smile on the screen appeared. “Fighter 10: Lumaline Gaia, Age: 23, Roomihaven” scrolled across the bottom. *She looks no stronger than me—bet her powerful magic makes up for it...*

Cal, who had been as invested as the rest of the customers, sighed. “Ah—feel sorry for her.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“She’s no fighter—look at her. See, Lisa, these contestants are picked based on magic, but that doesn’t mean they are warriors or Hunters like us. Two years ago, some boy had strong Ice Manipulation but no combat training. Didn’t even make it past the first challenge.”

“Oh... seems kinda unfair.”

Cal chuckled as he leaned over to make eye contact with me. “That just makes the games more fun—” His words stopped as the attention returned to the TV. “*Oo!* They’re getting down to the last two. It’s always the best part, seeing who the youngest will be.”

On the screen, fighter number eleven was announced, and the room went crazy... and my heart flew high to the ceiling.

There was no mistaking those blue eyes and polar-ice hair. A picture of Ayker—the Ayker I met in Nuolja—popped up next to his name: Ayker Rovonami, Age: 18, Nuolja.

I grabbed Cal’s shoulder and shook it hard, yelling, “That’s him! That’s Ayker—the boy who stopped that giant fish from knocking me and the kids over in the freezing lake in Nuolja!”

“I can’t believe there are two from Nuolja!” the Prince said with a similar excitement. “You never told me you met *that* powerful of a Mystic when we were there!”

“Never told me about this giant fish that attacked you either,” Gaius added, eye-daggers lashing toward me.

I flailed my hands. “I never knew his magic was *that* powerful.” My eyes went to Gaius, sagging. “And it’s nothing—I’m fine.” The Keeper grunted.

Murmurs from behind began to rise in speculation.

“That’s only number eleven—”

“Who’s gonna be twelve if he’s that young.”

“Where’s Nuolja—”

“Never heard of that land—is it north?”

“Shove it—they’re announcing the last one!”

The juice bar of Luca’s was now covered in fingerprints and empty glasses, hoarded by strangers—all wanting to know who the last contestant was. Gaius was even staring high up at the television screen, the green in his eyes unshaken by the crowd behind him.

The male announcer with the black hair, dressed in a fancy suit, began, “And here is our final fighter to enter into the Paragon Games—an interesting line-up we’ve had so far, you agree, Winry and Garth?”

Winry—the female announcer—answered, “It’s one I am looking forward to watching—and *two* from the same province? Not to mention how young that one boy was—”

“Never met ‘em, but I like that kid!” Garth interrupted with a hefty voice, tan and muscly. “Don’t know about you, but I can tell that young Mystic must have some *spark* in his bones to make it in the ranks, *and* we still have one more! Come on, let’s see who it is, Rhiner!”

The black-haired announcer, Rhiner, smiled and glanced up toward the magic projection that resided on his left—looking to be where they discovered the player lineup for the first time before displaying it live for us to see.

I ate the final chocolate-covered orange, hyping up on my last bit of sugar, knowing good and well Gaius was about to tell us to book it the moment the final contestant was announced. *Can’t believe he stayed this long—never complaining once about the crowds of people or if his tea was brewed proper—*

“Lisa Robbie of Boolavogue!”

When someone says your name in a crowd, it’s like your ears finally begin working again, noticing every sentence that follows. Before, you can’t hear a single conversation—just jumbled-up noise. Once your name is uttered, even by a stranger, all your senses are heightened, wondering why you became a topic in their discussion. When my name was mentioned on Earth, it usually came from Mom telling me to do the dishes—shouting it from downstairs. Teachers from school would say my name every day, but only when they called roll, never because they needed me for errands or idle talk. In Calendula, Gaius said it quite often, especially when I got off topic during practice, and in Boolavogue, Captain Ekron would say it

before telling me how I did after battling his magical beasts. My ears always perked up when Cal said it, followed by a warming smile.

Right there in Luca's, though, that was the first time I heard my name announced on TV. Though I heard it loud and clear—like everyone else in the restaurant—my mind refused to believe it, so I sat motionless.

Did—did he just say my name—

Glancing up to the screen, there was my photo—one I *never* remembered posing for—with “Fighter 12: Lisa Robbie, Age: 14, Boolavogue” scrolling across the bottom.

The announcer's faces were dumbfounded. The customers behind me were either too stunned to speak or going crazy with bolstering voices. I still couldn't move.

Th-that's not possible—is this really happening right now?

Everything went into slow motion as I stared blankly at my empty drink and plate. Breathing stopped—senses stopped—everything just stopped. The back of my neck grew sweaty, my mind completely zoned out, and all blood from my brain drained down to my feet, causing my face to lose whatever pink complexion it had left.

“*Ouch,*” my voice softly hissed as a puncture of ice stamped my right inner wrist, breaking me free from my anxious trance.

Looking down underneath my palm, orange and pink hues swirled like diluted paint, inking a shape onto my wrist. It resembled a small quartz with an emblem inside—no bigger than a baby carrot—right along my purple and blue veins. Completing the tattoo was a symbol in the middle, looking to be an elegant number twelve. Proof. What just happened was real.

What—what's this? H-how did this happen?

My name, the tattoo, my identity on the screen—it caused the barista and a couple of other customers to stare at me. I hunched even more forward, making my hair curtain my now celebrity appearance. *They are noticing me from the photo—what's gonna happen—w-what do I do?*

I whipped my head to Gaius, ignoring the fact Cal's wide eyes turned in my direction.

When I saw the Keeper's face, he grimaced with bone-chilling eyes, staring at the screen as if it were an enemy. His left hand turned into a fist, knuckles paling white, before using his right to grab my wrist.

“The *git!*” Gaius bellowed, teeth gritted, and pulled me out of the stool fast. “We are leaving now.” We began heading to the back of the restaurant.

Prince Caelum quickly jumped off his seat and followed behind, bumping into many customers. “Mr. Gaius!” he called frantically, but the Keeper kept forward.

We rushed into the back kitchen to get away from the crowd. No workers dared to stop us, seeing a beefy man charge through with a girl latched to his hand. Gaius turned toward Cal and held up his palm. “Sorry, Caelum, but I’m sending you back home. This is none of your concern.”

Blue evanesce dust swirled inside Gaius’ fist before Cal could even ask for an explanation, and the Keeper sent my friend back to Boolavogue in an instant.

Evanescing on the street was not a common courtesy—most go to landing sigils or excluded areas. Evanescing in the back room of Luca’s with five other employees watching with terrified eyes was *rude* and *absurd*.

Gaius didn’t care; he was irritated and outraged.

I looked up at him. Anger veiled his face. “Gaius—what’s going on —”

“We are talking with him right now,” he growled low, filling his hand with more evanescing dust, punching the air, and sending us away to the Game Keeper’s arena.

20 I Choose...

Gaius let loose his tight grip around my wrist as we landed on the teleporting sigil at Zephan's Hero Arena in EverWake. Never had I been around the Keeper of Stars when he was angry, only ever seeing him upset with Vilmad when I eavesdropped on them last year. He always kept his composure with me... but the chaos of the games broke him out of his tempered demeanor. He was ready to charge Zephan.

Not even two steps down the brightly lit hallway, the suited journalists and their entourage were swarming—most likely wanting to know more about the Paragon Games from the host himself.

Gaius didn't care. He trudged his way through their baffled faces—not a single one attempting to mess with the brawny, angry Mystic.

I followed behind, walking fast to keep up with his aggressive gait. *Why is Gaius so upset—is being selected that bad? Is he gonna tell Zephan to remove my name—is that even possible?* I scratched at my new tattoo. *Please tell me I can cover this up with the Eternling band. No way will Mom believe this to be a fake—it's far, far too intricate... and ginormous.*

We reached the open lounge room with the giant window overlooking the stadium. Zephan flaunted in the middle of a reporter pit. His hair was still a luscious blonde, complementing the bright turquoise suit that hugged his slim body. He seemed to love all the attention the Paragon Games gave him, smiling smugly. Unfazed by the bombarding questions from the tailored crowd.

The moment Gaius burst through the atmosphere and met Zephan's eyes, however, the whole mood changed, and my teacher belted, “*You sly, money-hungry vorrg!*”

Everything halted—even the dust in the air ceased to waft around—at the sound of Gaius' words. His voice—my gosh—it turned my blood cold in seconds. Everyone stared at us—the Keeper with the youngest contestant by his side—and my heart couldn't stop racing.

“If you would pardon me for a moment,” Zephan said to the crowd, his voice still charming as the torpedo of a man came toward him. “Seems I have two surprise guests who need my attention.”

The Game Keeper made his way to his large office and was immediately followed by Gaius, the gardener glaring at the blonde man like a Hunter scouting his prey. I tagged along behind so no reporter could snatch me up to talk.

Zephan did not welcome us inside or hold the door open. He walked directly to the back near his polished wooden desk, transforming all the windows from clear to frosty with a flick of his pointer finger. No one could see inside.

The moment Gaius walked in—making me be the door closer—he went straight for the pompous Mystic.

Zephan didn't lose his handsome voice, but I could sense a bit of worry as he said, "Now, why do you insist on—"

The Keeper of Stars took no pleasure in small talk and grabbed Zephan by the collar of his suit and creamy button-up, cutting off his words. He *slammed* the thin Game Keeper directly against the wall, holding him up and making him bump his head.

My body staggered as I heard Zephan's body hit the wall, shaken by my teacher's actions. I quickly paced to the posh, blue armchair with a fumble since my eyes were fixated on this new side of Gaius. A scary side I never knew existed—the *brute* Vilmad claimed him to be.

"*You* are going to tell me *why* you thought it was smart to put her name into this stupid game of yours—you pathetic *snake!*" Gaius stormed in a deep voice, spitting his words out fast.

Though his body was being squeezed, Zephan made a breathy chuckle. "Didn't think for you to be so concerned—"

"She's a *child*, Zephan." Gaius nudged him harder, the abstract metal art on the walls rattling.

The blonde man's lips toyed a grin, looking down at Gaius' chest. "So, it is her *age* that brought us into this predicament. I don't see you getting all bothered about the other young contestant—really want me to believe that, hm?"

Suddenly, two pairs of feet clicking on the glossy floor came from the right side of the room. Out of thin air—disrupting the about-to-be pummel of Zephan beneath the hands of Gaius—Emunah and Vilmad appeared, looking as elegant and celestial as always in their jewel-tone robes stitched in gold.

Wait... why are they here? Is this situation really that serious for these two to show up?

Vilmad, with his typical, disdainful look, rolled his eyes at Gaius before walking forward. “Ah—seems you’re here, too. No surprise, acting like a buffoon. Can you not handle confrontation without idiotic violence, Gaius?”

The angered Keeper dropped Zephan and backed away, coming near me. I looked up toward him, but he was not looking back. My mentor’s eyes were green flames, burning his target in the turquoise suit.

Emunah spoke next, grinning at me as if a fight had never happened in the room. “Nice to see you, Fighter Number 12.”

Gaius glared at the bearded Guardian, causing me to refute the smile I was about to give back to Emunah.

Fixing his suit collar and fluffing his hair back over his right shoulder, Zephan calmly said, “Thank you, Vilmad, Emunah—”

“Why are you here?” Gaius interrupted, voice still sharp.

Vilmad sighed. “Same as you, though without the intention of physical harm.” The oldest Guardian turned to Zephan with no sense of kindness in his voice. “Zephan, explain: Why is the Agapéd a part of your silly game and announced as a contestant? She’s not of planet Kalm.”

Zephan’s smirk still resided on his clean-shaven face. “I will forgive your ill-wit toward the human affairs of our world, Vilmad, since the Heroes Games isn’t a pastime you enjoy. The rules are for those *living* in Kalm and claiming residency—”

“Lisa has never claimed citizenship of Boolavogue or Calendula—only by word of mouth. Never legalized,” Gaius said.

Crossing his arms, the Game Keeper replied, “Not according to that Restricted Hunter license of hers. Once she claimed to be a Hunter of Boolavogue and had it approved by their King, she had every right to be a part of the games.”

Gaius was somehow able to make his eyes wider and angrier than before, gritting his teeth. “So that means you *knew* her name was chosen. You *knew* and let it happen!”

The Keeper of Stars took two steps forward, but Zephan held his hands up as if he asked for surrender. This time that charming grin he seemed to have plastered on his face went away.

“You know I do not pick the contestants—”

“But you can stop them before it’s announced for all Man to hear—”

“That is not my role. I’m here because the world needs to know that powerful magic is not subject to a select group, wealth, or...” his hazel eyes darted at me, “... age. Lisa was chosen because she is on par with the rest, no matter how you fail to see it.”

A bass drum continued to thud inside my chest. I felt so confused, scared, and flat-out overwhelmed, and I bet Zephan knew that, seeing as his eyes hardly looked away from me. Yet, he acted as if nothing was wrong.

“*She* is a fighter,” he continued, a snarky grin resurfacing, “unless you want to pull her name out and pick the runner-up.”

So, it is possible... I can be removed...

Vilmad stepped up, standing haughty and proud. “That is *precisely* what will happen. We cannot have Lisa participate in this game; she’ll lose—no offense to you.” He looked right at me. Offense was taken.

Emunah extended his arms and nudged Vilmad’s shoulder; he shrugged it off. “Now—come on, you heard Zephan. Little lady is as powerful as the others. She has to compete—showing all the world how powerful The Light is in her heart. Lisa’s got this in the bag—”

“How you’re still a Guardian and filled with such idiocy still amazes me,” Vilmad stopped the naïve adoration, rubbing his forehead from the headache Emunah was giving him. “Powerful magic means nothing if one doesn’t have the skills to use it. In battle, Lisa has zero experience in combat other than dark creatures, and the one man she succeeded in dismissing almost killed her. Throwing her into a rink and showing everyone how vulnerable she is—why, no one would ever take her seriously as the Agapéd once she reveals her identity to the world.” His ocean emerald eyes darted at Zephan. “It is unacceptable. We will not have Ranemir’s magic made a fool of in something as selfish as entertainment for your petty games.”

After hearing Vilmad’s testimony... for once in my life, I agreed with him over Emunah. I had only known magic for a year and was not even a professional Hunter yet. No way could I take on another man or woman in battle, especially one who was in the top twelve most powerful Mages and Mystics on Kalm. I was outmatched—those other contestants had been honing their magic for years—even Ayker said he discovered his fauna magic was powerful six years ago. *I have no chance at this...*

Zephan spoke toward Gaius again, glancing between the gardener's heart and frustrated eyes. "Ah—would this be the first time you agree with Vilmad—"

"Never in your lifetime," Gaius quickly interjected.

"You're her mentor. You say the word, and I can pull her out." Zephan cocked his chin. "But something tells me you don't want that."

Wait—what?

I stared, owl-eyed, at the glossy table between the seating arrangement. *Thought this was the whole point of us showing up! Does Gaius want me to compete?*

Gaius calmed after releasing a tight breath. "I came here for no other reason than to demand an answer as to why Lisa was picked. She did *not* need to be an option, and she did *not* need to be chosen. Every Mage and Mystic—every vile heart and mind, Zephan—knows her power, and *you've* just shown them her face and location..." He bit back his lips, thinking. "Taking her out would be a cash grab. She was already taken once—before the worlds heard and saw her name on your gimpish television program. Now, even more people will come for her, seeing only a small girl incapable of defending herself with the magic she's been given..."

The Keeper of Stars breathed deeply, hating every word that slipped through his teeth. "Her name is staying in."

Vilmad erupted, "Are you *mad*? Gaius—she has no chance at winning against these contestants—"

"She's fighting!" Gaius roared at the long-haired Guardian, the metal digging against the walls from the echo. My heart shook in my chest at his harsh words, causing me to flinch in the armchair.

He then walked closer to Zephan, unraveling his clenched fist. Bones could've cracked from how hard he pointed on the Game Keeper's chest. "I know you don't use Mataalixer in the official games, so you will get her one of *your* fighters to train her and one that agrees to do what I tell them. I am *not* having her go out and be tossed around like a doll for sport."

Zephan squinted his eyes. "Your demands don't surprise me... but I think everyone here is forgetting the most important contributor to the argument at hand..."

Sauntering across the floor, Zephan backed away from Gaius and came right over to where I was timidly sitting. "Lisa..." Zephan began, leaning down just enough so his hair fell off his shoulder. His eyes were

cold but very healthy, perfectly glossy like furnished hazelwood, with no wrinkles near his lower eyelashes. The cologne he had on was very strong, but being right near his mouth, I could easily smell mint toothpaste. Though he was very clean and charming, I honestly wished he didn't get that close to me. "I'm not allowed to help contestants, but being that we are somehow linked—you with your power from The Light and I with mine—I'm here to help you. I will say... all your mentors make valid arguments, but... what's yours?"

Zephan, with his heart-reading powers, obviously knew which choice I was leaning toward, probably why he wanted me to admit it in front of everyone. *These games can't be as scary as fighting Ecuras, and Gaius has never been wrong before... plus, Zephan's magic just proved I'm stronger than I give myself credit for...*

Giving it thought, I gulped down my fear and asked a follow-up question, "Hm... you can give me any trainer I want?"

The Game Keeper cocked an eyebrow. *Guess he wasn't expecting me to ask that...* "Who did you have in mind?"

"Since being in the games is now official..." I looked toward Gaius; he was standing sturdy, so I, too, took a chance on courage. Straightening my back and lifting my chin toward Zephan, I said, "Then, I want to be trained by Reno."

Reno Otyamu—the toned, dreadlocked fighter that had me fangirl the first time I saw him throw a punch—had a fighting style I *knew* could help me have a chance at winning. Like me, he didn't have boulders for muscles and still could prove himself powerful. He had tactics—hitting his opponent's body to paralyze parts of them before using his Gravitia magic to nail them out of the rink.

I only knew swords and beast fighting. Reno not only knew the game but also how to use mind over might. And Gaius liked him. He was perfect as a trainer... and I couldn't believe I just willingly asked the Game Keeper to make him mine.

Zephan gave a titter before straightening up, wafting his minty breath onto my nose. "You drive a hard bargain. He is one of the crowd's favorites... but I wouldn't mind seeing what young Reno could do with you. This could be interesting—"

"You'll do it," Gaius butted in.

Zephan didn't seem to mind. "Since your mentor agrees with your decision, I will inform Reno that you'll be training with him. Say starting next month—"

"Next week."

The Game Keeper scoffed. "You're asking me to give up one of my best contributors—"

"He will train Lisa in combat, and I will train her in magic. *You* have plenty of other players up your sleeve that can replace him for the next three months."

Emunah let out a chuckle. "Seems you won't be taking no for an answer today, Zephan."

The blonde Mystic went to his desk and took out a light blue linen sheet of paper. With a twirl of his finger, the golden pen on his desk began to write in elegant script font: "Reno Otyamu of Sky Valley..."

I couldn't view any more words because Zephan stepped in front of me and Gaius again, letting his magic do all the writing for him.

"If Reno teaching Lisa makes this the best Paragon Games in this century," Zephan said toward my teacher, "then I don't mind. Have her meet him next week on planet Bruin in Tuukweald near the citiship and avelift station."

The pen finished its job, and Zephan sparked gold dust from his fingers. Bending and creasing, the paper formed into an origami of a dragonfly, zooming quickly out the window as fast as a bullet. *Do all Keepers use blynks to send messages?*

Gaius rolled his eyes. "You're not even fit enough to take her yourself?"

"I'm the host—I'm already breaking the rules to gift Miss Lisa a fighter of my own. I can't be seen favoring sides. If you need help getting there—"

"I know where Tuukweald is." The Keeper of Stars had already begun his trek back to the door.

Both Guardians evanesced away, leaving nothing but the sound of Gaius' echoing boots thundering toward the exit.

"And Lisa..." Zephan stopped me with his words before I caught up to Gaius. "I'll be rooting for you. Just don't tell the others. Good luck."

Gaius growled as he slung open the door.

Once out of the room and passing by Zephan's paparazzi, I caught up to Gaius. His face was still bothered.

Ignoring the chattering of people, I asked, "Gaius, does this mean I'll be adding more training time to my Hunter work? Will I still be a Charmer, too?"

He slowed down and looked at me, seeing my overwhelmed and confused heart coming forth through my widened, glossy eyes. I didn't know much about the games, but given the fact Gaius almost beat up the host over my name, being selected meant this was bigger than I could have ever imagined... and I was scared—scared of the unknown.

Using his hand, Gaius grabbed my shoulder gently and caused us both to stop walking. No one stepped in or even brushed by to see what a Keeper was doing with a contestant of the game, thankfully. "Lisa, you're about to step into something I never wanted for you. These games are not like the ones you've seen. They are dangerous because they aren't fought with professional players. Your opponents are fighting to prove themselves powerful, and you can bet at least half of them will take the next three months to prepare themselves. For now... you will have to push back your Hunter training and focus solely on growing your magic and hand-to-hand combat."

Two reporters found some courage and came by wanting to talk to us, but Gaius stared at them with an unsettled grimace. They scattered like roaches caught in daylight.

He continued, "You promised that Mender you'd get him Enkurious algae... that will be your last assignment as my Charmer for the time being. Next week, you will start your training with Reno, Inna, and me..."

Words fell from his lips. Silence.

His green eyes weren't angry anymore—if anything, they looked sad, pitying me as we stood in that hallway. He did nothing wrong, but that gaze was fueled by this unnecessary guilt. *Maybe he feels bad because if I were a Hero, I wouldn't have been in the running to be selected...*

I pushed forth a tender smiler. "You know I'm gonna train hard, right? No way am I gonna look weak in these games."

Maybe what I said was a bit of an exaggeration, given that I still was utterly clueless about the difficulty of the Paragon Games or if Reno could *actually* teach me hand-to-hand combat. Still, I wasn't about to let Gaius

walk away feeling sad. He had enough to worry about with his Keeper role and with the Veradome.

My contagious grin grew on his face, and he stood straight again. “Let’s get going.”

...

Two days passed since the announcement, and Cal joined me on my last Charmer job, helping defeat the swamp mites while I harvest the Enkurious algae for Mender Roo. Gaius couldn’t come. Being my bodyguard had pushed his Wishing Star workload back, and risking more time off would affect the seeds’ growth—that’s what I gathered, at least. He did give me coordinates on where to find the magic seaweed, which happened to be near Raglan—assuming he picked that location because it was close to him. It seemed he was still worried about my safety, which is why I asked Cal to join me in fighting off the swamp mites.

After arriving at the location, Cal and I were happy to see the running stream calm with minimal dark magic octo-spiders lurking about. The water was also pretty shallow and lukewarm. I liked that. I was afraid I’d be diving in cold-biting water while trying to grab the magic weeds.

Cal defended me from the dark creatures with ease while I gulped up the algae in my jars, making it my smoothest Charmer job yet.

“*Twenty down!*” I heard Cal yell as he sniped the last of the amphibious spiders from interfering with my harvesting the moment my head rose out of the water. The swamp mite’s body hit the surface before turning into black, magical soot, flowing back into the earth and sky.

My fingers were pruny after carefully sweeping another handful of algae into my jar, filling up three quart-sized glasses. Water hugged my waist, clinging to every seam of my clothing as I shut the final lid. Cal stood two feet away from me, wiping sweat and loose swamp grass from his arms. I eyed him and said, “Thanks for helping.” I pointed to the jar. “Got even more than I planned on.”

Cal trudged through the water, staying in the shallow end. “You know it’s not a problem. Would be rude of me to not help a citizen of my Kingdom.” A chuckle left his lips, and I reciprocated. As he watched me swipe through my orbkit and place the jar inside one of the empty projection pockets, he added, “So... this is the last time we will be working together for a while, huh?”

Water sluiced off my hair and down my back while I looked up at the Prince. “Yeah, I guess so,” I said quietly, making my way to the bank’s edge.

“You’re gonna make training with Ekron less tolerable... you know that, right?”

I jettied the water off my body with a *fling* of my arms, my clothes now dry though still wreaking of swamp and fish. “You’ve got Amos and Erin—I’m sure you’ll be fine without me for a few months.”

Cal gestured to his pants and boots, the water that soiled them. I dried his clothing in an instant. “It’s no *you*, though,” he continued. “You still gonna make time to come to the castle—just that, well, Honey and Celine will probably want to see you...”

Wondering why Cal was slipping up on his words, I turned to see his face. His nose was a warm shade of red.

I smiled at the mucky floor. “Trust me—after days of practicing with Gaius and Reno, I’ll need a break at the castle with you... and Honey and Celine, of course.”

There was a brief pause before Cal cocked his chin. “You know, we are one-for-one right now.” And he started walking back toward Raglan’s main town.

My eyebrows furrowed as my feet caught up to him. “Uh, didn’t know we were playing some game...”

“No—‘one-for-one’ as in ‘saving one’s life.’ *I* saved you from an Ecuras shot back in Fladden last year, and *you* saved me from those Dark Sages. Honestly, you owed me back then—having the Prince of Boolavogue risk his life for an Earthian is kinda a big deal—”

“*Hey—*”

“*But—*now, we are even. Though, next time, you *will* owe me.”

I pushed his arm, wobbling him into the mud, getting his shoes even dirtier. “What makes you think there will be a next time?”

“I’m just saying: you being the Agapéd, trouble seems to follow. So, you’ll owe me. Don’t know what, but it will be something grand for sure.”

Before we parted ways—him going back to the castle and me to Mender Roo—Cal took on a serious tone. He looked right at my freckled face, keeping a steady walk toward the main path. “Are you scared... you know, about the games?”

Ever since we left Zephan's office at EverWake, I had put on a brave face in front of Gaius. Being nervous or showing a lack of strength concerned him, so I never brought up the games if I could help it. I was not an expert on the Keeper (no one was), but I could tell he felt responsible for me... or something like that. Guilt was not a good look on him, so I did my best to ensure I never contributed to that emotion in his house.

With Cal, however, I didn't have a reason to hide my feelings. He was my closest friend... and I hoped he felt the same way about me.

"Honestly..." I began, shoulders dropped, hugging my stomach, "I don't really know what to expect. So, being scared—I wouldn't say that is what I'm feeling. Everything is still so new to me... I just don't wanna make a fool out of myself in front of the whole world—*all* the worlds, actually."

Cal saw me glaring at the ground and nudged my shoulder. When I looked up, a perfect smile dressed his royal face. "Hey—might not mean much coming from me, but you don't have to worry about that last bit. You're gonna slag 'em, Lisa—becoming the youngest Paragon Games contestant *and* taking home the champion title."

As my cheeks turned pink and my heart fluttered like a pack of celestial butterflies, grinning was the only thing my face could do. That moment was special to me: the first time I had ever heard Cal speak so highly of me.

21 “Would you do it?”

“What made you want to start learning origami?” Mary asked me as she sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor, folding a perfect paper butterfly in lavender craft paper.

“Just seemed like fun,” I lied, sitting across from her, jealous that she nailed down every step-by-step guide from *Everything Origami*.

Tomorrow was the one-week mark before I left to train with Reno. Being home on Earth was a nice break, and I enjoyed my doppelganger memories—even the ones of magicless school. Here, no one saw me as the twelfth fighter of the Paragon Games. Here, I was normal—not gawped over or constantly being worried about.

In Boolavogue, I was the talk of the Hunters, the guards, the Calendulians—every single stranger, it seemed—and I didn’t like it. Popularity in the form of gossip was not fun, and every person seemed to have a different opinion of me being in the games. The citizens in the Kingdom would whisper that the games were rigged or unfair—that I should never have been involved; the old folk, enjoying their time people-watching in the Kingdom’s streets, would frown and feel sorry for me; the farmers I passed to get to the secret Veradome entrance believed I would take Boolavogue’s great name “down to the slumps” as they called it; the Veradome workers gave me pitying looks when I went through their gardens. The only words I could enjoy were from Ekron’s Hunters since many of them knew the strength of my magic.

First, the Agapéd Bearer, and now, the youngest Paragon Games contestant—everything was way over my head. I couldn’t escape it unless I was back on Earth where I was only known as “Lisa Robbie” and nothing more.

Rip!

The red petal on my paper flower tore; I truly was the worst at paper art.

I grunted. “Mary—how are you so good at this?” She was creating a beautiful collection of blynks, though she just thought they were ordinary origami creations.

Mary started coming over about once a week, seeing as we both became closer friends and didn't have any after-school priorities like Jenny Kim and Lily. She was smart, helping me with geometry homework when I failed to understand what Mr. Pullium was saying, and as of this afternoon, I discovered she was also gifted in the creative arts. Though Mary wasn't the biggest fan of video games, she would attempt to play them when she came over and never made fun of me for the hobby. Having her over was nice. I didn't feel like I was a second choice or that I had to dress in style to be wanted by her.

Mary laughed as she flipped the craft book a couple of pages over. "I'm just following the instructions. Here—try this one. The butterfly is pretty easy."

"I did!" I held up the yellow piece of crumpled paper. "This was the outcome."

She giggled at my pathetic attempt. "Well, try the frog. The tutorial was the easiest one to understand."

I grabbed the green paper and ventured through the cute little frog's instructions. *Wish that blynk charm helped make the origami and not just enchant it...*

After folding the wrong creases on the amphibian, I attempted to try again as my mind wandered; the Paragon Games continued to zoom through my thoughts, and now, they were reaping up clusters of fear.

Even though Mary didn't know of my magical predicament, I asked for her advice, disguised in a more "Earthian" form. "So, Mary..." I began, watching her pull her frizzy hair behind her ears, "If you had the choice to do something scary in an attempt for a good prize, would you do it or back down?"

Without breaking her concentration on her pink paper flower, Mary answered quickly, "Wouldn't do it."

I raised my eyebrows, her quick answer surprising me. "Why not—what if the prize was, like, a lot of money or a trip to Hawaii or something?"

"Nothing is worth the risk if it means putting myself in harm's way. I'm comfortable where I'm at; no point in trying to get something I can live without."

"But—just *hypothetically* speaking—what if Mr. Gutts picked your name to play against him in dodgeball in order for the whole class to get a

day free of work *if* you were to win? Would you do it?”

“No way.”

“But the whole class would make fun of you for backing down—”

“Better to be made fun of for *not* doing it than risk a beatdown *and* be made fun of for losing.”

Valid point.

My blue eyes swiveled around. “What if you *could* win?”

Mary huffed at that, finishing up her fifth perfect origami, the sun seeping through my bedroom window and reflecting coolly off her glasses.

“Yeah, like *I* could win against Mr. Gutts. Why are you asking this?”

“Just curious...”

Is keeping my name in the games the right decision? Will it just be better if I stick with my comfortable life of learning magic with Gaius, Inna, and Ekron?

Suddenly, a perfect frog formed beneath my fingers. My freckled cheeks grinned wide. “*Ha*—finally did it!”

Three knocks on my bedroom door interrupted my paper-folding celebration, followed by Mom turning the handle.

With her smiling face, loose slacks, and blouse, she looked down at us both before saying, “Mary, your stepmom just pulled up—oh, guess Lisa’s got you on this origami habit now?”

Mary grinned. “She’s kinda bad at it, but it was fun—see you later, Lisa!”

Mom stayed in my room as Mary left. After we heard the front door close from downstairs, Mom decided to stick her nose in my business like she always did after my friends left; I didn’t mind.

“So, am I gonna have to start buying you paper and glue for your birthdays and Christmases now—”

“*Mom!*” I interjected while gathering up the scraps of paper.

She laughed. “Sorry, I honestly didn’t think you would use that book so much. But I’m glad—and Mary enjoys it, too.” She walked past my bed, eyeing my cleaning process as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. “Glad you met her. Lily and Jenny Kim are great and all, but I can tell you’re more comfortable around Mary.”

“Glad to know you didn’t like my friends all these years,” I toyed, picking up the paper remnants.

An eye-roll and a plop on my bed sounded, followed by her hand swiping up *Everything Origami* from the floor. She nonchalantly flipped through it. “First off, I can have opinions about your friends just like you can have opinions about my coworkers. Second, I *do* like them. They are fine, but I know they are a bit...”

With her words disappearing, my mind automatically filled in the rest of her sentence, and I couldn’t help but answer. “More on the popular side of the high-school spectrum than me?”

She stopped flipping the pages, probably staring at me, but I didn’t look. What I said was true, didn’t take a genius to know I wasn’t as pretty or cool as Lily or Jenny Kim.

“No,” she said, watching me crawl on the floor and using my hands as a broom and dustpan for the paper shreds. “They are just a bit more on the aloof side—Lily always planning stuff for you to do that *she* likes or Jenny Kim not caring *enough* to ask to hang out with you. I notice these things. Plus, I didn’t even consider them to be popular. It’s just nice to see you doing stuff you like with someone else who enjoys it, too. And I’m not saying you can’t hang out with them—you could have them all over here for a sleepover if you wanted. You know I wouldn’t care. As long as you’re happy.”

I huffed as I walked over to my plastic, too-small trash can. “Yeah, doubt that will ever happen.”

“Why not?” She now turned on the bed to face me.

I gave her the “Isn’t it obvious?” look, but she didn’t understand. I explained with a single sentence. “Because popular and nerdy don’t mix, so Jenny Kim and Lily being with Mary do not mix either.”

Though Mom was trying to be polite, she wasn’t a part of the 21st-century high school life. Popular and dorky couldn’t be friends unless one was willing to risk their reputation. In our school—like most—athletes and cheerleaders did not hang around those outside their group, and Mary was very much on the outside. I didn’t agree with cliques or labels, but even Mary had admitted she was part of the nerdy group, though she didn’t care; it was impossible to hurt her feelings, her emotions as stable as cinder blocks. Saying I was popular was a lie, but I didn’t read 700-page novels daily or have straight A’s to join the nerdy clique. I was just Lisa—belonging to the undisclosed party-of-one clique known as “magic dork.”

“Well,” she began, slowly pressing off the bed, watching me display my perfect origami frog on my windowsill, “as long as you’re happy and are treated fairly, then hang out with all of them whenever you like. Just don’t feel like you needa fit in with a group in order to be liked or that you can only be friends with those who are just like you.”

“I know. Thanks, Mom.” The same Paragon Games thought skirted through my mind again. As she reached my door to leave, I asked, “Mom... me and Mary were talking, and I wanna know what you would say.” Her hand palmed the doorframe, her eyes facing me. “If you were chosen as a contestant for one of those survivor shows on TV, would you do it if the prize was really good?”

Her blue eyes maybe surfed my wall for a second before she responded, “Yeah, why not?”

“But, like, what if it risked you getting hurt?”

A sweet laugh seeped through her lips. “Then, I’d make sure that wouldn’t happen, training really hard for it so I could bring home the prize for you because I know if I *didn’t* do it—letting fear win—I’d regret it for the rest of my life.” She winked and gave a tap to the door. “Making spaghetti soon, so don’t be snacking on more Oreos—I can see them peeking out from underneath your bed.”

She left as my face turned red, and I quickly heeled the blue package farther under my mattress. *I told Tuff to stop eating these in my room...*

22 Reno

“Do NOT be late” was Gaius’ only instruction about meeting him at EverWake early in the morning. He was to take me to Reno’s home called Tuu-something in Sky Valley for my first day of Paragon Game training; it was all in the blynk he sent the night before. Gaius didn’t mention how long I would be there or if I would even stay overnight, so I made sure to throw mounds of clothing for all four seasons into my orbkit before the morning came.

As I evanesced to the Landing in EverWake, finding Gaius was easy. One look ahead, and there was a solemn, beefy man sitting on a white bench and ignoring all forms of human interaction. He opted out of his usual brown leather trench coat for a light, airy, cream-colored cotton shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His brown boots, the hem of his pants tucked behind the tongues, still had the familiar mud stains from his magical gardener work.

Though the crowd was bustling like usual, it seemed no one recognized me from the Paragon Games broadcast, even with my tattoo concealed with the Eternling fibers. Still, I kept my head down, letting my long, wavy brown hair curtain my face.

Gaius saw my quick, short steps and stood up immediately. “You ready?”

No “hello” or “good morning”—seems he’s back to his normal self and not obsessing over my safety so much...

“Mhm.” I pinched a smile. “But how come you aren’t just evanescing us to Reno’s home?”

Gaius led us toward where I got my first COIN, maneuvering his way through the small crowd of people. “It’s good for you to know how to get to planet Bruin without magic. I imagine you’ll be worn out from all the training you’ll be doing—”

“*Planet?*” I jumped ahead of Gaius, blurting out my excitement. “I’m going to another planet?” I had forgotten that bit of information from the Zephan-Gaius squabble.

He nodded. “Means you’ll need to update your COIN. Right now, you only have permission from Kamari to leave Earth and visit Gadot—

where we are now—and Kalm.”

“How come we can’t travel freely from planet to planet?”

“There are some forces out there that shouldn’t be allowed to traverse as they please, so everyone is restricted until cleared. Similar to Earth, I believe, where you can’t freely travel from country to country without security clearance.” Gaius extended out his palm. “Let me see your COIN.”

I opened my orbkit and gave him my tungsten ID token, watching its green stroke disappear as it touched the Keeper’s tan, calloused hand.

We made it to the booth where Gaius held up his Keeper charm. A new worker came to the desk. My mentor did not like this worker, given his sunken green eyes toward the small man with the name tag spelling “Tonnel.”

“Where’s Gene?” the Keeper asked Tonnel.

“He’s on brea—”

Gaius plopped my COIN down on the desk and stopped Tonnel the Desk Worker’s words, though it sounded more like a harsh slam. “Lisa Robbie. Unrestrict her COIN for all of Luna Theta.”

The new worker jumped. “Uh, sir—will she be traveling alone, given that she’s—?”

“Doesn’t matter. She needs it.”

Stares from passersby immediately pelted us, Gaius *failing* to whisper his demands.

Sweat beaded down Tonnel’s neck. “I, uh—I’m not allowed to give full access to a minor without permission from her—”

“Today, *I* am her sole guardian,” the brawny Wishing Star gardener calmly—yet firmly—commanded, “and she has somewhere she needs to be. You will change her COIN, or I’ll drag out someone who can.” Gaius smirked, coming close to Tonnel’s nervous, pale face, leaning over the counter. I swear the little aloe plant on his desk started producing spikes.

Fearing for his job and his life, Tonnel quickly obeyed the Keeper and snatched up my COIN, taking it to the back and onto their strange computer system.

Gaius resumed his crossed-arm position, acting as if he did nothing out of the ordinary. In his mind, he didn’t; that was just the way Gaius acted—never taking no from someone who could give him a yes. Still, I felt bad that Tonnel didn’t know that.

Holding my COIN in his gloved hand, Tonnel returned and dropped my ID into my palm. It was surprisingly warm. When it made contact, the stroke was no longer green. Yellow magic lit up the dark polygon's edges as bright as fireflies.

"Here you go, ma'am," Tonnel said to me, words all shaky. "Your COIN is now unrestricted for all Luna Theta planets. You'll be able to travel without a guardian now on all citiships and through the Stellerlegion Aura Beacons. Just show them your COIN if there is ever any issue."

"Thank you, sir," I said to him genuinely before following after Gaius toward the Landing. I stood on my tiptoes and whispered to Gaius as we walked, "You didn't have to scare the guy."

The Keeper responded, not in a hushed tone, "I don't see what you're talking about," before grinning down at me.

Instead of going toward the evanescent and teleporting stalls, Gaius turned left where the giant citiships were—the oversized, magical bullet trains that filled up the Landing like airplanes in departing terminals. Each one was a different color depending on the destination or planet they traveled to. The green and white citiship—the biggest one—had many families exiting through its automatic doors, carrying boxy cameras and maps. *Are those tourists? Never really thought about people taking vacations here as we Earthians do...*

Gaius walked past that citiship... and three more that followed.

I quickened my step, brushing against his dangling arm. "Which one of these are we taking?"

"Here." His eyes drifted ahead toward the right, gazing at a silver and white citiship. "NOW BOARDING: BRUIN LANDING STATION 3" swirled in a magical projection above the eight-foot glass doors, along with a small crowd of people waiting patiently behind a white line. "Have your COIN ready."

We walked underneath a thin arch, following the line of people toward the ship. Not sure what that archway was for, but a short couple behind us caused the archway to *beep* before two guards dressed in gray checked their bags. *Was that a weapon check or something? It didn't catch Valor stashed away in my orbkit, and I bet Gaius has plenty of swords inside his necklace as well.*

Near the giant glass doors of the space bus were two ladies dressed in similar gray clothing. Each checked our COINS to ensure we were who

we claimed to be. Mine glowed yellow in my hand, and Gaius' Keeper keychain glowed green. The ladies smiled at my muscly mentor and started blushing as he entered the magic train; he didn't even notice, ignoring them while marching forward.

Inside resembled avelifts, with plenty of large windows to view the adventure soon to come. Benches were padded with sleek cushions, lined in rows; some along the walls like a subway; others, near the back, only facing forward. Above and underneath the seating were large compartments, a family of five stowing away a plethora of their shopping bags.

A couple of citiship busboys—magical flight attendants—were near the seats, welcoming each passenger in. I smiled at them, but my brutish guide kept his eyes forward, searching for a row without any people.

At first, the Keeper picked a seat near the exit just like last time on the avelift to the Heroes Games; it was the *worst* spot. *If we are traveling in space, then there is no way I'm missing out on a window seat.*

I ran to the back, where I saw a cushioned corner seat having the best view out the window. When Gaius noticed my presence was gone, he turned to see little me giving the begging baby-doll eyes again.

A deep sigh left his lungs, succumbing to my curious desire. He begrudgingly marched between the rows of seats to the very back of the giant space train.

"Why did you want to sit back here?" he asked me, sitting on the part of the cornered couch that was near the aisle and had plenty of legroom.

With my face already glued to the window, I thought it was apparent, but I answered him. "Because it has the best view. Will we really be traveling through space?"

I heard him titter. "That is what citiships do. Make sure you pay attention to how to get to Bruin. Don't just stare off into space."

My head whipped around. "Did you just make a jo—"

"Poor choice of words—that is all."

"Gaius," I began, scooting closer to his muscly shoulders, "do you not like traveling on these or something?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well"—my fingers began to count and display each point I was about to make—"you scared that desk worker half-to-death, you didn't look

a single person in the eye since we arrived here, you ignored the flight attendants—”

“*Flight* attendants?”

I held up my fourth finger and continued, “*And* you were about to choose the seats closest to the exit—the *worst* seats, at that.”

He kept his gaze forward with his arms crossed. “I just don’t care for non-magical transportation.”

I pulled in my legs, letting my chin hover above my knees. “*Or* for crowds in general.”

“Since when did you become so observant?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what you don’t like.”

The citiship suddenly jolted, causing me to jump in my seat. My face turned toward the window again, seeing the platform beginning to fade away in the distance. *We are already moving—that was so fast!*

“How long will it take until we get there? Like a couple of hours or something?” I asked Gaius, the city beginning to disappear in the distance. *Can’t even hear the engine running—this ship is so cool!*

The Keeper scoffed. “Never would have stepped on this ship if that were the case. Will take an hour at the most.”

“Really? How—what type of magic do they use? Do they teleport or have magic fuel?”

“Starlight. There are various types of star magic besides Wishing Stars, and citiships run off of starlight—letting the ship travel as fast as light. They must first ensure the nebulae is clear—their teleporting portal for the citiships. No two spacecrafts can travel along the same nebulae, or else they would crash, and we would die. During that time, we will be in space, traveling fast until the nebulae is clear for us to ‘teleport’ to the next stop.”

Though I chose the window seat, Gaius’ explanation captured my interest even more. “Whoa... so, what happens when we land? I’ve never seen these in Boolavogue or any towns we’ve visited during our Charmer jobs.”

“First, we will land at one of Luna Theta’s Stellerlegions—Kamari lives at one, though hers is more homely and less equipped, given that you are her sole patron. Once we land and their security checks us to ensure we are cleared to enter Bruin, we will transfer to another citiship—a smaller one just for the continent that Tuukweald is on. After that, it’s a straight

avelift ride to Tuukweald where Reno will meet us... You can see why evanescing is much more efficient.”

“And all this is free? I never saw you pay or anything.”

Right when the citiship jolted again, and the skies turned dark purple and blue speckled with stars, Gaius smirked and leaned over to me. “Look at their COIN—the gimps next to me, flaunting their tourist bags.”

Leaning past his brawny frame and over the aisle walkway, I saw a young couple counting their credits on their MC Chip and holding their COINs. Theirs were not like mine; they were silver, not a dark, tungsten gray.

“Why are their COINs different?” I quietly inquired.

“The day you got yours, Inna ensured you received the inclusive kind. All this—every citiship flight, evanescing sigil, and avelift ride that isn’t a part of Mantene—will be free for you to use. You probably never noticed since you’ve been with Inna, her workers, and around the Prince; their entrance is always free, given their titles. Kamari knows you well and doesn’t have to check your COIN each and every time you visit—doubt she ever will. Did you really think the Magic Embassy would let all this be free? You know how expensive starlight is and what it takes to run these ships?”

My ignorance of the magic world appeared yet again, and a part of me was embarrassed. I was the Agapéd, after all; knowing something as simple as public transportation shouldn’t have been that surprising. “Oh... no, I never really thought about it before...”

The Keeper nudged my shoulder, almost knocking me over. “Hey, being the Agapéd Bearer and one of the Paragon Game fighters means you deserve a couple of perks—another ‘magic perk,’ as you would call it.”

Glad Gaius doesn’t think I’m stupid, making me feel better without having to say much.

“So, when do I get a cool version of a COIN, like your Keeper keychain?”

“The day you beat me in battle... I will consider it.”

I giggled. “Deal.”

Miles out, we could see nothing but stars and glowing stardust. We passed by a couple of other citiships, but they were the size of peanuts—traveling far out into space; one even appeared out of thin air. Gaius said

when they did that, it was because they had just left the nebulae—saying it so casually as if it was common sense.

I fiddled with my COIN as stars shimmered out the window, grinning. I didn't look at him but said to Gaius, "You know... you've never called yourself my guardian before."

"Never had a reason to until that bloke of a worker didn't understand what a Keeper was." He paused. "Did you not want me to say that?"

All fidgeting stopped. "No... just..."

I don't know why, but the truth refused to leave my throat—words too hard to swallow. Guardian meant someone who looked after me... and that is what Gaius did. But it also meant someone who gave up parts of themselves to ensure the safety of others. He gave up parts of his day to do this and dealt with the worry that my evanescing couldn't get me back home safely—and he *hated* this stuff. Magic lessons and the Wishing Stars used to be his only concerns... Now, I was making his life harder.

Guardian... Gaius wasn't just my teacher anymore... *and he wants that, right?*

A heartbeat passed, and I said, "Never had someone other than my Mom say that before."

My eyes jolted up. I saw him staring, worried again. I didn't even say anything bad or mention my fears about the games, and his brows furrowed. I already took time out of his day, and *now*, I just inflicted distress into the Keeper's heart. Gaius... He didn't need that. He didn't want worry in his life—no person does. And I was the cause of it because I wasn't just his student.

I wasn't going to let him worry about me anymore.

I grinned like everything I said was nothing but idle talk. "Just a random thought—sorry." And I proceeded to tell him I finally learned how to make a blynk.

...

After thirty minutes, the citiship jolted one last time, and a flash of blue light encapsulated the ship for three seconds. When it faded, a massive asteroid with a tall metal building stood high in the distance. Small, rectangular windows decorated the edges, all except for the middle floor; it had a glass window that circled around, allowing every eye to peer inside—showing a handful of Stellerlegion workers going to and from floors.

Large metal and space rock pathways extended out of the asteroid, like landing decks for arriving citiships, leading toward the main building. Three other citiships were already parked, letting passengers step off. It was crazy—families with children were gallivanting off magical ships in the middle of space like it was as normal as taking a bus.

The only familiar thing I saw was the massive glowing pink tree that grew on top of the metal building—the Verisweet. Its roots dug around the curved walls and inside the Stellerlegion base through the roof—letting its beaming petals create an invisible mantle that allowed all humans to breathe freely. Kamari had one similar on top of her home. Hers was better because she had a Moon Water pond on her roof. They only had more boring metal.

I followed close by Gaius as we left the ship, and to no surprise, it was *freezing* outside. All the other passengers brought jackets, well prepared. Not me. Stepping out into space was *not* in the blynk Gaius sent, yet I only had myself to blame. *Lisa, you should know by now to ask for more details when going somewhere new with Keepers or Guardians...* I clutched my arms tight and rubbed them warm as Gaius took the lead.

The gravity on the Stellerlegion asteroid was not different. As my shoes clicked on the metal ground, I looked off the edge. There was not an endless sea of space below as I was expecting. A planet—a *giant* planet of blues, oranges, and greens—was thousands of miles below us. *No freaking way!* I was so busy looking up and at the space building during the flight that my mind forgot to wander down below.

My hand hit Gaius' elbow as stars filled my eyes. "Is that *Bruin*?"

Gaius refused to stop and look. "Yes, now, come on before you fall over. One more ride until we land in Tuukweald."

"You know I can fly, right? Falling isn't that big of a deal anymore," I reminded him.

"Lisa—"

"*Just* making sure you remembered."

Entering the next citiship involved us touching an Aura Beacon—proving we had clearance to enter into Bruin's atmosphere—and finding more seats to sit in; again, I ran toward the row with the best window seat. Taking off, planet Bruin came slowly into our field of vision with the speed of a turtle; in reality, though, we were traveling as fast as a rocket.

A blue light encapsulated the citiship again, allowing us to break Bruin's ether without us "blowing up into pieces," as Gaius put it. He said

that piece of information without any emotion in his words—acting as if space travel was as dull as long car rides.

Blue mist turned into clouds and soon began painting a picture of the world below. Vegetation unfurled like an endless bard's scroll—mixed with bustling cities in between—and I could see oceans, valleys, and mountains alike. The color range of the greenery remained orange and yellow, and the waters were a glistening emerald. *Wonder if it's autumn on this planet or if that's just the natural color...*

Landing smoothly, the pilot happily announced over the intercom, "Welcome to Bruin—you'll find the avelifts to the right. They will lead you toward the capitals of Tuukweald. If your final destination is in Leyadin or Harbir, please remain on the spacecraft..."

"Alright—let's go," Gaius said, stretching his arms and legs. I tagged behind. "Reno will be waiting for you."

Avoiding my habit of never asking enough questions in strange lands, I quickly inquired, "So, am I staying here overnight, or do you want me to come back home?"

"Reno said you are welcome to stay with him and his family, and I encourage it. But, if you feel unsafe, come back home... just tell me ahead of time with a blynk to avoid any more late-night intruder situations, okay?"

"Oh... yeah, I will..." I was a little flustered replying. Gaius just threw my living arrangements at me like a pile of heavy laundry, acting as if staying with a celebrity's family in a foreign land was normal... Well, I guess for him, it would seem that way, given that is exactly what I did last year with the Balthiers and at his house.

The giant doors opened to Tuukweald.

Air brushed warm and dry as the sun beamed brightly, filled with the sounds of squawking birds and voices of people welcoming those who exited the citiship. Ahead, unlike the Landing at EverWake, was open, not a jungle of brick buildings and merchants. A broad stairway descended in front of us made of beige rock with rows of yellow plants between the lanes. Similar beige buildings with accents of red stood to the left, and the avelift station was on the right where Gaius began to turn.

People were either scarce or must have all been working because I only saw a handful strolling the streets, unlike the avelift stations in Boolavogue. *Thought the hometown of a celebrity would be busier...*

“You’ve been here before, right?” I asked, squinting from the bright sun as I looked toward my mentor’s face.

“You know the dagger I gave you?” he countered, to which I nodded. “The wood I used for it was found here. Bruin is similar to Kalm. It contains a vast amount of magical creatures, plant life, ore, and glintz, but Tuukweald is not like Boolavogue.”

“How so?”

“Fewer mountains, hardly any cold weather, and no Gora bears... though they do have uldirons.”

“What are those?”

Gaius smiled as he looked ahead. “I’m sure *he* will take you to see them, and you can find out for yourself.”

Thirty feet ahead of us, his dazzling, crowd-pleasing smile stretching wide, was Reno. His dark skin stood out from the beige walkway, making even Gaius look pale, and his dreaded hair was gathered underneath his thin hooded cloak—somewhat disguising his Heroes Game celebrity appearance. The short-sleeved beige shirt fit his frame, showing off his arm muscles—nothing like Gaius’ beefy arms, though—and his shoes were a never-before-seen design in my world, having the toes open like sandals, but the ankles and bridge covered in brown fabric like Hunter boots. The last thing I noticed before my timidity took over was his eyes; they were orange, like rich marmalade. *How did I not notice his eyes before—didn’t even know humans could have orange irises surrounding their pupils.*

“Glad to see he’s punctual,” Gaius muttered happily to me before Reno could hear.

With his young, easygoing voice, Reno welcomed us. “Well, it is good to finally meet you, Sir Gaius, and you too, Lisa. Last time, I wasn’t able to properly introduce myself—it was you both at the quarter games over a month ago, right?”

Wow—he is so chill around Gaius! Guess him being around Zephan and other powerful players makes all the intimidation wear off...

Gaius answered with a nod, and Reno continued. “Have to say my thanks to you—giving me a break from the games to train instead.”

“Don’t thank me.” Gaius dropped his hand on my shoulder and pushed me out from behind his shadow. “Lisa was the one who told Zephan to drop you out of the rink to train her.”

Reno let out a giddy yet handsome laugh. “Oh, really?” He then looked at me as I grinned back. “Then, Lisa, I appreciate your request. Games are fun and all, but I’ve missed home and haven’t been able to train another fighter for the games before. Hope you will enjoy it here, too.”

“Thank you for agreeing to teach me, Mr. Reno,” I timidly said, staring at his handsome face and lean figure.

“I’m no old man—just call me Reno; Otyamu is fine as well, just no ‘mister’ or ‘sir’ in front of it.”

I let out a deep breath. *I’m glad he is so kind. I was worried he wouldn’t want to teach me...*

He then made eye contact with Gaius again. “Three days here and four days off, right, sir?”

So, Reno knew the living conditions, but I wouldn’t have known unless I asked... Wow...

Gaius nodded and then looked down at me. “Need anything, send a blynk. Okay?”

A soft smile peeked from my lips as anxiousness was taking over my heart. “Okay.”

Just like that, Gaius evanesced away... leaving me in the hands of a celebrity stranger on a foreign planet without even questioning whether or not he was more than a pretty face on TV. Gaius must have really trusted him... or perhaps, he was watching from afar, spying on me. Or worse: he threatened Reno in a blynk if the celebrity dared to do anything that made me uncomfortable.

Reno quickly began leading us toward the avelift. Small talk seemed to come to him as easily as breathing. “So, this is your first time in Tuukweald?”

“Mhm,” I answered, fidgeting with my Echo Ring.

“Well, Lisa, I’m not too familiar with Boolavogue, but I can assure you that you’ll love it here. Plus—bragging on my home a little—Sky Valley is the perfect place to live. It’s big in land but small in people, though it has been growing as we’ve been able to afford more homes to create high-rise properties. You ever stayed on a canopybosque before?”

“No... what is that?”

He let out a soft chuckle. “Guess Boolavogue doesn’t have that type of topography. You scared of heights?”

I smiled. “No way. Kinda love ‘em, actually.”

Reno returned my enthusiasm. “Then, you’ll love our home, for sure.”

We sat shoulder to shoulder on the avelift, traveling toward his hometown of Sky Valley. It wasn’t the capital of Tuukweald or even a bustling city, according to Reno, which explained the lack of civilians present when we arrived. There were only five others in the avelift cabin we were in, too.

“Being that you know the Keepers, I am guessing you’re one of their trainees, or are you just close friends?” he asked, sitting closest to the aisle. He let me have the window seat. More kindness shined through him.

Guess he doesn’t know I’m the Agapéd. Why else would he say that?

“I’m both of their students, actually. They are pretty great mentors and really powerful, too,” I responded, still in my shy voice. “So, how is it you know the Keepers?”

“Zephan doesn’t talk about them much, but you’ll learn that, in Sky Valley, we all respect them; they fill our skies with stars and gift magic to all lands, after all.”

My mind was shocked at Reno’s knowledge of the Keepers. Sure, the people in Boolavogue knew of them and the Guardians, but it was definitely not a common topic amongst Hunters.

Reno continued, “We also pay tribute to the Guardians as well, keeping our lands clean of dark magic by expelling dark creatures and using our magic for the benefit of Man and nature...” His orange eyes smiled down at me. “You look surprised. Guess you didn’t expect a game player to say all this?”

He has no filter—can’t believe he pointed out my baffled face!

Embarrassment blossomed, my eyes shooting toward my fiddling fingers. “Sorry—just that I’m not used to being around people who are so casual with the Guardians and Keepers like me—didn’t mean that in a bad way. You’re just a celebrity, so I, uh... yeah, I wasn’t expecting it.”

Reno laughed. “No worries, Lisa. As you’ll learn in about four months, most people in the rink are *exactly* how you pictured them: selfish and following their own ideals of magic. I was just fortunate enough to be born in a small, magic revering land...” He leaned forward a bit, our eyes connected. “Might I ask a more personal question?”

I wasn’t about to say no and be rude, even though my heart was two seconds away from bursting out of my chest—we just met! “Yeah, that’s

fine.”

He softened his voice, still having his laid-back tone. “Why did you pick me to teach you? Honestly... I was surprised when Zephan sent that blynk my way. Before then, I just thought I was another player in his game; nothing worth interest. But, suddenly, a kid shows up—grabbing his money-maker out of the rink for four months—and she’s kinda shy and doesn’t have a single rumor spread of her outside of her home planet. I’m also no teacher, only ten years older than you. So, I wanna know why?”

In my head, while back at Zephan’s office, my mind was not focused clearly. Gaius showed his scary side right in front of me, Vilmad actually made *sense*, Zephan seemed more interested in a good show than the safety of the Agapéd, and I *still* had no clue what the games would do to me. Would I be fighting battles, slaying creatures, teaming up with contestants—I didn’t know. Gaius was worried for me... that was a fact... and I chose Reno because *he* liked him. Being trained by some stranger was not another thing I wanted the Keeper to worry about. I did admire Reno’s skills, but I was basing all that on the one match I saw him in last month.

Still... Reno seemed genuinely kind, and I wanted to be comfortable around my new teacher as the months passed. “To be honest... I thought that if a guy like you with smaller muscles could win a battle, then maybe I could, too.”

Instant regret.

I couldn’t have picked a worse way to say “using his weakness as his strength” than that... *Way to go, Lisa...*

As the poorly thought-out phrase escaped my mouth, I quickly retaliated, my hands in the air to help explain my point, “Ah—I’m sorry! That came out wrong! I just meant that you were able to take down tougher-looking opponents by using more than just physical strength—using your Gravitia magic and that paralyzing punching tactic together. I thought that if you could do it, then maybe...” Fidgeting began. “I would have even a small chance at not getting thrown out of the games during the first match.”

Abnormality was a quality of Reno because he didn’t get embarrassed or upset by my unintentionally rude remark; instead, he cackled rather wildly at that, slapping his knees with his hand as if I were a comedian. “No winning track or number of champions I have defeated, but my lack of *physical strength* made you pick me. *Ha!* You know, no one has ever admitted that to my face, though I always knew it to be true—why else

would I have made it as a paid fighter if that weren't the case? People like watching a match with stakes, a match with a lean guy like me up against a warrior with the physique of a hurricane. You seem to know your strengths and weaknesses, just like me. Glad to know we think alike."

I partially laughed back, still confused about whether he accepted my compliment. "For a second, I was regretting what I just said."

Reno relaxed into the padded seat of the avelift, brushing off the last bits of his laughter, braids and dreadlocks swaying. "Well, I very much appreciate honesty, Lisa. You won't find that much in the games, especially the ones you're gonna enter. Here, though, loyalty and kindness are qualities our small clan practice... and to tell you the truth, you just passed the Otyamu test."

Confusion swept over me. "Test?"

"Yes, test. See, the fighting style I use that you want to learn, dúlaman, is coveted by many—as you can see why. It's meant for defense only and for those the Otyamu trust. My grandfather taught me and many others as a way to defend our tribe—our Sky Valley. It is not a game tactic, which is why Zephan took an interest in me. He saw a way to improve the games; I saw a way to show people Sky Valley is strong in magic. Dúlaman fighting... it's a big deal here, and not just anyone gets to learn it. If you had said you only came because I was your last choice, I would've been offended and a little hurt; if you said you picked me only for my magic strength, I wouldn't have felt as bad but would've seen it as a shallow means to train. But... you gave the correct response: humility."

Reno leaned forward. He really liked eye contact. "Plus, a kid like you being in the games... seems like you could use all the help you can get, seeing as you didn't run but stayed in the top twelve. Guess you had someone telling you that your magic was strong despite being young and small?"

If he only knew Inna, Kamari, and Gaius...

"Many times."

"Then, Lisa, we have more in common than I had ever expected. Guess I was meant to be your teacher after all—just cut me some slack if it's not up to the Keepers' standard."

I giggled as the avelift started to come to a stop. "I promise."

23 Sky Valley, Tuukweald

Out the window of the avelift was a thick bush of trees and bark, trunks as wide as the width of my house. *Sky Valley is in a forest? Kinda assumed it would be in the sky...*

A chime rang on the avelift, and Reno stood up fast. “Alright! We are here. Gonna be a bit of a walk. Hope you don’t mind if people stare. Visitors are rare, and me being home is even more so.”

“That’s fine,” I said, unfazed. Being stared at was something I had grown used to since living in Boolavogue.

Reno led us off the magic monorail and down a paved road. Trees created a thick and coarse canopy of orange and yellow leaves over our heads, the sky barely visible. A couple of passengers followed the broad path to a city in the distance, but we veered left, going down a stone stairway deeper under the leafy cavern. Soft sun beams broke through the tree branches, glittering our trail and highlighting the buzzing gnats. *Is his home underground or in a jungle? Where is the ‘sky’ part of this Sky Valley?*

After a good ten-minute walk down stone steps and pathways—all very clean, as if someone dusted away the loose dirt—a large, glossy wooden gate appeared at the end of the tree canopy. Two people, similar to Reno with their dark skin, braided hair, and weird shoes, stood near the gate. They each held a tall staff with an orange glint the size of a baseball strapped to the top. *Never seen a glint that big before. Wonder what it does...?*

The moment we made it to the bottom of the last step, Reno removed his hood to reveal his face and thick dreadlocks—orange strings in a couple of the braided strands—and the two guards didn’t have us state our names like at Boolavogue. Not only did they smile big, but they also dropped their staffs and gave Reno a hearty hug and handshake. It was like seeing friends reunite, but the craziest part was I couldn’t understand a *single* thing they were saying.

Magical foreign language—what is happening right now?

Reno said something in the strange language while smiling and gesturing his hand to me. The guards did not shake my hand, nor did they resume their spot at the gate; they each picked me up and hugged me as if I

were their own child. It was abrupt—*really* abrupt. But I couldn't do anything about it. Though I had no clue what they were saying as each giddy guard squeezed me tight, I did understand "Lisa" followed by the twice-repeated phrase "gudoklo hōin."

Reno laughed as they put me down. "Sorry, Lisa. Told them you brought me home, and they couldn't be more grateful."

Timidness overtook my voice as I said, "That's okay. Glad they like me at least."

The two guards started laughing... at me? *Did they just understand what I said? They speak English... or whatever they call my language in this universe?*

The more heavy-set guard with short, coarse hair grinned at my startled expression. "Lisa of Boolavogue, you've brought back our clan's champion. Couldn't help but return the gratitude," he said in words I understood perfectly.

So, they do understand me and are bilingual... Well, now, I am even more embarrassed than before.

The other guard, about as tall as Gaius with thin braids, joined in on the gratitude. "Training or visiting—stay as long as you like, young lady."

Reno turned to me. "This is Lukkan and Vuno. They guard this entrance to Sky Valley. Been doing so for quite some time and always speak in Tuukwealdian when there are new visitors. *Oh*—forgot to give you this."

Out from the deep pocket in his cream cloak, Reno pulled out something small, trapping it inside his fist. Opening his palm—not calloused like Gaius'—was a small blue circle the size of a dime. It looked just like a craft sticker. Not magical at all.

"What's that?" I asked.

Reno and the guards turned silent. Dumbfounded eye raises were shared. "Guess they don't have cluins in Boolavogue," Reno said. "Here. Stick it just behind your ear like mine." He leaned down and pulled back his dreadlocks to show me behind his ear.

A similar blue dot was there, just like a sticker, only it slightly began to glow. "They allow you to hear any language and have it make sense in your mind. For you, it will sound like your everyday tongue."

"Whoa... this little sticker can do all that?" The moment it glued to my skin, my mind felt alert—refreshed as if I had just drank a gallon of water.

“Most of the younger generation do not speak in Tuukwealdian and just use the normal tongue, but you’ll be here a while, and having one of these will help you get around the city. Many players in the games wear them as well, so it’s good for you to get familiar with them. Also, they aren’t cheap, so don’t lose it if you can help it.”

I kept touching the cluin as it stuck to the back of my ear like a hearing aid. *This is the coolest thing ever!*

The guards then grabbed their glinted staffs, and in seconds, the orange stones began to glow like embers. They pointed the glints toward the door and grazed the sides. Roots unraveled like snakes, slithering away from the middle opening, and the gateway unlocked. Both men pushed the double doors open, sunlight breaking through.

Suddenly, we were standing on a leafy patio in the sky.

Below and ahead was a forest of skyscraping trees—tall, broad, and strong like mountains—with buildings carved and formed around the bulkiest three in the middle. The homes and villas weren’t huts or treehouses either; they all were furnished with electrical lights glowing in the windows and throughout the shadows of the trees. Long bridges of roots and beige rock towered over smaller trees and extended to each of the woodland suburbs, branching high and low to the ground below; one even reached Reno and me, guiding us downward.

“Welcome to my home,” Reno said. “Most of the city is in the canopybosque—the buildings in the trees—but we will save that for later. Like with Lukkan and Vuno, we would end up getting back to my house crazy late with all the constant stopping and hugging.”

“Wow...” slipped from my jaw-dropped mouth. A breeze, laden with scents of petrichor and maple, blew the hair off my shoulders as I scanned the city. “You actually live here?” My eyes were going every which way, from the labyrinth of bridges to the lemony beams of the sun pushing through the towering grove below.

He nodded with a humbling smile to the orange weeds. “Pretty great, isn’t it?”

A chirping sound came from below, off the edge of the long bridge near my shoe. When I looked down, there was no normal animal but a strange creature. It resembled an onion with dotted eyes like Tuff’s but with the coarseness and hue of charcoal. The thing looked as heavy as a rock, but it suddenly popped out yellow and orange leaves on his back—matching the

trees all around—and used them as wings. It flew as light as lost cotton in the wind.

Tuff was curious about the creature as well. *Guess even glainies don't know all the creatures out there.* He revealed himself from my side and waved at the organic little sprite. The leafy wings on the creature fluttered and left behind similar orange and yellow dust to Tuff's magic soot. I swear I saw it smile at me and my glainie before it flew off the rooted cliffside we were on.

This place has good magic creatures—this is incredible!

Before I could ask what the unusual creature was, Reno inquired about mine first. “Wow—never seen a glainie make a bond with a human before!”

“You know of them?”

“Some wander around here periodically. Never been able to get too close to them, though.”

Tuff sat his little pudgy self on my left shoulder, holding my hair so he wouldn't blow away in the wind. “What was that black sprite we saw?” I asked as he began to lead us down the rooted-stone path.

“Those are kyokos. You'll see a lot of those flying around here. They are as common as birds, growing scads in magic soil heaps. Most cities don't care for them because they eat soil like cattle graze grass. For us in Sky Valley, we love having them around. They keep away dark magic in the earth, allowing for our trees to grow mightily.”

“I have never seen trees like these. Do they have magic in their roots or in the yellow and orange leaves?”

“They do in their trunks—crazy amounts of it, too. Harvesters collect the sap before it crystallizes and sell it to many farmers and crop herders across Tuukweald. Putting the sap around the roots and base of high magic-bearing plants during winter prevents them from freezing or losing their magical qualities.”

Magic sap from magic trees—Gaius would love it here.

The bridge ahead split into a three-way intersection: one continuing forward to the canopybosque city, one going down to the left, and one having a standing chairlift attached to the end. Reno chose the final option.

The chairlift moved by itself or, rather, was automated like a ski lift. We had to time our steps to get on since it wouldn't stop for us and hold onto the railing on the edges or the pole in the middle.

“Vehicles and galasi ships aren’t the best with trees around. You’ll see a lot of these standers going to and from neighborhoods outside of the main city, Yuka—the capital canopybosque,” Reno advised as we stood close together on the stander.

I leaned over the edge of the wooden railing with Tuff joining me, noticing more of the kyokos flying below and tiny houses mixing in between more orange and yellow trees. “Do you not live in the big city, then?”

“I get that question a lot, but no. I like home to feel like home. Sorry if you aren’t used to a more rural lifestyle surrounded by plants.”

I grinned, my eyes still glued to the endless forest below. “Actually, I’m quite used to it and don’t mind it at all.”

The town we entered was as beautiful as the tree entrance to the magic gate, just with more people around. Every stranger gave Reno a hug or handshake; he truly was a hero returning home. I kept removing the cluin from my ear to see if they were speaking Tuukwealdian or not, and the older citizens were. Once I stuck it back onto my skin, their language was immediately translated to English in my head.

Though we were walking on stone paths, we weren’t entirely on the ground level of the forest. As we crossed another bridge, down below was the neverending scape of trees. I couldn’t even see a speck of a dirt-grimed floor or a woodland road. *How high up are we?*

More kyokos flew past me as the road ahead turned quiet, orange trees dissipating, the colors of the sky finally visible again.

We arrived at a wide-open balcony with a wooden and beige house peeking over to our left, the ground continuing to be cemented with stone and tree root flooring—Reno’s home. It was weird not seeing grass or dirt in the front yard, but it made sense, given we were still in the treetops. Straight ahead had a perfect view of Sky Valley’s forest—the property being whittled on the edge of a beefy tree—and contained a beautiful patio where one would exercise or have campfires. On the right was a stone grill, nothing like the barbecue pits I had seen on Earth, and a rectangle table with enough seats for Ekron’s entire recruiting team.

Everything was peaceful, but that silence was quickly interrupted by the sound of the front door of the low-level beige house swinging open.

Out came a young woman with umber skin and similar clothing to Reno and a little boy tagging behind. They each were smiling big before

running into Reno's arms.

"You're home!" the lady cried. So much joy and happiness veiled her voice with that simple phrase alone.

The little boy, having the same orange eyes as Reno but with hair too short for dreadlocks, caught up with the couple. He looked no older than six, close to Celine Sonon's age. "Daddy!" he yelled, causing Reno to break the hug from the pretty lady and squat down towards the boy.

Reno picked him up in his arms, and all three hugged each other.

Wait—he met me before he even had a chance to visit his family?

The moment was so pure and loving that I felt as if I was intruding on a welcome-home party, so Tuff and I stood back in the shade of one of the trees at the end of the forest property.

In all my life... I had never seen a family that happy; they were beautiful together—the essence of love in the form of three Otyamus.

Mom loved me and would tell me all the time, but she never had a man around to hug like that... I didn't even know couples could be that in love. Grandma and Grandpa sure didn't do anything close to that type of affection, nor did Aunt Genn and Uncle Leo—hand-holding was as close to "I love you" as they would ever get. Even Cal's parents weren't too affectionate. The Balthiers were close, but they never kissed or held each other when I stayed with them.

Magic training was why I was there with Reno, but now, a part of me wanted that type of family. Bet Mom did, too. She never talked much about dating, nor did she put down the thought of it. Her going on dates was not something she did regularly, and she had never brought a man home before. Excuses I heard—the few there were—about why the relationships never worked out typically involved her saying, "I just want the right man for you, too."

I never had a reason to be jealous because I thought our two-person family was perfect. Having a family of three, if it was like Reno's... was something I now desired.

"Lisa," Reno called to me while letting the little boy down. I began walking toward them. "I'd like you to meet my wife, Talanah, and my son, Naku."

Talanah was as young as Reno. I was surprised to see them having a kid and not just a tiny baby. *Guess they marry young in this land...* She smiled wide at me and gave me a warm hug. Her straight hair was long and

flowing, and her skin smelled like roses. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Lisa, and I can’t thank you enough for bringing my husband home. Having him here for this long is something of a dream. Hope you enjoy it here, too—got you a room all set up and everything—”

“I saw you on the screen!” Naku interrupted his mom. “You’re gonna play in the games like my dad does, right?”

I smiled at their son. “Mhm, but I have a long way to go before I’m anywhere near as good as him.”

Reno huffed, charming and confident. “I have a hard time believing that. If you’re up for it, I wouldn’t mind seeing your magic and skill before our true training starts. What do you say?”

I nodded, sharp and quick. “Sounds perfect to me.”

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24 First Day and Dúlaman

Battling beasts? No problem. Sparring against a trained professional? Tough but manageable. Being watched by Reno's adoring wife and kid? Terrifying.

Are they gonna be here the whole time? I'm gonna look like an idiot—and their kid will probably make fun of me—I just know it...

After showing me around their home, a warm and decorated place with neat wooden furniture, lots of pillows, and small seating, Reno wanted to see my magic and hand-to-hand combat skills. I didn't mind; I was excited, actually. Learning a new way to fight using my magic was thrilling. *After three months of this, I bet I will finally have a chance of beating Gaius in battle.*

The only thing I wasn't expecting was doing all of it with his wife and kid watching. Working with the Hunters was different. We all were there to practice, and struggling with Ekron's lessons was expected. Falling over and getting hit—everyone did that. However, being in front of Reno's biggest fans in the galaxy with the known fact I was Gaius' student probably made their expectations of me quite high. *Lisa, just don't embarrass yourself too much.*

Outside on their patio was where it all started. Talanah and Naku sat close together on one of their twin wooden benches on the circle's perimeter, Tuff joining them. It seemed my little sprite was more comfortable with Reno's family since they were used to little magic creatures flying around.

Reno stood ten feet from me in the center, sunlight glistening from behind, his chin held high. "Okay, Lisa. First things first, what type of magic do you have?"

I replied honestly, "Water Manipulation, Non-Living Terrain, Animalian Hearing, and Flight."

Reno's eyes flickered as I heard his wife break the stunned silence on the bench. *"Four? You're kidding? Reno—did you know that?"*

Reno chuckled in amazement as I smiled at the ground, rubbing his thin jaw. "No... I did not... Heh—Lisa, you are something else. I see why

you're in these games now. Since water and terrain magic will be your best bet in the rink, which are you strongest with?"

"I would say my terrain magic."

"Alright, then, for your first introduction to arena battles, we will hone in on using *water* as your weapon of choice. First rule of the games: Never show off your best skills at the beginning of each match. For you—well, you've got an ace up your sleeve." He paused for a moment before grinning. "Well, you've actually got aces four-of-a-kind!"

"So... you're saying I shouldn't use my terrain magic at all?"

"Not exactly, which leads to the second rule: Win the crowd. Best way to do that is by showing off, and in your case, popping off the fact you've got two elemental magics will secure you to be one of their favorites. If you already revealed your hidden secret at the start, your opponents will know your moves, and the audience will have nothing to look forward to. Though you're just trying to win without breaking a bone, you're nothing more than entertainment in their eyes."

A world of worry opened up to me the moment I realized there was more than just winning these arena games. Thinking back on the time I watched Reno in the rink, he was calm. *Smiley*.

Slaying magic creatures—I never had to worry if I looked good. Gaius never cared about that either, only that I was able to stay alive. During the Spar with Cal last year, after watching the replay of Tuff's memories, I looked like a fool compared to him. Elegance wasn't my strong suit, and now, I had to worry about first impressions while avoiding a punch to the face on galaxy-wide television.

"It's okay to be nervous, Lisa," Reno assured, kind and caring. Apparently, my gaze sunk to the floor, and my hands started fidgeting out of habit. "Trick is, just find something worth battling for, and don't forget to enjoy the game... though, for you, the Paragon Games might be harder to enjoy. I'll train you well, though, okay?"

I really am bad at hiding my nerves...

Reno hit my ankle with his foot. "Stand straight and tall, Lisa. You've got powerful magic, don't you?"

My chin lifted higher. "Yes..."

"Come on—say it with confidence."

I blinked twice. "I do!"

Reno smiled. “Third rule: Don’t let your opponent know you’re scared. Even if you feel like your bones are about to snap, you smile at them as if you’ve already won. Got it?”

A smile grew as I stood sturdy and tall, both habitually and because he told me to. “Got it!”

Reno jogged backward to the patio’s edge, keeping light on his feet. “Have you ever fought before? I probably should have led with that...”

I stretched out my arms, suddenly nonchalant. “I’m actually a Restricted Licensed Hunter, but the only Mystics I’ve sparred against using solely magic are Gaius and Prince Caelum.” *And Ecuras and those Dark Sages.* “I’m used to fighting creatures, not close combat with fists.”

Reno laughed again, along with his wife. “Wow! You had me fooled for just a girl gifted with magic, not a trained Hunter! Any more surprises I should know about?”

I’ve been taught by the celestial Guardians, I’ve met the last remaining Elysian living in Haim Gana, and I’m also the Agapéd Bearer—

“I think that about covers it.” I blushed and giggled.

“Okay—let me see your magic, then. Go ahead and try to hit me with some water.”

I saw they had a large bird fountain next to the fruit garden behind their home. I whipped my hand toward it and floated over about two gallons of clear water, swooshing it around my fingers and wearing the liquid as if it were gloves.

Naku made a loud *whoa* to his mom, greatly boosting my confidence—impressing the celebrity’s kid even with a simple magic move.

In a fight against a large creature, this small amount of water wouldn’t have done much damage. Against a single opponent, I could make it work perfectly.

“Let’s do a sole-survivor spar for practice; just worry about knocking me out of this portion of the yard,” Reno said, hands up in a fighting stance with fingers straight and not curled into a fist.

Using Gaius’ and Inna’s training, I slung my water out toward Reno, making a hardy splash toward his body. Since it was my first time against the champion, I didn’t go too hard with a magical push. In my mind, I was hoping to knock him over from the force, but the man didn’t move. He stood stagnant and used his arms to break through the wave like a swordfish.

Naku and Talanah *oohed* and clapped at my magic, even though I failed my first task.

“Nice force!” Reno congratulated me. “Had to use my magic to make my weight heavier to block that. The games will be fast-paced, and that move would work well in close range. This time, however, I want you to keep the water moving. Act as if your hit did *not* land and you have to keep going. Also, I’ve seen many water Mystics use water as whips and shields, so you should try giving that a go as well.”

I soaked in every word. “Got it.” I regathered the water off the ground and back to my arms. This time, I kept the water in motion as I slung it toward him—making a bubbling boomerang aim for his shoulders.

Reno ducked and guarded with his forearms, bending low and spinning around with ease to avoid as many attacks as possible. *He is so flexible!*

Suddenly, he sprinted toward me and, in a heartbeat, reached for my neck—stopping his hand before grasping me in a hold. I almost yelped, but his face was smiling big, covered in water, and my mind reminded me I wasn’t in danger.

Catching his breath and lowering his hand, Reno stated, “Fourth rule: No tree trunks allowed.”

What—

His orange eyes went to my feet. “Though you’re trying to stay in the rink, keeping your feet planted when your opponent is obviously bigger than you is a mistake. Could just grab you and toss you out. You can freeze water, too, and I’ve seen a couple of my opponents freeze their feet to the ground to stay standing. Not a bad tactic... Just don’t break your ankles. Ready to try again? Please don’t hold back on me either. Heard those Hunters are pretty tough after all.”

My mind had forgotten about Talanah and Naku watching me. This magic lesson was amazing, the most fun I had experienced in quite a while.

With another smile, I answered my new instructor. “I’m so ready.”

...

Reno trained me until the sky was nothing but warm pinks and oranges, helping me get used to battling in a sporting style. It was magically thrilling! I stopped being so timid with my strikes, acting like I was sparring with Gaius. Reno seemed to like that, too. We mainly focused on close-range combat with my water as he used his Gravitia magic with his legs and

fists to dodge my attacks. My Hunter skills did help my alertness, which Reno was again surprised by. Honestly, I didn't know how good of a fighter I already was until Reno kept praising me.

The biggest thing he showed me during that first lesson was using cleverness, something I didn't think would even be part of a sport.

"As we continue training, Lisa," he began, sweat dripping from his forehead as sunset neared, "I want you to think of your own moves. Something that is 'Lisa' and would make you stand out. Now, when I begin teaching you dúlaman, that will make you stand out, but you've also got some flashy and powerful magic. Think of smart ways to use it against your opponents, getting the audience riled up. May seem silly, but you'll do better in the rink if they are cheering for you, even if they see you more for a game piece than a girl fighting for her life."

I took a drink of water that Talanah brought out for me a while ago. My fingers drummed on the side of the glass. "Okay, but I'm not very good at the whole 'finesse' thing... My fighting, as you can tell, isn't very refined."

"Sounds like, to me, you have tactics worth watching, then. Being elegant in a game isn't what the crowd wants: They want magic and bloody noses. Doing something risky is always more fun than doing what is expected. For example, if your opponent is truly about to nail you, use your water to freeze the floor so they slip and fall."

"Wouldn't that be kinda a cheap trick, though?"

Reno laughed, coming toward me as we both sat on the patio floor, the marmalade trees spanning for miles ahead of us. "Not in these games. The crowd would laugh, and remember, you as the one who made the bigger opponent lose by a little slip on the ice. As long as you come back with a big punch at the end to win, you will be liked. Each player has their own persona out there. Pick the one that suits you best and expound on it with a little bit of magic."

Hmm... one that suits me best...

What Reno said was simple, but my brain found it tricky to comprehend. *How in the world do I pick a personality in a battle—I'm more worried about surviving and not looking like an idiot—*

Reno nudged my shoulder with his own cup of water in his hand. "You're a great Mage, Lisa. You'll do fine in the games, so don't worry

about it too much.” He pressed off the floor. “Let’s get some dinner—Talanah looks to have brought a whole crowd with food in buckets full.”

An audience gathered behind us. Some were cooking over the long grill on the other patio; some had been watching us for more than an hour, sitting on the wooden benches; some were even going to and from Reno’s home with Talanah, carrying out plates and bowls. Reno and I were so focused on training that I hadn’t noticed all the other Tuukwealdians wandering onto his property. By the looks of it, they were preparing an outdoor buffet, and my stomach reminded me of my hunger.

Turning my face toward Naku and two other little kids sitting on the floor, they all smiled at me while the lone girl said, “You’re so cool with your water magic!”

I dusted the dirt off my thighs and thanked them, watching as an older lady called them all to the outdoor table near the big fiery grill.

“Hope you don’t mind, but me being back means crowded dinners,” Reno said. “You’ll love Kala’s cooking, though—my grandmother. Just call her Mi. She doesn’t like to be reminded she’s one of the old ones.”

“Reno—you finished with your fightin’ yet?” the old woman, wielding a wok to fry eggs and veggies over the flames, shouted toward us. *“We wanna meet her sometime, too!”*

“We’re coming, Mi!” Reno called back. He leaned toward my shoulder. “You can sit by Talanah if you’d like. She’s the best if you haven’t noticed.”

When Reno said Talanah’s name, his eyes smiled with his cheeks as he guided me to the boisterous crowd of friendly strangers. Everyone—including the lively kids—wanted to talk with Reno. Sky Valley loved him, adored him, as if he were a part of everyone’s extended family. He was getting dragged left and right from the long outdoor table, which matched their beige patio and wooden benches. One man embraced him warmly like the two guards earlier that day, and the women informed him of how the town had changed since his return.

While Reno went around, not complaining about his plate of food getting cold, Talanah made sure to stick next to me at the table. Some of the ladies near us asked me the typical questions: name, age—which they were shocked by—magic, and my thoughts of Reno. Glad they took charge of leading the conversation. The lively atmosphere had my shyness swimming

all down my body, clamming me up, allowing me to only talk when spoken to first.

Dinner—containing vast amounts of charred fruits and meat from birds—lagged on for a while because everyone wanted to talk with the famed fighter. Talanah stayed by my side the *entire* time, even during dessert, which was a stodgy pudding; didn't know pudding could be hot and not served in a plastic cup. She really missed her husband. That was obvious, but she still stayed near me. *Can she tell I'm nervous in large groups, or does she not care for them either?* Whatever the case was... I appreciated her kindness.

When most of the women left to meander around the grill, Talanah leaned closer to my side. "Lisa, I know I shouldn't be thankful that you were picked for the Paragon Games so young, but I'm grateful to have this time with Reno—everyone, actually. Makes us all happy to see him here."

Naku played with the kids while all the other adults talked with Reno or about him, unable to hear Talanah's tender words. Reno had been smiling nonstop for hours but refused to have a break—making sure all those around him received the same attention and adoration back. For a celebrity... Reno was nothing like I had imagined, and neither was Sky Valley.

I relaxed more on the bench, staring at the kids running around. "He's a really great guy. I can see why everyone here loves him."

Talanah grinned. "He's done so much for Sky Valley over the past three years. His being in the games has changed our land, giving most of his winnings away to the people here so they can have better homes, businesses, and tools for working."

"Really? He doesn't keep it for himself?"

"He keeps some, but only enough to keep me and Naku comfortable here while he's away working. The rest, he gives back to Sky Valley. Before, we weren't thought of much in Tuukweald. We had minimal technology and not even an avelift stop to our border. After he won his first seasonal game during his first year, our land built better roads, new canopybosques, and more modern technology because of him." Thinking of her husband made Talanah smile at the dusty floor. "I admire him for it and all his hard work."

Reno glanced back at Talanah amid his boisterous conversation, happy to see her smiling next to me.

I followed her adoration with another question. “He looks to be treated more like a Hero than a game fighter. How come he isn’t one?”

“Well, he’s never been asked, but I thought the same. He’s saved this land from sheer poverty. I think he deserves it, but he claims he doesn’t want the title.”

My doe eyes turned toward her. “How come?”

Naku came running up to his mom, eyes wide and hands clasped. “Can I have some more pudding, *please*?”

“Sure,” Talanah said, “just a small bowl of it, though.” She then looked back at me as Naku went running. “Reno says this is his home, and he wants to always be here to support it and can only do that with the game’s earnings. He could tell you more about it—”

Talanah cut off her words as she saw Naku take a *giant* bowl of pudding from the patio counter. “Excuse me, Lisa—*Naku, I said a small bowl—Mi, stop givin’ into his begging!*”

Mi did not care, playing the game. The old dark-skinned woman plopped that pudding on his plate, and Naku giggled and ran away with his friends, causing Talanah to chase after them. When she caught up to her son, Naku passed the bowl to the other little boy before he was grabbed in a bear hug of laughter.

Joy in a big family setting... *Have I ever seen that before?* On Earth, definitely not... not in my extended family anyway. It was... strange. People getting along and the grandma not bickering with Talanah or the other moms. I thought it might have been a facade—everyone acting all cheery because Reno was there. Nope. That was truly who they were—Reno’s friends or, uh, relatives (was too nervous to ask), and they all were simply *nice*. Sky Valley was a place I was glad to be at.

...

It was late by the time everyone left. I settled into the small sunroom Talanah prepared for me. Warm fleece blankets were piled on the futon bed, and plenty of books were scattered on shelves along the walls, appearing to be untouched for quite a while. The sunroof window was long and decorated with orange and yellow leaves, starlight pooling in coolly.

Their home was one level with plenty of room for the three of them and me. Soft hoots and chirps from the kyokos were the only sounds whispering through the home, quiet and serene—opposite of the welcome-home dinner. Talanah and Reno put Naku to bed early and let me rest

undisturbed, welcoming me to any food in their cupboards. Everything about the Otyamus was beautiful, a kindness that reminded me of the Balthiers.

My eyes were about to drift off to sleep when something started tapping against the windowpane. I gave a hardy rub to my face before glancing up. Like a celestial blue beetle, a blynk was demanding to be let in. The familiar star shape—I knew it was Gaius’ before I even sat up in my bed. *What could he want right now?*

Finding the latch to open their large window took longer than expected—Tuff even joined me on the treasure hunt—and the blynk grew impatient. It compressed through one of the large cracks and shot into the pile of blankets resting in the corner of my new room.

I pursed my lips as I rushed over to the note. *Gaius better be glad it crash-landed into something soft and not breakable.* Inside was a simple message:

You alright? Or are you coming home?

- G

Most of the time, Gaius’ worry for me was a little too much. This, though, was sweet—never suspecting a burly Mystic was on the other end of this message. My heart warmed up, forgiving his bullet-like postal delivery.

Tuff made a whistle behind me at the same time I heard paper ripping. I turned away from Gaius’ kind letter to see my glowing orange sprite holding a piece of the Otyamu’s random notebook paper and a pen.

Then, it hit me. “Oh yeah—first time getting to use the blynk enchantment. Thanks, bud.”

I grabbed the ink pen from his stubby hand and wrote back to the Keeper with an even simpler answer:

“I’m staying. See you in two days!”

The torn paper wasn’t too thick. I carefully reviewed the origami frog instructions in my head as I folded the creases. In minutes, the cutest little frog formed with my message inside, and I even added two scribbly circles for eyes so it could see where it was flying to.

Okay, let’s hope this charm works...

The charm used to create a blynk was easy enough to understand and cast without needing Tuff to show me a flashback. All I had to do was say one word with the recipient's name while pinching the sides of the blynk and pushing out a little bit of magic.

"*Siui, Gaius*," I uttered with my eyes shut and fingers pinching the toes of my frog.

Instantly, my blynk glowed *purple*, and the origami frog came to life! The little eyes I drew on his head blinked as the paper amphibian hopped out of my fingers like a true tree frog. I watched as it leaped into the air and shot out the same crack Gaius' blynk rushed through—soaring high into the sky with the speed of a jet plane.

I stared out the window a little longer with Tuff snuggled up in my lap. *Magic is so cool...*

...

Reno taught me dúlaman the following morning, Talanah and Naku joining us again as our audience. Learning to hit somebody without magic or a sword... I honestly didn't think I could do it. Even my strong punches powered by my magic pulse against Gaius would leave me weak. My spirit was hopeful, though, because Reno had faith in me—smiling big with the morning sun lighting up his orange eyes.

"Dúlaman is not just seeing how fast you can swing your arm or leg toward your opponent," Reno said as he rolled back his shoulders, loosening his muscles and cracking his spine. "It's about *where* you hit and being precise with a *pinch* of magic. It will take some knowledge of the human body but is well worth it in the rink. You'll catch on quickly, no doubt."

"Got it," I said, nodding.

Reno girded his beige shirt and tossed it aside, his lean Heroes Games body rippling with healthy muscles.

"*What a view!*" Talanah shouted from the side, causing Reno to smile at the patio floor.

Their love for each other is just the sweetest thing.

"Dúlaman is hitting nerves against bones with the proper knowledge and use of magic. It has two main elements you must understand: First, you are essentially shocking the nerves of your opponent's body, not breaking bones, bursting blood vessels, or tearing tissue like a normal punch would do. To do that leads to the second element, the hand sign."

Reno held up his hand, free of sweat and not clammy in the slightest, and made a type of fist where his index minor knuckle was standing out, almost like the sign language symbol for the letter “T” but without the thumb sticking high in between.

“Using your knuckle, tightly curled and sticking out like this, you’ll be able to hit the nerves of your opponent perfectly and with a considerable amount of force. But this means nothing if you don’t know where to hit.”

After unfurling his pointed fists, Reno lifted his elbow and continued explaining the fighting style. “For example, what you want to achieve is similar to the zapping and tingling you get when you hit your nerve on the back of your elbow.”

“Oh—you mean like your funny bone but on more parts of your body?” I theorized.

The confusion on Reno’s face made no sense. I didn’t say anything weird or unusual. My instructor chuckled. “Funny bone?”

I shrugged my right shoulder. “Yeah, like you were just showing me... right?”

“Hate to break it to you, but there’s no bone there. You’re hitting a nerve instead, one that happens to connect to your pinky all the way through to your spine. Not sure who told you that was bone or why it’s funny.”

Ah. Earthian lingo that doesn’t make sense in Tuukweald and leaves me looking like an idiot yet again... Perfect.

“We will start with something easy to explain the result you will be achieving. Hold out your arms in front of me with your fists clenched—palms facing each other.”

I did as he said. He hit my left radius bone lightly with a “karate chop” motion, and instantly, my arm flinched and retreated. The strike—more of a tap, really—wasn’t forceful, but it still surprisingly stung. Not even a red mark appeared.

Rubbing my thin arm, I looked up at Reno. “How come that hurt without you even trying?” A part of me wished I didn’t say that because I feared he would say it wasn’t supposed to hurt—proving I was inhumanly *weak*.

“That’s because there isn’t much fat or muscle on that part of your arm,” he answered, my heart relieved. “Hitting your opponent there will cause them to drop whatever they are holding. This includes their magic—

could even make that water whip technique you did yesterday lose its form. Hitting here,”—he pointed to my left forearm—“you don’t have to be precise since the bone is fairly long.”

Whoa—so cool!

Next, Reno pointed his dúlaman fist right in the middle of my chest underneath my collarbone. “Go ahead and try walking toward me.”

The request was odd, but I did it anyway... Well, I tried to at least. I went to take one step, but Reno’s curled finger and pointed knuckle on my chest prevented me. The more I tried, the more it hurt. *He’s not even using much strength—how is this possible?*

I crunched my shoulders with my chest in pain. “Whoa—I can’t even go one step,” I said in painful awe.

He lowered his arm. “Your nerves and bones are more vulnerable here, just like before on your arm: not enough cushion from muscles and fat. Even without any magic involved in my hand, your body is protecting itself and won’t allow you to move. Punch your opponent sharp with the pointed fist as I showed you, and they will back down easily. Punch a bit *too* hard, you might break a bone—a good self-defense move, too.”

“That’s so cool! So, what nerves do you normally hit when you make your opponents fall down? I saw you do it in the rink once, hitting them on their torso or something.”

“Well, before we see if you can handle that, are you able to put magic behind a punch or kick? Using your magic pulse to power your strength?”

Confidence made me sway on my heels. “Hmm-mm, but it does leave me pretty weak.”

“The fact you can do that, Lisa, means we can skip the tutorial lessons and go right to nerve-hitting with magic.”

My eyes lit up as I stood an inch taller. “Really? You mean to paralyze my opponent with a dúlaman punch—”

“You’ll have to use a little bit of your magic strength... but only a crumb of it. Here, let’s try it. Along the left side of my torso, I want you to hit,”—Reno pointed to each spot on his side stomach as he spoke—“here and here. Do it quickly and with force, being as *precise* as possible. Though you’ll need to eventually do this in mid-battle, I won’t do anything but be in a blocking position.”

Oh—anxiety dove through every part of my body like a mudslide. I was about to punch a man who wasn't Gaius and also happened to be *shirtless* and not caring about it one bit. Giving a weak punch wouldn't make Reno happy with my results, and if I punched too hard with my magic, I could hurt him—all the while, his wife and kid were not even letting a blink go by in case they missed something magical.

"Uh... so how much magic do I store in my hand?" I asked as I looked at my small excuse for a dúlaman fist.

"Ever opened an enchanted lock or said a charm?"

I nodded.

"That is all the strength you need in that fist. Like I said, you aren't trying to knock me out with a punch. You're just trying to zap my nerves. Now, let's see it, Lisa."

I held up my pale hands and circled Reno as he held up his arms, acting like he would fight back. Remembering the two spots near his side ribs, I took a deep breath. The amount of magic I used to open Gaius' magical door was what I fueled my hands with. In all honesty, I didn't feel any stronger—almost like I was holding a marble in between my fingers.

With a quick and hard blow using both of my index knuckles, I jabbed Reno on his bare torso exactly where he told me to.

He scrunched his eyes and fell on one knee—just from my two little punches! The best part was my stamina; it was still at one hundred percent. No weak knees or sore fingers, only a little red blush on my knuckles where I punched his muscled stomach.

On the sidelines, Talanah started clapping for me, and I heard Naku say, "How'd you knock down Dad like that?"

"Oh—I'm sorry!" I quickly apologized to Reno as he wobbled back to his feet.

My instructor smiled through his pain, enjoying it if anything. "You kiddin'... Lisa, that was perfect. Seems you've been lying to me about your strength so far. Gonna be one jolt of a training session with you. Now, I'm even more excited than I was before. Ready to try again, only this time with me trying to push you out of the way and you evading?"

A river of relief flowed through my body, and joy filled my heart. Being chosen to be in the Paragon Games... I didn't think I stood a chance; part of me still doubted it, but not as much as before. This one day and a half with Reno had me see myself differently. My Hunter training improved

my skill, and learning to adapt to a new fighting style was easier because of Gaius and Inna's hard work. *Maybe I can stand on the same playing field as the other opponents after all... Maybe I don't just have to survive in the games but can actually aim to rank higher—win first place, too...*

Resuming my fighting stance, I smiled back at Reno. "I'm ready."

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25 “Why aren’t you a Hero?”

The first month of training went by so quickly. Each week, I spent three days with Reno and three days with Gaius and Inna (the extra day in between was for resting and returning home). Soreness was a recurring visitor for my muscles, and bruises decorated my knees with purple and pink daily—mixed in with splatters of freckles and dirt. I loved it, though. The Mage I was before was now turning into a magical fighter.

Though most of my time in Sky Valley was spent training, Talanah was kind enough to show me around their main city in the canopybosque, Naku tagging along. We rode the standers and walked across the sky bridges that led toward the center, where many citizens were either working hard or enjoying their time off. Delis served their dishes in flatbreads topped with chicken and grilled vegetables, and there were traveling snow cone carts where the servers used ice glintz to freeze the sweet water on the spot. Clothing stores were small with all the essentials. I bought myself a pair of those sandal boots called zaris, which were very comfortable for all the walking we did during the day. Tuff enjoyed the trip as well, not having to be invisible since many of the Tuukwealdians knew of glainies and saw them as normal as flying kyokos.

One store in the center of Yuka, the largest canopybosque city, was their magic shop. I went there more than any other place when Reno gave me a break.

The owner, Yokun, had glintz I had never heard of before and many small vials of potions. Fire cherries and glowing beldums I had seen in Gaius’ books were growing in planters, and quite a few training staffs with smaller glintz were also on display.

The first time Talanah took me there, she was quite surprised at my reaction to the shop. Though magic shops were as common as convenience stores in New Jersey, I still found them fascinating.

“You can buy something if you’d like,” she told me, my face inches away from the Hippo Beans (according to another one of Gaius’ books, Hippo Beans created a magic cloud of sleepy dust).

I backed away. “Oh, you don’t have to. I have plenty of credits. Just never have seen these before...” I took another glance around the shop,

noticing the abundance of magical items and a wandering kyoko flying through the open sunroom, knocking yellow leaves onto the floor of the shop. “Sky Valley seems to really love magic. I think that’s pretty cool.”

Talanah walked beside me, gazing at several magic wristbands embedded with light stones. “I haven’t traveled much outside of Tuukweald, but I can say that we care for magic as much as we care for our homes and nature. We use it wisely, respect it, and grow with it because, without magic, the goodness and wonder of our world would be shrouded in Darkness.”

What she said about the freedom of magic grabbed my attention even more than the magical plants in Yukon’s shop. “That goes along with the ideals of the Guardians and Keepers, right?”

Talanah nodded her head sharply. “Magic is beautiful when it’s in a land that trusts it, and we make sure to keep all dark magic out. We have a couple of Hunters stationed that take care of the beasts and two Mixtitians that create elixirs for our land when dark magic infects the crops. Here, magic is as valuable as water, and to be completely honest with you Lisa, I couldn’t imagine a life without it.”

Talanah mentioning the value of magic sparked a memory within me: my time in Nuolja. Both cities valued magic. Both cities needed it to survive. However, one saw magic as a burden and something to be traded for money or life while the other saw it as a gift that should be treasured and acknowledged.

I hated knowing the Nuoljians couldn’t love magic like those in Sky Valley. Strong magic was seen as greedy in the arctic province, making the Vits a walking credit dispenser. Here, Reno had shown that powerful magic could do marvelous things, and for his home, it brought more life and comfort to his people.

Knowing I couldn’t do anything about Nuolja irked my stomach every time I thought of Ayker and the kids. I’d have given anything for Boolavogue to ally with them...

...

Pastel purples and oranges washed the evening sky during my training session with Reno. As he worked with me on more dúlaman blocks and strikes, a Tuukwealdian duo of wrinkly sisters stopped by with a bouquet of pink flowers. It mostly contained daisies mixed with foreign glowing peonies in the center; nothing too grand and not particularly a surprise

either. Three days before, a family of five came by with homemade lemon squares called pakikais, and Naku and I ate more than we probably should have. Still, Reno and Talanah happily ran up to the sisters and listened to their thanks and adoration for Reno's earnings.

Visitors were a daily occurrence. Pretty sure half the city stopped by to thank Reno during my time there.

Talanah took the flowers inside along with Naku, seeing as the sun was beginning to set. She told Reno leftovers were in the fridge from their big dinner the night before—very odd. Usually, Reno's Grandma, Mi, would bring over all her friends and have a vibrant shebang of supper and laughs. The nights the Otyamu's didn't have a party, either Talanah would cook or we four would simply go into town to one of the small delis.

A quiet evening... it was rare, so I took advantage of it.

I sat on the floor of their patio, right on the edge of their treetop balcony. My feet dangled off the side, my calves brushing against the leaves. The golden forest view, swimming with refracting light and kyokos flying below, I soaked it all in. Peaceful and serene.

"Reno," I asked, hearing him walking behind me, "what are uldirons?"

My celebrity instructor sat beside me; he wasn't an acrophobe either, so he dangled his feet off the edge of his balcony, too. "Uldirons... you mean the kyokos?"

"Oh, are they the same thing?"

Reno chuckled. "Yes, but that's a pretty old name for them. Where did you hear that?"

"Gaius told me you had them..." A sigh and a chin tilt followed. "He likes to use technical names for everything."

Reno leaned back on his hands as a gust of wind swirled the creatures in question below like a flock of birds. "I don't blame him. Pretty sure some kids years back started calling them kyokos, and it just kind of stuck with us ever since."

Being with Reno for over a month, many questions popped up about his life stories that I wanted to know. Somedays, I would forget to ask him since I was constantly thinking of the games and training instead. When I would remember, he was spending time with Naku and Talanah. But after seeing the two sisters come by with flowers as a gift, that recurring question tugged on my tongue. I had to ask.

“You know, if I didn’t know you were a player in the Heroes Games and I came to Sky Valley, I would think you were some type of Hero.”

He released a hot breath. “You wouldn’t be the first. I know they treat me like one, but I’m nowhere near good enough for that title.”

“What? No way!” My voice rose. “You basically revived this whole city all on your own. Been here long enough to see that. Pretty sure ‘saving a treetop city’ is one of the main qualifications for that title.” A joke that I was being deadly serious about.

“Whoa—didn’t know little Lisa was so passionate about this.” He raised his brows, laughter trailing his words.

Confidence kept me talking. “I just can’t believe you’ve never been asked before...” I softened my voice, thinking about King Bolthor’s gift to me that I refused. “You think you would take it though? The title, I mean... if Tuukweald offered it to you?”

Reno sat upright, hunching over a bit and gazing far off through the clouds ahead. His ember eyes were as bright as the setting sun. “Nah.”

My eyes fluttered. I figured he would’ve said yes. “How come? With your magic and skill at fighting, you could save a whole lot of people all over the planet.”

“Means a lot that you think so much of me, Lisa, but I’m no grand Mystic like most Heroes out there... and even if I were, I would still refuse. Don’t feel like my heart is called to it, ya know? Sky Valley is my home, and with that comes a handful of love and struggles, just like any normal family. I know that I do have skill in fighting, and there are more nations out there that would benefit from my magic, but the thing is...” He scanned the sea of trees as if the memories were on each leaf. “Sky Valley’s people were put in *my* path, and I don’t think that was by some mere chance.”

Reno paused, and that same grin he had when he spoke to Naku or Talanah appeared. “Plus, being a Hero would mean even less time with my family—the little bit I already have when it’s off-season. Knowing I’m helping them and our home... nothing is more important to me than their happiness.”

He turned to me.

I was making the dopiest Reno-obsessed face, doe-eyed and not blinking, the sapphire blue in my eyes spotlighting his glistening nose.

Tuff came around to my lap as Reno said in gentle seriousness, “Just my opinion, but I believe some people are meant to save the world—meant

for the Hero's life—while others... the ‘world’ they are called to save may just be a small group of people. For me, my world is Sky Valley and the two inside that house. These people needed me, and there was no one else out there who seemed to care about them enough to do something about their struggles. I train hard because I love seeing my friends and neighbors be able to walk on clean roads, ride an avelift to the main city in Tuukweald, and receive medical attention for any physical or magical illnesses. It’s where I’m meant to be, no doubt about that. So, I’ll keep playing in the games if it means my home will continue to prosper.”

For a young guy, Reno sure had a lot of wisdom. His words left me thinking—*really* thinking and not just daydreaming of magic like normal—about a bigger purpose than just training for the games. Reno didn’t know I was the Agapéd Bearer. Pretty sure he would’ve said something by now. Last year, I completed my purpose, and now, my goal was vaguely to become a Hero... but I never had a genuine reason why.

Making decisions for myself was not something I did. Gaius told me to be a Charmer, so I did; the Guardians said I needed to train to stop Saraquel, and I accomplished that; Gaius took me in front of the Queen and told me to train as a Hunter, and I agreed without second-guessing it. Even at home, if Mom told me to do something, I did it... though cleaning my room took a *bit* longer than she probably liked. Whatever was laid out for me... I just did it because that was what was required of me. Letting people down and saying no—my self-conscious heart could not even dream of that.

Being gifted with magic meant every Mystic and Mage’s ultimate goal should be a Hero. That’s what I thought. Made perfect sense. But, here was a young twenty-four-year-old man who was playing in a sports arena and changing a small part of the world without second-guessing himself. The more I soaked in his words, the more open my heart was to discover what I was born to become—what the new Lisa Robbie was meant to be.

I petted Tuff’s head, the fluffy part that stuck out of the diamond on his little round noggin. “So... how did you know being in the games was what you were meant to do?”

He paused for a short while. “You know that feeling you get when you help someone? Like genuinely helping them, not just picking up something they’ve dropped or saying ‘thank you’ as a courtesy?”

Memories flickered like an old movie reel to the time I saved Vonny and Caelum from the Dark Sages. “Yeah. It’s like a weird type of joy that

warms my heart... knowing I was able to make them smile even though I was scared... It's a feeling I love, to be honest, to know I am the reason they are happy."

"Well, then, Lisa..." The Otyamu fighter smiled at me, "... sounds like you were born to save others, and with the path you're going down, I bet you'll discover how to do that in no time. Could be a Hero. Could be Hunter. Maybe even a Warrior someday. You'll know what you're meant to do the moment it happens."

Reno began to stand back up as I asked, "How will I know?"

"When saying 'yes' comes to you as easily as your next breath—your heart will love it that much." He stretched his arms high up, cracking the back of his spine, followed by a sigh of relief. "Welp, I say we will call it a day here. I know Talanah said there's food in the house, but you don't have to eat it if you don't—"

"Is it more of that cucumber spread?" I interrupted Reno as my mind thought about the fluffy sandwiches his Mi brought over last night.

"You like that stuff?" he asked, scoffing at the thought.

I stood up, dusting the dirt off my shorts. "You don't? It was so good on the flatbread we had last night!"

"Well, you and Talanah can eat all that, then; too scared to tell Mi I hate it. Gonna stick with a less sorry-excuse for a sandwich spread—"

"Hummus is *not* better! Bottom of the tier list for me."

"*Lies*—what could possibly be better?"

I started counting on my fingers as we began to head inside. "Uh, peanut butter for sure, strawberry jelly after that, hazelnut spread next—"

The moment I took another step forward, my spine shot my body with piercing pain. It was as if someone nailed me in the back with a hammer. The thing was, Reno didn't hit me, and nothing serious happened during my lessons earlier that day, but I bent over in pain and let out an "*ouch*" loud enough for my mentor to turn around.

"Hey—you alright?" he asked, alarmed, seeing me trying to grasp the middle of my spine.

To not worry him, I said with a forced smile, "Yeah, just all the soreness finally starting to hit me, I guess."

Reno bought my lie, pausing for a second before continuing his way inside toward their earthy kitchen. I, on the other hand, limped straight to

the bathroom. This was not the first time my back hurt like crazy, but it sure was the most severe.

With the bathroom door shut and my back facing their long mirror, I reached my hand behind my head to grab the collar of my shirt, girding it with my fingers.

Looking at my spine... It was completely fine, dotted with a couple of brown bruises the size of dimes and as pale as ever. There was no large scrape, no gnarly scratch, and no giant purple patches of busted blood vessels.

Then, the pain was gone—as quick as a blink—leaving me clueless as to what caused it. Wrinkles now ran along the back of my shirt as my hair draped over.

Maybe it was just a muscle strain or something...

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26 Painful Shockers

Only thirty days remained until the Paragon Games commenced, mid-December marking three months of training for me so far.

Overthinking the games' difficulties and unknown trials was a daily occurrence. I hated it. I had to constantly push those worries off my mind as each day inched closer... but it was difficult when I was in Boolavogue. Everyone I passed had to stop and say something to me, either through words or glaring eyes. It was never a hearty "We believe in you, Lisa!" coming from their mouths or a smile of encouragement: it was fear, assuming I would lose and disgrace Boolavogue. This was the land of fierce Monster Hunters, but now, it was the face of a child on a butcher's block.

Though my common sense of all things magical was still pretty low, I wasn't entirely in the dark. I knew every Boolavogian citizen would be in their homes watching the games' broadcast, getting hyped for the biggest event about to happen in a month and growing upset that little me was representing their nation.

Despite all the negative thoughts about my mincing appearance, I was confident. Gaius and Reno trained me hard and well. Happy to say I could finally use dúlaman in sparring while also using my magic. At first, it was tricky, trying to get close enough to Reno to hit him before he hit me. I fell quite a lot at first, even with Reno not hitting me as hard as his opponents in the rink, but he never gave up on me.

Ever since then—not sure if it was me or just some magic perk—the fighter inside me began to blossom... and I felt pretty cool being able to finally land some hefty blows on Reno.

Gaius was a different story.

It was supposed to be my day of rest, but after Gaius finished his work in the Veradome, he offered a traditional spar with me. I immediately agreed and met him in the middle of his practice ground after lunch. Grabbing the neckband was already hard enough with an average-sized opponent, but I was about to practice with the Keeper himself. The man stood a whole foot taller than me and could easily pin me down with only three fingers.

We stood in the center of the wintery field, his home being *inside* the Veradome and still changing with the seasons. It wasn't a realm. The same sun above our heads rose and set with Boolavogue. Asking Gaius about his magical home behind the enchanted door never led to a logical answer either. In fact, it *never* led to an answer; just a Keeper on the other side smirking. I eventually stopped asking, accepting that some things in this world—in Gaius' world—were best left for my curious mind to wonder.

Before we began our spar, Gaius had us share another shot of Mataalixer. I was beyond thankful. A "Gaius punch" was something my teenage bones never wanted to experience.

As he broke the glowing geode in half, fizzy confetti popping in the air, he said, "You know this means I'm not going easy on you, right?"

I gulped down the drink—not savoring the bubbly, tap watery taste. "Will dúlaman still work on you if I try it?"

He snickered. "You think you'll land a hit on me?"

"Yes—been practicing long enough and can *finally* say I can—*ouch!*" Pain pinched my spine, and my hand instantly dropped the empty geode cup and lunged for my back.

Are you kidding me? Not today, stupid back!

Gaius' mouth turned small while his eyes flickered. He was confused.

Before he could say anything or stop our spar, I straightened up and lied, "Sorry—just a muscle flare." I rolled my shoulders, but it didn't help. *Why isn't the pain leaving today...?* I took a few steps back. "As I was *saying*, get ready to lose because I'll be winning *and* knocking you flat on your rugged face."

He stood unnervingly still for a moment. "Well, if you're this confident, I'll make you a deal..." Then, a toss of the mataalilyte shard.

Phew—our spar is still happening.

Gaius smirked. "If you're able to land a good hit on me... I'll consider it a win for you today, even without you taking possession of my ribbon. For our match, let's do what Reno said and only use water for now. When you start losing—"

"*If I start losing, you mean,*" I corrected him loudly as he searched his pocket for the ribbons.

He huffed. "*Then*, you may use your terrain magic." Gaius handed me a blue ribbon, which I tied around the shoulder strap attached to my

winter jacket. The Keeper tied the green one around his belt.

“Shouldn’t it be around your neck?” I reminded him as we began backing up to take our stances. My back nicked me again, sharp like the edge of a kitchen knife, and I had to bite on my lower lip in fear of Gaius noticing.

The Keeper didn’t see my pain and found his perfect spot near the edge of the trees. “Trying to give you a slight chance at winning this one, Lisa.”

He really doubts me. Oh, I’ll show him...

Gaius typically stood straight with clenched fists, but for some reason, he cocked his chin. He scanned my body, watched me hunch and roll my shoulders, and took his time to curl his fingers until his knuckles were white. “You ready?”

Another scratch to my spine, another twitch to my face. But I forced a determined smile and nodded. “Don’t hold back on me either, old man!”

With the winter breeze dying and the sun peaking high, Gaius returned to his normal self... and started the fight with the sleaziest move up his sleeve. Roots burst from the ground like a bear trap and knotted themselves up around my ankles. As they tightened, pulling my feet together, I fell forward, hearing the sounds of Gaius’ boots running full-throttle toward me.

Smart, but not smart enough.

I let Gaius think he’d won by allowing him to come within six feet of me, but I commanded the earth to move before he could try anything else. Since my ankles were strapped to the ground, I cleverly moved the cold soil they were bound to instead. A column of dirt—the size of my mom’s car—shot upwards to the sky with me riding on top of it. I flew on the frosty patch of land with ease.

“Should’ve bound my hands!” I yelled, soaring over his head as my column knocked him off his feet.

“I said no terrain magic!” Gaius yelled back at me, already on his feet again.

“It’s called *tactics*, Gaius! Shouldn’t have believed me and expected I would try this!”

Before I landed my rock on the ground, I whipped out the water from my belt pouch and froze it into a sharp, glacial knife. The roots around

my ankles cut easily with my frozen shard, and I hit the ground with a rumble, pushing the rock away in all directions.

Gaius never wasted time in combat. He had already gathered his artillery of plants when I stood on my feet, smiling big, proud that I had outsmarted him.

I gathered the frost from the grass and whipped it into a chain of ice as I saw him coming for me. But then—

“Ouch—” I bit, another jabbing pain to my spine, and my icy rope quivered. *Nervous system—can you stop with the surprise attacks?*

Gaius’ thorns hurtled toward me and shredded the shoulder of my jacket. Blood would’ve poured, but the Mataalixer prevented a scratch, and I shouldn’t have felt pain. But I did—in the same mocking spot in the center of my back. And it showed on my face.

Crap—I should have parried the attack—it was an easy one to avoid, and Gaius knew that.

I heard his stomps slow down. I was *not* ending this spar. My body rolled over quickly. Ice turned into ribbons of hot water, and I barreled it toward the Keeper. Steam rose fast and fogged his vision, roots slithering blindly in the crusty grass. My water wasn’t an attack. He had to have noticed. But it gave me time to rise to my feet, wipe away a tear, and regain my composure.

I pressed on through the pain, and we took turns at long-range attacks, inching closer and closer to each other. I kept up with him even with my nerves parading needles down my spine. *He’s not going easy on me, right? He wouldn’t do that. I think I can finally win this match.*

Suddenly, one of my waves tripped him up. Confidence soared through me, and I used the ground below to spring me forward.

I was about to try the dúlaman rib-numbing when my spine suddenly tightened with a piercing stitch.

Not right now!

The pain was fierce, like a rusty nail scratching my bone, causing me to wobble. My dúlaman plan was immediately negated, and I veered off to the right.

We continued our match, but every few seconds, nerves in the middle of my back would pinch hard—biting me like the winter frost along the trees. The pain bullied me all the while I tried to avoid losing to Gaius

again. I waited for it to subside, but after each dirt column and water whip, the aches continued to linger.

I had to hurry the match along, making my sole goal to grab Gaius' ribbon and not to necessarily pierce him with my dúlaman fists.

The Keeper came out with his fiercest move: the tree swing. I both admired and feared this move because it was exactly how it sounded. The Keeper reached his hand down into the earth—acting as if the soil wasn't frozen and rock hard—and grabbed a tree root as thick as a python's body out from the ground. He also wasn't letting me stand by and watch. The man was multitasking, making the smaller roots in the earth spring up like boobytraps—aiming for the soles of my boots.

As I avoided his shrubbed army, another invisible spike stabbed my back. My teeth gritted. *I can't take this much longer... I'm flying right over to him and grabbing that ribbon right off his belt!*

A couple of weeks ago, I asked Reno if I should fly in the games. He said, "Best not to unless it's your final match, but *only* if you think you will win. Your opponent will be powerful and put everything he or she has into that match, but show off that flying skill too early, and all the battle tactics will change in your subsequent matches. It's your flashiest move, Lisa. Save it for the grand finale."

A giant tree was hurtling toward me by the hands of an all-too-happy Mystic—*proud* he was about to pummel a little girl who had a mysterious back illness that wouldn't shut up.

Using flight was my only option.

Bark and splinters meant nothing to the Keeper. His calloused hands clasped the tree as I saw his muscles tense with magic, veins throbbing as the wind sliced. When that giant oak tree came my way—whopping at speeds that should've been impossible for any human—my body hunched.

And then everything just stopped.

Gaius held the tree in the air like a baseball bat pointed toward me, and all I felt was the reverberations of the icy breeze nipping at my pink nose. Not even a dead leaf brushed by me.

My fists were clenched, water swirling around my knuckles as my chest puffed and puffed. I peered behind the twenty-foot tree. "Wha—why'd you stop?" I breathed when our eyes connected.

He stared, silent. "You're hurt... aren't you?" Then, he lifted the tree in the air, and all its roots began to slide back into the earth.

Soil morphed and cracked the air while I watched the bugs scatter every which way from the quaked land. Water dropped from my hold, but not because I made it happen. The pain caused me to flinch, my magic stopped. “I’m fine—”

“Your agility is your strong suit. And it was off.” The tree swam—*literally* swam—back to its woodland family on the other side of the practice field as Gaius walked toward me. “You also were tense the entire time, missing many of my attacks. Even the easy ones I intentionally threw your way.” His eyes went to the *four* should-have-sliced-my-arm-off tears to my jacket. “And twice you said *ouch* while trying to blind me with mist, thinking I wouldn’t have noticed. The Mataalixer negates pain from *my* magical attacks. So...”

Gaius stood inches from me. His face was sweaty and solemn, trying to hide his worry for me with a blank stare; I avoided his green eyes at all costs. “What’s wrong?”

I sucked on my lip, annoyed with myself. *If I just would’ve sparred better through the pain.* “My back... it just started, you know, hurting or whatever,” I said, casual, like it didn’t matter. Just a muscle flare.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in pain?”

I crossed my arms. “Well, it wasn’t until mid-way through.” A lie, and then I muttered, “Didn’t think it would happen today...”

He stopped breathing. “*Today?*”

And I realized what I just said.

I never told Gaius about my back hurting *more* than today... or over the past three months—only because I thought it was just my body hurting from training so hard.

Now, it seemed I was wrong; couldn’t let Gaius know that, though. He had enough to worry about besides me and would probably take me out of the games. No way was that going to happen, not after all the training I did with Reno.

“So, this has happened before... and you didn’t tell me?” He crossed his arms this time. Eyes drifted from my torn-up jacket to my shoulders. Reaching for my back.

I pivoted as if that stopped his staring. “It’s just from practicing so much—magic soreness or whatever you call it.”

Gaius didn’t buy that. “*Magic soreness?*”

“You know, like, when my magic is overworked, it makes my body sore.”

He huffed in disbelief, clouding the chilly air with his warm breath. “First off, that isn’t a real ache. Second, the magic you have doesn’t affect your physical health; it only drains stamina like any normal Mage. Tell me what really happened.”

This time, I was being honest, and my hands flared to the skies. “I don’t know. Just hurts sometimes—and before you ask, I already checked my back, and nothing is there. No bump, scratch, or bruise—just normal-looking skin.” I looked down at my boots. “I mean, I *have* been training hard—which I enjoy doing—so I guess my muscles aren’t used to it...” My baby-doll eyes reached him. “Think I could have a small vial of that Enkurious algae potion when we get back?”

“You know that only numbs magic wounds,” he reminded me.

“But what if it’s magic soreness—”

“I’m not giving you medicine for something that doesn’t exist, Lisa. An Enkurious potion isn’t a vitamin drink. It’s an anesthetic and shouldn’t be used blindly. Just pour yourself a glass of water with a scoop of vigor powder. Should take away the pain from your strained muscles...” He cupped my shoulder, *making* me stare at him. “*If* that is what the problem is.”

I scrunched my nose at the thought of drinking the grass-green powder. Though I had it often with honey, I still didn’t care for it. Plus, I didn’t believe it would heal my back issue. Gaius had me drink that sorry green juice after most of our practices over the past three months. If it was supposed to heal me, it would’ve by now—hence the predicament I was in.

“If it gets worse, let me know. I’m not having you compete in the games when your body isn’t well enough.”

Just like I thought, back pain equals no more Fighter 12...

I pinched a smile—my back *now* deciding to remain silent—and walked with Gaius to his home. As we passed the watering pump between his half-buried cottage and greenhouse, the star engravings on his wooden domain entrance started glowing green.

Entering through, adorned in her full-length wetsuit and winter coat, was Inna carrying her water orb of starseeds attached to her six-foot scepter. Her blush hair was in two lavish braids instead of one, cascading behind her back.

“I have a new batch of seeds for you. I see practice is going...” she began to say before her eyes saw me. My hair was knotted, and my jacket looked like it had been through a paper shredder *twice*. “... well?”

Great. My body ached, and now, I was embarrassed about my appearance in front of Inna—the definition of feminine perfection.

Yep—I was done. “I’ll be going inside now.” A saltine cracker had more flavor than my words as I marched toward the Keeper’s home

“Lisa,” Gaius said, stopping my feet from moving, “take an extra week off when you return to Earth this afternoon. Allow your body to rest. When you come back, we will continue training until the games. I’ll be busy with the seeds and in the Veradome the rest of the day, so if I don’t see you before you go... be safe.”

As I said bye to Inna and turned my back on the two Keepers, Gaius loudly began to remind me, “Don’t forget—”

“—‘to drink the vigor water’... I know. I promise.”

After a drink of the sorry healing juice and a long nap, the time came for me to evanesce back home. I changed out of my Boolavogian winter garment and into my straight-leg jeans, hoodie, and black Converse before leaving Gaius’ home.

Once I teleported to Kamari’s Aura Beacon and back to the woods of my house, I landed in even colder weather. As I ran through the snowy grass and to the back door, I saw Mom lounging on the couch. The gaudiest coffee mug—the one shaped like a Christmas ornament with a bad paint job—was cupped between her palms, filled with her post-work coffee.

I tapped on the back door ever so gently so Mom couldn’t hear.

Instantly, the door cracked with my doppelganger on the other side. Our eyes connected, and we patiently waited until Mom was distracted. Typically, that was when the TV resumed whatever program she was watching, but this time her phone rang.

As she put down the mug to grab her BlackBerry on the table near the unlit Christmas tree, dupla-me opened the door more. She extended her hand just enough for our fingers to touch.

The moment our skin brushed—just like always—my other me *poofed* away. Her memories crashed into my brain like a tidal wave as our souls combined, a headache instantly forming. Luckily, dupla-me hadn’t been too stressed, so the pain was mild, tolerable.

Seems school went well this week. No surprise since Christmas is coming up...

Shoes off, I squatted on our fake tiled kitchen floor until I reached the pantry to grab a snack, another thing I usually did after I returned home to make it seem like I wasn't off in a magical land. But suddenly, Mom paused the TV. That wasn't anything unusual, but only when I heard her say, "Yes, Ma," did it change the situation: Grandma had something serious to talk about.

With a handful of Oreos creating black crumbs in my palm—Tuff wishing he could have a bite (I shooed away his invisible hands)—I went over to the couch to wait for Mom to recap all the drama Grandma told her on the phone. I began my Oreo eating method—twisting the top, eating the cream, and finishing the two cookie pieces last—when Mom rolled her eyes and went *silent*. Odd. Mom would at least have something to say, even if it were just an "I know," or "Sure, Mom."

I finished all my Oreos by the time she hung up the phone and laid it on the couch cushion between us. A sigh and a long pause came from her.

"What did Grandma want?" I asked.

She rubbed her face as if all her energy was drained by that phone call. Her hair was still in her work ponytail, though quite ruffled from lounging on the couch. She somehow could make messy hair look good; wished she had passed along that trait to me.

Staring straight ahead at the paused TV—happening to be *The Santa Clause*—Mom begrudgingly responded, "Grandma wants us to come over for Christmas this year... and stay until New Year's."

Since moving from Virginia to New Jersey, Mom and I hadn't been over to Grandma's... which meant for four years, we had avoided staying at their old country home. Avoided the iconic Robbie Tension Christmas. Besides the fact Mom hated driving long distances, the last time they were together for the holidays was when Mom told Grandma she was moving away from home. The same day—only eight hours apart—Mom asked me about moving to New Jersey.

Mom said they fought, but I didn't believe that. Fighting took two people equally putting forth the same angry force, and Mom wasn't like that. I was strapped in the car during the so-called fight, so I don't remember anything but Mom wiping away tears as she stumbled toward the driver's seat. She played music—*lots* of old, soul-warming 80s classics—

and forced a grin each time our eyes connected in the rearview mirror. *Everything is alright*, her eyes said... but I knew that was a lie. Words that tore hearts shredded their relationship that day in their cabin home... as if their bond wasn't already a tattered strip of love.

Though I was curious, I didn't dare ask about it, not even now. Simply speculated. I bet Grandma shouted about how it was wrong of Mom to leave her family. Mom probably left without saying a word... or something like that. For the record, I had never heard Mom yell, so maybe she did fire back, but that was very unlikely. Mom... She was the best.

My reaction wasn't the same as hers, however. I was more surprised than solemn about the situation. "Wait—how come we have to go there? Why can't they just visit up here for a weekend like they normally do before they spend the rest of Christmas with Aunt Genn?"

"Apparently, Leo saved up his vacation time from work and took off the whole week with Genn and the kids, and Genn told Ma I did the same... which led to Genn suggesting we all go over to Ma's house like the 'old times' and enjoy Christmas together."

I crisscrossed my legs on the couch cushion and faced her. "Why not just say no?" That seemed to be the magic word to end her melancholic face.

"Well..." Mom grabbed her coffee again and leaned back on the couch. "Ma did sound different on the phone. She sounded happy we would all be together, and I wouldn't mind spending more time with Genn and Leo. Plus, Titus and Aiden are older now. Would be wrong of me to not let you see your cousins."

I disagree.

Titus and Aiden... Memories of the two soured my face. The last time I had seen them was two years ago when Aunt Genn and Uncle Leo visited us during Spring Break. Titus was in fourth grade, and Aiden was in fifth... but they acted like spoiled kindergarteners. They continuously tried to one-up everything about my life, even my problems. If I said I stubbed my toe, Aiden would say I was a baby and that he stubbed all his toes like it was no big deal. Titus would say he broke his ankle and how it was far worse.

They both would be in middle school now... which would either mean they had matured or fallen into the trap of annoying-middle-school-boy syndrome; I crossed my fingers, hoping it was *not* the latter.

“So... we are leaving on the 26th, then?” I asked.

“That is the thing.” Mom pressed off the couch and headed towards the Christmas tree. “Ma wants us there *on* Christmas Day.”

My eyes widened as my heart embraced for a holiday-crushing impact I knew was about to come. “*What*—but *why*? We wouldn’t get there until late after we did our own Christmas morning traditions... Do you mean we would have to leave early and open presents before it’s even bright outside?”

The tree lights burned a warming yellow, beaming through the plastic branches and cheap ornaments Mom gathered from many yard sales over the years. “‘Yes’ about leaving early, but ‘no’ about the present part... that’s the *other* thing Ma mentioned. She wants us to wait and open all our presents until we arrive.”

Coal and soot from the world’s most forgotten fireplace began to dust my holiday spirit. I could only see visions of a traffic-jammed Christmas morning playing through my head. “You mean I have to *wait* to open my presents? Even the ones from *you*?” I sounded pathetic and didn’t care.

Mom saw my saddened face as I pouted; it didn’t faze her like it would with Gaius. “You’ll be fine, Lisa. At least you don’t have to be the one driving through the snowy weather and can sleep all you want.” She hunched her shoulders and muttered to Jack Frost, “Please just don’t let it snow while I’m driving...”

“Can you just say we waited to open presents and let me sneak just *one*? *Please*?” I begged.

Mom went to get more coffee, ignoring her only daughter. “And look like I didn’t get you enough in front of Genn and Mr. Realtor Leo—no way. I love you, sweetie...” Her bare feet padded across our kitchen floor. “And I know you can suck it up just this once. I promise that your gifts will be worth the wait.”

As I heard Mom open the fridge to get her vanilla creamer out of the side cubby, I collapsed in defeat on the couch, my back pain haunting my spine with whispering aches.

The biggest game of the year is next month. My back is messing up my magic flow. Now, I’m deprived of gifts on Christmas morning... Can I just catch a break from the worst surprises a girl could ask for?

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27 “Gaius is going to kill me.”

At 4:00 a.m., Christmas was not very bright or full of cheer.

Instead of being decked out in red and green pajamas with my ringlets tangled in knots, I was putting on my gray sweatpants and an oversized light-blue hoodie that quickly began to soak in my freshly showered hair. Outside was dark. Inside was dark. And I knew our Christmas tree downstairs was left unlit. If my phone didn’t beam a bright “December 25th, 2011,” I would have never believed it was the most wonderful time of the year.

As I grabbed my suitcase to lug downstairs, Tuff appeared on my shoulder. My door was closed, so I didn’t mind his sudden visibility.

“Whoooot.”

That one whistle of Tuff’s lifted my spirit. I smiled at him. “Glad you’ll be there if I get too bored. It’ll be nice to see them again... you know, as long as Grandma doesn’t upset Mom.”

“Lisa—five minutes,” Mom called as if she had just woken up, her feet trudging down the steps.

My suitcase wasn’t too heavy, but I still struggled to carry it downstairs because my nerves *refused* to give up their surprise attacks on my spine.

Gaius told me to rest, so I did. Didn’t use magic a single bit while I was home or did anything too strenuous during the last week of school—but it didn’t help at *all*. Needle-like jabs to my spine appeared daily, even after I drank that nasty vigor water. I never felt the pain at school until this last week when the Keeper said to not use my doppelganger either. *It could be the overuse of the Sublimity Charm*, his words echoed. Doubted that because this morning, the pain returned in the shower—

“Ouch!” Another grating pinch jabbed my back when I reached the last step, and I had to play it off as a slip before Mom noticed. *Not today, stupid body! You will let me enjoy Christmas and stop with the pain!*

While I grabbed breakfast—a Frosted Cookies & Crème Pop-Tart straight out of the foil wrapper—Mom finished securing the house by propping up one of the dining room chairs underneath the backdoor handle. The key to the door was officially missing as of last month. I found it under

the trashcan... and made the mistake of putting it in the coupon drawer in the kitchen. I'm pretty sure Mom threw it away when she cleaned out the drawer last week. So, the chair method was our robber-proof plan for the next six days.

As Mom joined me in the car—wearing similar comfy attire—she leaned over to the passenger's side and dug through the glove compartment, causing me to pull my legs close to my chest.

"I can get it for you," I said, not knowing what she was doing.

She proceeded anyway and found three silver CDs with over a dozen songs written in blue and black Sharpie. "Not gonna have a road trip without my jams."

The songs were blatantly not Christmas music based purely on the first couple of written titles being from Run-DMC and Air Supply.

I chuckled at our favorite 80s music and the good kind of Rock n' Roll scribbled sporadically on the silver face. "When did you make these? Didn't even know you knew how to do this."

Mom scoffed as she turned on the ignition and put the first burned CD into the dash stereo. "It's called, 'Your grandma wouldn't let me buy the music I wanted from the store, so I had to learn how to burn my friends' copies.'"

I held back my giggle. "Pretty sure that's illegal, Mom."

She thought for a moment before backing out of the garage. "Oh... well, they don't teach you that growing up in Virginia—these CDs are fine, though. I don't need a guilt trip from my daughter about my musical life choices on *Christmas*."

I couldn't help but laugh as Mom turned up the volume to Tricky by Run-DMC to try and make me forget about her past musical felonies.

...

When we turned into the poorly paved driveway to my grandparent's house, Mom silenced her stereo—the thing had been playing for six hours straight. Virginia was pretty, covered in snow-dusted mountains, but their home was in the valley at a dead-end road. Grandma's only view was the forest of bare brown trees and a cattleless farm from the only neighbors almost half a mile away.

Her home was old and large, rising two stories with a wooden front porch and plenty of acreage. The cousins and I used to play outside quite a lot when the grass was greener. When we parked the car, Grandma, Aunt

Genn, and cousins walked out on the deck to meet us. Everyone looked happy at our arrival—producing cheery grins on their holiday faces—but I knew the smiles on Titus and Aiden’s faces were because my arrival meant time for presents. My smile was a mix of both emotions.

Grandma came in for the hug first as I stepped onto the porch. She looked the same as I last saw her two years ago: wrinkly tan skin, a shoulder-length gradient of brown and gray hair, an average frame that wasn’t too chubby or skinny, and a perky “I missed you” smile. Like the other family members, she wore a Christmas sweater—Mom and I didn’t get the memo as we walked up in non-festive clothing.

“My favorite granddaughter,” Grandma said in her old chipper voice with her arms wrapped around me. Gosh—that old-lady soapy scent was overwhelming as her short hair flew toward my nose. “I’ve missed seeing you and your pretty face.”

I smiled, pressed against her shoulder. “Missed you, too, Grandma.”

Maybe this year will be different if this is her new-and-improved attitude.

As she released her grip, she padded my shoulders and gave my body a good scan. “You look like you’re about to blow over in the wind. You eating enough—never mind. Better fill up as much as you can while you’re here.” She teased a grin and turned away.

And there’s the not-so-subtle jab-to-the-gut compliment...

Titus and Aiden finished hugging Mom and came over to me, but no hugs were given among us three. We were more of the “smile givers” instead of the “hug initiators” in the family.

Aiden, the oldest (age twelve) and now an inch taller than me, heard Grandma’s comment and whispered, “At least she didn’t say you looked like you’ve eaten too much.”

I quietly snickered along with Titus—a year-and-a-half younger than Aiden and clearly fitter out of the two. Looking at both cousins, it wasn’t like Aiden was huge, but compared to his brother and many other seventh-graders, he was on the chubbier side.

At first, my mind thought the two boys had matured—getting a sense of relief thinking I could finally have a normal conversation with them—but that was until Titus ran up to Aunt Genn and shouted, “*Mom, can we open presents now?*”

Honestly, it wouldn't have been that big of a deal, but the way he said it was so whiny that it reminded me of his seven-year-old self again.

Aunt Genn was Mom's older sister, and it was clear that Mom got all the pretty genes, including a sense of style. No offense to Aunt Genn, but her nose didn't match the pointiness of her chin, and her pixie cut didn't help. To top it off, she didn't get the blue-eyed trait either. Still, I didn't think that could've saved her face from its constant annoyed look, and that wasn't just because of Titus' whine.

But... she was the favorite all because she did exactly what Grandma wanted: married a quiet man with money, had the perfect amount of kids, and didn't screw up her life by getting pregnant with some random boy in college—at least, that was how Mom worded it. It's like Grandma thought ticking off some boxes in her version of the "Perfect Robbie Life Test" would make Mom's world happier, and if Mom even skipped one box, her life would be pathetic and sad. It sounded ridiculous and utterly wrong to me.

Mom never hit me, whined, or put me down. She always comforted me when I was sad—even if it was simply giving me my space after a rough day at school. She even cooked like a five-star chef. If Grandma thought her way of life was better, then I felt bad for her and Aunt Genn. My life with Mom was perfect, even without a big fancy house or someone to call Dad.

After more begging from Aiden and Titus, we kids all plopped on the rug in Grandma's living room, right in front of her non-plastic Christmas tree. All the adults sat on the couches and watched us open presents, including the men.

There was Uncle Leo—Aunt Genn's husband—who never talked to me and was just as boring as her. They were perfect for each other.

Grandpa sat in the recliner, wearing a jean jacket that looked to be as old as him and smelled like a musty attic. He would never talk in groups, but if I saw him before Grandma woke up, he would chat a bit. His country accent was the funniest thing in the world, especially when he nagged about Grandma and his coffee being too weak. He was my favorite out of the family.

The last man in the room—quiet but louder than the other two—was Grandpa's brother, Uncle Jed (Mom called him Uncle Jed, so that was what I called him, too). Mom didn't mention he was coming—probably wasn't

told—but after listening to the women talk while I put my suitcase upstairs, I discovered Uncle Jed had been coming over more since he retired. He was now a permanent visitor for Grandma... and probably a savior for Grandpa. When Uncle Jed was in the room, Grandma wouldn't pester Grandpa as much. A forty-something-year-long marriage, and he still couldn't tell her when to stop griping.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie," Mom said as she handed me two presents.

I opened the smallest one first. It was not only an iPod Nano; it was a *purple* iPod Nano. I flipped out.

I ran to the couch and hugged her tightly. "*Thank you, Mom—can't believe you got my favorite color!*"

"I already put all the songs that were on your MP3 player on there *and* a couple of new ones," she said, smiling big, knowing I loved her gift.

While I admired my iPod a bit longer, crawling back over to my spot on the floor to open the other gift, I heard Titus whisper to Aiden, "Wonder why she didn't get the new iPod Touch like us?"

Their whispering was horrible, and I saw Aunt Genn snap at them before Mom handed my cousins the gifts from "us" (Mom did all the shopping, so I had no clue what was in those boxes she gave them).

I didn't care what they thought. I'd wanted an iPod Nano ever since I saw Lily's pink one at school in eighth grade. Mom must have remembered my MP3 player dying the night we both woke up from our own nightmares. She was the best and deserved more than a simple hug from me.

My second gift was thin—a video game, for sure. I didn't think I would get a bigger surprise until I ripped the Santa Claus wrapping paper off to reveal the cover. That game was *the* game—the one all the confident dorky kids at school were talking about—*and* it had just been released only a month ago. It was beautiful, glossy, and didn't even have a dirty "PRE-OWNED" label stuck in the corner: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* for the PlayStation 3.

Both Aiden and Titus dropped their football and basketball PlayStation 3 games Mom got them and marveled over mine—definitely jealous I got a better game than them, especially since I didn't even tell Mom I wanted it. Buying new video games was not something she usually did.

Before I even had a chance to thank Mom, Aiden blurted, “What—no way! Mom, how come Lisa gets to play that game?”

Titus snatched the game from my hands and looked at the pictures on the back as he said, “I wanna watch you play it!”

Aunt Genn snapped again at them the moment she saw the rating. “You aren’t playing that *or* watching it. It’s rated M, boys—you know the rules.”

Grandma turned to Mom and whispered loudly (she, too, didn’t understand the meaning of the word), “You’re letting Lisa play that game?”

Mom didn’t care that Grandma tried to be discreet. “Ma, it’s fine. I asked the employees at the game store about it, and it’s only rated M for violence. That stuff doesn’t bother Lisa.”

She is right about that. I've seen more blood in the past year than she has in her entire life.

Aiden grabbed my game from his little brother’s hands and corrected Mom. “Says ‘blood, gore, violence, alcohol, and—”

Reading ahead on the rating label, I snatched my game right back because I knew exactly what word came next, and there was no way he was about to say *that* in front of Grandma—getting Mom in trouble and looking like a bad parent compared to Aunt Genn.

“Thank you, Mom!” I blurted out loudly. “Can’t wait to play it once I get home!” I then began to put all the torn-up wrapping paper into the giant trash bag Uncle Leo took from the kitchen.

...

All afternoon, my back throbbed and stung. This time was worse than before—just like my last lesson with Gaius. The only remedy I found that worked was lying supine, specifically on the couch in Grandpa’s den; that’s where I was currently, swirling my finger around on my new iPod and listening to music.

Grandpa and Uncle Jed were there, too, sitting in the twin recliners that faced the TV perfectly with their feet propped up and watching the only channel that mattered to them: TV Land. I wasn’t sure what television show it was. It was black and white. Even had some funny bits that grabbed my attention away from the pain and music.

“Ow—” I breathed as quietly as I could, both old men not moving a muscle.

Body, can you just stop, please? I’m trying to enjoy Christmas—

Loud footprints ran down the stairs and into the den. My back was already being poked by invisible knives, and now, the beautiful silence was gone.

Aiden and Titus, with the boredest look on their faces, came around the den corner. The two brothers said, “Hey,” to the old men, both of whom gave no mind to their grandkids, and walked right up to me.

Aiden knelt so close to my face that I could smell his Christmas cookie breath as he divulged, “Lisa. We wanna watch you play *Skyrim*.”

Being in *pain*, I didn’t want any company, especially from them. The entire afternoon, they complained as if it were their job: lunch wasn’t good, they didn’t get everything they asked for, and they had to share a bed. Aunt Genn would *snap, snap, snap* her fingers at them, but they never listened. And Grandma *still* never said anything to her eldest daughter. Back home, Mom and I would’ve been decorating cookies or watching movies about elves and Santa Claus. I wished we were back home. At least the only annoyance would be the pain in my spine.

Keeping my focus on my iPod, playing with the camera and sound settings, I answered, “I didn’t bring my PS3, so it’s not like I can play the game anyway.”

“We brought ours from home!”

I glanced toward Grandpa and back to Aiden. “I just got comfortable on this couch, and it’s not like Grandpa is gonna let you play it down here —”

“Do you care if we play our game down here, Grandpa?” Titus, on the floor next to his begging brother, abruptly asked.

Without moving a muscle except for his vocal cords, our grandpa responded in his low country voice, “Fine wit me.”

While Aiden and Titus were about to celebrate, I rolled my eyes before scrunching my face from the ache in my back; the middle school boys did not care to notice my pain either. “Aunt Genn said no, remember —*ouch!* I’m not getting in trouble with her—”

Titus jumped next to me and inflicted more unintentional stabs to my spine. *Do I have “bug me” written on my face or something?* “Mom won’t know. We will just change the channel if she comes in!” he joined in on his older brother’s plea.

Seems they’ve done this before...

“Lisa, my friends say it’s one of the best games ever made, and I’m not gonna get to play it until I graduate high school,” Aiden added.

Though playing my game sounded fun, enjoying it would be impossible with these two.

I looked him dead in the eye and slowly clarified, “... No.”

Titus turned into a whiny gremlin-of-a-cousin, grabbing my iPod from my hands, ripping the earbuds out of my ears, and jumping off the couch.

First, I get Christmas six hours late, and now, I’m being bullied by a ten-year-old—that’s it. He only made it two steps onto the beige carpet before I grabbed his ankle and made him fall on the floor. Grandpa and Uncle Jed didn’t bother to stop us; it was definitely more entertaining than their old TV program.

Titus laughed like it was fun while I squirmed on the floor to try and reach for my iPod.

“Would you quit it?” I quietly yelped at him, trying to avoid his kicking and alerting the moms and Uncle Leo down the hall.

Titus threw my iPod at Aiden and said, “Dude, run!”

Are you serious? This is not some stupid game—I swear if he breaks my new iPod—

My mood suddenly changed, and I forgot I was dealing with a couple of punk cousins. Before Aiden made it to the archway of the den door, I released Titus’ legs and ran for the chubbier brother. My training with Reno and Gaius helped improve my speed, so I caught up to Aiden quickly; the other thing was... their lessons also increased my will to fight.

With my goal focused solely on getting my new iPod out of Aiden’s sweaty fingers, I didn’t put a restraint on my tactics. My fist clenched and index knuckle pointed—releasing two quick and hard *dúlaman* strikes to Aiden’s side.

He didn’t just go down with a thud. Pictures, as well as my iPod, clattered to the ground as his head hit the wall, and Aiden released a horrid cry that shook the house. Because he was wearing a sweater with layers of boy pudge underneath, there was no magical paralysis to his body. He just was that pitiful when it came to pain.

I went straight for my iPod. *Thank goodness it’s fine—*

“Lisa!”

Mom’s voice rang, a shocked tone I had never heard before.

The realization of what I did struck me hard. This wasn't because of Aiden's whines or Titus' laughs toward his brother's demise... but because of where he landed.

The way Grandma's house was laid out had a perfect view from the dining room to the den if the door wasn't closed; the doors were wide open for today, and the dining room just *had* to be occupied with the rest of the family.

Explaining the whole situation was thrown out the window when all their eyes grew wide. From their point of view, I had just beaten up my twelve-year-old cousin for no apparent reason at all... and all I could do was stand there.

Crap...

There was no point in making excuses as Aunt Genn came running to Aiden's side, so I rushed the truth. "He took my iPod—I didn't mean to hurt him that bad."

"It was just a *joke—gah!*" Aiden rudely reacted on the floor, cupping his head. Titus' laughter grew louder from around the corner.

My back continued to pinch my nerves, and out of nowhere, I blurted, "It was a *stupid* joke—"

"*Lisa!*" Mom's voice grew louder, and I saw Grandma roll her eyes.

This wasn't supposed to happen... and now, I just said one of Grandma's most hated words.

Aunt Genn scolded Aiden. "Stop playing around, or you're gonna be grounded from your Christmas gifts, you hear me?" She then looked up at me, gathering the fallen picture frames. "Lisa, he's fine and will *not* do this again."

To avoid making the scene even worse and producing tears during the most joyous time of the year, I tried to end the situation. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to knock him over..." And I retreated upstairs.

Mom didn't stop me as I ascended the first step, and I heard Grandma lean over on the squeaky dining table and hiss at her, "Can't believe you let that happen, Odette..."

My pace quickened as Mom quietly replied, "Ma, just let it go—"

"You're gonna have to put up a firm hand as Genevieve did, or else she's gonna do it again—"

"Did you not see what just happened?"

My foot stopped on the top step, my fingernails digging into the railing.

I could feel Grandma rolling her eyes and crossing her arms. “If you’d just have a man in your home, maybe your daughter would behave —”

“You’re kidding right now?” Mom huffed, and at that, I heard Uncle Leo step away from the table; a smart choice.

I couldn’t help but kneel on the step to peek just beneath the ceiling. I hated seeing Grandma being rude to Mom—it was her own daughter she treated so poorly, blaming my attack on the fact Mom was single. It made no sense, and all I wanted to do was to tell Grandma to stop. But I didn’t.

“Why do you think me getting married will somehow solve every problem you *believe* I have?” Mom breathed, trying to be silent, her caramel hair falling off her shoulders.

Grandma clicked her tongue with a raised brow, pausing. The cousins arguing filled the room even though the commotion was coming from the den. Aunt Genn tried to yell over them, but it was not working. Not a word came from the men, and I was pretty sure I heard the backdoor open—the two brothers escaping to the bitter cold. I swear Mom scoffed, listening to the *problems* happening in the next room.

Grandma leaned in closer, wrinkles souring her cold face. It was a scary look. “You work far too much and could only give Lisa *two* gifts—both filled with vulgarity, no doubt. You also aren’t taking notice of her health—Lisa is too skinny for her age, and I’ve seen her sluggish the entire day. Then, she goes and attacks her own cousins.” Mom rolled her eyes. “Odette, you need to settle down, get yourself a man so you can afford nicer things, actually *take* vacations with your daughter, and raise Lisa *right*—”

“Ma just—” Mom sucked in a breath, her jaw clenched tight. She wanted to say something but didn’t. I wish she did, but I understood why she refrained: it was Christmas, and we were all stuck in the same house for a week. “Let’s just drop it, okay?” Mom shot out of her seat and grabbed her purse. “I left something in the car—be back in a minute.”

A lie. She just needed some space—like me.

Vexing pain hit me again between my shoulder blades as I took the last step. I was done—so fed up with my body that I skipped the bedroom and marched straight to the guest bathroom. *I can’t take this anymore.*

Something is seriously wrong—no normal muscle tension or soreness from training can cause this much pain.

I flicked on the yellowing lights, locked the door, and immediately removed my sweatshirt. Because of my frustration and solitude, Tuff came out and joined me, perching his little body on the rim of the pedestal sink.

My cropped cami had spaghetti straps and extended low enough on my back that if there was a red mark or bruise, I would've been able to see it easily.

I stared at my reflection. *Gosh—I look tired.* My long hair drooped over my freckled shoulders, and my belly button looked like it had never seen the sun. Both collarbones were easily noticeable, but what had me pursing my lips was my figure. It wasn't curvy—hardly feminine enough for a fourteen-year-old girl. *Skinny*, as Grandma said. But I wasn't ugly or unhealthy. There was a bit of muscle on my belly and arms from all the physical training. I wish I could've told her that.

I held my breath. *Okay, please let there be something there to prove I'm not going crazy...*

My hands girded my hair as I turned my back toward the mirror. I was shocked.

"Nothing...?" I quietly whispered, dumbfounded beyond belief. Tuff had the same perplexed look on his squishy face. "How is nothing there—what the heck is going on?"

"Hoot-floote," Tuff whispered with his dopey gaze.

His woodland whistle flickered a light bulb in my head. *Duh—why did I not think of that?* All my magic scars and the Paragon Game tattoo were still covered. "You think... there could be a magic mark on my back?"

My sprite didn't know for sure as he shrugged his orange stubby shoulders, but his guess was something I never thought about before.

I let my hair down, looking at my left wrist. "I *do* sleep with my concealment band every day, not even taking it off when in the shower.... It would make sense as to why I never saw anything before..."

I lifted the Eternling fibers and slid them off my wrist for the first time in over three months.

The skin on my tummy and arms misted away like smoke. My vezper scars, failed-evanescent scratches, and game mark all reappeared. Blackened burns from Ecuras' attacks weren't as apparent, but I did forget about them when my hair was down. He left a burn on my neck in the shape

of a hand print and many hair-thin stripes across my ears. I looked like a battered mess without a hoodie to cover them up.

Let's see if this worked... I gathered my hair again on top of my head and turned my back toward the mirror. This time, it worked... and nothing could have prepared me for what I would see.

On my back was a blotch of deep blackness, spider-veining down my spine and growing toward my shoulder blades and rib cage—bleeding like spilled ink. The mark was huge, so long that I could see the thread-thin strokes peeking through the bottom of my cami, right at my waist. I tugged my cami down. The darkest part was directly in the center of my spine, darker than a starless night, allowing the festering magical illness to keep growing. I swear it looked like a black hole was just thrown on my back and splattered all over, tainting my blood vessels from the outside in.

This... is very, very bad...

My heart sweltered. I could not turn away from the mirror. My body was officially messed up... and it didn't look like it happened overnight. My back pain had started months ago, meaning the basketball-sized splotch must have been eating away at my body for over a hundred days.

"What even happened... Tuff, do you know what this is?" I asked, unsettled, trying not to be too loud just in case Aiden or Titus bouldered back up the stairs. I couldn't stop staring at myself in the mirror. Tuff flew next to me and stared at my back. Curious, the only thing he could think of was to touch it to discover its true identity. He extended out his little stubby hand, and right when he felt the mark, he flinched in pain and zoomed away—hitting his orange diamond back against the door. It was a pretty loud thud.

"Tuff—you okay?" I whispered as he floated in the air and shook off some orange dust.

He gave a quivered hoot, one that was scared and worried.

"It's *dark magic*?" I breathed, and he nodded. "Guess that explains why it hurt you when you touched it..." My eyes shot back toward the mirror. I looked like a tormented mess. "And why it's not healing naturally either..."

Stay safe—the Keeper's words roared in my ears like a siren.

"Oh no... Gaius will kill me if he finds out I let this black *thing* get this bad before the games next month, too. I doubt Zephan and his workers

will let me play if I'm sick." Another scan of my back. *All that training I did with Reno will be wasted.* "What do I do?"

Tuff commanded, "Whoot!"

"I can't tell Gaius or Zephan—that's like asking for my name to be pulled out of the games—"

"Whoohoohoot—"

"I know it's bad! Look, the only side effect it seems to have is just pain... and I can deal with that for now..." I looked at myself in the mirror one last time before putting my sweatshirt back on and sliding on my Eternling bracelet.

Tuff's worried thoughts wouldn't stop coming through in my mind. As I adjusted my shirt and fluffed my hair, my glainie had an idea. It was a wise and caring idea. I was surprised he thought of it first.

Determined, I whispered back, "Okay... just to be safe, though, we will go with your plan tonight after Mom and everyone else goes to bed. Maybe having *him* look at it will let me know what it is without me getting into trouble with Gaius."

28 Vicissitude

Around 2 a.m., I awoke to a dim orange glow and a tickle on my cheek. Tuff stared at me under the covers.

It was time.

Being in Grandma's house meant I shared one of the guest rooms with Mom. She took the small, twin-sized bed while I slept on the flat futon on the floor. I wasn't too sure when she came into the room—had to be close to midnight—but I told Tuff to wake me up when everyone in the house was officially asleep, using his invisibility to spy on the Robbie family.

Grandma's house was pretty squeaky, but thanks to her old white-noise machine in our room, I could grab my light blue hoodie and sneakers without waking Mom up—Tuff being my floating flashlight as I rummaged through my suitcase.

Using my doppelganger was not a smart idea; I could reappear in front of someone from the Robbie family. I couldn't risk Mom waking up and finding two of me if I didn't time my return promptly. For her and the rest of the household to buy my lie of a non-magical night escapade, I used the bathroom as my alibi. I locked the door, turned on the light, and even put my extra pair of pajama pants and socks on the floor. I didn't want Titus or Aiden peering underneath the door and seeing no one was inside. In my head, the camouflaged escape was perfect. It would simply appear as if I was having an upset stomach in the middle of the night—*genius*.

A deep breath escaped as my arm extended before me. In moments, I evanesced to Kamari's Aura Beacon—the old Keeper not awake, thank goodness—before heading to Rudlin's evanesce sigil. The streets were quiet, a couple of straggling night owls wandering, and the sky was utterly dark. A bit creepy without Gaius with me, and my pace naturally quickened.

The only lights were from planet Kalm's moon, Tuff's orange glow near my shoulder, and an old lantern covered in spider webs hanging above the Menders' door. I hadn't visited Mender Roo since I gave him that batch of Enkurious as my last Charmer quest, and that was months ago—a couple of days after the Paragon Games broadcast at Luca's.

Hope he still remembers me... and perhaps give me a free consultation tonight.

The doorknob was as cold as ice when I twisted it. Locked.

I peeked through the window to see if someone was there but only saw a dark, empty desk. I backed away and glanced upward. A candle flickered behind the top window.

Mender Roo's awake.

I knocked three times. Silence. I knocked harder, assuming he didn't hear me the first time. Nothing but a squeak from a mouse followed, my body tense. My back pinched again, and I swear I heard whispering nearby. I hated the dark. Hated the pain more. That lamp was lit in his window. And I was desperate.

Oh, please don't be in a bad mood...

Like in most civilized towns, evanescing inside someone's house or business was illegal. Some homes even had a charm that negated all powers from an Evanescence flower past the front door. No way was I going to test if there was a magical lockdown on the doctor's office and risk *more* stinging blue slices to my stomach.

So, we moved to plan B.

With only a nod, Tuff understood the assignment. He vanished inside the shop and fiddled with the bronze door knob until it unlocked. In my mind, this was an emergency, and I didn't necessarily *break* into the shop by the literal definition: I was invited in by Tuff himself.

I moved with the whirr and hum of the building, slowly easing up the steps. A soft light whispered through the crease of Mender Roo's door. I swallowed, trying to ignore my overdrawn worries as another pinch to my spine had my shoulders rolling, and knocked twice.

Metal wheels rolled across the floor. Slow clicks of antique shoes came closer. As a shadow breathed through the bottom gap, the door opened with Mender Roo on the other end. Perplexion couldn't even begin to describe his face.

Little me—looking pathetically drained and tired, dressed in Earthian clothing—stood there staring at him in his baggy shirt and dress pants as he muffled, “Lisa? Wha—what you doin’ here so late, girl?”

Seems late-night surprises cause his feisty anger to die down...

A smidge of relief fell over me. I could finally be honest with someone about my pain.

Fidgeting with my fingers, I answered, “There’s... something wrong with my back... and I didn’t know who else to go to that would know what it is... I’m sorry it’s so late, but... but it’s kinda bad...”

Mender Roo, his gray hair frizzy and tied back, scanned me up and down. “If it dragged you out of bed and brought you to me... must be pretty bad, then...” He jerked his wrinkly chin. “Come in. Let me look at you.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, heading over to his patient’s bed.

Mender Roo flicked his tall lamp on and swung it over the fake leather cot, the room only slightly brighter. “Now... let’s see what we are dealing wi—”

The words disappeared right out of the old man’s mouth the moment I took off my sweatshirt and sat hunched over in my tank top. My eyes were on the floor, but I didn’t have to see his face to know that his silence wasn’t a good sign.

In his raspy voice, Mender Roo finally broke the stillness, staring at my black, blotchy back. “This... when did this happen?” His tone was stark and disturbed.

“Is it that bad?” I asked, though, in my heart, I knew it had to be.

“Is it—are you serious, girl? Don’t you know a dark magic rot when you see one?”

“What’s that?” I looked over my shoulder.

Mender Roo’s eyes were surprised at my confusion, glossed with frustration at my innocence. My heart began to throb. I said, doe-eyed and rushed, “I’m sorry... I’ve been wearing an Eternling band on my body for the past three months, having the Concealment Charm cast over me, so I never—”

“*Three months?* You’ve let this filter through your body and magic for three months? Don’t you know how dangerous this is? My... how are you still alive right now?”

What? A-alive? This thing is that bad?

Mender Roo sighed as he saw the watery fear in my eyes, probably hearing my rattling heartbeat. He looked at my back a second longer, never once touching the blotch or asking about the other scars that tainted my body, before plopping into his old rolling chair. His bony hands rubbed his furrowed brows and forehead. “That is magic rot—*dark* magic rot, at that—and is *deadly* for your magic, as it does nothing but infect your magic pulse like a parasite... Treat it quickly, and it won’t do anything but make you a

little weak. Let ignorance take over, and you'll end up like yourself just now: risking the loss of your magic *and* your life. It can only be caused by a dark magic creature or pure dark magic. You remember running into either of those?"

"No... well, maybe..." I thought back, remembering my kidnapping. Because my mind was knocked out that day, I never knew what all those Dark Sages did to me. "But you can cure it, right? I'll take whatever medicine you have or endure whatever pain it may cause."

With his sagging eyes behind his tiny spectacles, Mender Roo rolled his chair over to a drawer that was underneath his potion shelf. As he rummaged through, he explained, "This isn't something you cure with medical liquids and Aeson Spurges. No—the only way to get this out is with a magiblood stone."

I didn't have to dig through my memories to know what that was. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Tradin' it is illegal," Mender Roo raised his voice as he found a black stone in his drawer. It was thick with a sharp needle point at the top. "For medical purposes, it is one's only hope and should *only* be used in a situation like this."

My heart raced at the sight of the stone. *Is he—is this Mender about to steal my magic?* I bent my legs and scurried farther back against the wall on the patient's cot—a mouse watching a trap being set for itself.

He took notice. "Hm... seems you know what this is..." He put down the stone. "I don't care much about the outside lives of my patients, as long as they come out livin' and breathin'... but you're a peculiar little girl. If you've seen one of these stones before, means you know what it does, right?"

I nodded. "Takes your magic pulse, unlike a normal absorption stone..."

Mender Roo rolled his chair over to me. For the first time, his eyes didn't give off the impression he was annoyed by an unannounced visitor. "Magic rot eats away at your magic, chewing it down like a worm on a flower. The thicker your magic strength—how powerful your Wishing Star or Bloodborne veins are—the more time you have until it reaches your heart where your magic pulse resides."

Mender Roo poked my chest where my heart was with his long fingernail. It kind of hurt, but I was too invested in his explanation to care.

“Right now... with how bad it is on your back... I’d say it’s already there, Lisa, but your magic must be pretty strong, seeing as you’re still standing.”

“How does a magiblood stone get rid of it? It just takes away my magic pulse, right?”

“No—it drains *all* magic, including any magic-related illness and rot, which is handy for dire situations like this. What you’re thinkin’ of—it only will do that if you let it drain you completely. See, a magiblood stone absorbs the surface level of your magic first, the raw strength of your power. If you stop the stone’s process here, you will just be weak again and have to continue to grow your magic back to its normal power. Let the stone continue, and it will have nothing left to drain except—”

“—the magic pulse,” I finished for him. Mender Roo didn’t mind. “But can’t you just destroy the stone when it’s done and have my magic return to —”

“This magic is only attracted to one with a magic pulse,” Mender Roo hurriedly chimed in. “How can it go back to you if you ain’t got no magic pulse for it to cling to? It’s not *your* pulse anymore. It will whizz away to the stars or the next available heart.”

I sat frozen. *I... I didn’t even think of that...*

“And if you don’t get this treated, that magic rot will eat up all your magic until it gets to your heart, where it’ll eat up your life instead.” He went back for the stone. “Now you see the importance of hurrying this procedure along. We have to do this now—”

“I can’t!” I blurted out without a second thought.

Mender Roo widened his beady-old eyes behind his glasses as if I went against his wisdom. “*Can’t*—I just told you, girl, how serious this was! If we don’t get it out of you now, you could risk losing your magic—”

“I’m sorry... but I can’t...” I wasn’t one to disagree with someone who knew more than me, but Mender Roo did not know of the predicament I was in. “Risking the loss of magic strength is not an option for me at the moment.”

The old man was back to his agitated self again. “I saw your name picked on the broadcast. I don’t care if you’re in those piddlin’ games, girl! We are talking about your magic and potentially your *life* here—”

“Is there an alternative? You said you were surprised I was still standing, right? Means the magic rot isn’t spreading as fast as you thought...” I began to pick at my hangnails. “And the only side effects I have are minor back

pains... and it's only until the games are over—I promise then to get this fixed... but until that happens, I just need something to subdue the pain so I can still fight.”

I didn't even recognize my own voice—the ignorant confidence spewing from my lips. Mender Roo looked just as shocked.

He slammed the rock back into his drawer and rubbed his forehead again, deep in thought.

While he was thinking, I glanced over at his shelf of glowing ingredients and potions. Right in the corner of my eye, I saw the Enkurious algae and the Enkurious potions.

“Mender,” I began, “I'll make you a deal. I'll be your personal Charmer for the next month and gather you a year-supply of Enkurious algae *if* you make me their anesthetic potions for free—as much as I need to get through the games. It will have to be a secret, though... but I won't ask for any other payment besides the potions...”

The old Mystic looked at me like I was a babbling idiot. “You serious right now?”

“Please, sir. I know it's crazy... but I have no other choice—”

“A choice to *live* or *die*.” His breathy words shut my mouth fast. For a moment, we both remained silent, my heart pounding. He looked at my chest. “I can hear the rhythm of your heart—the blood pumping. It's fast and nervous. You're scared straight stiff... So *why* are you refusin' to get rid of this rot? I am not makin' any deals with you until you give me a better reason than pride?”

Tuff reappeared as he sensed my heart growing scared, floating in my palms to stop my fidgeting; his comfort was perfectly timed. My chest swelled as honesty veiled my words. “These games... I don't care about the sport. I don't even care if there was a grand prize of a million credits.” *Though, that would sway me even more to tough out the dark infection.* “The magic I have is really rare. The kind of rare that would get me kidnapped, sold, or killed if anyone knew about it... and my name, face, and location were broadcasted all over the galaxies. If I leave the games...”

“You'd be seen as a weak little thing with a heart full of magic...” He muttered, his eyes pointed to the floorboards. “An easy target.”

“Yeah.” I exhaled. “And all the training I've done for three months would be wasted... and the people I care about are already worried enough about me. I just... I don't want to be seen as a failure gifted with powerful

magic.” *Proving to the Guardians the Agapéd made the wrong choice.* “I want to show that I am strong, even if it means going out there and losing the first match; at least I could say I tried... so I guess that would be the only prideful thing I can think of.”

The Mender ignored my glainie, sighed, and walked over to the shelf, taking two bottles of Enkurious potions in his hands. “In my lifetime, I ain’t ever seen a Mage or Mystic brave dark magic rot like yourself... and I’m also not one to send a child out of here knowing they are risking the life of their magic. But I’d hate to see you walk out of here with a price on your heart for somethin’ as silly as sayin’ no to those petty games... So... I’ll accept your deal. I’m not a Heroes Games watcher. I think it’s a foolish thing to do with magic... but now, you’ve given me a reason to take a look.”

Tuff flew to my shoulder as the Mender handed me the two eight-ounce jars, each filled with dark green water. “One jar should last you a week, makin’ you feel like everything is normal. Your magic seems to be strong enough to buy you time.” He then stood inches away from my face. Severity wrinkled his forehead. His words hit with a scratchy tone, his breath smelling like bad tap water. “But don’t let it get any worse. If you start feeling abnormally weak, throwin’ up black magic, or feeling an abrupt change in your mood—you get yourself back into my clinic as fast as possible. That means the rot is eatin’ up more of your magic and going for your *pulse*. I ain’t havin’ you dyin’ on me, girl—not over something as petty as negligence.”

“Thank you, sir—I promise not to let it get worse.” I then put my sweatshirt back on and walked to the door, the jars magically shoved into my orbkit. “I’ll bring you some Enkurious algae next week, too.”

“That’s fine with me,” he finished and rolled right back to his desk.

Once I evanesced back into Grandma’s bathroom, almost tripping over the pajamas I left on the floor, I took out one of the jars and stared at its gross color. *Wish he told me how much to take... Guess just a couple of sips until the pain stops?*

The lid unscrewed easily, and I embraced myself for a horrid, grassy taste. One gulp of the stuff was all it took before my face scrunched at its sour, swampy tang.

“Gross...”

But suddenly... my back felt completely fine. I rolled my arms, turned my upper body around, and stretched my neck. The only thing my body felt was the tiredness finally kicking in.

Guess this will be my new daily routine until the games are over... and it's only two weeks until they begin. Agapéd, just stay with me a little while longer...

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29 “Then, you can’t.”

“What did your guidance counselor say?” Jenny Kim asked as she finished the meager serving of chicken tenders and mashed potatoes during lunch.

Since I used up so much time discussing my second-semester schedule with Ms. Reece, the lunch ladies stopped serving food by the time I arrived at our usual blue cafeteria table. I was lucky enough to share lunch with Jenny Kim and Lily, but my stomach was *dying* for food after listening to Ms. Reece go on and on about her boring Christmas break in Colorado.

I unfolded my new school schedule in front of Jenny Kim. “Well, she said the reason why I was kicked out of Economics was because more sophomores wanted to take the class... and there wasn’t enough room for freshmen. Then, she said I could take a foreign language or get Biology I out of the way, so now I have Biology I as my Fourth Period.” My stomach growled. “Do you happen to have, like, a snack or something—”

Nothing was special about my tone of voice, but it made Lily turn her gaze away from the iPhone she was trying to sneakily hide in her lap. “Oh—you can have this!” She then took out a Pop-Tart from her backpack. The pastry foil was still perfectly intact. “Mom bought me blueberry ones for breakfast this week. I hate that flavor.”

Lily’s pickiness came in handy at the most perfect time. “Thanks,” I said, eating away at the crust first to savor the gooey middle for last.

“You said you had Biology I after lunch?” Lily asked, starting to pack away her fancy lunchbox. It looked like a purse with her initials stitched in a curly font on the front—a bit expensive for something meant to store a lunch.

“Yeah, with uh...” I was about to grab my folded schedule I placed on the table when Lily was one step ahead of me.

As she snatched and unfolded it, her fingers adorned in long plastic nails, she happily said, “*Hey*—I have that same class next! Cherish said Mr. Bolt doesn’t give out assigned seats. Means we can sit together.”

Lily’s excitement for me being in the same class as her was unusual. *She* was usually the one our peers would be excited to sit next to. With one semester of high school down, Lily had already gained a popular name in our grade. She was pretty with naturally blonde hair, had a bubbly

personality, and had gained much attention from jealous girls and football players when she wore her cheerleading uniform.

I was already shocked when she and Jenny Kim both wanted to eat lunch with me on the first day back—even Jenny Kim was growing a fandom on the athletic side of the school—since I was neither “cool” nor part of the pretty crowd. But I figured it was because they didn’t have any of their newer and cooler friends during the same lunch... for now, anyway.

With that one comment, though, I started to believe I did have the potential to be a part of Lily’s friend group. I was pretty enough—deemed worthy to be wanted as a deskmate. It was silly, but that was just how high school worked. Popular cliques were put on pedestals because they were seen as perfect—the 21st-century teenage version, anyway. When the *perfect* ones didn’t accept someone, even ignoring a simple smile down the school hall, it implied the rejectee was flawed in some way. Like something was wrong for not being born in a certain circumstance, not maturing fast enough, or not being able to buy the trendiest clothing.

I guess why I cared was because it meant I was attractive enough to be desirable. I didn’t care much about that in middle school... but now... it would be nice to be wanted by someone physically like I was thought of first. To be wanted for more than a convenience store friend—one to look at and talk to when there were no other options.

To be wanted for something other than a girl with rare magic in her veins.

If I truly was a loser or flat-out lame, Lily would have never asked in the first place. My mind went blank as my stomach turned nervous. After all, sitting with her meant sitting with the other trendy girls. Sitting with good-looking boys. “Really? Thanks—”

The bell rang.

On our way to our last period, Lily talked to me about her break so casually, not letting any details about her family drama slip away. We hadn’t talked much since the beginning of the last semester. It felt nice.

Some older junior cheerleaders, including Cherish, passed us by and actually smiled at me as I walked with Lily toward the end of the hall. *It feels good to be noticed by someone prettier than me... Makes me think I’m prettier than I give myself credit for.*

The moment we walked into Mr. Bolt’s Biology I class, my eyes grew wide.

Weeds of confliction tangled up every nerve in my body.

In the far back corner of the white-bricked classroom was Mary, reading a book with three empty seats near her and one filled with a girl I didn't know. Half of me wanted to sit with her, but the other half wanted to sit with Lily and her friends. When I turned to where Lily was headed—the middle rows with the prettiest people in the room—I couldn't help but want to sit there. *Why do I feel guilty for wanting to sit with them? I'm not doing anything wrong.*

Mary then looked up at me, a burst of excitement on her face, but her smile quickly faded when she saw me *not* sit next to her.

There was nothing I could do about it. I was already sitting in the chair behind Lily and next to Trevor Rolland—the cutest boy in the whole class—plus, Lily invited *me*... I had no right to invite someone else. To avoid any more self-inflicted guilt, I started doodling on my paper as Mr. Bolt closed the classroom door.

Lisa, stop thinking you did something bad—you have bigger things to worry about this week anyway. You are leaving for the Paragon Games tomorrow! You can have more than one friend and sit with whoever you want... I just hope Mary isn't mad at me...

...

When the class ended and everyone went to the buses or front of the school, Mary came to my side before I made it past the lockers. *Guess she isn't upset with me, then...*

The unnecessary shame made me speak first, the school exit was now in sight. “Hey—uh, so I just got transferred to Mr. Bolt's at the last second and didn't know you would be in there.”

Mary pulled out her phone as the winter air hit us hard when we stepped outside to wait for our moms. “Oh... it's okay. It's just class anyway...”

Though Mary was naturally quiet like me, she definitely was not one for hiding her opinions or giving vague answers... and that response left me in the dark as to what she truly was feeling.

“Next Friday, we're still going to the movies, right?” she asked.

The corners of my lips rose as my heart felt more at ease. “Duh. I'll even sneak us in some Dr. Pepper if you want.”

“Then, I'll bring the candy.” Mary smiled, reassuring me that our friendship was still intact.

We stood out in the cold. Our conversation about school was like any other... but my heart still wouldn't shut up—constantly telling me our friendship was at stake and that she was just acting like she wasn't mad.

When her stepmom came in the line of parent chauffeurs, she said “bye” like usual, giving a casual grin before telling me, “I’ll text you about homework later.”

Maybe I’m just overthinking this... Why are first days back at school covered in anxiety... and why did my first day have to also be the week the Paragon Games start?

A burden-filled sigh escaped when Mom swerved around the school, playing music so loud that I could tell it was Bruce Springsteen, even with car windows shut tight.

...

Touching the Aura Beacon was typically all I did when I landed on planet Zena, but the moment my feet hit the ground, Tuff popped out of his invisibility and whistled to me that he wanted some Verisweet tea. A kind lie. I could read his thoughts, and he merely wanted me to talk to the star-loving woman to perk up my spirit. Out of the six Keepers I’d met, she was the one who always gave the best advice... but I would never let Gaius know that.

My coat kept me warm as I walked up the space-rock stairs to Kamari’s front door. All her lights were shining brightly in her home. As my knuckles were about to give a knock, a loud crash of clay and ceramic from inside the house stopped me. I went straight for the doorknob instead.

I swung open the door to find two yaminurus scurrying toward me. Each one ran out the door, white eyes flickered with anxiety, their bellies full of stardust. Glancing away from their scared faces, it wasn’t hard to see where the clatter came from.

Amid Kamari’s home—already cluttered with antique knickknacks, dusty wooden chests, and vast amounts of random vases and potted plants—was a knocked-over stool surrounded by a broken pot and millions of specks of dirt. Off to the right of the chair was a purple plant looking to be the owner of the once non-broken pot, lying helpless on the colorful rug and losing its magical qualities. To top it off, a cup of Verisweet tea was also spilled in the accident, staining the same rug... which was where Kamari was huffing.

Out of all the times I had been to Kamari's home, I never encountered this situation before, and I didn't mean the mess: Kamari was moving a boxy television into her living room, floating it in the air with her magic. However, when her eyes caught the yaminurus fleeing behind me, she dropped the TV on her tacky, orange loveseat. From the looks of it, the culprits were using me as their wall of defense, believing I was strong enough to protect them. Being that the crazy lady just lifted a TV like it was a feather, I highly doubted I would ever stand a chance if she came bolting toward us.

Kamari's brown eyes connected to mine, and her laugh lines stretched wide. "*Na so*—Lisa, you have to excuse da mess. Dose two—messin' around and actin' like dis home is deirs—came in, *swoopin'* down as I was settin' up da television, knockin' over my *only* mauveyseam sprout."

She then glared at the two purple, celestial anteaters—both cuddled against my calves. "You know how hard it was to find dat sprout—*no, you do not!* Betta be glad Lisa showed up, or else I would have fed you to da cosmos—makin' use out of all da stardust I be givin' you!"

The yaminurus bowed toward Kamari, a plea for forgiveness, and quickly vanished to the roof of her home. Honestly, if I received a threat like that, I would've run off, too.

"Um... is this a bad time?" I hesitantly asked as she moved her television again, lifting it mid-air with a *whoosh* of her hand.

"When you are here, dere be not a betta time," Kamari insisted.

Taking her invitation to continue inside, my thoughts went straight to the giant electronic Kamari floated with her magic. "So, what's with the TV?"

She chuckled and used her left hand to change the gravity of the wooden console table. It moved just beneath her giant viewing window, and she released the television's gravity so it placed perfectly on top. "You in da games—you dink I was about to miss dat, *abi?*"

The broadcast of the games can reach all the way out to space?

Kamari continued to use her magic to tidy the room, though her purple mauveyseam could not be saved. She floated it toward the kitchen sink, turning on the faucet to at least try and revive it. "Cannot wait to see da faces of all the odda playas when you take home da winnin' title—*hah!* Gonna show dem da powah of da Agapéd is not one to be messed wid."

Though Kamari's compliments were sincere and very uplifting, my brain just couldn't see myself as a Heroes Games winner—barely could see myself as a worthy contestant in general. “Kamari... do you really think I have a chance at winning?”

As if I committed a crime, Kamari gasped at me as she finished charming the broken planter pieces into the trashcan near her fridge. “You dink I would lie to you—sayin’ dings like dat just to amuse myself?”

“No, no, no—I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Den dell me, Lisa, do *you* dink you could win deese games?”

My fingers began to fidget as my eyes turned to the Verisweet stain on the carpet. “I mean... *maybe*...”

“Den, you can’t.” Her words were too harsh. Too confident.

Isn't this the part where she's supposed to make me feel better about myself...

As I stood baffled at Kamari's statement, she explained further. “Lisa, how does a wise man turn into a fool widout him even noticin’?”

And now a riddle... still not seeing how this will explain her blunt assumption...

“Um... I’m not sure.”

She snapped her fingers. “When he refuses to accept *dat* he is wise. You could be gifted in mountain climbin’ and never know it because you believe oddas out dere are betta dan you. Meanwhile, a complete *fool* is out dere scalin’ cliff sides and gettin’ himself broken and bloody while you are lettin’ yo’r skills hide away unda da sad shadow of fear. So, if you believe you cannot win, den you nevah will. If you believe you can, den you can. Yo’r greatest enemy will *always* be yourself, and it be a hard one to say ‘bug off.’ For me, I *know* you can, but it does not matta what *I* dink; I am not da one out there fightin’. You really believe Gaius would send you out dere if he did not believe you could do it?”

I shook my head.

Kamari lifted her wrinkled umber cheeks and clasped my shoulders. “Then, it is about dime you finally accept dat you *are* powa’ful, Lisa. You saved da *world* and all da Wishing Stas in the sky... You dellin’ me you really believe you cannot win some silly game?”

My eyes looked at her dark skin and crazily gathered braids on her head. “I just... don’t see a Hero when I look in the mirror. I only see ‘Lisa’, a girl who barely understands all the rules of magic and can’t even talk

comfortably with high schoolers. I guess... I don't see myself fitting in with all these powerful Mages and Mystics just yet." *I don't see myself fitting in anywhere...*

"You givin' up den?"

With confidence, I said, "No."

Kamari grinned and patted my shoulders hard as she released her grip. "*Hah*—den dat's all da proof you need. I'm not sure what mirror you got, but *I* see a Hero *and* a champion of da games. When you step out dere—standing' next to all dose odda contestants—do not compare yo'r strengths wid deirs. After all, who said deir strengths mean yo'rs are not worthy enough to be strongah? You focus on *yo'r* strengths and say, 'I *can* do dis,' and you *will*. Da Agapéd is strong, Lisa, but dat all depends if you believe dat as well."

Anxiety was easily lifted when Kamari spoke, and standing there was no different. My brain knew I was strong—my body felt that as well during all those lessons with Reno and Gaius—and I just needed her to tell my heart that, too.

I mimicked her warm smile. "Thanks, Kamari."

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PART 2

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30 The Games Begin

“It’s gonna be a busy one down at the Landing in EverWake for the next four weeks—Paragon Games festivities *officially* start today! Tell me, Garth, you said this is going to be the best one of the decade?” Rhiner, the black-haired co-host of the Heroes Games broadcast, asked his colleague.

Smiling big and using his muscly arms, Garth shouted, “As far as entertainment goes—my credits are all in! You’ve seen the line-up! Can’t convince me otherwise.”

The female co-host, Winry, chimed in next. “I agree, but I must say that I think there is more than just entertainment value in these fighters. This is the biggest age gap in Paragon Game history, and many are from parts of Kalm that even surprised me, being a resident of Hoidan. This is bound to be the best show of magic we’ve seen.”

“Then, tell me,” Rhiner inquired, “who are you most excited to see battle it out?”

Winry intertwined her ring-covered fingers. “I’ve gotta say it’s a tie between the Duplication Mage and Mystic—never had two such unique types before in the same games. I do not know much about the others, but rumors have spread—and I do enjoy a good phantasmal brawl of creatures in the battle arena.”

Garth showed off his straight teeth. “Honestly, I couldn’t tell you who I am most excited to see. Gonna be a surprise to all of us when they show us their power—”

“Knowing their magic type or not,” Rhiner interjected, “I’m gonna say what we all are thinking: That little girl representing the Kingdom of Boolavogue has *all* eyes on her. Youngest player in *history*, coming out of a kingdom known for its Monster Hunters, and doesn’t have a single traceable heritage to follow. It’s like she popped up out of nowhere.”

Garth flexed a muscle. “You could also say that about the Nuoljian Mystics—a province hidden from most of the world and now suddenly emerges *two* Paragon Games contestants—and one happens to be almost as young as that Boolavogue girl.

Winry took turns glancing at both of her male co-hosts. “I have a little girl around her age. Couldn’t imagine sending her out to fight in a

game as big as this.”

“She’s got guts, I’ll tell you that—putting herself up against adults like these, but I’m not worried,” Garth said with a nod.

Rhiner raised his thin black eyebrows. “You sound confident saying that.”

“Of course, I am! It’s all about magic and skill, after all. Bet she’s got something up her sleeve—wouldn’t be in the games if that wasn’t the case!”

A loud ring came from one of the citiships at the Landing, muffling the sound from the rows of TV screens patterning the station ceilings. The Paragon Games broadcast was displayed on every channel. One near the upper-left corner of Gaius and me.

My eyes faced the ground, watching my legs shake and fingers fiddle with the hem of my cloak. Gaius just sat motionless next to me. We both were waiting for Reno, hoods covering our heads. Silence loomed between us, but I didn’t mind.

Though my appearance hid underneath my pale lavender cloak, I still couldn’t look out toward the beautiful merchant city to our right. My nerves told me not to. I didn’t have to see the broadcast to know how big of a deal the games were. Risking someone seeing me the day before the first match of the Paragon Games was not a chance I was taking. Even the thought of a kid coming up to me—something as simple as saying, “Hey, I saw you on TV”—terrified me. It meant I really *was* being watched by the whole universe. If I let my brain keep thinking about the billions of eyes monitoring all my future choices and mistakes, I knew a wave of fear would come crashing over me—making me lose focus from all my training.

A big group of young adults came rushing by, and I swear they could see right through my cloak as they stopped to chat about the games and their “golden seats” in the stadium.

I hope I don’t disappoint the people watching... What if my training isn’t enough? Will Boolavogue look weak all because of me? What if none of the contestants like me—including Ayker? They all could be advanced in fighting and magic I didn’t even know existed—

A nudge from Gaius’ arm caused me to jump in my seat, pulling me out of my hole of worry.

Apparently, my legs were shaking the entire bench and starting to rub up against Gaius’ brown pants.

“Hey. You’re gonna be fine. You’ve trained hard for this,” he reminded me in his calm, deep voice.

A broken breath scratched my throat. “I know... just can’t help but be nervous... You’re gonna come and watch me play, right?”

I heard Gaius’ burley huff. “Every second of it.” His green eyes veered ahead. “He’s here.”

Leaving the evanescent platform and perfectly disguised in a beige cloak was Reno. The only reason Gaius and I knew that was him was because he told us exactly what he would be wearing; he also couldn’t risk being seen in such a crowded area.

My legs grew stable as I stood beside the Keeper, and Reno approached. He grinned underneath the shadow of his hood and said, “Sorry for arriving late. Even the Aura Beacons at the Stellerlegion were more crowded than expected.”

“It’s fine,” Gaius said with his arms crossed.

“Shall we go ahead and make our way to the Gallant Arena?”

“Lisa will, but I won’t be.”

Reno raised his brows. “You’re invited to join the preliminary and post events, I’m pretty sure—”

Gaius stopped Reno before he wasted more time explaining something the Keeper already knew. “Listening to Zephan’s speeches by choice is not something I’m interested in. Just here for the games and Lisa.” He then looked down at me with his peridot eyes; there wasn’t a trace of worry in them. “Tomorrow, I’ll be there with Inna. We will meet you after the match.”

Knowing both of them would be there brought a little relief.

I followed Reno down the Landing, passing by all the large citiships and toward an exclusive avelift station—one that happened to be roped off and guarded by more-than-enough Landing security. When Reno showed them his COIN—dark tungsten just like mine but glowing blue around the edges—and I showed them my Paragon tattoo, the guards let us in. We were the only ones inside the small, lavish compartment. The seats were red and cushioned, and each had matching padded headrests. All overhead railings were glistening without any fingerprint smudges. From the outside, the windows were strongly tinted—complete privacy, unlike most avelifts.

When the monorail took off toward the Gallant Arena, Reno leaned close to me. “When we get there, most contestants will already be waiting

—trying to scope out the competition before the first challenge tomorrow. I, for one, have learned that showing up right on time or even a bit late is better.”

The merchant buildings out the window began to trickle away. “Why is that?”

“Prevents reporters from coming up and chatting, trying to discover everything about you... and for *you*, Lisa, being arcane is your greatest strength. You only give away as much information as the smartest person in the room knows. Never reveal any secrets. You said those two Nuoljians know you have Water Manipulation, right?”

I nodded as the light from the evening sun made the orange in Reno’s eyes burn like embers.

“Then, that is *all* anyone in that room needs to know. Once you make it past the first round—possibly even after the second—you can use your terrain magic. Same goes for dúlaman. Save that for the spars.”

“Wait—you mean there won’t be a spar tomorrow?” I rushed my worried words.

Reno sighed with a grin. “Zephan knows the spars are what the people are there to see, so he normally saves that after half of the contestants are eliminated. Gives the audience a chance to pick their favorites and root for them in the stands. But that is just me taking a guess. He could do a spar tomorrow or wait until the final rounds for all I know.”

The avelift went underground, and when it resurfaced, a lustrous coliseum twice as large as the Hero’s Arena stood tall in the distance. Three avelift stations were elevated high, connected to long extravagant bridges that led right up to the top of the stadium. Small towers, very sleek and sealed with opaline metal, were evenly placed atop the rim of the stadium, golden flags whipping at the tallest points.

Streamers decorated the sides of the massive gray walls of the stadium, pronouncing “Paragon Games” in bold gold and silver ink. The main entrance had to be four stories high. There wasn’t a roof over the building, but I could see a magic mantle being cast over the top, probably used just in case it rained... or to keep the battles from getting too out of hand vertically. I tried not to think of that.

Below the avelift stations were many mobile shops and hundreds of vendors, filling the concrete soil with a sea of goods. Toward the farther end were tents, galasi cars, and even an airship. People were lively, and I saw

smoke puffing from grills and sparklers. *They have tailgaters here already—the games don't start until tomorrow!*

“Have you ever played at this Arena?” I asked, trying to distract myself from more anxiety bubbling up in my gut.

“This one is only for the Paragon Games, so that is a no. I have been inside quite a few times, and it's pretty big. Has a giant viewing room for you and all the contestants to watch the other players and way more seating than the Hero's Arena.”

I took a big gulp. *There are definitely over 100,000 seats in that arena... that's a lot of people...*

Our magic monorail swerved left, going toward the back of the arena. “There are only four tournaments, right? One every week?”

Reno nodded.

“So, am I staying here, then? Or do I get to go back home and train with you?”

“Zephan requires every contestant to stay only until after the games the next day. You're free to leave during the rest of the week. Glad to see you expecting yourself to make it past the first week.” Reno smiled.

I wasn't trying to make that assumption; I just wanted to know if I would get a break in between so I could do my Charmer job for Mender Roo. The bottles of Enkurious algae potion were about empty, and I did not need magic rot interfering with my battles during the games.

The railing of the avelift began to appear at the private VIP station of the arena. It was auroral—more beautiful than even Mantene's—with spotless flooring that had no cracks in the tiles and even a long overhang that extended to the back entrance. Workers dressed in suits—and even some in athletic gear—walked up and down the pathways, all very serious and in a rush.

“Lisa.” Reno stopped me as I began to stand up out of my seat. “One last thing...” A tilt of his chin. “Okay, two. When you step foot into the cavaedium—the giant assembly room where Zephan conducts his meetings and the reporters hold their interviews—the other fighters will either think having you in the games is a joke and not take you seriously *or* not see you as a challenge and try to get you out first.”

I paused and squinted my eyes. “None of those are good things...”

Reno chuckled, though I didn't think anything I said was funny. “That is because you will have to create the third option yourself: having

them see you as a threat. That is only possible if you do as we practiced—being a little flashy and clever with your magic while winning the first round. Once you do that, the contestants will then take you more seriously, and so will the audience.”

The glass doors automatically opened, and a Paragon Games worker dressed in a white button-up with blue shorts and sunglasses welcomed us. “Afternoon, Mr. Otyamu and you, too, Miss, uh...”

“Lisa, sir,” I answered.

“Ah—my apologies. These are for you, Miss Lisa.”

The games worker placed two blue dots in the palm of my hand. With one glance, I knew them to be a pair of cluins.

“Oh, thank you, sir,” I said, putting the blue stickers behind my ears. *Guess some of the fighters don’t speak the everyday tongue.*

As we stepped out of the avelift, the worker said, “If you don’t mind, I will take you both to the cavaedium where the opening session will be held.”

The back entrance could have fooled me as the main if I didn’t know any better. Doors were twenty feet tall with tinted blue glass, and there was an open foyer that even had a view of the two balconies above. *What back door has a lobby behind it?* The inside was clean, swimming with workers and other Heroes Games players. Many said “hi” to Reno when we passed by. I only smiled—too nervous to even wave in fear of them seeing my tattoo.

In the middle of the hall was a giant crystal statue shaped like a jagged crescent moon. The stones glowed yellow and orange from the sun that glistened through the atrium windows above, making each shard beam bright just like the Wishing Stars. *Seems Zephan takes a lot of pride in his games if even the backdoor is this elegant.*

The worker led Reno and me down a darker hallway. A ten-foot arched doorway stood ahead, sparkling clean like the floor below. Lots of muffled chatter echoed from behind, and my stomach churned like the world’s thickest glob of butter. All I wanted to do was run away because I knew the moment I stepped through those doors, I was about to meet eleven of the most powerful, undiscovered Mages and Mystics on planet Kalm... and at least ten of them did *not* want me there.

This is it. Please don’t let everyone be staring at me...

The worker opened the door for us. Inside was another magnificent room with a large window in the back that gaped over the stadium below. The walls were adorned with tall columns and paintings of past Paragon Game fighters—very pristine and elegant, though not as much as the halls of Boolavogue’s castle. An elevated stage was in front of the window, and Heroes Games players and reporters were scattered throughout—standing. No one was sitting on the emerald sofas nestled against the walls. I wish they were because I truly looked like the smallest person in the room now.

Though the cavaedium was beautiful, I couldn’t help but stare straight at the floor. Eyes were everywhere, and most conversations grew silent... especially from *them*.

In the middle of the room—right where Reno pushed me to go toward—were the contestants. Most weren’t talking with each other but with the journalists and other intrigued Heroes Games fighters. It seemed they didn’t want to get to know their opponents too well... or only thought of them as enemies and not a relationship about to blossom. Not a single kindhearted smile. More acidic churns swirled in my gut.

My eyes flickered up from the polished floor to peer at them just so I could find the twelve seats that were lined at the front of the stage: One man was almost as large as Gaius; one boy, about Reno’s age, had the coldest face I had ever seen; one girl had more muscles than any female Hunter on Ekron’s team; one even told a reporter he could make his whole body turn as rigid as stone.

I regretted ever looking. *I know Reno said not to appear scared, but how can I not? Every single fighter is terrifying!*

Everyone grew silent as I walked past them. Luckily, a familiar white-haired boy was near the edge of the stage, motioning me to come over. My heart finally beat steadily again as Ayker took away the weight of loneliness. I picked up my pace as I walked over to him. He was at the edge of a row of twelve chairs, appearing a bit older with his hair trimmed shorter on the sides and styled messily at the top.

Avoiding the eavesdropping contestants around us, Ayker whispered with a sigh, “Kind of a shock, huh? That we’re here?” Anxiety shadowed his every word.

I couldn’t speak. The tension suffocated me, so I nodded and released the deep breath I had held since I walked into the room.

Ayker spoke again. “It’s wrong of me to say this, but I’m glad you chose to stay in the games. Makes being here not as—”

“—scary?” I softly finished.

Ayker released a deeper breath. “Yeah...”

Suddenly, the double doors behind us swung open.

Dressed in a fitted aquamarine suit, with blonde hair perfectly styled and drooping on his right shoulder to show off his silver earrings, Zephan strode in. His smile was confident, proud, thinly stretching his clean face as he ascended to the stage. Cameras flashed behind us as the other fighters took their seats in the row of twelve; two female players were blushing and speaking of our host’s handsomeness while most sat silently.

The room fell silent as Zephan took centerstage. His brown eyes were squinted, and his chin stayed pointed up as his hand twirled off to his right, causing his thin fingers to glow yellow. In moments, a slender white microphone zoomed from the corner of the room into his glowing palm and fingers. It resembled a 50s-style microphone I had seen in reruns of old game shows back on Earth, like the one Bob Barker used in *The Price is Right*.

In his charming voice, with the sunset’s orange beams decorating his suit from the window behind, Zephan officially welcomed us all. “It is always a pleasure and honor to be a part of what unites all our galaxies together, and that is magic. This year, Kalm was chosen as the host planet, and I must say... I was even surprised myself as the contestants were chosen. This will *truly* be...” Zephan paused and looked right down at me; my eyes quickly averted back to the sweaty fingers in my lap, “... a Paragon Games to remember.”

I glanced down the row past Ayker. Without even trying, I saw the other Nuoljian staring right at me. Setzyr, the man from the Court of Partisans. Typically, when two strangers make eye contact, one would turn away out of fear of being noticed. The moment I saw his eyes, though, Setzyr did not change his gaze. He gave a subtle, sneery smile before leaning back into his chair.

He wasn’t the only one engaging in the impolite staring game either: a girl with pink hair was glaring at me, as well as the buff older lady.

I couldn’t take another eye-dagger from the contestants and quickly leaned back into my cushioned chair again, listening to Zephan’s speech.

Never met a group of adults before who looked at me as if I was a pest... I bit my lower lip. I hate this...

Before discussing the rules and our first challenge tomorrow, Zephan re-introduced all the fighters. I was glad. Being at Luca's, I was too distracted to pay attention to the names and photos of anyone besides Setzyr and Ayker.

He started chronologically by age, meaning the first was the buff lady. Forty-two years old and named Impa Helsinki. She had an intimidating smile, standing boldly out of her seat when Zephan announced her, finishing with a hearty wave to the reporters.

Fighter 2 was Bless—no last name given. She looked young for age thirty-five, had no smile on her feminine face, and had many braids in her coarse hair.

Fighter 3 was thirty-four years old and the buffest man in the group with *tons* of scars around his arms, Lotto Granidior. His face appeared friendly when he turned around toward the small crowd of players and reporters, giving a small wave. The moment he sat back down, though, those dark eyes were ready to kill.

Fighter 4 was Setzyr Tzelem. When he stood up to turn toward the reporters, I noticed his brown, shadowing hair was just about as long as Vilmads, all tied back in a low ponytail.

Fighter 5 had the weirdest name: it was Ben—not Benjamin or some magical name like the rest. Just Ben like any normal Earthian name. He happened to be the one who told the reporter his magic was turning his body to stone, which led me to realize that not even Zephan was telling everyone in the room our magic. *Guess he is letting it be a surprise, even to us... Hate that, too...*

"Fighter 6," Zephan began, "is from the nation of Torne, age twenty-eight, *Miss Rongolebeau Alawai*—"

"Just *Rongo* is fine," she interrupted the Game Keeper. Her hair was scarlet red, her arms were crossed, and her voice was deep and loud. Glass bracers hugged her wrists, reflecting her stark, feminine face. She didn't even stand up to acknowledge those around her. She, by far, was the scariest woman there.

Zephan wasn't fazed by the outburst. "Apologies..." He continued on. "Fighter 7 represents the small country of Vulli, age twenty-seven: *On Cal*—"

“It’s O.N., not ‘On,’” the boy with shaggy black hair next to Rongo interjected, though his voice was much less intimidating and more gloomy sounding. Zephan didn’t apologize this time for messing up a contestant’s name.

Fighter 8 was Terroko Kazun (the spiky brown-haired, mean-faced boy), and Fighter 9 was Varl Hepbruin (the top of his hair was neon orange, and the bottom was shaved and dyed black). He, too, had a snarly face.

Fighter 10 was the long, pastel pink-haired girl—age twenty-three—Lumaline Gaia. She jumped out of her seat and said “hi” with a big wave to those behind her. Out of the whole group, she was the only one whose smile didn’t look conniving.

When Zephan called Ayker’s name next, my heart wanted to pack up, leave, and never return. *I already have to battle while performing, and now, I have to present myself in front of everyone—thought I escaped simplistic introductions once I graduated middle school!*

“And our last player, Fighter Number 12, age fourteen and from the Kingdom of Boolavogue...” Zephan smiled before saying my name. I wish he didn’t do that—made it seem like he knew me, and I did *not* want the other fighters to know that he did. “Miss Lisa Robbie.”

My body *refused* to turn around... and I did not force it to. I stood up, and my first instinct was to slightly bow; the Guardians did it, and the guards at Boolavogue did it for the King and Queen, so I thought it was less awkward than waving.

When I bowed at Zephan—literally only bending my waist one or two inches forward—three contestants verbally scoffed. *Was I not supposed to do that? I thought it was common courtesy; he’s a Keeper, after all.*

Zephan nodded, pleased with my reaction, and I sat back down in my chair next to Ayker. “It is no secret that there will be four tournaments during this Paragon Games... but as to what those are, well, we will only reveal that to you in pieces. For tomorrow, however, I will tell you all this: It will be... a race.”

My eyes widened, and I bet I wasn’t the only one. *A race? Are you kidding me? I didn’t train for a race. I trained for fighting! Hate. These. Surprises.*

“There will be four groups of three, meaning there will be four races, and whoever comes in last of each trio will be eliminated. The remaining eight will return for the second tournament. Now, this is the

Paragon Games, so do not expect this to be easy. Your groups and *type* of race will be undisclosed until the moment it is revealed to the public. After all, it wouldn't be a proper game without a surprise for even The Twelve." Zephan said that last part with a smile, but I saw nothing cheerful about being left in the dark.

"Like all Paragon Games, you must be present the evening before each match. We will provide you a proper meal, lodging, and use of our Menders for any ailments that may happen before or after the battles—"

"What's the prize?" Rongo bolted from the crowd.

All our eyes shifted to the red-headed contestant, including the guests and reporters, shocked she interrupted Zephan's speech. Still, she did point out a valid question, one that I didn't even think of until then.

Zephan tilted his head, smirked, and spoke charmingly into the microphone, "The prize... won't be revealed until tomorrow—just before your teams are announced. But I can assure you... it will be one worth fighting for."

Rongo crossed her legs and scoffed.

Zephan continued, "After tomorrow's fourth race, all eight final fighters must regroup here. Once finished, we will see the final eight the evening before the second challenge."

The blonde Game Keeper said a bunch of other things that pertained to the pre-game shows and battles, but it took a lot of work to focus. My mind wouldn't rest. There was a race tomorrow, no one seemed very nice, and the only person who tolerated me was a boy—no girls. I wanted nothing more than to jump out the window and tell Gaius this was a bad idea—all this was bad. But I couldn't let doubt and fear and shame bring me down. Kamari said I could do it—Cal said I could do it—even Gaius said I could. I clung to their words for dear life.

Zephan finished his speech and evanesced away, a grand exit. We twelve followed the two assistants, Joolee and Garis, through the door and down two more hallways until we reached the lounge area of the place where we'd all be staying. It was big and lit up with warm lights.

"Feel free to eat and relax here before the games tomorrow," Joolee said as she opened the door.

But relaxing was impossible.

31 A Room Full of Fighters

Most fighters took no pride in common courtesy, acting like starving teenagers going toward the food table and piling their plates high with meat, chicken, and fruit. I was too nervous to eat, but I still grabbed a plate of rice and vegetables as a cover-up for my anxiety. All I wanted to do was go to our private rooms Joolee and Garis said were in the back, avoiding the players at all costs. But no one left the posh living room... so I didn't either. They already saw me as a pathetic kid, and escaping to my bedroom with my dinner would confirm how terrified I truly was.

I sat on the edge of the large maroon couch, which was placed dead center of the artless wall quarters. It was huge, formed three-fourths of a square, and could easily fit ten people. My knees faced inward and held my plate as Ayker sat next to me. I still couldn't talk to him—couldn't look up. Couldn't eat.

Then, more players came and sat near us with food in their hands.

And that was when the filterless conversation started.

"Man—this food is *so good!*" neon-orange-haired Varl exclaimed, guzzling down his second plate of grilled chicken.

"Go ahead and eat as much as you want," Rongo said, fierce and without a smile, lounging directly across from Ayker and me on the couch. She only had a small bowl of meat and rice. "Better to have you sluggish for tomorrow and allow one of us to easily take a spot in the next games."

Varl sneered and looked directly at Lotto—the scarred, buff man—sitting to the left of the couch. "Big guy over there is eating more than me —"

"—and could easily turn the food into muscle, you twig," Rongo said with a pick at her nails, her voice calm yet demanding.

Agitated, Varl stood up and rolled his eyes. "A lot of talk for someone with a lame crap load of magic like yours!"

Rongo scoffed and crossed her toned legs, extending her muscly arms along the top of the couch. "At least you've heard of me. If you were worth my time, I would have heard of you, seeing as your country of Marth is just an avelift ride away from my home in Torne. So, kid, go ahead and eat your heart out. You'll be out of the games before noon tomorrow."

In the back of the room, the crazy strong forty-two-year-old Impa started belly laughing. Everyone stared at her. She did not care one bit. Her legs were crisscrossed like a child in the wide cushioned chair near the paneled doors to the balcony. “Ha! Seems *you’re* the one that’s all talk, Miss Glass Shredder. Your reputation is bold, but that’s only ‘cause Torne is *weak*! Been there twice. You’re nothing too hard to handle.”

Rongo twitched a smile, her red hair glistening from the warm lights. “Says The Beast herself.”

Lumaline—sitting next to Varl—jumped in her seat with stars in her eyes as she looked at Impa. “Oo—you have some type of beast magic?”

The old lady had some food in her mouth. “Hold on, girly...” Impa then stuck the cluin behind her ear.

I didn’t even notice Lumaline was speaking another language, my blue sticker translating speech since I left the avelift. Lumaline repeated herself, and Impa gave a grand smile, proud the pink-haired contestant knew of her magic.

In the shadow of the room, sitting six feet away from Ben—the other buff man—was Setzyr, and he proudly smiled. “I say... you’re quite the competition then, Mrs. Beast. You’ve earned yourself quite a name and title. Bet you’ve defeated many creatures and unworthy Mystics and Mages that have crossed your path.”

Impa took a gulp of water. “You’ve got that right, slick.”

The broad-shouldered Nuoljian pressed off his chair and casually began walking toward us in the center of the room. His stance was proper, exactly how I remembered him from the Court of Partisans. Confidence oozed off him.

He continued, “I’m not sure about the rest of you, but since we were all chosen—the strongest undiscovered magic in all planet Kalm—I believe... it would be fair to attest to our *own* greatest feats. Get to know each other before the games truly begin. In fact, it would make the challenge tomorrow be that much more... riveting.” He cocked a thin black brow at the group of us on the couch. “Unless you’re ashamed of what you’ve accomplished with the magic you’ve been favored with.”

Bless—sitting a good distance away from Ayker’s left side on the couch—tossed back her waterfall of coarse, beaded braids. “I stopped a Bog Behemoth with my magic, an eighty-foot-tall one at that—*while* my arm was broken after winning a spar against a retired game player.”

She defeated a behemoth—I've never even seen one before. Gaius said they are some of the strongest forms of dark magic out there...

She then darted at Varl on the couch. "What about you, kid?"

Everyone proceeded to boast about their greatest slays and takedowns. They all were great—all of them. Lotto said he just won his hundredth spar last month, taking his opponent's blood as a prize. *A prize.* These people were beyond crazy. Even Varl; said he shot a giant flying bird of Darkness out of the sky with his magic—laser magic. Most didn't say what their powers were, keeping it hidden, but the red-headed woman did.

Rongo—living up to her Miss Glass Shredder nickname—had Glass Manipulation. "I've taken down many who thought of me as weak, killed those who couldn't accept defeat as well. Still, I haven't met an opponent worthy enough to earn my respect. I don't care who knows my strength in this room. None of you seem strong enough to even be considered a challenge against me."

All the scoffs from the other fighters did not faze Rongo as she turned toward Setzyr. "And what of you? You were the one curious enough to start this."

Setzyr gave a coy smile as he began to pace his way back around the room. Out of everyone, he was the most intriguing to me. From what I was told, only the Vits—the white-haired Nuoljians—could have magic. *Wouldn't the Nuoljians have talked about him if he was so powerful? He is the only dark-haired citizen to have magic other than omrivim, right?*

"I have something I've called Red Torrent—a phantasmal magic that allows me to... well, use my Starnate heart to do whatever I wish, I guess you could say," Setzyr smiled, squinting down at us with his oddly-vague answer. "Used it to better the citizens of my province, helping them thrive."

Ah. So, Wishing Stars can still be drawn to the dark-haired Nuoljians like any other human... though it must be rarer than I thought...

Lotto huffed, scarred arms crossed next to Rongo. "Just a politics man, not a fighter, then?"

"Now... I wouldn't say that." His voice turned sly. "I wouldn't be the man I am today if repercussions weren't involved... hearts imprisoned and beaten if one disobeyed my orders. And I've come out of my battles *without* a scratch." A flick to Lotto's tattered body.

I swear Ayker stiffened next to me, the veins on his hands throbbing.

And at that moment, the room realized what I hoped would be avoided: Ayker and I sitting mute on the couch. My food was untouched, turning cold on the wooden coffee table ahead of my feet. My body hunched—trying to curl up as if that would’ve prevented all eyes from seeing my timid face.

Rongo’s eyes leered at Ayker first. “You’re from the same province, right, white hair? Bet you know if this guy is really a threat or not.”

Without a smile, staring gruffly back at Rongo, Ayker answered, “I don’t know much, actually.”

She scoffed. “Fine. Then, what about you?”

His voice stayed low. “Slayed a couple of inarimars in my time.”

“Those sea monster things?” Lumaline sprang up, and Ayker nodded. “They are super powerful. Can’t believe you actually killed one and survived.”

Before Ayker could say anything else, Setzyr spoke up. “He is quite the marvelous Mystic. Nuolja is proud to have him.”

Something in Ayker stirred because he didn’t respond or look up to his leader. If anything, his chest puffed, a breath held. *Guess they aren’t on good terms... or maybe he just doesn’t like it when others boast about him*

“What of you?” Rongo’s voice broke my train of thought, my body chilling.

Everyone in the room stared at me—the last fighter to say their greatest accomplishments—but I only took subtle glances away from the coffee table to look at Rongo.

I could’ve been honest and told them how I defeated the greatest dark magic in the universe on my fourteenth birthday—how I saved the stars that gave them their incredible power. But, I couldn’t... because then they’d know about my magic.

Reno’s advice rang in my ears: *Never reveal any secrets. Being arcane is your greatest strength.*

I shyly responded, “I won a spar against a famed Hunter—a, uh, Boolavogue huntress last year.” A bit of a lie about the “famed” part, but it was something many Hunters talked about—could’ve gotten around the Kingdom. Gotten to other nearby Hunter guilds.

Many grunts and sighs lingered in the room, leaving me frozen in fear. I thought I gave a good answer. *Did I say something wrong? Kids*

don't normally beat up adults.

Varl blurted, “One spar? That’s it? I knew it! This is just some charity fighter—that Keeper using a kid to score more money in the games.”

Nerves started quivering against my bones. Emotions ready to burst. I had sparred more times than that—sparred against Gaius, Cal, and Ekron. I even slayed more creatures than Varl, Terroko, and Ben, but I didn’t have the guts to tell them that. Fear chained me down, and tears would roll if I had to say one more thing.

“What?” Bless questioned. “One spar isn’t that surprising. I mean, look at her—even I didn’t fight that young—”

“But *you* also weren’t chosen for the Paragon Games until now—can’t believe this. We’re being taken for a *joke* here...” Varl pouted back into the couch cushion while I sat motionlessly staring at my freckled kneecaps.

Reno was right. He was completely right. They all think I’m just here as a gimmick... Just do not cry, Lisa—the last thing you need is more clarification of how scared you really are—

“Actually,” Setzyr said, making his way around toward Ayker and me, “there is more to Miss Lisa here. I hate to see her spot in the games be seen as one for a charity case. She did come to Nuolja, after all, with the title of Restricted Hunter—and even saved one of the citizens from a dark creature. Saving a life, now *that*... is a great feat... and I bet she’s more skilled than she’s letting on.”

Setzyr’s words—nothing could have prepared me for that. He not only paid attention to me at the dinner in Reylja, but he also knew I saved Vonny, even though Ayker was the one who scared the massive fish away. Still, he was spreading information about me to the contestants... and I didn’t like it. Praising me and my abilities should have made me feel better, but the way he said it made it seem like I was hiding something while the rest of the room was being honest about their magic.

Impa, still sitting comfortably near the back paneled doors, laughed. “Boolavogue recruiting children—now, *that’s* a laugh. King Sonon can’t even get decent men to battle his creatures—*pathetic!* I’m with stupid hair.” She gestured to Varl. “A joke in the form of a child if I’ve ever seen one.”

My eyes glossed as more emotions ripped through my stomach. *Don’t cry, Lisa. Don’t cry—*

Terroko stood up and said with his mean face, “Whatever—I’m out for the night.”

Varl stood up, too. “Same here.”

With the commotion of the two younger and loud fighters leaving, Ayker nudged my arm and whispered, “Hey, follow me.”

I didn’t care where Ayker was taking me. Any place was better than under that spotlight of agitated eyes on the maroon couch.

Ayker led me out to the balcony, far away from the ears and chatter of the paragon fighters. The weather was cold as night lingered over the arena, and the lights of the merchant city were glowing brightly in the distance. Out there, everything seemed happy and normal. I wish that were the case for me.

My knees were pulled near my chest as Ayker sat beside me on the balcony steps. The beats from my heart were about to burst through my ribcage, thudding so hard that if one more person said anything degrading toward me again, tears would pour.

“Figured you wanted to leave...” he said to me, gentle and kind, calming my nerves. He couldn’t have been more right.

A teardrop riveted down my face. This was only the second time I had met Ayker, and yet my body trusted him enough to see me cry. Another moment to catch my breath, and then I said, “Thanks.”

He waited a second more for my emotions to settle, or perhaps he also needed to recollect himself. “You know, Lisa, most of them are just talking a big game. Setzyr and I came early. Discovered that half of the players don’t even have any experience fighting, let alone took the time to truly train for the games. They probably were just lying, trying to seem tough...” Ayker looked over at me with his polar-ice eyes. He saw my shaken face and picked-pink fingers wrapped around my shins—saw how utterly terrified I was. I couldn’t hide it. He nudged my shoulder as if to let me know he saw the heart I had worn on my sleeve. “So, you don’t have to worry too much, okay?”

I let out a sigh of relief. Ayker’s kindness was more healing than any medicine, and I couldn’t have been more grateful to him.

He continued his synopsis of the fighters—to distract or to inform. Either way, it helped. “Only ones that I see as a threat are Rongo and Impa—being that both are known to use their magic for taking down foes—Lotto and Ben—their size is one thing, but they also have been in brawls

and rarely lose—and possibly Lumaline. Those hosts of the games mentioned her magic. It's Man Phantasmal Duplication, which means she can summon the foes she has killed in the past. For Setzyr..." He sighed before continuing. "Well, I couldn't say much, but after my name was called, he had me spar with him a couple of times... but only without magic. He's pretty skilled but nothing too crazy. Nothing like those Hunters you train with in Boolavogue."

"It's really kind of you to have told me all this..." I began, warm breaths brushing against my kneecaps, "but why—I mean, you didn't have to... would've helped your chances of winning if I stayed in the dark about their fighting skills."

"Besides the fact that you were getting bullied by a couple of adults, I believe that if anyone deserves to win this, it's you. People like them... it just proves that powerful magic only makes people greedy. This whole idea of the games, I think it's wrong and that magic should be shared."

Ayker Rovonami, this teenage boy who had no reason to be kind to me, was sitting beside me, believing a lie. He told me all this before, and even then, it sounded wrong—brainwashed almost—and I couldn't let him continue to live his life under some shadow his Nuoljian culture had placed him over.

I took a deep breath. "Ayker... you've been really nice to me ever since we met... so, I want to tell you something, too. Something that's a secret that you need to know."

My legs unbent as I sat more comfortably on the stairs. "I know you believe magic should be shared and not grown, believing that powerful magic can't do good things... only producing what you see in that room... but, you see, the magic I have... it was given to me for the sole purpose of being strong to save the world."

Ayker looked over at me, though I couldn't see his face. My eyes were still stuck staring at my tiny, pale hands.

I asked, "Do you know the Guardians or of the Keepers?"

"I mean, I've heard of the Keepers, seeing as Zephan is one of them... and only that the Guardians are just some belief people have... why do you ask?"

I let out a short breath. *Nuolja isn't just keeping its people secret from the world but also the knowledge of the protectors of magic...*

“Well, they are real because I’ve met them... and I ask because they and Lady Ariela—the Elysian and one of the first original protectors of all magic—asked for The Light to gift them the world’s most powerful magic whose purpose was to defeat Darkness... it’s called the Agapéd Magic. The thing about this magic... it doesn’t just go to whatever heart it’s drawn to like all other Starnates; it chooses the heart based on its will to do good...”

A breath of courage whispered out. “And that magic has now chosen me. I’m not sure why it saw my heart as good, but I’ve vowed to become stronger so I can save the world someday. So far, I have—with the help of others—and I’ve seen my magic grow. So... what I’m saying is”—my spurge of confidence made my eyes look directly at Ayker—“sharing magic is fine, but if you’re blessed with strong magic, you should hone it and use it to help others. I believe you’d be really good at that—with your widmoos and everything.”

Ayker didn’t respond quickly; he just stared at me in silence with his head turned toward the bustling city of EverWake. No breath filled my chest, not until he said something.

Suddenly, he made a soft grin. “You know... a part of me always wanted to see how strong I could get with my magic; even the widmoos seemed to want my strength to blossom. I just always thought that Darkness would take over my heart—that’s what we’ve been told in Nuolja. Fear keeps us away from ever exploring the depths of our magic. With what you said, though, and what I’ve seen from you... I want to do what you do: Save my home and others using my power. After this—this whole thing with the games... I’ll do it.”

The lights from the town made Ayker’s eyes shine brightly, resembling the winterdaze radiance, but it was the newfound purpose that made his face seem to glow. Happiness was a charming look on him. “You’re pretty wise for a kid, you know?”

I couldn’t help but giggle at his absurd comment. “I’m just telling the truth. Nothing wise about anything I said.”

“Still—thanks, Lisa. Maybe my being in the games will show Nuolja that powerful magic is good. Would be nice to see our people use it for more than credit exchange.”

We both shared a smile as Ayker stood up to his feet. “Gonna take a walk around the stadium. Anything’s better than being back in there. Care to join?”

Ayker's gesture was kind, but after everything that happened... "I think I'm just gonna head to my room and try to sleep... Thanks for asking, though."

With Ayker gone, the only way back to the private bedrooms was through the door on the right of the buffet table... which could only be reached by passing the crowd of adults who hated me. I stopped near the paneled doors when I heard them gossiping.

"You going easy on the kid?" I heard a man's voice say. I peered through the cracked paneled door. It was Lotto still sitting on the couch.

Rongo, lounging near him, didn't smile as she replied, "Kid? She lost that innocence the moment she stayed in the games. I'm treating her like any other opponent, and I don't care who sees. We lose to *that*—never would a Hero or Warrior title be even suggested to us."

Rongo stood up and turned to Setzyr, who was still near the back of the room, right next to the door I needed to reach. "You said she's some Hunter, right, Partisan?"

Setzyr smirked in the high-top chair he was seated in, his elbow on the table propping up his chin.

Rongo continued, "You really want us to believe that? I've seen those Hunters from Boolavogue *and* their King. No way he would ever disgrace his Kingdom with a cipher like her representing his people."

The Nuoljian cocked his chiseled chin with that same stiff grin. "You have no reason to believe me... but it is true."

Impa—still close to the panel doors—belted, "You're just soft on her—*hah!* Can't have your people in that frozen land see their leader beat up a stupid kid."

"You're wrong," Setzyr said, voice calm, finally standing to his feet and sniping his eyes toward Impa; that coy grin of his wasn't fading. "She goes up against me... I will see her like any of you: easier to squash than a bug."

His bold praise and arrogant attitude didn't even faze the others.

I, on the other hand, was shaking on the other side—wobblier than a baby tree in the wind. *They all can't bear the fact I'm here... I can't take this anymore...*

Slowly sliding open the panel doors just enough to squeeze through, I kept my head down as I scurried to the back door. No one in the room

talked or whispered as I walked by, but I could feel their harsh glares at me—noticing even the tiniest freckle on my knees and hands.

The moment I touched the door handle of the hallway toward the cabins, I couldn't help but glance to my right. Setzyr and his squinted eyes targeted me, putting the cherry on top of my sundae of hatred.

My feet rushed to the end of the hall, where I saw my name on the plaque of a glossy door. The door handle glowed green when my hand touched it, unlocking the latch to let me inside... and I melted onto my bed as my eyes filled with tears.

And I thought teenagers were mean...

One sniffle was all it took to summon Tuff out from his invisibility. His plush tangerine body made the dark room glow orange as he flew up next to my face, wiping away one of my scared tears.

"I don't know if I can do this, Tuff..." I told him as I laid on my right ear, his body sitting at the edge of my bed. My eyes leaked as my mind kept telling me, *still pathetic—still a kid in an adult game*.

My glainie refused to see me upset. He turned around and began to project a memory in front of me. It was of Kamari. Tuff replayed the moment from early that week when she told me I was strong enough and needed to believe that myself.

"Flooot-hoot," he sang.

I couldn't help but smile. "You believe I'm strong enough, too, huh?"

A thread-thin smile perched on his glowing face. *"Whoot!"*

"Thanks, bud..." I rolled over on my back as Tuff flew to cuddle near my neck, wrapping himself in my hair. "They all think I'm weak because I'm hiding my magic from them... Tomorrow, though, I'll show them. All I need to do is win one tournament—wish it wasn't a race, though. If I do that, Tuff, I won't look like a weak Mage."

"Hoohoot?"

"Winning would be amazing, but I don't *need* to win to look strong. Just need to lose against a good fighter. Doing that will show the world that I *am* powerful, and Gaius won't have to worry about me being kidnapped again. So, yeah... just need to win tomorrow and after that"—the dark rot on my back started hurting me again, reminding me to take another gulp of the Enkurious potion—"I can finally get rid of this stupid magical skin disease."

As I cuddled up in the foreign covers, I pulled out my iPod from my orbkit and swirled the button around until I found some songs by Chicago to listen to. Mom was right about her music helping me go to bed, and before I knew it, my scared thoughts finally diminished, and I drifted off to sleep.

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32 Challenge 1

It was 9:00 a.m., and voices from the cheering crowd were shaking the walls of the viewing room. It had a lower ceiling than the cavaedium but with a longer horizontal window where all twelve of us, Zephan, some broadcasters with their cameras, and a couple of the Paragon Games workers stood. Through the window, a sea of eager fans filled up almost every seat of the massive stadium, all watching some pre-game battles Zephan put together using his paid fighters. Reno wasn't asked to perform with them, but I did see G-lad out there.

My throat turned dry. *That's gonna be me soon...*

As for us, we all were waiting to be told, along with the rest of the galaxies, who the teams were for the races. My heart was not resting easily.

Please, please, please, don't let these races be strictly running. If Zephan pulls out some "Hey, let's not give them a chance to use magic!" trick, I am done for...

We lined up in the viewing room, facing the stage where Zephan stood. A violet suit adorned with a golden tie hugged his toned, slender frame—exquisite, as usual. I wish I could've said the rest of us were wearing athletic clothing. I figured that to be expected, like any sporting event. Nope. Every fighter but me, Ayker, Varl, and Terroko were dressed in outlandish garb, resembling whatever province or nation they were from. *Wish I got the memo that I needed a costume and not just my Hunter training shorts and Mantene bathing suit...*

The glint on the back of the camera lit up blue, and out in the stadium, four larger-than-life magical projections floated in the air. Zephan's face popped up on all the screens. *Whoa! Didn't know there were magic stones that show live feed through cameras.*

As the Game Keeper smiled, the crowd cheered loudly, knowing the Paragon Games were about to begin.

"I'm sure you enjoyed the pre-game entertainment," Zephan announced in his calm, charming voice, "but now, we shall proceed to the main event. For the twelve's first challenge, we will have a *race* to determine the final eight that will battle in the arena next week. There will be four courses, and each trio will race against each other. The first two to

cross the finish line will proceed to next week's games. Like any Paragon Games, all challenges and further details have been kept secret, even to your fighters. So, what I unveil now... will be a surprise to them as well to you. After all... this is a game. Should be full of mystery and challenges."

Suddenly, a smaller, sparkled projection appeared next to Zephan, revealing all twelve of our faces on the screen. As the Game Keeper talked, the headshots of us began to shift into teams.

Toward the bottom was mine, and I was grouped against Varl—which I didn't mind too much—and Lotto. My stomach became a whirlpool as I looked over my left shoulder at him. Beefy muscles rippled up and down his body. There was no fat underneath his scarred skin.

At least this is a race and not some type of physical strength spar. No way could I block a punch from him.

"For each racing trio, there will be a unique course, and I promise you... you won't want to miss a second of it." Zephan grinned. "Racing around the arena—that would be no fun. These are magic games, after all, with Kalm's strongest Mages and Mystics ready for their quiescent power to be unleashed. Each race will take place in a location known for its extreme climate or magic temperament and will be shown live. Though, for those here, you'll be able to witness your eight champions the moment they cross the finish line, for *it* will be right here in the stadium."

On the screen below our groups of three, the terrain of our race began to be displayed. I couldn't be more relieved.

In glowing white font, the words "Ocean Waters" appeared below our group while Scorch Plains, Desert Storm, and Flying Earth appeared under the other names. Though no details were given about our location, I didn't need any clarification on what mine entailed. *I can't believe I got the one terrain I have the best advantage in. Thank goodness for the first surprise that didn't make my bones tremble.*

"Like all our Paragon Games, it wouldn't be a proper contest without a covetous grand prize. This year... its worth is quite priceless."

All ears—even the cameraman and security near the back doors of the room—paid attention to the Game Keeper's next words.

"With the help of some beloved Heroes and Treasure Hunters from all over our galaxies who have given their time for the Paragon Games, this year's prize for Champion... is, in fact, a *wysh*."

A what?

Every pair of eyes around me—including Zephan’s own assistants—looked as if they just heard the world’s most shocking revelation while I just squinted as my eyebrows furrowed down. The prize Zephan mentioned... well, it sounded so arbitrary and child-like, as if a parent told a kid they could have anything they wanted for their birthday. It, by no means, sounded like a real prize. *Is this a real wish? Is there actual magic out there that can make anything? Not even the Guardians can do that... There must be some catch.*

Despite my thoughts on the apparent wish, all the other eleven contestants stood stiff as if their motivation to win had just tripled.

Zephan finished up his opening speech. “Magic is what connects us all. It’s more valuable than diamonds or gold and yet can be found in the heart of the frailest child. Magic is worth being seen as much as it is necessary for life, and here at the Paragon Games... we acknowledge that powerful magic knows no bounds...”

Zephan’s eyes veered away from the camera and behind, toward us twelve fighters. I swear he looked at me the longest. “For even the smallest star can birth forth a Hero when magic takes hold of the heart. Now, let the games *begin*, shall we?”

The broadcasts out in the arena then changed to show the three co-hosts who had been all over the sports stations: Garth, Winry, and Rhiner. I figured Zephan would have let one of his employees tell us the rules and direction of the race, but *he* stayed even with the cameras turned off—stood right in front of us and explained everything. I liked that he took pride in his games and role as Game Keeper.

“Group 1”—Zephan turned his attention to Impa, Bless, and Ayker—“you will join Garis and my other assistants out to the Highland Desert in Kalm for the Desert Storm track.” He then glanced at the rest of us. “Just like all four courses, the first two fighters in each team to reach the portal that brings you back to the arena will move forward to next week’s tournament. You’ll find that every race is three miles long and that there are no rules regarding how you will win. You need only to make it to the finish line.”

Did he just say three miles long... and that sabotage is permissible?

“You’ll notice that the group with the oldest contestant will always go first and the group with the youngest goes last; that carries on to each week, as well. As your group runs the race, the rest of your fellow rivals

will watch from here in the viewing room until the next team is called. I'm sure you all won't disappoint..." Zephan said that last part with a cocked smile. "Good luck to you, fighters."

At that moment, Ayker left with Impa and Bless by evanesing away with Zephan's workers. *I hope he does well...*

The rest of us watched through the glass window and out toward the arena at the magical broadcast. After a few moments, the live feed of Group 1 showed up crystal clear on the screen amid a giant desert being battered by a sandstorm. A bass drum thudded hard in my chest. That was no racetrack: that was a natural disaster, and they had to run through it—a whole *three miles*.

What in the world will my race be like, then?

Sand pelted them before the race began, and Impa shot off as fast as a cheetah, bulleting through the sand as if she were one with the wind. Her beast magic was no joke, allowing her to gallivant through the storm at twenty miles per hour. Sand hit her but didn't nick or scratch her skin; the tissue and muscle underneath were durable like crocodile scales. But she had competition.

Ayker flew ahead, using his widmoos as glowing wings to glide through the storm. The little creatures morphed like bubbly lightning, jetting at speeds that matched a helicopter, and they veiled Ayker's skin in a thin film—gave him a mask of clear widmoo gel. Sand simply bounced off his body and eyes, and he and his ghostly sprites moved as one. *Those little creatures are way stronger than I thought.*

The craziest part was that we could see it all! Camera angles of the race were incredible, zooming quick and with clean-cut shots like a movie.

Ayker cut through the wind with his magical wings, and Impa ripped through the sand waves like they were made of hair-thin paper. Bless, however, struggled. Her magic was Living-Earth—Gaius' magic—and the only plants around were cacti. She tried throwing the spiked balls at her competition, but the beige storm swatted them away. No plants dug underneath the orange sand, and she couldn't find a way to use her magic to help her see. Bless was no match for the Nuoljian and Mrs. Beast.

Ayker and Impa were neck and neck, and in fifteen minutes, they were near the end of the three-mile race. The crowd began to scream as the portal in the arena glowed brightly. Orange and red sand flooded into the rink at the same time a contestant zoomed through.

My heart couldn't help itself when the first-place contestant came out with snow-white hair. I smiled wide and muttered a hardy, "Yes!"

Ayker did it!

Moments after Ayker landed and caught his breath, the portal whirled again. Impa ran through with a stretched, beastly smile, securing second place and her spot in the final eight.

Group 2—Setzyr, O.N., and Ben—went next, heading to a zone in Kalm that had rocks infused with Gravitia magic, causing chunks of earth to float aimlessly in the sky like clouds. Before the match even started, O.N. used his magic to transform himself into a green version of a flying beast—one I had never seen before. *Whoa—he's a Duplication Mystic, but transforms himself instead of manifesting beasts like Ekron...* Ben looked worried the moment he saw it, causing him to hesitate his starting run at the beginning. He was bulkier than O.N. and Setzyr. Odd for him to be scared of a creature. *Does O.N.'s magic detect what his opponents fear, or did he do his research on what scares Ben...*

Though O.N.'s flying creature was skillful, it was nothing compared to Setzyr's. That mysterious Red Torrent magic he spoke of last night formed black and scarlet lightning-filled clouds around his arms and legs, propelling him fast across the floating boulders. The coolest part was that his magic was highly versatile and would transform into giant phantasmal scythes between jumps, gripping the rocky clouds like grappling hooks to swing across. Ben's stone magic was no match against those two, and both Setzyr and O.N. took the two spots for next week's tournament.

Hangnails formed near my cuticles, even with my fingernails trimmed as I stood closer to the viewing window. *If I make it through my race... I'm gonna have to spar against one of them, no doubt...*

Group 3's race took place on the side of a volcano. Hot geysers gushed steam like bursting water pipes from the ground. Zephan wasn't holding back on his promise of a challenge.

Lumaline used her magic to create a duplicate of a seven-foot ice Mystic that glowed pink from head to toe. She had the giant man carry her across the hot floor and freeze any hot steam, running at speeds as fast as a horse. *She didn't even have to move a muscle! Her magic did all the work!* Lumaline easily took first place. I thought Terroko would've taken second. He had Sand Creation and used it to surf along the boiling terrain, but Rongo had an advantage I never expected.

The fiery red-headed Mage—Miss Glass Shredder—had glass in her shoes, jewelry, and belt, even along her back. She manipulated the minerals stuck to her body, flowing the shards like an ocean wave, and surfed along it. Soaring, she tailed Terroko and *swiped* him off his sand-boat with a glass whip, causing him to almost fall into the skin-burning geyser.

Rongo secured the sixth spot... meaning it was my turn to race.

I'd faced many beasts, a dark Mystic, and a couple of prideful Hunters in my life, and even had seen the repercussions of magic gone wrong—got a giant black hole of death on my back to prove it. Fear should have been something I was immune to, yet I stood in that room as if I was experiencing the emotion for the first time. My palms stayed sweaty no matter how many times I wiped them on my shorts, and my heart wouldn't stop its deafening drum solo inside my chest. *Everyone is going to be watching me... Everyone in the universe is going to see me either win or lose... Boolavogue's reputation is on the line... This is more terrifying than I thought...*

Tuff, invisible, perched on my shoulder. *You can do it*, he mentally whistled—inserting the encouraging memories of my mentors and friends into my mind. Their words were a continuous safety harness, keeping me from falling off the rocky ledge I had no choice but to tread across.

I sucked in a deep breath when Joolee told us three, “*Group 4—let's go!*”

We gathered near her as she compiled blue mist in her fist. Lotto put his right hand on her shoulder and the other on mine. *Even his casual grip is strong!* Varl wasn't moving his hand, so I timidly put my palm on his shoulder; he gave me a disgusted look. *I'm not gross to touch—my gosh...*

The Paragon Games Mage then punched the center of our circle of four, and after two seconds, the bright lights of evanescing ended, but the thunder did not.

Glops of water splattered against our bodies before we even opened our eyes. All of us were standing on a skinny sea stack surrounded by the ocean... right in the center of a bolstering storm. Rain pounded hard like sand against my face, and the waves were as high as forty feet. There were no trails of rock or low shorelines aiming towards the dimming portal that was glistening yellow three miles away. Only a path of crashing waves. Walking and running were impossible. *Zephan really expects us to swim*

across this? This is so much scarier than watching it from the viewing room.

“Take your mark at the edge!” Joolee yelled, the storm almost drowning out her voice. “The moment I fire a BURST, you may start. Stay the course for the portal... and try not to die.”

My eyes widened. *She says that like it’s no big deal... and what the heck is a BURST?*

In the sky, zooming around, was a glowing camera—flying all on its own like a drone. It had no wings, just a white luminous trail of dust as it zipped in the storm, recording our every move.

“If you need to prep your magic, do it now!” Joolee finished, now standing six feet behind us.

Lotto whipped off his shirt. Using the metal bracelets around his wrists, he wrapped his muscled torso with his hands and *sliced* two huge slashes around his stomach. Red blood began to mix with the rain, but he didn’t even act fazed.

What—this man is insane!

Instead of pouring down like waterfalls, the blood from his wounds suddenly stopped, and when Lotto clenched his fists, his blood floated near his body like wings; it obeyed him. *Blood Art—he has Blood Art?* His magic was rare, something I had read about in Gaius’ books. It allowed him to charm his blood like how I could make water move to my will.

Varl scoffed. “Hey—like to see you try and beat me.” The spiky hair Mystic then bent forward and flexed his arms, lighting his fingertips with an orange and yellow aura. His eyes turned beady in my direction. “I don’t even know why I try. Big guy and I have already won. Heh—have fun in the water, kid.”

At that moment, as the storm rolled around in the ocean and caused the salty water to thrash against the sea stack, my mind forgot about all the fans in the stands or that frilly camera in the sky. All I could see—all my mind focused on—was the bratty Mystic with the tackiest orange hair I had ever seen before on a man standing two feet next to me... and my fear seemed to morph.

Obviously, I could have just flown across the ocean and left both Lotto and Varl in the jabbing air, but we were in a game... and I didn’t need flight to win. *Use cleverness*, Reno told me. *Be flamboyant.*

My Water Manipulation was perfect enough for this race.

“Have fun in the ocean, kid,” he says... Oh, I’ll show him fun...

I bent my knees and extended my right foot behind, ready to push off.

Joolee made three yellow orbs in the sky, no bigger than a softball, and as each one progressively turned green, my body tensed up. *I. Am. Winning. This.*

Right as the third orb turned green, all three light spheres exploded like a firework, and Lotto jolted off the rock first. He made his blood as durable as bat wings and manipulated each one to dash him through the storm.

I, on the other hand, was ready to jump off, but—

ZAP! A beam of Varl’s laser magic shocked my foot, causing me to stumble on the rock. I was now in third place and was beyond angry.

My teeth were grinding on their own. *He already claims to have won and still has the nerve to knock me over? That is it. I’ll show him what a water Mage can do.*

I stopped caring about how stupid I looked. I already fell over at the starting line, so the worst embarrassment that could happen already did—meaning I had nothing left to fear. My shoes were soaked—plopped my butt hard on the ground and took those off. Joolee looked at me like I was insane.

I was, and I didn’t care.

My shorts were loose-weight, soaking wet from the rain. I let the wind carry the pair into the sea. Joolee gave me an even *more* bizarre stare. It wasn’t like I was flaunting in my underwear; I had a one-piece bathing suit on—not like it would’ve stopped me anyway.

I was ready to go all out.

My hands reached out beside me, the ocean moving to my command. As ropes of the sea wrung around my arms, I launched off the edge of the rock and dove straight for the crashing waves. Any normal person would have probably drowned, been knocked unconscious by the harsh landing, or even died. For me, the water embraced my being as if my veins were filled with salt and sea.

Waves pulled up to my body as if I were the center of gravity, causing me to dive fast and safely into the ocean. Right when my body was submerged, I swirled whirlpools around my feet and used Inna’s water-jet technique—only this time, I didn’t create small jets around my heels; I

willed mini typhoons underneath my feet instead. I went *blasting* forward—faster than a shark, dolphin, and swordfish combined.

I was a torpedo of waves and wrath, water tornadoing around my legs and propelling me forward. The rain didn't hurt me even at the high speeds I was going; I simply sliced each water drop ahead of me to make a dry path to follow.

In no time, Varl's bright yellow and orange lasers—firing him forward like a jetpack embedded in his palms—came in sight, and I only had one objective: not to let him win.

While gushing forward on my whirlpool engines, the rainstorm grew to my advantage. I thundered my palms together with a clap that challenged the wind, and all the rain 500 feet ahead of me crashed hard—sending Varl and Lotto plummeting to the ocean. The force was inhumanly strong, which even surprised me; it was the first time I had ever used water on that powerful of a scale. And I felt unstoppable—felt celestial.

Floating on my jetting geyser, my eyes sniped on Lotto when he revved up his blood again. His red wings reappeared, twice the size they were before. He didn't flinch from the sea salt seeping into his cut wounds. Pretty sure the desire to win negated all his pain because he dove out of the water faster than a swordfish. *For a big, beefy guy, he sure is swift.*

He began to catch up, which meant Varl was not far behind.

I took a second to glance down at the water and saw the orange-haired man about to use his lasers to join us in the air. Stopping Lotto from entering the portal was like standing in front of a race car, so I aimed straight for Varl instead.

As he was about ready to jet out with fiery lasers, I landed my feet on the water, and frost unfurled like a blanket on the waves. This, of course, stopped all movement in the water near him, and he was stuck in a slush of ice. He yelled something at me, probably vulgar or very trashy, but I couldn't hear him from the storm's intensity. Still... I couldn't help but cock a smile at his demise.

Time to finish this race properly now.

All the gushing waves below me transformed into my arctic roller coaster terrain, and I skated the last mile of the race in less than two minutes, hardly even lifting a leg; my magic did all the work. My velocity matched that of a speedboat, and—crazily enough—Lotto's did, too. His

Blood Art was insanely powerful, and when the portal finally was twenty feet ahead, he easily crossed first while I crossed second.

Water from the ocean and the storm poured onto the middle of the stadium as the portal spit me out. I wobbled as I landed, catching myself as the sea water rushed behind me before splashing into the safety trench below the rink. As I looked up, I saw Lotto catching his breath and standing stoically, the thunder surrounding my ears suddenly sounding different.

Reality then hit me. *That's not thunder... that's—*

“And there you have it! Lisa Robbie and Lotto Granidior have cleared the race and are your seventh and eighth champions for Week Two of the Paragon Games!” the vibrant and loud announcer said over the speaker. Rambunctious cheering followed and didn't stop.

The sun was bright in the sky as I stood barefoot soaking in the crowd's roars. From left to right, people were yelling and celebrating my and Lotto's victory—the most surreal feeling in the world. Higher up, there was my face on the giant magical screens. My hair was a complete mess, I looked frigidly cold, and I was soaking wet... but that smile I saw—I was happy and not bloody or bruised. One of the final eight.

I can't believe this is actually happening... I did it. I really did it!

33 “What’s Your Wish?”

Zephan’s game workers led us back toward the cavaedium, where I passed by soaking-wet Varl. I didn’t think his face could look any meaner until he glared down at me—yet I couldn’t help but bite back my smile. *Feels so good to win against him.*

In the long hall that connected to the cavaedium, the infirmary was to my right. Some Menders had just finished healing Lotto’s self-inflicted wounds when I peered inside, and by the time I passed the door, he was walking out right next to me.

“Nice work, kid,” Lotto said, chin pointed down, causing my bare feet to stop while he continued forward.

“Thanks, sir.” I grinned, very doe-eyed. A worker had to nudge me along. *I can’t believe I just got a compliment from him! Maybe that means some of the other contestants won’t see me as weak anymore.*

The glossy doors to the cavaedium were wide open, the final eight fighters, reporters, and Zephan’s paid workers all inside. I was about to enter barefoot when the corner of my eye caught a glimpse of a massive frame off to my right. A smile grew across my face.

Gaius, Inna, and Reno were all coming toward me.

Inna opened her arms wide as I picked up my pace. She squeezed me tight before looking back down at me. Her smile was the biggest I had ever seen. “Lisa, you were incredible out there!” she said, her hands letting go of my shoulders. “Can’t believe that was really you—never seen that kind of power during our practices! Makes me proud to be called one of your instructors.”

Reno chimed in next, “*You* were surprised? I was flat-out shocked! Never expected you to win the crowd as quickly as you did.”

Inna took a blue jacket out from her orbkit and covered me up as I faced my celebrity mentor. “What do you mean?”

“You out there, being knocked over at the beginning and taking your time to wind up your magic. It was quite crazy, but you proved to them you were strong enough to not need a head start. You’re definitely one of their favorites, Lisa—some of my co-fighters even agree.”

Stars filled my eyes. *I impressed Reno's friends! Zephan's paid fighters actually think I'm cool!*

Though their kindness and positive critiques lifted my spirits, one man's opinion mattered most to me. I glanced up at Gaius, wrapping Inna's soft blue jacket around my cold body. "So, what did you think?"

Gaius, arms crossed, shadowed over me and noted my frigid body and lone leotard. "Undressing on screen was a bit much, but overall... you did well and made it through to the next week."

My heart warmed up with his words. "Reno said to be flashy—"

"Not *literally*—"

"It's a *bathing suit*, but I'll still accept your compliment."

Gaius nudged my shoulder to go forward. "I'll wait out here for you to finish whatever it is Zephan wants to talk with you all about."

He didn't have to wait for me, but I thought it was sweet of him. Inna left for Mantene while Reno and I walked into the cavaedium. The eight fighters were lined up from oldest to youngest near the back wall, so I padded my way to Ayker's side. From the look of it, we were all about to have a short interview at a table in front of a reporter. *Whoa—it's like we are celebrities right now.*

As we waited, I quickly plopped on the floor and faced the wall, grabbing my shoes out of my orbkit and evaporating all the water out of them.

Steam rose from my sneakers as Ayker squatted down next to me. He was smiling pretty big, some specks of sand still trickling out of his icy white hair.

"Lisa—you were insane out there!" he said, hushed and thrilled. "Everyone in the room was pretty shocked at how powerful you were."

"Really?" I said, starting to put on my next shoe. "I thought you were amazing out there yourself—using the widmoos like wings."

Ayker chuckled, showing off his pearly-white teeth. "That was nothing, but thanks. I don't think you'll have a problem with the rest of the fighters thinking you're weak anymore, though."

I stood to my feet with my last lace tied, trying to be discreet with my giddy smile.

Impa finished her interview with the reporter, making it short and blunt, which meant Lotto was next. We couldn't hear anything; it was only a written report and still camera shots.

While we waited, Ayker leaned over to my ear—trying to avoid Lumaline from eavesdropping. His closeness sent my heart throbbing.

“So, what are you gonna wish for?” he whispered, his breath hitting the shoulder of Inna’s blue jacket.

“What do you mean—*oh!* You mean the prize?” I remembered. “Is it, like, a gesture thing, where the workers just give us something we want?”

Ayker tittered. “Nah—it’s way better than that. A *wysh* is when an intense amount of good and dark magic come together and never combine—allowing for a clean slate of what it will create. It has no instinct or intelligence, waiting patiently in silence until someone tells it what to do.”

Okay, that is definitely not what I was expecting...

“What’s it look like, then? How did they catch something like that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only ever heard of it from my parents. The magic is incredibly rare. Even if an animal came by and wished for something, its instinctive desire would come true.”

Lotto finished his interview—also fairly short—as I continued probing Ayker. “So... it can grant *anything*?”

“Well, sure. If you wanted money, it could become money—you just gotta be specific about what kind. If you wanted magic, it could grant you magic, but it can’t create something that isn’t real or goes against the Laws of Magic. I’m pretty sure the Magic Embassy or Zephan won’t let us wish for something without them knowing first—”

“Hold up,” I interjected as the reporter began to talk with Setzyr next. “What do you mean by ‘magic laws’?”

“You know, the Laws of Magic... the thing that guards people and nature against the overuse of magic...”

My mouth stayed shut as my eyes remained wide. The only rules I knew about were the evanescent ones and all the Hunter rules Ekron made us follow, and the look on Ayker’s face told me I didn’t know something as simple as common sense.

“... Just explain it to me,” I said, flailing my hand.

Ayker quietly chuckled. “There’s not much to explain, just that the Laws of Magic are what prevent magic from going crazy, the whole reason why some people have a little bit and others don’t, why there’s a cycle of killing dark creatures to release their dark magic until it finds something new to create in the world, why people can’t create magic—having it inside

those Wishing Stars instead—and so-on and so-forth. So for this wysh, you can only wish for things that already exist in our world, which excludes changing history or bringing a soul back from the dead. Do they not teach you that in Boolavogue?”

Ah... I did know this. I just didn’t know there was a name for it. It was what Ariela did for the Keepers, putting all the magic in them instead of out into the world, and why the Guardians move dark magic around so it’s not all contained in one space. Why overusing dark magic can turn Mages and Mystics into beings of Darkness because their heart wasn’t meant to hold that much power.

So I wouldn’t look like a complete idiot, I followed up, “Oh—yeah, I knew that. Just by a different name...”

Setzyr finished his interview and waited near the exit door as Ayker reminded me, “So—what are you gonna wish for, now that you know what it is?”

My mind went through its files of “hopes” and “dreams”... but, honestly, everything was already checked off at the moment. Sure, having more money or my purple flames return would’ve been nice, but it wasn’t anything truly admirable, especially after winning something as grand as the Paragon Games. Being more durable to pain or being able to punch with the strength of a gorilla would’ve been a decent choice; I could easily beat Gaius in a spar with that.

Yet... everything I was thinking of felt kind of shallow. All those things I could easily earn myself with enough practice—even the purple flames, though Gaius doubted me—so, wishing for them seemed pointless.

I thought for so long that Rongo was already finished with her report and O.N. was stepping up next.

What is something I want that I can’t make happen myself...

“The only thing I would want,” I began to say with my arms crossed, “would be for my Mom to finally find a man she really liked.”

Ayker’s face quickly grew dumbfounded, holding back a laugh. I couldn’t blame him.

Before he was about to fully burst, I retaliated, “I *know* I can’t wish for that—wouldn’t want to, anyway, in fear of it being all the wysh’s power and not just ‘love’ or whatever—but that’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Wasn’t expecting that—”

“Then, what are *you* wanting?” I hurriedly asked before embarrassment burned my face.

“For me, if I win...” His cheeriness turned somber as both polar blue eyes faced the floor. “I’m gonna use it to save my people. No more of this omrivim reliance or a life without magic for the others... even be able to get this signet off my back. I’m not sure if a wysh can do *all* that... but if it can make my people live normally as you do, then I’ll take anything it grants me.”

Ayker’s whole body was tense—anxious and almost scared. A whole new life was just three more wins away. What he wanted was *impossible* without that wysh. His heart wasn’t selfish; it thought of his entire province and their future happiness.

Looking around at the other contestants, I doubted they had a wish as charitable as Ayker’s. Most of them were probably greedy desires for more magic or power. Compared to mine, as well—Ayker had a noble goal worth reaching.

I thought. Not long, but long enough.

Suddenly, as I whispered softly, the reporter thanked Lumaline. “You know what”—the pink-haired Fighter 10 began to get off the tall interviewee’s chair as the reporter motioned for Ayker to go next—“I hope you win the games, Ayker.”

He didn’t turn back to look at me, didn’t even slow his steps.

I held my breath, clutching Inna’s jacket. *Did he... not hear me...?*

Tuff—invisible—nudged my shoulder, imprinting hope into my mind that Ayker did hear my encouragement. But... it would’ve been nice to know the truth, even through a smile. Because I meant what I said.

During Ayker’s interview with the female reporter, I began to think harder about what I would wish for right when a giant ache thundered up my spine. I gritted my teeth, trying to act as if I was completely healthy. *Ah... guess I could use that wish to get rid of this blotch on my back. Is that even a possibility? Bet it would go against the Laws of—*

“You were quite surprising, Lisa of Boolavogue.”

I stopped rolling my shoulders.

Setzyr came up behind me—scaring me out of my wishful thinking. His dark brown hair was loosely gathered in a ponytail that trailed along his back, and his blue eyes squinted down at me. In his smooth voice, he continued, “I knew you had to have been a skilled Hunter when you arrived

with that Captain and his troop, but your magic... I didn't know a simple water Mage would be that powerful."

My glances weren't stationary, subtly scanning his tan face and gray clothing. Gripping the edges of Inna's jacket, I said, "Oh... thank you. Your magic was pretty cool, too."

Could've been a little more elegant in front of a partisan, Lisa...

Setzyr stepped closer to me. "It's a shame we couldn't work together—Boolavogue and Nuolja, I mean. My people would've loved having you there, seeing that incredible power even in a titchy body such as yours. Seems Boolavogue has quite a lot of skill in magic—much more than I could've ever guessed. Starting a Hunter guild... now *that* would have been something grand, don't you think?"

Politics wasn't a topic I was ever that interested in or knowledgeable about—even on Earth—but I knew exactly why we weren't working with them. No way would King Bolthor or Ekron ever agree to their demands of using a human's magic as a way of payment.

I politely lied, "Your home was very nice... Maybe in the future, we could work together again."

Ayker stepped out of the chair when Setzyr concluded, "I'll be looking forward to it."

When it was my turn to face the reporter lady and her foreign laptop, I still looked toward Ayker. Setzyr was waiting for him... only Ayker didn't look happy. The partisan stood close to Ayker's uncomfortable face and whispered something before making Ayker follow him down the hall—the one *not* toward the exit. I knew they weren't buddy-buddy before, but this—Ayker's smile went away instantly at Setzyr's mysterious words, and the partisan didn't seem to care.

"Excuse me—Lisa?"

My mind finally heard the reporter talking to me, and I quickly began to focus back on her.

"Sorry, ma'am, what did you ask again?"

...

The report was simple: I gave my thoughts on the race, answered questions about my strange start, and said which fighter I thought would be my biggest challenge (I was honest and said all of them, which probably wasn't the most logical thing to say). I didn't talk for too long, though: Gaius hated waiting, even if it was waiting for me.

Right when I left the cavaedium, there was the gardener, leaning his back against the hallway wall with his arms crossed, avoiding all eye contact from everyone who wasn't me.

"Sorry I took so long," I said.

The brawny Keeper of Stars straightened up, and we both began walking to the back entrance. "It's fine. You only have one day before you head back to Earth, so I want you to get some rest. No training or magic practice. Then, return in two days to the Hearth, alright?"

A break sounded phenomenal, but there was something I needed to do that Gaius didn't need to know.

Walking next to him, picking at the hem of Inna's blue jacket, I asked, "Do you think I could go and see Cal at the castle—just to hang out and relax—instead? I haven't seen him in a while, and it would be a nice break after all that happened today."

Gaius didn't slow his pace, but an eyebrow rose. "Is there a particular reason why you only want to see him? Not the Princess or those other female Hunters I've seen you with?"

Yes, I need Cal's help for—wait a second...

Gaius never cared about me seeing Cal before, not once asking about the details if I saw the Prince. But the Keeper had been around us during our Charmer jobs, saw how I acted toward Cal... and Gaius mentioned Celine and the female Hunters. Only the girls. *Kinda weird for him to—*

I blinked at the moment of realization, jerked my shoulders, and blushed. "It's just because I miss him as a *friend*—that's it—I promise!"

He huffed, a smirk following. "Okay... Never seen you so defensive over a simple question before."

I hunched, letting my hair curtain my embarrassed face. *He doesn't know how I may or may not feel toward the Prince—no way. I don't even know how I feel—I hate this.*

"So... can I go and see him or not?" I muttered.

The Keeper pulled me into his side, rubbing my shoulder, smelling of cedarwood. "That's fine, Lisa. Just stay safe and come back in time for dinner."

A smile of relief swept across my face. Not everything I said to Gaius was a lie; I did want to see Cal, but I needed his swordsmanship skills more than I needed to rest.

...

“You know when you said let’s go hang out near Fladden”—Cal sliced a swamp mite clean in half in the frosty winter air—“I didn’t think killing dark creatures would be a part of that.”

Even though I had on a full-body wetsuit from Mantene, every nerve and bone shook cold as I swam through the pond to find the Enkurious algae. Luckily, Inna gave me one of the Aquanaeum’s best inventions during one of our training sessions: a breethur. It was a slender neck choker that allowed one to “breathe” underwater. In actuality, it was infused with magic that surrounded the wearer in a coating of air and water-repelling fibers, but only for thirty minutes at a time. To replenish the air, all one would have to do is resurface their head for two minutes.

I saw Gaius use it many times, and it helped me stay submerged for longer while searching for the green algae. If it weren’t for Cal, there was no way I would’ve been able to collect enough ingredients for Mender Roo before Gaius dragged me back home for dinner.

As I finished another jar and lugged it back on land, Cal continued, “Why *are* you doing this, by the way? Thought your Charmer job stopped because of the games?”

I dumped my small jar of algae into the bigger one, readying my empty jug for another dive as I fibbed with purple lips, “I just promised him I would get him some more—”

“*In the middle of winter here in Boolavogue?*” Cal yelled before turning around and using his magic to create an invisible shield around us.

The swamp mites kept bumping into his Fysiks wall as he marched on the shoreline. Those hazel eyes pelted my face while water soaked his pants and boots. “*I’m cold, so I know you must be freezing down there. Couldn’t you have asked Gaius for a better location?*”

My calves were already in the water again as I tried to hide my chattering teeth. “‘Yes’ to being cold and ‘no’ to the last part. Now, if you don’t mind”—I sniffled, my nose running—“I’m almost done, so please lead them more to the right side of the pond this time—thank you.”

Cal grunted and splashed around the swamp water, muttering some Hunter lingo and mimicking me, too, no doubt. Being in the cold was not what I wanted, and I hated that Cal was thrown into this mess, but it was the only Enkurious algae location nearby that didn’t involve directions from Gaius.

With the last bit of magic weeds collected, I sprung back up to the shore and shot off all the cold water from my hair and body. *I do not see how Gaius can do this with just a T-shirt and pants.*

I watched as Cal swept the pond clean of the disgusting octo-spider creatures, allowing us both a chance to rest.

“Thanks for helping me,” I told him as I screwed the lid on the large jar, trying to hurry along the process so the Prince didn’t see my shaking purple hands. “I know it probably was the last thing you wanted to do.”

Cal stood next to me, watching. His hair was a bit longer and looked really good on him, and I could tell he had been training more, the muscles on his arms fuller than I remember. I didn’t mean to stare as he sheathed his glinted sword. He just stood very close to me while I was gathering my magic plants... looking away feeling impossible.

“I can always go for a good monster hunt,” he said smiling, “so, it’s no big deal... Oh, you know what?”

I stashed the jar in my orbkit and began tying my boots. “What?”

“About this time next year, I’ll be starting my Dawning—my final hunt as a Restricted Hunter—and will be an official Hunter before Spring. Ekron said I’ll be the youngest Hunter that’s ever gone through his ranks...” He leaned down so our eyes connected. All boot-tying stopped as he darted my cold face. “You jealous?”

A scoff and an eye roll came all too easily from me. “Why would I be jealous of *you*?” And I shot off the ground and grabbed my winter jacket off the nearby tree.

“Because... that should’ve been your title, but now, you’re gonna win the Paragon Games. Bet you’ll become some Hero after that.”

We started walking away from the pond’s shoreline and towards Fladden. I stuffed my freezing hands into my coat, clenching a pocket-kettle in both palms, my hair falling over my shoulders. “Never said I was gonna quit being a Hunter—doubt I’ll even win anyway.”

The Prince gawped, hot air puffing out of his mouth. “*Lisa*—you’re joking?”

“I’m not joking! You’ve seen those players. They could hold me down with just one hand without any magic. Plus...” I shrugged. “I don’t fit in with people like that yet—powerful wannabe Heroes and Warriors, I mean. Sure, I’m the Agapéd Bearer, but... Look, I’m not gonna lose on purpose or anything, but I don’t see myself actually winning the whole—”

“*Naff it!* Lisa, who is telling you this *garbage?*” My doe eyes were on him, and he was shocked with a growing smile. “Every time I see you use magic, it blows me away. You’re insanely talented *and* powerful—standing up with us boys in the Men’s Troop. First time I saw you hold a sword, I honestly thought, ‘This girl is the Agapéd? She’s kinda weak,’ but then, you kept trying again even after failing the lot of Ekron’s drills. You even convinced me to grow my magic when I never thought that was possible, *and* you went out and slagged Darkness right outside of the Kingdom and saved the Wishing Stars—”

“*Gaius* was with me when that happened.”

“But it was still *you* that did it, right? You stood against a Mystic, Lisa—a dark Mystic at that...” The Prince kicked a stone in the dirt as he lowered his voice. “I’ve never even done that before. Pretty sure most Hunters haven’t... I can’t imagine how scary that was for you. We just fight creatures. Heroes are the ones who stop dark Mages and Mystics. So, saying you don’t see yourself standing up to the level of the other fighters is complete *jacks*, Lisa. We all watched you in the race—even my father—and we believe you can win this.”

My jaw dropped as we made it to the worn, stone road. “Your *dad* watched me play?”

“Ekron even stopped all his lessons that morning so we could watch. When you make it to the final match, you better believe we are all gonna be there watching you take home the title of champion.”

I couldn’t hold back my blushing smile anymore. Getting praise from Cal wasn’t like getting praise from Reno, Gaius, or any of the other Keepers. His somehow made my heart light up like the Wishing Stars.

I stared at the frosty road to avoid Cal noticing my reddening cheeks. “I’ll try my best to make that happen for you, then.”

34 Alone

Falling asleep in Biology I to Mr. Bolt's flatlined voice should have been inevitable, but the fear of Lily's popular friends and Trevor Rolland seeing me doze off kept my eyes open. But it was a task. The stress of the Paragon Games made me insanely tired, even for me in my doppelganger form. *Truly wished all the weariness stayed in my other body since that is the one doing all the battling—*

"Hey." Lily turned around at her desk ahead of me, a piece of peppermint gum between her fingers, snapping me out of my sleepy daze. "You going to the basketball game tonight?"

Lily's question surprised me. She knew I wasn't that into sports, which meant she was asking me to hang out with her at the game—to be around the popular crowd. I wanted that, even though it was way out of my comfort zone... but I couldn't let her know I was eager. How pathetic would that have been?

I took the piece of gum and made sure Mr. Bolt couldn't see me unwrap it. I didn't really want it, but I wasn't going to refuse either. All of the populars were chewing the illegal rubber-like snack.

"Maybe. Is this a big game or something?" I asked, subtly putting the gum in my mouth.

Lily also handed Emma Harden—the tall, tan, and perfectly glossy brunette-haired cheerleader—a piece of gum, bringing her into our conversation. "Yeah, I think, but I'm just asking if you wanna go with Emma and me. It's varsity's night to cheer, so we get to just watch the boys play—gonna be a lot of *cute* ones—"

"That's for sure. You should come with us, Lisa," Emma added.

Any speck of tiredness I once had swept away at that very moment. I wasn't dreaming—Emma and Lily invited me to hang out with them, to giggle and flirt with other school boys, to step into their pretty girl gossip. This meant I was officially a part of their group... right? I was good enough to be considered cute and trendy. I was worth the attention of others. *Wanted* for something other than magic—finally belonging somewhere.

"Yeah, sounds like fun," I replied, hiding my excitement through forced nonchalance.

“Great—I’ll get my mom to pick you and Emma up tonight. I’ll just text you when we get close.”

I took out my biology binder, smiling at my desk like an idiot. *Can’t believe I’m going to hang out with cheerleaders tonight. They really see me as their friend!*

...

I never really considered looking cute for a high school basketball game until today. I knew my hair was duller, my skin was paler, and my freckled cheeks gave me more of a baby face, but wearing the correct clothing would at least allow me to look like I belonged with the cheerleaders.

Lily’s opinion of me wasn’t what I was worried about. She was the one who invited me to sit with her and her friends in Mr. Bolt’s class, after all. It was her reputation I didn’t want to hurt. Being with her friends allowed me to be noticed. It made me feel good, and one wrong shirt color or strange conversation starter would spread gossip. I already had to deal with the game contestants scoffing at me... I didn’t want that same thing to happen with my Earthian peers.

The pants I picked were my only pair from American Eagle, what most popular girls wore in school, and I stuck with my blue Under Armor hoodie. Name-brand clothing didn’t matter to me, but Lily and her friends always wore them, so I asked Mom to buy me one from the store last week. In school, wearing sporty clothing was “cool” *if* your makeup was perfect and your hair was flat-ironed straight. It made no sense—nothing about high school culture did. Yet, every student followed the unspoken rules like it was the law.

Was I trying too hard? Possibly... but it was worth it. It could be the day I finally belonged with a crowd everyone else admired. I’d feel wanted for being me and not because I was a strong Mage.

As I straightened my hair, ensuring each ringlet was nonexistent, my phone vibrated on the bathroom counter, and my hand almost dropped the straightener into the sink out of shock.

On the BlackBerry’s screen was a message from Mary... reminding me of how bad of a friend I was: “Suzie and I are almost at your house for the movie. I brought snacks to sneak in :)”

My mind took a second to remember. Last week, I told Mary we would go to the movies, and that just happened to be *today!* With the strain and pressure of the Paragon Games, thinking about something as trivial as

going to the movies with a friend did not cross my mind in the slightest—and I was the doppelganger. My sole job was to deal with high school life!

Both Lily and Mary are almost here—I am the absolute worst!

Now... I had one of the hardest choices I'd ever been involved with and only had about five minutes to assess the pros and cons of the dire predicament—hoping—*begging* that the universe didn't come crashing down on me. If both of them arrived at the same time...

I dropped the hair straightener in the waterless sink and paced the bathroom with my phone in my hand. I thought. Thought hard until my head rang like a gong. *Going with Mary would be fun, but being invited by Lily and Emma to hang out may never happen again. Mary did ask me first, but that was more than five days ago, so does it really count? And I didn't really care to see the movie... though I cared even less about basketball...*

I found myself desperately arguing for one particular side.

Mary could've reminded me—texted me sooner. Telling her “no” might upset her, but telling Lily “no” would ruin my chances of having a big friend group and possibly meeting cute boys from the other school!

“Uh, Lisa?” Mom's confused voice rose from the bottom of the stairs. “Is Mary riding to the game with you? Her stepmom's car just pulled up.”

Crap!

Our bathroom opened right in front of the stairs, and I had a perfect view of Mom. My straight hair flew off my shoulders as my head whipped.

What should I do—what should I do?

Then, an idea popped into my head, though it wasn't one I was proud of, and I couldn't believe what I was about to make Mom do.

My voice turned frantic and babbly. “Mom—Mom, just tell her that—that I don't feel well, and we can see the movie next week, okay?”

Mom scanned my clothing. “Uh, why—”

“Just, please? She forgot to tell me about tonight, and I already promised Lily first.” Lies on top of more lies. “Please, please, please, *please*, Mom—just do this for me?” My hands folded together, pathetically begging.

This was not my typical behavior because this was the *first* time I ever asked Mom to lie for me. But she pinched her lips, saw the headlights shine through the living room window, and said, “Okay, I'll tell her.”

A rampage of elephants raced through my chest the moment Mom came back inside and Mary's car left... and another car stopped in front of our house. *Lily was one minute behind—thank goodness!*

But, my conscience rattled behind my ribcage prison. Guilt throbbing. I lied all the time—this small one shouldn't have been a big deal. Mary's feelings weren't harmed, Mom was cool about it, and I still got to hang out with Lily. *So, why does this lie make me feel so scummy?*

Mom was still at the bottom of our stairs, her mouth open to tell me Lily pulled up... or to question why I lied. I didn't have time for a lecture. I stuffed my phone into the pouch of my sweatshirt and rushed to put on my black Converse. *Just shake it off, Lisa. Mary's feelings didn't get hurt, and she'll never know. It'll be fun with Lily and Emma, a nice break from the stress of the Paragon Games, too.*

When I passed Mom standing in the kitchen, I didn't look at her.

"So, are we going to talk about..." she began, but her words trailed off. Maybe it was my face not smiling at all or the fact I refused to make eye contact, I don't know. But when my feet passed the couch and headed for the front door, she said calmly, "Just... text me if you need anything, okay?"

I bit back my lip and opened the door. I could feel her confusion and concern, but I was glad she didn't ask me to stay and talk about my poor decision-making. My melancholic tone matched hers. "Okay."

We arrived at the school. Both Emma and Lily were extra kind to me, making sure I was involved in their conversations, even if it was mostly just with gentle laughter. Lily's mom gave us some money for concessions, and I was craving a plate of those store-bought nachos with the goopy cheese, but Lily and Emma didn't. They picked candy, so I picked candy, too. We bought sour gummy worms and soda and headed to the bleachers.

Noise and chatter exploded out of the gymnasium doors, the game having started a bit before we arrived. Nothing smelled pleasant, but that was just the gym essence. We all were used to it. Most of the bottom bleachers were filled with parents and their crying toddlers, unable to get babysitters, while at the top rows were the teens. Everything was a bit much—very loud and packed with judging eyes. Emma and Lily were used to the chaotic scene, but it was a first for me. I stayed close to them, silent, as we headed toward the rickety seats.

“Your hair looks really nice, by the way, Lisa,” Emma complimented as Lily led the way up the bleachers.

I smiled—glad to know I did something right with my look. “Thanks.”

Lily heard Emma and quickly said, whipping her pin-straight blond hair, “I’d give anything for your natural hair, though, having those curls at the end. Mine just has ugly creases—have to curl or straighten it every day, which sucks.”

The buzzer rang as Lily picked our seats, and I was beyond flattered at her opinion of me. Never thought someone as pretty as she would ever be jealous of my hair, and a surge of confidence filled up my heart that caused me to smile at the floor.

The game quickly resumed as we sat on the metal bleachers. For the first five minutes, it was just us girls eating our snacks and me listening to them talk about which boys were the cutest on both teams. Everything about it was fun, and when Josh Yollan, Ricky Tinks, and Heather Tissle showed up—two football players on the freshman team and another one of Lily’s pretty girl friends—I couldn’t believe it. To finally be the person people came *to* instead of being the one that tagged along like a loose string.

Being the new girl in the group, I scooted down to the edge of the bleachers so they could sit around Lily and Emma... Then, two more popular students showed up, so I scooted down more. And then again... and again...

Then, suddenly... I was alone. Classmates and older students were around me, cheering and gossiping galore, but not a single person knew me. Lily and Emma were in the middle of the group of pretty students while I sat next to Hendon Murphy, but I might as well have been a brick wall.

Not once did any of their friends give me a second glance or find me more interesting than the phones in their laps. Even though I knew who Hendon was—his brother was the quarterback, also very good-looking—there was *no way* he knew me, so starting a conversation with him would’ve been creepy on all levels. I also didn’t have the confidence to talk with him first, even to ask about his day. *Do popular kids even start conversations like that?*

My optimism kicked in as a time-out occurred. *Just give it a second, Lisa. They’ll talk to you soon—Lily and Emma will say something for sure.*

We scored ten more points, and still, no one even nudged me or asked who I was. I leaned forward to see Lily and Emma. They were laughing, completely unaware of me all alone, but I couldn't blame them. Even I would rather look at Josh or listen to Heather's crazy drama stories than talk to me.

If they only knew I had magic—

I clenched my fists shoved in my hoodie pouch. *Am I really succumbing to that?* People should've liked me for me—I couldn't use magic as a cop-out. Then, I would *know* it was the magic they liked and not Lisa Robbie.

Was that it? Is that the only reason people liked me in Boolavogue because of my magic?

I blinked and picked at the buttons on my phone. *No—no way... I really, really wish Tuff was here right now and not with magical-me back in Calendula...*

We scored thirteen more points, taking the lead from the opposing school by three. When the buzzer went off to end the first half and no one still bothered to look my way, my eyes sank to the floor, and I pulled out my phone from my hoodie pouch. Emotions began to rumble. *I can't believe it... I'm such an idiot for thinking I belonged with them... I'm going home...*

Lily's mom was supposed to pick me up, but plans changed. Through a text, I told Lily I was sick—using the same stupid lie I used on Mary—thinking she would read it after I was long gone, and sent a message to Mom to pick me up instead.

Tears wanted to flow as I walked out to the curb, but I held them back, waiting in the cold for Mom to get there. I couldn't let her know how big of a loser I was, especially with gobs of mascara on my eyelashes—one tear away from painting my face with faded shame.

When she picked me up, the moon shining high above the school, my face glued to the passenger window after I buckled my seatbelt.

In her kind voice, Mom asked, "Were we losing, or did Lily have to leave?"

No conversations were happening in that car unless I wanted waterworks to pour from my eyes.

Still facing the window, I used the same sorry excuse for a lie again. "I just didn't feel well, so I wanted to leave."

“Aw, I’m sorry, sweetie.” She rubbed my back, bubbling my emotions more; I didn’t respond. “Need me to pick any medicine?”

Pulling my knees up into the seat against my chest, my response was quick. “I’m fine... just needa lie down.”

Mom drove off and turned up Air Supply on the stereo system, meaning she didn’t suspect a thing. With the lies working, my heart finally released its pitiful emotions in silence as my head faced the night sky.

Stuck with powerful magic that doesn’t even suit me, thrown into games with people who don’t like me, and now, I can’t even grab the attention of some high schoolers the same age as me...

Two single, pathetically lame tears ran down my cheeks, making me feel even worse. I wiped them away. Black makeup stained the hem of my sleeve. *Now, I’m crying over myself—gosh, Lisa. Pull yourself together. This is all your fault anyway for thinking you were better than good enough. Just dry it up before Mom sees... This is ridiculous...*

...

Around 11:30 p.m. that night, three knocks rapped on my bedroom door. Mom walked in, and I wish it were a better sight.

There I was, poorly lounged in mismatched pajamas on my beanbag, way too close to the television playing *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. My chin was almost touching my collarbone with how low my body sunk and sprawled out in my squishy chair, surrounded by an assortment of clothing I never got a chance to put away. I probably looked just as pathetic as I felt in her eyes. After all, nothing made a mom more proud than seeing her daughter glued to a fantasy, role-playing game instead of enjoying the real one at school hours before.

Any typical mom would’ve seen their daughter slaying fictional thugs and walked straight out of the room, wishing them a goodnight and a “Don’t stay up too late!” demand. Or they would’ve told them to clean up and go to bed, even though it was a Friday night in the middle of January. Or worse... they would’ve asked about the whole making-me-lie-to-your-friend situation.

Odette Robbie was one of the unique ones. She was curious about her daughter’s hobbies.

“How’s the game?” she asked, taking a seat on my unmade bed as my character ran through a snowy forest. Mom was dressed in sweatpants and a baggy Rolling Stones T-shirt, the usual Friday night wear for her.

My eyes stayed on the TV. “It’s really good.”

“Have you slain any dragons yet?”

I chortled. *Can’t believe she remembers those are even in the game.* “There was one near the beginning, but I have a *long* way to go before I can kill any of the other ones. I can try to show you one, though. Just let me drop all my stuff off at my house.”

Watching me run around in the game was pretty boring when there wasn’t a quest involved, even for me. But Mom stayed. Not sure if she was interested in my game or if she simply wanted to be with me, but I enjoyed it. Being that she was there and not mentioning the state of my unclean room, I figured I could get her opinion on... well, *me*.

“Mom,” I began, mindlessly making my character wander around, “how did you know when you found the right group to click with in high school—like, you were popular, so I was just wondering how you *knew* that was where you belonged?”

“I wouldn’t say I was *popular*—”

“*Mom—come on—you told* me how many cute boys would ask you out on a date on a regular basis,” I interjected.

She laughed as she slid off the bed and sat beside me on the floor, using a pillow as her seat. “For the record, most of them were all looks and no personality, except for Gilbert Bryan.”

I snort-laughed at the name. “*Gilbert?*”

“He went by Gil—pitcher for the baseball team and was the only boy in the whole school who could rock a mullet. Why *I* liked him, though, was that he was always very kind to me. Let me borrow his CDs after taking drives around the neighborhood together.”

I muttered, “The ones you pirated from.”

Mom didn’t bother to make an excuse. “It was worth it—you wouldn’t know all this music without the crime, by the way.”

“And you’re not still with him *because...*”

A deep breath left Mom as she reminisced on her high school days. “Eh, just didn’t love him. He was nice and all, and we dated for a good bit, but I didn’t like hiding it from Ma. Couldn’t be excited about a boy if I couldn’t even bring him over for dinner.”

“So, did you tell Grandma, and then she made you break up with him?”

“No, she never found out. Still has no idea. It was me who stopped it. Gil started being sneaky with other girls and smoking with the team, and that wasn’t for me. Kissing that breath was the nastiest—”

“Mom—”

“Sorry.” She laughed before turning her chin toward me. “But, back to what you said before... Why are you asking that?” My eyes surfed the details of my TV, and Mom prodded more. “Does it have anything to do with Mary and why you left the game early?”

I pressed “Start” on the controller to pause the game. My stare was toward the floor and the dim green light of my PlayStation 3. “Well, kind of... yeah. I messed up... Lily and Emma asked me to go to the game with them, and I was surprised they did. You haven’t met Emma, but she’s like Lily: pretty and tan and gets all the attention without trying. Them asking me...”

Mom looked at me, quietly listening.

I fiddled with the analog sticks. “Well, I thought that meant I was a part of their group. Like I was pretty like them...” I huffed at the thought. “But then, I realized that I was wrong because the whole time at the game... I *watched* the game. None of their friends even bothered to notice me; probably didn’t even think I was with Lily and Emma... It was completely embarrassing, Mom...”

Silence hung in my bedroom for a moment. “I can’t believe that... Lily really did that to you?”

I put the controller down. “No, not really. I don’t blame her. It was all *her* friends, and she was only hanging out with them like normal. *I* was the stranger there... I just thought that maybe I would finally have a group to be with that would look forward to seeing me, talk to me first, and be excited I was there. Like how in the movies, people have a group of friends to hang out with that are cool and all love each other. I just...” Both of my eyes teared up, and my voice turned small and sad. “I wanted that, too.”

Mom got off the floor and scooted her way onto the bean bag with me. I didn’t mind. She was skinny enough to fit, though she had to wrap her left arm around my shoulder to not fall off. Our legs were now bent and scrunched like children, sitting squished together with the pause menu lighting up our faces. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Those kids really missed out. Why didn’t you just invite Mary to come with you?”

“Because I didn’t think they would like her—she’s just kinda... well... nerdy...” I felt awful for saying that, seeing as now *I* was the one who they all didn’t like. “Plus, they invited *me*. Would’ve been rude to bring someone else unannounced.” *Even though that was exactly what happened with all of Lily’s “friends”...*

“But *you* like her, and you don’t care that she isn’t into makeup or likes to read for fun, right?”

Brushing off my chuckle at the last bit of her sentence, I said, “Yeah, I love having Mary, but for once, I just wanted to fit in with people like them so I wouldn’t have to be so alone at school all the time—a whole group of cute, fun, and pretty people looking forward to seeing me because they think I’m cool, not because I’m some type of last resort.”

Her arms pulled me in. “I know right now, feeling like you need to fit in really matters—like fitting into some mold crafted by whatever TV show or magazine celebrity defines as beautiful is the key to happiness—but when you graduate, *all* that goes away. Everyone is in the same boat: Make enough money to pay the bills and not go hungry. I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t think I was popular because I didn’t care. I just so happened to have the look everyone else wanted and was curious enough to try the popular styles Ma hated. For me, I was just friends with whoever was nice to me. Didn’t care what they wore, about their grades or their home life, or if other people labeled them as weirdos.”

I turned to face her as she spoke.

“Even now, if I cared about fitting in, I would definitely be the outcast. According to Ma and just about everyone else on this planet, having a husband, being a stay-at-home mom, having two kids, and staying close to your family is what I *should* be doing. Getting that means I am living the perfect life. Means I should be happy. *Well—*”

Mom fixated her blue eyes on mine. Somehow, that man-made light of the TV made her skin glow like the stars. Her genuine smile helped. “I don’t have any of those things and couldn’t imagine a better life. Ma’s got them all, and you see, it didn’t help her nagging... Do *not* tell her I said that.”

I chuckled. “I won’t.”

She turned her head back toward the bright television screen and cuddled me closer. “So, if Lily’s friends aren’t giving you the time of day, then they don’t seem like the kind that even deserve your attention in the

first place. You're a good kid, Lisa—not bragging about my parenting skills or anything—so you do what you believe is right and what makes you happy. I want you to enjoy high school like I did, not obsessing over the opinions of others who won't remember you after these four years are up. If you wanna hang out with Mary *and* Lily, then do that. If—for some reason—they don't like each other, that doesn't mean you have to stop being friends with them, right?"

"Yeah..." I said, leaning against her shoulder.

"Then, don't worry about trying to fit in with some crowd, okay? You just be yourself. The right people will come along, and there will be no pressure about trying to be a fake 'you' around them. They will like you for who you are..." She then sat up, causing me to almost roll into her. "And don't let me *ever* hear you say you're not pretty. You are *beautiful*—and that is *not* just the 'mom' in me talking. Seen a couple of kids from your school, and their parents *really* need to tell them what a good haircut is."

I laughed, and Mom stood to her feet.

Before grabbing the controller, I couldn't help but ask one last thing. "So... you would *never* consider having a family of three?"

Mom took the elastic band from her wrist and threw her hair into a messy bun. "Honestly... if the right man came along, I would love that. But I'm not gonna wait for that to happen in order to be happy right now."

I unpaused the game and said confidently, "Well, I give you my blessing and say I wouldn't mind having a dad in the future."

"Hm—duly noted," she laughed between her words, making her way to my door. "Goodnight, sweetie," she concluded in her warm voice as she went off to her bedroom, still never nagging me about turning off my game or cleaning my room.

...

Mom's advice—like always—was wise, and I took it to heart as I stepped foot into Mr. Bolt's class that following Monday afternoon. My hands gripped my backpack straps tight as I walked over to Lily and her friends.

Just do it, Lisa. Worst thing that can happen is they judge you... which would be pretty bad—but it's worth it.

More students trickled in as I went over to Lily's desk. Like every day, she was laughing and casually gossiping with her friends, dressed in the best clothes with her hair perfectly straight. *Just say it like it's no big deal, Lisa—Lily probably won't even care.*

As her glittery eyes made contact with my nervous ones, my hands grew sweaty, and my voice turned shy. *Spit it out!*

“Hey, uh,” I began, trying not to be heard by the others around, “I think I’m gonna go sit over there with Mary... if that’s alright with you?”

Asking for permission like a kid from their parents—really, Lisa?

Lily looked over at Mary, seeing as she probably had no idea who the girl with the frizzy hair was. “Okay.”

A deep exhale came from both me and my heart. *Well, that was easier than I—*

Lily started shuffling things into her backpack as I walked over to Mary. Following after, she then got up and started coming over to where I was, bringing all her things.

Mary’s eyes looked over at us as I turned back to Lily. “Oh, I didn’t mean to make you move—I was just gonna go.”

Lily did not stop her pace over to the back of the classroom. “This is the only class we have together, and I wanna sit with you.” She then took a seat near the aisle and right next to Mary. “Plus, you’re way better at Biology than Emma and Trevor, and I will need to copy your notes as much as possible if I wanna pass and still be on the cheer team.” Lily suddenly turned toward Mary. “Hey, we have U.S. Government together, right? My name’s Lily.”

What is actually going on right now?

Mary smiled at Lily as if the cheerleader was nothing but a normal student. “Yeah, with Mr. Wayfinder. Wasn’t his bowtie today a little bit—”

“—clownish?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know where he shops, but he needs to *stop*. Hey, you want some gum before Mr. Bolt comes back in? And did you happen to take notes on his lecture...”

My mind was completely floored by what was happening in the seat in front of and beside me. The whole time, I thought they would never get along. I, for sure, thought at least Lily wouldn’t have cared to be associated with fashionless Mary, but now *both* were chitchatting like confidence was something easy to take hold of. Thinking that my friends would stoop that low to judge a friendship based on cliques was pretty wrong of me; they were my friends, after all. I wouldn’t have hung around either of them if they weren’t kind.

I am an idiot...

As Mary took a piece of gum, I smiled at Lily. “Can I have a piece, too?”

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35 An Unhealable Wound

“I’m rooting for you, by the way,” the doorman of the cavaedium whispered.

I knew the worker didn’t intend for that remark to be a big deal, but it was for me. “Thanks, sir,” I quietly said with a dip of my chin as Reno followed me inside.

It was the evening of Week 2’s day-before speech.

Unlike last time, there were fewer reporters and paid fighters in the room. I was happy about that; Reno wasn’t whisked away from me like last time. Being with him was *far* better than standing around the final eight contestants, all except for Ayker.

Scanning the room and avoiding all forms of eye contact with the rest of the players, I saw the white-haired Nuoljian... standing near Setzyr. Setzyr was chatting away with one of Zephan’s paid fighters while Ayker stood still and silent. His eyes were drooping, and his smile was absent.

I leaned over and grinned, but he didn’t return the gesture. Instead, he turned *away* and found the floor more interesting than me.

Mid-wave, my hand retreated back to my side. *Huh... wonder what’s up with him.*

A second later, the overhead lights above the podium turned brighter. Zephan had just approached the stage. He nixed the suit for our meeting, wearing a silky white button-up, a golden clip on his collar, and a perfectly pressed pair of gray slacks. The bloneness of his hair was still as shiny as the floor—providing enough elegance that his suit jacket normally would contribute.

After his brief introduction like last time, my ears—probably like most others in the room—perked up when he said, “... and tomorrow’s challenge will be a two-versus-two battle. I won’t go into detail just yet. The games will remain a surprise until the very last second. I will tell you this, my fighters... I suggest you get along well. Never know who you’ll be paired with... or against.”

Tension swelled my nerves. Reno and I practiced sparring one-on-one and never considered a teammate an option. As a Hunter-in-training, working in pairs was something I was used to... but this was different.

Doubted anyone in the room—besides Ayker—would ever be happy to have me on their team.

I glimpsed down the row of seats toward him again, avoiding Lumaline and Rongo's unfiltered stares. He still wouldn't look at me. *Hope he's not like this tomorrow... I wouldn't mind being teamed up with him...*

Zephan continued in his charming voice, "Being that it's a two-on-two battle, there will be two tournaments tomorrow. The winning teams will move on to the semi-final spars the next week—our final four. So, fighters... get some good rest tonight. We look forward to your magical performance in tomorrow's battle."

The dinner prepared for us eight was a buffet of shredded chicken and cheese melt steak sandwiches with lots of seared fruit, vegetable kabobs, and a hot pudding for dessert. *What's with EverWake and Tuukweald having hot pudding? It's not that good...*

Even though the others weren't strangers anymore, I couldn't eat more than a couple of bites as I sat in the same spot on the couch. Hunger was the last thing on my mind, and I couldn't escape to my room. Zephan said for us to get comfortable with one another, to bond or make some silly pack so the spars would go well tomorrow. So, I stayed—and hated every second of it.

Ayker sat near Lotto, opposite me on the couch. His avoidance seemed it would carry on indefinitely, and now, I was alone on the edge, my food barely nibbled on. I tried not to let it bother me, but I couldn't help it, especially after he was so kind the week before.

Impa resumed her spot in the chair near the sliding panels as Setzyr remained by the cabin door, the partisan staring at us like a social investigator.

After the man's blue eyes fixated on mine, I quickly shot my gaze toward my hardly-eaten food. That somehow triggered something inside him. In his beguiling voice, stepping out of his high-top chair, Setzyr said to no one in particular, "Quite a shock to see a wysh be our grand prize, wouldn't you say?"

Lumaline sat up on her knees, giddy like a child. "Isn't it crazy? And we have a chance to get one!" She then nudged O.N.'s shoulder as if they were buddies and not opponents. "What are you gonna wish for?"

Pessimism protruded from O.N.'s deep sigh, and he shook off Lumaline's touch. "It's not like it really matters. It's a Magic Embassy

wysh, anyway. Bet they will control whatever it is we want.”

“You’re no fun,” Lumaline pouted before turning to the beast lady. “What about you, Impa?”

The muscular middle-aged woman smirked after wiping the grease off her lips with her arm. In a raspy voice, she bellowed, “*Ha!* Pounds of money, for sure. I don’t know how much Zephan and the Magic Embassy will offer me, but it’s better than nothin’. Can’t think of a better reward after taking all of you out.”

Kinda blunt, but not a terrible answer...

Lotto said he would want his powers enhanced, allowing him to use more blood for longer. Lumaline wanted more summons for her duplication magic—if possible. O.N. finally succumbed and revealed his desire for money.

“What about you, Ayker?” Lumaline asked next.

His glacier-blue eyes didn’t shift their gaze from the coffee table. “Probably money, I guess...”

What?

No one else saw that answer as surprising, but I sure did. He told me last week he would wish for his people to live normally. *Maybe he doesn’t want to say it in front of Setzyr, or he wants to keep the truth a surprise if he wins...*

Rongo scoffed as she sat across me, her legs crossed, whipping her red hair off her shoulders. Her arms stretched over the rim of the couch, very comfortable and relaxed. “You all have such weak wishes. That wysh can grant you anything you want, and you choose something you can already obtain. I, for one, am wishing for another form of magic. Being known as a dual-wielding elemental Mage would get me *all* the riches and fame I want and attract formidable foes from miles out—finally giving me a chance to prove to the world I’m not one to deal with lightly.”

Stars zoomed in Lumaline’s eyes. “*Oo!* I am changing mine! I want that, too. You think we could wish for any power we want?”

Lotto, with his scarred arms crossed, answered her, “Bet there is a limit... but I agree. Would be a worthy use of the wysh. Wouldn’t mind having Self-Healing with my Blood Art. *Heh*—would be a Warrior like no other.”

Setzyr walked past Impa after grabbing a glass of water. Smirking, he announced, “You all are still wishing too low to the ground.”

Rongo tilted her chin. “You think there’s something better than more magic?”

“I don’t doubt that—believe it myself, actually—which is why, if you’re going to wish for more, you should wish for the most powerful kind.”

Impa gave a hefty laugh. “There ain’t no such thing as the most powerful kind. It depends on the user. Thought a partisan would at least know that.”

“Oh, but there is *one* out there that is stronger than any magic. One that is... limitless. Suppose you haven’t heard of the *Agapéd* Magic, have you?”

My chest tightened, my breathing stopped, and my stare stayed zoned-in on the gray rug below my feet. *Setzyr... He knows about the Agapéd?* Given that Ayker had no clue what I was talking about when I first brought it up, I figured Setzyr would be just as oblivious.

“What’s that?” Lumaline questioned.

Rongo answered instead of Setzyr, very skeptical, “A load of mythical *rot* is what it is. You think you can wish for something that doesn’t exist, huh, Nuoljian? And you said *our* heads were the ones stuck in the stars.”

“He’s not jokin’.” Impa’s barbaric attitude was diminishing. “That magic is the most powerful, but there’s only one of its kind, meanin’ you can only wish for it if it is already roamin’ the galaxies—provin’ Red’s point. That magic hasn’t even been heard of since I’ve been ‘round. Been over a century since the last wielder had it. If it ain’t here, you might as well be settlin’ for what we want.”

Lumaline smiled big. “*Whoa*—so what kinda magic can it do?”

“Anything and tons of it. You want elemental and phantasmal magic—that *Agapéd* can do it all, least that’s what the old blokes say in their Hero stories.” She turned back to Setzyr. “Still, needs to exist to make it a wish.”

“Ah... well, what if I told you it does...”

He’s not serious, right?

“... and that I have proof.”

By this time, my chest turned tight, suffocating, as I sat motionless on the couch. *He can’t know. H-he just can’t.*

“It’s sitting right here in this room actually... by none other than our very own Fighter Number 12.”

I could feel my face turning bone white as my entire soul leapt my body, an avalanche of darkness and terror piling into my hollowed-out chest. Everything the Guardians worked for—keeping me hidden and away from the possibility of me losing my magic—had all come crashing down. Gaius said the world wasn’t ready for me. My magic was already in jeopardy because of the games, even without people knowing I was the Agapéd. Now... it had all been unveiled before the planet’s greediest, most powerful Mages and Mystics, one wish away from stealing it from me forever. *Is that even possible? C-can he just wish it away like that? Th-this can’t be—this can’t actually be happening right now? How? How did he even—*

All color faded away from the world, replaced with shadows and fuzzy grays, as my eyes ever so slightly glimpsed at Ayker. His face was plagued with guilt, and my entire being began to crumble like a dry sandcastle. *He... he told him? He told Setzyr? But... but why?*

Wishful thinking changed to a lust for power in that room. I didn’t even have to look at their eyes to know every pair was aimed at my fearful self.

Rongo broke the silence and laughed. “You expect us to believe the most powerful magic in existence is in Miss Boolavogue over there?”

I heard Setzyr’s shoes tap across the wooden floor behind the couch. Closer and closer. “I’m not one for jokes. Why else do you think she was chosen for the games?”

“Hey—is he telling the truth or not?” Rongo said... to me.

The whole situation caught me answerless. I couldn’t even muster up the courage to lie in fear of crying in front of them all. So, instead, I sat silently as my eyes grazed the floor.

That was all the proof Rongo and the rest of the room needed.

“See,” Setzyr continued, his voice directly behind me, sounding happy I sat mute, “the Agapéd has, in fact, returned. But... a magic like that—like yours, Lisa—must be a hard burden to bear.”

I hated the way he said my name: It sounded foul and sly as if a snake was slithering and hissing up my leg. I wanted to leave—to become nothing but loose dust and lint—yet all their attention had me tacked to the cushion. *Please stop... please just make this stop...*

“I think we can all agree that powerful magic should be in the hands of a powerful person, not in the heart of a little girl...” Setzyr then moved to the right, his black slacks and glossy shoes coming into my corner-eye view. “We already knew it wasn’t fair when Lisa’s name was picked. Her parents and dear friends probably felt the same way, wishing her magic was chosen by someone more capable... more *worthy*, I guess you could call it. Bet she wishes for that, too... am I right, Lisa?”

Tears were about to fall if he asked me any more questions. My fingers gripped the cushion near my thighs. *Just stop—just make it all stop, please...*

Since I didn’t respond, Setzyr continued as he completed a circle of the room. The rest of the contestants were now staring at me, turning their heads away from Setzyr. But my eyes glared right up at the mean Nuoljian, glossy and bloodshot.

A gnarled thrill lit up his face—joyous over the fact I was being tormented. He was *basking* in it, my pain warming his sick skin like sunlight to overgrown weeds. He sat on his stool, head propped on his knuckles, leaning his elbow on the high-top table. “I believe strong magic deserves to be with the strong... So, for my wish, it is still unchanged. I will wish for Miss Lisa to enjoy a burdenless life... and in turn, the Agapéd will be mine. Feel free to wish for the same, *if* you consider yourself worthy enough for such grand magic as this.”

Impa shot off her chair, her beast feet thudding against the ground. My shoulders jerked. “I can’t let some scrawny man take such a gift! When I win this, better *believe* I’m using that magic for my own gain.”

“You’re too old, grandma,” Rongo chastised next. “That magic deserves someone with more than half their life left.” Her face turned toward me. “Hey, kid.” I still couldn’t look anyone in the eye, and that annoyed her. “Pathetic of you to let him say all that... but I guess he’s right. Your magic deserves someone strong enough to defend it... I’ll be the one to hone it and give it a reason to be existing in the first place.”

“*Not if I get it first!*” Lumaline shouted, *smiling* as if wishing my magic away was no big deal. As if it was perfectly fine. *Kind* of them to take away this “burden” Setzyr inflicted into their minds. To take away my pulse—my *life*—

I glanced up at Ayker one last time as they gambled on my magic like a silly poker chip. Heartbroken tears balanced on my lower eyelashes

like dew on a leaf. His face was still unchanged—not even trying to apologize for what he had done—and that was it for me. The chains of attention binding me to the seat fell off, and I briskly escaped with my head to the floor. I didn't care if they stared. I didn't care if I looked like a crybaby as the tears started rolling down my overheated face. I didn't even care that they all knew about my magic. The friend I thought I had—the *one* person I thought I could trust—completely let me down.

I was betrayed, a feeling I never wanted to know or experience again.

The moment I opened my cabin door and then slammed it shut, I collapsed onto my bed, muffling my cries in my pillow to avoid any further embarrassment. My heart felt as if it only knew pain, being raked dry every time I replayed the whole scenario in my head. I'd been physically scarred and tortured—blown off a cliff, for crying out loud—but I never knew the sting of betrayal could hurt as bad as a sword's bite. Even worse, this wound couldn't be healed with magic.

What kind of friend just—just does something like that? I thought he was truly being nice. Being kind to me because he liked me. No—he just wanted to win—win this whole thing, getting me to lose so he could get that wysh for himself—

Tuff came out and cuddled up against me. I felt terrible for making his glowing cheeks soggy with my tears. He didn't mind, though. His little warm belly was the best comfort as he took the time to remind me that their opinions didn't matter. I turned away from my damp pillow to look at my sprite glowing five inches from my nose. My voice sounded raspy, and after a snuffle, I said, "Tuff, I'm really glad you're here. You'd never turn your back on me, right?"

"*HOOT!*" he belted, beyond appalled I'd even say such a thing.

I chuckled, causing two tears to fall from my squinted eyes. "Sorry—I just had to make sure..."

Rolling over on my back, I faced the dark ceiling as Tuff's radiance painted the room with the colors of marmalade. My heart was torn... but it wasn't destroyed. I was angry and sad beyond belief. Old Lisa would've wished to leave, feeling sorry for herself.

Not this time.

I dried up my tears and said to my glainie, "You know what this means, bud? Means now, I *have* to win and not just look powerful on stage.

No way am I losing my magic to the likes of them. They wanna see the power of the Agapéd, I'll show them... make them wish they never doubted its choice for my heart."

Tuff flew above my head and gave another confidence-boosting whistle before I cradled him in my palms.

No more feeling like I don't fit in with them—wouldn't want to now anyway. Tomorrow, I'm winning that team battle, and I don't care who I'm partnered with.

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36 What is a Muck Man—

It was hot, but the audience didn't care, cheering louder than last week as we all went to the viewing room to hear Zephan finally tell us about our paired teams. I avoided being near Ayker at all costs, staying in the back of our group of eight. An apology would have been nice, but I didn't want to risk my emotions falling out of check, causing me to fumble around in the rink. My mind was more determined than yesterday, only wanting to win this challenge. *Needing* to win.

Because the weather was blistering and we were all about to sweat to death in our spars, many of the contestants were in light, flexible clothing, and all the men—except for O.N.—opted out of a shirt, including Ayker. As I glanced up ahead and saw his bare back, I noticed the Nuoljian's signet. Bet everyone else did, too. Hard to ignore the giant mark.

It looked just like a tattoo but inked entirely *white*, spanning the length of his spine and across his tan shoulder blades, crawling toward his ribcage. The design was intricate with thin lines, nothing like the cheesy feather and tribal tattoos I'd seen the upperclassmen at school rave about getting when they turned eighteen. There were no distinct pictures etched either, but the middle did resemble a tree made of ice the more I stared—roots and branches extending out into icicles and frozen shard patterns down his back.

Klay wasn't kidding when he said his brother had the biggest signet.

In the room—like the week prior—Zephan stood next to the magical screen with our faces on display as the cameraman pointed the giant lens at the Keeper's face. He didn't wear a coat jacket today, only a simple silk collared shirt with the top two buttons undone and a pair of navy slacks.

With his glossy smile, Zephan announced, "Thank you all for joining us as we welcome our final eight fighters for their first-ever Paragon Games-style spars. If you're anything like me, I know you've been looking forward to this... especially given the magical talent our champions have already demonstrated. For tournament two, the spars will be a team battle, but it wouldn't be a proper game without a little surprise..."

All our ears listened intently as Zephan continued. "Normally for a two-versus two-matchup, the players are selected at random, but I thought,

‘Why not simply group them by age instead?’ So, for this match only... we will group our players in teams chronologically.”

Wait—so that means...

Our headshots moved around on the screen into Battle 1—Impa and Lotto versus Setzyr and Rongo— and Battle 2—O.N. and Lumaline versus Ayker and me.

Ayker turned to me, but my eyes flung to the floor, and my lower lip pulled in. *If Ayker hadn’t been such a loser of a friend last night, I would have loved this matchup...* I blinked away my feelings as I remembered my goal. *Friend or not—we are winning this thing.*

Zephan gave another snarky grin at the camera. “A team battle spar is one thing, but the *style* of the spar makes the game that more interesting. For the rules... our fighters will be following the battle style of sole-survivor, meaning whichever team can knock both opposing players out of the rink will advance to the final four. However... this *still* is not enough to please you—I know.” A coy huff hit the open air. “You want something more... invigorating, something that pushes your fighters. So, I thought... why not add a disadvantage to both teams—testing the limits of their magic and proving theirs to be the strongest. For the battle...”

Zephan skimmed over our faces. “Each team will have one player with *blindness* and the other with *immobility*. Should be quite a show, but I don’t doubt the abilities of our fighters. With all that said, let the Paragon battles begin!”

As the cameras turned off, Zephan approached us all, probably reading the emotions of our hearts. Mine were going crazy. *Blindness would be the worst, but so would being unable to walk around! Why can’t we just do a normal spar like I’ve been training for over the past three-and-a-half months?*

Because of our teams, each pair of players began to group... and Ayker stood near me.

I didn’t look at him.

Zephan finished. “As I said, each of you will be charmed with either blindness or immobility for the duration of the match. I’ll leave it up to you to decide who gets what before your team enters the rink...” Zephan paused, scanning us and ending with me last. “I can see some of you are confident you’ll win, but don’t forget to use your teammate as an ally... *if* you can put aside any and all grievances toward each other.”

Zephan left our huddle as Joolee and Garis took Group 1 away. The rest of us stayed in the viewing room.

I wasn't sure what Ayker was thinking, but I began to assess the match. We both were teamed up against magic duplicators—literally the *worst* possible scenario. O.N. and Lumaline's magic did all the work for them because they could summon creatures unaffected by blindness and immobility. Not fair.

For me, being motionless *could* have worked, but leaving Ayker out on the field to battle blindly would be a mistake. I had the most training with combat compared to him, and I was used to fighting against duplication magic, thanks to Ekron. *But how in the world can I fight while being blind?*

Though Tuff was invisible sitting on my shoulder, his presence reminded me of Ayker's magical creatures and how they could warp to form specific shapes... and that's when a crazy idea came to mind.

"Hey, so, I was thinking—" Ayker began to say to me, but my idea was too genius to hide away. Plus, I really didn't want to hear him talk.

"Give me blindness," I interrupted, staring out the window toward the raving crowd.

"Uh, okay, but what exactly is the plan?"

"You use your widmoos to shoot forward and grab the opponent with immobility to get them out of the rink first." I released a sigh. "I can try to fight the other blind fighter on the ground, just throwing up walls of ice, but even if I'm knocked out, you could still—"

"I'm not letting you be thrown out and risking a chance at me fighting both," he said, as sharp as a dagger. "My widmoos may be strong, but against *two* Duplication wielders—I'm not skilled enough for a fight like that, especially being stuck on the ground. Doubt I could lift the one bound—"

I turned to face him; his blue eyes were as icy as ever. "Your widmoos lifted *you* during the race—"

"That was because I wasn't fighting back. If Lumaline or O.N. lash out and destroy my widmoos without my pulse being near them, then my creatures would die. I'd have nothing—nothing to fight with and dead creatures haunting me." He looked out the window, frustration bobbing up and down his throat. "I mean, I can try to do that, but it's better if you help

and use your magic to fight instead of being a distraction—us working together.”

I gnawed on the inside of my cheek. Another idea came to mind... and it was absolutely insane.

I sucked in a deep breath. “I have a plan, crazier than the first one, but it *would* work. A hundred percent. We just need to practice it...” I flicked my eyes toward the arena as Group 1 took their places, “... like right now.”

“Lisa—”

“I’m not losing my magic, Ayker.” My head turned toward him, both our eyes darting the other. “And I’m going to do whatever it takes to win.” *Even if that means working together with you.*

Ayker’s chin tilted down, and his eyes sniped the arena like an enemy. “I have no intention of losing either, so... what’s your plan?”

...

“Hoothoot!”

As we finished practicing my strategy in a nearby medic room, Tuff—our game lookout—alerted us that Setzyr knocked out Impa.

We rushed back to the viewing room. My lungs shrank in fear as I saw Setzyr move around freely with his Red Torrent as if blindness didn’t even affect him. But Rongo—it was evident that she was beyond irritated by Setzyr doing all the fighting, even knocking away her long-range glass attacks. No teamwork was involved, and Setzyr didn’t even care. He wanted to win—without the help of Miss Glass Shredder.

Before too long, Rongo shot out a large glass wave toward Lotto, but Setzyr used his Red Torrent as a shield for *her* attack. The screen above showed her gritting teeth as Setzyr took the finishing blow to Lotto, knocking him into the water.

My mouth grew dry as the announcer declared Rongo and Setzyr the winner. Lotto was a huge guy, and Setzyr’s magic pushed him over as if he were just a flimsy twig. *I hope I don’t have to fight him. Let him fight Ayker or Rongo instead, please ...*

“Group 2—you’re up!” Garis called and took Ayker and me to the opposite end of the stadium and down to the base level. Everything was quieter and dimly lit, and I could only hear the sounds of muffled cheers between the beats of my racing heart. *I hope this battle plan works...*

Once we stood inside the arched dome that led out to the rink, we passed by Setzyr and Rongo. She was *furious*. Eyes widened with bitterness, she even refused help from one of the Menders near the entrance, swatting the poor nurse's hand away like a fly. I couldn't blame the way she felt. The games were meant to show off our magic, and she never got a chance to. Though our motives were vastly opposite, I, too, would be upset if Ayker didn't cooperate with me and made the crowd see me as unnecessary.

An older Mage approached us, dressed casually like the other Paragon Game workers, and asked, "Who will be taking the immobility charm?"

Ayker lifted his chin, and the lady held out her palm; it glowed with a rectangular symbol.

"*Sandraela*," she said, but nothing happened.

She turned to me. Her index fingers were cold as she touched the corners of my eyes and said, "*Dnilb*." Again, nothing happened. I could see as clearly as before.

She flicked her eyes at us. "The charm won't take effect until you're in your positions, giving you time to adjust."

"*Oh*," we both said.

The Mage stood back as Garis led us to the edge of the archway.

Out ahead, the rink elevated high off the ground with water ten or fifteen feet below—plenty enough of the element for me to use. The arena's surface was glossy like a gymnasium floor, the width longer than I remembered from last week. *It's no soft grass. Gonna be painful to fall on that.*

Roars from the crowd wrangled my stomach in knots as I stood next to Ayker. Bile sloshed around like a rampaging river, my arms wanting to wrap around my torso to try and hide my fear. But I refrained, silent and utterly terrified, standing underneath the archway. *Please, please, please, let my plan work. I have to win. If the Guardians ever found out I lost my magic in these games—if Vilmad ever found out—gosh! I don't even want to think about what he would do to me. Would probably erase all my memories and send me back to Earth.*

In his charismatic, booming voice, the announcer said, "*Let's hear it for the next round of Paragon Games Fighters. On the right side of the stadium, give it up for Lumaline Gaia and 'On' from Vulli!*"

Right ahead, I saw O.N. droop down and clench his fists, his dark hair veiling his eyes. *“It’s O.N.!”* his voice echoed, as if invisible microphones hovered around him from the flying cameras.

Lumaline headed toward the mezzanine as the shaggy-haired Mystic continued to trek to the middle.

“Next up, our youngest team of fighters to ever storm the arena, Ayker Rovonami and Lisa Robbie!”

As Garis pushed our shoulders to walk out, Ayker veered off to the right... and I had to walk alone to the middle. That first step was as bone-rattling as the sun was hot. I glanced to my left and then to my right. Millions of eyes were everywhere, watching, and my heart wouldn’t let me forget it with each rapid beat. Every move, every step, every mistake I made during this spar would be displayed on the giant screens above the arena.

Lisa, just focus on the match—on winning. You’ll be blind anyway... like that is any better.

I took my spot on the white-painted circle, ten yards from the center line, twenty yards away from O.N. Once we both stood stationary, the announcer declared, *“Charms up!”*

Everything went pitch black. No matter how many times I blinked, that same darkness surrounded me. *Okay, hearing screams and cheers from the crowd in the dark is a little freakier than I anticipated.*

“This is gonna be a piece of cake!” Lumaline’s mouthless voice yelled, less cheery and more assertive than usual, her voice able to penetrate through the audience. *“Don’t even try to fly your little magic spirits up here to toss me over. I’ll rip them to shreds, Nuoljian.”*

“Sorry, but don’t take it too personally when we win,” O.N. said to me. “Bet someone like you is pretty scared—making my magic the most powerful it will probably ever be.”

Seems his pessimistic attitude goes away with confidence...

My legs bent and took a sturdy stance as I clenched my fists. Probably should’ve said something intimidating in return, but I just couldn’t, not when I had just discovered that his magic transformed his body into the fear of his opponent. *What is he gonna duplicate? Probably a vezper, a ferna vorrg... or Ecuras—can he even do that? Does thinking about my fears trigger his magic—I hate this, especially since I’m as blind as a bírokavaran!*

“And let the match begin!” the announcer said as a firework shot off into the sky, causing me to jump in place.

“Alright, O.N.,” Lumaline began in her piercing, girly voice, *“let’s show these little wannabe Heroes the power of Duplication magic!”*

Before the match, Ayker and I agreed to wait to see what they did first. During my time with Reno’s training, assessing the situation and the power of the fighters was better than charging head first. Ayker would wait until both Lumaline and O.N. showed their beasts so he could tell me what I faced, hoping that visualizing the height and strength in my mind would help with my blindness.

“Let’s see what you’re scared of,” O.N. said in a low voice.

My brain ran a mile a minute, flipping through all the files of things that terrified me. *Why am I scared of so many things!*

Suddenly, a few seconds passed with nothing happening. Even the crowd grew stagnant. O.N.’s clothes rustled as if he was trying to shake them loose.

“O.N., what are you waiting for?” Lumaline yelled.

I stepped back a hair, both arms still up. *Is something wrong?*

In a distressed and disappointed voice, O.N. exclaimed, *“Wha—my magic— it’s—it’s not working.”* I could hear him still flinging his arms. *“What the—your biggest fear is losing your magic? Are you serious?”*

“Now, would you look at that!” the announcer declared excitedly. *“Mages and Mystics, it seems that Fighter 12’s fear has nullified all magic from our Fear Duplication Mystic, Fighter 7! Bet he never saw that one coming!”*

The crowd erupted.

In all honesty, I didn’t even consider that fear to be an option, but with the Dark Sages, the rot on my back, and last night’s gamble on the Agapéd... it made sense. Courage sprouted in my heart, a Gaius smirk drawing across my face.

Then, he started running away.

“O.N., you idiot!” Lumaline shouted angrily. *“Just take the Nuoljian’s, then—”*

“I can’t!” I heard him pout as he ran, wobbling from his blindness. *“I can only take the form of the person whose fear is the strongest! Ugh—this is so lame!”*

Well, I could've ran after him or commenced my plan... but I didn't need to do either. To knock out O.N., I only needed my magic. The shaggy-haired man was blind, so he couldn't have gotten too far, and I paid extra attention to the length between us before the charm took effect.

My hands sprawled at my sides. Water from underneath the rink followed my command, whirling in tight waves. Every ounce of it I could feel, and once I had enough, I slung it upward. A typhoon whip launched from the stadium, *whoas* from the crowd followed, and I latched it around O.N.'s legs.

There was no time for him to yell. Water shackled him in frozen chains before I *jolted* his body out of the rink—fast and quick—not allowing Lumaline a chance to save him.

The frosted chains dragged him down, and a sparkling buzzer rang through the stadium the moment a splash exploded.

Celebration poured over the fans, boosting my spirits.

“O.N.—ugh, of course, I have to do this all myself!” Lumaline yelped and grunted.

Sounds of dropping coins rang from Lumaline's Duplication magic, and once her warrior was formed, a colossal stomp thundered on the ground. I had to regain my balance from the quake. *Crap! Bet she summoned a beefy guy!*

“Ha! Let's see you try and defeat the fallen Mystic Bortuga! I'll let you know, he's a Muck Man—the toughest one you'll ever meet!” Lumaline yelled. Her explanation did *not* help.

What is a Muck Man—

“Lisa!” I heard Ayker shout from way behind me. *“Seven foot, huge frame, bare chest, and seems to have his power in his fists.”*

Ayker's description helped in making him scarier, but not what a Muck Man was.

The he-beast grunted twenty yards in front of me, the match officially starting.

Time to cue Ayker!

My right arm shot up in the air with fingers sprawled out. Instantly, a rush of wind came to my side, and the cold chill of the widmoos encapsulated my entire body. *Okay, Ayker, do not fail me now—*

A jolt came from my right leg, and I flew backward as I heard the growl of the Muck Man fly past me. With a hefty boom and the sound of

slime, something heavy fell to the ground. *Wait—was that the Mystic’s punch? That sounded like a pile of squelchy cinder blocks falling from the sky!*

“What a dodge! Seems our youngest fighters are taking no chances today—combining their magic to allow Fighter 12 to be the puppet and Fighter 11 to be the puppeteer!”

I had just gained my balance when the widmoos made my hands point out my middle and index fingers—a closed peace sign. *Ah, so Ayker wants me to try using my waves to simply knock Lumaline off the stage.*

My hands willed ocean waves by my side, and the widmoos controlled my arms as I whirled around to blast Lumaline. Hundreds of gallons roared in front of me when suddenly—

“Nice try.” More coin-dropping magic echoed behind Lumaline’s voice.

And I heard all my waves turn to steam in seconds, but it wasn’t because of me.

As the crowd grew more excited, the announcer shouted, *“Fighter 10 just summoned another Duplicate, a Heat Mystic, completely nullifying Fighter 12’s attack! Our pink-haired Mage may have lost her teammate, but her magic just gave her an upper hand!”*

“Ha!” Lumaline yelled as I heard the Muck Man rumble toward me. *“Nice try, but you aren’t winning that easily, Water Mage! I’ll burn all your magic and those stupid little ghost things if you try to come for me again! It’s just you and Bortuga now!”*

I should’ve known she could summon more than one fallen Mystic. She was picked for the Paragon Games, after all! But I had worked with Ekron for over a year. I learned two things about Duplicators: One, controlling more than one at a time was beyond tricky, so I knew Lumaline would probably keep that Heat Mystic by her side as a bodyguard; Two, the more summons a Duplication wielder cast, the less time they had to keep the summons on the field. I just needed to tire her out, to weaken her magic, and then—

“Lisa!” Ayker shouted, and the widmoos tightened around my legs.

The Muck Man began to thunder across the arena. More water billowed to my side when suddenly, the stomps veered left.

My head whipped around, following the sound—the Muck Man was running toward Ayker!

“Getting the Fauna Mystic out first—smart move from the opposing team!” the announcer noted.

No way am I letting that happen. I will lose without Ayker here!

As I felt the widmoos pull me forward, I ran fast in the same direction as the giant. I pulled back my arms, gathered the water around me with my fingers, and created a twenty-foot whip of rushing waves.

Ayker then used his widmoos and slung the water whip forward, but I instantly added some frozen shards to the wave.

I was unsure how close that Muck Man was to Ayker or if he wanted me to punch the duplicate, so I listened to my gut. Icy waves threaded themselves together and wrapped around the Muck Man’s leg. When the widmoos pulled, I didn’t hold back. My muscles tensed, and sweat poured from me as I swung the beast at least fifty yards away from my teammate.

“Bortuga—don’t fall! I command you!” Lumaline shouted.

My water chains recoiled back on me, and I felt the ground rumble as the Muck Man grunted.

“What a save! That sticky magic in his hands sure comes in handy! Smart duplication to send out for today’s spar!”

Sticky magic...

A memory resurfaced. I fought someone with “sticky magic” a little over a year ago. Otrera—my first win for the Men’s Troop—had a phantasmal sap-like power, only she would shoot out her goop. This giant had it on his fists, probably armored all over his body, meaning I needed to avoid close-range combat... or...

The giant came running again, but I made a triangle with my hands in the air, causing Ayker to fly me over to him. Though I had no clue where his face was, I could hear Ayker breathing hard. *Bet this uses a lot of magical stamina. Better make this quick.*

“Ice—ice will freeze his mucky goo!” I yelled to Ayker. *“Let me freeze his hands, and when there’s a clear shot for his torso—”*

“—do that dúlaman punch you were talking about?” Ayker finished my sentence, his voice to the left of me. I turned my head and nodded.

“Once that’s done, let me finish this!”

“Water wave—down below—now!” Ayker hurriedly commanded.

Bortuga was an angered bull running toward Ayker and me, grunting and stomping like a thunderous oncoming train. I acted fast. My arms shot to my sides, and with all my might, I commanded the waters in the safety

ravine to rush out toward the duplicate Mystic. I wasn't sure how much water I splashed onto the floor, but my muscles were strained as I heard the crowd cheer powerfully.

"Now, THAT is magic! A sea of water just took down the duplicate giant and sent him back to the center of the arena!"

"Nice one, Lisa!" I heard Ayker say to me, sounding like he was smiling. *I'd be lying if I said that didn't make me feel at least a little better after—Lisa, focus!*

"Hey—can you keep me flying while I try to get closer to him? I have a plan to get *both* summons out!" I called.

The widmoos around me began to lift my body as Ayker said, "I'll try to for as long as I can."

Ayker summoned the widmoos to fly me toward the giant, but I slipped out a bit of my own flight magic. No one would notice, and it gave the widmoos a chance to "push" me instead of fighting against gravity. A secret Lisa strategy working out perfectly.

As the widmoos guided me, I knew the splash I made had to have covered the floor. *Be a little flashy and clever*, Reno said in my mind's ear. And I listened. Boisterous stomps hurtled toward me, and as I heard the guttural breaths of the Mystic come closer, I froze the water beneath him. The whole area was now an ice rink.

A huge boom came from the ground as Lumaline shouted, *"Get up! That's a cheap trick, you little twig!"*

Due to the laughter coming from the audience, I knew Bortuga took a hulking slip, to which Ayker flew me closer. The widmoos then formed the same hand sign to cue my ice attack, and I zoomed forward at full speed as my hands formed a whirlpool of water in them. *Time to freeze this Mystic's fists!*

As I zoomed faster, a mighty grunt came from the Mystic. The widmoos tried to pull me away, but the giant was more agile. When my body flew to the right, the widmoos made me hold my arms up in defense, and a huge sap-armored punch hit me hard on my forearms. The impact sent me soaring, but the widmoos caught me before I fell out of bounds.

My arms and chest twinged, and I knew I definitely bruised every blood vessel from my wrist down to my elbow. *Gosh—is this guy even human—no arm is as huge as an elephant's foot!*

"What a save by Ayker from Nuolja—Fighter number 11!"

I shot back a “thumbs up” at Ayker, letting him know I was fine—ached and bruised but fine and ready to keep fighting.

Ayker kept me flying as I started shooting frozen chains at the Muck Man, but the duplicate was quick at blocking. With every shot, he would use his slime to break free faster than I could freeze him.

A couple of times, he hit me with the slime, and his “muck” would *sting*. Never felt magic like it before, like brushing against a prickly cactus repeatedly. Luckily, it wasn’t too bad, a bit annoying, if anything. It was the widmoos that concerned me. Their little glass noises—they were whimpering in pain. I felt terrible, but they weren’t giving up, wrapping around my skin like spandex, so I didn’t either.

Suddenly, Ayker shot me to the ground and yelled, “*Freeze!*”

My hands slammed down on the melting ice, and I commanded it to freeze in front of me. Apparently, the giant was only steps away, and when I shot the ice forward, it hit him *smack* in the face and froze his hands together. Bortuga fell from the weight of the ice—*perfect*. I froze more water around him as he was down, and the crowd cheered. *Just have to punch him—*

Without warning, strength in my legs wobbled, and it wasn’t because of my stamina running low. Widmoos sniffled—breaking my heart to hear their cries of pain—and I felt them begin to sag on my skin and clothing. Ayker’s magic strength was depleting—and fast.

The beast grunted as ice began to chip and crunch. I had no choice but to act quickly without Ayker. I willed blankets of ice toward the Muck Man, covering him in a sharded blizzard—again and again and again.

“*Would you stop freezing my Mystic?*” Lumaline shouted at me, almost out of breath. I grinned; her magic, too, was growing weaker.

Suddenly, the crowd rumbled, and the announcer sounded as if he had sprung out of his seat when he said, “*Seems magic from both sides is beginning to fade because Lumaline Gaia’s Steam Mystic just disappeared! All that’s left is her Muck Man. We are coming down to the end of the wire on this match—and it’s neck and neck!*”

As I skated on the ice toward my opponent, I flung up one hand, pointing toward the sun; it was Ayker’s cue. Though I knew he was too worn out to fly me and take complete control, I knew he could at least guide my hand where to strike.

Two widmoos wrapped around my wrist and veered left. When I felt the creatures steady my arm, turning my first into the dúlaman pose, the time had come to immobilize the Mystic.

Fast, I zoomed when ice and slime dropped to the floor. Bortuga grunted. *When did he get this close to me?* The widmoos suddenly jerked me down with their last bit of strength, a cold chill escaping me—Ayker's magic gone.

I heard and *felt* Bortuga's arm swing over my head when the widmoos collapsed and folded into the breeze. I avoided the attack perfectly, thanks to them and Ayker, but the rest was up to me.

My body was so close to his that I could feel the warmth of Lumaline's glittery magic, and I knew I was right against the Muck Man's leg. Pulling the water from the ravine, I froze his feet and up to his thigh as fast as I could. Water scurried up his legs, allowing me to feel where precisely I needed to hit him.

Then—*there!*

The water propelled my feet as I heard the giant breaking free from the ice below. With my index knuckles pointed out on both hands, I added some magic behind my dúlaman punches right on his upper thigh, ensuring it would hurt even if I hit the wrong spots.

Please let these be the correct two spots—

Bang! Bang! Two violent jabs and hefty grunts I made, his magical skin crackling like a frozen lake.

My knuckles were bruised, and my stamina rapidly depleted, but the beast suddenly cried with the roar of an avalanche. And something slammed against the floor.

"I can't believe it! The Duplicate Mystic—he's been hit hard, and with just two punches from such a little girl—no offenses meant to be taken, Fighter 12," the announcer said; I didn't mind.

"Bortuga—get up, get up, get up!" I heard Lumaline yelp.

My breaths sawed out of me, but I smirked because I knew exactly how to end this match. Pains from the Muck Man's attack throbbed, but I didn't care. I tensed my arms and summoned all the water back to my side. Typhoons raced like killer whales, an ocean storm ringing in my ears. I spun my arms and *grabbed* Bortuga's weak body in the waves.

All the cheers from the crowd exploded, shaking the arena.

"Bortuga—move!" Lumaline yelled again, but it was no use.

I could've thrown the Muck Man out, but that wouldn't win me the match. It was the pink-haired Mage immobile in the concrete cubby I needed to get rid of.

I whirled around and around like a shot putter, and Bortuga was the cannonball.

"*Now!*" Ayker shouted, out of breath, and I felt the widmoos use their last bit of strength to guide my arms.

Muscles tore, and I let out a battle cry as I willed the power of a comet into my body. And I let the beefy Muck Man *fly*—straight toward Lumaline.

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37 Reprisal

THRASH!

The stadium quaked as my waves collided against the wall, and the audience roared in reply. Another sparkling buzzer went off. Instantly, my blindness was cured. Sunrays bulleted into my eyes, making me wince, but after a moment, everything was filled with color once again—streamers, glowing charms, and thousands of screaming fans.

I faced forward, and Lumaline's concrete mezzanine was cracked in half. *Whoa—didn't mean to throw the Muck Man that hard—wait, where's*

Yelling and crying emerged below, and cameras zoomed in on the ravine. There was Lumaline, splashing in the depths twenty feet below the battle rink. She was fine, ugly-crying like a child but fine.

"I can't believe it! Our youngest fighters, Ayker Rovonami and Lisa Robbie, are moving to the semi-finals! This is utterly insane!" the announcer shouted with glee. The camera panned back to the center of the arena where I stood.

Gosh—is that me?

Broadcasted live, there I was, shrouded in more bruises and burns than I expected, even some bloody scratches I didn't remember getting—not to mention my messy hair. I looked like I had just come from the trenches of a war while tumbling around in pink honey, but I couldn't help but smile wide.

My eyes flicked toward Ayker across the rink. He grinned up at the sky, happy, breathing out relief. My soul was still hurt by him, but he made a great teammate. We both won, moving onto the semi-finals.

I didn't lose my magic today. Just two more matches to go...

When the Paragon Games Menders and other staff showed up, the last of my adrenaline disappeared with a single breath. I fell to my knees, staring at my purple and red arms, dirty legs, burned skin, and frozen fingers. Still, breathy smiles beamed on my battered face. *Man... I really got beat up. I couldn't even feel half of his magical strikes.*

One Mender kindly rejuvenated some of my stamina with her healing magic, allowing me to walk down through the corridors in slow

steps. That duplicate's slime *did* burn my forearms, patterning my skin with fair pink, blotchy burns—straight through the widmoos bodies. *Hope those little sprites are okay...* The welts were magic wounds, so the staff took me back to the medic room to get treated with a Muck Man remedy.

Going down the halls, we passed a couple of television screens showing replays of the match. I could not believe my eyes: It was *me*, beating up the absolute rock of a man, Bortuga, only he was fully pink from Lumaline's magic. I wanted to stop and stare, but the medics kept nudging me. I didn't think I looked that powerful until then. I huffed and raised a brow, standing an inch taller. *I'm pretty freaking awesome!*

Many workers congratulated me as we continued our walk while some only gave widened eyes at my grated arms. And then, I saw Ayker walking alone down the hallway ahead of us. No blood or burns were on his arms, and his hair wasn't a mess when they showed his picture on the colossal Paragon Game screens.

My lips pinched, bitterness stirring. *He betrays our friendship, wins the match with me, and gets to walk away without a scratch.* If it weren't for Ayker, the Agapéd would've stayed secret—

In a blink, Setzyr whipped around the same corner Ayker stood near and gripped Ayker's wrist—forcefully taking him away... but not to the exit. Not to a mender's room, either. It happened so fast that no one seemed to notice but me.

I squinted. *I need to know what else he is telling Setzyr...*

Tuff floated invisibly on my shoulder and heard my every thought. My eyes flicked to him, and I mind-whispered, *Tuff, go and follow them.*

He did *not* want to go, claiming I was fatally injured and that I couldn't go a second without him by my side.

I was walking just fine.

He was just being a dramatic flying orange.

Please... I mentally whispered. *I need to know what Ayker tells him... You're the only one that can do this.*

As the Menders turned left toward the medic room and past the cavaedium, Tuff thinned his little mouth and flew right—following the Nuoljians. I didn't care if it was wrong. Ayker told Setzyr I was the Agapéd, and the partisan told every single player in the games. And I knew those two were talking about me *again*, probably scheming for next week—to get

me to lose so one of them could wish away my magic. Glainies were meant for companionship, but today, mine was a sleuth.

Right when we entered the medic's room, my face was immediately cupped by Inna's cool hands. Her fingers were icy against my hot, scratched-up cheeks, and I felt bad she had to touch my sweaty skin.

She didn't care, smiling in relief. "Lisa, my goodness—your little face—I am so glad you are fine. You were absolutely incredible out there! You and the Nuoljian boy worked so well together."

"Lisa, you killed it!" Reno declared and gave me a gentle nudge on my arm. "Never in my time as a player have I seen two magic wielders with such chemistry! Wouldn't have guessed you were fighting blind out there either—throwing a perfect dúlaman punch to that Muck Man as you did."

"Thanks," I said to them, my smile unfading.

Behind them both, standing stoic and silent, was Gaius. His emotions were less ecstatic and leaned more to the worried side of things, his smile as subtle as a feather dropping to the floor.

He knelt on my level, adjusted my slimed and scuffed-up shirt as if I needed to look decent in front of the two medics, and examined all my wounds. "You okay?" he asked in his deep voice.

I nodded confidently as the nurse gathered the remedies off the shelves and perked up my rosy cheeks. "Mhm! I feel just fine!"

The older nurse heard my statement and scoffed. "You must have a high pain tolerance, young lady. Muck burns should be stinging like bees on your skin. Now, come here and let us treat you before you head off to the reporters." As I plopped on the examination table, she turned toward my mentors. "If you are not family, we ask that you leave for now—"

"I'm her guardian," Gaius interjected with his arms crossed.

The older nurse scanned him, squinting. "You're a Keeper—Zephan's friend and what-not—"

"*Friend* is not the word choice I would ever use, but I am her guardian. I am staying."

The younger nurse in the room started blushing, staring at Gaius' muscly frame. "I don't mind if he stays."

I swallowed my laugh, glancing off to the corner where the medical supplies were. On the bottom shelf, there were bottles of Enkurious potions, and that's when it hit me.

Ah, that's why I couldn't feel the full effect of the magic muck burning me. Drank a whole bottle of that stuff last night.

Inna and Reno left as the Mender healed me and checked my vitals. All the while, I listened to Gaius giving only one-word responses to the infatuated younger nurse. He didn't flirt back or acknowledge the "You're very handsome" compliments that kept coming. The gardener even offered to help the Mender so we could leave sooner. It truly was the funniest thing.

The potion for the muck stings was a magical balm. The Mender rubbed it on my wounds before applying her healing magic. I stared at each wound, watching the slime and blood evaporate away like rainwater on hot metal, my skin cells stitching themselves back together.

While she washed her hands and Gaius remained a hostage in conversation, Tuff returned from his mission. The rest of the room couldn't see him, but I heard his hoots and felt him cuddle up near my thigh, letting me know he had the whole discussion memorized. I was ready to know what they said, hoping it might explain why Ayker acted the way he did.

...

"Okay, Tuff. Show me everything," I ordered my little sprite as I lounged on my bed back at Gaius' home.

Normally, when Gaius told me to rest, I didn't listen too well. Today was different, my bed being the perfect place to watch the secret meeting divulge. The Fyrnuhaura splashed along the roof of my greenhouse ceiling while Tuff snuggled in my lap. Gaius was working in the staritorium and wouldn't be back until dinner, so I didn't have to worry about him snooping on my business and hearing Tuff's memories.

My glainie projected his computer-monitor memory screen in front of us while I bunched the covers over my legs. In moments, a first-person view of the Nuoljians appeared. Tuff made it just as they entered the lounge area with the rectangle maroon couch.

Setzyr had Ayker by the wrist, and when he shut the door, Ayker snapped his arm free. The partisan reacted by callously grabbing the back of Ayker's neck to pull him closer—gripping hard and staring the teenage boy down.

My body froze. The way he was treating him... Nothing about it was comfortable. For an opponent in the games, maybe it would make sense to be jealous or angry, but Setzyr wasn't just an opponent of his. He was one of Ayker's leaders—a part of the government. A full-grown man.

My soul already began to sink. *This—this is not what I was expecting...*

“What do you think you are doing?” Setzyr snarled at Ayker, losing that smooth and sly voice he usually had. “You were supposed to *lose*—”

“You were *wrong*,” Ayker sniped, angry but keeping his voice low. They both spoke as if this wasn’t the first time they bickered or argued. Not the second or third, either. “The world needs her and the Agapéd. She’s the only one here who wants powerful magic to save others. Unlike *you*—”

Setzyr pushed Ayker’s neck back with great force, causing Ayker to stumble and stop speaking. “You plan to go against your leader, then?” the partisan asked, greatly irritated.

Ayker glared at him, a stare that could freeze fire. “You’re no leader of mine—wishing away a girl’s magic just for your own selfish gain and from one who isn’t even a part of our land. I am *not* letting you win, and if Lisa isn’t the one to beat you, *I* will. And when I do, I’m wishing away our Nuoljian curse—living life normally, loving magic like we are made to do. You won’t rule over us any longer with the demand for magic in exchange for life—”

Setzyr broke Ayker’s concentration and started sneering. *Pleased* with whatever bitter thought he was thinking of. “What foolishness. Go ahead: Try to beat me and waste such a wish as yours. Nothing will happen.” He began walking toward the young teenager, cocking his head to the side and looking down at him. “You know why you’ll always be a slave to omrivim? It has nothing to do with our bloodline... You know that, right? A wysh could fix your genes, but it can’t rid a curse over an entire nation—one that’s been weaved through time like ours.”

Ayker didn’t respond, standing wide-eyed as Setzyr stood inches away from his nose, two blue-eyed Nuoljians having a stare-down.

“You know as well as I do that nothing can break Magic Law,” Setzyr hissed, “not even a wysh. What you have—the Vit that you are—is a curse you’ll live with until the day you die... which will be sooner than you think if you don’t comply...” A vile, lewd leer swept his tan face as he began backing away. “So, if somehow you end up against the Agapéd tomorrow, you *will* win against her—no doubt she will let you. So, when we’re in the finals, you will *lose* against me... or else, you can forget about any more omrivim for your family ever again—”

“You can’t do that—”

Setzyr grabbed his jaw, gripping Ayker's tender skin with his fingernails, sniping the icy blue from Ayker's eyes. "Then, I suggest you do as I say," Setzyr scowled, "or your family's death will be on *your* hands."

Ayker's chest kept puffing, but no words came from him because there was nothing else he could do. Not a single thing.

Setzyr released his grip but slid his hand underneath Ayker's chin, lifting it. "And speak of this to anyone back in Nuolja or to that feely Agapéd girl you're growing attached to..." He pinched Ayker's chin as if he was a bug between his fingers. "And you'll not make it back home to your precious family... Do you understand me?"

Ayker shook off Setzyr's hand, and his back hunched—defeated. He didn't give any response, but his silence and watery eyes said enough as he marched out of the room, concluding Tuff's memories.

My breathing turned rugged as I sat, my room becoming nothing but blurred lines as memories flooded my thoughts and emotions.

The pain in my heart was now different. It didn't hurt because of Ayker's actions toward me; it ached because of how cruelly his so-called leader treated him. Ayker was kind, just like I thought, and even went against Setzyr to try and win to save his people... including me.

Everything he did was a risk, but now... it was too big of a risk.

"He's gonna lose his family," I uttered coldly, staring off into space and searching for the right emotions to feel. "He's gonna lose his life if he keeps going..."

Tuff gave me a sad look with his little black eyes and mouth, floating in front of me.

The tempo of my heart changed into something grievous. Never had I felt this before—this tightening grip in my chest, like my bones were trying to block a firework from exploding. I wanted to shout and run and punch something—to soar and cry and show the world that Nuolja was in trouble. That Ayker needed help. I didn't want pity. I didn't care about the consequences. My soul only wanted one thing.

Retribution.

Before, I couldn't do anything to help Nuolja, leaving their land with Ekron—feeling powerless. Lisa Robbie was nothing—nowhere near strong enough to save a whole province no matter how much it needed to be saved. A selfish and unattainable wish.

Then, I visited Reno. He was *one* man from a small town but was able to make it as a star fighter—earning money and growing his magic. Reno had the fame to become a Hero, the potential to save countless lives worldwide, but he refused. In his eyes, his whole world was his *home* in Sky Valley. He was the only person who could save his people because no one else ever gave them a second glance. Sky Valley didn't have a significant impact on the world, unlike EverWake on planet Gadot or Boolavogue on Kalm, but those people were put in his path...

And Nuolja was put in mine.

No one out there ever cared about Nuolja until their province popped out two new game pieces in the Gallant Arena, and I doubted they ever would again, but I cared. I saw them, bonded with them, and made friends. They were put in my life for a reason, and I wasn't going to sit back and do nothing about it.

"I'm going to save them." I furrowed my brows at Tuff as determination swept through me. "I will win these games, keep the Agapéd, use that wysh to save their people, *and* expose Setzyr of his cruel actions."

"*Fwoot?*" Tuff whistled, his dopey eyes wide.

"I know Setzyr said it wasn't possible, but I don't believe that..."

I leaned my head against the greenhouse glass. An idea struck me. "He mentioned a curse and Magic Law... You know anything about curses?"

Tuff shook his body, dusting my covers with tangerine glitter.

"Me neither, but that's okay..." I jumped off my bed and put my hands on my hips while Tuff floated in front of my face. "Because I know a couple of people who *definitely* know a thing or two about them. I am breaking this curse, and I will use that wysh to do it."

Tuff glowed brighter and reminded me: "*Floot-whoot.*"

I sighed. "You're right... Gaius will know if I'm gone. Don't want him to worry about me any more than he already has..." I paced around my colorful carpet until a clever strategy came to mind. "Okay—new plan. You and I will just return a day early and *not* tell him. That way, we can take all the time we need to find out how to break this 'curse.' Sound good?"

Tuff flew around me, dusting me with sparkles, matching my smile.

"Good."

38 Vaenes and Maalisons

“Lisa, what a pleasant surprise.”

I walked into Micah’s study in the Elysium. His brown hair was short, and his face was perfectly clean-shaven—the Guardian looking the same as always. He sat at his massive wooden desk, adding a new entry into a leather-bound book. “I figured you would be training with Gaius or the Otyamu boy.”

I followed my plan—resting on Earth for one day while Gaius and my other mentors thought it was two. I wasn’t one for lying to Inna and the brawny Keeper, but with what was going on with Setzyr, Nuolja, and the fate of the Agapéd falling into the wrong hands, this took precedence. A little exaggeration about my arrival time was nothing compared to whatever this ‘curse’ thing was between the dark- and light-haired Nuoljians.

My hands fiddled behind my back as I strolled farther into the golden library. “Well, I have the day off today, so I just thought I would come and visit,” I fibbed.

Micah smiled up at me. “Good show, by the way. Was able to watch you make proper use of the Agapéd Magic out there in Zephan’s games, showing the world how powerful you are. Seems you will have to rub it in good ol’ Vilmad’s shiny face that he was wrong about you.”

My eyes widened, shocked that even the Guardians were watching my performance. “Oh—well, thank you. I’ll be sure to do that...”

I walked to the edge of his desk. Even though I had worked with Micah many times before, approaching him voluntarily with the risk of sounding ignorant was still intimidating.

Digging deep into my heart, I mustered up all the courage I could. “So, uh, Micah... I was wondering if you knew anything about magic curses... or if that’s even a real thing?”

Micah’s fancy ink pen continued his work by itself, making the text as perfect as a computer’s printed font. The Guardian, dressed in royal purples, stood up. His eyes sparkled with a kaleidoscope of emeralds and sapphires, delighted. “I commend you for coming to me on your day off, seeking my knowledge on such a topic as this.” He backed away from his desk and came closer to me.

Glad he loves it when I ask for his wisdom, never probing for a reason in return.

“The ‘magic curse’ you’re referring to is actually a modernized phrase you humans rather use. Its proper name is Maalison, a subcategory for a myrddin.”

“What’s a myrddin?” I asked, leaning on his desk.

“A myrddin is a charmed vow, per se—a magic-based contract between the user and whomever they enchant. It may look similar to a normal charm you’d find in a charmbook, but there is a vast difference: a cost. With a charm, as you know, there is no cost to be paid. You must only know the correct words or instructions for the said charm and have enough magic within yourself to cast it. A myrddin doesn’t require the strongest Mage or Mystic, for it is the *price* you are willing to pay that determines its strength. The stronger or more valuable the item, the more unbreakable the myrddin will be.”

“You said a curse, the, uh...”

“Maalison.”

“Yes—*that*—was a *subcategory*, so does that mean there are more?”

Micah grinned again as he continued, enjoying my “adoration” for his wisdom. “Yes, there are two subcategories: one of The Light and one of Darkness. A Twynkling is a myrddin based on good intentions and powered by light magic, and a Maalison is one of dark magic—cursing the user and whoever else is affected by the myrddin. Normally, one would *not* want to break a Twynkling, but Maalisons... you want to rid those as soon as possible.”

“So, you can’t just wish them away or cast another charm on it?” I thought of the Paragon Games’ grand prize.

“All myrddins are bound by the Laws of Magic, meaning even us Guardians are bound to its regulations. It states, ‘Any myrddins cannot be broken once said Mage or Mystic has paid the magical cost.’ This simply means they can’t fade away with time. They are different from charms, for any charm can be nullified with a potion or magic that is stronger, and some charms naturally fade away because the magic strength has been used up.”

I glanced around the room. “Is there *any* way to break a myrddin, then—the Maalison, I mean?”

“Oh—of course, though it is quite tricky. All myrddins have a distinct recipe, you could call it. Like any potion or charm. However, they

have *one* ingredient you must always offer: a deal. Say—for example—a ruler cursed his servants with a Maalison into never leaving his kingdom by offering his own magic in exchange for his servants' invisible chains; there is the *price* paid—the ruler's own magic. If a servant wanted to leave his land, the ruler would then strike up an agreement, maybe making that servant give up their magic in return. There is always a *deal* to break the Maalison."

Micah crossed his arms. "The other possible way to break a myrddin is for the caster to die, seeing as his soul is no longer bound to the human world and ridding itself of all magical ties. We don't condone this unless it's a last resort, but some humans tend to prefer this option... Typically, to break a Maalison, one needs to know the price paid and the deal struck in the magical contract."

"Ah, I see. Didn't know something like that existed." *Quite odd... a bit confusing.* My eyes went to the floor as I changed the subject. "Do you happen to have any books on Nuolja—the little arctic province on planet Kalm?"

"But of course," Micah happily said, leading me over to the bookshelf on the left side of the room as he searched. "Any particular reason why you're interested in that clan?"

I think there's a hidden curse there terrorizing the people and their magic—

"I'm just curious since we visited there with some of the Hunters a while back," I said mid-fidget. "And since two of the players are from there."

Micah grabbed a thick leather book titled *Kalm: Arctic Regions*. The edges of the pages were yellowed but still clean-cut, and the book's spine was embedded with blue jewels. It was pretty for a history book.

Flattered by my sudden burst of knowledge-yearning, Micah handed me the book and grinned. "Here you are, then, Miss Lisa. Everything we know of Nuolja will be documented here. Their province is quite small with hardly any magical substance, so don't expect too much to be found."

I took the book and thanked him.

"Feel free to stay here and read. I am finishing up an entry before heading back out to dilute dark magic near the rim of Luna Theta. Need anything at all, simply ask."

I sat on the floor near the bookshelf as he resumed his spot at the fancy desk. Once flipping to the middle of the book, I found Nuolja mixed in with the other arctic clans and nations starting with “N.” Micah was right about there not being much; their history was less than twenty pages!

The first paragraph said Nuolja was once called Lunagödvelin before being settled by the Nuoljians. *Glad they changed the name—can’t pronounce that correctly to save my life.* Nothing about a curse popped up, so I kept reading. Nuolja had remained closed off, which I already knew, and the population was very small—about the size of Calendula. Still, no Maalison to be noted. Toward the end, the Guardians documented geography, creatures, and magic spotted there.

Illustrated in black and red ink was a picture of the sea creature Ayker scared off the day Klay and Deyter fell into the water: the inarimar. Freaky couldn’t even begin to describe it. I was surprised Rayna, the baby-faced and kindest Guardian of them all, was the one to illustrate it—her signature scripted in gold toward the bottom right corner. The beast was long like an eel and thirty-five feet in length. *That thing is as big as a school bus! And Nuolja just lets them roam around their capital?*

Its dorsal fin was sharp—huge like I remembered—but I would never have guessed the face of the dark creature would be like an angler fish, jagged and sharp. What made it even scarier was the mouth. The inside and down into its stomach glowed red like a blaring exit sign in the dark, seeping through its eyes and gills. A nautical nightmare come to life.

I didn’t think something like that could be living in such a calm province like Nuolja...

I reread the history and geography of Nuolja twice. Nothing mentioned a myrddin or some type of dark magic... which meant switching to Plan B: the signets.

“Micah,” I said, interrupting the scribbling sounds of his ink pen working in a giant book, “do you know of a magic that would cause someone to be born with a tattoo or symbol on their body?”

He didn’t break eye contact with his lengthy entry about some foreign plant. “No human is naturally born with a sigil or magic marking on their body. If one were to have one, it would most likely be due to a myrddin or charm cast upon them while they were still in the womb.”

I needed more specifics. “Do you think you could show me a book about it? I’m just... curious.”

Micah stopped his writing and beamed as I triggered his pride in his knowledge once again. “I have documented many different forms of magic markings from all across the galaxies, all the way from those formed in nature to those produced by Man.” He lifted his hand toward the ceiling, facing the shelf on the right.

Out from the top—at least fifteen feet high—came a large blue book floating down and into my hands. The cover was embossed with the title *Colorations, Engravings, and Magic Emblems*.

“I’m sure you’ll find everything you’d wish to know in there, Miss Lisa...” He stared at me, his eyes like a celestial ocean. “You normally aren’t one for scouring through my books, going forth with those in Gaius’ home. Might I ask why?”

I lifted both eyebrows and flaunted my charm as best as I could. “Gaius knows a lot... but you know more since you’ve been around longer. And not everyone gets to visit here, and I feel honored. Might as well take advantage of it—your knowledge, I mean. Become the best Agapéd Bearer I can.”

I sounded lame, like a kiss-up... but Micah smirked. Pleased. “Then, it has been a pleasure to have you so interested in my studies. You may stay as long as you like, Miss Lisa, but I have to be going.” He closed the large book he was writing in and magically made everything return to its rightful place. “May The Light be with you, and good luck in the games.”

With Micah gone, Tuff reappeared and joined me in looking through the blue signet book. Everything was so neatly organized on the pages, but because my magic knowledge was less advanced than theirs, it still took me a bit to understand where to look.

Tuff showed my memory of Ayker’s back to use as a reference in finding a similar signet illustrated on the pages.

Flip by flip, nothing seemed to match the dainty, rigid lines or icy patterns. *Never knew there were so many types of magical tattoos and markings out there.*

My brain abruptly stopped about midway through and forced my eyes to do a double-take. Right at the bottom left of the large book was an array of markings. One happened to match the frozen tree mark on Ayker’s back. My eyes lit up as my blood pumped faster to catch up with my excitement, grazing over the scripted description.

The text was easy to read because there wasn't much about it.

“‘*The markings of a vaene’s Maalison...*’ but what’s a vaene?” I thought aloud, thinking maybe Tuff would know.

A shrug. He had never heard that word in his life.

I grabbed the encyclopedia of magical creatures from the bookshelf. Being in class with Bethesda, Vilmad, and Micah, I was familiar with this hefty book and easily found the section for this so-called vaene. It was a rare dark specter, not a *creature*, something I had never heard of before. The entity had no physical form, would manifest from Darkness, and needed a host laden with magic to survive. A parasite, almost like a magical eerie leech.

My eyes widened as I read aloud so Tuff could understand. “‘*They are known to form contracts, Maalisons, with humans in order to gain magic and stay alive. They leave a marking on those they curse.*’”

Below the text was a chart labeled “Vaenes Discovered” with a list of different vaenes, at least over 400 documented. Most had the words “defeated” neatly written by them, but a handful had nothing—guessing to mean they were still active—and only ten had “undisclosed.”

Not a *single* one had Nuolja written beside it. My hopes were about to crumble as I saw a dead-end in approach, but I went through the list one more time and saw something familiar. At the bottom, near the words “undisclosed,” was the crazy word I could not pronounce: Lunagödvelin. Stars shimmered in my eyes at the foreign word, and I rushed to the book about Nuoljian history.

It’s the same! No mistaking it!

“Tuff!” I smiled at him. “You know what this means?”

Nothing but a dopey stare came from the sprite.

“Look,” I explained slowly, working to understand everything myself, “this Luna-whatever was here *before* Nuolja *and* where a vaene was once spotted, which means *this* location probably has more information about it. Just need to find a book about history that’s over a thousand years old...”

I spent about ten minutes reading the spines of the books on Micah’s cramped shelves, even flying to the top to reach the ones my legs couldn’t stretch to. After my eyes began to grow weary and my mind about to give up, I finally found one titled *Kalm: Ages 0 A.D - 1150 A.D.*

Lunagödvelin was in the index, and I immediately flipped to that page while still hovering a foot below the ceiling.

Inside, the text was charmed, morphing from foreign scribbles to English letters as my eyes fixated on the paper. Even with the charm enchanting the pages, the text was more scribbly than the other books and more weathered.

“... 1003 A.D. Foretalk of a vaene transpired amongst the vagabonds and traveling merchants who settled the land. Dark creatures came to fruition not long after. If dark magic grows or humans begin to show signs of dark magic infections, then we will trek to the land to seek out said vaene...” Tuff perched himself on my shoulder. “1029 A.D. A clan labeling themselves as Nuolja has settled and claimed the arctic land of Lunagödvelin. Not long after, dark magic left the land, and the platter of the vaene diminished once Nuolja was formed.” That was the end of Lunagödvelin’s entry.

I floated back down to the ground with my eyes as wide as my mouth. The dots in this curse were beginning to connect. “The vaene didn’t disappear... It’s still there because its mark is still on the people... and it’s been cursing them for over a thousand years.”

My voice suddenly spiked from shock. “Tuff—that vaene is *still* in Nuolja. It hasn’t died because it’s been thriving off the magic of Ayker, the kids—everyone with whatever Maalison it cursed them with. Makes sense why the Guardians never noticed. Nuolja’s magic has been diffused amongst a nation of people.”

“Hootoo—fwoot.”

“Hmm... you make a good point. If that vaene has been there unnoticed, it *has* to be somewhere uncharted... but still reachable by a Mage or Mystic. Someone had to make a deal with it after all, even if it’s over a thousand years old.”

I flipped back to the page where the map of Lunagödvelin was. It was mostly elevation and with a bunch of numbers I didn’t understand; honestly, I couldn’t even tell what I was looking at if the book didn’t tell me it was Lunagödvelin’s map.

I stood confused, peering at the intricate geographic scribbles, when Tuff started whistling. Immediately, an orange projection of memories popped up in front of me.

In his replay of orange memories, the Hero meeting at the Boolavogue's throne room swooshed on screen, the moment when Maven Aurum came in. Tuff played the part where the Queen introduced her as a past Treasure Hunter.

Tuff smiled at me... but I was still confused. He rolled his dot eyes and swiveled the memories with his stubby hands like ripples in water until another one began to play. This time, it was the memory of Cal, Gaius, and me walking in Rudlin—the day I was chosen to play in the Paragon Games—right before we made it to the Mender's shop. Tuff replayed our conversation:

“You've been to Rudlin, Caelum?” Gaius asked.

“No, sir, but I believe Maven Aurum went here not too long ago, saying there's a good treasuring shop here,” Cal answered.

“What's a treasuring shop?” I added.

“Treasuring shops collect a lot of charts and tracings for Treasure Hunters. There aren't many around Boolavogue, at least that's what she told me. Even though she's mostly a traveling Fysiks instructor, she still likes to collect as many maps as she can. Her office in the castle is full of them.”

The memory ended, and my cheeks perked up as I smiled big. “Tuff, you are a *genius*! Maven Aurum is bound to have a map of Nuolja or at least be able to tell me what all these markings mean in the old map.”

I looked down at the book. The map was drawn right on the page, not tri-folded or inserted like loose sketch paper. Not meant to be removed.

A vaene hurting a nation is far more important than whether or not this is bound to the spine.

Rip!

I tore the page clean out of Micah's old book and rolled it up into my orbkit.

Tuff made his black eyes extra wide, not believing I crinkled a one-of-a-kind historical map out of a Guardian's book.

“I'll bring it right back—this is *more* important!” I said, feeling his judgment in my head.

“Whoo—fwoot!”

I was in mid-evanescing stance as Tuff whistled at me, reminding me I had no *clue* how to defeat the vaene. “It's got a Maalison, right? So, we just have to break it.”

He flew right up at my nose. If he could, he would've crossed his arms in a very Gaius way. "*Fwooooooot!*"

I dismissed the evanesce dust in my palm at Tuff's realization.

Breaking a Maalison was already tricky enough, but I didn't consider the fact this was a dark creature. For a thousand years, it has been alive. It could be insanely strong, not to mention what type of host it was attached to. *What if its host is a monster—like those inarimars? It's gotta be powerful, too... How do I even stop that?*

Tuff fiddled with his nubby hands. "*Whoohoot?*" he suggested.

I sniped, "No way am I asking for Gaius' help—you really think he would let me do this? Plus, he's already super worried about me being in the games—he does *not* need this problem on his plate, either. We are saving Nuolja, Tuff... but asking Micah how to fight a vaene *would* definitely help, though he did say he had to leave to do his dark magic business—"

"*I wish you would stop with your childish vaunting, Emunah,*" Vilmad's voice echoed through the halls.

"*Just admit you were wrong about Lisa and Gaius—*" Emunah bellowed next, sounding like he was smiling,

"*I will not succumb to whatever game you are playing at here!*"

Though I liked being around Emunah, running into Vilmad was a different story. He was already nerve-racking enough, and adding my sneakiness in Micah's room with a torn-out map in my orbkit that he probably would discover with his celestial nosiness made it even more terrifying.

I scurried to the entrance. Their shadows approached from the left. Evanescing would have been the better option, but I needed to find someone *not* with Vilmad to ask about vaenes. My fear of being caught made my body fly out the door and to the right, avoiding any sounds of my footsteps. I flew past a corner and down the lavish hall, right up to the Onsen door—far away from Micah's study and the two older Guardians.

Standing near the door to the hot spring, I heard someone walking inside. There weren't any shoes clicking. More of the sound of bare feet hitting watery puddles.

Curiosity made me peek through the door. Rayna stood inside, and something was seriously wrong.

Her once-glistening tan skin with golden freckles upon her shoulders was stained black like a starless sky. Dark goo, thicker than ink, dripped down her arms, but it wasn't sluicing away. It truly looked like her skin was melting. The outfit she wore was a thin dress, but it, too, was soaked with liquid shadows, hugging her young adult body. Even her long dark hair was mucky with the goop, though the most painful part looked to be her eyes: ashen black and purple, glowing with dark magic and not with pools of emeralds and sapphires.

Rayna's breathing grew heavier as she eased herself into the Onsen—clothes and all—sounding like a wounded child. She suddenly reacted to the water as if it was too hot but soon submerged far enough to where her head and shoulders were untouched. Once she laid her head against the green and blue moss on the edge, my foot accidentally slipped. The sole of my winter boot squeaked like a mouse. It wasn't very loud, but the Elysium was made for echoing. Rayna looked right at the door.

I was shamefully caught.

As I was about to stand up and apologize, Rayna quietly said in a calm, girly tone, "You can come in, Lisa. It's alright."

I walked over to the pond slowly and couldn't help but stare at her—all of her. She usually was so cheery, but her baby face crinkled up, showing pinches of pain through a subtle grin. Dark blots and running sludge began to diffuse into the water, healing her and washing away whatever dark magic was covering her body.

With a scoop, she splashed her face, gently scrubbing the liquid magic into her gold-freckled pores. She flinched a couple of times.

Though I had nothing to do with the strange sickness, I still felt bad. "Are you okay?" I asked.

The darkness on her face began to drip into the water like melted ice cream, slowly revealing her tan, peachy cheeks.

Rayna released a deep breath, wringing the dark mud from her hair. "I am. This is just the price..." She paused to rub her face again, more goo leaking down her neck, revealing healthy skin. "That we Guardians must pay for diffusing and fighting off pure dark magic. We've been doing this for thousands of years..." Her fingers ran through her long locks like a brush and combed more dark sludge out. "Though, the pain of the Onsen's cleansing is still something my body is not quite used to."

"I'm sorry," I said as I squatted at the edge.

Rayna rubbed the back of her neck with water before glancing up at me. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Lisa... but thanks for your concern.”

If Rayna hadn’t invited me in, I would have never considered asking her for help. Given the fact she still hadn’t shooed me away *and* did illustrate that inarimar picture, I took advantage of the moment.

“Rayna... do you know anything about vaenes?” My eyes rolled around. “Like... how to defeat one?”

I could now see the golden freckles on her shoulders as she answered, “Vaenes...” She pointed her finger to her chin, thinking, forgetting about the blackness about to trickle into her eyes. “It has been a while since I’ve encountered that category of dark specter. Very intelligent beings of Darkness. To kill one... you need only to destroy the host. If that host is not an animal or human but a tree, rock, or even a mountain with vast amounts of magic, you would need to get rid of all magic there. The vaene would then die naturally.”

More black goop diffused into the water. “Hate the things. Not fun in the slightest. Because of their need for dark magic, however, many vaenes make Maalisons between humans to receive a plethora of magic...” A frown emerged. “Poor things—humans not wise enough to know what they are getting into.”

The way she spoke sounded so pitiful, nothing like Vilmad. He would probably degrade our mortal existence without a second thought.

Rayna continued, “With the Maalison in effect, it would cause the vaene to never perish, meaning you would need to lift the Maalison—break the vow.”

Okay, so I just need to break the curse... but...

My legs stopped squatting and were now crisscrossed on the pool’s edge. “I thought that if the caster of a Maalison dies, the Maalison would also go away?”

“Well, yes, that’s true, but vaenes are normally the caster. If they keep receiving magic all their lives and keep finding ways to pass the curse along to another ignorant Mage or Mystic, the Maalison will go on for hundreds if not thousands of years—as long as their host body doesn’t age.”

My fingers fidgeted in my lap. “So... how do you know what breaks their curse since they probably can’t tell you?”

“Oh, they can speak, unlike most creatures. Another reason why they are so tricky to handle.” She shuddered like a teenage girl as if she

hadn't seen centuries of dark creatures. "Makes them super freaky. They are sly beings"—she jerked her chin—"dimwitted but still crafty. They are known to toy with humans, as humans cannot help but fall for their traps. The specters get pleasure from wicked games played and will tell you how to break their curse if they think you could never win or believe they can steal the magic from you."

Rayna then stood up and sat on the edge. Most of the dark magic was gone except at her ankles and toes. She kicked the water like a kid as her feet waded. "But, they will *never* want their Maalison to be fulfilled. Just like all dark creatures, they crave and desire it, will do anything to keep receiving it, even if that means them telling you their secret to get you to trust them before they just eat you up alive."

Glancing at her celestial youth face—trying to ignore her last grotesque statement—I asked, "Have you broken any Maalisons from a vaene, then?"

"Oh, no—they freak me out, and I'm not so good at it. Most of us Guardians leave that task up to Vilmad. He is far better at following a Maalison's trail and discovering their contract's key to the cursed lock." She leaned in close as if she were telling a secret. "Seems he rather enjoys it, too."

My eyes widened. *Vilmad actually finds joy in something?*

Rayna stepped out of the hot spring, her skin and silk lavender dress fully restored. "Thanks for the company, Lisa, but I needa get going before Bethesda thinks I'm doting around the human worlds again. Your kind is quite fun—and I enjoyed watching you in the games. You and that Nuoljian boy made a pretty great team. Hope to see you again soon."

Are they, like, sitting on the clouds watching me or something? Hope they don't do that often. Kinda creepy.

As the Guardian left me alone in the tranquil room, trickles of needle-like pain spun around my spine. The rot reminded me it still was nibbling at my magic, but I already drank a whole eight-ounce bottle of the potion last night. The pain should've been gone today. *Is it getting worse or something?*

I rolled my shoulders and glanced down at the water.

Rayna's magic muck did look similar to the rot on my back... and Ariela also used the water to break that magiblood stone months ago.

Maybe it can help me...

I rolled up my jacket sleeve and extended my hand, submerging my fingers. Instantly, tiny thorns pierced my skin as if I slept on my hand too long. It wasn't that painful, but the farther my arm went, the more it hurt.

Water ran down my forearm as I retreated it, and an idea—a little ill-thought-out, to say the least—whipped through my mind.

What if I tried putting this on my back instead...?

I took off my winter coat and used my magic to float a bubble—the size of a golf ball—of the Onsen's water in the air. Tuff hovered near me as I moved my long hair over my shoulders. With a deep breath, the water floated to the back of my shirt, seeping through to my spine.

Tears glossed over my eyes as I knelt forward from the sudden burn of the water. It felt as if blazing flames had charred my bones! I had to hold back my screams by biting my lip—shooting the water away from me and onto the floor.

Tuff flew to my face and rubbed my cheeks, hooting worrying tunes.

Gosh—why did that hurt so bad? I drank a bottle of the Enkurious... guess it nullifies pain from magic but not pain from something healing it.

"It's okay, bud," I whispered, feeling the burning sensation leave and only the ache from the magic rot returning. "I'm fine... though... I don't think I can endure that pain to get rid of this dark magic as Rayna did."

Grabbing my coat, ready to leave for Boolavogue, I paused and stared at the hot spring. With a raise of my brows, I took a bottle out of my orbkit and quickly filled it with the Onsen's water, making sure not to let it touch me again before evanescing to Boolavogue.

39 Team of Two—Plus Tuff

Since I was now a full-on celebrity of the Kingdom, going through the Inner City would double the length of my trek to the castle. I did not have that kind of time. Gaius was expecting me later that night, and it was already around noon.

To avoid this, I took the entrance through Calendula, which led into the storage cave near the Gora bears. The weather instantly turned frigid through the enchanted gateway. Flurries drifted ahead of the rocky entrance, and the sounds of bears roaring hummed through the air.

Tuff huddled near my neck and against my blue scarf as I zipped up my jacket. “*Fwoohoot?*”

His suggestion raised an eyebrow. “You know, I was thinking about asking Cal for help, too. Would be nice to not have to do this all alone.”

Tuff huffed at me, and I could feel his wrinkleless forehead furrow.

“I didn’t mean it like that—I love that you’re here... just would be nice to have someone *else* to know our agenda, you know, just in case something goes wro—”

“*Honey—come back!*” a sharp plea echoed outside the cave. The voice was familiar and singed with worry, so I quickly rushed out to see who was in distress.

The sun popped in and out of the snowy clouds above as the cave’s darkness vanished. Trees outside of the Gora bear caves were barren except for the white snow decorating the limbs, and that was when I saw a creamy bear with caramel paws and ears rushing in my direction.

I opened up my arms and smiled as Honey barreled toward me. Her long face nestled underneath my arm, almost knocking me over and causing me to giggle. Slobber instantly covered my face as she licked me like a dog, getting in my hair and all over Tuff (he was not thrilled about it). She told me she smelled my scent and couldn’t help but find me.

“Nice to see you, too,” I said, scratching underneath her furry chin—one of her favorite cuddle spots.

“*Honey—what are you—*”

Right from behind Honey was little Celine, bundled up in warm pants, a jacket, and elegant boots made especially for her royal feet. “Lisa! I

can't believe you're here!"

She sprinted over and hugged me, her nose and cheeks flushed a rosy red from the cold. "You. Were. *Amazing* in the games!" she said, her voice overexerted and stuffed into my jacket. "The whole time I watched with Mother and Maven Aurum, I was like, 'I know her! That's my friend!' You were so *cool*!"

Celine was unlike any of the other members of the Sonon family: She had a loud spirit that she never seemed to outgrow. Being with her... well... I never knew what she was going to say. Her flattery in the middle of the snowy woods was much appreciated, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks, Celine," I said as Honey backed away and closer to the Princess. "What are you doing out here, anyway? Thought you were not *allowed* to let Honey out without—"

"I don't need Cal anymore. The workers happily let me take her out anytime I want."

I stretched a curious smile. "So, Queen Leonora doesn't know, then?"

Celine paused and glared around. "... Maybe."

I held back my laugh. "Don't worry. I won't tell... *if* you can take me to Cal right now."

The Princess liked deals—probably how she convinced the workers to let her play with a family-sized bear without supervision. It made her feel like an adult and not a helpless kid.

"Hmm... because it's *you*... it's a *deal*. He's training with the Hunters right now, but if *you* interrupted, I doubt Captain Ekron would be mad. Oo! Wanna take Honey there? It's so much faster, and I can't ride her alone. *Naff* my legs for being too short."

A giggle slipped through my pink lips. *Seems she is taking after the Hunters a little too much.* "That's fine with me."

Celine sat in front as I clutched the leather hand grips—bigger than most pommels on a horse's saddle—and she held tight to the horn in between. My feet kicked the sides of Honey's fur. "*Fara!*"

The royal bear shot toward the castle, running through the snow fields and aiming for the Hunter Training Grounds.

Even though it was winter, the Hunters still took no rest. A few were sparring as we passed by the Women's Troop to get to the Men's, though most seemed to be huddled in the Lazes.

With a couple more turns, Celine and I finally saw Ekron. The man still refused to wear a winter hat over his bald head as he talked with other men bundled in winter gear. They all recognized me instantly—hard to avoid a giant bear in the middle of the Hunter grounds. The smile on my face matched theirs as I noticed Brightbeard, Amos, and Erin.

“Now, *there’s* our mighty fighter!” Amos said, grinning wide as snowflakes decorated his red beard.

“Little lass—you’re quite the incredible Mage.” Brightbeard had five gold beads braided into his goatee, more than usual. He began to help Celine dismount off Honey. “Nice to see you, too, my Princess.”

“Much obliged,” Celine said so casually as if the word was meant for girls below the age of ten.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, Erin came over and nudged my shoulder, his shaggy hair stuffed into a navy blue toboggan with leather straps down the side. “You really showed that big ol’ pink giant who was boss—blind and everythin’, too! Slagged him hard like he wasn’t but a frilly vorrg!”

The burly men in their winter leathers and sheathed swords crowded me with compliments, and I was glad it was cold outside to give me an excuse as to why my cheeks were turning pink from all the adoration. “Thank you. Nice to see you all again.”

Ekron’s bald head peaked through the tall Hunters. His eyes smiled down at me, and he grabbed my forearm with a solid, single shake, saying, “It’s always a fair sight when you grace our grounds, Lisa. Staring at these stocks-for-hunters hurts my eyes after a while—”

“*Sayin’ we’re ugly, Captain?*” Erin toyed.

“You worst of all if you don’t start winning against my jackjaws.”

As Erin retreated with a slumped head and Amos and Brightbeard snickered, sounds of snow crunching came from behind—quite fast, too.

I turned around and saw Cal running toward us. He was beaming. I thought he would go straight to Honey first—hence the smile—but he came right up to me. Gentle reds hued his nose and cheeks, and flurries decorated the waved locks of his hair, the sparkle of the snow somehow making him cuter. A thin black-wooled headband wrapped around his head and ears, too—something he bought in Nuolja—strands of his hair trickling over.

I saw him last week... so the excitement to see me again was surprising. I liked it—liked him smiling at me.

“Lisa—didn’t think you would be here,” he said. Somehow, that smile of his radiated onto my face. Again, I was thanking the cold weather for burning my blushing cheeks.

Celine butted in before I could answer. “Lisa said she needs to talk to you, asking *me* to help.” The Princess turned to me and stood up straight like a soldier. “Here is my brother, like you asked.”

Cal looked down at his sister. “And you *know* you’re not supposed to take Honey out without me—”

Celine grabbed my hand. “I was with Lisa—”

“—the *whole* time?” Cal questioned.

Celine paused before turning her head away from her brother’s glare. “... Yes.”

“Celine!”

She stuck out her tongue with a mean sneer at her brother, causing us to all giggle at the Princess.

Ekron broke the sibling spat with a sharp look at me. “I suppose that means you are not here just for a visit?”

“Yeah...” I glanced toward the frosted ground as I fiddled with my gloved fingers. “Is it okay if I borrow Caelum for a while?”

The way I phrased the sentence didn’t transcribe in my brain as weird, but the Hunters started *ooing* under their breaths.

Cal punched Erin in the stomach, the attention now on the skinny Hunter instead of us teens.

Ekron stayed stoic like usual. “For you, that is perfectly fine.” He turned to Cal. “Take the whole day if you need. You did well enough during practice to earn time with our celebrity, my Prince.”

“*Naff it—he didn’t even practice long!*” Erin complained, regaining his balance after the Prince’s slag.

“Perks of being royalty. Thanks, Captain.” His gaze went to Brightbeard. “Mind taking Celine and Honey back to the caves?”

Brightbeard nodded politely. “Of course, my Prince.”

Ekron and the other Hunters returned to training as Celine and her escort hurried off. Cal and I were now alone.

“So, what do you need me for?” Cal asked, leaning close. “If it’s about more algae, I will help, *but* can we at least pick somewhere a little warmer?”

I giggled. “Don’t worry. No swamp mite hunting this time...” I glanced around to make sure no one was eavesdropping as a couple of Captain Clover’s Hunters walked by. My voice softened. “It’s actually super important and kind of a secret. I’ll tell you on the way to Maven Aurum.”

Cal, like most teenagers, loved the idea of a secret and didn’t question anything. He immediately nodded his head and led me to the castle.

We walked slower than usual to avoid a run-in with his mom, going all sorts of ways I had never been before. Telling him the curse over Nuolja and about the vaene—he was just as shocked as I was, but he never thought it was too crazy beyond belief.

When I mentioned my reasoning for seeing Maven Aurum, passing by some castle maids, he quickly whispered, “She definitely will have a map. Just don’t show her the one you have from the Guardians.”

“Why not?” We were almost at her study’s door.

He let out a breathy laugh. “You want to keep that thing, right? You show her and say it’s from Haim Gana—you’ll never get it back. We will just have her explain to us the one she has.”

Cal didn’t knock on the door like a normal student going into a teacher’s classroom, merely twisted the knob and entered. *Guess since this is his home, he can kinda do what he wants.*

Inside was a large study with all but one wall covered in books, maps, and loose pieces of paper. The bookless section had a large horizontal window stretched across and a perfect view of the forest behind the castle. There were a couple of navy blue armchairs as well as more maps and shiny globes of all different sizes scattered on a walnut coffee table. Four desks sat in the room: two were small, like ones I would see at school, just without the wobbliness and metal bars for legs, and two sat facing away from the windows, elaborate with wooden carved designs. A royal school room for the two Sonons.

Sitting at one of the embellished desks was Maven Aurum. She was bundled up in layers of scarves and hunched over, using a pointed divider across a map she was sketching out. Her black hair was messily gathered in a bun, and her face remained makeupless with round glasses resting on her nose.

When the door cracked and revealed me and the Prince, Maven Aurum did about three double-takes, startled by our presence. “Oh—Prince Caelum—” Paper flung off her desk and into the air, her not caring to pick them up as she scurried over to us. “You are on break—sorry for the mess! Please excuse that—*Oh! Lisa!*” The maven grabbed my hand and bowed at me as she did with Cal. “You are a *marvelous* Mage! Seeing you, if I may, is an inspiration! Gaius the Keeper—his training with you is unlike anything I’ve ever seen—being that your skill in the battle arena reflects his —”

“Maven Aurum,” Cal politely interrupted her rambling. “Sorry to bother you but—”

“You know you are always welcome here, Prince Caelum. Never a bother to me.”

“Thank you. Lisa and I were wondering if you had any maps or charts on Nuolja—the arctic province far north—”

“*Oh! That I do!*” Maven Aurum immediately rushed over to her wall. She continued talking with us as she rummaged through her cluttered shelves, most of the items being rolled-up parchment with a couple of old books in between. *She’s only been Cal’s teacher for less than a year, but with the state of this room, I would have guessed she was here before the birth of Celine.*

“When I heard you and Captain Ekron’s team went to visit, I was so jealous—forgive me for saying that, though it was true.” She knocked over a stack of ripped paper and two pens and ignored them completely. “It has been ten years since I stopped treasure hunting professionally, but Nuolja was one of my first out-of-world visits. *Beautiful* winterdaze—were you able to see it?”

She KNEW of it? Wish she had gone on the excursion—I could’ve asked her instead of running around the entire capital of the province with a couple of kids. I answered, holding back my shock, “Yes, ma’am. It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“Let’s see... I have two charted maps: one of geography and one of Treasure Hunter markings.”

Old vaene magic was what I needed. “The Treasure Hunter one, if you don’t mind.”

Suddenly, Maven Aurum grabbed a rolled-up map that had a blue ribbon sticking out of the middle. She brought it over to her desk—

throwing all her work on the floor like it was nothing of importance anymore—and unrolled it. “Are you considering the title of Treasure Hunter, Miss Lisa—sorry, if that is too forward to ask—seeing as you’re interested?”

I rushed a clever lie. “Uh, Gaius said it’s good for me to try new things to see what I would want to do in the future, and treasure hunting does sound pretty interesting.”

I earned a complimentary glance from Cal.

Her brown eyes sparkled behind her glasses. “How marvelous! Well, let me tell you about this map, then. For treasure hunting—as you can see...”

Maven Aurum pointed to a plot of land near the water where a patch of blue, squiggly circles were. “We marked here where magic ore was located. This was Hyolyte, hence the blue, and over here”—her bony finger pointed to small green dots near an island, looking similar to Guardians’s map—“is their capital. The green markings mean magic soil. In their case, the stone underneath the snow was sturdy enough with heat-glitz—able to withstand the heat of their fires without melting the snow. The magic in the stones isn’t very high and quite common in arctic regions.”

Cal’s teacher continued to explain the map, and I was able to understand more of the layout. Still, one area was not marked with any colors, dots, or strange symbols.

I pointed to the large, colorless land north of the capital. “This is that big glacier, right?”

Maven Aurum answered, “It is more of stone mixed with ice—partially glacier—but, yes.”

“How come there aren’t any magic sightings marked?”

“We had a Mauri—a magic-sensing Mage—with us, like with most new treasure hunts, saying dark creatures were inside and below but no sense of glitz or magic ore to be found.” Maven Aurum then took off her glasses and stuffed them in her messy bun. “There also was no way inside—no cave or even a man-made opening, which meant not even Nuolja found anything worth discovering there.”

Cal spoke up next. “So, there is *no* way to see if something was inside that mountain?”

Maven’s fingers tapped her chin. “Well... given that it’s not fully a mountain, I assume parts of it are floating like an iceberg—seeing as dark

creatures were zooming in and out—most likely those horrid inarimars, if anything. There may be a way underneath, though we weren't Nautical Hunters—sticking to the land and climbing up a mountain was about as adventurous as our group got."

That's it!

I glanced over at Cal as Maven Aurum started rolling up the map. His eyes were the definition of clueless.

Without showing too much excitement for my newfound trail in the Nuoljian mystery, I asked, "Is it alright if I borrow your map—just for a week or two? I promise not to lose it or anything, Maven Aurum."

My so-called "passion for treasure hunting" must have earned the Maven's trust because she handed me the rolled-up map as if it were a Christmas present. "You may use anything in this room, Miss Lisa. Can't *believe* you're so interested in treasure hunting—a Keeper's student nonetheless—one I happen to know!"

We thanked Maven Aurum before leaving her study. Right when we exited the door, I pulled Cal's jacket and tugged him over to the end of the hall. There was a door that led to the mudroom of the flower garden, which was quite barren since it was winter. It was snug and dimly lit, having a single window that overlooked some evergreen trees outside. A perfect hiding spot.

"No one is going to come in here, right?" I asked while already squatting on the floor.

He slowly began to join me on the ground, suspicion trailing his words. "Um, yeah, I don't think so..."

I mentally told Tuff to appear so I could have more light other than from the window to view the maps.

Cal saw me unroll both and gawked. "Wait—you actually *got* something from all of Maven's ramblings?"

I couldn't focus on the Prince's question, my mind going a mile a minute. Both of the lands were charted similarly, but I could tell the elevation of the water had risen on the newer map. The Lunagödvelin chart was a thousand years old, so it made sense the water would have increased with new civilians coming in. Still, the mountain-glacier was similar in size... but with one significant difference.

High north, almost off the map of the Guardian's chart, was an opening. If it weren't for Maven Aurum, I wouldn't have known that

symbol meant—

“*Cave!* Look, right here!” I pointed to the small opening on Lunagödvelin. “On the other map, it’s completely submerged in water, but that doesn’t mean it’s gone.”

“So...” Cal began, “you’re saying that this vaene is in that glacier... because there’s a *cave*.”

I looked at his eyes. Doubt swam about in those hazel irises. I explained further. “Maven Aurum said she sensed dark creatures in that cave—*dark magic*— but no glintz, and vaenes *are* dark magic creatures. For something to be unseen and still living for over a thousand years, there *has* to be a way inside since a human needed to keep passing along the Maalison for centuries...” I paused and stared at the charts. “It’s in that glacier. It’s got to be... and I’m going there right now.”

Cal slammed his hand down on the maps as my hands were in mid-gather. “*Are you serious?* It’s underwater, Lisa—*ice-cold water*. You can’t swim that.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re forgetting I can just move the water away while *flying*. Easy.” I touched both maps and teleported them into my orbkit, his hands unable to stop the magic.

When I stood up, Cal did, too—brisk and still in shock. “*Easy?* Lisa, you have no idea what you’re—”

“I have no choice.” I darted his eyes with an unwavering stare. A tone I had never used in front of the Prince before. “No one else can do this but me—”

“Then, get Gaius or the Guardians to help you!”

“Not possible.” I began to make blue evanescent dust in my palm. “You really think a vaene will tell me how to break its curse with the Star-Keeping King of Stoicism by my side? My child-like body is finally coming in handy—that vaene will definitely see me as weak when I show up. I’ll have no problem with this—”

Cal grabbed my wrist with force, stopping my evanescent, and breathed, “Lisa—listen to yourself!” Eyes were wide as his muscles tensed, huffing his agitated breath on my nose. Never had I been that close to him, and never had he looked at me in such a worried and baffled way. “I believe you about this whole thing with the vaene, but this—this is crazy—”

Suddenly, footsteps began to walk by. Cal ran to the door and locked it before making me duck down. After a few seconds of sitting in silence

against the wall, the footsteps left, and I whispered to him, “I know it sounds crazy, but this is something only I can do. Nobody cares about Nuolja in the outside world. I don’t think it’s some mere coincidence that I went there with Ekron, was picked to be in the games with two Nuoljians, *or* had a glainie by my side to overhear their entire conversation.”

Tuff nodded his floating body in agreement.

Cal’s gaze kept shifting between my nose and eyes. Waiting. Listening. I sucked in a deep breath, letting my determination fill my lungs. “Once I find this vaene, I’m gonna make it tell me its Maalison and how to fulfill it... then I’m winning these games and getting that wysh to break their curse.” I held my knees closer to my chest as I couldn’t help my heart from spilling out anymore. “You know, back when I saved the Wishing Stars, Lady Ariela told me that the Agapéd normally leaves once it’s done with its job.” *And kills the heart it’s bound to in the process...* “And obviously, that was defeating Ecuras... but since it stayed with me, she said it *wasn’t* finished with me yet...”

Silence. Finally, Cal said, “And you think this is one of the reasons why?”

“Who else do you know that can move water, fly, and has a chance at gaining a wysh in less than two weeks?” I cocked a grin.

Cal took a deep breath and stood to his feet. “Then, I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t—”

“I *want* to, Lisa. You’re my friend, and it would be kind of a low move for a prince if I let you sneak off into another nation to possibly get yourself killed. And don’t worry about giving me some gimpish piggyback ride when you fly down into the water. My magic has grown stronger. I can stand on my floating Fysiks shields longer than before while you push the water away from us. If one of their lake monsters comes our way, I’ll protect you.” I swear his teeth sparkled when he said that last bit.

Gaius was the only one to ever promise me protection. Hearing it from Cal... Well, it was the kindest thing he ever did. Doubt he knew that.

Tuff hopped on my shoulder as I held out my hand. “You ready, then?”

Cal was about to grab my other hand when he flinched, and his cheeks turned red. I’d be lying if I said mine weren’t about to blush, too. We had latched arms before evanescing to our Charmer quests many times,

but this was different. It was my hand... and this mission carried a lot of weight. Emotions were involved, ones that had him backing up my crazy hopes of finding a vaene in a frozen mountain. No Hunters, no Keepers, and no Captains were there either. Just me and him... and a glainie playing the third wheel.

He cupped the shoulder of my jacket instead. "As ready as ever."

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40 Icy Depths

“Where *are* we exactly?”

We watched two unies swim out of the freezing water and waddle by.

I was grabbing some pocket-kettle stones from my orbkit when the same two owl-penguins made it to the other side of the giant iceberg on our right. “It’s on the edge of The Chigs—Nuolja’s frozen beach,” I answered, handing over two of the warm glintz. “Keep these in your chest pockets so you stay warm.”

“Thanks, Hunter Lisa.” Cal grinned, putting them in his coat. “So, what’s the plan for both of us getting across the water?”

Glancing out to the freezing lake, the waves were calm. No sounds of kids playing on icebergs. Flying would’ve been easiest, but I could not carry Cal all by myself for that entire distance. If we were to walk on an ice bridge, people could notice us from the town across the lake... or another giant inarimar could even crash into our frozen path. Really didn’t want that to happen.

Then, an idea swept through my mind, one a bit on the thrilling side. I grinned with eyes on the water. “You’ve ice skated before, right?”

“Yeah.” He turned his head at me. Then, his words rushed. The realization of what was about to happen kicked in. “Wait, you want me to skate across *that*? The lake with the sea monsters that tried to *kill* you last time we were here?”

“Don’t worry about the giant fish—and you won’t be *skating*.” Out of my orbkit plopped the maps as I walked to the shoreline. “More like, you just need to keep your balance.”

Tuff floated to my side as I unrolled Maven’s map. “Okay, Tuff. I need you to be our guiding light today. I can’t read the map and skate at the same time. Think you can fly to this spot”—I pointed to the northern part of the map, near the cave—“and shine bright enough for me and Cal to see?”

He spun around to face the glacier. The thing was massive, almost as big as the Boolavogue Mount that rested behind the castle. His little eyes were as small as a dot from an ink pen. When he looked back at me, seeing

my need, he quickly shook off some orange dust along with his fear, saluted me, and whisked away toward the north base of the icy peak.

Going with my plan, I had Cal stand on my frozen platform, making him put his hands around my waist from behind—holding tight on my coat. Not gonna lie, it was a little awkward because he was holding me like a dance partner. I didn't hate it, though, but I wasn't going to let him know that—*ever*.

Cold waves riled beneath my ice platform, the Prince now clenching tighter to my sides. In seconds, I made the frozen water shoot us forward as I continued to freeze the surface ahead—skating quickly along the hardened lake.

Cal's grip tightened until he hugged me from behind, his face almost touching my freckled cheeks. My heart pounded, and my jetting ice path wobbled a bit. But... I didn't mind him. I liked his arms around me.

I sort of felt safe. Protected.

Another bump from the waves—

Lisa, just focus—it's not a hug. He is gripping for dear life!

Luckily, he didn't notice or simply refused to note the mistake, squinting hard from the rushed icy breeze. The frigid air nipped at our faces, biting our noses and burning our cheeks. Still, Cal didn't complain—even heard him giggle a couple of times from the skating fun.

After about five minutes, I made the waves curve to the right to see the back of the mountain. Tuff was floating and beaming bright above a solid chunk of ice, thick enough for Cal and me to stand on. Everything else around him was nothing but frost and rock, no plant life or even an uny to be seen.

I willed the frozen waves to slow their pace, feeling Cal's grip loosen as we came to the wintry patch of land. Tuff zoomed over to me, resting on my shoulder while I took out the maps. "This looks to be correct," I said, glancing back and forth from the surroundings to the scribblings on both charts.

Cal's attention went toward the water below. "So... guess that means we are going *under* now, right?"

"Yes, but first"—I put the Guardian's map on top of Maven's and held one finger against my heart—"we need to know where we are while floating down there since everything will be nothing but darkness and ice."

I pretended my finger was pulling a string out of my heart as I stated, “*Vilvanseer.*”

A glowing thread of blue appeared.

I guided the stringed magic to the map, where the pages soaked up the glow, and a radiant blue dot surfaced a couple of inches away from the cave symbol.

“Whoa—what charm was that?” Cal asked, staring at the blue circle on the map.

“The Guidance Charm. Saw it in the same section of the book where I learned how to make a blynk. You connect your magic pulse to a map, and it’ll show you where you are. Takes a good bit of magic to use—”

“But not a problem for you, though, right?” Cal smirked.

“Wouldn’t be a proper Agapéd Bearer if I were magically weak, now would I?” I answered with playful confidence before turning to Tuff. “Shine brightly for us down there, okay?” He gave a mighty whistle.

I began floating, and the beatings of my heart thudded in an anxious rhythm as I looked below my feet. Nothing but unknown depths of deep dark blue. One misstep with my magic and icy water would drown us in seconds, or worse: something else could drown us instead. *Please, please, please, don’t let those giant eel monsters be down there. Just let it be unies—just cute little owl-penguin creatures and nothing with knives for teeth—*

“Hey.” Cal nudged my shoulder and gave a warming smile, one that could’ve melted the ice beneath our floating bodies. “You aren’t alone in this. I’ll protect you from any monsters, just as long as you keep us breathing air. Deal?”

I might have looked too long in his eyes. There wasn’t an ounce of fear. Never had I seen an almost sixteen-year-old encompass that stare before. A very princely, chivalrous look for him. It was nice not being alone while trying to stop Darkness at work. Nice to have Caelum Sonon in my life.

“Deal.”

Cal stood beside me on his magical planks while I floated and made the ice beneath disperse. Using one hand to hold the maps, my other swirled around the lake below, pulsing away the water so it hovered four feet away from our bodies. Water surrounded us in a bubble cage of air while we descended, making a hard *bloop* sound once wholly submerged. Though it

looked pretty neat, it wasn't long until the beautiful blue sea turned to thick darkness. The only light came from my map and Tuff.

The world became nothing but an eerie, nautical silence for a while, only Cal's footsteps echoing as he walked on his glass pathway. Our ears popped the lower we went, my eyes stuck on the path of the blue dot. Every few feet, the magical GPS would move two millimeters closer to the middle of the glacier. It was slow—so, so slow—but it was easier to watch the snail-slow dot move than to stare into the frozen void.

Tuff was doing his best to shine bright, but his nervousness caused him to flicker and shake orange dust everywhere, including in the water. A glowing tangerine trail began to appear below, and I grew nervous, questioning whether or not there could be a monster hiding in the dark beneath us.

I looked down to check. Nothing was there. Not even a single plankton, blue fish, or other floating membranes. *Guess not even fish are headed to where we are going...*

Suddenly, the water swished and vibrated our air dome, but I brushed it off—refused to accept the disturbance—and focused on the map.

Well, Cal did acknowledge the gulping echo... and just had to remind me of the seriousness of the situation we were in.

"Uh... Lisa?" he began in a hushed tone. "I thought I was just seeing things at first... but, uh..." He paused. "Something has been following us for the past couple of minutes."

My eyes were still glued to the glowing map marker, avoiding the death pit beyond my water sphere. "Does it have red eyes?" I asked, keeping it casual and worry-free.

Cal's jacket made a swiveling noise before his voice aimed in my direction again. "Uh-huh."

I willed calm into my veins. "Does it have a big dorsal fin?"

A swishing of water resonated from beside me.

Cal walked closer to my side. "Larger than a Gora bear."

"Red glow coming through its mouth?"

"More than there probably should be."

"Sharp, jagged teeth as well?"

"Yep."

Well... at least it's a creature I read up on and not an unknown species.

“An inarimar...” Another swish came barreling by as I felt the reverberations bouncing off my water dome. “Make that *two*—have been following us, probably due to Tuff’s trail and our magic scent. I’m pretty sure they don’t crave flesh... but...” I finally looked around me.

Oh, I regretted that decision with every ounce of my being.

Two red glowing eyes were dimly lit in the distance... and they were already as big as two basketballs.

“... I’m not risking my life on that guess.”

The red eyes soon faded away into the darkness once again, causing my mind to now involuntarily think of scenarios of where the devilish fish went.

Cal remained near my side, now clutching his sword tighter in his right hand. “These creatures were the ones that attacked you last time when you saved those Nuoljian kids, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Then, how come they aren’t attacking us now?”

My eyes were now back on the map. The blue dot moved another millimeter. “They aren’t well armored and are very sensitive to pain, so they avoid fights at all costs. And these two are pretty far from civilization, probably aren’t used to visitors. Guess they are waiting for us to weaken or tire out...”

I saw his sword in my peripheral vision and glanced toward him. His eyes were going every which way.

“If you don’t stare, it’s like they aren’t even there.”

“Yeah... Lisa, that’s not possible,” he retorted with a deep breath.

...

More time passed, but still, no sign of a cave or giant wall of ice or rock appeared, and the inarimars continued to follow us. I really hated their predatory stares popping up out of nowhere—reminding me what terror felt like every few minutes.

The map showed us almost directly in the glacier’s center, though everything remained as dark and void as before. I couldn’t even tell we traveled far without the charts.

Normally, using magic for as long as I did would cause me to grow weak, but my strength felt fine. The water I manipulated around us wasn’t shaking, my flight stayed steady, and the black rot wasn’t piercing through my Enkurious anesthetic. Even Tuff grew braver the farther we went.

Cal hadn't spoken in a while, so I turned around to check on him.
And all color pooled from my face.

His head slumped down while his legs started wobbling, and my heart sank to the bottom of the lake. Though his magic was powerful, it was nothing compared to the Agapéd, and he had been pushing forth a tremendous amount nonstop for almost half an hour—never once saying anything about it.

Nothing else mattered at that moment—

He's—he's gonna fall—

Before I could go to him, he weakly said, "Lisa... I don't think—"

Like a submarine with blazing red headlights, the face of an inarimar came plunging toward us. Cal's foot slipped off his glass pathway as his fatigue worsened, and I saw the monster's nightmarish face full of nine-inch teeth coming for him. That gaping mouth—a mammoth, monstrous eel with a fiery throat—was a branded image I'd never forget. The dark sea creature had waited for this moment the entire time—a moment I wished never to happen.

"*Cal!*" I shouted as I threw the maps at Tuff, seeing his little stubby hands wave around until he grabbed them.

I was ready to catch the Prince, but the inarimar's face shocked Cal out of fatigue and caused his adrenaline to spike. He mustered up his energy and made a solid Fysiks platform beneath him, landing hard with glass crackling. But the monster didn't stop its speed. The giant fish broke through my water barrier and went straight toward Cal.

My hands kept the water from devouring us as Cal slung his sword at the fish, chopping off its dorsal fin and slicing a two-foot gash down its spine. A piercing shriek from the inarimar struck the waters as we watched the creature swim back into the pit... and Cal was about to join it.

Specks of glass began to fall like snow, his Fysiks magic weakening along with his strength.

And I *flew* toward him the moment he fell.

With a thud, Cal landed perfectly on my back, conscious enough to grab onto my neck and shoulders. The abruptness and weight of him caused my air bubble to burst. Water gushed onto our backs—only for a second—before I closed the hole again. *My gosh*—the lake was beyond freezing.

I steamed away the water on our clothing but—

Wait... weren't there two—

Torpedoes of red eyes bolted beneath my feet, seconds away from barreling unto us—a red mouth of teeth opened wide. Cal's added weight gave me no time to grab a weapon or potion from my orbkit, one hand busy keeping us both alive with air.

Cleverness joined my side. I used my free hand to form a ten-foot ice spear with the water beneath, and when the monster came hurtling even closer, I shot my ice weapon at the beast.

The fish instantly became a monster kabob. Red rays from his stomach burst like a firework—lighting up the water around us—and dark blood diffused amid the icy waters.

Gone—can't believe I just did that...

Scared and tired, Cal held on to me tight, gripping my neck and shoulders while pressed against my hunched back. His breathing was hot and whispered warmth through my hair, and his hands shook as he readjusted his body.

What concerned me most was his heart. The beats were rapid, as frantic as mine. Guilt swam up my bones for not noticing his magic weakening sooner than my own. *He's just as scared as me... but he never showed it. Why didn't he say something sooner?*

After a moment of catching our breaths, Tuff flying near our faces with the maps, Cal said in a weak whisper, "Guess we're one-for-two now... saving each other's life..." Another deep breath from his chest. "Sorry... wish I was stronger than that... for you."

Though he couldn't see my face, it lit up with gratitude. "You just killed a sea monster with one swing... I say we're even again." I held up his legs, his arms grappling around me more. "You did more than enough for me. Now... let me help you." I looked at Tuff. "You're gonna have to hold the maps for me, okay, bud?"

Tuff's eyes were wide and saw my predicament. He didn't back down, nodding and holding the maps out for me. He lifted them on his back so his diamond's light shone underneath the two charts.

As I started to fly again, Cal muttered, "Lisa... I'm sorry... You shouldn't have to—"

I shut his apology down fast. "Your magic is low, and I'm fine." As he held on tighter, my words became more breathy as his weight seemed to get heavier the farther we went. "Just hang on to me for now... until you're well enough to walk on your Fysiks magic again."

“You sure?” he said, his lips close to my ear, quivering from the cold and his now-scarce stamina.

Didn’t matter if I was *sure* or not. Didn’t matter if my bones felt like they were about to break. He was worth it. “Mhm. Just be on the lookout for more of those creatures, okay?” I said, smiling, trying to lighten the mood so he would stop feeling guilty about something not in his control.

“You’re... pretty incredible, you know that?”

My heart thrummed a pleasing song at his words, and I knew Cal could feel it with his arms wrapped around me.

Shut up, heart! It’s just a friendly compliment and nothing more!

My cheeks blushed from his praise. “You must have hit your head or something...” He didn’t respond, but I could sense him smiling. “But thanks.”

Ten more minutes passed before blue lights from ice emerged around us. *Either that’s magic glowing, or there’s an opening for the sun to shine through.* Walls of rock and icebergs appeared as our blue dot finally hit the center of the glacier mountain.

Cal’s magic stamina was well enough to allow him to walk by my side, so we started our ascent, watching as the darkness glimmered away, morphing into a cold azure color again.

A ceiling of ice soon formed above, proving Maven’s assumption true. Suddenly, the water I was controlling began to be pulled by a current. *That means there’s an opening—a crack on the surface!* Cal and I picked up our pace, our hopes rising, following the pulling force. The crystal canopy began to incline, allowing more cold light to beam, pushing away Tuff’s orange glow.

Cerulean waves appeared above. Something was reflecting on the surface. We came closer and closer until our bubbled barrier broke through the crest of ripples—bursting and splashing against rocky walls.

We were finally out—and in the dry, cool air of a glacier cave.

Our venture took us through a swallet and into a cavern made of glowing ice. We stood near the pool’s rim, panting and catching our breath. The air was surprisingly silky, refreshing. *I’m breathing just fine... but aren’t we deep underground?*

Glancing away from the luminous floor, watching out for the slick ice and cracks in the rock, I saw blue ivy growing along the walls. The plant had pearly turquoise bulbs that flickered slow, surviving well in the arctic

grotto. *Ah—that explains why we can breathe so easily. Not a barren cave after all.* My nose almost touched the plant. The ivy wasn't just clinging to the glacier walls. It was growing *inside* it!

"Whoa—these plants are what's making the walls and floor glow blue," I said aloud, not really to Cal or Tuff, my breath vaporizing in thick steam as my voice echoed through the cave. "Never seen these plants in the Veradome or Gaius' greenhouse before..." I snipped a couple of pieces into a jar and shoved it back into my orbkit. *When all this is over and I'm not running into danger, I'm definitely showing this to—*

"Lisa!" Cal was already ahead of me. "The cave keeps going!"

I ran to his side with Tuff trailing behind.

The narrow cavern grew colder the further we went. Waves gently grazed the icy walls and ceiling, causing the arctic vines to shine brighter. It was strange. The atmosphere was beautiful—the ocean humming, the lights dancing to fill the room in a kaleidoscope of frosted blue pearls—but the circumstances made it the eeriest experience of my life.

We were alone... *For how much longer, though?* There was a dark specter somewhere. Possibly around the very next corner.

"So... do you have a plan if this vaene is actually here?" Cal asked as the walls pressed us almost shoulder to shoulder.

I looked up at him. His nose was very pink, bitten by the frosty cave air. But he wasn't as tired. A surge of relief brightened my heart. "You mean about what I'm gonna say?"

"Yeah—figured you weren't just gonna tell it who we are... right?"

"I'm not *that* stupid," I tittered before turning serious again. "I've planned it all out. Got the perfect lie and story up my sleeve. All you have to do is play along."

"Didn't take you for being such a confident liar."

I scoffed. "I'm pretty good at it—thank you very much. Though... it's not something I should brag about. But, yet again, another reason why this mission was made for me."

My confidence sent the Prince twitching a smile as we turned left with the cave tunnel. "Have you ever lied to me, then?"

Playfully, I pushed him on his shoulder, almost knocking him into the glowing wall. "Lying to a Prince? You really think I'd risk that? Been in trouble with your dad before, and I *don't* plan on that happening again—"

Tuff zoomed through my hair and hid behind my back, interrupting me and Cal's conversation. "W-w-whooot," he whispered, trembling, terrified of something.

I lowered my voice. "There's dark magic ahead."

Cal reached along his back to unsheathe his sword when I put my hand on his shoulder and whispered, "No—we don't want to be seen as enemies. If this is a vaene, we need it to think we are here because we *like* it. Just follow my lead."

"Okay..." He released his grip on the hilt of his sword. "But if that thing attacks, you better believe I'm stopping it."

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41 The Thousand-Year-Old Tale

After another trek through the shoulder-to-shoulder tunnel, the icy canopy expanded and led us to a large open cavern.

A swallet was off to the side, wider than the one Cal and I popped out of, and more glowing ivy was stuck in the frozen walls. No breeze brushed past our skin or swept the frays of our hair. Everything remained just as cold as before, but something felt alive in this pocket of the mount.

Then, a whisper from the cave webbed around my nerves. My heart revved up. Unsettling pumps of blood coursed through my veins. Something was here. Something dark, and it floated in the middle of the glacier wall.

Ribbons of shimmering black smoke seethed from a fissure directly at my eye level. *Dark magic—no doubt about that.* Once our shoes passed the threshold of the domed room, I noticed half of the vapor was stuck in the cave wall like a blanket jammed between a car door. The rest of the dark mist began to swivel and swirl freely. It was morphing... into the silhouette of a lady—but only the torso up. She had slender arms and long hair that flowed like seaweed against the current, a shadow come to life.

But she emitted an old, ashy magic. Worn and powerful.

Then, a crack appeared in her darkness when she opened her eyes. *Red*—glowing scarlet like the inarimars. She saw us, and my fear put on its disguise of confidence mixed with lies.

Yeah... that's a vaene, alright... No mistaking it...

Her shadowed lips smiled, mischievous and filled with the same red burn as her eyes.

Cal and I moved closer as she floated—an apparition made of smoke against the wall. “Jaeli, jaeli, jaeli...” she began slowly. With each foreign word, ruby radiance lit the inside of her throat, breathing a sour, grimacing feeling down in my gut.

“Um—one second, please, ma’am,” I said as if she was a customer and I her store clerk. I was just trying to be polite and not seem scared. I quickly swiped my orbkit and dropped the blue ear-stickers in my hand. *Thank you, Paragon Games, for the free cluins.*

Cal watched dumbfounded, and the suspected-to-be vaene hushed, as curious as the Prince.

“Hey,” he whispered, “what are you doing?”

I ignored him. “Sorry, Miss, but, uh”—I slapped the blue dot behind my ear and on Cal’s, not even asking whether or not he knew what a cluin was—“we are Rae and Lee, junior dark magic creature enthusiasts, and have heard stories of a vaene untouched by death. Our elders have said the one in Nuolja’s glacier was a myth, but we disagreed. So, by chance, are *you* that vaene?”

Cal stopped breathing long before I finished our introduction, and my breath stayed lodged in my throat, waiting. *Please, please, please, work...*

Suddenly, the words from the dark magic vapor sounded like common tongue in my ears. “It’s been lifetimes since a *child* has graced my presence...” Her voice wasn’t raspy or sounded like an old lady; it was dreamish, charismatic, and sly in the most alluring way. Very captivatingly feminine. “And you are not Nuoljian either... so, before I say whether or not I am what you believe me to be, tell me, who are *you* to have made it this far without a scratch or blemish of blood? You said dark magic enthusiasts... but even then, delving into my frozen lake is something not even the natives do.”

“We are a water Mage and flying Mystic, venturing all over for dark creatures who have escaped the eyes of the Guardians. We both found the Nuoljian culture to be... strange and theorized a vaene had to be behind it.” I lifted my chin, a flicker of fake adoration for dark magic. “A curse of this magnitude—it was you, wasn’t it? Couldn’t be just a simple human after all.”

My words were fudgy and filled with phrases Lisa Robbie would never say in a normal conversation. Cal would have sounded more profound, but I didn’t know whether his lying skills were as proficient as mine. Still, it was the best I could do.

She smiled, proud, allowing the eerie red glow to protrude between her shadowy, plump lips. “I am Vaene Yeulavon, the one you speak of. To be admired by two magical sprites like yourself...” She propped her elbows on an invisible table, intertwining her smoky fingers, her chin hovering above her hands. “I am honored. It is true: My presence has gone unseen by those paraded nymphs. Ah... it elates me just to think about it.”

I bit back my smile. *It worked!*

“So... I suspect you want to know more about my great feat—how I’ve mastered the thousand-year-old shroud?”

“More than anything,” I said.

Misty fingers drummed along her shadowed crossed arms. “Then, you know... there will be a price. A story as acclaimed as mine can’t go without payment—”

“—of magic,” I finished. “Whatever you need, we will give you, Miss, uh, Vaene Yeulavon.”

Out of the corner of my eye, Cal shot fiery darts with his pupils, telling me I was insane. I knew that and didn’t care. The vaene had already begun her game with us the moment we stepped into her domain, and there was no way I was losing. I was getting this story one way or another, selling any lie necessary.

“Hmm... I like you and your quiet friend,” she said, squinting, the red blazing through her eyelashes. “So... I will tell you what you wish to know.”

Cal and I stood six feet from her, bearing faces of innocent, dark-magic-loving teens so she wouldn’t skip out on any details. *Okay... just need her to tell me how to break this curse, and we are out of here.*

“Lunagödvelin was this land before the Nuoljians settled, and—needless to say—poor with magic,” she began, talking freely and enjoying her captive audience, “but I needed a host. The frozen mount was my best bet. Unweathered, cold like the air, not bound by a feeble heart and blood and bone. But its magic was weak. Living off the aglidi vines, the blue plants that slither through, was not enough for me. That was when Darkness gave me two fatuous brothers from a band of vagabonds: Vituol and Nilj.”

The specter began to craft shadowy puppets of the men, each resembling paper cutouts I used to make in elementary school. One had white hair, and the other had burnt brown strands—two perfect examples of the present-day Nuoljians. “These were the leaders of the Nuoljians, two brothers with eyes as blue as the frozen depths and polar opposite tufts of hair. When they saw me, they had no clue of my weakening strength—ignorant men they were...”

She smiled with her red eyes. “Oh—how I miss them. The games we played—such was the merriment. The brothers came to me,

unbeknownst what a vaene was. When I promised the two I could make this land their home and one of prosperity and riches, they did not bat an eye.”

Vaene Yeulavon flung out her arms and made the puppets into life-sized men. Unnervingly life-like, standing tall. For us, this was a stage performance in the cave, and instantly, I took a seat on the cold floor, not wanting to be rude as the dark enthusiast I claimed to be. I yanked Cal’s jacket sleeve for him to join me.

The ashen projections of her magic didn’t just walk and stand—they began to tell the story as well—*talking*. But the way they spoke, it didn’t seem like an illusion. Hairs on my neck rose. *Memories... These are her memories.*

Vituol—going by Vit, the one with white hair—spoke to the vaene as if he had no clue Cal and I were in the room. The vaene, too, played along, taking part in the past while narrating.

“How will you make our land prosper?” Vit asked.

The vaene smiled at us before turning to Vit. “With the only known source of true wealth: magic. I can gift you magic and enhance your own, but I need magic in return. This is my land, after all, and the magic in this frozen ridge is draining dry.”

Nilj, the brown-haired brother, looked concerned. “We have no magic to give. My brother needs my omrivim blood in order to live... To relinquish my magic pulse for a gamble is too much of a risk.”

The story and men paused as Yeulavon turned toward us. “Hearing their peculiar magic was enticing, ever so tasty just thinking about it.” Her eyes returned to the men, resuming the memory. “Well, now, that is simply not fair... Every man should thrive from the joy of magic... What if *you*, white hair, *had* magic, even if it meant still relying on your brother for life? Would you like that?”

“To be a grand Mystic...” Vit answered, “I must admit that is desirable.”

“Then... would you want that for your people, even if it meant them relying on omrivim to live, too?”

Both brothers looked at each other before Nilj answered, “If there was enough omrivim for our people to live... then, yes, having magic would be worth the price.”

Vit nodded in agreement.

Vaene Yeulavon smiled again, excited. She faded away the projections. “They were perfect fools. Never in their life had they heard of a magic vow, so creating one perfect enough for me to thrive was an effortless joy. For the two brothers, our Maalison was sealed. They bound their people to a vaene without a second thought, allowing magic to be gifted freely to me.”

“What was the Maalison they agreed to?” I asked, nearly forgetting I was talking to an abomination.

“It was my first myrddin—the most brilliant Maalison ever created. Vituol and his heirs would be gifted magic through all their generations, producing double that of a normal Mystic or Mage. Because of their magic strength, Nilj’s heirs could only bear one type of magic, that omrivim life he so carelessly mentioned to me. I cursed them and their whole people into servitude to one another... marking the skin of those whose magic I would drain for my benefit. Man is just like Creature: needing magic as much as they need food and water.”

Cal finally spoke up. “How did you convince them to go along with your, uh, perfect plan?”

Her red eyes squinted as she leered, her shadowy body still tethered to the wall. “All I required was magic in return. The more they gifted me, the stronger their people would become, the ones of the white-haired brother’s bloodline. To secure their trust and my eternity, I reminded them they could pass along the Maalison to one another—ensuring their magic would never fade from their land.”

She made a sigh as she reminisced on the poor souls she scammed. “Though they were dimwitted, they weren’t completely incompetent. They wanted something in return—a way to be the leaders their people wanted. So... I gifted each brother *my* power as well. To that... they agreed wholeheartedly.”

The vaene was more open than I anticipated.

I decided to take a leap of faith. “Every Maalison comes with a type of nullifier—a, uh, loophole—right? So, what was yours that they never bothered to fulfill?”

A snicker as she took pride in her words. “I told them, ‘If, for some reason, you wish to be free of me and my plethora of magic, all you must do is gift me a generation’s worth of omrivim magic pulse,’ taking

advantage of one of the brother's magic. They thought it was a perfect deal and easy to achieve if needed... but I knew otherwise."

She made her misty puppets again, a whole nation's worth, all the sizes of match sticks. "And so, the Maalison took full effect. Each and every Nuoljian was bound to me because of the brothers. I wasn't all mean, you know. I did provide them with an easy identifier of those with the most magic, putting an emblem on the ones whose blood—" she licked her lips in the most unsettling way as half of the silhouettes received white signets—"was most delicious and filled with magic."

"How did they convince the people you weren't behind it—seeing as your power had to be something new to them?" I asked.

She pursed her black, glittery lips. "I told them it was of the Guardians—pathetic to put my power up against their foolish light magic. But... the people bought their poor lie. I received years' worth of beautiful magic, so I did not mind."

Her leery red smile returned as she formed the apparitions of the brothers again. They appeared older now, their attire adorned, beards graying. "Time passed, and like all humans, the brothers began to feel guilty for their deeds. Not sure why. Their people were flourishing, and I was blessing both of them with my magic. Still, their people wanted to leave—feeling bound to the land without any free will of their own. The two then decided to break our Maalison."

The shadow of Vit turned to its brother. "Let us rid ourselves of this specter—set our people free from the vow."

Nilj's blue and shadowed eyes surfed the cave floor. "But there isn't enough omrivim to take without putting the others at risk of death. They need that to survive..."

The vaene fluttered over to the brothers. "If you wish for more omrivim, why not venture the planet—search on your own? Why take the magic from your own people when you can borrow it elsewhere?" She smiled at Cal and me. "They liked that idea, and who would not? The human heart cannot resist the desire for magic, and the brothers discovered that quickly. Their agenda to find omrivim led them into the passion for stealing all types of magic to feed me so I could help their people survive... and after a while... Nilj seemed to have forgotten about ending our deal. Vit, however, became smart and discovered I was a vaene and not a mere instrument of magical luck." She brought back the brothers again, still

brawny but creased with more wrinkles. “They each came to me one icy night with Darkness in their hearts...”

Vit, his long white hair elegantly braided with loose strands peeking down the side of his beard, said to the brother, “That thing is draining the magic of our people. It does not care what you or I do! It only feeds off the ones we swore to protect—whom we promised a grander life than what we had before! Our people can’t leave—can’t see the world beyond our borders. They will never love magic. They will only see it as currency and a necessity for life!”

“Whether you speak the truth about the creature or not,” Nilj rebelled, anger boiling, “Yeulavon has given us a *home*—has given *you* and *I* magic of our own. Our people prosper because of this vaene!”

“Our people are in *chains* because of this vaene! Can’t you see that, brother?” Vit leaned in close to his Nilj. “We don’t have to find the omrivim either. All we have to do is drain the magic from the vaene—stop feeding its gluttonous desire—and it will die... and the Maalison will be broken. We kill it... we kill the curse.”

Vaene Yeulavon enjoyed their spat and peered down at me and Cal. “That Vit had a good head on him... so, I had to remind them both of the predicament they were in...” She regained her role in the story. “Ah... I believe I must remind you... that *my* magic is what fuels your people with magic. You neglect our Maalison, and all magic—including the omrivim—will fade. Oh, you may kill me... but your people will be dead *long* before I am... Can you live with that blood on your hands?”

Vit fired back, “The vaene *lies*—”

Nilj then grabbed him by his collared cloak. “And that is worth the lives of our people? I think not. Our duty is to *them*. I will not take your assumption of what’s to be true or what’s to be a mere myth. *I* am not willing to watch my family perish for the death of *one* vaene...” Pained, he reached behind his back and unsheathed his blade, the tip pointed at his old brother. “Magic brings us wealth and life... and I knew you couldn’t see past its pitfalls. If you go along with this plan, do not think I will stand idly by and watch you destroy the world we’ve given to our people.”

Vituol retrieved his own sword with tears in his aged eyes. “We don’t have to do this... but I am not having our people be enslaved to the chains of Darkness any longer.” And he swung.

Cal and I watched as the brothers fought. I drew my knees to my chest, trying to find some form of comfort in front of this fight fueled by anger and gutted love. But this—this was too real. When they swung their swords, the puppet show was gone. It truly felt as if the brothers fought right in front of us.

Steel clashed, but in a swift motion, Nilj swung at Vit and cut off his hand. Bile churned in my gut, my eyes so wide they could've popped out. The chunk of flesh rolled on the floor with all five fingers limp as Vituol bit back his screams. In my head, that wasn't an illusion anymore. That was an actual hand that had just been severed right in front of me. A human hand with bone and tissue and blood.

I don't like this... I wish this would stop...

Lying about our names was easy, but fear could not be contained in my eyes. That emotion shone brightly, and the vaene saw. And she smiled.

Yeulavon let the fight continue. Vit pushed his brother against the wall, knocking Nilj's head hard against rock and ice. Something cracked, and my shoulders jerked. With his brother discombobulated, there was time for Vit to tourniquet his handless arm with some fabric from his coat.

"I'm sorry, Nilj," Vit wept with disheartened angst, a sword still pointed at his brother. "Please... let us stop this."

Nilj yelled and swung his sword. He must have forgotten he was fighting his brother—or simply didn't care—because he went straight for Vituol's chest.

The white-haired seemed to be more skilled in battle as well and parried the attack perfectly with one hand... and the blade plunged through Nilj's abdomen.

The blood in my heart curdled as I flinched, my head sniping away to the icy ground with squinted eyes. Vomit rose in my chest as Vit let his dead brother slide to the ground like a lifeless doll. I didn't care if the blood was an ashen black. It poured all too real—too thick and inky. I hated swallowing down that fear-stricken acid while my hands gripped my shins. The clatter and rumble in my chest could've caused an earthquake—my heart about to burst through my ribcage like a ravenous prisoner begging for relief from this agony. I had seen creatures die. I had seen Gaius dismember the dark skeleton of Ecuras. I even saw a vezper murder my best friend... but I had never seen a human kill another human. A soul killing a soul. They were brothers, too, and that agonized my heart the most.

Even though it was just a projection and coming here was beyond dangerous, I didn't expect this.

And I fell for her perfect fear tactic.

Cal and I stared at the scene as Vituol cried before turning to the vaene, "And I know... that if I die, too... your contract with us will perish." He held up his sword to his chest and cried. The vaene merely smiled. Vit roared, "*Am I not wrong?*"

One—two—three times, she clicked her tongue. "Pity you killed your brother. I'm sure your people will mourn his death..." she coldly leered at him with her beaming red eyes, "until they find out it was—"

"You will *answer me!*" Vit snarled with bloody tears cascading down his old face, his white beard now stained scarlet.

Though my nerves were shot and strung with terror, hatred for Vaene Yeulavon helped my fear stay contained. After all, she was just a vaene, a spirit with no claws or sword—her power was through the people. There was no way she could hurt me or Cal. A forced calm rushed through my blood. *We're fine...*

She looked at Vit and smiled brightly, unfazed by his painful lashing out. "Ah, ah, ah—if only you had killed the correct heir, would that apply. But you see... he had already passed the Maalison to another." She snickered before saying, "And do you happen to know who that is?"

Vituol's eyes were already bloodshot with tears as he feared the worst, and my heart hurt along with his. "What do you mean?"

"Did you forget, or are you just playing coy with me? Our Maalison can be passed on to any one of your heirs. We made a vow, Nilj... He knew you would try and kill him, so he passed along the Maalison to his nephew... *your son.*"

When my eyes grew wide, Vit dropped to his knees. "Th-this cannot be—"

"Why do you weep? Your land will now continue to thrive... unless... you feel as if your son's life is not worth—"

"You are *cruel*," Vit cried out. "Why? Why did he curse *my* son? Why place this burden on my family and not on his own?"

Black mist unfurled, just enough so she was inches away from the old Nuoljian's face. "Because he knew the worth of magic... something I've wasted on you."

The vaene made a red glowing spear with her hand, puncturing Vit right through his chest until Cal and I could see the point from the other side.

No... No...

Right then, terror froze my being—spider-crawling up my body and sinking deep into the marrow of my bones—because at that moment... I realized she wasn't some weak apparition bound to a glacier. She could hurt—*kill*—and we were sitting six feet away from a thousand-year-old murderer.

Her two Nuolja puppets vanished as she regained her misty body along the cave wall again.

Cal ever so slightly glanced at me, trying not to draw attention from the vaene. I had been brave the entire time, but being in front of a powerful creature with my friend... it brought back a tormented memory I wished to never repeat again.

And my breathing just stopped—throat burning. *I'm in a cave... with a high-ranking, dark magic creature... and Cal's here, too. If those two men couldn't stop this thing... what—what means I can stop it from hurting my friend? I'm not repeating the past—why did I bring him here—*

I bit down on my lower lip to stop from quivering, and it wasn't from the cold. My heart began to drag my brain and all other emotions back into the sinking pit of fear I had just climbed out of a little over a year ago. *I can't let this happen again—no—not now—not with him here—*

Cal subtly grabbed my shoulder and gripped it tight. No words were spoken, no warming glance from his hazel eyes, but still, it helped. He let me know I wasn't alone. *I'll protect you*, his silent gesture said. *I am here*.

"So, if the brothers died," Cal asked, since I could not without the vaene sensing anymore of my fear trickling out of my disguise, "how did you convince Vit's son to continue with the Maalison, given that the people are still under your power?"

With her red undying smile, the vaene crossed her black magic arms. "Well, Vit's son did what his uncle told him to do: Gift me magic so I can gift it to his people. In turn, he received the same power I once gifted his uncle and father, never questioning my intentions. After that, the land and his descendants flourished, and soon—just like all greedy humans—they changed the way the game was played."

Cal let go of my shoulder as the vaene made more illusions appear from her magic. “One person from each heir took the role of the Maalison holder—allowing them more magic and me a chance to thrive from their own magic pulse. More deals were made as the craving for magic transpired, and soon, a generation of omrivim wasn’t even enough to break the Maalison.”

“You mean,” I began, my emotions simmered, “no one ever came close to breaking the curse? How much was a generation of omrivim worth in the first place?”

“Actually, a generation was met... but that was before each heir began to pile on more to the curse. Fifty omrivim pulses were the price at first, but now... it is up to *1,000* pulses of pure magical lifeforce blood.” She began to cackle. “They barely even have that many vessels of omrivim in this entire province!”

A th-thousand!

I swallowed my fear, dawning fake courage. “Your power is more impressive than I thought... but I assume that is because the person on the other end of the Maalison is playing along better than you had hoped, right?”

Her eyes squinted down at me. “You’re wishing to know the current holder of the Maalison?”

I did not answer right away, thinking, remembering our alibis. “Well... yes. Any holder of a Maalison for this long is someone we admire and wish to learn from.”

“Hmm... well... I cannot say... But”—her cheeks perked up—“you’re too fun, both of you... and I can sense you have some skill in magic... hence your adoration for me. So... come again in a week’s time *exactly*. Not too soon, not too late—for I know you’ll return. You’re human, after all, in search of Darkness.”

I stood up off the cave floor, and Cal followed. “I presume you’ll tell your, uh, ‘Master,’ we were here?” I inquired.

“And ruin the chance of meeting again? I could never... but be warned: it might not be an easy return the second time.”

The vaene wasn’t attacking or threatening us with a piece of her Maalison. She was calm. *Guess my plan worked, her not seeing us as a threat.*

We thanked her, and Cal and I walked back through the tunnel. Once we were out of sight of the specter's eyes, I evanesced us to the frozen shore of The Chigs.

When our feet hit the ground, everything in my head became fuzzy, the icy beach whirling in washed blues and whites. *What—lightheadedness from evanescing... this... doesn't make any—*

“OW!” I yelped like a child and fell to my knees at the sudden pain in my back. The shore of the beach was icy and cold, and I definitely bruised my kneecaps with the force of my fall. The question was, why?

I drank a bottle of that Enkurious juice late last night! Do I have to start drinking more?

The sound of Cal's boots rushed to my side as his hand grabbed my shoulder. “Lisa, are you alright?”

My brain blurred as if I had stood up too fast after sitting for a long while, so when I tried to stand, I wobbled more, Cal catching me. “I'm fine.”

The answer to him was a reflex—a phrase I had grown so used to I had forgotten its meaning other than a cover-up—but Cal saw right through me.

“Thought you said you'd never lie to me, huh?” he said with a pitiful grin, but he, too, was lying. I knew his real jokes versus the fake stuff. He was genuinely worried for me.

Cal fixated his gaze on me. “Tell me... are you okay, really?” he asked, breath clouding in front of him.

When he looks at me like that, I can't lie to him—

I had to ignore his stare, veering my attention to the lake instead. “For now, yes. I'm just a little sick—but it's nothing serious—”

“You just fell to the ground and screamed ‘ouch,’ and you're saying it's not serious?”

I swiped my orbkit and took out a green bottle. “Look—I've already seen a Mender about it, so there's no need to worry.” I popped the cork off the jar and took a huge sip of Enkurious. Like always, it tasted incredibly gross. Waiting for Mender Roo to brew the potion was a hundred times worth it if it meant skipping out on the slimy grime of the raw algae going down my throat.

Cal's mouth dropped. “And now you're taking an anesthetic? Wait—that's why you've been dragging me around to slag those swamp mites

for you?”

I took another sip, feeling my dizziness and the pain in my back fade away. “I promise I am fine. This is just a side effect of my...” I rolled my eyes, “... magic soreness. Once the games are over, the Mender promised to heal me up since it would take a good bit of my magic strength away.” My words muttered the last bit, hoping Cal’s prying would stop.

For a moment, he stayed silent, watching as I put the bottle back in my orbkit. The look on his face was the same as Gaius’ after Ariela broke that magiblood stone with my pulse inside... causing guilt to resurface in my heart and mind.

Worrying him was not something I wanted—something he did not need to have festered in his princely heart—so I smiled up at his face, watching him stare at the freckles on my pink cheeks and nose. “Thanks for being there for me today... but I won’t make you come again the next time.”

“*Next time?*” Emotions of shock hit Cal like a slap to the face. Rapid blinks followed. “You mean you were serious about returning? I thought that was just a part of your lying scheme. You already know how to break the Maalison, so why do you need to go back?”

“You heard the thing,” I began, throwing my arm out, gesturing to the vaene-infected glacier. “The person with the passed-down Maalison is still here. Even if I use the wysh to offer the 1,000 omrivim magic pulses to the vaene, do you really think that this Nuoljian co-host of the specter won’t try and do it all over again? We are going to be stripping away Nuolja’s magic—their *exports*. They won’t have any resources, and whoever has this Maalison will do anything to bring back magic again...”

My eyes drifted toward the frosty beach. “And I am not wishing away a curse if it just means the people are still in danger because that Mage or Mystic is still walking around. Once the vaene tells us who it is, that is when we can tell the rest of the nation of the Maalison and why their magic was being stolen for centuries... and that Mage or Mystic will be arrested—or whatever it is the Nuoljians do to criminals.”

Cal paused, deep in thought. His eyes were squinted from the sun's intensity above our heads, but a thin grin appeared. “Well... guess that means I’m going with you, too—and you better not leave without me. Prince’s orders.”

Ribbons of blue mist tickled my palm, his hand grabbing my shoulder. “Next time, just say you’re coming and leave off the princy part before you get too full of yourself.”

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42 A Bloody Spar

Midday sunrays glared through the wall-to-wall windows as we final four fighters followed Joolee to the viewing room.

The stands were full of raving fans watching Zephan's pre-show fighters battle it out. Every sling and burst of magic from his players boosted the crowd's vigor and hunger for us, the main course—the first one-on-one spars of the Paragon Game tournaments. Not a single fan cared that the sun was blaring down, cooking them all in their seats. We were all they wanted—and they wanted to see a bloody battle. That was a fact.

I knew I'd be walking out more hurt than last week if I wasn't sparring with Ayker. I tried to not think of that, hoping for no broken bones. Pleading the rot would behave and remain stagnant.

As we all waited for Zephan to enter the room—anticipating the sparring style he refused to unveil—I stood near Ayker. Last night, all four of us didn't sit and talk with each other in the lounge. At least, I didn't. Getting sleep and resting my back was my first priority, and hearing Rongo and Setzyr give more reasons about how they would wish away my magic was not something I wanted haunting my dreams.

"Pardon me, but I need to get by," the cameraman said, carrying his lofty camera toward me and Ayker.

"Sorry," I replied and shuffled away, but Ayker remained still. I grabbed his shirt hem, seeing as the cameraman was polite and not pushing him aside.

Ayker snapped out of his tired state and moved.

There were no purple bags under his polar ice eyes. Neither were his eyeballs threaded with blood vessels to indicate any sleep deprivation, but his tan skin did appear paler than usual. Something could've happened last night during dinner, but I didn't ask. He told Setzyr I was the Agapéd, so I couldn't let him know I eavesdropped on his conversation and then proceed to act like we were buddies. Being aloof and distant was the best strategy, but... he looked sick.

"Are you alright?" I whispered.

"Oh, yeah... just tired, is all," he answered in the same hushed tone. I didn't believe him.

New bruises on his left arm caught my eye. Setzyr was likely to be the perpetrator, but it also could've resulted from him practicing for today. A feeling in my gut told me it *had* to be the former.

I leaned forward to glance at Setzyr to ensure he wasn't watching us. "Did Setzyr do something to you? I noticed that you two don't get along very well."

Ayker's muscles tensed. "It's nothing... and, Lisa, I am sorry for last week... for ignoring you when you were upset. But I want you to know," he breathed and turned away from the window that faced the crowd, "I'm not wishing away your magic if I win. I know Rongo and Setzyr will, but—if by some chance you don't make it through—I'll fight hard to win and save you from losing the Agapéd."

A soft smile peeked through my lips at his kindness. "Thanks, Ayker. I mean that." But in my heart, I knew the risk he was taking, and when I turned away, a frown drew over my face. *I have to win for him and his family.*

Sounds of expensive shoes came waltzing through the double doors, cueing the flashing of cameras. Zephan was exceptionally lavish in his cerulean suit. *The spars truly are his favorite part if he got this pampered for just the semi-finals.* Gold thread stitched the shape of a crescent moon and a falling star on his suit pocket, the same hue of his tied-back blonde hair—a sleek ponytail showing off his sharp jawline. Handsomeness and wealth gleamed off his body, the sun basking in his scar-free skin, making me question if that was one of his perks as a Keeper.

After his smiley introduction, he began to announce the details of the spars. "Last week, we saw two battles that exemplified the strength of our final four... but today will be their true test of magic. Our team battles prior were a favorite genre of mine. Today... we had *you*, the audience, choose what you want to see."

What—

I really needed to stop expecting simple tactics from Zephan, but this—he never told us the crowd was going to participate so brazenly. Not even a worker mentioned it to us. The audience would want the most exciting battle, the most brutal and handsy, whatever would cause a teeth-shattering punch to the face to be legal.

Zephan used his magic to project a screen to his right. A chart popped up of the three sparring styles, and of course, the bloodiest one was

picked—

“*Binding Spar* is the style for both of today’s tournaments. For those unfamiliar with this fight, it will be a true test of strength and precocity for our players. To win... all they must do is pin their opponent down for longer than seven seconds. This, of course, could mean a plethora of tactics being used, but as long as the opponent’s shoulders and legs are bound for seven seconds, the binder will win. It will be the best two-out-of-three today...” He glanced at us four. “So, let us see who is paired with whom.”

Our photos on the screen moved next to our opponents. The beating of my heart picked up its pace, but it wasn’t because of who I was with. On the screen read “Group 1: Setzyr and Ayker,” and I wished it wasn’t so. If I were against Setzyr, I knew Ayker had a chance to win against Rongo with his widmoos by his side. But, no. Today, he was against Setzyr... the man who threatened Ayker’s family if he didn’t do as he was told. Now, there was no way Ayker could win. Defeating his leader—Setzyr would have Ayker cast out or chained up just for thinking such a thing.

I looked over to Ayker.

Defeat already consumed his face as the blue in his eyes faded. He knew he was now just there for entertainment and nothing more. That wysk was out of his reach.

Zephan finished talking as I glared out the window. “Hey,” I said to Ayker before we both were about to be whisked away, “I’m not gonna lose this match, okay?”

“*Group 1, ready?*” someone shouted near the exit.

Ayker’s face didn’t change, and he didn’t respond to me either. When the Paragon Game workers came by to escort him and Setzyr to opposite ends of the arena, Ayker’s eyes stayed on the ground.

Glass-chimed footsteps emerged from behind me.

“You know... I haven’t lost a single battle in over three years.”

Gazing upward, I saw *her*. Blood red hair, more saturated than usual, half-gathered in a tattered bun on the crown of her head, the bottom half brushing her stocky shoulders. Flowers or scents of vanilla had never been a part of her fragrance of choice; she didn’t even bother to wash the battle clothes she was wearing. Her chin and jawline were stark, yet her eyes were exquisite, like Inna’s. If she wasn’t always glaring down at me

with her prideful siren eyes, she would be a beautiful feminine warrior, one to captivate men and instill jealousy into every woman.

But Rongolebeau was the literal definition of “haughty,” and nothing about that would ever change.

She continued, “Have you ever been in a battle before? A real one—not some pubescent sword fight you play at in Boolavogue... or whatever it is you Hunters do...” She crossed her arms. They were *ripped*—hefty with muscles and white battle scars, just like her chiseled abdomen she was showing off with her cropped shirt.

Air scratched my throat, burning as I gulped. *If she grabs me, she can easily pin me down with just one hand.*

Due to my lack of answers, Rongo turned blunt, probing, “I know you’ve got magic, and you’re not as dumb as I thought, taking down a Muck Man blind. So...” She turned her entire body in front of mine, blocking my view of the arena below. Glass dangled from her wrists, formed her chest plate, wrapped around her belt, and encompassed her armguards. She made the mineral look as desirably impenetrable as diamonds. “You better use all you have on me. I don’t take pleasure in pummeling children. This is already embarrassing enough as it is. At least, let me see the power you have, *Agapéd*. I read up on your magic. Asked the old bags of my town about the so-called Chosen power. You’ve got crazy amounts of it—hiding inside you. Hoarding it.” She scoffed. “How pathetic.”

Again, my response was silence, but as she stepped away from my face, I saw Ayker’s picture on the giant projections outside. He was walking out to lose. I hated it—hated it so much.

Angered confidence bubbled up in my stomach. “I don’t plan on losing,” I muttered with clenched fists.

Her belt jingled from the glass latches hitting together. Turning back around to face me, she was smug. “Then, show me your worth. Show me that I’m not just wasting my time.”

My heart was a growing weed of agitation. “You said you haven’t lost a battle in three years?” Intrigued, she stared back, listening. “Why’d you lose?”

An arrogant huff. “Because they weren’t worth my time.”

“So you *let* him win?”

Two strides were all it took for her to make it ten inches away from my face. “*She* was an undeserving, incongruous piece of flesh that thought herself worthy enough to challenge *me* simply because someone told her she was strong—never even seeing a day of war or battle in her life. So... yes. I *let* her win because I do not fight those who couldn’t earn my respect if they presented it on a golden platter. Even rewarded her: a life without ever hearing her arrogant blabbering again.”

I did my best not to seem shocked, but my breathing did cease for a moment. “You cut off her ears?”

She cocked her chin, her hands propped on her hips. “In this world, Lisa, powerful magic deserves powerful hearts and rightful blood. So, when incompetent Mages like that one bloat themselves with praise just because they have magic, I take it upon myself to set things right. I did not take her ears. She needed those to hear her own screams when I took her *tongue*. No one would ever hear her self-righteous, idle talk again. And when I win this match against you...” She took a step closer, but I didn’t back away. “I’m beating that clod of a Nuoljian, Setzyr, and wishing for that magic of yours.”

The glare she gave me before leaving my personal space was not as agitated as before. Her eyes weren’t rolling off to the side as if I was a nuisance. The moment she turned away, a slight grin appeared across her face. She wholeheartedly believed she would win but not because I was weak. That smile was one of curiosity. She wanted to see what I was made of... and I would show her.

Every. Last. Bit.

Both my nose and forehead were an inch away from the window pane as I stared at the battle about to start. Even with the windows shut and doors closed, the crowd still rumbled the entire stadium with their chants and cheers like a herd of elephants running rampant.

The moment the announcer shot off a loud spark, Setzyr immediately hit first—bolting a twenty-foot beam of red magic toward Ayker. He held up a shield of widmoos to defend, but he couldn’t move fast enough. My heart plummeted.

Ayker flew across the field, taking three seconds to get back up while Setzyr stood and watched. I knew how strong those widmoos were... They should have been able to take that hit. They could’ve wrapped around him and flown him to safety. Once back to his feet, Setzyr and Ayker

exchanged more magical blows, but Ayker could never pin Setzyr down, let alone knock him to his knees.

On the four screens above the arena, the magical cameras jetting around the rink zoomed in on the match. Bitter, nerve-numbing frost froze me into a block of worry when I saw Ayker. His poor face was covered in scratches, lethargic and bloody after only a couple of minutes of fighting. Setzyr didn't have any bruises, only a couple drops of sweat. I understood the hidden predicament Ayker was in, but with how his blue eyes could barely stay open...

My breath clouded on the window pane as I watched the two. Something was wrong. Ayker wouldn't throw the chance of winning away like this, not after everything I saw. He would've at least given it all he had... to show the world he was strong and could outlast a more mature Mystic. And if he was sick, the medics would've treated him before the match.

I bit back my lip. *Ayker... are you okay?*

The crowd loudly *ooed* when Setzyr slung Ayker to the ground from about five feet in the air. My muscles tensed as my jaw tightened, watching his head smack against the glossy floor. They were supposed to *bind* the other... but the partisan was purposely taking it further by trying to knock Ayker unconscious. All I wanted to do was to yell *stop* and run out to help. But I couldn't, stuck behind this window, watching a lion devour its limping prey.

Ayker was slung again to the floor, his widmoos cushioning the blow but not by much. He wasn't getting up.

I breathed harder, beyond worried. *Come on, Ayker! Just get up!*

But he didn't. A spark shot in the air, followed by the announcer saying, "6... 7—*Match 1 goes to Setzyr! And what a clean attack—he didn't even have to lay a hand on Fighter 11 to pin him down.*"

The two minutes of downtime were gone sooner than I had hoped. Ayker's knees wobbled before he stood up straight—dizzy after a fall like that—but he continued to fight. A blast from the spark started the second match, and both Nuoljians began to spar again. Only this time, Setzyr went for close range. He ran fast with the help of his Red Torrent propelling him forward. The partisan grabbed Ayker by the throat and pinned him down again.

Ayker's widmoos suddenly wrapped around Setzyr's legs.

He can pin Setzyr down with his widmoos latched on to—

Suddenly, the broadcast showed Ayker's ghostly creatures moving away from Setzyr's calves, disappearing from the arena like mist.

Ayker was now completely defenseless.

What just—

"1... 2..." the announcer slowly began counting.

My eyes were wide. Never had I felt anger like this before: Ayker's routing had *nothing* to do with his strength of magic.

"3... 4..."

He was already weak before the games—weakened by Setzyr, no doubt. I bet after Ayker told him *no* to wishing away my magic if he won, Setzyr probably drained his magic... or maybe...

"... 5..."

Would Setzyr really not give Ayker omrivim? Can that be why he is so tired? That's—that's like sabotaging the match!

"... 6..."

My fists were clenched as my mind shifted from pregame worry to detestation. A grown man—a nation leader—was smiling down on his native beneath his grasp. The uneasiness about him before was different. Staring at Setzyr's crude, sly face didn't scare me as it did when he told everyone about my magic. He didn't make me want to cry from fear or run to my room to hide. My mind was blind to his brute strength, only seeing him causing my friend to suffer. Now, there was only one thing filling my thoughts the moment his face popped up on the screen...

"7—Battle over! Our first finalist is Setzyr Tzelem of Nuolja!

A nebula of blue flames filled my eyes, burning into the skull of Setzyr as he smiled at the crowd. *I really, really hate this man.*

Joolee and a medic came over to me. "Please, follow me, Lisa," she said. "Your match will start in about fifteen minutes."

The halls were dim even with the warm sunrays wafting through the window. A couple of trickling Paragon Games workers passed by, not smiling, not laughing. The rumblings of the crowd muffled, silencing the quivering arena walls. I could feel the stone, its lull, almost as if the stadium concrete didn't like watching a man brutalize a weakened teenage boy.

Strategies swirled in my head about how to win against Rongo as the hallway continued forward, my eyes staring at Joolee's blue sneakers. Pinning down the redhead with ice was the best tactic I could come up with

since close-range combat with her glass attacks was like asking to get a million tears in my skin.

Though her power was a subcategory of Non-Living magic, I couldn't manipulate glass, and I tried. I was no genius when it came to magic or science, but I had knowledge from the Guardians. Technically, glass was another element made from melted quartz, and my terrain magic had no effect. Moving gemstones was also something I couldn't do; just boring dirt, soil, and rocks were at my command.

I waited at the edge of the arena archway, its shadow looming and pressing down on my shoulders. The ravines of water were gone. *Guess the safety pool is not needed for a binding spar.* Only the glossy paneling of the rink touched the rim of the concrete walls, meaning I had no means of using Water Manipulation.

An idea flashed brightly. I turned to Joolee after adjusting my armbands and black sleeves. "Would it be possible for me to bring a bottle of water out to the rink—to use to fight, I mean?"

She blinked rapidly. "Oh, uh—yes, that is fine, seeing as you need it for your magic." She was a little startled. My tone must have been more abrupt than I thought, or she didn't expect me to ask her a question at all; she was just a regular employee, not a referee or one of Zephan's primary VIP workers.

"Thank you," I said. Out of my orbkit plopped my belt with my flask holder Gaius made me, the bottle full with about thirty-two ounces of water. Though it was no river, it was enough. *For now, Rongo will only know I'm a Water Mage unless there is no other choice.*

The crowd began to take their seats with fresh treats and game souvenirs in hand while I stood in the dark, ready to fight for my magical life. The medic replenished my stamina by emitting a green glow from her palm. No ounce of tiredness remained—proving my theory about Setzyr restricting Ayker's omrivim intake. *If Ayker got this same treatment, he definitely should have lasted longer in that match.*

I took my stance at the shadow's edge, knee braces tightened, my long hair thrown into a ponytail. Coarse breaths sawed through my throat—but not from fear. Roaring from the crowd wasn't as scary as before, even though more people were watching than last time. My thoughts were too distracted to care. *Go for her feet, freeze her arms, avoid her glass—you can do this, Lisa.*

“Mages and Mystics! It is time we find out who will be moving on to the finals next week and face off against our first champion, Setzyr of Nuolja,” boomed the announcer. Rongo began to step forward a hundred yards away from me. “On my right—coming through the north entrance of the arena with hair as fiery as her desire to win—is Rongolebeau Alawai! First time I’ve ever seen a Glass Mage with the strength of a pack of jackjaws... and not one I would want to be put up against! Which leads us to our next fighter”—Joolee tapped my shoulder, but I was already marching forward—“all the way from Boolavogue, Fighter 12, Lisa Robbie!”

Lemony light lit up my freckled, smileless face as I aimed for the white circle near the center of the rink.

“She is living proof that powerful magic isn’t determined by age, but will she be able to prove that today with our binding spar? Today’s outcome is hanging by an Eternling’s thread, but I can tell you this for sure: I’ve never been more charmbound about a match than this one. This will be one for Paragon Games history!”

Rongo stood twenty yards in front of me. Her muscles were relaxed while she steadied her stance, glass glistening like deadly diamonds around her cropped chest plate and gladiator skirt. “Better make this a match worth fighting, Agapéd.”

I copied her ready position, bending both my legs and giving only a furrow-browed look.

Trust me, I will.

Spark! The charmed firework shot in the summer heat like a bullet, igniting our match. Before I could whip out my water, Rongo had already dismantled the glass from her belt and around her wrists, bolting sharp shards of metal quarts at my hands.

Needles pierced my palms and made me flinch, stopping my magic from grabbing the water. A millisecond later, she jumped forward at me and morphed all the glass around her back, feet, and shin guards into a huge four-foot column of crystal. With an effortless lunge, she slung the column at me with speeds I thought only Gaius could reach.

I didn’t even have time to blink when—*SLAM!*

Her glass log struck me hard on my right side and slung me fast across the rink. I felt as if I was hit by a professional linebacker with super-human strength, skidding across the hard floor like a ragdoll. Blurry blues

and stars and shadows covered my eyes as I rolled one, two, maybe three times before the crowd's cheers muffled. The world slurred and danced in fog. I had no clue if Rongo was near me, but I felt chains of glass pinning me down. I could not move.

The announcer's voice began to penetrate my thoughts again—sounding off like an alarm in my ears as he said, "... 4... 5..."

No way am I losing the first match in the first minute of the game!

"6—well, that was a close call!" the announcer exclaimed as my sweat turned into ice, cutting through the glass like craft paper, and my shoulders propped off the ground. "*Fighter 12 is up! A hit like that had to have shaken her bones—Rongolebeau is not holding back a single ounce of strength in this match!*"

My eyes finally adjusted, loosely staring at Rongo. She ran toward me with a river of glass sand behind her.

She is quicker than I expected. She's not even giving me a chance to hit back!

Judging by her movement, she was aiming for my feet next. I tried to run, but my head still hadn't recovered from its smash against the rink, causing my feet to wobble to the right. I couldn't just run away, though; I had to fight back.

She's going for my ankles. I'll just use my water—

"Looking for this!" Rongo snarled at me, holding my glass flask of water in mid-air before throwing it to the opposite side of the rink. "A real fighter can make do when their plans don't go their way!"

Crap!

I shot my hand forward to command the water to come, but she launched the glass jar so far away that by the time my magic grabbed the water, she was already two feet from me.

Glass rivers swam around her effortlessly like an army of crystal birds aimed for my legs.

As I was in mid-leap to dodge, she extended her arms with a hefty thrust of her elbows and commanded the glass back to her body. A perfect feint.

I had no time to react to her new game plan as her hand gripped my neck, holding me tight as a lumberjack does with the belly of his ax. My scream was silenced, and she plummeted me to the floor with a *thud*. Pain returned with a vengeance the moment my body hit the ground. Moving

was not an option. My brain clouded like a rainstorm as Rongo's clasp released, and her foot took the place of her hand, pinning my body down with just one leg.

And before I knew it—

"... 7! Match 1 goes to our red-headed warrior!"

I lost the first match before I even had a chance to throw a punch.

Rongo stepped off me and wiped her sweat when the two-minute break was announced. She wasn't smiling.

"Why aren't you fighting harder than this?" her voice sniped at me as her shoulder-length hair brushed in the light breeze. "Next match, at least try to hit me before I win. Pathetic."

She returned to the white circle on her side of the rink as I mustered the strength to stand. I gritted my teeth, not caring that my hair was tattered or that I had purple bruises painting my back. Rongo wasn't wrong. Part of me still saw this as a game, so I wasn't planning on hurting her purposely, only as a side effect of pinning her down.

I pulled my knee braces back up and readjusted my black armbands, spitting out some blood from my busted lip. *No more seeing her as a player.* She was a potential threat to me losing the Agapéd, which meant fighting her like an enemy: no holding back.

My body flipped its adrenaline switch to max. Aches burned on my right shoulder, and my hands were still grated by her glass, but I didn't care—and took my stalwart stance without fear. *Pinning her down first was a bad idea. Going to have to wear her down first... hit her as hard as she did me. Knock her out. Just need to get my water she dropped to the ground.*

The second spark shot high in the sky. Round two began.

Rongo came rumbling to my left side again with glass covering her hands like crystal boxing gloves, ready to nail me to the ground. My movements felt faster as I felt my magic pumping my heart with more strength. I extended my hand forward and commanded the spilled water to come—flying it to me at the speed of a bullet. When it caught up to my fingers, I froze the water into a shield as Rongo's beefy arm came swinging.

She fell for it. Her fist continued to aim right at me, but before the moment of impact, I ducked, melted the ice, and formed watery ropes around her wrists in rapid succession. Though she was heavier and more muscular than me, my magic was ten times more powerful... and I knew

taking the force of her attack behind my shield would knock me down for good.

The water froze into beefy, iced chains, her wrists tethering to the chilled surface, and she was now in my command. With as much magic as I could muster up, the Agapéd thrumming through my veins like a jet engine, I hurled the ice with Rongo attached across the rink—twice as far as she had slung me.

“What a launch and with a clever tactic used by Lisa of Boolavogue!” shouted the announcer as a replay of Rongo’s fall broadcasted on the screen.

Her wrists were bound in mini icebergs, so it took her five rolls before she used her glass to chip it away and break free. By the time she stood up, her face was now bruised, and she even spit out some blood from where her tooth had gone missing.

Now, her bloody smile had emerged. The real match had begun.

Ice returned into my hands, and we each took turns sparring—my icy whips against her lashes of thin crystals. Rongo would run fast and launch a wave of glass, but I would parry it back with floating, frozen shields. The brutal training days with Ekron, Gaius, Inna, and Reno were shining through. I kept pace with her, and it was invigorating. Every few strikes, my ice would scratch her knees and torso, and I would be scored by her glass blades on my shoulders. She would try and grab my neck again, but I would shoot the water forward with my palms like a torpedo, boosting myself up and away. Long-range fighting was what I needed.

“You’re pretty good, kid,” Rongo breathed as we stood fifteen feet apart, both of us taking a second to catch our breath. I stayed on alert, ensuring she wasn’t just playing with me—goading me into letting my guard down. “Seems you have been training hard... I think it’s time we take it up a notch.”

Rongo pulled back her sweat-coated arms as she squatted to the ground. Vibrations struck the soles of my shoes as her magic began to shake the base of the stadium walls. Suddenly, with the sounds of cars crashing, windows across the ground floor burst open—*bang, bang, bang*—shattering into millions of pieces. The chunks of glass didn’t fall to the floor but started flying toward Rongo—thousands of pieces of the arena’s windows hurling to her side, a legion of crystal bees with sharded stingers.

Cheering from the crowd grew louder at the sight of the floating sea of glass, ready for a bloody tidal wave to ensue. She was flashy, but I knew that tactic wasn't just for show.

I took no time to see what scheme she was about to unleash—didn't have to. One hit from that tsunami would make my body a scarlet tapestry. My feet sprung me forward as I shot my ice at Rongo's hands—aiming to freeze them to the ground. I noticed while fighting that she only would *punch*. She never used her legs to direct her magic or land a brutal kick.

If I can just restrain her arms, then I can knock her down—fuzzy her brain so she can't think straight. Then, I'll bind her.

To the left, one glass river morphed into a long, flat plank and came swinging at me like a baseball bat. Instantly, I tucked and rolled before swirling around my water. A spiked batten, as tough as a glacier, formed in seconds. I swung—and punctured her crystal bat, shattering it like a frail jar.

The reverberation caused me to wobble, and by the time I caught myself, another plank came from behind. I didn't see it in time.

Rongo's glass swatted me like a fly, sending me to the ground. I carefully cradled my head, landing on my back and staring straight at the sun. Poor decision.

Her sweaty, bruised, and hulking body jumped right on me.

I went to hit her with my ice, but she pinned my hands down with hers—making me melt my water and splatter my icy weapon into useless droplets on the ground. Her hands shoved my wrists hard on the arena floor, and her legs pinned down my thighs hard. No glass involved, just her brute strength. *My gosh*—her grip hurt. It felt like a gorilla was crushing me. I could not move or focus on my magic, no matter how much I squirmed.

"1..."

Crap! No, no, no, no, no! Lisa, you have to get out of this right now!

I tried to use my fingers to get the water, but Rongo noticed. She clenched my tiny wrists harder with glass, slicing up my knuckles and erasing away my fingerprints. Hundreds of paper-thin tears slit up and down my hands. I screamed from the pain, feeling as if I jabbed my hand into a pot of needles. I looked pathetic under her.

Rongo's breathing was heavy, and her sweat dripped on my chest as she grinned. "No matter how much magic you have"—another shove she

gave my squirming body, causing me to grit my teeth in pain and taste her bloody sweat—"you're still just a kid."

"2... 3..."

"You can't win against someone with more brawn—"

"4..."

"—and raw strength!"

I am not losing—I cannot lose!

"5..."

The roaring of the crowd grew louder as Rongo's strength seemed to double in power, her legs like boulders pressing on my thighs. She really didn't care about my age. She was pummeling me with no remorse. My body was a bug stuck under a shoe. No matter how much I squirmed, she just kept stepping on me harder and harder.

Red strands from her shoulder-length hair barred her sharp cheekbones, her nose inches from my face. "So, you should just stop and give up already."

NO—

"... 6..."

I. Am. Not. Losing!

I came into the Paragon Games afraid, merely expecting to lose as long as I proved my strength to be powerful enough on live television. Then, the worst-case scenario happened: The wish to win became the only solution to save my magic. These battles were meant for entertainment—a "fun" series of games to play. The moment the lives of Ayker's people and my magic came into the mix, all ounces of fun were smashed, burned, and tossed out the window.

Fighting for the lives of others took precedence over whether or not I played fairly now. I *had* to win, and my heart knew that, too. It was going to do whatever it needed to protect the Agapéd. If that scumbag Setzyr got my magic—or even this blistering barbaric woman—I couldn't imagine what world they would create. What terror would follow. What lives would be lost because I was careless and weak and didn't give it my all.

Be flashy and clever, Reno's words continued to ring. At that moment, I didn't care what happened. I had one second to get up—one second to win.

As Rongo hung over me and the announcer's voice crept up to say the final number, I stopped playing the game. I went into survival mode, the

dignified Hunter under the name of the King of Boolavogue taking a hike. Gritty fighter Lisa entered the rink.

The entire time Rongo was barreling down at me, I hadn't had time to swallow my saliva, letting even my own sweat drip into my mouth while I lay motionless beneath her. My mind said my idea was clever, but I knew the crowd and my mentors would see it as insanity... but I didn't care one bit.

Before that final number rang throughout the stadium, I sloshed up the liquid in my mouth—bodily *water*, my magical element—and bulleted it at Rongo. Getting spat on would not get this beast of a woman off my body, so when my sappy spit jetted out of my mouth at sonic speeds, I froze it into a twelve-inch needle.

And I jabbed the spit-sicle into Rongo's right eye like a toothpick stuck into an olive.

Instantly, her body jolted back—her arms releasing mine—splattering the blood of her pierced eye in my face, giving me a chance at freedom.

Water willed to my free hand. While she cringed and yanked out the foot of ice from her socket, the lukewarm river came thundering toward her. A jet of water and sweat *thrashed* against her abdomen, pushing her away from my body. My elbows supported my head off the ground, saving me from a loss while I watched Rongo wobble on the floor.

"This—this is unbelievable! Never in all my time here have I seen such a bold and outlandish tactic!" the announcer said as mixed emotions of startlement rang from the crowd. *"And it seems—this is insane! Rongolebeau is still standing!"*

On my feet, I watched Rongo trying to find her balance. Her hands were in front of her face, covering the space where I jabbed her eye. Blood was gushing. The part of me that should've felt remorse or guilt for hurting her was absent. I wasn't sure if it was the pressure of the Paragon Games, but my first instinct was to finish taking her down. For the first time, I felt I had every chance to win the entire thing.

But using pure water wasn't going to cut it.

Legs bent and arms tensed, I shot both my palms out. Gravel and rock from the ground level of the stadium started to rumble. As I sprinted for my weakened opponent, two concrete slabs were ripped off the wall like a scab and followed behind me.

“What on the planet—that’s not water! That’s rock! Lisa of Boolavogue is moving the stadium like it was a piece of rubber! We have a dual-wielding elemental Mage in the rink! The intensity of today’s match is nothing like we’ve ever seen before!”

Rongo’s good eye saw me coming with rock as my weapon and widened big. Glass began to swirl in her left hand but quickly retreated as pain caused her to flinch—dropping her glass and giving me a chance to strike.

The world zoomed past me as the rock in my control bolted at Rongo’s ankles and wrists. Streams of stadium pebbles wrapped around her with a whip of my arm, pinning her on her stomach. She *wailed* hard to the ground, stretched out like an animal ready to be skinned with her head cocked to the side. The eye I punctured was nonexistent, just an incoherent hole filled with crimson-red flesh and running blood.

Standing ten feet away, concrete pinned her to the floor, and I didn’t dare look away or lower my strength. *Stay down. Please, just stay down!*

“...6 ...7! With a surprising turn of events, Match 2 belongs to Lisa of Boolavogue!”

The crowd roared louder as the Paragon Games medics stood on standby in the entryways. I released Rongo from her binds, huffing and puffing. In my peripheral vision, I could see the nurse and Joolee coming out of the shadows of the arched passage, but then, Rongo stood to her feet. Her bloody palm shot toward the two Mages, a command to halt.

Both of our breathing turned hefty and deep, hers mixed with another one of her chaotic smiles. She gripped the side of her skirt and ripped a strip of fabric off with ease. Quickly, she wrapped the strand around her head and over her eye, spitting more blood onto the floor that fell into her mouth from her damaged socket.

No words were exchanged—not even a threat or demeaning remark came from her mouth. As we took our stances back to the white circles in the middle of the rink, every emotion on Rongo’s face showed no signs of pain. The battle she had craved for so long was finally here.

Our hands were up, clenched red and ready to fight. Hair near her right eye was crusted with blood, darkening her fiery locks. The ponytail I had was no more, not too sure when that happened either, allowing my waved, matted mess to drape in damp curtains on my shoulders and spine.

My arms were covered in glass scratches, too, and my head was pounding mercilessly.

Still, I felt as strong as ever—ready to win this and make it to the finals.

The third and final spark went off, and neither of us held back. Glass from the broken windows summoned back to Rongo. She lost blood and probably felt unimaginable pain but suppressed it all as she slung a wave of crystals toward me—the biggest attack yet.

I pushed out my arms toward the stadium, grappled more rock, and gave a mighty clap with my hands. The moment my palms came together, tides of cement hurtled for Rongo's glass. Rock and crystal collided with the force of an avalanche, clashing so hard that nothing but glossy sand was left—filling the air with gritty opaline dust.

“What a hit—pure magical strength from both fighters just turned rock and stone to fog!”

Everything was ashen—a blinding sandstorm. I swiped the dust away from my face and dashed against the arena's edge. The stadium walls were still sturdy and banged up, so I figured a little more damage was no big deal. Pulling out a tactic from none other than the brawny Keeper himself, I moved my hands to the side where the ground floor walls were. Clenching my fists as if wielding a battle hammer, my magic pulled off a chunk of the wall as wide and long as a tree. The muscles in my arms tensed, straining while holding that much concrete, but adrenaline pushed me through the pain.

If Gaius can do this with an oak tree, then I'll have no problem taking Rongo down with a stone version of it.

Floating my ten-foot billet of grout and stone, I hurried toward the rink's center. Vibrations of Rongo's glass grumbled, their jingling sounds filling the air. Betting on the odds she was coming for my left side, I gave a robust and vigorous swing with my chunky pile of concrete. Dust zoomed away with the speed of my attack, just in time to see Rongo right in my path.

The swing was colossally *perfect!*

“What a HIT! Lisa just took off our rink's foundation like it was nothing, swatting Rongolebeau thirty yards down the arena!”

Rongo was a scarlet tumbleweed, limp and without any glass following her as she rolled and rolled. The pillar dropped from my grasp

and morphed into springs that propelled me forward to catch up to Rongo before she rose. *I am not letting her get up again. No way!*

Her body soon stopped skidding across the glass-speckled floor, and I caught up with her just in time. My hands grasped more concrete and latched around her shoulders, arms, thighs, and ankles. I knew my body weight was nothing for her, but pounds of magically pressed rock would keep her pinned.

Suddenly, with her face looking toward the sky, the smile she once so proudly had was completely gone as I jumped on top of her. My knees were around her torso while my hands pressed on her shoulders. The magic in my heart thudded and did not let up, keeping all the stadium concrete pinning her appendages. No matter how much she was trying to make the glass chisel away her restraints, nothing was working. She was nothing but a carcass I was cocooning with rubble.

“1...” the announcer began to count down.

Just need to make her stay—

Rongo busted out of the restraint on her right arm and tried to push me off. *That’s not happening—no way!*

The dust around me formed into chains, and I swirled it tight around her arm and the rear of her body, using the small specks as an army—pushing her down with more concrete sand.

“... 2...”

Rongo squirmed more underneath me, but my dust punctured her skin even further like millions of rocks, keeping her pinned down. She was growing frantic. Her jaw clenched so tight I thought her teeth were going to crack.

“3... 4...”

My body shook. My heart pounded harder than ever before. And I could feel Rongo’s doing the same as she lay underneath me.

“5... 6...”

Veins were seconds away from bursting out of her forehead. She was losing—she was utterly losing and couldn’t handle it—and we both belted battlecries as glass and rock nicked and chipped at our skin. *I am not LOSING!*

And suddenly—

“7! Match 3 has been decided!”

—it was over.

“Lisa Robbie of Boolavogue is our second finalist for the Paragon Games! And what a spectacular show from her and Rongolebeau—two of the strongest Mages we’ve seen this century!”

All the cheering from the crowd seemed neverending as I still sat on Rongo’s abdomen. Our breathing sounded like overstrained stallions, harsh and completely worn out.

Sweat soaked our bodies from head to toe, and the cloth around Rongo’s eye was drenched in blood. Her creamy tan cheeks were scratched, and strands of crimson hair matted on her glistening forehead. She looked utterly awful.

“Hey,” she huffed, raspy and gasping for air. A curse or vile nickname was about to burst from her—I could feel it as her chest rose..

But... she smiled. “Beat that rat... of a Nuoljian for me... when the next week comes. And thanks... for a battle worth losing.”

Blood from my own scratched-up forehead began to drip near my eye, and a grin of my own appeared. “I promise.”

I rolled off Rongo’s body and slowly rose to my feet, releasing her from the concrete binds with the last bit of magic I had left. Hearing the crowd still chanting even with the match over was the most surreal feeling in all the worlds.

I can’t believe it. Rongo’s not mad at me, and now, I’m one step closer to... to...

My left foot trembled, and I fell to my knees, catching myself with my left hand. The vision in my eyes went blurry, but that wasn’t what made me fall. Something in my stomach pinched, punched, and boiled my torso. My right arm grabbed my bruised belly. Getting up was out of the question.

I’ve only got bruises and scratches, so why do I feel a grinding sickness in my gut?

Again, I tried to move, but my strength had plummeted. Dove fast like a meteor. Rongo hit me hard, and I battled many creatures and got thrown around repeatedly during my hunts. Pain from swords and magic I was used to. But this... this was something different.

Light-headedness came next, followed by the nerves in my fingers growing cold. *Cold?* I clutched my stomach as it gurgled. It was unsettling, sloshing around and causing me pain as acid hit my throat.

What—I am—I am about to—

No matter how much I tried to suppress it, my body faced the ground as the reeking vomit came up all over the glossy floor. Nothing about the upchuck was pretty, but my blurry vision couldn't help but stare right at it.

The stomach acid... was *black*, goopy like ink from a squid and glowing a grimacing purple around the edges. When it left my throat, whatever strength was remaining to balance on my hands and knees was now in the pile of gross muck on the floor.

Cold chills cascaded down my arms, neck, and legs. And I fell forward. My bloody head *smacked* the ground hard, right up against my luminous black barf. My hands started shaking, quivering uncontrollably, as my body lay lame on the ground and my fingers touched the vomit. That bodily goop was as cold as me.

Why... can't I move? W-why am I so... tired... and d-dizzy... what just...?

The crowd's cheers died in an instant, but I couldn't tell if it was because they saw me purge black slime or because I had collapsed. With my head throbbing and dripping with blood, my eyes struggled to stay open. The last thing I saw with clear vision were the medics running... and everything after that came to me in pieces.

43 “She’s a living corpse!”

Someone picked me up and carried me like a baby, cradling my head. I couldn’t tell who it was. Didn’t know where I was going. Weights hung on my eyelids while muffled voices shuffled around me, strength struggling to find its way back into my shivering body. One second, the halls of the arena’s ground floor flashed around me; the next, I saw Joolee running past with a worried look; the third time, the glossy ceiling near the viewing room blurred above me.

Then, everything became shadows.

...

Suddenly, my upper back slid against something cold—more freezing than my own shaking body—slowly waking me up. Rubber texture rubbed on my tank top, sticking to my thighs and bony spine when my head started to turn around involuntarily. Someone was moving me. Never had I been this tired, drained completely, feeling as if I was in a realm between reality and dreams. More cold flushed across my body since I was wearing nothing but beat-up shorts and a now-loose shirt. Sleep was all I craved, but my body kept shaking—making sure I could not drift off entirely.

A hand grabbed my wrist, the first time my brain came out of a dazed state. I was lying on my back.

What’s—where am I? Is someone... healing me?

Scalding fingers touched my forehead, healing the bloody gash that was causing my head to ache. My mouth was partially opened. I breathed fast like a baby, subtle and quick. My eyes crusted open as another arm started turning my legs over—looking for more tears and scratches.

The lights above were bright. Fluorescent. But I could’ve been in total darkness and my sickened body would still keep my eyes squinted. I was in the medic room with two nurses: One was a tiny Mage healing my wounds while the other—much older but not in need of glasses—was examining me all over, even taking off my shoes in search of wounds. It didn’t make sense to me; no glass had penetrated my boots.

“No black blotches under her soles,” the older female medic said to the healing Mage who was sealing the scratches on my hands. “Have you seen anything near her head? Checked under her hair and chin?”

The young Mage brushed back my hair, and my eyes made direct contact with her. Frazzled worry consumed her fair cheeks with her black hair tied tight, but she managed a little grin. “Mind I turn your head, dear?”

Speaking was another bodily function that stayed dormant. My mouth puffed short, pitiful breaths as I nodded my chin a centimeter before shifting my eyes to the right. The nurse gently tilted my neck to see what was behind my hair, allowing my gaze to face the right side of the room.

And there was Gaius, standing there as muscly and stoic as always. His arms were crossed, and his face was without a smile or snarl, showing no outward emotion. It was the same look he had constantly given me every day since my name was chosen for the games. I knew he was beyond worried, though none of the nurses seemed to notice. He looked right into my eyes, not moving a muscle. And we just stared at each other for a bit. Breathing, waiting, listening—green guilt eating away at my shaking body.

The viridescent glow of his eyes was bright under the shadow of his brow ridge, complementing his olive green shirt underneath his leather trench coat. On his chest and along his rolled-up sleeves were speckles of red blood. My blood, proving him to be the one who ran onto the arena and carried me to the patient’s bed. That wasn’t a hard guess—the nurses were almost as scrawny as me.

As we kept staring, the sounds of people running outside the room swelled the air, and my mind crippled in self-shame. *I made him worry about me again...*

“Not a single tick, blotch, or smudge of dark infection anywhere,” the Mage said to the older nurse, fixing my hair as if I needed to look pretty lying helpless on the bed. “You think it could be internal?”

At that moment, if my body wasn’t as feeble as a newborn, my eyes would’ve widened, followed by a deep, pitiful sigh. Instead, I stayed focused on the cabinets because staring at Gaius was now too difficult. There was no mistaking what they were looking for.

The older medic hurriedly responded, “If that were black blood, I would bet my life on it...” She grabbed a wet cloth to wash away the blood on my shins, picking out some glass still lodged in the scratches.

On my freezing skin, that lukewarm water was the perfect temperature. *How cold... am I right now...?*

“Her body just purged a wallow of pure magic grot. She should have a marking the size of a human foot, so it doesn’t make sense why we can’t

see it.”

There was a knock at the medic door. The older nurse went over and released the handle. Her voice switched, startled. “Oh, Sir Zephan—please forgive us. We are quite busy at the—”

“No need to apologize for doing your work properly, ladies.” The Game Keeper bowed slightly as he closed the door behind him. “I came because of Lisa.”

Zephan was still wearing his fancy blue suit, only without the tie and the upper two buttons undone. His face was slick and clean, but his charismatic smile was gone.

Is this... am I that critically injured?

He then went over to Gaius.

For the first time, the brute Keeper did not fight back or say anything to the prestigious blonde man.

Okay—this is way more serious than I thought.

Now standing near Gaius, Zephan continued with the nurses. “They are asking about her health, but I haven’t told them anything for it to be public. With what we saw, it looked like—”

“Dark magic rot,” the older medic spoke up. “That is what that was. With as much as her body purged out, she should have a field of rot painting up her body—being swallowed up in pain, too. She’s lying here like a trooper.” Her warm hands lifted my left arm to check down my ribcage. “Never seen a person have symptoms of dark magic rot and not a single mark on their body.”

Not even a second after the nurse finished her explanation, Gaius’ eyes grew wide. His squeaky boots immediately took two strides toward the patient’s table. The medic still had my arm in her hand, and my left bicep was perfectly visible. Gaius took note of that.

He didn’t ask for permission. The Keeper grabbed my wrist from the medic and slid off my Eternling band.

Under my rolled-up shirt, the vezper claw marks appeared, and the purple bite mark returned to its ghastly spot on my bicep. The thread-thin lashes from my failed attempt at evanescing also appeared on my stomach as all four pairs of eyes stared at me.

Suddenly, the young Mage looked down at my neck, cringing at the faded purple hand print from Ecuras’ burns. “Minni—there’s something

there,” she said, her eyes darting to my nape, and my heart started pounding.

I don’t want him to find out—

Minni put down my arm and lifted my neck. As her eyes widened, she and the young Mage turned me over on my stomach.

—not like this.

My eyes could only stare at the floor as I saw both Gaius and Zephan’s shoes move closer to look at my hidden sickness. I knew how bad it was, but their silence made the severity of the situation sink in.

That black blotch was now a giant elephant-foot-sized tattoo of darkness that covered my entire back, going up my neck and over my shoulders, not a single freckle to be seen. It looked like someone had just spray-painted my body with glittery, vile, magic-eating paint.

“Oh my...” the young Mage quivered.

“She’s a living *corpse!*” Minni gasped loudly, causing my eyes to shut tight as if that would’ve hidden me from their worries. “How you’re still standing—fighting out there with a body like this...”

Gaius put his warm hand on my forehead as I mustered enough strength to look at him. An unsettling fret filled his face.

My hands trembled. All the stars fell from his eyes as a heartbroken pity blanketed my cracking voice. “I’m sorry.”

“Have them leave,” Gaius said from the pit of his belly, removing his hand from my cold head. His eyes had trouble peeling away from my sickened face.

Minni swept her fingers down my back. “Mr. Gaius, I understand your concern—”

“Ladies, if you don’t mind,” Zephan interrupted calmly, “would you care to leave us for a moment.”

Both medics blinked and didn’t dare go against Zephan, their boss. My face couldn’t see them, but with the amount of lull, their jaws had to be gaping.

“Of course, Sir Zephan,” Minni said, and two sets of footsteps exited the room.

The moment the door closed, Gaius marched toward Zephan. I shifted my body a bit, leaning on my right shoulder instead of my belly, watching my brawny instructor stare daggers into Zephan’s eyes.

Gaius gritted through his teeth, “Why did you let her fight—”

“You really believe I’m as cruel as to put Lisa through a match, let alone the entire tournament, while her magic is being eaten alive?” Zephan asked. He didn’t even sound like himself, severe and without a hint of a smile.

Gaius stepped closer, making the Game Keeper’s shoes click along the floor as he backed away. “*Your* medics are supposed to make sure she was well enough, so how did you not notice she was *dying*—”

“It’s not...” I muttered, “... his fault.”

Both Keepers looked at me as my hands started shaking with chills again, one limp over my stomach and the other on the rubber-padded table. “It’s... mine... I-I’m sorry.”

Gaius came from my backside and scooped me up like a baby, making me feel completely weightless. My head lay against his warm chest, cradled in his muscly arms. I could feel his heart pounding—pricking my conscience with quills of shame. Bet Zephan could feel it, too: both of our hearts’ concern, especially the worry pumping through Gaius’ veins.

Holding me, he turned to the Game Keeper. “I’m taking her to Lady Ariela. Try and stop me and—”

Zephan held out his fist as blue dust formed in his palm. My droopy eyes looked at him. He was just as worried as the Keeper of Stars. “I’ll tell them Lisa is being treated well. If she can’t participate in the games anymore... then you do what’s best for her.”

Zephan’s kindness was very unexpected. He needed me for his game—both to profit and prove to the galaxies magic could be given to any heart of any age. When he held out his hand to evanesce us without a “but” or any type of refute—*agreeing* with Gaius—a part of my heart liked him more.

Gaius nodded his chin. “I’ll let you know.”

44 Solitude

Ariela's glittery copper hand traced along my spine as I sat on a bench before her, hardly touching the rot. Dark magic for her was ten times more deadly than on my human body. More guilt sprouted in my chest... and having all seven Guardians in the Onsen room didn't help. My body could sit up by itself, but doing so caused my head to ache and cloud. Shadows and weariness were not leaving me, refusing to give me peace from the rot's pain. But I deserved it. Mender Roo warned me, and I tried to ignore it. How ignorant I was.

A trickling of water from the Onsen's hot spring was gracefully interrupted by the golden Elysian. "You've let this prolong for quite a while," Ariela said from behind me, golden magic pressing around my back, sensing the depth of the sickness.

My face stayed drooped, cemented to the pristine floor from the Guardians' stares. Admitting my guilt in front of them was even worse than throwing up that black vomit.

My hair slid off my shoulders as Ariela continued, "The infection has spread into your bloodstream, which is why your body fought back and purged out a heap of the grot. But what surprises me is that you're not in any pain."

She released her hands and came around to face me. *Why do you always have to look so beautiful? I don't even deserve to be in your presence...* Liquid sunsets filled her eyes, though dimmer than usual, muddled with concern as she knelt at my level. "A dark magic rot of this severity should have you on the floor wallowing in pain, pleading for death. So, dear Lisa..." she placed her warm hand on my cleaned-up kneecap, "can you tell me why that is not the case?"

My fingers fidgeted in my lap—calloused and dirty since Gaius whisked us away before the nurses could clean my hands. My only response was for my eyes to divert back to the tiled ground.

What I did was pretty stupid.

Okay, it was *beyond* stupid—completely and utterly psychotic. I knew my health was at risk by covering it up, my life and magic at stake. I

just thought I had more time... thought I could finish the games before it got this bad.

Gaius came and sat next to me due to me procrastinating Ariela's question, moving away from the wall of the Onsen's room. He leaned forward on his knees with his fingers loosely intertwined. His face was worn and tired, wishing for me to see him.

I avoided his green eyes at all costs.

From the circle of Guardians standing around me like I was an animal at the zoo, blonde-headed Alona said in a concerned voice, "Lisa, you're not in trouble." She came around to face me, and I puckered up enough courage to look at her briefly before glaring back down at the glossy floor. "We just need to know why you've been concealing this and why your body seems to show no pain." This was the first time she ever showed concern for me... which meant this was catastrophically bad.

"How is it *you* never noticed it until now, Gaius?" Vilmad scorned from behind. "You're the one she lives with—"

"She was keeping it concealed," the gardener answered in a low voice, still staring at me, analyzing every freckle on my face. He normally growled when Vilmad said even the slightest thing bothersome. This was unlike him... and my heart started questioning whether he felt guilty for not noticing it. I was under his care, after all—and not just some foster care situation either. Been with Gaius long enough... Seen him at his lows... Saw Tuff's memories of him at his lowest. And I knew he cared about me and my happiness, me enjoying life and staying healthy. Staying alive. Staying *safe*.

I messed up—messed up big time. I hated the gloom and contrition in his face most of all. I needed to prevent him from thinking this was his fault.

I gripped the bench with my hands, shadowy spots flying around in my brain again, as I softly said to Vilmad, "It's not his fault... I just... I knew having this rot meant I couldn't be in the games. So..." I bit my lip as I took a deep breath. "I've been taking Enkurious potions to suppress the pain until the games are over."

"You've been—" Vilmad gasped before regaining his composure again. "Must have been taking a vial a day!"

I gripped the bench tighter, my fingernails hurting against the white stone. "At first... but now, it's about... two bottles."

The Guardians all made a breathy gasp. *Guess that isn't normal—*
“*Potion overdose!* She had to have gotten this from *you!*” Vilmad snarled at Gaius.

“Gaius wouldn’t do that to Lisa,” Emunah chimed in, standing behind me with the rest of the nosy celestial beings.

Vilmad turned to Emunah. “Then, from *you*, perhaps, with your obsessiveness of potions and crafting—”

“They haven’t even discussed potion-making yet,” Gaius added. “Nor have we.”

Ariela stood up as the room fell silent again.

“Where have you been getting the potions, Lisa?” Gaius asked me, still sitting by my side.

My hands moved back to my lap, starting to shake again from the chills and pure anxiety returning to my body. His worry turned my already timid voice even softer. “Mender Roo.”

Gaius leaned back, making his angry grunt, so I quickly retaliated. “But it’s not his fault. He actually knows about the rot.”

Vilmad butted in, “You thought to tell a *human* before telling one of us?”

Breathing became more difficult as stress entered my body. I glanced up at him. “I just didn’t—”

Haziness took over my eyes again, and I wobbled on the bench. Gaius slung his arm around me and caught my shoulders as I almost fell forward.

Bethesda, standing near my left side, muttered in her deep feminine voice, “You could show a little more sympathy towards the situation, Vilmad. Honestly—”

“How am *I* the one receiving criticism? Lisa said she *knew* of this—knew the predicament she was in—and willingly let this rot eat up the Agapéd Magic’s pulse, all while Gaius practically supervised the whole atrocity.”

By this time, Gaius stood up and nestled me back in his arms like a child against his chest. My hands were wrapped around his neck, trying to support myself so he wouldn’t have to do all the work. I hated feeling weak... I hated feeling worthless in front of all of them like this. Most of them were just starting to believe I was strong and worthy of my magic. I

earned praise for defeating Ecuras and doing well in Zephan's games, but this *one* little thing had all their cosmic eyes sunken with doubt again.

"Lisa." Lady Ariela came in front of Gaius and me. "How long have you known of this?"

"Well..." I looked around at the seven Guardians. It was like they were peering into my soul with their still, unblinking faces. "I didn't notice the black mark until last month..." The frayed hem on my tank top garnered all my attention. "But the pain in my back started... just a little over three months ago."

The grip from Gaius' hands clasped me tighter. *He's mad.... and if he's mad—*

"*Three months!*" Vilmad erupted, causing me to flinch and Gaius' heart to beat faster. "You went three months gallivanting around with this rot infecting your back, *knowing* what it was and *refusing* to get help. Do you not understand the severity of—"

Ariela quickly held up her hand toward Vilmad.

He ceased all scolding.

She then rubbed her hand on my forehead and down to my cheek. I was still as cold as ever, her fingers feeling just like a blanket that had been sitting next to a warm fire.

Tears piled up as I muttered, "I'm sorry."

"Can you heal her?" Gaius asked.

Her wings moved like silken stars, gliding across the floor as she stood a foot away from me and the Keeper. She wasn't smiling as she looked at me. "I can... but it would take quite some time for me to extract the rot without hurting your magic pulse. Weeks or possibly a month. It would cause you to grow very weak and drastically drop your magic strength. You would heal, but for a while, you'd be very exhausted and require monitoring as your heart is recovering." She sighed. "Though... you are in the finals for Zephan's games this week—"

"Heal her," Gaius interrupted, his throat bobbing. "Zephan's games can do without Lisa."

Vilmad scoffed with a leer in his eye. "At least *that* we can agree on."

"No," my voice scratched like a pitiful record player, "I have to play in these games."

Emunah crossed his arms. “You’ve proven yourself more than enough, little lady, but this infection could take your life at any moment.”

“It’s true,” Micah spoke up, as serious as the others, dressed in lavish purples. “You have to let Lady Ariela fix your heart, Lisa.”

None of them truly understood my predicament. They only saw a black mass on my back. Me... I saw a wish I needed to get to save my magic and the lives of the Nuoljians. Telling them the situation about Setzyr wishing away my magic would cause Zephan to cancel the games—never allowing me the chance to get my wish. No way was I about to let some black magic infection get in the way of that, especially with it just one week away.

“Ariela,” I began, my arms still wrapped around Gaius’ neck, “would it be possible to try the magiblood extraction method instead? Since last time, the Agapéd saved my magic pulse from being expelled from my heart.”

She raised her copper eyebrows as if my solution was not something I should have suggested. Melancholy staled her face. “What happened last time was something I have never encountered before... and trying it again, expecting the same results, could risk you losing your magic *and* the Agapéd altogether.”

My head lay against Gaius’s chest and shoulder. *No... I have to be in the games...*

My despair must’ve read plainly on my face because Rayna perked up suddenly. “She could try the Onsen! It cleanses dark magic for us, so it could easily heal a human, right?”

Lady Ariela put her golden fingertip up to her chin. “It wouldn’t hurt to try.”

I BEG TO DIFFER!

My body tensed up, as well as my grip around Gaius’ neck, thinking back on last week when only a drop of that water hit my spine. I could already feel the burning sensation creeping up on me, even in the protection of the Keeper’s arms.

My hold on Gaius’ trench coat collar must have been stronger than I thought. He looked down at me before aiming his green eyes back at the golden Elysian. “It’ll cause her quite a bit of pain, won’t it?”

Lady Ariela slowly nodded. “Most likely, but the intensity of it, I cannot tell, seeing as we have never used the Onsen on a human with dark

magic rot before.”

My teacher released a deep breath. “I’ll go with her.”

Boots strapped and pant hems tucked into the leather tongues—Gaius stepped into the healing pool with me in his arms, not caring about his clothing getting soaked. Going by myself, my body would’ve retreated, refusing to walk at the thought of even the tiniest sprinkle splashing my ankles. With Gaius there, maybe the pain would’ve eased if he guided me in.

The rippling of the pool was the only sound moving through the room. Everyone watched in silence as the Keeper’s knees submerged completely. *This magic hot tub is a lot deeper than I thought... or is there a magic floor that just changes with who is in it?*

Suddenly, warm water hit my toes as my feet dangled off Gaius’ forearm. No pain followed. I felt Gaius’ neck turn to look down at me, but I kept my eyes shut tight—waiting for the inevitable onslaught on my back. Once Gaius’ elbows hit the surface, however, the water seeped through my tank top.

It was a pain I would never forget.

Slashes from an invisible, fiery knife slit my back, penetrating through my skin at the speed of a high-powered blender. I tried to suffer through it, stuffing my face into Gaius’ chest. Scents of freshly cut wood helped distract my brain for a second, though I wished it lasted longer.

My fingernails dug into Gaius’ trench coat even more as the water finally hit the center of my back. Every nerve in my body sounded off an alarm that could’ve shaken the core of Ariela’s realm. An invisible meat grinder was shredding my skin—erasing away my rot with a hundred razor blades. And I couldn’t take it anymore.

I pulled my body up using Gaius’ neck and shoulder as leverage when tears gushed down my face. “*Please, stop—I can’t—please!*” I yelped and cried, pushing my body up, almost crawling over Gaius’ shoulder. It was the most pitiful I ever sounded, but that pain was like a million fire ants biting my back.

Gaius lifted me quickly from the Onsen’s waters, still holding me and raising my wet, wavy hair off my back. The pain fully roused me from my tired state, but I would’ve taken years of sleepy days rather than face a second of that torture again.

With what just happened, I knew Ariela and the Guardians were about to suggest the only other solution to my problem, but I did not want it. I needed to be in the Paragon Games, even if that meant still suffering through this magic rot.

Still held in Gaius' arms, Ariela willing the water to evaporate from my clothing, I turned my tear-stained face toward her. "I'm sorry," I apologized again. "I just can't suffer through that."

"Lisa, you do not have to apologize." Ariela's eyes housed a deep sadness. "Truly, if I had known just how much suffering that would cause, I would not have agreed to let you step in. Please forgive me for that."

I took a deep breath, one filled with courage and seriousness, because I knew no one in the room was about to agree with anything I had to say.

"I still want to do the games," I told the room. Uneasy looks of the Guardians pressed down on me. I kept talking anyway. "I know... it's really bad, but I need to do this. I can make it through the fighting when I take the Enkurious potions—and it would only be for one week."

Lady Ariela walked up to me. Her golden freckles were exceptionally more beautiful than ever, maybe because she was standing so close that my eyes noted the sun-kissed details of her celestial skin. "Please don't feel obligated to stay in Zephan's games, dear Lisa. The Agapéd is important to us, but so are *you*."

Her care for me, though kind, still didn't change my mind. "If you could assure me I would be fine, then... could I still be in the games?"

She paused for a moment. "I know there is only one match left, but it is merely a game... Is there another reason why you insist on competing?"

I swallowed, only having a split second to think.

If I told them Setzyr would use that wysh on my magic, they'd be disappointed in me—Vilmad furious above all else. Bet they could convince Zephan to cancel the games, preventing Setzyr from using the wysh...but that would cancel my chances of stopping the vaene from sucking the magic from Ayker's people.

I could've told them of the vaene, but then they'd demand I show them where she was... and Yeuvalon would never reveal who the current holder of the Maalison was the moment a Guardian or Gaius stepped through the cave. It had to be me. The vaene saw me as an innocent, weak

kid, which is why she kept spilling her secrets. She was merely playing with her food.

I had to lie.

“I just... want to prove to the world I am strong enough—that the Agapéd made the right choice. I trained hard for this and don’t want it to be wasted—all the time spent with Reno and Gaius. And I really believe I can win it.”

Vilmad scoffed. “Your chances of winning were already beyond low, now you believe you can still do so with rot infecting your—”

“This is what I’m supposed to do.” My voice sprung. It wasn’t a yell, but it left every eye in the room stunned. Even Vilmad. “The Agapéd chose me last year to defeat Darkness, and I did. I won and lived. Now... I was picked for the games. And I’m going to win, and I’m going to show the world how powerful The Light is even inside someone like me.”

Lady Ariela flicked her eyes at Gaius before back down to me in his arms. She paused the entire room—no one daring to insert their own opinions—before letting a soft grin appear across her glistening lips. Standing so close to me, her breath smelled oddly like peaches and cream, even though I knew neither she nor the Guardians ate as humans did. Gold strands patterned her eyelashes, too, but not enough to lose her human-like qualities—gifting her that comfort she so easily portrayed.

Ariela whispered to me, “I see a bit of his spirit rubbing off on you—willing to keep fighting even though your body deems otherwise. To prove The Light’s magic made the right choice.” She glanced up at Gaius. “Remember when you came to me when your own dark blight grew to this extent centuries ago?”

What did she just—

I glanced up at Gaius, staring at his side profile. He subtly grinned. “You don’t seem to let me forget it... Will she be okay, though?”

Ariela returned to her normal voice, her eyes on me. “If you were closer to death, I would take matters into my own hands, but... seems your heart is stronger than we’ve imagined—keeping you alive and well enough to take part in Zephan’s games. Almost as if it wants you to stay and fight.” She turned to Emunah. “Do you happen to have a vial of Yulandio serum in your study, one that’s fermented for a year or more?”

Emunah bowed his head. He didn’t even have to think about the answer. “I do.” His fingers twirled, causing flashing lights as blue as the sky

to form in his palm. In less than a second, the vial of the oily serum appeared.

After he placed it in her palm, Lady Ariela unscrewed the lid and began to create a piece of magic in her other hand. Clouds of gold trickled drops of sparkly rain into the bottle as her eyes shone as bright as the sun, causing her pupils to disappear. A chiming sound also dinged as the cloud *poofed*, and a ribbon of silver seeped down the inside glass walls. Oily liquified pearls and bubbles of stardust remained.

Did I just see Ariela create magic?

She motioned her hand to the floor. “Are you able to stand?”

I nodded my head as the gentle giant put me down slowly. My brain was still dizzy, but I acted as healthy as possible.

Vilmad, watching his Lady agree to put me through the games, quickly asserted, “Are you sure about this, Lady Ariela? I mean, this rot is far beyond the point of risking the Agapéd’s life—”

“She will be fine,” their Elysian reassured him, not even batting an eye.

I draped my brown hair over my shoulders while Ariela dabbed the strange oil on my back. Chills sprawled across my spine, the remedy cold and delicate like droplets from melting icicles.

“Yulandio serum is a type of magic nullifier—like a stopwatch for rot. It won’t heal nor let it spread, but it will prevent your heart from growing weaker for the time being.” Fog still filled my head as she handed me the bottle, but there was no pain in my spine. “For now, Lisa, add a couple of drops to your body each morning until the games are complete. Your other self, the one you summoned with the Sublimity Charm, will not be affected by magic rot. That Lisa does not have magic in her, nothing for the rot to grapple on to.”

My eyes shifted to her tight ringlets touching her shoulders. *Ah... now that I think about it, I never had back pain during school or saw the muck on myself.*

She continued, “Once the last tournament is finished, I will have you come and join me here as I remove the rot from your blood and magic pulse. Until then, I require you to rest. This is not a suggestion.”

Ariela’s words turned more serious. “Though the rot is not spreading, it doesn’t mean it is not still flowing through your body, causing you pain and possibly hurting your magic. If you want to be strong for the

games, you must let your body be in the best shape possible and not come into contact with any more dark magic.” Her hand rubbed my shoulder, comforting me. “If you were to be struck with even the smallest amount of dark rot—adding more infection to your body—you’d be standing at Death’s door. Promise to rest this week, okay?”

I clasped the bottle in my hands. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you for this.”

She rubbed my cheek with her soft hand one last time. “And I am sorry to have made you cry.”

A smile dressed across my face fast before I made the Elysian feel remorse for something that wasn’t her fault. “It’s okay, Lady Ariela. I promise. I already feel a lot better, too. I will get a lot of rest this week.”

Ariela gave another gold-tinted grin before I stood next to Gaius.

He put his hand on my shoulder with his fist held out. “Thank you for doing this.”

Lady Ariela fluttered her wings as she stood tall, nodding toward the Keeper. “Likewise. Take care.”

...

We arrived at the clifftop secret entrance to the Veradome, landing on the winter grounds in Boolavogue. It was midday, but the powdery skies left the sun hidden. I kept my gaze on the frosted weeds as I walked, but Gaius stopped ahead.

He knelt on one knee, offering a piggyback ride.

“I can walk,” I timidly responded, fighting back my wobbliness.

“This isn’t a request,” he said, his tone almost intimidating.

Air caught in my throat. *He’s upset because I said I wanted to stay in Zephan’s games... or because I didn’t tell him about the rot... or probably both...*

I obeyed him, latching onto his back as his arms wrapped around my legs. He didn’t say another word our entire venture home.

Back at his cottage, he used his magic to summon a firelily to spark the wood in his fireplace, even with me still on his back. I thought he would’ve stopped near the couch or maybe in the middle of the living room. Nope. The Keeper took me straight to my greenhouse bedroom and dropped me off at the edge of my bed. I had the winterdaze rolling on my ceiling, creating glowing waves that lit my room with blues and purples as Gaius lingered around.

Typically, being around people for as long as he did today—the crowd at the games, Zephan, and the Guardians—made his body tired, needing to be alone for hours. The fact he wasn't leaving secured my assumption: He was truly disappointed with me.

The wooden chest in my room was open with my clothes inside. Gaius shut it loudly, but I think that was by accident. He then sat on top, releasing a deep breath before slouching over with his elbows on his knees. I was beginning to loathe that position. It meant worry, and I hated causing that in my teacher. Seemed like the only thing I knew how to do lately.

Tuff flew out of hiding and cuddled up to me as I laid my head down on my array of fluffy pillows—close to the edge near Gaius. My magic was replenishing, so I wasn't as weak, but my mind was still fuzzy from both the battle and the stress I caused on the others. I could've slept... but not with him here. Not with him upset.

Today has officially been the worst...

After seconds that felt like hours of stillness, Gaius finally breathed, "Why didn't you tell me?" It was the most disappointed his words had ever sounded.

I clutched my glainie as my eyes faced the door. Telling him the truth was hard, but lying was impossible in the state I was in.

I let my emotions settle down in fear of tears. "You already had so much on your plate... and I didn't want to add another thing for you to worry about."

He didn't respond.

A cold quiet flushed through every seam and crack of the room for so long that my head stopped hurting. I sat up on my bed, knees bent with just enough space in between to allow Tuff to squeeze in. His little body warmed my cold chest as my hands clasped my knees.

The Keeper, utterly consumed in silence, made me worry even more. He wanted more of the truth, desiring what was left unsaid... but what I wanted to say was incredibly hard.

Letting my heart speak, that shouldn't have been such a challenging thing, especially to Gaius. I've told him about my family life, about my struggles with Ekron's training, and even about petty things happening at school. Ever since the past couple of months, though, I've put him through too many hardships. I've learned I hated making those I cared about worry for me. Gaius wasn't even my dad, and here I was: lying sick on a bed in a

home that I didn't even deserve to live in with a man who healed me, cooked for me, and saved my life on more occasions than one should have to.

His life was far easier before I came along. He would never admit that, though. Convincing him to believe my reasoning for hiding the rot was another hard thing I didn't think I would've been doing today.

But... he deserved to know the truth.

I released a shaken breath, heartfelt emotions beginning to soften the words I had never spoken to the Keeper before. "This summer, while I waited for you and the Guardians to summon me back to continue my magic training... I re-watched a lot of Tuff's memories, especially the battles..." I rubbed my glainie's puffs of hair sticking out of his diamond. "Tuff was there, you know, watching us fight Ecuras... and he was there when I collapsed."

Gaius turned his head over to me, but I kept my eyes focused on my freckled knees and orange glainie.

"I saw you catch me as Ecuras' dark form faded away. I didn't know how bad I was... Like, I knew I was knocked out, but I didn't consider myself truly *dead*, you know? But then... I saw you looking down on me, brushing away the dirt from my face. I saw you hold me in a way I didn't know anyone could. And... I saw you cry, too."

Emotions were rising in my throat, cracking my words like brittle glass. "I didn't mean to make you cry... didn't mean to hurt you either. It kinda surprised me—like, I didn't know you cared that much about me. I just... I sort of thought you just liked having me around because I found magic to be interesting—sharing the same hobbies as you. Or you felt obligated to care for me after you gave your heart to me and all—like you didn't have a choice. Just stuck with this girl with magic the Guardians forced you to train when you were already so busy with the Wishing Stars —"

"Lisa, you have never been a burden to me," he said, his caring voice shaking my emotional heart even more.

I turned my eyes to face him.

And I saw a man brokenhearted. Gaius, torn from the inside out by my words. His brows were furrowed beneath the waves of his walnut hair, a look of pure astonishment hiding beneath.

“Is that why... you didn’t tell me about this? Because you thought your life wasn’t worth my attention—my care for the Stars being more important?” His eyes peered over my shoulder, noting the rot creeping to my collarbones.

My heart throbbed. I clasped my shins with my fingers. All my focus was on my bed’s blanket because seeing him—waterfalls would start pouring from my eyes. “I hate when you’re hurt... making you worry about me when you don’t have to. You got stuck with me, and then, I got caught by the Dark Sages and dragged into the Paragon Games. Well, that made you stress even more. So, when I got this mark, I just couldn’t tell you... I didn’t want to make you worry more about me than you already have.”

My magic-world guardian turned his body around on the wooden chest to face me from the side of my bed. Sadness blanketed his green eyes. “Lisa... never feel like your hurt, your fears, or your troubles are not worth my time. I care for you because I *want* to. That is worth all the worry that goes along with it.” He sighed. “And I am sorry for not noticing you were hurting because of something as silly as worrying about me. All those things—Ecuras, the Dark Sages, the games, and now this—were things you shouldn’t have faced just yet...”

His eyes sunk back down to the swirling patchwork patterns on my blanket. I guess he, too, couldn’t stare very long into the eyes of another when emotions took over. “I never should have doubted your magic, either. Zephan was right about you being strong—even King Bolthor saw that when he offered you the title of Hero. Thinking if I had let you take that title, you wouldn’t even be in this mess in the first place—”

“That’s not your fault, though. You couldn’t have known this was going to happen.”

“Still, knowing I was a part of the series of events that led to now...” His deep voice grew slower. “It hurts, especially when I feel I could’ve done something. But, saying no to the King for you... it wasn’t simply because I knew you weren’t mentally ready yet. Sitting by and watching you sail off into this world so young... it scared me.”

He cupped my shoulder tenderly, careful not to grip too hard or pull my hair that dangled over. “I already lost you more times than I should have... and I didn’t want to lose you again.”

My eyes started to glisten. *Lisa, don’t you start crying right now!*

He removed his hand as a soft grin drew beneath his facial hair. “But, watching you take on the games... You’ve grown. You’re stronger than I’d like to admit, seeing as you’re still so young—becoming more like me than I would have ever hoped for.”

I let out a small chuckle as a tear fell down my cheek, hearing his care for me.

My teacher continued his unneeded adoration. “Before... I would have taken you out of the games the moment I saw that rot on your back. Now—though foolishly thought out of you—I’ve seen you fight against it and not back down. You winning these games, I know you can do it, which is why I didn’t go against your choice to stay in. But please, don’t feel like you have to hide your heartaches from me. I am here for you... through the good times and the rough. There will never be a day where I am upset or angry because you’re hurting.”

Out of his pocket, he handed me a green handkerchief. The fabric was the softest thing in the world, stitched with cream-colored thread and smelling of peony and rose water—one of my favorite scents. Embroidered with the same colored thread and off on the lower corner was an emblem of a Wishing Star, dainty and in perfect detail.

“So, please, don’t cry anymore over something as gimpish as your worry for me,” he said as I wiped my face with his kind gesture, another smile slipping. “You are a part of my life now because I *want* you to be. Never have you been a burden, Lisa, and I never want you to think that. Not for a second. I want you to be alive and well. I want you to be happy, as much as you can with me living here—cooking, cleaning, growing magic—a tough life, I know—”

A hissy chuckle shot out of my lips, causing him to stop with a smile. The green in his eyes returned to its peridot crystal glow, and no essence of remorse remained in his voice. Admitting my fear of worries to him released my heart from an unnecessary burden of guilt. My breathing was steadier, and that invisible wall I built between us was gone.

A soft smile crept along my face as the tears stopped. *I can’t believe I thought hiding my problems was a good thing... I’m such an idiot...*

“Thanks, Gaius,” I smiled, folding his elegant tissue and putting it back on the bed.

He pressed off the chest, gave me back my concealment band, and touched my forehead with his warm hand. “You’re still cold and porcelain

white. So, before I send you home—”

“Stay here and sleep. Easiest thing you’ve ever asked me to do.” I smirked.

As he was three steps from the door, what Ariela said in Haim Gana found its way to the top of my thoughts again.

“Gaius, is it true what Ariela said about you having dark magic rot before?”

His body turned toward me as I unbent my legs and stretched them out along the covers. He looked toward the ceiling filled with the billows of the winterdaze, reminiscing. “It is.”

“And...” I prodded.

“And what?”

“*And* how bad was it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck as if thinking about the memory made him embarrassed and uncomfortable. “Was on my left ankle. Thought it was a piece of soot or something. Then, it eventually spread until my whole foot and up to my shin were clouded in rot. I had to eat plates of that sod-of-a-weed algae for weeks—before Enkurious potions were crafted—just so I could walk on it.”

I crossed my arms. “And you *didn’t* go and tell her, hm?”

“The same reason why you didn’t: I couldn’t bear to worry her.”

“What made you go?”

He huffed as Tuff perched on my shoulder. “I didn’t. You’d be surprised to know it was Vilmad who found me in the staritorium out cold when Inna didn’t hear from me for a couple of days—”

“*Vilmad!*” My jaw dropped. “Didn’t know he cared about you that much!”

He rolled his eyes. “The growth of the Wishing Stars was at stake—not a grit or smudge of sympathy for my personal health even crossed his prideful mind. The git didn’t trust me with the Wishing Stars completely just yet, so he would do check-ups every now and then, another reason why we don’t get along.” Gaius smiled as he looked up at the winterdaze above our heads. “But, my life and magic were saved because of him—just don’t let him know I said that. It was all Lady Ariela in the end.”

I giggled. “Guess she was right about me being like you.”

The path to the door seemed to get further away from Gaius. He approached me again, his smile gone. Seriousness overtook him.

“I know you said you wanted to stay in the games to show the Guardians you are strong enough... but it’s just you and me now. So, tell me: What’s the real reason? Was it the wysh?”

I didn’t think he’d ask that question, and my heart pulsed fast again.

One more lie, and that’s it...

I fiddled with my Eternling bracelet. “It was true what I said. I do want to prove that I am stronger than they think... but I also really want the wysh. For Ayker.”

“That Nuoljian boy?” His left eyebrow rose.

“He needs it for his family... they are struggling.” *With a magical contract to a dark specter, not financially.* “And since he lost the last match, I promised to give it to him. I don’t need the wysh, but he does.”

“That is noble of you, Lisa... but I see why you didn’t tell the Guardians. They don’t understand human needs very well and would’ve told you that was a poor reason to risk your life in the games...” He glared right at me. “But you need this wysh more than his family needs help, so promise me: When you win, you’ll use that wysh to strengthen your heart against Darkness. When Lady Ariela removed the magic rot from my body all those centuries ago, I lost a year’s worth of my magic strength. I fear the same, or worse, will happen to you.”

Though I had my own agenda for the wysh, I still was intrigued. “Couldn’t I just wish the rot away?”

“If it were that easy, Lady Ariela could do it for you. You can’t wish away any dark magic infection without a battle of light and darkness taking place in your body. Backlashes of magic would strike you from the inside out, hurting you more than you could ever imagine, worse than what you felt in the Onsen. So, wishing for your heart to be strong would allow you to preserve your strength when Lady Ariela heals you.”

I didn’t answer him, continuing my stare at the blanket beneath my legs. *I need that wysh for Nuolja... even if it means losing all I’ve worked toward over the past year.*

My lack of talking caused Gaius to step closer. “This isn’t because of the Agapéd. I still want *you* living, being strong enough to defend yourself against Darkness.”

His words were sincere, and I couldn’t say no to him. Wiggling around a straight-up lie, I answered, “I promise not to let Darkness take my heart.”

“Alright.” He began to make his way to the door, *officially* this time. “Get some rest, and around dinner, I’ll come back here and return you to Earth.” He grabbed the door handle and glared at me. “And no more getting your potions from that git of a Mender. Take what you need from me.”

“Yes, sir,” I said before he shut the door behind him.

Resting was coming... but I had one last thing to do.

As I heard Gaius walk back up the stairs out of his home, I went to my desk. Out of my bestiary, I ripped a piece of parchment paper and wrote a note.

Tuff zoomed to my side as I started scribbling fast. “*Fwoot!*” he scolded, very cute, though he tried his best to be menacing.

“I will rest, Tuff. But first...” I paused as I signed “Lisa” at the end of my urgent message. “I need to send this blynk to Cal.”

Creasing the sides and adding my signature two eyes for my origami frog, I cast the charm upon the paper. “*Siui, Caelum.*” The letter leaped off my desk and magically disappeared into the sky.

“We still have a vaene to visit before I return to Earth.”

45 Wrong Answer

I evanesced Cal and me inside the ice cave in the Nuoljian glacier, skipping the perilous journey through the inarimar-infested waters. Though my heart was ready for the venture, my body was not.

Landing feet first on the cavern floor, my legs staggered.

Cal looked over at me as I tried to play it off like a slip on the icy floor. “Lisa,” he questioned, hushed, as though the vaene could hear him all the way down the tunnel. “You sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m fine,” I exaggerated. My magic was *not* done replenishing, and the hundreds of miles of evanescing I did was about the last of my magic for a while. “Let’s just go.”

The Prince walked in front of my path, stopping me in my tracks. His abrupt steps left echoes in the frozen cave, followed by a shocking glare in his eyes. “You *literally* threw up black magic all over the arena just a couple of hours ago—”

“Thank you for reminding me,” I grumbled, walking past him anyway. *Did Zephan really have to air that on all televisions galaxy-wide...*

“It’s not even the correct day to return, remember? It’s supposed to be tomorrow.”

“Well... I can’t come tomorrow. Because I have to...” I cut my words short before I blurted to Cal that I was supposed to—

“Rest—you *are* sick! Lisa—”

My body spun around. “Yes, I am sick,” I interrupted, going back and forth between each of his hazel irises. He wore his normal leather coat lined with some type of animal fur, a pocket-kettle stone warming each chest pocket. Around his neck was his tight turtleneck, which also happened to hug his entire torso. He left his jacket unbuttoned, showing off his new muscly frame. Still, his best feature was not anywhere to be found because I had made him upset *and* lied to him.

I continued, “But I am not lying when I say I am fine enough to talk with the vaene. I’m gonna be resting all week, so today is the only day we can do this...” I looked toward the frozen blue floor. “And my magic is a *little* low, so if this vaene does something—”

“I’ll be there to stop it,” he said with confidence. “Just don’t push yourself so hard. I kinda have a bet with Erin about the next match—”

My jaw dropped before giving him a hefty shove. “You *vorr*g!”

“Hey! I said you’d win within the first ten minutes!” the Prince laughed. “Erin’s the one who said you couldn’t last long against ‘that grime of meat’ as he put it.”

“Some Hunters you are.”

The cavern steadily veered left, my heart picking up pace with each new stride. I gave Cal the other cluin of mine, and we both stuck them behind our ears. Like last time, against the icy wall amidst the blue ivy pearls, was the dark black and red mist. When our feet stepped into the open grotto, her vile, vivid red eyes appeared as her dark magic silhouette formed.

Vaene Yeulavon’s lips spread with the same jarring glow as she mused, “My—I would say it is satisfying to see you here, but you do come a day early. I told you a week, *exactly*. Is there a reason you neglected to obey one such as me?”

We made our way to the center of the room. I camouflaged myself with the same lie as last time. “We just were too excited and couldn’t wait any longer, but we are truly sorry if it is not a good time—”

“You both are something of a spectacle,” she cackled as her smoky silhouetted arms bent, and her chin rested in her palms as if leaning against a table. “Though...” she stared right at me as her red, soulless eyes squinted, “I do not believe that lie. Really, what made you so insistent to come early?”

When did vaenes care so much about punctuality?

Flipping through my files of cleverness, I pulled out a half-truth. “Well, besides the fact we still want to know who the current Maalison holder is, I—we—got to thinking... This glacier mountain has no magic aura, according to our Mauri. You are quite powerful—beyond what we were expecting from our first meeting—so, we came early because we wanted to see if you were still here. Given that you are here...” I fidgeted with my fingers behind my back, “we wanted to know how you’re still bound to this mountain if there is no strong magic essence to be felt?”

I crossed my fingers. *Please work, please work, please work.*

The red within her smile flamed. “I see...” Vaene Yeulavon snickered. “You’re a lot smarter than I took you to be, little Mage. It is true

that my specter is bound to this Nuoljian rock, but my magic—the essence your Mauri could not sense—is bound to something that moves freely and has a heart whose soul is now mine.”

Cal spoke up. “So... your magic is bound to a person, then?”

Her black, misty body began to pour onto the floor like dense smog. “*Multiple*. Two generations ago, the Nuoljian to receive my Maalison was part of the province’s magic trading—those glintz they put the Vits’ magic into. He was a mighty, magic-obsessed man who only had omrivim and wanted something more to make him a great Mystic. He asked that I tether my magic to him and his followers. At first, I was hesitant, but then, he showed me their work...”

Swirling dust morphed into a ball in the vaene’s palm until a stone with a sharp tip appeared. Suddenly, the rock lit up with a red glow, and my eyes widened at the familiarity. *That stone—*

“They call themselves the Dark Sages. They were able to travel in disguise all around the planet and forge me these delicious stones filled with magic pulses. They are far better than the average glint, and though I already had a decent fill on the Nuoljians, these”—she licked her lips—“were even more delicious.” She sipped the tip of the stone like a straw, devouring the pulse inside as if it were her favorite drink. My stomach churned. *She just consumed someone’s life like it was nothing.*

Something rumbled underneath the frozen cave floor, making me inch closer to Cal. We both acted as if we didn’t notice so the vaene would continue her history.

“So, if one of the Sages agreed to my Maalison, I gifted him or her a bit of my power—allowing them to shadow through zones where evanescing was restricted. But that Nuoljian, the heir to the Maalison, was bound with *me*—my magic running strictly through his veins. Before, with Vituol and Nilj, I only gifted a portion of my power. With *him*, he would take the magiblood stones and infuse them with himself, gifting him magic to feed me as well as boost his own power. When he is strong, *I’m* strong. A beautiful, divine relationship between Man and Darkness.”

My head began to go a mile a minute. The Dark Sages—they were a part of this corrupt, thousand-year-old deal. How many were there? Did they know what they were doing to the Nuoljians?

What if—what if there are some in Nuolja right now?

I held a worried breath. If there were some in Nuolja, then that would've explained why they kidnapped me and Cal—kids with magic, an easy target. Getting rid of the Maalison was one thing... but now, a whole system of criminals was involved, and we didn't even know how to find them.

Overthinking had my eyes stuck to the icy walls, but Cal stayed invested in the conversation. "But that still means only *one* person is truly bound to you, right? As in, if their magic is destroyed or their pulse is taken away, you will be—"

"—cut off and drained dry, purely surviving on the ones in the arctic province. But I have thought through this as cunning as I am." She flicked her ashen hair off her shoulder. "I would not have gifted my entire magical essence to a Nuoljian whom I didn't believe would stay living..." The vaene's eyes blazed brighter as she leered. "The current host, now, he has grown well with my magic, probably the best one so far."

Another shake rattled under the grotto.

"Who?" I asked, maybe a bit too hastily.

She crossed her shadowy arms. "He's the new leader of the Dark Sages, of course, and obviously a native Nuoljian. Amongst his followers, he's known as Sage Senko, but his true identity—the one that keeps him here masquerading—is the partisan, Setzyr Tzelem."

The blood in my body completely went cold, my face beyond colorless, as I stood horror-struck by that name. *It's him? No... no this—this can't be happening right now.* Caution about the situation turned into utter panic, knowing the leader—the man I had to fight in a week—was Vaene Yeuvalon's host, her pawn, her magic leech. The power he was using in the games was not some magical gift from a Wishing Star; it was the parasitic power from this vile specter. *I knew he was evil by the way he treated Ayker, but the leader of the Dark Sages?* This was a whole new level of chaos... and I was not ready for it.

"Ah..." the vaene grinned, evil and with gut-wrenching pleasure, "you both know of him, don't you?"

Our faces couldn't hide the distress and shock in our hearts, causing our eyes to gape and mouths to thin. Making an excuse or throwing on another I-love-dark-magic costume was burned to a crisp. We could do nothing but stand in silence as she continued her play.

“Well, I can say this...” Her mist then began to float closer to the floor, inching toward our winter boots. “He was like any omrivim-bearing Nuoljian, wishing for elemental or phantasmal magic of his own. When he became the next Maalison holder, he promised me mountains of magic pulses if my magic throbbed through his veins. He fulfilled that beautifully. Though...” Vaene Yeulavon’s mist blanketed the cave, hugging our ankles, cold and lifeless, “having my magic in him is nice and all... but what I wouldn’t give to rest in the body of someone who already has power—a heart palmy and oozing with rich, sweet magic...”

Like a swift storm cloud, the vaene appeared two feet in front of me before I could blink. She acted as if Cal, the Prince of Boolavogue, was nothing but loose debris in the wind. Her essence was colder than the Nuoljian lake, without a foul or grimacing scent. No soul rested beneath her chest, only a desire for cosmic power. “Someone just like *you*.”

Cal was standing so close to me that I felt his hand brush by my waist as he gripped his sword latched to his belt.

I, on the other hand, stared in horror at the red glowing duos of evil in the center of the vaene’s smoky face.

She whispered close to me, “*You* have a grand amount of magic—don’t think I didn’t notice the first time you came into my domain, but today... you seem weaker.”

Her cold mist brushed against my pants and seeped through the denim fabric. I hated it. Felt just like bugs crawling all over me. “You could be the one with my powers—an oracle of a Mage you’d be. All you have to do is kill Setzyr and my magic is yours.”

“Is that why you told us everything? Because you wanted me to be the next holder?” I asked, wary of her riling fog beneath. Wary of her—a vaene. And vaenes only wanted one thing. “Or because you wanted my magic for your own gain?”

“If you answer correctly... then I’ll let you know.” She leered.

If I encountered this same situation a year ago, I’d be stone-cold—a statue in baggy Hunter gear. Fear would’ve left my knees locked and feet frozen to the floor. But I was different. Courage burned through me, and my heart only shook—*never* crumbling. We got the information we needed. The facade was over, and I was done playing games.

I furrowed my brows at the horrendous, homicidal request the vaene made. “I have enough magic as it is already... and I would never kill

anyone for your satisfaction.”

She snarled. “Wrong answer.”

The fog along the floor suddenly whipped back into the shadowing palm of the vaene. She began to ball up her strength, the orb of ashen havoc whirling like a black hole in her hand, but I wasn’t standing idly by. My fingers had been swishing around the water in the flask attached to my belt during her intimidation tactics, but it wasn’t just any normal water. I was one step ahead of her.

Cal unsheathed his sword the moment I speared my water toward the vaene’s riled arm. Her misty flesh began to burn—sizzling like bacon frying in hot oil—when the Onsen water hit her arm, causing her to drop the death ball she began to hurl. The vaene magic thundered on the ground, shaking the cavern like an earthquake.

“You *wretches!*” she cried, palming her shadowed wound.

I quickly summoned the Onsen water back into my flask before grabbing Cal’s arm to evanesce. Blue ribbons curled in my hand as she was distracted by her pain, but suddenly—

Pain seethed from my chest—magic stopped. All evanescing completely dissipated, and my knees buckled, hitting the icy ground with a *thud*.

No... stupid magic.... Just replenish... faster...

“Lisa!” Cal breathed as I let go of his arm.

The icy floor gave another rumble; only this time, the vaene’s hand caused the shake—slamming hard against the floor. *This isn’t even her full strength... How powerful is she inside Setzyr’s body, then?*

Cal attempted to grab my hand to pull me up, but deep beneath the frosted floor, a shadow came barreling in the water below the cavern. *This isn’t just a cave! We’re standing on ice—*

SMASH!

The five-foot fin of an inarimar blasted through like a sharpened knife, right in between me and Cal.

Caelum pushed me away just in time, but unknowingly to him, it was right onto the still-cracking floor. Ice shards burst out of the creature’s entry as the fish went down into the deep blue again, faster than I could react. My body couldn’t fly. My evanescing wasn’t working. All my magic was drained. There was nothing I could do in that split second as the floor

shattered beneath me like candy glass, and I fell into the waters of the sea monster.

Daggers of ice stabbed every inch of my skin the moment I crashed into the sub-zero water. Never in my life could I have imagined feeling that cold—as if my body was experiencing every bone-chilling winter since the beginning of time all at once. When my adrenaline spiked higher, icicles pricking my heart, I opened my eyes—

Two red eyes glowing in the dark of the icy waters came bolting toward me, followed by a gaping mouth with foot-long teeth—a belly full of nightmare blazes.

NO—

Though I knew I could not outswim death, I still flailed my arms and legs in the water. I tried to shoot an icicle spear, but my magic could only create it, not throw it. The weapon sank into the dark pit below, and now, my body was even weaker than before. My heart was turning into a rimy organ as my frightened mouth accidentally choked on the water. Blades of ice sliced down my throat—too fast. I was going to die.

The thoughts in my head went fuzzy as the red eyes of the inarimar came closing in when, suddenly, bubbles coiled around me. Something snagged my jacket hood as blue glitter beamed near my face. The great fish was still coming—not even three yards from me—and I was about to drown from the amount of freezing water wading in my chest. I shut my eyes tight when without warning—

Smack—my back hit something hard, and all the darkness faded away.

Chilling air replaced the glacial water, and the sun from the Nuoljian skies blinded my eyes the moment they opened. No sounds of the vaene cackling or billowing water swimming in and out of my ears could be heard. I was out of the water—I was alive but did not have time to celebrate.

In shock—ached and completely fed up with my actions—my body started coughing up puddles of the lake, so I jolted to my right and let it spew out all over the secluded frozen beach. My clothes were dripping wet, making my skin down to my bones quiver and shake. I knew my body temperature had to be dangerously low, especially since I made the irrational decision to leave after Gaius said to get rest.

As the purged lake water hit my quivering hands that propped me up, something warm draped over my head and back. The moment I saw the white and pale blue colors of the winter boots, I knew it was him.

“Lisa—Lisa are you okay?” Cal said to me, his clothing as soaked as mine.

My coughing was finally subsiding, as well as my strength. I could only glance up at him, unable to sit up on my knees or jet all the water off both our clothes. The jacket he placed on my back was dry, an extra pair he had stashed in his orbkit. And he gave it to me.

He’s probably freezing... and it’s my fault... but still... he saved my life.

Tuff then appeared, crying and trying to warm my cheeks with his glainie breaths. It didn’t work at all, but I appreciated his care.

Shivering, I palmed the icy beach. “Th-thanks... for saving me. M-my magic... it—it wasn’t—”

Cal’s hand then pulled back the soaking wet hair that curtained my face, seeing the pitiful girl he just saved. His palm was cold yet still warmer than my forehead when he touched it.

“You don’t have to apologize, you know,” he said with a glum voice, beginning to shiver, too. “I’m just glad... y-you’re alright.”

He moved closer and put both his hands on my shoulders, propping me up so I could sit on my legs and not bear my own weight. When I looked up at him, he was different. The princely side was showing in a way I couldn’t help but be captivated by—his stare, his heroic actions, his entire being. Cal had saved my life before... but not like this. He never stirred these feelings within me before. If I weren’t soaking wet or plagued with the knowledge of the vaene, I would have blushed. Would have hugged him and not let go for a long while.

Cal’s grip tightened around my shoulders, snapping back into our freezing reality. “H-how did you get us t-to escape?” I asked.

He grinned. “Evanescing. Popped a petal in my mouth before we came here...” The frown and worrying gaze returned, followed by a sigh. “I really thought I lost you for a second.”

I looked down at his chest where the frigid water glued his soaked shirt to his skin, noting his body beginning to shake. Guilt swam into me, and I whispered, “I’m sorry...”

Cal paused, nothing but the coos of the unies echoing past the icebergs, Tuff's snuffles humming by my ears. "So..." he finally breathed, "Setzyr... he's really a part of the Dark Sages, huh?"

I pushed myself up a little, letting Cal know he could move his hands from my shoulders. Still, the Prince stayed close to me, his breath clouding onto my cheeks and forehead. "Yeah."

"We have to tell them."

My eyebrows furrowed. "Who?"

"Everyone—my father, the Nuoljians, the Paragon Games people, too."

My heart—weak and still thawing out—couldn't stop the words from coming out of my mouth. "What—are you crazy? W-we can't tell anyone."

"I'm crazy?" A shaken scoff. "Lisa—he's a *criminal*!"

I put my palm on his bent knee as I pleaded my case. "We can't yet. We tell everyone about him and the games get canceled—"

"So—"

"So—then, my chance at getting the wysh will be gone, m-meaning the vaene won't get destroyed. Throw Setzyr in a j-jail or whatever and the vaene will just suck all the m-magic out of the Nuoljians. If he were to still l-lose his magic and not gift the vaene extra power, the curse will break but at the p-price of a whole nation dying in the process." I formed a fist, scratching Cal's soaking pants. "I'll win the games... and *then* tell e-everyone about Setzyr."

"But, Lisa, won't he figure out it was us in that cave? I mean..." He paused as he noticed the jacket slipping off my shoulders. Quickly, he adjusted it before continuing. "Even though that vaene doesn't know our real names, she knows it was two teenagers. She could use her puppet-memory magic and show him... h-he could discover it was you. You're gonna be with someone that literally kidnapped you and has probably killed people before... and you're willing to stand next to him d-during the games for all the galaxies to see—acting as if nothing is wrong?"

I uttered a deep sigh, absorbing his words.

Like a gentle blanket, Cal softly clasped my hand, the one I had clenched on his bent knee. The sudden touch caused me to look up at him as he spoke. "Lisa... you sure about this?"

Care from Cal should have warmed my heart, but he said it with such concern that everything inside me remained cold—more freezing than before. All the points he made were valid. It made no sense to hide the identity of a criminal, especially the one who captured the Prince of Boolavogue and the Agapéd. The people he governed had no idea either. One could even call us culprits in the plot for knowing something and not telling anyone else.

Still, when weighing the odds in my head, the Nuoljians' lives were more important.

Staring into his hazel eyes above his scarlet, frostbitten cheeks, I said, "If it means saving these people, then I'll do anything... e-even if it means facing a villain in front of all galaxies."

Cal released two deep breaths before staring up at the sky. "Then, you better get some rest... and beat Setzyr to a bloody pulp."

I clasped his jacket around my back more, appreciating the warmth it gave. "I promise."

46 Heartfelt

I paced a mile on my bedroom rug, a new personal record. The final match was tomorrow, and in about an hour, I had to leave to meet Gaius before heading to EverWake while dupla-me went to school as if it were just another regular Thursday morning.

But my pacing... it wasn't only because I was scared of the fight. Mom was sleeping comfortably in the room across the hall without a care in the world.

I pivoted on my rug, my toes scrunching the thick purple fabric while Tuff napped on my bed.

She knew nothing about the match, the Sages, the magic, or the giant rot infecting my back. Ariela said it would take days or *weeks* to heal, but my doppelganger could only last seven days at most. *What if it takes longer and I just poof away in front of her or at school?*

I couldn't lie and say I was at Mary's for *weeks*. That would make no sense. I also couldn't *tell her* the reason. Imagine that: "Hey, Mom, I have a death curse on my back, and I need to fight a Darkness-affiliated criminal in less than forty-eight hours, so do you mind if I spend the next two weeks being healed by an Elysian a gazillion miles away?"

I huffed, standing in the middle of my rug. *Yeah, that's if I don't die in the process...*

I plopped on my bean bag. My eyes surfaced along the ceiling, finding a random spot of paint to stare at.

I wasn't planning on dying, but Ariela did say if I were hit with more dark magic, then I would be at Death's door. Setzyr had that vaene power pulsing through his veins. *What if his Red Torrent is actually dark magic and not just some phantasmal red lightning? If he hit me...*

The Nuoljians were worth the risk, but I didn't want Mom to live without a daughter. She knew nothing of my other life—leaving her without knowledge of magic or a goodbye—

I jerked my chin at the thought. *No—I am not saying goodbye to her.* That was like admitting defeat. I was winning the games. I was getting that wysh. And I was *coming home*.

Determination burst me out of the bean bag. Tuff flinched, orange dust flying off his face and stubby arms. “Tuff... let’s go,” I said, putting on my boots. He rubbed his eyes and gave a sleepy whistle.

I swirled my Echo Ring, my glainie on my shoulder, and summoned my doppelganger. I hadn’t used the Sublimity Charm all week, getting rest like Ariela and Gaius told me to—after the whole vaene-almost-killing-me situation.

When dupla-me formed in the middle of my room, we both took deep breaths. Everything was about to change in two days.

“Don’t make any plans with Mom or Mary,” I told copy-me. “I just —”

“—don’t wanna get their hopes up,” she finished my sentence. “I know...”

I watched my doppelganger head downstairs for breakfast as I evanesced to Kamari’s planet. Everything was normal—space spanning miles and the weather being absurdly cold. I put my hand on the Aura Beacon like always to make it turn green so I could travel to Boolavogue.

A new color formed as my fingerprints hit the cold, lamp-looking scepter. It was blazing red.

“That’s odd...” I let go and tried again... and again and again. Nothing but a mocking scarlet color.

I tried evanescing anyway to Haim Gana as Tuff sat on my shoulder. Not even the blue dust in my hands was working or the stone below my feet glowing. Planet Zena’s galaxy continued to surround me as my confusion and frustration rose.

“I can’t even get to Haim Gana—why isn’t it working?” I asked Tuff, trying a *fifth* time, just with more force. That beacon was *not* turning green, no matter how much I tried.

“*Hoot whoot!*” Tuff pulled on my hair, telling me to turn around.

As I looked behind me, my eyes immediately went to the ground. Purple, upright, and filled with fifty pieces of stardust in its plump belly was Yami, Kamari’s delightfully lethargic yaminuru. She was staring at me with her glowing white eyes before coming up to my legs and proceeding to stretch out her arm. With her claws—dull like a sloth’s—Yami grabbed my index finger on my left hand and began to lead me to Kamari’s home.

“Um... okay, guess I’ll come with you, then. But you don’t have to hold my hand, Yami.”

Yami stopped. The little anteater stared at me, emotionless as always, and gripped tighter.

I timidly looked down and apologized, “Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you... let’s just go.” We proceeded to Kamari’s front door.

Didn’t know yaminurus were so stubborn...

Once the silent, glowing guide of mine opened the hefty metal door, she finally released her grasp and waddled straight to the couch—right where my favorite star-loving old Mage was.

“Finally!” Kamari said as I shut the door behind me, jumping off the couch with more energy than an old lady should. She then looked to Yami and hurriedly commanded, “Get da tea, Yami—you know da drill.”

Kamari was wearing many layers of plum and purple but exchanged her excess amount of colorful necklaces with a bright yellow tunic; it didn’t match at all. As she approached, I noticed more braids in her black, coarse hair, still knotted with half in a balled-up bun. Wrinkles under her eyes stretched wide when she smiled at me, and with a hug, scents of cinnamon lingered.

She hugged me, then patted my shoulders and said, “I know you probably wonderin’ why da beacon was not workin’ fo you. But *you* had an urgent message dat came from planet Kalm not too long ago. Needed to make sure you got it.”

She led me to her tacky orange couch, letting me sit on the comfiest side near her glowing yellow pothos plant.

I took off my jacket and placed it on the armrest. “Really? What kind of message?”

“*Nuru!*” Kamari yelled, making me jump just as I began to sit cross-legged.

Scurrying down the half-hidden spiral staircase behind her metal and stone wall was the other yaminuru. Nuru was a bit bigger than Yami, with fewer pink leaves growing on his spine. He quickly came over to Kamari with a piece of paper in his claws like a mailman.

Kamari smiled at her glowing roommate as it dropped the paper in her wrinkly, brown hand. Just by the look of it, it was a blynk—but not in a star shape. The paper was a muted pink, bulging out to make it seem round. If it weren’t for the little green stem at the top, I would have never guessed it to be in the shape of a strawberry.

This is too cute for Gaius’ taste... but who would send this to me?

“Da magic behind da blynk was not strong enough to enta Earth’s atmosphere—landin’ right here at my front doh,” Kamari said as she sat next to me, handing me the origami letter, “so I knew it was not from Gaius. Gettin’ blynks—*hah!* It’s a rarity. When I touched it, it would not open fo me. Dat was when I knew it *had* to be fo you.”

Yami waddled toward us from behind Kamari’s couch as I pulled the stem and pinched the bottom of the paper berry. Immediately, the origami began to glow and unfold in the air, turning into a flat eight-by-eight-inch piece of paper. The writing had a homely warmth with no eraser smudges or ink smears as if each letter of each word was carefully planned. The handwriting was not familiar in the slightest:

Dear Lisa,

My, how you’re growing up into a beautiful Mage. It has been a while since we’ve last been together, but we’ve been watching you play in the Paragon Games and are so proud of you. When you win, which you will, we want to celebrate (at Luca’s, of course).

We know it’s probably been tough for you, even for us here watching you fight those powerful contestants during the matches, so we are sending this to you to let you know we love you.

Being the Agapéd... We’re sure it has been very trying at times. Though we can’t feel what you feel, we know it has to be hard to stay strong day in and day out. But never feel like you’re alone. Just know we are always thinking of you and offer you our home if you are ever in need of one. You are a part of our family, and that will never change.

Thinking of you always,
Roy and Emmeryn Balthier

Yami held up a cup of Verisweet tea the entire time I read the blynk, but I couldn’t grab it. My hands didn’t want to let go of that letter. The more I kept rereading the Balthiers’ kind words, the harder it was to hold back my sniffles.

Going into the final games... they didn’t know anything about the true depth of the situation, but it felt as if they did. Their love always came

to me at the right time and never failed to make me smile.

A heartfelt tear trickled down my cheek and off my chin, staining the paper.

To this, Kamari put her arm around me and squeezed me to her side. “I see a smile baskin’ undaneath all dose tears. I take it... dis be but a happy letta, abi?”

I made a big snuffle and continued my grin. “It’s from the Balthiers... saying how proud they are of me being in the games.”

The kind Keeper put her hand over mine, making me place the letter on my lap to look at her. My freckled face was definitely patterned with spots of pink, but Kamari didn’t act like she noticed. “You are most *loved*, Lisa. I know deese games have been brutal and dat rot you have feastin’ on your back has not been an easy challenge either.”

“How did—”

“Gaius told me.” She tittered. “Said to keep an eye out fo you when yo’r evanescin’.”

I finally grabbed the teacup from Yami’s clawed hands. “Sorry if I worried you, too.”

“*Na so!*” She jolted on the cushion. “Don’t you be worrin’ about what isn’t true. I care fo you Lisa, just like da oddas, but I do not worry; fo worrin’ is nothin’ but sayin’ yo’r trust in oddas is a lie. If Gaius says yo’r strong, den I do not worry about yo’r strength. If Lady Ariela says yo’r heart is fine from da rot, den I do not worry about you dyin’ just yet. But most of all...”

She smiled brightly. “I do not worry because I trust *you*. Yo’r heart, Lisa, is so strong—just look at you in da games! I know dat you will always do what is right, and I know da Agapéd will keep you safe. After all, you are still here—beamin’ wid magic in yo’r heart and in my room drinkin’ da Verisweet. Da magic is not done wid you just yet, so I have nuddin’ to fear, and da same goes for *you*.”

I wiped away the last of my tears and cradled the warm cup of pink tea in both my hands, the letter now touched with three more teardrops. The care that continued to be given to me from everyone... I didn’t deserve one bit. But, because it was offered to me in the form of tea, blynks, and the words from a brute gardener, I cherished it.

“Thanks, Kamari,” I said, a deep breath escaping.

She abruptly hit my shoulder, almost knocking my teacup out of my hands, and grabbed her own mug. “Don’t dank me just yet. Betta stay and drink before Gaius sees yo’r face as pink as da Verisweet. He might not let me eva keep you from meetin’ him on time eva again.”

Kamari took one sip and scrunched her face. She whipped her head, staring at both Yami and Nuru as they were on her cluttered kitchen island. “*Why do you curse me wid no honey?*”

The anteaters made no noise, but when they jumped off the counter from Kamari’s grumbling, they caused more ruckus than ever before. Yami knocked over some wooden spoons and a bowl full of almonds because Nuru bumped into her. They each then began to scramble to get the honey from the jar on the counter, bumping into each other once more. Still, the mess they made didn’t upset Kamari in the slightest. She was more concerned about her unsweet Verisweet—making me laugh as I took a sip of mine, which had plenty of honey.

47 He and I

“Tomorrow is *the* day!” Garth boomed, showing off his muscles on TV with his navy suit being a little too tight around his biceps. “What a crowd we already have—and I don’t just mean those near the stadium. EverWake city shops are swarming with those already trying to save their spot anywhere a broadcast of the game is playing. Not to mention that every seat has been sold *out* ever since that little girl won the final match. *I* barely could even get in... and I work here!”

Rhiner, sitting on the other side of the broadcasting table, sharply dressed with his faded black hair and clean-shaven face, gave a charming laugh toward his co-host. “That is why you show up on *time*, Garth.”

“It is true,” Winry said, wearing rose gold rings on almost every finger and sitting between the two men. “You have a habit of showing up just before our cameramen grow frantic.”

Garth threw up his hands. “How was *I* to know a sea of people would show up a day *before* the games?”

“You should’ve, with all the rave about this year’s final match.” Rhiner got more comfortable in his seat, not looking toward the camera. “What are your thoughts on it, Winry?”

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t picture these two to be in the finals —”

“Oo—Winry’s coming in a bit harsh today!” Garth interrupted.

She rolled her eyes at her co-host. “I never doubted their magic, but out of the twelve, Setzyr Tzelem from Nuolja was the quieter one of the adults, and—I am not alone when I say this—that little girl looked so tarnished during the match with the Glass Mage, Rongolebeau. Though, the moment she was revealed to have two types of magic, well...” Winry grinned with a flick from her eyes—a glance to the cameras and co-hosts. “I have to say, she stands a good chance at taking the prize of the champion.”

Rhiner raised his black brows. “So, you believe she stands a chance against someone twice her size and twice her age?”

“It’s a battle against magic, and from what we’ve seen, she has just as much of a chance as any of the other contestants. You’re saying you think Setzyr Tzelem will win?”

Rhiner scoffed. “I’m not saying I do, but with age comes experience. Robbie has only been training in Boolavogue for a year. Tzelem has been a partisan of Nuolja for over ten years. Does that mean he has trained with warriors? Not necessarily, but judging from his last match, he does not seem uncomfortable in battle.”

Garth sighed. “I will admit, though I am excited about the match, seeing a small thing like her up against a man almost as big as me—”

“No one is as big-headed as you,” Winry laughed, Rhiner joining in.

“Hey—that’s not what I meant,” Garth returned the gesture, his smile thinning. “I am just saying—me having a son around her age—it would stress me to the bones watching my kid brawl it off in a battle. And you *have* to admit that is why so many people are here, right?” The muscly co-host looked behind the cameras and around the room. Everyone traded glances but not a spoken word. “Come on, I can’t be the only one thinking that?”

Rhiner broke the silence. “I agree, but from a *different* viewpoint.” Winry and Garth looked at their sleek, fellow announcer. “I believe the crowds are so great and the seats are completely bought out because they want to see this girl *win*. At least, I do.”

Winry and Garth dropped their jaws.

“You’re telling us you’re betting on Lisa Robbie of Boolavogue?” Winry asked, staring right into Rhiner’s brown eyes.

“Coming from a father as well...” Rhiner glanced at Garth, “I’d rather not see a loss end poorly. I do want a good magic heavy fight—both Tzelem and Robbie will deliver tenfold, no doubt about that—but I don’t want to wish for a child to lose bloody and torn in front of all galaxies.”

For a moment, all the announcers lost their showy smiles and replaced them with soft grins, but I could tell—just like Reno sitting next to me on the VIP avelift—they wanted to frown. None of them wanted to see a child hurt, even though I would be fifteen years old in just three months—not really a baby to begin with. Still, it didn’t look fair from an outsider’s point of view, probably even from Reno’s. For the others on the ride with us—Gaius and Inna—they saw it as fair... magically speaking anyway. From my vantage, knowing my opponent’s dark secret, I couldn’t care *less* if it was fair or not.

I crossed my arms as the broadcast continued playing on the TV inside the avelift. Crowds and cities passed by the window while the sun

painted the sky sherbet. It was beautiful, but I couldn't admire the scenery like I normally would. Fabric of the avelift seat in front of me stole my gaze, my mind plotting—diving through every clever tactic and ploy I could think of to win against Setzyr.

Do I tell him I know everything—bet that vaene already did that for me... The Onsen water really hurt her, so maybe I could—

“Hey, you alright?”

Twice, I blinked—Reno's words snapping me out of my can't-let-Setzyr-win thoughts. On my right, the celebrity from Sky Valley shined his amber irises on me. Concerned, a look his unsmiling face never seemed to have.

I glanced behind his shoulders and dreadlocks.

Gaius and Inna sat close together on the right shoulder of the eight-row cabin, giving me the same look. Eavesdropping wasn't their style, but on the avelift with just us four, it was hard to avoid.

I didn't mind. “Yeah, just thinking through my tactics for the battle—whatever style Zephan is gonna pick,” I answered, which was *true*... mostly. “Do you know what it's gonna be?”

Reno put one elbow on the cushioned armrest. “Well, last year, it was a sole-survivor match with fifty duplications of some type of creature—can't remember what, though—and the crowd really loved it... but Zephan didn't so much. Two years before that, he did a binding spar but had his terrain Mystics make the ground slowly crumble away bit by bit. I personally loved the suspense as well as the other professional fighters, but again, Zephan wasn't as thrilled.”

My breathing stopped. *That didn't impress him? What on earth does he have planned for me and the Nuoljian jerk?*

Reno nudged my shoulder with his elbow, grinning. “Don't worry too much, Lisa. You're gonna do just fine...” He then leaned closer to me and hushed his words to prevent Keeper One and Keeper Two from hearing. “Is that mark on your back affecting your magic? Zephan told me about it—saying to watch out for it during this week.”

“What else did Zephan say?” Gaius' deep voice bellowed from behind us.

Reno tensed up as we both turned, the hefty Mystic directly at the back of our seats. “Sorry, sir. Didn't know you knew. Zephan only told me and the fighter Lisa went up against—that redhead—since he knew I was

her mentor and because they thought the glass Mage was responsible for the rot at first. To everyone else, he just mentioned it was a side effect of her magic clashing against Lisa's."

Gaius changed his seat, plopping down right where his feet stood. He exhaled with his arms crossed. "I'll give him credit for that lie, though I bet he just didn't want the Embassy upset with him putting a child who is sick in the rink." Gaius fixated his gaze on me. "You are fine, though, right?"

I smiled confidently and held up two fists. "Better than ever—gonna win this whole thing for sure."

My remark gave my three mentors a bit of relief, which was my goal. As the Gallant Arena came into view, my head turned toward the window, my smile now gone.

Doesn't matter if I'm ready. I can't afford to lose...

...

The hall leading to the cavaedium was a highway of people—workers and friends of Reno's going in and out of the large assembly room. I was walking with a celebrity, the prettiest water Mage I knew, and a beefy six-foot-five-inch Keeper, and yet, their stares were on me. I didn't care. After the first couple of times of being noticed or sticking out because of my age and thin frame, their judgmental eyes stopped pricking my self-conscience. Saying I was immune to their spotlights of unwanted glares would be a lie, but because my thoughts were already troubled with something far more important, I stayed calm as the doors to the cavaedium opened.

Blather turned into hushed murmurs the moment I entered. Flashes from cameras bounced off my wavy brown hair as my presence made the room part. Getting to the front near the stage was easier, at least. Peering around at the waists and feet of Zephan's fans, I noticed familiar faces.

The fighters—all of them—are here! But the match doesn't even start until tomorrow.

I saw O.N., Ben, and Lumaline talking together, seeming to be close friends now instead of opponents. Lotto and Bless were off to the left, enjoying each other's company. They were smiling, and I would consider it flirting by the way she blushed at him. Impa was laughing wildly with some random old guy, possibly her husband—though, with her personality, I doubt she would ever settle down. Terroko and Varl were in attendance as well, more so toward the front and near Ayker.

I smiled when I saw my white-haired friend, but I couldn't stop walking to the front, mainly because Gaius was behind me. He was making sure no one around grabbed me for questions—wielding nothing but a stare alone.

When I reached the head of the crowd, Inna took Gaius' arm and escorted him to the back. Reno, on the other hand, went to be with his fellow employees on the opposite end of the room. I stood alone for only a second or two until someone came beside me. Sounds of jingling glass followed.

It was Rongo, wearing another warrior garment with plated glass on her shin guards and around her knuckles. Though seeing her smile outside of the battle rink was bizarre, it was her right eye—the one I gouged out—that grabbed my attention more.

An orb of glass swirled in her eye socket but not the creepy kind to look like a fake cosmetic eye. Sky blues and frosted whites twinged the smooth surface, sharded stardust reflecting each time the overhead lights fluttered over. It made me feel insanely guilty.

"Hey, kid," she said. Chatter picked up slowly, but her voice was easy to hear as she closed into my right side. "Good to see you not puking up rot today."

Wait... did she just say something kind to me?

A normal person probably would've said thanks and apologized for ruining her feminine face. But I was Lisa Robbie, and anything remotely curious and infused with magic took precedence.

"Could the medics not fix your eye?" I asked, unable to stop looking below her red eyebrow.

Rongo huffed and grinned.

Was that a laugh?

"They offered, but I said no," she answered, hands on her hips and chin lifted. "I want to say I fought against the Agapéd and came out only losing an eye." Rongo turned to face me. "You've earned my respect, Lisa of Boolavogue. And that boorish ice tactic you used also inspired the use of my glass eye."

Splitting glass chimed as the crystal shards in Rongo's eye extended, creating a foot-long needle attached to her face. The speed at which it formed was as fast as a hawk, gleaming only one inch from my

nose. My breathing quickened as I went cross-eyed from staring at the pointed shard.

“So”—Rongo returned the eye weapon into its spherical form in her socket—“pretty skillful, huh? And it’s all thanks to you.”

Honestly, it was pretty cool, but the fact she was not upset at my barbaric attack was what really surprised me. “So... you’re not mad at all?”

Rongo’s eyes flickered behind me, the blues of the glass orb shifting. “As long as you beat him...”

I turned around. Setzyr was drinking a glass of water and ignoring all those around him. All except for me.

“If he takes your magic, I’ll never forgive you, Lisa.”

My body faced her again. “I won’t let that happen.”

“*Lisa! Miss Lisa!*” a voice shouted.

Joolee ran through the crowd, her brown ponytail swaying. By the time she caught up with me, Rongo was already gone. “We will be doing a media pre-wysh soon, and I need you and Setzyr to come with me.”

Symphonies of drums began banging in my chest, but they weren’t beats of fear. When Joolee led me to the criminal, my hands turned hot with anger, clenched by my sides as she told Setzyr the same.

The Nuoljian looked down at me. Hatred for him burned in my chest as he merely grinned and proceeded to follow me out the side door.

“Once Sir Zephan is finished giving introductions and dismissing the guests,” Joolee said with the door propped open, hand on the handle, “we will have the Magic Embassy and the Paragon Game staff record your wish for the press. Be specific with your wish, too. You shouldn’t be bothered by the exiting VIP guests in this wing.”

The door shut. Stiffened silence entered.

It was only me and him in that hallway. Completely alone.

Long windows ran along the right side of the hall, offering a clear view of the arena as it underwent meticulous cleaning for the final match tomorrow. Two Mystics were still patching up the giant hole I blew into the side of the arena last week. For an average human, it would be a tiresome task. Luckily, Zephan’s employees were terrain magic users. I saw them trying their best to smooth out the concrete to look as good as new again. The only reason I noticed all these small details was because I didn’t want to look to my left where *he* stood.

The ceiling's dim yellow bulbs burned over us like murky headlights while the sun slowly set. Zephan's muffled voice began speaking in the cavaedium while Setzyl and I waited, though I couldn't make out a single word the Game Keeper said other than "thank you." It bothered me.

Why do we have to wait out here anyway? Why can't I just stay in there with—

"I know it was you who visited Yeulavon after the match last week."

Calm and polished were the Nuoljian's words, which is why I didn't jump the moment he broke the silence. He sounded confident—happy, even—but I didn't turn to check.

I kept my gaze out the window, still and silent. My heart, however, raced at a breakneck speed.

I knew it... He did figure it out...

My mind remained composed because I anticipated him knowing the truth. So, I didn't say a thing and let him continue. *Let him reveal his secrets.*

"It wasn't hard to figure out, seeing as you are the only child Mage I know who has flight and water manipulation..."

Even with his surprise knowing I could *fly*, my mouth stayed shut.

"Look, Lisa, let's just be honest here..." Two clicks of his shoes, his body turned toward me, his voice clear—sly and cryptic. "Being that you've met the vaene means you know exactly who I am. So, there is no need for a wall to stand between us any longer."

A couple of workers started to clean the rink with water and some type of oil, giving the floor a perfect sheen. "When did you find out it was me?" I asked, serious, without averting my gaze.

"Ah... it seems you've grown and are not frightened of me anymore..." Setzyl turned toward the window, answering my question. "The moment I felt Yeulavon's magic being used in the cave. She then told me of you, a girl with a vast amount of magic who could brace the cold waters and best a dark magic creature. When I showed her a picture of you from the Paragon Games news release, she confirmed my assumption. So, what I would like to know, Lisa, is why you are standing here with me now?"

I did not answer.

Setzyl prodded more. "You know my intentions, the curse upon my people, and the fact I am a leader of an organization that attempted an

abduction to steal the powers of you and Prince Sonon. Yet, I am here—a criminal in disguise—about to play a game for the sheer satisfaction of a Keeper and his pawns.”

Lights flickered on the archways below, a test run for tomorrow’s game. Many workers were going in and out of the entrances with bins—probably filled with trash or cleaning supplies. Not a single one looked up in our direction.

I softly responded, “The same reason you didn’t come after me, I’m guessing.” My eyes veered right.

Setzyr was leering. His coffee-brown hair, tied loosely in a ponytail, ran down his back and blended in with his shirt. His arms were crossed, bulky with muscles I didn’t notice he had until then. Though his face was without a beard and could be considered attractive to a woman his age, I hated it—with his pointed nose and arched brows—disgracing the color blue as it surrounded his pupils.

He was an ugly man.

“Ah... the *wysh*. It appears even the Agapéd serves *itself* most of all,” he said, glaring down at me with a cocked chin.

My confidence perked up. “Why are you telling me all this anyway? What if I didn’t know a single thing?”

“Because it will not matter in the end. I will be winning the games and gaining the *wysh* while you will be powerless to stop me—quite literally.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll tell? Won’t matter if you win then.”

Closer he came, words rasp, vilely alluring—enjoying whatever this sick divulgence was. “You seem to care deeply about my people—which makes no sense to me—and you are pretty close with the Rovonami boy, putting your life at risk to discover why my people were cursed with *omrivim* and a branded mark of power. So, you reveal my identity—one slip of the tongue—and the blood of Ayker and his family will be on *your* hands.”

I bit back my thoughts on how cruel that was, sucking my bottom lip between my teeth. But I remained calm. Setzyr’s threat would never work.

The thing was, he didn’t seem to know that—so dead set on the fact he was winning the match tomorrow without any problems—which meant that the *vaene* didn’t tell him everything Cal and I knew.

So, let's just see what he knows...

"If I win," I began, turning my attention back out the window, "I could just wish for Nuolja to be free of the vaene and free of you. That way, you have no chance of hurting me, Ayker, or anyone else."

"You are quite funny, Lisa." I cringed—hating the sound of my own name musing through his lips. "Though you will not win, let's play with your notion. You could make that wish, but it will do nothing. You need more than an 'I wish...' to rid the vaene of my people. It is part of a Maalison, remember, and you should know even a wysh cannot go against Magic Law. It seems you're out of luck... and out of time."

At that moment, I knew I had the upper hand. I could never understand the ethics of a vaene, but Yeulavon did *not* tell Setzyr I knew how to break the curse, hence the cockiness and his wearing-his-heart-on-his-sleeve attitude. She may have been bound to Setzyr, but she *craved* my magic, and she was playing with Setzyr's naïvety to get it. The vaene's life was on the line, though... *Why not tell Setzyr? She could lose all her magic.*

The only thing I could think of was that the vaene still saw me as pathetically *weak*. Setzyr probably said that too—beefed up the notion he could squash me like a bug. Then, I walked into her cave with my magic drained dry—as if my body couldn't contain the Agapéd inside me. To her, she saw a way to get my heart while also enjoying her version of a "fun" game, messing with Setzyr's head.

Whatever the case is, Setzyr doesn't know that I know how to break the curse...

"So," Setzyr continued, "when I win... the Agapéd will be mine, which—by the way—I already knew rested inside you long before the games began. Good fortune turned to my side as well, having you already told Ayker in advance, leading you to believe *he* told me. It allowed me not to hide that known fact any longer and use it against you."

What did he—

Hiding my emotions had become too great a trick to pull off. I couldn't help but flick my owl eyes at Setzyr. "When did you know?"

The bulky partisan uncrossed his arms and leaned toward me, his head cocked to the side. Lost strands of the ponytail drooped off his shoulders when his waist bent forward, only inches from my face. His eyes were soft, devoid of fear, giving off the energy he had already won. "Oh, Lisa... who do you think put that mark on your back?"

How does he...

Every pulse of blood—every ounce of breath that swelled my lungs—froze, and my hands lost their grip, laying limp by my thighs. My throat turned dry when a cold sweat beaded down my back, and all I could do was watch him through terror-stricken eyes as memories flooded in. “I-it was you?”

A malevolent smile breached across his face—quiet and blood-chilling.

“But... when? I-I never met you until that day in Nuolja.”

“The day my men secured you and the Prince...” Setzyr straightened up his back but didn’t move further from me. “Well, *attempted* to secure, I should say. You came in with that purple flame of yours while I was in the Prince’s chamber, even tried to burn my legs when I threw that spear at you. Then, you jumped on the Prince and started to evanesce, so...”

Setzyr lifted his left hand and swirled his Red Torrent in the palm. Scarlet flares slowly morphed into black mist, the same aura and color as the vaene. My nerves strangled my bones. “Out of anger of stealing away the heir to the Sonons—a boy filled with the power of a Wishing Star and a possible Bloodborne with Crystallian magic—I shot you clean in the back with the magic of the vaene... which happens to inflict rot.”

Flexing his fingers made the magic disappear. “And once you were gone, only *then* did my Sages reveal you were the Agapéd. They said your power was drained in the stone, but obviously they failed the only task they were given. You still had those purple flames after all. I was furious with them, so I... took care... of the ones you had already burned so severely.”

I swallowed hard. *He killed them?*

Setzyr puffed his chest as he grinned, eyes glistening blue and minty as they mixed with the lights from the ceiling. “When I saw your name appear in the pot for the Paragon Games—*alive*—I knew you were truly more powerful than I could ever imagine, seeing as you’re still alive even now. Quite the peculiar young Mage, outlasting rot for this long.”

That smile of his changed—contorting into something sinister. Something as lustful as the vaene’s desire for magic blood. It wrung my stomach like a cold, sweat-drenched towel.

“And to add on to what I said before, Lisa... if you tell anyone of this”—a blade of black and red appeared at the ends of his fingertips, pointed right at my heart—“I can just end it all right here... watching as the

rot eats away at your heart, leaving you an empty vessel and me still living.”

Aggression began to coarse through my veins. “I thought you wanted my magic? Killing me would just—”

“—prevent me from being found out, keeping me in my land and as the Sages’ leader. Do not think of me as ignorant.” His calm words cut in, red and black needles retracting.

“You can’t make the Agapéd choose you—”

“I never said it had to. I am just wishing for its power—stealing it, just like before when we almost secured it from you the first time. You see, Lisa, you’re proof that even something as powerful as The Light’s magic can be stolen just as easily as a trinket from a store.”

“It won’t work—”

“It will because nothing is stopping a wysh from stealing magic or...” a flicker toward my heart, “... even the mythical magic pulse from a little girl... but, as you said, if you *do* win, then I will destroy it before it destroys me. For I am not leaving these games in chains.”

I hate this man...

“You would kill me?” I asked him—blunt, assertive—hearing footsteps leaving the cavaedium through another exit. “You would really kill a kid?”

Setzyr scoffed and lowered his voice, though his words were rushed and angry. “The moment you stepped foot into my land and got yourself involved with the vaene, you neglected your role as a child. So, either I win and wish for your power, or you die by the rot. Either way, you lose, *Agapéd*.”

I really, really hate this man...

Someone in the cavaedium said our names, and footsteps began to come near the door.

Leaning near my ear, Setzyr quickly concluded, “Oh—reveal my identity in that room, and I’ll happily pay the Rovonamis a visit with the Sages I have on hand in Nuolja at this very moment.”

He is foul... cruel in the purest form of the word...

“Mr. Tzelem, Miss Robbie,” Joolee said as she opened the door. “We are ready for you. Do you need more time to think about the wysh?”

Setzyr perfected his posture with a beaming smile plastered on his face. “I believe we are ready.”

Anger had never been a huge part of my life before, mostly because I never had a reason to blow up or had flint in my heart to even spark a fire. I'd get frustrated or mad over little things but never to the point I neglected reason. If I failed a level in a video game, I'd sigh but continue going. If I kept missing Gaius' or Ekron's practice attacks, I would get agitated but keep my composure. Timidness suppressed any form of outrage or wrath in me, making me a shy human under challenging situations.

That was all before Setzyr Tzelem stepped foot into my life.

As I trailed behind the criminal into that elegant meeting room, right onto the stage next to Zephan and a black-haired lady sitting in a chair, I only wanted justice for all that he had done.

He deserved to be punished, and *I* wanted to be the one to do that.

A solemn expression painted my face as I looked at the small crowd. The fallen ten contestants, my three mentors, and a couple of other important Paragon Game workers were left. *They don't know... none of them do...*

I sucked in a deep breath as the lady with black hair began to talk. She was sitting in a chair near the edge of the stage, scribbling something on an electronic notepad while a mimic glint (a stone infused with copycat magic to record messages) hovered beside her.

"First off, congratulations, you two," she said, though in a very melancholic manner, not even looking away from the glowing screen in her hands. "During this time, I will be recording your request that the wysh will grant. You've worked hard to get here, I'm sure, but there are rules which you must follow. It is a wysh, so it can become anything that already exists. You only need to be precise. You can't go against Magic Law either, but that should be obvious."

She crossed her legs and continued, "Because it is a gift from the Games and the Embassy, there is a limit on wealth if you want to wish for a reward in credits. Along with that..." The woman put down her tablet and looked at me and Setzyr. "Wishing for money on galactic television would make us and you look like greedy pigs, so here is how it will work..."

How did she get picked to do this—calling us pigs like that?

"Know what you want to wish for—you've had plenty of time to think of it—and tell me a 'cleaned-up' version of it. This will be what we broadcast once you win the games. For example, if you want money, say, 'I wish for my family to never go hungry, blah, blah, blah'—you get the point.

Then, after I recorded the cleaned-up version, tell me what you really want.”

She pointed behind with her thumb, eyes half-opened, brows arched high. “They are all here as witnesses because what you tell me now *must* be what you tell the wysh. So, if you wish for wealth, you won’t go to jail for a random amount of money now in your credit account. And we have to make sure it’s appropriate and suitable, needing to be exactly what you say today. Hope that makes sense...” She turned her attention to Setzyr first. “Let’s start with the oldest. Mr. Tzelem, what is your broadcasted wish?”

She looked down at her tablet and waited.

Setzyr gave a dishonest smile, but only I seemed to notice. The partisan’s words were confident, articulate—unsettlingly perfect. “For Nuolja to prosper with an abundance of life and magic.”

My jaw tightened. *Pretty good cover-up. Too bad it’s a complete lie.*

“Alright...” The reporter wrote on her tablet with a magic pen. She then touched the floating mimic glint, making it glow green. “Now, what is your true wysh?”

I held my breath because I knew the moment he said his desire would be the moment one person, in particular, would erupt.

“I wish...” Setzyr paused, and I could feel pride swelling inside him, “... to have the power of the Agapéd.”

There wasn’t much commotion amongst the past contestants, but a couple of strangers in the room scoffed or gasped. My eyes were on the floor as I bit my lip, anger broiling in my gut. But the moment a familiar voice sounded, my eyes shot up.

Gaius made the only audible sound a millisecond after Setzyr spoke, grumbling with a deep voice, “He can’t—”

“*Gaius*,” came Zephan’s voice, and all eyes fixated on him. The Game Keeper, still standing between me and Setzyr, held his hand toward my brute instructor, but that wasn’t what made Gaius stop.

Nothing in the world could prevent the stubborn Keeper of Stars from speaking his mind... all except for Lady Ariela’s voice and the stare I was giving him.

The moment Zephan cut Gaius off was when my eyes met the green pupils of the riled-up Mystic. I didn’t have to mouth any words or even shake my head. My body wasn’t wavering or shaking in fear. My eyes were wide and not glossed with tears. Even my brows were straight. I was

stagnant—as still as a statue. Not an ounce of shock or fear swelled within me, so he had no reason to save me. He kept his words bottled up.

The moody reporter cleared her throat and cocked an eyebrow at Setzyr. “So, you wish to have the power of this Agapéd Magic... whether or not it exists yet?”

Casually, Setzyr answered, “Precisely.”

“O... kay.” She began scribbling on her magic tablet and muttered quite fast under her breath that only I could hear and possibly Setzyr. “You can have anything, and you choose something you may never get—whatever.”

Her voice returned to normal, projecting it loud enough so the “witnesses” could hear. “Now, Lisa Robbie, what is your broadcasted wish?”

The floorboards were where my eyes went. My fingers curled tight because I knew I wouldn’t say what Gaius wanted. “For my friends in Nuolja to be free from their chains of Darkness.”

Setzyr gave a half-suppressed laugh.

The black-haired woman touched the mimic glint. “Alright... now, what is your true wish?”

I stared at the woman and proclaimed without a single hint of doubt in my voice, “I wish for the wysh to become 1,000 magic pulses of omrivim, and to be absorbed by Vaene Yeulavon instantly.”

I could feel Setzyr’s presence barrel down on me like rolling thunder. The rest of the room stood confused, especially Miss Joyless, with her black hair tied so tight in a bun that it could snap off with a twist.

“Um... okay,” she breathed, disappointed and bitter again. “I know a vaene is a dark specter, so will your wish be harming anyone—”

“No. No one will be hurt.” My words slit, surprising even me.

Her eyes rolled, and she muttered again, “Fine—I can’t believe these are what a wysh is being wasted on...”

The glow from her tablet stopped, and the mimic glint plopped into her palm. My eyes stayed on the floor as she spoke. “My work is done. I will see one of you tomorrow, and your wish will be granted.”

When she walked off, Zephan stepped up in front of us. His words were not as charming as before as he faced the small crowd. *Did Setzyr’s remark throw even the Game Keeper off guard?* “Tomorrow, before noon,

we will announce the sparring style between our two finalists before sunset. Feel free to join us or watch with the audience. You are dismissed.”

Lights from the walls lit up Zephan’s silhouette as he turned toward me and Setzyr. His blonde hair resembled strands of gold as stray wisps caught the warm spotlight, but his facial features did not match the elegance. He was serious and staring right at me.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t help but cock my eyes at Setzyr; he was desperately trying to hold a grin on his baffled, unsettled face.

The Game Keeper stepped closer at the sounds of shoes beginning to exit the doors. “I will see you both here tomorrow.” Zephan stared at me when he said, “And stay well for the games.”

Zephan clicked away from the stage, and something hulky caught my eye. Gaius was charging for the blonde man, Inna trailing behind. *They are coming for me... Yeah, I’m in trouble—*

A warm hand grabbed my wrist—pain twinging my skin—as Setzyr bent close to my ear to keep our conversation only between us. How swiftly his threats left his dry throat: “When did you find out—”

“Doesn’t matter,” I whispered back quickly.

Loud footsteps began to emerge, familiar stomps obviously from a beefy Keeper.

The grip tightened as the partisan leaned in closer. “You were supposed to stay *silent—*”

The girly kid in my voice was gone. “I never revealed your identity. I kept my bargain, but if you go against it, don’t think for a second I won’t tell, and you’ll never be able to get that wysh—walking out in chains.”

The footsteps came directly behind me, to which Setzyr let go of my wrist. Gaius’ shadow loomed over me as Setzyr backed away, and I knew the Keeper was about to belt out something that could’ve gotten him kicked off the planet, so I quickly responded to the Nuoljian. “See you tomorrow.”

Setzyr turned his head to the side. “May the best Mage or Mystic win,” before stepping off the stage.

I really, really, really hate that man.

By that point, everything that I suspected was to happen did—but in rapid succession.

Gaius pulled me off the stage, and we followed Zephan to some random room with elegant seating. Inna was there, too, and Vilmad and Emunah walked through an evanesce portal moments after the door shut.

Were they listening the entire time, or did Zephan call them here? Do they have anything better to do than to watch my life and judge my decisions?

Everyone was there, shadowed with flustered, agitated emotions. And all the attention was poured over me and the blonde-headed Keeper.

Gaius released my shoulder as I swept into a comfy and plush seat with plenty of room to sit cross-legged—which I did—and I didn't say a word. It was about to get ugly and not for me.

"You empty-minded Keeper!" Vilmad scolded Zephan first, long hair flying off his shoulders, his silk tunic trailing the wooden floor. "What do you think you are doing, *not* stopping that human from his wysh? Did you happen to forget the Agapéd was standing on that stage, or are you choosing to go against your calling—to protect its power from being lost?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Zephan hissed.

Vilmad scoffed. "Obviously, a 'no' would have been sufficient, but you stood there and let that woman from the Embassy accept it."

Gaius stepped toward Zephan, standing near me with his trench coat hitting the back of my chair. "Why didn't you stop it?"

Zephan merely gnawed on his cheek, and then, Inna spoke up. "If you would've told them it was Lisa's magic, he couldn't have wished for it. It's against Man's rights from the Embassy and any modern nation to steal magic from another."

"Don't you see," Emunah said, more serious than I had ever seen him before, "if Zephan would've told everyone in that room Lisa had the Agapéd, the Magic Embassy would have shut this game down. They don't care for us and would have thought the games were doctored for Lisa to win, probably not trusting Zephan ever to host the games again—"

"And where is the harm in that?" Vilmad interrupted.

Emunah sighed. "Then, everyone would know Lisa was the Agapéd and think she only made it this far because we allowed it to happen, even though we know she made it purely by her skill and magic. It would make her look weak. It would make us and Lady Ariela appear dishonest."

The Guardian, with the black beard and silver hair, turned toward Gaius. "You wanted to keep her a secret, Gaius, and you know if it's revealed that Lisa is the Agapéd, everyone will assume she's only strong because Zephan let her win. More people will come after her. Now, if this Nuoljian *did* know the Agapéd Magic rested in Lisa, he would be considered a criminal and charged with theft of magic..." Emunah turned

his gaze toward me. “Lisa, does this Setzyr Tzelem know you’re the Agapéd?”

I looked him dead in the eye and remained calm. “No, sir.”

Zephan shifted like a jagged rock about to rumble a landslide, brown eyes pelting mine.

And at that moment, my chest pounded hard. Zephan didn’t speak, shout, or scoff, but when I saw his eyes, I quickly averted because I knew he read my heart. He knew I flat-out lied to Emunah—and to everyone in that room.

This is bad.

“This is *foolish*,” Vilmad raked, eyes rolling. “Gambling in the hope that Lisa wins is too grand of a risk. Zephan, you have to tell that Nuoljian Lisa has the Agapéd and that he—under the Laws of Man—*cannot* wish for her magic—”

“Lisa,” Zephan began, ignoring Vilmad. The blonde man placed his hand on the arm of the chair, knelt, and looked right at me.

Fear froze my heart, and I knew he felt it shudder, too.

Crap—he’s gonna tell. He’s gonna tell everyone I just lied and stop these games. I can’t let that happen. I just can’t—

“Is your wish really that important to you?”

I blinked. It wasn’t what I expected to hear... but I guess to him, it was the only reason he could think of to explain why I lied.

“Yes, sir.”

Vilmad huffed, fingers drilling his forehead. “Speaking of which, what is this notion of an unfamiliar vaene—never in my time had I heard of one calling themselves Yeulavon?”

“I thought you were using that wish for that Nuoljian boy. You didn’t mention a vaene was involved,” Gaius said to me.

“I just... it wasn’t like it was a big deal. The vaene was cooperative.” *Not a complete lie.*

“Wait—you *met* the vaene?”

My eyes glanced around the room, unable to focus on the green ones staring into my soul. “Yeah...”

Disappointment seethed from him. “This is not the same as helping a friend. That’s a dark specter, Lisa—you could’ve been hurt... Why didn’t you tell me?”

I was beginning to loathe where this conversation had gone.

The room fell into a thick silence, waiting for an explanation I didn't want to give—one I *couldn't* give.

With Zephan keeping my lies a secret for some unknown reason, I continued with my vague answers, fidgeting with my hands in my lap. “Well, I wasn't threatened by the vaene and found a way to get rid of it with the wysh. It just needed a lot of magic pulses of this weird power called omrivim. So, I didn't see a need to tell... I'm sorry.”

“1,000 pulses of omrivim,” Emunah wondered aloud. “Must mean this is for a Maalison, correct?”

I didn't see a problem with agreeing, so I nodded.

Emunah continued, brows furrowed. “Even if we were to get involved, we'd have to wait until the omrivim magic is revealed in the Wishing Stars, which could take a while. That magic is is tricky to find—very rare—”

“You are entertaining this idea?” Vilmad asked. Emunah shrugged. “If this vaene was such a threat, we would have heard about it by now, and I, personally, would have destroyed it. I see no point in Lisa risking the loss of the Agapéd for something as trivial as a powerless vaene to help one human friend.” He looked at me. “Lisa, simply tell me where to find this vaene, and I'll see that it's guarded until its Maalison is lifted—”

“I can't.”

Crap—shouldn't have said that.

Their stares thudded against my skin like slung stones, but none were as nicking as Vilmads. “What do you *mean* you ‘can't’?” he reiterated.

I sucked in a deep breath and stared everywhere his eyes weren't. “I just... well, I can't, and I'm not passing up the chance to get rid of it, which is why I need to stay in the games.”

“*Agapéd*—I don't know what you are thinking, but you can't assume you will win—”

“But I will. I promise you that because I am not losing my magic to him.”

Vilmad used to scare me, but sitting in that chair, I became more annoyed by the long-haired Guardian than anything else. I didn't care if he was a powerful being. I didn't care if he was doing what he logically thought was best because it never was about *my* feelings—only the Agapéd's safety. I didn't care if he was an adult, either. If that vaene was not stopped by tomorrow, Setzyr would keep controlling Nuolja and the

Dark Sages. He'd end up killing me, too. So... Vilmad was just an irritating, robe-wearing obstacle with too-long hair that stood in my way.

Emunah giggled. "Leaving a little girl to do your job, Vilmad?"

"Lisa, are you sure about this?" Gaius put his hand on my shoulder and stared me in the eye before Vilmad could even comment.

Boldness took over. "I can win this. I promise."

His thin smile protruded underneath his trimmed facial hair, causing me to grin, too. He stood back up. "Let her play."

"You barbaric *fool!*" Vilmad snarled. "You honestly believe she will win against this grown man?"

"I do." He pivoted toward Zephan, stepping closer, forgetting about personal space. "But she is *not* staying here tonight, and there better be security on this other contestant at all times before tomorrow."

"That is fine..." Zephan leered down at me. "I have no doubt Lisa will win this."

48 The Deal

I never cared about looking pretty before a battle, especially when it was less than two hours away.

Zephan's workers thought otherwise.

When I showed up in normal practice wear—shorts and a tank top with some knee braces—three women came and dragged me away, saying I needed to look “champion ready”... but I was pretty sure a champion didn't need to wear lip-gloss or have their hair freshened up pre-battle. Gaius sure didn't teach me that. They gave me clothing that was breathable at least, not covered in heavy armor, and in the hues of lavender and white. It even coordinated with my weaponry belt I bought with my Charmer credits, which the women reluctantly let me wear after I gave them my baby-doll eyes.

I presumably looked good as I stared at myself in the changing room's mirror... and at that moment, I remembered I was the only one who knew the true stakes behind the tournament.

Honestly, I had forgotten I was a piece of entertainment for paying customers just wanting to see another brutal magic spar. I even forgot I would be on television galaxy-wide. None of that mattered. The only thing swirling through my mind in an endless loop was my plan.

All night, when Gaius thought I was sound asleep, I was awake and alert, running through strategies for how to win the tournament. Punching and swinging some rock would not be enough to defeat the leader of the Dark Sages—no way. He definitely had something cruel up his sleeve, and I gambled on the fact he would try to kill me with more magic rot. With the amount of magic he had and what Lady Ariela said last week... one hit from the vaene-infested mist and I would be dead. *Dead*.

After looping the final lace on my boots, the Paragon Game women led me out the door—camera and Zephan ready. We walked down the hall where men and women of all different shades and silhouettes stood. I was sure they were saying something to me, but my thoughts drowned out their words—rendering them mere background noise.

The Setzyr-defeating plan... the blueprint I had chosen... was *more* than risky: It was chaotically insane to the tenth degree.

But... it was the only thing that would ensure my victory and prevent Setzyr from killing me with more rot.

Cameras flared like strobe lights as I stepped foot into the cavaedium, right behind Joolee and two other workers who I didn't even notice guiding me the entire time. Before, my eyes stared at the floor, but in that room, it was hard not to look around.

Familiar faces were rare—couldn't find anyone other than a glimpse of Reno standing in the crowd—while the wealthy strangers were many, dressed in wrinkle-free suits and with ties strangling their necks. They had to be sponsors for the game... or they simply enjoyed watching a grown man fight a teenage girl. Or possibly just desired magic for the money it brought.

Voices floated my name around and asked questions. The workers barricaded me, pushing the reporters away as I walked further inside the chatty room. *I really didn't think there would be this many—*

"Excuse me?" One man's voice snapped me out of my head. A very enchanting voice, not anything like the naggy reporters.

When I looked up, it was *him*—not the "him" I was about to fight.

It was the Hero, the famous Hero I saw in Boolavogue with Sana months ago: Gladius Snow. He wasn't wearing a suit like most of the men. He was in something even more distinguished. His copper hair grazed his brow, trimmed neatly above his shoulders, the hue harmonizing with the chains around his belt latched onto his thick, stainless slacks. Silky designs of lightning and mountains were cleverly disguised on his one-sleeved jacket, which hid his left arm and showed off the muscles on his right. To top it off, his eyes were big like a puppy's, giving warmth to his chiseled face. He was a Hero from head to toe.

My feet stopped before the captivating gladiator as he held out his right hand—gloved in a strange material. It resembled a metallic fabric, clearly embedded with magic.

"Gladius Snow," he said to me. When I grabbed his hand, his palm was cold while his fingers were warm like fine beach sand. "Happy to see a Hunter prodigy from Boolavogue make it this far."

How can one man's voice be so dashing?

I nodded my starstruck head with my jaw still dropped. "Oh, thank you for saying that, sir."

He smiled like he perfected the art. “You’ll do well in the games. Good luck to you, Miss Lisa.”

He remembered my name? Am I really that well-known—Wait... this is the finals... Kinda forgot I’m also a bit famous now...

Mr. Snow disappeared back into the crowd while Joolee and some others stood as shocked as me to see the Hero at the games. *These are even a big deal for Heroes, too.*

We made it toward the front, where I was led onto the stage... right next to the repulsive grime of a man, and it seemed every spotlight in the universe was aimed down at us two. I didn’t look into his eyes, only at his pant legs and black boots. *I can’t stand even being next to him...*

I was thankful for the blaring lights overhead, the beams blinding the crowd from my gaze. My focus was on the battle, and I knew if I saw more people I recognized, it would drive my anxious heart into a frenzy. Telling my mind not to think of the King of Boolavogue and now the Hero, Gladius Snow, watching me was like telling a kid not to think about Santa Claus watching their every move.

Don’t think about who’s out there, Lisa... It’s only you and the blue-eyed pig you need to worry about...

A thunderous applause commenced as the Game Keeper took center stage, cueing two cameras to start recording. Zephan was dressed in a suit as white as pearls, accented with a tie of cerulean and silver. His most alluring ensemble yet. The sapphire gems, crafted into cufflinks, stood out on his clean sleeves, and the diamond-embedded silver chain around his left ear was visible due to his perfect long hair styled to his right shoulder. He was stunning, but his smile was different. It looked forced.

If he can sense the power in my heart, he can sense Setzyr’s, too... which means Zephan has to know that the man on the stage next to me is out for more than just the title of winner.

When Zephan’s eyes flicked to mine, all I wanted to do was tell him not to worry—that I had a plan. But I couldn’t. Instead, I nodded. Staying brave.

“My dear friends and welcomed guests,” Zephan said, sounding like his typical Game Keeper persona, “before we begin, I would like to thank our very own head of the Magic Embassy, Chairman Abdon Aurelius, for joining in our festivities and helping us in providing the grand prize of a wysh.”

What—he's here?

Zephan's hand gestured to the top of the room toward a lavish balcony.

A man, probably fifty years old, pudgy, and dressed in a velvet charcoal suit, stood at the top. He had a thick beard that hid his double chin and any trace of happiness—if there was any—contrasting his shaved bald head. When he gave a subtle wave, everyone could tell he was wearing mountains of gold rings on his fingers. Looked like shooting stars were bouncing off the walls when the spotlight hit his knuckles. By far, he was the wealthiest man in the room, and for a first impression of the guy, I was both surprised and bothered by his presence.

So that's the Magic Embassy leader... I bet he's just here to make sure the Keeper does his job. Why would he ever care for a silly game?

The audience below clapped for the kingpin, though he didn't seem to care. His pride was as big as his belly.

Zephan continued to give his speech, more relaxed and charismatic. "The sun paints our arena with an array of opalescent colors, not only in celebration of the final tournament between our fighters but in awe of the power of magic. All twelve of our Paragon Game contestants have shown that magic is something to be revered and respected in both power and adoration..."

The blonde Keeper extended his opened palm out toward me and Setzyr. "And our final two, Setzyr Tzelem and Lisa Robbie, are here today because they've shown what it means to use that power cleverly, packaged with skill and willpower. But by the time the sun sets, there will only be *one* who will rise at the top, proving them to be"—he looked toward Setzyr's position—"the mightiest Mystic"—his head turned toward me—"or bravest Mage... Now, I am sure many of you are here to see what type of battle our final two fighters will participate in. So, let us not waste any more time."

Zephan brought his hands together as if pulling strands of thread out of thin air. Suddenly, a cosmic jar of yellow appeared in his palms. Subtle *oohs* and *aahs* whispered from the audience. The bowl was ordinary glass, but within it was Zephan's magic. Golden waves of the ocean spun, carrying sand of the brightest starry island.

"Inside here, my trusted Paragon Game staff and I have submitted many types of spars and battles they believe would impress you and the crowd. Battles that test the limits of the power between our final two. A

randomized selection would seem fair, but then again, having luck earn the honor of choosing would be no fun, now would it?”

My eyebrows lifted subtly as I stared at the back of Zephan’s head.

“The power I have been bestowed with can sense the most potent magic within our universe, and it also knows what battle would best fit our fighters... so, *it* will determine what spar will be placed. I can assure you, magic choosing magic is far more captivating than letting little luck do the job.” He cocked a grin so big I could see it from the corner of his tan jawline.

“Now, to *who* gets the honor of pulling out the name of the spar... I feel should be the youngest in the room.” Zephan turned his eyes to me.

Wait—what? Is this even allowed? I mean—for real?

Zephan, with his pot of gold snug in his palms, stared at me as the cavaedium fell silent... reminding me I hadn’t even moved a muscle.

“Lisa...” the blonde spokesman said, “would you mind doing us the honor?”

I do mind—and it’s a no! Everyone is staring at me, probably thinking this is rigged!

“Oh—of course,” I timidly answered after bowing my head. No way was I about to go against the Keeper.

Five steps were all it took for me to stand beside Zephan and his jar of magic. He lowered his arms so I could reach inside the glass pot without standing on my tiptoes. The golden dust zoomed fast and felt like feathers whipping across my fingers once my hand was completely submerged.

What exactly am I supposed to be doing anyway—

Suddenly, a piece of paper—as thin and narrow as one stuffed inside a fortune cookie—placed itself between my fingers. I didn’t have to dig or push the glitter around; it was like it was drawn to me, one of the most bizarre feelings I ever experienced—and I’ve touched a Wishing Star and read the minds of countless animals.

With the paper clinging like a magnet, the golden sand fell off my arm and stopped swirling. The room’s ambiance changed, diverting from controlled excitement to dense anticipation.

Zephan made the gold pot magically disappear, and I handed the tiny, folded paper to the Keeper.

He smiled. “It’s yours to read, Lisa.”

Okay, public speaking was NOT a part of today’s grueling tasks.

Nervousness about the day made my hands a bit sweaty, so opening the paper was embarrassingly easy. The pressure of the camera recording my every movement for all those at home and in the stands to see had my next breath stuck in my throat. It didn't take me long to read the spar. There were only two words, and it was something I was even surprised to see.

This... this is what Zephan's Keeper magic picked?

With my brows slightly furrowed, my voice magically grew louder even though I whispered the words as a question, "'Traditional Spar'?"

The room was so dead quiet that I could hear at least twenty different opinions—good, bad, annoyed—all in the form of English words and wealthy gasps.

I passed the paper to Zephan for him to confirm to everyone I was telling the truth.

He, surprisingly, was pleased with the style, giving a grin to the camera. "A Traditional Spar it shall be, then. I must say... this was not what I expected. Then again, simplicity doesn't always mean less thrilling, especially with these two behind me. I, for one, am *quite* excited and say... let the games begin." He dismissed everyone, and now, all there was to do was wait.

...

The sun was high in the sky, poking in and out of flooding clouds that wafted over the crowd. Zephan's paid fighters battled through pre-game matches—hyped the fans—even had Reno out there fighting a beefy colleague to please the hungry eyes. Each fan in the stadium was mesmerized as I stared outside the viewing window, eating away at snacks and buying merchandise from the Gallant Arena vendors. Many probably saved up their credits for weeks and waited hours in line to get tickets while others, the VIP guests, had to come because it brought *them* a lot of money. I bet even some were on vacation with their kids. *Children*. Kind of a strange thing to bring a toddler here, in my opinion.

All of the fans, though, were loving every second, overjoyed they could snag a seat at the sold-out pageantry of magic.

To them—and to anyone watching from the outside—it was a magnificent sport. Picking me or Setzyr to root for had no meaning to them other than a reason to cheer. They had no idea a criminal was about to walk out there or that the Agapéd had returned if they even cared about that.

They all thought we were there for a wysh, but in truth, it was a battle of life and death... and I did not plan on losing.

Joolee told us to be ready at our dignified archways—me at the south end and Setzyr at the north—when the countdown on the live-game broadcast showed fifteen minutes left.

“30:00” was displayed in a bold white font when I moved away from the window.

Time for my plan to commence...

I went down the hallway until I found a worker, one who knew where Setzyr was. Without any idea of my agenda, he carelessly took me to the Nuoljian at the bottom level near the Northern Arch. Sun gleamed through the wall-to-wall window, the pre-game battles roaring. My heart pounded.

And there he was, staring out the window with two workers standing guard at his door. *Wonder if this is the “security” Gaius told Zephan to get...*

Setzyr stood with his back to me, long hair tied in his usual low ponytail, but was without a shirt—showing off his arm and back muscles—perfectly tan and not too sculpted to be considered unnatural. Not a single scar tarnished his back. *If this is his intimidation tactic, it won’t work on me. Gaius’ muscles are way beefier, and I spar against him all the time.*

The battle outside—two elemental Mages performing a sole-survivor spar—was pretty loud, but for some reason, the clicking of my shoes grabbed the partisan’s attention.

When he turned, a leery smile appeared under his pointed nose. Could call it excitement in a sick, twisted sort of way.

“Mind if we talk?” I asked him, not fidgeting one bit.

Setzyr looked toward the workers. They traded blank stares.

“... if that is alright?” I added.

The workers moved away from us, keeping our silhouettes under surveillance but out of eavesdropping range.

I stood next to the tan thirty-something-year-old man, the tip of my head reaching the height of his bicep. He smelled like nothing, not even sweat or Paragon Game bathroom soap, and looked very champion-esque. Compared to me, he would win if physical strength was the only thing involved. Glad that wasn’t the case.

“It will be quite a show,” he said, a weird first choice of words, but it wasn’t like I expected anything good or courteous to come out of his mouth. “Did you honestly believe you would make it this far, Lisa of Boolavogue?”

My hands lay still by my thighs, hitting the hem of the dark purple shorts. “I want to make a deal with you,” I said without looking up at his face, ignoring whatever tactic he was trying to pull with the question before.

“A deal? Heh—I am guessing it has to do with our match coming up?”

I nodded. “This rot you put on my back... right now, I know it could probably kill me at any time if you hit me with just one more shot of it. Well... I like living, and I have people worth living for... and I know the only way to get rid of it is by using a magiblood stone to suck out all magic. Knowing you, you probably have one with you right now, given who you are.” I flicked my eyes up. “Am I right?”

The polar ice hue in his irises shimmered with pernicious pleasure. *He truly is a dark man—finding joy even in the thought of me asking for his stupid stone.*

“I do.” As if the shadows obeyed him, Setzyr lifted his hand from his trouser pocket and held a scarlet and black rock in his palm, all without being noticed by the workers. The stone’s tip was sharp, a thick rotting needle. “Quite a dangerous assumption for you... and even more so that you know how to cure the sickness and have not gone through with it. Is it because you knew the consequences?”

I nodded my head again before staring out the window. “During the game, while we are fighting, I will let you use that stone on me to get rid of my rot, which also means...” I released a deep breath. “You will have my magic, too. This, obviously, would mean you would not need your wysh. We recorded our wishes, and I know you can’t ask for something else. So, instead, you use *my* wysh. *You* save Nuolja and give them the freedom they deserve.”

My fists clenched as hated words began to sprout. “You’ll be a Hero to them and have my magic... and *I* still get to live. I won’t reveal your identity if you use the wysh to save Nuolja. But if you take my magic and don’t use the wysh for Nuolja, I’ll just turn you into the authorities. It won’t matter if you have my magic then.”

Setzyr scoffed at my deal before I even had a chance to ask if he agreed. “You truly want me to believe that you, the Agapéd, are willing to let an evildoer like me go free with the most powerful magic in the universe just because you want to live and see this vaene destroyed—freeing a people that isn’t even your own?” That smirky smile of his faded. “I do not believe you—”

“I want to live more than I want the Agapéd, okay?” My eyes shut tight as my head drooped to the floor. “This magic wasn’t even something I wanted in the first place...”

The words felt so dirty... but it had to be done. I had to do whatever it took to get Setzyr to take my rot away because I knew I could *never* win if he shot me with another spear of that dark vaene-infested magic. And gambling with the Agapéd—thinking what happened last time would happen again—was an even greater risk. Lady Ariela said she had never seen a phenomenon like that... but it was the only shot I had.

“Despite your opinions of me,” I continued, “I *do* care about Nuolja and the friends I’ve made there. I don’t want to see any more of them suffer... even if that means never having magic again.”

Please... please just let this work...

He laughed discreetly so as to not alert workers, taking pleasure in my pain. “You do know, the extraction process will be excruciating since you will be conscious. And unlike last time, I will make sure to drain every last drop of the Agapéd Magic—Water, Terrain, Flight, and those pesky purple flames of yours. You’re willing to bask in that type of torment?”

“I’ve survived death and was blown off a cliff by someone ten times more powerful than you...” I stood unblinking. “A slice from a stone means nothing to me.”

Setzyr stretched another slick smile. “I see... you would give up your power—your magic pulse—and go through *unbearable* agony for a land that is not your own... You know, Lisa, I thought you were finally one that would show me how strong The Light truly is in Man...”

He leaned forward just enough so we were closer to eye level. “But *you* are *soft*, and The Light you so carelessly follow has made you that way. Now, Darkness—the thing you fight—is not evil. It is *grand*—a necessity, really. Without it, the magic you’ve grown to love and wield would not exist. Dark magic is neither good nor bad, contrary to what you’ve been taught. It gifts people the strength to make shelter and even allows Nuolja

to thrive into a civilization like it is today. The Kingdom of Boolavogue, for instance, makes its living on the reliance of dark creatures continuing to appear so they can send Hunters out to kill the prey.”

Setzyr crossed his bare arms and looked out the window as the Mages’ battle concluded. “Darkness is meant to be enjoyed and admired. Even the Wishing Stars bask in the shadows of night. They cannot be birthed without dark magic intertwined within their fibers. If they need darkness to flourish, why should the human heart be any different?”

My nose scrunched up as I, too, crossed my arms, but only because the inner Gaius in me was showing. Out of all the wise and witty things I heard the brawny Keeper of Stars say, I had a library to pick from to explain why Setzyr’s reason was incorrect.

“Well, that’s *stupid*...” I stuck with the Lisa Robbie style instead. Setzyr snickered at my remark, but I wasn’t finished. “No one would ever admire a starless sky. It’s the stars they come to see—the light. You can say what you want about magic and have your own opinions about what to do with it, but those Wishing Stars are grown with The Light in mind. Because even without the night sky, the stars are *still* worth admiring. They don’t need the dark to be strong and bright; they can do it all on their own.”

I stared at his repulsive face. “Before you win, we put on a good show... to make this seem like an ordinary battle. So, let me win round 1... I’d like to use my magic one last time, and *in turn*, you receive the Agapéd and use the wysht to save the Nuoljians, or I *will* reveal your secret.” The clock outside inched toward the fifteen-minute mark. “Do we have a deal?”

No words came from Setzyr as he watched the crowd. It was the first time I saw him pondering something, not scheming. “You can have the first round... but if you try anything else—”

“You’ll kill me with rot... I know.”

He huffed. “You are unlike anyone I’ve ever met, Lisa of Boolavogue—more clever than most men and more brave than any child... but still just as selfish...”

A BURST went off outside, and the stadium began to rumble and chant.

It was time.

“I like that.” Setzyr held out his hand. “We have a deal.”

I took his hand in mine, relieved and frightened because I knew in less than fifteen minutes, I had to trust that the Agapéd would not leave my

heart.

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49 “Because I am the Agapéd.”

No bandanas for this traditional spar—the Paragon Games were too exuberant for something as cheap and flimsy as that. Instead, it was a one-inch thick collar made of fluffy cotton, a sweatband turned into a comfortable choker. A plastic clasp was on the front, small and easy to push, that unhooked the necklace. Though it was comfortable and less likely to get in the way, it was harder to grab for me. Knowing Setzyr had the same one, I would have to be right up at his face—already tricky enough because of the height difference—and I’d have to do more than just reach out my arm and grab his.

Mine was blue, and I was told Setzyr’s was red as I stood at the entrance of the Southern Arch.

Three medics—the same women who assisted me with the rot from last week—were on standby, outwardly anxious about the battle. Joolee was there as well. I took my flask of water out of my orbkit and clasped the bottle’s rim on the hook of my belt, the last piece of my plan.

Joolee noticed. “We didn’t drain the water below since it was used during the pregame shows. You’d still be able to spar.”

I held my breath, noting the countdown displayed “5:01”. “I just like having this by my side. It gives me a bit of relief knowing it’s near... Is that still okay?”

If it hadn't been Joolee standing there— who had been with me since the beginning of the games—I probably would’ve been told no. But she pinched a smile after ensuring the other medics weren’t watching. “It’s not breaking the rules, so it should be fine. You need it for your magic, after all.” She nodded. “Be safe out there.”

I nodded and faced the arena.

Everything is ready...

Sunrays barreled onto the rink just in time for our match, an organic spotlight about to be completely focused on me, lighting up every feature on my face, arms, and legs. The air swam with the deafening cheers. Each fan blared loudly, engulfed with excitement. *Just concentrate, Lisa—focus.*

One minute remained as I stood at the edge of the archway’s colossal shadow. It was a little excessive for a door to a 100-yard rink, but

that was the “Zephan way” for sure, and I was nothing but a toothpick under the shadow of a two-story-high entrance.

Truly, I was terrified—scared straight stiff—especially when I knew I was one punch away from dying of rot. But... I wasn’t shaking. I was hopeful, trusting, because I knew the Agapéd had chosen me. For some reason, it led me down this path, and I would not fail... I had no choice...

Two sparks shot up into the blue sky as the timer on the broadcast showed “00:00”. The announcer beamed in his charismatic, game-loving voice, *“It is time! This is the moment all you Mages and Mystics have been waiting for! Right now, we are about to see two of Kalm’s strongest magic-wielding charmcasters duel it out for the title of Paragon Games Champion and a once-in-a-lifetime wysh! Now, give a hand and cheer for our final fighters!”*

White lights emitted from beneath the elevated rink, making the water shimmer and the concrete walls of the ground floor appear less gritty and gray. Moments after, red geysers of light burst from the North Arch. And Setzyr began walking out of its shadow.

“He’s a valiant co-leader of the Nuoljian province in the arctic region of Kalm and a powerful phantasmal Mystic of red remnants—Red Torrent. He’s fast and strong and flew effortlessly through the first three challenges. He’s our Fighter 4—Setzyr Tzelem.”

I growled. Nostrils flared—watching as he took his stance at the white circle twenty yards from the center line.

Two blue rays shot up from the ground near my archway’s base, and I began to walk forward. The crowd cheered louder for me, only because I was the unpredictable one and happened to be a kid in an adult’s game.

“Taking the whole games by storm is our youngest fighter, hailing from the land of Monster Hunters. Though she’s only fourteen, her magic is as strong as a Hero’s, and her battling skills are as sharp as a sword. Actions speak louder than words for her, and she’s shown she is not one to be messed with, so give it up for Fighter 12, Lisa Robbie!”

Earthquakes roared from within my chest that I had to ignore, rumbling my heart with each step toward my enemy. Fear bound to my bones like muscles and fat, and no matter how much I hated that emotion, it drove me forward. It kept me on my toes, alert and ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

He stood with a lewd smile, wearing a red choker around his neck and still without a shirt, nothing like the monsters I've hunted. This man was cunning and didn't fight me because of some instinct. He *chose* Darkness while I chose Light. He *chose* to fight a teenager—to kill me—all because he could, making him worse than a soulless beast.

I took my position in the white circle, exactly forty yards from Setzyr. My elbows straightened with my palms face down to the floor. Setzyr bent his knees, vaene-infused magic spiraling around his fingertips. Though we had a deal, there was no way I was going down without a fight.

“Whoever can claim possession of their opponent's neckband in two of the three matches will be our winner! Let's see some magic!”

As soon as the golden firework of bursting stars struck the midday sky, I shot off toward the Nuoljian. Setzyr quickly pulled back his arm to send a long-range attack, but out from the arena's edges, I summoned lassos of water. Blue bubbly ropes all moved at viper-esque speeds and immediately froze as they touched his skin, latching onto both of his wrists from behind. It was almost too easy.

He let me bind him. At least, he is sticking to our deal... but I'm not winning the first round without a little flashiness...

Setzyr yanked his arms and jerked at the sudden restraint, the crowd roaring around us. He leered at me, as if to say *Go ahead, take my neckband and win.*

I had other plans. I moved within seconds. The concrete underneath the wooden floorboards *cracked* and jolted me forward like an organic spring headed straight for the enemy. Rubble knuckled my fist, a gritty punch coming his way.

Setzyr lost that sinister grin in an instant—shocked I even attempted to fight—probably questioning whether my deal was legitimate.

While I reached for his body, his right arm broke free of the frozen bind, followed by another cheer from the crowd. A red glowing blade of magic, jagged and the length of ten feet, blasted out of his palm toward me, but I wasn't afraid anymore.

My feet hit the floor quickly to dodge the magic spear while I whipped my flask water at his arm. Sliding on the glossy floor with my knee pads, I froze more water on his wrist. Ice slit his skin, and blood freckled the air.

Gritting his teeth, he lost all concentration, and his red blade of mist faltered.

Here's my chance!

I didn't waste a blink or breath. My palms shot out as I ran, stripping concrete off the walls and slinging two garlands at Setzyr's feet.

His soles were cemented to the ground in less than two seconds, knees wobbling as I ran right up to his left side. He expected me to grab his neckband—taking his right arm and aiming toward my head—but, to his surprise, I summoned a wave of water and *thrust* a column of ice under his chin.

His teeth clenched down when my ice attack nailed him, knocking his head back while my frozen chains pulled his wrists down behind his back. A creature caught in a perfect Hunter trap.

As the crowd thundered, I saw Setzyr's discombobulated eyes. Blue glacier pits swimming with shock. *Did he believe I was just about to give him my magic without punching him at least once, or did he underestimate my skills just because of my age?*

In his bewilderment, I knelt low to the ground and held out my fists—pointed knuckles and everything.

Bang! Bang! I hit the two pressure points on his left thigh with two dúlaman strikes, causing his leg to fall asleep.

He crumbled forward—our eye level matched.

Now, *I* looked down on *him*.

Ice cracked from one of the chains, followed by blades of red whipping around his palm, so I quickly used my left hand to summon my flask water. A parade of icicles, as sharp as an inarimar's teeth, surrounded me like an army of floating daggers. It was a fear tactic, his focus on the blades and not on my hand reaching for his neck. The moment our blue eyes made eye contact, it was over for him.

My little hand grabbed the collar as he stared at the legion of ice shards hovering inches away from his body. And I clicked the button.

Ice chains pulled him back, allowing the force to help me rip the choker off his body. He went down while I stood tall.

“Not even giving us time to blink! Lisa Robbie has secured the brace off of Setzyr Tzelem's neck—barely even breaking a sweat!” the announcer said, elated, though exaggerating the last part.

The icicles I created fell to the ground and puddled, though I pushed the heftiest, glittery one—as tough as an iceberg—off to the side.

I stood looking down at Setzyr bound in my concrete and frosted chains. I was breathing heavily—sweating *a lot*, actually—watching the villain beneath me stare at the ground during our two-minute break.

His voice was angry, startled, and gruesome as he spoke—not a tone meant for a kid but for an enemy. “I said you could win the first round, *not* make a fool out of me.”

I threw his sweatband at his hands as I unbound his limbs. I didn’t apologize.

The Nuoljian stood close to me, rubbing his frost-bitten wrists, hair matted on his muscular shoulders. For the first time, he was irate, puffing his chest. Some workers were about to come out from the archway, concerned my opponent was about to hit me during our break. Setzyr played by the rules.

He didn’t touch me, only spoke.

“If you don’t wish to die by another shot of rot on your back, then you’ll do as I say.” A bitter, nightmarish whisper. “When I pin you down, you are not to move and to let me drain your magic. It will take multiple injections for it not to seem suspicious... and it will be painful since you are not put to sleep like last time.”

The sun’s intensity hit the top of Setzyr’s head, shadowing his entire face as it loomed over me. His lip was busted, and his arms were sprinkled red. Blue flames sparked in his eyes. Not the cool, polar ice hue he normally showed through squinted eyelids. “And no more of your barbaric Hunter tricks, Agapéd.”

I headed toward the white ring without responding. No doubt—what was about to happen next terror-struck me. I let a saw-cutting breath escape my throat. *My plan has to work... I’m not even going to guess the success rate.*

My hands sprawled out toward the floor as I saw Setzyr snapping his degrading red collar back around his neck. Flying sparks bolted through the blue sky, cueing round two.

My heart braced for impact. Never had I fought a battle where I had to tell my body to *let* itself get hit, and I knew Setzyr would not go easy on me.

The Nuoljian fired a parade of magical red shards toward me—darting along the ground’s surface like a sea monster breaking waves underneath a scarlet ocean.

In a heartbeat, I used the concrete beneath the rink’s glossy floor to do the same, *smashing* Setzyr’s attack into pieces. Red bits of magic flew into the air like gray and bloody confetti, making an unpleasant fog that blurred my vision. Dark and rubbled ash blinded everything.

Not even giving me time to put my hands up to clear the concrete particles away, something sliced the side of my calf. I wobbled as pain raged. My arm went to reach down but was instantly seized with a red and black whip, pulling me straight to the ground. I landed hard on my shoulder—rattling my brain. He was flying toward me.

Setzyr slammed down more red phantasmal magic, creating a plethora of fiery dust as his body hovered over me. The audience couldn’t see anything, but I could. I could see him—far too close and uncomfortably easy.

Fear like I had never known before shackled my heart.

Never had a grown man towered over me—not even Gaius when we sparred—and my nerves panicked.

I didn’t like it—didn’t like it at all. And horror had my chest sawing up and down. He pressed hard on my left arm, finding the perfect spot to suck out my magic. I could’ve pushed him off with a concrete column or a crashing wave, but I didn’t. I had to let it happen. Let that foul man touch my body and remove the thing I loved.

As if it were an everyday task, Setzyr whipped out the stone like a switchblade and jabbed my arm with the one-inch needle.

I winced and clenched my teeth. That *pain*—that *fire*. My magic being drained by that stone was like getting injected with poison. It sucked away my stamina and the air in my lungs, replacing it with hot coals. My muscles tensed up, causing the pain in my calf and spine to hurt even more. All I wanted to do was shove the morbid man off my body.

If it weren’t for the crowd cheering, my cry would’ve been heart-grindingly pitiful.

The dust faded. With a malicious smile, the sweaty tan Nuoljian removed the stone but *not* my blue neckband. He jumped, and a wave of red swatted me away like a fly.

I slung down the rink twenty yards.

Skidding on concrete and busted wooden chips from the arena floor, I tried to stop myself with water, but I couldn't move a single wave or bubble. At first, I thought it was because of the magiblood stone's power, but my body was *hurting*—a pain I usually felt spiking up my spine. *Lisa—don't die—not yet—*

As my body halted—splinters raiding my back—tiredness took over, and my hands felt as if they had been wading in arctic water. I looked down at my calf. It wasn't just bleeding.

A blotch of black rot, the length of my hand, was beginning to spread like bloody ink.

I didn't even have time to think or breathe. Setzyr came barreling toward me again. I was a fool for not expecting he would try to hurt me and still obtain my magic, but there was nothing more I could do.

Setzyr had already smashed more red particles in the air, creating another veil on top of us.

The stone's injection hurt twice as bad the second time, causing me to yell even louder, tears puddling across my face, but my cry was still swallowed up in the chanting of the crowd.

When I opened my veiny eyes, Setzyr looked like a beast craving food after starvation. His long hair dangled over his bulky shoulders, and his chest hovered inches from mine. This man... he was addicted to magic and loved every bit of me squirming underneath him—minutes if not seconds away from death.

But the longer the stone absorbed, the less my body hurt. The rot was disappearing... along with my magic.

Raspy and sinister with his voice as Setzyr loomed over me. "Your magic is strong, Lisa." He wrapped his hand around my neckband and pushed the button in the middle. "So, don't stay down too long and cause those medics to start running."

Setzyr won the second match.

Sunshine cut through the red and gray dust. The crowd cheered, but they weren't as loud as they were with my victory.

As the announcer gave the credit and adoration to Setzyr for his magical performance, I slowly got off the ground. My forearm was bleeding in two spots from the stone, and the gash on my calf made my nerves spike with pain when I stood on it, but my mind wouldn't let me forget why I was doing this.

Ayker, the kids, and every Vit on that arctic island went through this every week—getting their magic drained for profit. Having it drained from me hurt physically but it also tore my spirit—knowing I could not move water and barely could make a stone skip across the battle rink.

As I noticed some medics staring me down, I quickly dried up my tears and put the blue cotton collar back around my neck. *Just let him finish, Lisa... and don't let him win this match... and don't let him kill you either.*

"It's neck and neck! Round 3! Whoever wins this match will be our Paragon Games Champion of Planet Kalm!" the announcer called while I made the long trek back to my white circle.

I held up my powerless fists, and Setzyr discreetly rubbed the stone in between his fingers. The magiblood rock was now glowing a faint purple, but from our distance, neither the audience nor the cameras seemed to notice. Everything looked normal outside of our forty-yard bubble.

The final spark of yellow shot off into the summer sky, and Setzyr sent a wall of red in my direction.

Instinctively, I tried to whip concrete at him, but only a strand of rocks the length of a necklace leaped off the ground. Defenselessness was another thing I hadn't felt in a long while, and more despair stockpiled in my heart. I ran to my right, trying to evade Setzyr's attack. His magic turned a ninety-degree angle and grabbed my ankle anyway.

SMACK—pain surged through my body as I thudded to the ground, a new bruise painting my cheek, more fuzz clogging my brain. Amid the blurred shadows and stars boggling my head, I saw the vile man running toward me for a third time.

Setzyr jumped on me, not creating as much red fog as before, and punctured my skin once again. Scarlet and purple threads stained up and down my arm, along with smudges of blood from Setzyr's hands gripping my skin—forcing the magic to squeeze out.

I hated every terrifying second as I lay defenseless underneath him.

Then, his hand grabbed my arm.

Wait—what's he—

I was nothing but loose debris as Setzyr slung me around one more time, whipping my already bleeding arm with a grip of his Red Torrent. The crowd's cheering grew fainter as if worry was sitting in the stands. I bet they just wanted to see the magic battle they were promised, not a pathetic massacre.

Setzyr didn't bother to create any more dust as he scraped my arm again—only needing three seconds—and my heart felt incomplete. The beating it once had was sad and normal, even without the rot holding it captive any longer. All the beauty and color and curiosity of magic faded from my eyes.

He had done it... but...

Why isn't he letting me go?

My body, all scratched and rot-free, still lay beneath the Nuoljian as he cast his shadow over me and clasped the stone tight in his palm, avoiding the pointed edge. A sinister, delightful smile drew across his face. His fingers wrapped around my neck.

No grip was made on my neckband.

He—he was pushing air right out of me.

I instantly clawed his hands even though there wasn't enough strength in me to pry his fingers away from my windpipe.

"You are a naïve *fool*, Lisa," he riled while I continued to wiggle around, tears and air being pushed out of me. "Did you really believe I would allow you to walk away and not reveal my identity? You trust too easily and think like a child... and now, I will make sure you don't make it out alive... even if that means immobilizing you here and now."

Everyone—even the announcer—thought Setzyr was about to win, but when he released his grip, he didn't push the button on my blue choker.

My breathing was frantic as I watched him stand tall over my body as if he had already won. Then, while I was about to roll over, Setzyr swung his leg at my stomach. No magic, just a hefty kick to my abdomen with his boot. Nothing about it was against the rules, but the objective was to grab the neckband, *not* to keep me on the ground.

It felt like a bowling ball hit me with the intent to knock over every pin in every lane. My arms cradled my gut as I scrunched into the fetal position. My body slid across the damaged arena floor, painting two streaks of red.

Cr-crap! W-why is he doing—

He swung a vermillion wave of spikes toward me. My reflex was to put up a column of concrete, but nothing happened except my arms flailing defensively.

Setzyr's attack hit my bare skin straight on, cutting my forearms and adding more stinging—more rot—to my already battered body.

And the arena became nothing but blotches of sun and shadows as I cried—my voice unrecognizable. Setzyr began to walk over to me, ignoring the gasps from the crowd. *Please—just stop—*

He snarled loudly, looking at me as if I was nothing but dirt, “You are weak, Lisa—stupid and innocent to give up your power.” His saunter slowed, and he swayed with snide glee. “And I know how your magic works. It requires your pathetic heart.”

I willed all my strength into my hand. My palm slammed on the ground to hoist me up, feeling the warmth of my blood dripping down to my wrist, painting over my freckles. *Come on, Agapéd! Please—tell me you’re still in there—make some magic!*

Setzyr flung his hand toward me. More red waves pushed me down. My head landed with a thud, the audience’s cheers turning all too quiet.

Setzyr didn’t care. Chaos boiled in his throat as he shouted, “You were chosen to have this magic—the *Agapéd*—and now look at you! I told you, Lisa—powerful magic deserves powerful users, and you’ve proven to me,” Setzyr extended his arms, including the one holding the stone, “to everyone here, that *you* were not meant for this. You—the *Agapéd*—a child? It was as if you were *meant* to fail!”

Though I couldn’t hear clearly, the crowd in the first few rows grew silent. Their roars and chants—all of it—turned into hushed gossip with their stadium seat neighbor. There was no doubt they heard Setzyr’s voice... hearing him say I was the *Agapéd*.

My hand kept slamming on an invisible button, hoping for a pulse of water or rumble of rock, as Setzyr gazed at the stone in his fingers.

I am not failing—not like this—not by him!

He admired the stone’s magenta glow—forgetting about the match and my neckband.

“*Get up, Lisa!*” an ocean of cheers rang from the crowd. “*Get up!*”

I heard them, but my body was in so much pain I could not move my knees, pushing all my energy into my hand. *Magic—please! Don’t be gone—just please—*

The Nuoljian took two steps forward. “I want to thank you, Lisa, because now...” Setzyr began to press his finger in the center of the stone, making it glow, using the power of Darkness to summon it to himself, “this magic—this awesome power—will be mi—”

Like a rushing cascade, something bright—something powerful—darted toward Setzyr's hand and arm. The purple beams plumed like the liquid of a glow stick rolling through sea billows, flying through the air at the speeds of an avalanche. Waves—blazing, fiery flares burst—but it wasn't pure fire because orange and yellow were not present, nor did it hurt me when it left my hand to surround the partisan. The flames were magenta and a peony pink, powered by the heat and light of a Wishing Star—*my* Wishing Star, the Agapéd.

It hadn't abandoned me. It didn't flee. The Light's magic stayed inside me: My plan was now one million percent more successful than before.

SINGE! The flames bit Setzyr's hand and arm in vicious revenge, causing him to drop the stone and wince from the burning pain.

"*What—what are we...?*" the announcer mumbled, flabbergasted—fumbling over his words. It sounded as if he was away from the microphone. "*Zephan, sir, is the match still going?*"

Setzyr turned around, seeing fuchsia flames burst forth from my palms and jet my body toward the stone. My blood trailed me, my strength on its last leg. But my heart was transformed, breathing with celestial power.

The Nuoljian stood open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the believed-to-be powerless girl as I zoomed past him, unable to move or shoot magic toward me. He was crumbling in horror right in the middle of the battle rink.

"You? But—but how?" he exclaimed, holding his purple burns.

When my hand clasped the stone, I rolled onto the ground and ran straight to the left, away from my opponent. Pain seethed through my body, but my endurance trampled over every ache, pinch, and gash—the Agapéd yearning to keep me alive. To keep me *fighting*.

Anger ignited in Setzyr, and he darted a toothed red spear at me.

My arm whipped, and a cannonball of purple flames whirled at him, exploding in his face.

He bellowed in pain as his magic extinguished. His hand went to hold down his left cheek, but he was burned with great severity—the blood vessels in his forehead and neck throbbing.

His burns distracted him from my true agenda. The lone icicle I had cast aside earlier was now in my hand, one formed from the water in my

flask. Water from the Onsen—pure, Darkness-destroying water. I kept it as sturdy as a glacier earlier in battle so it wouldn't melt away, assuming my flames would have returned.

Holding my ice baton, I put the stone before me, a nail to my magical hammer.

Menders—medics—every lingering arena worker were gathered at both archways, watching the match finally reveal its true purpose. They saw the stone, and it didn't take a genius of magic to know what it was, but why would they stop it? This was more unhinged and captivating than anyone had expected our battle to go, even though that stone was just used to steal my magic—a crime committed on the field.

But no one was stopping us. What sane person would jump in front of the two most powerful Mystics on planet Kalm?

Clenching the iceberg mallet, I plunged the frozen Onsen water into the stone. Mauve light rays burst forth from the rock in sparkling embers as it cracked open. Echoes of shattering glass penetrated the stadium air, and Setzyr's face drooped.

I rose from the ground as ribbons of light left the stone and swirled around in a flying miniature whirlpool. My magic pulse beamed back into my chest—back home into my heart.

All my strength felt restored, and I had nothing to fear anymore: neither a plethora of magic rot attacks or even Setzyr himself. The best part was when I tensed my muscles and flexed my fingers, purple flames wadded up in my palm, as well as droplets of ice and stone.

My plan worked: I came out as a Mage with *five* forms of magic.

Finally, when I slammed my hand down on the battle rink, rolling waves of pink flames and concrete danced until they formed a circle of color around us both. The glow burned hot for the Nuoljian but not for me. When I looked right at him, that helpless child disappeared from his eyes.

A world of panic poured into his body, color abandoning his charred face.

"How is that *possible*?" he breathed, his right eye wide while the left squinted from the phantasmal blisters.

I furrowed my brows. "Because *I* am the Agapéd, and I will not be shaken. And you shall fall because The Light isn't finished with my heart just yet."

The announcer came back on the microphone, sounding as if he had left his chair prior. “We have an all-clear that the match is not over. This—this is *insane! Everyone—hold onto your seats because you are about to see a true magic battle, unlike anything you’ve seen before at the Gallant Arena!*”

Fingers sprawled to my right, thunder rolled behind me, and rock and water whirling in slow motion. Like before, when I fought Ecuras and learned to fly, a purple glow encapsulated my chest, shining brightly as the sun flashed its rays on our battlefield.

Setzyl laughed like a rabid animal as a red glow, one that matched the vaene’s soulless eyes, surrounded his fingers tips. His irises changed from blue to blazing red. “*You—oh, you are quite clever, Lisa. A game well played—very, well played—betting on the Agapéd to save you so that rot would leave your body.*”

The red blades he once had changed to a shadowing mist of black fog. He was taking on the full power of the vaene, and I knew the spikes on the ends of his hands had to be covered in rot-inflicting syringes.

He was not holding *anything* back any longer.

A toothed waterfall of darkness—the height of forty feet—emerged from Setzyl’s hands. It was a mist of rot and red lightning. Something that wasn’t intended for a simple theft of a neckband.

“I’m winning this game, Agapéd! I shall *not* be bested by a *child!*”

Setzyl’s roaring waves of darkness came crashing toward me like a mudslide.

Hundreds of gallons of water came from the depths of the arena’s ravine at my command, and I lashed it forward. A blizzard walled in front of the attack, and dark magic mist thrashed like a hurricane against my iceberg.

Magic rot combusted into the sky like smog, and that was when I ran right through it.

The idea was chaotically stupid and inflicted needles of rot on my body, but I went almost half a year with that grot running through my immune system and didn’t die. Twenty bites of it now would do nothing. At least, that was what I hoped.

Sprinting through the cloud of dark magic was not what Setzyl expected because when I approached him to grab his neck brace, his right eye was outraged and opened wide—burning a bright red.

The Nuoljian swung his leg to kick my stomach out of the way, but he had magic behind the attack.

Instead of a push to the floor, I went flying twenty feet. I should have landed hard and been knocked unconscious, but I summoned back my water and made myself an ice ramp to swing my body safely to the ground.

Cheers came from the audience as I landed back on my feet.

I stared right at the cruel man, both of us breathing heavily and sweating blood. *I know I need to grab that neckband to win—*

Purple flares lit up in my palms, and I could feel my heart beginning to glow brighter, feeling it inflame with the cosmic power.

—but I'm not letting this man get off with only a burned-up face.

With a grating glare, we both agreed this wasn't a game anymore.

Setzyr swirled vaene havoc around his hands and feet, and I willed a fiery wave of liquid amethysts behind me. Pellets of concrete, stripped from the bottom of the stadium, mixed in with the flames to create a skin-burning blast.

Like a shotgun, Setzyr propelled himself forward with his magic, making a gulf of shadowing rot aimed at me. Whips of darkness became shards long enough to cut through my legs.

I used the heat from my flames to fly me at the same speed, my fire ready to burn through his attacks. The Agapéd's inferno was *mighty*, chewing through his shards of rot. Bits of the crystallized dark magic scraped my skin, giving me a multitude of bloody cuts, but I was alive and closer to the enemy.

I evaded another swamp of darkness, using the flames in my palms as a jet—bursting around his magic like a fish darting away from a shark. In moments, my hand was right near him. I could've tried to aim for his neck, but I knew he would swipe me away again. Instead, I summoned concrete to blend with my fire and made a burning hot chain around his ankles.

Pain spiked him, and he roared as I saw the fire burn the hem of his pants and through to his skin. A perfect distraction.

Rocks yanked him down to the floor, crashing him on his side. Quickly, I jetted for his red collar.

But Setzyr—like me—fought through the aches.

He used his magic to grab my shirt, gripping it tight and ripping many of the seams. The partisan then slung me into the air fast, and it was no toss. His magic was a slingshot, and I was the pathetic pebble.

He powered his muscles with dark magic and bulletted me toward the sun, causing me to lose concentration and diminish my flames. I was soaring high as if thrown off a roller coaster, discombobulated, the air knocked out of my lungs.

The crowd didn't cheer or chant. Nothing but gasps and yells pierced the hot summer air. They all were about to see a human splatter onto the ground from the height of a twenty-story building, turning the game into a morbid cemetery.

But unconsciousness could not find its way into my body.

As the arena floor came into sight, my heart burned a blazing purple, and I slung my body around.

Stares from the audience—even eyes beyond the floating cameras—vanished. I didn't care who saw. I was going to live no matter what. I was going to win.

Then, I *flew*—not with flames or water either. The power in my heart pulsed through my veins and bolted me toward Setzyr, zooming my body through the air like a plane.

The Nuoljian mentioned he knew my secret of flight but failed to determine how fast I could go. And, man, did it not only surprise him but the crowd too.

Sunrays glowed behind me as the audience turned exuberant and thunderstruck at the power I contained.

Setzyr had no time to react; in seconds, I was at his body with a whirlpool of water in my control.

All the water in the stadium's ravine engulfed Setzyr and shot him in the air like a geyser. I flew high to match his flawing speed, circling my watery vortex and keeping my eyes on my opponent.

His body was spinning too fast for him to keep up or attempt an attack. I wadded up the magic in my fist—just enough to not drain me dry—to pump my muscles with twice as much strength. The power of a comet surged through my veins, taking a good portion of my stamina. But I willed vigor into my muscles, as much as the Agapéd would let me.

And my arm *thrust* right into Setzyr's chest. Ribs cracked beneath his muscles and sweltering burns, and I watched him plummet down to the earth like a meteor.

His black mist summoned around him—cushioning his fall by creating wings—but he couldn't stop himself from the bouldering descent.

He sent the dark smoke rushing all around, making a thick smog that not even the stadium cameras could see through. And he flew a cloud of rot toward me.

I am winning this. He is not using this to escape or shadow away. He needs to pay for the crimes he has committed!

My body flew into the rotting mist. Darkness pinched, scratched, and ripped the freckles off my arms and legs. Magic gnawed at my skin like armies of ants, but I commanded my nerves to obey me—to not back down. I had to do it—I had to win. I had suffered through pain like no other and came out alive. No way was I losing to HIM!

Rot hit the sides of my ears and cheeks as I flew farther until I finally saw him.

Setzyr was on the ground, using his magic to soften his fall, but he was weak... weaker than me.

I formed a concrete boxing glove around my right arm and soared right at Setzyr's chest, and I let him have it. I *pounded* him hard, knocking him onto the arena floor with the thud of a fallen elephant. If his ribs didn't break before, they sure did then.

My body shook and rattled as rubble and concrete burst into ashen confetti, the rot eating away at my fingertips and kneecaps. That blow was the last bit of strength I had.

Silence seeped through every crack and seam in that arena. Staff members stopped what they were doing. Families didn't blink. Kids ceased their candy snacking. Even the announcer sat mute. The audience couldn't see anything, solely watching the black fog, imagining the outlook of the battle. Every person in the stands and every worker in the games didn't let even a cough or sneeze go by. All beating hearts in that arena froze, anxious of the unknown: what lay beneath the rotted smog.

Mist began to disperse, sunrays trying to crack through. Suddenly, an arm raised high in the air. It was a weak and wobbly raise but confident as it clasped the neckband tight within a fist. When the sun finally was able to pierce through the ashen grit, that was when everyone saw it.

That neckband was *red* and in the hand of a scratched-up, rot-bitten teenage girl.

"Your Paragon Games Champion—Lisa Robbie of Boolavogue! Yes! I can't believe it! You did it, kid! You did it!" the announcer shouted, entirely proud that I had claimed the victory.

Every voice in the audience cheered loudly, watching my smile beam and eyes sparkle amid the black rot and scratches on the broadcasting projections.

Setzyr was beneath me, out cold from my stone punch. He looked worse than me, with dejection smeared all over his burned-up, bloody, and unconscious face.

I then fell to my knees and sat on my legs, watching my Paragon Games tattoo disappear on my forearm, the neckband clutched in my hands. I was about to collapse, but I was alive... and happy. My heart was finally free to relax. I lifted my head to the sky as I sat on the floor, about to cry tears of joy, taking in all the roaring adoration from the crowd.

I did it... I really did it.

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50 The Wysh

Setzyr woke up and was being carried off with the help of two male workers, defeated and worn, while I steadily walked with one arm around Joolee's shoulder when something big—something all too thunderous—echoed behind us. Footsteps barreled down the hall before we even reached the medic room. A plethora of requests, mainly consisting of, “Sir, please stop!” shouted, trailing the unstoppable march—getting louder the more the commands rushed in.

Joolee and I paused, like the rest of those in the corridor, to see what the commotion was about. I had never seen green eyes turn that fiery before. A fuming Keeper with rolled-up sleeves was ramming down the hallway.

Still ignoring the remarks from the Paragon Games workers who were too scared to get involved, Gaius growled as he stared straight past me and into the face of the fallen Nuoljian.

“*Killing a little girl?*” he blustered in that thick brogue accent of his, picking up pace as he passed Joolee and me. “You loathsome *git!*”

The Keeper was a bolt of sweat and lightning as he balled his fist and let it fly at Setzyr's face, nailing him so hard the partisan flew out of the arms of the two Paragon Games workers. His body rolled like a loose piece of meat onto the floor six feet away. Not only did blood gush from his blistered mouth—but so did a *tooth!*

My eyes flung open along with the rest of the workers. *What the heck is Gaius doing—I mean, I don't mind, but I'm pretty sure Zephan is not going to like this—*

“You *knew* of her magic!” Gaius snarled, picking up the Nuoljian by his swollen neck. He slammed Setzyr against the hallway wall with the strength of a cannonball. Bits of the ceiling crumbled onto his hair from the impact, and the picture frames around him rattled. “You deserve nothing but a merciless death—”

“*Gaius, stop!*” a voice shouted from behind us, followed by hastened sounds of fancy shoes clicking across the floor.

Gaius did not listen. My brawny mentor stared fiery legions into the burned-up face of Setzyr. “And I will be the one to give it to you—”

“*Wait!*”

At the sound of *my* demand, Gaius peeled his eyes away from Setzyr, his grip still pinning him to the wall. My voice wasn’t strong and was definitely the softest one in the room, but to Gaius, mine held more power than anyone else in that hall, including the Game Keeper.

“I knew... he knew... of my magic,” I said, flinching from the pain of my cuts and new specks of rot.

Zephan caught up and stood next to me, accompanied by Inna and a couple of other workers. Gaius dropped the Nuoljian and widened those eyes at me as the workers rushed in and grabbed Setzyr’s collapsed body. I had never seen such a shocked look on him before—on anyone, actually—and I expected him to yell at the girl who blatantly lied to him *again*.

Nope. Those green orbs surrounding his pupils darted at Zephan. “You *knew* and *let* the games go on?”

Seeing their Paragon host about to get clobbered, two workers jumped in front of Zephan, though they couldn’t have hindered Gaius’ path for long if they tried.

For things to still go according to my plan and not have Gaius be banished from the Gallant Arena or sent to some galactic prison, I released my arm from Joolee and stepped forward—right in the way of my teacher.

“He had to,” I tried to yell, but my voice was nicked by the rot, causing me to wobble as I stood my ground.

Instantly, Gaius forgot about pounding Zephan.

He grabbed my shoulders and frowned at my dark-purpled, scratched-up face. A sigh, containing much of his flaming anger, left and hit my nose. “Lisa, why?” he breathed, clutching me tight, acting as if we were the only two in the hall.

“For my wysh...” I glanced off to my right for a brief moment. The Game Keeper stood with his hair frazzled from the amount of sprinting he had to do to catch up to Gaius. “But Zephan didn’t know anything, just that I lied about Setzyr knowing the truth because of how badly I needed to get that wysh. I promise... I would have told you everything if I didn’t think I could—”

Gaius pulled me into his body, wrapping one arm around my shoulders and the other cradling my head. Frantic beats were coming from his heart as my forehead smeared a bit of blood on his faded green shirt. He was drenched in sweat.

“I’m just glad you’re alright.” My mentor’s words were gentle and filled with so much care that I couldn’t help but smile—my beat-up face stuffed into his smelly shirt and all.

As Gaius released the hug, Zephan—probably feeling safe enough to enter our conversation—said in all seriousness, “Lisa’s heart was strong and unwavering in her choice, but it wasn’t careless, which is why I let her fight. Though I did not know the context, I *did* know that Lisa needed that wysh more than anything in the whole world. With her heart, I knew she had pure intentions behind it. As for Partisan Tzelem...” Zephan leered at Setzyr, no trace of a smile, “I would like to know *how* he knew and *why* a magiblood stone was used during my game?”

Not wasting a second, I took the reins of Setzyr’s demise. “He knew because he’s the leader of the Dark Sages.”

Gaius’ eyes widened as the bomb dropped. He slowly turned around to face the criminal, followed by an orchestra of gasps coming from the staff members around us... but I wasn’t finished.

I looked past the muscly Keeper’s frame and at the half-burned man. “He knew of my magic because he was the one behind the kidnapping of Prince Caelum and me, *and* the magic he has isn’t because of a Wishing Star. It’s dark magic, which he’s been using to hurt the people in Nuolja...” I crossed my arms. “He also was the person who struck me with dark magic rot all those months ago, too.”

The latter bit seemed to infuriate Gaius the most, but the Keeper didn’t go running, only clenching his fists and gritting his teeth.

To everyone’s surprise, Setzyr didn’t plead for mercy or wallow in pity. He was smirking. “That is... quite an accusation,” he said, spitting out more blood from his mouth, raspy and out of breath. “You would need proof... for a claim like that.”

Oh... he wants proof, huh...

“I have all the proof I could ever need,” I stated eagerly.

Arms still crossed, a grin that was a bit too cocky emerged between my busted lips as a little orange glow finally made his timid appearance on my left shoulder. Tuff was not intimidating in the slightest, but given the devastating horror filling Setzyr’s eyes, the Nuoljian knew what a glainie was. His fate was sealed.

Setzyr’s trip instantly became a trek to a holding facility while I continued to the medics, Gaius picking me up and carrying me all the way

there. Minni and the young Mage healed my non-magic wounds and bandaged up the vaene-magic scratches, and the three Keepers and two other men in suits watched Tuff's memories as my glainie sat comfortably in my lap.

Everything—including my deal and Setzyr's own divulging of being a Dark Sage with the intent of killing me—was revealed. Though I probably shouldn't have been smiling while the medics healed my cuts and reduced the pain of the rot, my heart couldn't help itself. Seeing that horrible man's identity finally revealed felt good. I knew the people of Nuolja were free of him.

Proving him to be a criminal in a political stance was enough to do him in, so I didn't mention anything about the vaene. That was the part I had under control... and I liked it being a surprise to be honest. I only needed the wysh to help me out.

"Lisa," the same reporter from yesterday, though not as joyless as before, said as I followed her down the hall, "you will enter into the room where you'll find the wysh. It's in a sense-proof box, waiting in silence. Once you enter, just push open the lid, hold the wysh, and say what you want..." She hesitated as we turned a corner. "Just, uh, don't let your thoughts trail off and wish for something else. We have you under oath, and it could cause quite the liability issue with the Embassy."

"I promise not to," I reassured her, even though I had no idea what she meant exactly.

We—as in me, the parade of Keepers and other personnel—made it to the door, but only I stepped in. Three rows of lights flickered on, spotlighting a black box in the middle of a round table. No other furniture was present, not even a plant or a random set of boxes. The room was also windowless, and the only way to see inside was through the two cameras hung high in the corners, probably there for the "liability issues" Miss Not-So-Joyless was talking about.

Walking forward to the black box, the surface was not cardboard or made of metal, more like smooth, black tinfoil, if anything. At the top was a button. No need for instructions to tell me what that did.

As my finger pressed the blue stud, only thoughts of my wish ran through my head. The box didn't open as the reporter said, though: It collapsed apart, like a table disappearing under a magician's cloth, revealing a floating object underneath.

It was the wysh—pure light and dark magic reeling around but refusing to bond. Spews and plumes of iridescent black and white ribbons formed a sphere. It was more beautiful than I imagined.

My hands cradled the whimsical light. I was surprised it was lighter than a bowl of feathers with no texture or warm surface. I smiled slightly as the vaene-vanquishing desire replayed in my mind.

Instantly, the dark and light magic spun fast like a cotton candy machine before bursting through the ceiling at the speed of light, leaving no hole or portal in the room.

I blinked rapidly. There was not a chance for me to say a single thing. I glanced back and forth from the video cameras to my newly healed fingers, owl-eyed. *Did the wysh hear my thoughts? Was that supposed to happen?* It was only me in that room and the sound of silence. *I hope that worked... Gosh, please let that have worked...*

Having a moment to rest or check if it *did* work was still not an option as I was being led to the cavaedium once again, only, this time, to broadcast my wysh—the cover-up one.

I expected to be with Zephan on the stage, but instead, it was *them*—Winry, Garth, and Rhiner. They were as shiny and perfect as they appeared on the live broadcasting channel. To my surprise, Winry was holding a medallion. The base was a flattened diamond with refracted rainbows painting the clear surface. A thick, purple ribbon created the band, stitched with strands of gold. She placed it around my neck.

“For you, our youngest champion,” she said as I admired the crystal medal, cameras flashing. Embossed on the surface was “Fighter 12” in an elegant font, surrounded by intricate swirls and crescent moons. Zephan never mentioned I’d receive something other than the wysh. I never thought I’d be holding something this elegant in my lifetime. *This thing probably costs a million credits—it has to be a pure, magical diamond!*

All three hosts shook my hand and congratulated me, but Garth gave me a burly hug as if I were his child instead. The interview started in the next heartbeat. *Wish those nurses had fixed my hair and not just bandaged my cuts...*

“Now, tell us, Lisa,” Rhiner said, smiling at me as I stood between the three of them. I switched to fidgeting with the thick medallion instead of my fingernails. “What is it that you’re wishing for as the youngest champion of the Paragon Games?”

I smiled big and took a deep breath, the lights above whipping through my wavy brown hair, highlighting all the freckles on my pale skin. “For my friends in Nuolja to be free from their chains of Darkness.”

Camera flashes strobed, followed by the three tall hosts returning my grin.

“What a humble wish,” Winry said, though I never thought of it like that.

Garth patted me hard on the shoulder, right where I was hit with rot. I flinched hard, forcing a smile. “I say it’s *perfect*—using it to help your friends, huh!”

Rhiner, over six feet tall, glanced between the camera and me, a curious gleam in his eye. He raised his dark eyebrows and leaned toward me. “Lisa, I hope your wysh brings forth much happiness in the land of Nuolja, but I must ask... during the match, you put up quite a show—”

“A *show*?” Garth belted. “That was a pure *battle* out there!”

Rhiner tittered at his co-host. “Correction: *battle*, then. Toward the end, something unbelievable happened, and I know I wasn’t the only one who saw and *heard* it...” Rhiner’s walnut eyes were perfectly positioned toward mine. “Is it true what you said? That you’re the fabled Agapéd Bearer?”

I stopped fiddling with my medal and stood confidently. My grin was eager and growing larger by the second. “Yes. It is true. I am the Agapéd Bearer.”

Chatter exploded. Reporters and other VIP guests started swarming the stage, microphones and cameras pointed. The crazed commotion would have made anyone nervous, but I was relieved—feeling good that I didn’t have to hide who I was anymore. Smiling there next to the pristine adults was the first time people saw me as the Agapéd Bearer and didn’t sigh or give me pity. They saw me as strong and powerful, just like Gaius and the Guardians wanted. My self-confidence was at an all-time high.

Off to my right, Joolee ushered me out the side door and away from the crowd of strangers. Gaius, Inna, Reno, and some other workers were there, waiting for me. Rhiner, Winry, and Garth still had hosting to do, and I was relieved not to be in the spotlight anymore.

Before I could apologize to my mentors for revealing my secret on galactic television, someone came running down the hall toward me. His

white hair gave away his identity instantly, but his face was nothing like I'd seen before—on any person.

Ayker was crying with a grand smile. It didn't look natural on an eighteen-year-old boy. His pace wasn't stopping, and he ran right up to me, giving me the world's biggest hug.

My hands didn't even have time to react, posing by my side as he clutched me tight. He sobbed waterfalls of tears in my hair and left shoulder, not caring about the people in the hall watching him.

All my gut fluttered like a flock of birds. This was the first time a boy hugged me... and *cried* on me, too. *Why is he—*

"Thank you," he bawled. "I don't know how you did it..." Ayker lifted his head off my body, and I got a good look at his face.

Blush pink covered his tan cheeks, and the tears in his smiling eyes sparkled like the ocean. Joy was spilling over him, pounds and pounds of it. He then clasped my shoulders as salty water rolled down his jawline and onto the floor near my shoes. I had never seen such emotion before. Whether it was rude or not, I couldn't help but stare at his sob-stricken face.

"Not even a second ago—my heart just suddenly felt whole and the signet—Lisa"—he sniffled—"it's gone. It's completely gone."

It was then that I became emotional because I knew if he was saved... then all of Nuolja was, too. I had known joy before... but not like this. I saved a friend and gave his people a life without heartache. A home where magic could be enjoyed and loved.

Tears piled in my eyes as my heart sang a beautiful song. I matched his smile, and before I could say anything else, Ayker hugged me again. I didn't care that he was squeezing my rot-twined shoulders or pressing so hard I could fall over. His happiness passed on to me, and I wanted nothing more than to continue that cheerful moment.

"Thank you, Lisa." His muffled voice spoke with an overwhelming amount of gratitude. "Thank you—thank you so, so much."

"Lisa!"

As Ayker released his grasp, I saw Cal running toward me, escorted by Ekron and a few other Captains.

He, too, gave me a huge hug, and my heart soared as high as the sun. I couldn't help but blush, being in the arms of the Prince—the first *real* hug we ever shared.

“You are absolutely insane, you know that?” he said, releasing me. “So, you did it, right?”

“Did what?” I asked. When I looked over to my right, there was the beefy Keeper invading the personal moment.

Cal boldly stated, “She saved Nuolja from that vaene—the one that’s been terrorizing the whole town for centuries!”

Not only did Gaius’ eyes expand... but so did Inna’s and Reno’s.

“What exactly happened?” Inna asked.

Ayker looked at the strawberry-haired Keeper and grinned. “She’s our hero. She saved us—freed us from the curse binding Nuolja to whatever magic Setzyr was using. Our people”—Ayker looked over to Gaius next —“don’t have to be bound to omrivim to live, and the others don’t have to feel chained to our hearts any longer. Lisa didn’t have to do this. But now, we get to love magic for what it is...”

The handsome Nuoljian then turned to Prince Caelum. “We are forever indebted to Boolavogue—to Lisa—Your Highness.”

As Cal shook Ayker’s hand, I could feel Gaius’ stare pressing down on me like a mattress full of sand. When I looked up, his blank face turned into a smirk. “So, that vaene from your wysh...”

“It’s kinda a long story,” I whispered as the silhouette of the Game Keeper suddenly came into view, “that I promise to tell you about later.”

When Zephan came over to me, he had his usual charismatic grin sprawled across his face. Though it should’ve made me happy, I grew anxious.

My eyes went straight to his pointed dress shoes as I hurriedly apologized. “Sorry if I got you in trouble—you know—for saying I was the Agapéd in front of everyone.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Lisa,” he reassured, and my chin lifted. “You stopped one of Kalm’s leading criminal masterminds, saved a nation from a magic-leeching specter, and rendered Setzyr powerless moments after telling the wysh what you wanted. Once Setzyr’s identity goes public, it will look like you were just stopping a dark Mystic, the Agapéd’s job. Though the Embassy may not like it, the public is forever grateful to you. The Chairman and his officials behind the gray walls wouldn’t risk tearing down a child for doing what is right—what other adults and even us Keepers and Guardians couldn’t do.”

Zephan turned to Gaius. “I told you, she was strong enough for these games,” he said, teasing a smile. Gaius grunted. “Hope to work with you again one day, Lisa.” A swift turn, and he walked back into the room full of reporters and game sponsors.

Ayker grabbed my wrist, pulling me away from Gaius. “Lisa, you have to come to Nuolja. Everyone will want to thank you for what you did—Boolavogue, too!”

Though my heart wanted to return to the frozen island, every bone and muscle in my body did not; they only yearned for sleep, preferably while being cared for by the lady in gold. The thing was, I didn’t know how to tell Ayker no. He had just sobbed on my shoulder and given me the most heartfelt hug—how does one say no to that?

“Well, I uh—”

A burly hand propped on my shoulder. “Lisa will visit soon, but she needs to rest after the battle she just won.”

Gaius... thank you...

After chatting a bit more and talking with the others, the gardener dismissed us from the hallway. I didn’t say anything about how I craved a nap more than I did lunch, dinner, and even dessert—only by a *smidge*—yet my muscly mentor knew exactly how I felt.

We walked slowly as we turned a corner, Gaius being kind enough to go my pace. Once out of view of others, he said, “Before you see that boy and go back home to Earth tonight—”

“I know, I know,” I interrupted after giving a big yawn. “We have to stop by Lady Ariela first.”

Gaius tittered while we kept walking forward. “*Then*, you’ll tell me about this vaene?”

My eyes started drooping even while walking, but I still managed to smile. “Yes—every single detail... just let me get a healing nap first...” I stretched a yawn. “And maybe something sweet—you think you could do that for me when I wake up? Been kinda a long day, you know... saving the world and all?”

The Keeper of Stars gave a hushed, worry-free chuckle beneath his finely trimmed beard, walking closely by my side. He rubbed my shoulder and pulled me in close. “If that’s all you want, I guess I could do that for you.”

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51 A Nuoljian Gift

Best nap of my life.

Lady Ariela did her magic thing on my body to eliminate all the black rot from Setzyr's attacks... but frankly, I had no idea what she did. No incisions were made before I drifted off—just her fingers dancing above my chest and limbs with golden threads. Even Tuff wasn't allowed to sit and watch, but I didn't think he could've waited that long in the room before getting bored. Took the golden Elysian four hours, and she didn't even take a break! It would've taken longer if Setzyr didn't use that stone—a whole *month*, she told me. I truly let that stuff fester for far too long. I didn't deserve such ethereal kindness.

Waking up—*man*, I was still weak. Lady Ariela said my magic strength didn't diminish too much because of the magiblood absorption, but I still lost about two month's worth of strength. She also couldn't heal the giant scar on my back, a gift from the blotch that started it all. A dark rippling mark, looking as if a kid painted a roily star and then smeared it on my spine, was now added to my collection—taking the spot for the biggest blemish. I wasn't upset about it, though. Made me feel as tough as my burly Keeper, even though I wasn't planning on showing it off to anyone.

Leaving one of the Elysium's many rooms, I was happily greeted by Gaius. He was dressed in green and mud-stained boots, holding my winter coat and a flimsy bag of his *best* homemade creations: chocolate puffed strudels. Gaius had a talent for cooking but never made anything sweet, only under particular circumstances that always involved me begging or having a rough day training. He had never made *two dozen* of the chocolatey pocket-sized pastries before. I scarfed down about a fourth of the bag before he evanesced us back to Boolavogue.

On the snowy hillside, I went to turn around, but Gaius cupped my shoulder, stopping me. “Are we going somewhere?” I asked with half a pastry in my mouth.

“That we are,” someone said from behind.

To my surprise, Captain Arond stood near the hibernating wild berry bush. More strands of his beard were turning as white as the flurries fluttering to the ground. His Boolavogue winter uniform hugged him

snuggly, but like Ekron, he, too, was not wearing a hat to cover his receding hairline.

Embarrassment raced through my bones, and my face burned red like cherries. I had half a snack in my mouth with wide eyes, staring at the old man. I quickly swallowed and hid the bag of sweets behind my back.

The old guard smiled and held out his hand. I had no choice but to grab it, causing me to drop my pastry bag. Now, I was sweating.

“You were a fine—a *mighty* fine Mage in the battle rink, Miss Lisa,” he said with a hardy handshake. “Besides me wanting to personally thank you for representing the Kingdom well, I also am on a request from King Sonon. According to the Young Prince, you’ve saved the province of Nuolja, and they want to meet with our Hunters again—reopening the discussion of a guild alliance.”

“Really?” I asked as Gaius picked up the bag of pastries off the ground.

“Not only that—it seems they also want to talk with you personally along with the Royal Court, and King Sonon insisted on coming in person.”

The King is coming, too!

When my jaw dropped, Captain Arond eyed the Keeper. “We figured you’d be worn out from the match, but Gaius insisted you’d be fine. His words, I’ve come to realize, are usually on the side of truth.”

Gaius tittered at his old friend. “She is healthy enough to join you for a couple of hours, and I know she’s in good hands.” His green eyes met mine. “I will see you at the front entrance of the castle once you return from Nuolja.”

A trip down the snowy mountain and to an emership? Nope. Captain Arond was a part of the Royal Court. He evanesced us straight to an avelift station in a town outside of Nuolja’s province. Didn’t know the old man had magic in his veins, but it did make sense as the Captain of the Guard.

The moment we arrived at Nuolja—far away from the capital and crowds of people—the Royal Court was waiting for us: Cal (he took his mother’s spot in the court for today), Ekron, Captain Clover—the Women’s Troop Head Captain—two other men I didn’t recognize, and *him*—King Sonon.

Cal’s dad wasn’t wearing a crown, but his winter gear was still immaculate compared to everyone else. His hair brushed his shoulders and the thick layers of his elaborate sapphire-stitched jacket. Gold beads—the

real stuff, not just glossy yellow paint—decorated three thin braids of hair that fell near his right ear, less than usual. A winter belt girded his broad waist, covered in gems and holding two weapons: the bladeless hilt and a white steel dagger embedded with blue gems.

For Cal's dad to come... this has to be a huge deal...

At first, I walked comfortably with Cal and Ekron... that was until the King stopped leading the way.

With two hefty sashes in the snow, Bolthor Sonon turned around and began to walk next to me, causing Ekron and the Prince to walk with the others.

Wait—Arond said Cal told the King what I did. That means he has to be mad about us sneaking off into another land. Crap! Please tell me I didn't get Cal in trouble!

The winter sun made the King's hazel eyes glow copper under his black brows, his glare unwavering. "Lisa..." His words were commanding, drumming a gravelly beat into my heart. "Were you fearful... during that final match?"

The heck kind of question is that—is this normal for a King to ask a Paragon Game champion?

My legs worked double-time to keep up with His Majesty. I was not expecting such an odd question, so I answered honestly with my fingertips fidgeting with a pocket-kettle inside my jacket. "I would be lying if I said it wasn't, but, uh..."

I really didn't know what to say. I probably sound like an idiot.

King Bolthor kept the conversation going. "Caelum told me about the man you fought when he returned from EverWake... the Dark Sage's leader... and that you knew of his true identity and still fought him..."

My eyes kept their gaze on the snow. *He's gonna be so mad—*

"To go up against that man is already a feat of its own, but to *win* and come out *alive*..."

I glanced upward at him, seeing no anger in his eyes.

"That is the work of a true Hero."

My eyes flickered, doe-eyed. "Oh, thank you, Your Majesty..." Pink blushed my cheeks, so I turned away and glanced at Caelum.

The Prince was walking near Captain Arond, telling him something exciting as his arms flared. Seeing him sparked my earlier assumption. "I'm sorry if Caelum got in trouble for knowing who Setzyr was and not telling

you sooner. I told him not to because I needed to win to get that wysh... It was pretty selfish and wrong of me to do that, sir, so please blame me for that and not him.”

Scraping steel from the King’s weapon hit the silver latches on his belt when he exhaled. “I admit... crossing over into another land uninvited could have been a serious crime... and something I, as King, would not take lightly. But... there are times when doing what is right may not always be what is easy or what makes sense to others around them... It may bring about anger or frustration or, in your case, bring about potential death. Turning in this Setzyr Tzelem the moment you discovered his identity would have been the correct thing to do—taking him away from people he could soon hurt.”

The King tilted his bearded chin down in my direction. “But you, Agapéd Bearer, did not do such a thing. You saw a generation of people hidden away that needed saving. It was reckless and a gamble... but in the end, Lisa... you did more than what was asked of you... even risked losing your magic to save a land that isn’t your own.”

“I wasn’t going to lose my magic, though—” I shut my mouth quickly, following up with an immediate explanation. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to cut you off—I just, uh, had a plan... that’s all...” *Why does my voice sound so squeamish when next to him?* I sucked in a cold breath. “I promise, sir, that giving up the Agapéd was never an option. I just knew I couldn’t win without taking a risk.”

“Hm... you’re an extraordinary Mage, Lisa...” A sparkle appeared in his eyes as we began to cross the bridge. “And I thank you for representing our home well in the rink. You should be proud of your win.”

He wasn’t smiling, but my heart still somersaulted and cartwheeled galore, flying like a trapeze act. Bolthor Sonon, a man whose emotions were even more complex than Gaius’, gave me a compliment worth more than a pile of evanesce petals. It was one thing to call Boolavogue, Calendula, and New Jersey my home, but to have someone else say they are proud to have me there... it was a feeling like no other.

As we started to see some familiar faces coming toward us with a crowd behind them, I happily said back to the King, “And I am proud to be able to call Boolavogue my home, too... Thank you, sir.”

What I did for Nuolja didn’t truly hit me until I was there in their capital. A king was with us, and yet, the citizens kept wanting to drag me

away with hugs and tear-stained kisses. Families were coming up to me, shaking my hand and telling me through sobs how they didn't have to fear death because they couldn't afford omrivim. A dark-haired couple who used to run a medic shop thanked me repeatedly because they now could sell *real* medicine and not be forced to sell the magic of their friends. I even ran into Vonny and her parents. For her, I knelt and gave her the biggest Gora bear hug she could've ever wanted, listening to her tell me about how cool it was to see me on television.

I changed their lives—all of them. I couldn't feel what they felt, so I didn't know what it truly meant to be free of an invisible magic-binding prison, but their joy made all the hardships worth it. They could now travel, grow their families, and love magic for what it is supposed to be... and that made my heart the happiest it had ever been.

We reached the Lodge where Ayker and his family were waiting, all white-haired and blue-eyed. His father—tall and husky, just as an arctic chef should be—picked me up when he hugged me. He didn't say much besides “thank you” and smelled like the inside of their family restaurant.

Mrs. Rovonami embraced me next and forced Klay to hug me, too, though he really didn't want to: It would've ruined his “cool” look, as he put it.

Ayker joined my side. He, too, was treated like a Hero for simply being in the games and refusing to go along with Setzyr's plans, wearing a red and black wool ceremonial scarf (I was given ten on my way in, stuffing them inside my orbkit because I was too flustered to tell the Nuoljians no after the first two).

Entering the wooden building, the court of nine Nuoljians was now only four: Yaeger, Ryn, Yawn, and Vyrdir. Took no genius to figure out that the missing members had to be Setzyr's followers because the four remaining partisans looked very happy despite their broken political standings.

They led us into their dining hall where we all sat at the cedar table with our legs crisscrossed on the floor. The pillows were extra soft compared to last time, most likely due to Cal's dad being with us. Ekron made me sit across from the King and near the Nuoljian court. My timidity spiked to unnerving heights. Luckily, Cal sat to my right, so I wasn't entirely surrounded by old, high-ranking adults.

“Your Majesty,” Yaeger said to King Sonon, smiling wide with his wizened tan lips, “we cannot thank you enough for your kindness in taking the time to meet with us on this joyous day. We never knew a life of freedom could be possible until your people...”

The old Nuoljian then glanced at me amid his thankfulness. “Until Miss Lisa stepped foot into our land. When Setzyr was apprehended, quite a few civilians here fled, including half of our Court. They will be caught and stand trial for their crimes, but until then—knowing Darkness has fled—we can start anew, which is why we have invited you back to our land.”

Yawn, the burly brown-haired partisan with a thick mustache, added, “When Captain Ekron and his clan of Hunters first visited, we four wanted to take you up on your offer for a guild alliance but were outnumbered due to Setzyr and his followers’ demands. Though we cannot offer a gift worth the same amount as the one you’ve given us, we considered reopening the guild alliance”—a smile emerged beneath his brown whiskers— “but felt that still wouldn’t be enough. We, instead, want to be a part of Boolavogue permanently if you, Your Highness, would allow it. It is the least we can do for what Miss Lisa has done for us.”

Every Boolavogian at that table sat awestruck by Yawn’s statement, even the King himself. Cal and I shared dumbfounded glances before our dropped jaws grew into a smile.

Ryn, the young female with short white hair sitting beside Yaeger, said, “Our people will need someone they can trust. Though they have us, we are fragmented, and asking them to put their faith in those who were unknowingly standing next to dark-infested men and women would be wishful thinking...”

She folded her hands on the table, pleading, “But they will trust you and the Agapéd. Your kingdom is strong and showed kindness to us when we didn’t know we needed it. We are indebted to you and know you will help our land prosper if you’ll have us.”

Silence was the only thing that followed Ryn’s plea because we were all waiting for *him* to answer.

King Sonon fiddled with the giant sapphire ring around his index finger, thick brows furrowed for quite a while.

I had seen the King think before but never that intently.

“Though there will be more to discuss between us...” King Sonon turned his chin, an arm extending, “as of today, I welcome you into our

Kingdom, Nuolja Province of Boolavogue.”

What—it’s just that easy? Guess if you’re the King of Hunters and are the size of a mountain, you can kinda do whatever you want.

The quartet of Nuoljians and Ayker all smiled, gasping happily as Yaeger shook the King’s hand firmly. “Thank you, King Sonon. This... in all my years, has been the best decision our people have made...” The old man turned to his fellow court members. “Before we continue our discussion about moving forward, we do have a gift for Miss Lisa.”

All the attention was now on me. I was used to it by now—at least, a little bit.

Yaeger said with cheer, “First, because of what you’ve given us, we are calling this day our official day of freedom—The Day of the Wysh—celebrating life in Nuolja and the new one that is now a part of Boolavogue.”

I began to blush a bit—I couldn’t help it! *I just created a holiday!*

Yaeger continued, “In recognition of saving our people from a life of magi-pulse trading, we have a gift for you—if you choose to accept. On behalf of the entire land and the new Court of Partisans, we would like to give you the title of *Hero* from this day forth.”

Grins from both courts pressed down on my body like a blanket, comforting and wrapping me up in gladness. Cal nudged my arm with his elbow, beaming brightly at the surprise.

“You—you really mean that?” I gasped.

Vyrdir smiled with his eyes and said in his deep voice, “You’ve saved not only our people but everyone affected by Setzyr’s Sages. We’ve never been able to offer this title before but have all agreed, with King Sonon and his Court as witnesses, that you deserve this more than anyone.”

I can’t believe they are doing this! But...

Though everyone around was happy about my present, their cheer made me realize how much they meant to me. Boolavogue was my second home. If it wasn’t for Captain training me and the Sonon family’s charity during my first day at the castle, I never would have been such a well-prepped fighter or a Provisional Licensed Hunter—never even having my name put in the games to begin with.

Coming to Boolavogue, I was never meant to stay. Gaius only had me train with the Hunters to make me strong enough to fight against Darkness. But then, I defeated the Fallen. I bet I could’ve told Gaius I

wanted to only train under him and Inna and pick a new path to follow, but that thought never crossed my mind... because I *loved* being a Hunter. I loved the sweaty men I called brothers and the constant plethora of Gora bear hairs sticking to my pants. Stopping dark creatures and protecting people gave me a purpose, and I got to spend my days with Cal. The Kingdom was special to me...

And I knew what a Hero meant: no more life as a Hunter. I'd have to stop everything—killing beasts, training with Gaius, and practicing water magic with Inna. A Hero was a job—an on-demand stopper of evildoers for nations to call upon at a moment's notice. A whole new way of life, just like Gaius said all those months ago. I couldn't be both a Hunter and a Hero either. That was like trying to be a police officer and a fireman at the same time. Sure, I'd be saving lives and helping those in need all over the universe, but that also meant leaving Boolavogue, Gaius, Inna, and Cal. My heart lit up when I thought of my magical friends and mentors... not at the idea of being a celestial warrior. At least, not right now.

"This... this is very kind of you, and I don't really feel I deserve it..." I made a soft glance toward Ayker. "I was only trying to help a friend, never intending to be praised for it. And I'm beyond honored to be given that title, but..."

Like Reno said, my answer came as easily as my next breath. "I will have to humbly decline. Just like you saw the kindness in Boolavogue, I, too, want to stay with them."

The King shifted his gaze and adjusted his posture. He wasn't necessarily thrilled, but I could've just been mistaken. Everyone else, though, continued beaming.

"I know being a Hero means giving up my time as a Hunter and traveling across the world, and I am not ready for that just yet. I want to continue on my path of being a Monster Hunter, serving the Kingdom, and saving the lives of the people of the nation I love. The Sonons and Captains cared for me when I was only a visitor a little over a year ago and helped make me the fighter I am today. I'm devoting my life to protecting others as the Agapéd, too, and I feel I can do that better by completing my Hunter training first."

Yaeger clasped my hand, his fingers warm and wrinkled. "Then, we hope to see you again soon, Lisa Robbie—future *Hunter* of Boolavogue."

The King couldn't stay long, given the invite on such short notice, but promised to regroup with the Court of Partisans soon to discuss the next steps on becoming a true province of Boolavogue. Vyrdir and Ayker followed us on our way out, where Ayker's parents were still waiting outside.

Mrs. Rovonami gave me another hug, causing the material on our jackets to hum from the tight squeeze. "If you are ever headed back our way and need a place to rest," she began in her vibrant voice, "our home is your home."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, watching Klay run down the stairs toward his friends.

Ayker came up to me one last time, and I swear at that moment, his eyes glistened brighter than the ribbons of the winterdaze.

"Hope to see you again soon—especially now that we will be from the same Kingdom," he said, giving me one last hug. Through the curls of my hair, he whispered, "Just... thank you, Lisa, for doing what I could not."

Footsteps came up from behind me when Ayker let go. I hurriedly said, "Well, if you weren't so kind to me, I don't think we would be in this same situation... so thanks for that, too."

"See you soon, Lisa." Ayker glanced over my shoulder, bowed slightly, and followed his parents down the snow-flecked steps.

"So," Cal's voice emerged, causing me to jump, "are you and him like a couple or—"

I whipped around. My face turned redder than a pair of ripe tomatoes as I snapped, "What—no—of course not! He's practically an adult!"

Cal rolled his eyes. "Well, it's hard to tell when you're all... you know..." The Prince turned his head toward the Nuoljian lake, shrugging. "Just forget it."

... wait a second...

I ran to his side and leaned forward to get a good view of the Prince's face.

His cheeks were blushing hard.

"Cal..." I toyed. "Are you jea—"

"I said forget it!" he quickly evaded, going around in a circle while we waited for King Bolthor to finish his chat with Yaeger. "Let's just hurry up and get back home so we can tell the Hunters about Nuolja."

I started giggling as I followed beside him. “You know, you can just say you’re happy I’m staying in Boolavogue and not running off to be a Hero.”

That perfect smile I grew fond of returned underneath his cherry-red nose. “I *am* glad you’re staying, though you have a lot of catching up to do, Miss Champion.” The three Captains came out to join us, which made Cal’s voice slower and softer. “But seriously... you don’t *like* that guy, right?”

I blurted, “No—I just told you—”

“No, you said he was too old—”

“Well, yes, *and* I do not like him like that.”

The Prince hopped in front of me, almost bumping into my face. “So, you don’t like *anyone*, then?”

That wry grin seized my heart before I could blink. The question pumped my blood faster, and my cold hands heated, sweating. Even though Ayker was incredibly handsome and kind beyond belief... I knew I could not answer Cal’s question truthfully with him standing right in front of me.

I turned around with my nose in the air. “No, but even if I did, why would I tell *you*? You tell Amos and Erin *everything*!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—I do not!” he shot.

“I can agree...” Captain Ekron cleanly slit into our spat. He really did pay attention to every single detail, even from unintentionally eavesdropping. “With Lisa, that is.”

While Caelum stood with his mouth wide open, I hid my laughs behind the palm of my hand.

...

We returned to the Kingdom, the sun still hovering above the winter clouds, landing on the Royal Court’s evanescent sigil near the emeralds. Captain Arond walked with me to the front entrance, making sure I reached the Keeper without any Hunters running into me. I had just won the games just six or so hours ago, and being spotted by even one nosy Hunter would cause a commotion on the grounds.

Upon arriving at the bouldering castle gate, Gaius had acquired himself two other companions. Judging by his crossed arms and half-opened eyes, he didn’t want their company. *Loathed* it. Details of the strangers’ faces appeared the closer we came, each wearing old winter garments and woolly scarves. One was Lila—the Royal Family’s nurse—and the other a familiar old man.

His nose beneath his spectacles burned pink, and his frown lines were even more prominent talking with the Keeper. Even with his ears covered in thick warmers, Mender Roo made sure to tie half of his frizzy white hair with a piece of string.

But... why is he here at the castle with Gaius and Lila?

The green in Gaius' eyes found my blue irises quickly. He was overtly annoyed.

"Miss Lisa!" Lila said the second I came into their circle. The old medic gave me a soft handshake with her mittened hands. "You clever and reckless Mage—you did well in the games, and I've meant to apologize on behalf of my brother Roo here."

BROTHER?

I was wide-eyed, staring at the old lady, hearing news I never would have guessed to be true. She continued, "He should have *never* made you those potions without informing your guardian, Gaius, here first. He was thoughtless—had his stock up in the trees for it, too."

Mender Roo grunted. "I didn't do anythin' wrong. She was my Charmer, *not* my patient. She turned out fine, by the way."

"She was *survivin'* out there—not healthy or livin' well. Could've died—"

"I already had an earful from *him*"—Mender Roo pointed his frostbitten nose at Gaius— "so I do not need one from you." He fixated his agitated glance toward me. "Shoulda told me you were with this Keeper, Lisa. Can't work with him, as you can see."

The curiosity in me couldn't help itself. "Sorry, but what exactly did Gaius do to upset you, Mender?"

Lila tried to nudge her brother away, but the prideful Mystic stood firm in front of the castle gates, not caring that a Captain and his guards were watching. "*Forty* years ago, this bulky bloke stole my job. Never agin' and creatin' new potions that he propagated to my customers as better than mine."

"I only stated what was true," Gaius interrupted calmly.

Mender Roo only furrowed his bushy brows more. "Shoulda stayed out of my town—"

"Aye—would you *hush!*" Lila stopped her brother and nudged him even more. "I apologize again, Gaius, and to you as well, Lisa. Hope to see

you soon, back training again with the Hunters and keeping the Prince outta trouble.”

I waved to them as I watched both make their way toward the Inner City, though Mender Roo grumbled the whole way down the hill.

“Took your time,” the Keeper said, already heading down the opposite castle path.

I quickly caught up to his side. “You were the one who wanted to wait out in public—very unlike you, by the way. So, why aren’t we just evanescing home?”

“Was informed that a certain couple wanted to see you, but I am not risking another run-in with any other Mystic who doesn’t care for my work. So, we will meet up with them instead.”

“Who is it, then?”

Gaius smiled ahead as the snowy clouds cleared away in the sky. “Seems they’re early.”

The trail his eyes pointed toward went a good couple of yards away, but it was enough to recognize the couple. Cheery tears started piling up along my eyelashes.

It was Mr. and Mrs. Balthier—they hadn’t aged a day and looked even happier than I did.

“Go ahead,” Gaius said. “I’ll see you back home when you return.”

I nodded and ran to the family that cared for me as one of their own. Their purple eyes made crescent moons, and Mrs. Balthier about burst into tears. I embraced them with a hug before following them back to Calendula, telling them all about my adventures in the games.

...

Valhalla’s parents were the definition of a selfless family. They treated me to whatever drink I wanted from Luca’s, letting me blabber about Nuolja, Setzyr, and the vaene. Mrs. Balthier kept gasping at the details, wishing I was more careful, but continued pressuring me to get on with the story. Mr. Balthier praised my magic abilities like a proud father, especially my battle with Rongo, though Emmeryn thought my blow to her eye was a bit harsh. Though it was true, I made sure to remind her that me and the red-headed Mage were on good terms.

The sun was setting, and I couldn’t risk Gaius being upset with me for my tardiness, the stubborn Keeper he was. The Balthiers walked me back to the Veradome, giving me another set of hugs before returning to

their cottage home. I promised to see them again soon once Gaius said I was well enough.

One foot into the Keeper's magical property, I saw him waiting on the worn-down brick bench near his half-buried home. A piece of white wood was firmly in his left hand as his right whittled away at the branch, crafting a primitive weapon.

I grinned. If he wanted to work properly, he'd be in his workshop. Guess he still was worried about me... or perhaps was just excited for my return. Gaius... he was the best mentor of them all. Truly.

My feet crunched the cold grass as I approached, watching as he never broke concentration. A relieving sigh exited from my lungs as I plopped beside him in his winter trench coat, sitting in a crisscrossed position, not caring if my shoes were mudding my pants. Wooden shavings landed near Gaius' winter boots, falling one by one on the frosty grass.

For a moment, we sat in silence. I liked that. I had been through a lot... but so did my Keeper. It was nice to finally sit in a stillness that wasn't caused by dread or fear.

"Have a good time?" he finally spoke, making a smooth curve with his pocket knife on the birchwood's surface.

Tuff reappeared and floated near my wavy hair as I put my weight on my palms leaning back on the crusty brick. "Mhm. They sent me a blynk yesterday saying they wanted to celebrate with me, whether I won the games or not..." I smiled, staring ahead at Gaius' glowing greenhouse. "They're really kind."

Out from the corner of my eye, a soft grin peeked through the facial hair of the Keeper. Another wooden flake floated to the ground. "So... all the worlds know you're the Agapéd now... A lot of people won't take that information happily. You sure you're alright with that?"

My orange glainie nestled against my neck and cheek, dangling his legs on my shoulder. "Yeah. I don't really care what others think when it comes to me and my magic. I'm doing what's right—fighting Darkness and showing the world the power of The Light. Feels good not to hide it anymore."

"Was quite an impressive spurt of wisdom on the rink... 'I will not be shaken... You shall fall because The Light isn't finished with my heart just yet.'" He cocked an eyebrow. "Where'd you come up with something like that?"

I huffed and pushed his shoulder. The man didn't budge an inch. "It was the *truth*, Gaius!"

"Sounded a little *too* much like something I'd say."

"*Pfft*—you'd probably just call him a name and punch the guy instead—oh wait—that's *exactly* what you did." We both chuckled on the bricked bench, him resuming his whittling. "Thanks for that, by the way."

Gaius blew onto the wood, dusting the air with tiny chippings. "What about the meeting in Nuolja?"

"It was good, too. King Bolthor is gonna make their province a part of Boolavogue now. I'm happy about that."

"Oh really?"

"And..." I smiled bigger. "They asked me to be a Hero."

Gaius chipped away another piece of wood confidently. "I assume you accepted it?"

"Nah. Declined it, actually."

A subtle jerk from his chin. "What happened to that Hero dream of yours?"

I let my legs dangle off the edge of the makeshift bench, feet barely brushing against the frosted grass. "I mean, it's still there, just going about it in a different way. Boolavogue was put into my life and has become like a second home to me. Sure, saving the world for other Mages may mean being a Hero and going off to random nations. But, right now..." I grinned as warming thoughts of my magic home resurfaced. "Boolavogue is my world. I wanna do anything I can to help them. Plus, I like monster hunting—not too shabby of a Hunter if I say so myself—and I like staying here with you. Someone's gotta make sure you actually go to sleep, not running on the adrenaline of pure vigor water to keep you awake."

My mentor tittered at my confession and stopped carving, his peridot eyes beaming. It was nice to finally see him burden-free. "You better keep showing up for our lessons, then."

"Hey—" I jumped up and stood in front of him. "First, I need to make up for the time I missed with Ekron."

"You will *after* you rest for a month—"

"What—a whole *month*?"

He huffed. "It should be longer with all you've been through. Did you really think you were starting tomorrow?"

I guffawed. "Well... no—but maybe like next week."

The woodworking Mystic stood up, towering over me. “Though your rot is gone, your heart and magic pulse are still healing even if your spirit is ablaze.” He put his tools and soon-to-be weapon of wood in his trench coat pocket. “Enjoy your time off with your Earthian friends and your mother. In a month, you can continue your Hunter training...” He rolled his vibrant greens, teasing a smile. “And I’ll work on finding you a flame mentor while you start studying for potion lessons.”

“Really?” I perked up, standing on my tip toes. “Yes! Finally—told you my purple fire wasn’t gone.”

He rolled his bright eyes. “That’s because you recklessly made them appear. Don’t ever scare me like that again. I nearly jumped out of the stands if it weren’t for Inna.”

“Yeah, like *Inna* could’ve stopped you.”

He rubbed my cheek, the gentle giant he was. “But, you did well in the games despite lying to me.”

“It was for a good reason.” I crossed my arms. “So... do my flame lessons start in a month, too?”

A scoff. “Ah, no. You need to rest and catch up with Caelum if you’re wishing to pursue your Hunter dream.” Gaius held out his calloused hand. “Ready to leave?”

I took a step back, fidgeting.

“Something wrong?” he asked, evanesce magic fading away.

My eyes surfed around the patches of cold grass. “I know you said to rest... but can I still come and visit you in a couple of days? I promise to heal up and not use any magic, but... I like being here... reading in your study and drawing in my bestiary...”

My mentor’s shoulders lowered as a soft sigh left. “You don’t have to ask to visit me, Lisa. This is your home, too. You’re welcome to come tomorrow *if* you’re well enough to evanesce.”

I nodded. “Sounds good—Oh! I even got a new plant for you to look at. It’s called, uh, aglidivines—I think that’s what she said. Found it in that frozen cave and everything.”

“*She*—as in the *vaene*?” His right brow raised high.

A flicker toward the bare tree. “... Maybe.”

Blue ribbons formed in his palm. “You can tell me about it when you return.”

“Thanks, Gaius. I’ll see you soon.”

Before the thunder and chimes burst around me, a sincere and loving “stay safe” echoed from my teacher. I was glad to have him by my side, and I couldn’t wait to see him tomorrow.

I was tired and ready for another nap, but I knew dupla-me was probably worried sick. I dashed through the woods in my backyard as fast as I could.

Through the backdoor, I didn’t see Mom in the living room. The clock on the stovetop shone “7:09 p.m.” in white font. *Mom should be getting out of the shower—not much time!*

I jolted up the steps and saw my other self lounging on the bed.

Dupla-me pressed off the mattress. “Oh—thank *gosh*. We didn’t die—wait, does that mean we won?”

Out of breath, I puffed, “Oh yeah... got a little more beat up than I thought... but now, we have an official holiday in Nuolja thanks to the wysh, so... guess it evens out.”

My other self smiled wide in my sweatpants and oversized blue hoodie. She extended out her palm. “A holiday! For real?”

“For real.” I gave dupla-me a low-five, and instantly, she *poofed* away as her clothing dropped to the floor.

As my head pounded with the memories of the week, I immediately grabbed the clothing my doppelganger left, changed into that, and started spraying on my vanilla body mist to hide the scent of Hunter and Gaius—just in time, too. The water pipes stopped humming, and I heard the shower curtain *swoosh*.

My bedroom door was wide open, and I saw Mom step out of the bathroom quickly, matching me with an oversized hoodie and comfy sweatpants. Her brown hair was soaking wet, dripping onto the floor as she almost bumped into me.

In all severity, she stared right at me as if she knew something was wrong. *Wait... what’s with—*

“Did you order the pizza?” was her question, simple yet deadly serious.

I had fought a villain, saved a nation, and just had my magic cleansed by the lady in gold, but Mom didn’t know that. She thought I had been in my room the entire time, and my doppelganger was too preoccupied with worries about my magical spar to think of something as trivial as

ordering pizza. Mom *loved* pizza... and I just disappointed her with the one and only request she asked of me.

I giggle toward the floor. “No, I forgot, Mom.”

She rolled her eyes. “You act like this is funny while there is a good hot pizza waiting to be made—and what’s with you not wanting to make plans with me to go to the movies—”

“Let’s do it—tomorrow. Sound good?” I cut her off.

“You sure?” She continued to dry off her hair with the too-small purple towel. “I was guessing you were just avoiding me—not ‘cool’ to be seen with your mother anymore.” I smiled at her, to which she crinkled up her face. “You’re acting weirder than usual, sweetie—but, as long as you order the pizza—”

“I’m getting to it.” I took a step back toward my bed. “Just have *Friends* ready to play while I take a nap.”

Mom started walking downstairs. “Didn’t you just nap—”

“Do you want to call the pizza man instead?” I joked, phone wagging in the air.

Her steps quickened, almost a run down the stairs. “Nap all you want—I do *not* wanna talk to that one boy who always answers—he’s weird.” Her voice didn’t sound like a mother’s. It was blissful, girly, and stress-free. Happy. “And get half with pineapples, *please*. And don’t you *dare* ask for mushrooms!”

As we later sat on the couch, indulging in a buffet of American snacks and pizza, laughing and lounging with the TV blasting, I was finally able to enjoy my first winter night of the new year unbound by worry and full of a warming peace. I was happy—beyond it—knowing I had a mom on Earth and a celestial gardener of Wishing Stars in my life. And I couldn’t wait to continue my path of being a Hunter for the Kingdom of Boolavogue.

Acknowledgement

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Stay safe and know you are worth living for.

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