

# HERE, BUT not HERE

A NOVEL BY  
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## **Introduction**

When I was younger, my mother used to snuggle up by my side and tell me a story. It was all I would say for a long time, just a "story." Sometimes, I would creep up on my older brother and start narrating one for about an hour until he would shun me away. For the most part, I didn't mind. But it was during the summer of my first grade, did it really affect me. I was old enough to know about the real world. Real life is different from the stories I learned about growing up. At times, you mess up, and some, you can't fix. In books, it was different, different from the real world. Dreams, even impossible ones, ended up becoming a reality. With a story, anything was possible. They became my refuge from struggles, hurt, and even sorrow. Like the time I lost my best friend. I had a massive blow with her, and she never forgave me, even 5 years after it happened. So, I took out a pen and began sobbing my feelings into the notebook. Slowly, the blue ink formed words, and those words created emotions, thoughts, and even more powerful things. That may be why you're reading this now, to understand what words really mean.

There's a reason why I started with that anecdote. *Everything is real.* They say it's not true, but it is. I don't expect anyone to believe this story. I would not have believed it myself if I hadn't lived through it. Maybe that's why no one talks about it. For now, convenience and entertainment will be the basis of this story. But as you read further, you will realize the true meaning.

Also, one more thing. Stop immediately if you're reading this because you think you're one. It will do more harm than good. The moment you think

you're one, so will they, and they will stop at nothing to get in your way. I have only met a few, and I know that there will be tons more waiting for you and me.

If this story was fake, it would have started in a kingdom, far away, in a magical castle. But since it's real, I'll tell you where it actually started: my language arts class.

## **Chapter 1**

"Can anyone tell me what the five most important story elements are?" Mr. Casar yelled from the front of the room. He, meaning Mr. Casar, is a kind man. He was skinny and tall. He had blonde, short hair and bangs that hung over a fine, lived-in face. His hooded green eyes were set appealingly within their sockets, watching over the entire class. Most of the time, he wore a plain white, buttoned-down t-shirt with pitch-black slacks. They were adorned with a tie that showed the school's mascot: the T-rex. His students always seemed to think he was too professional for his job. All the other teachers they knew dressed casually, almost like them. But that didn't matter to Mr. Casar. He wanted to dress his best no matter what day it was.

Instantly, my hand shot up to his question. "Yes, Eleanor, as usual," he said. There was a slight tone of boredom in his words, but you could tell he was still ready to hear my answer.

"They are plot, character, conflict, theme, and setting. Also, can you please stop calling me Eleanor. I prefer Lena."

"That is correct. I must say, I am impressed; you've managed to answer every single question this week correctly." An instant later, he began talking again.

"This structure has been used since the Ancient Greeks and is still being used today. For example, in the assignment I gave you last week, I instructed all of you to come up with a story and describe the five elements. For example,

Brandon's story was about a girl and her destiny. The plot was a set of events wrapped together to make a story in the setting: NYC. The characters were a girl and her brother. The girl had to overcome her fear of being different and the theme was being unique is okay. Did everyone understand?" He didn't wait for a response and jumped into the next part of the lesson.

"Story elements are powerful. When you become writers, authors, or need literacy in any kind of way, they will guide you toward your story. Fairy tales are great examples of this. Many story tellers use them. In Little Red Riding Hood, the plot and setting give a warning mood to the readers. The characters are also essential in the story. A little girl and a wolf are two examples that could be used in real life of a kidnapper and a kidnaped person. This allures the reader to follow the moral of the story, always listen to parents and never trust strangers. That makes me wonder how powerful the theme could be, but that's besides the topic." For a fraction of a nanosecond, a slight hint of worry swept his eyes. But just as fast as it was there, it was gone.

"All right now, for your homework assignment, I expect to see a 500-word essay describing the elements and why they help with writing. Extra-credit will be earned by those who can write their own story and point out the elements. Have a good day everyone. Bye."

With that, the class began running wild out of the classroom, like a crowd at a pep rally. Except for one person: Monica, my best friend and roommate. She was scared to start her assignment. Her last grade had been a C, the highest she had ever gotten in Language Arts. But, if she got anything below a B on the

next assignment, the school and her parents would force her to quit the soccer team. From hanging out with her, I know that would destroy Monica. Soccer is like her getaway from the world, like books for me.

"Monica, can I see you real quick," Mr. Casar asked quietly. Scared, she reluctantly got out of her seat. "Your grades have been slipping a lot lately and I think I've found the reason. Every time there's a soccer match, you get excited and lose your patience and attention on anything else. I think it would be best for you to forget about soccer for one week until finals and then you can resume. Does that seem fair?"



That night, I walked back with Brandon, my other roommate. Brandon Roberts is a twelve-year-old boy. He enjoys football, glamping, and badminton. He is funny and theatrical, but can also be very near-minded and a bit frightened at times. Unlike me, he was born here in Switzerland. He is average-height for his age with pale skin, blonde hair and hazel eyes. Unusually, he has a prosthetic hand; he lost his during a fight with a vicious coyote growing up. He has a birthmark on his neck.

Brandon used to live with his parents in a fancy upper-class neighborhood. But that all changed when they decided to send him to a boarding school. Out of luck, Monica, him, and me all got stuck in the same dorm together. It was the best match ever made.

The rest of the walk back to our room was silent. It was as if everything in time had suddenly paused. But it was strange. The world really did feel like it had stopped. The campus food trucks were typically loaded with customers from the teachers to the staff to the students. But there wasn't a single living soul out in the open today.

"Isn't it strange, the campus is deserted. It's like the entire school went missing." I remarked, hoping that he would remember something that I'd forgotten.

"N..." That was it. A second later, Brandon froze, as still as ice. His mouth was still in time with it about to sound out an O, but it couldn't. It was frozen. My heart pounded, racing even. I yelled his name, hoping it was enough to bring him back to life. "Brandon, Brandon, Brandon!" I screamed into the night. But it was no use, he was stone. I fled. I ran. I didn't know what to do. In my mind, I was right to run. I was scared. No book I knew now would solve my problem. I took a straight right turn, darting like the wind. My legs were hurting so much, they exploded with pain. It was nothing compared to the amount my mind was hurting however. *Time can't freeze*, I thought to myself. The empty corridor made me feel even more isolated than I already was. Not a single door or room was in sight, not a single living soul. An hour passed by. A door hadn't appeared. The school wasn't itself anymore. Out of nowhere, the man dressed in black stepped up to me. I had wondered why he was wearing black from head to toe. Not a single speck of skin had been revealed. My heart pounded; was this it? Was it all really over?

"Eleanor, turn yourself over." My heart skipped a beat and I turned around as slowly as possible. Something told me that this wasn't a practical prank my friends were playing on me. They couldn't have pulled this off, and wouldn't have. Inch by inch, I turned my waist until I saw his figure. From head to toe, the man was dressed in black. A hooded mask covered his eyes, but I could see a faint glimmer that sparkled in his eyes. They weren't the ones where you had an idea; it was a look of pure evil. In a flash, the most bizarre thing happened. He took off his coat and it turned into a set of scales, covering his entire legs. Wings sprouted in place where his arms should be. They were black, pitch-black in fact. The feathers were placed intricately on the bone and flesh part of the wings. His eyes narrowed and turned a shade of red. Finally, the shaggy brown hair he had originally owned disappeared and turned into white, straight hair flowing freely. As I looked, it appeared to be as long as three feet. Two horns sprouted out of the hair. Blood completed the look with it dripping from his shoulders to his stomach. My heart sank to the bottom of my chest. There was no way I could have gotten out of this. It was a nightmare, like the movies I used to watch growing up. I pinched my right cheek, just to make sure this was really happening. I prayed for the split second that it wasn't real, that I wouldn't feel pain. Luck had betrayed me. There was nothing I could do.

"Eleanor, catch!" an old man exclaimed. He had the voice of a caring man, and an eerily similar voice to Mr. Casar. For a quick second, I turned only to see Mr. Casar standing at the end of the corridor. A small locket was thrown into my hands. I stared at it for a few seconds, puzzled how a tiny locket could

defeat the giant beast standing in front of me. The man/monster lunged towards me. With only a small trinket, I did the only thing my mind could think of. I opened the locket, and suddenly a purple mist began to fill the room. My eyes could see perfectly through it, but the monster wasn't as fortunate. Cough! I stared at the man. His eyes started to bulge into his head. His hair reduced and he fell. I walked over to him, still clutching the locket in my trembling hands. A voice that wasn't his started to talk.

*There comes a day when the sky turns to ice to set forth an eternal night.*

*It shall be on the day the exiled one usher forth the destruction of evil,*

*Benevolence wiped off*

*goodness glorified.*

With that, his eyes closed, forever sealed in the eyes of the world.

## **Chapter 2**

I woke up the next morning, still on the floor where the man had been last night. But he wasn't here; I was. Just me. But then, the weirdest thing happened. Squinting from the bright morning sun on my face, I managed to make an outline of a few students, just standing there. "What's she doing there?" someone managed to whisper to the crowd. Soon enough, an entire crowd of people began to surround me.

"Oh my god. Is that really you Lena?". My eyes shot wide open. I knew that voice and I was not ready to get into this situation again. My heart raced, with anger. Jennifer Cox had ruined my life the last time she humiliated me. I was not going to let it happen again, but it was too late. She pulled out her phone and took at least a million photos of me on the ground. I raced from the scene and into the open grounds. From there, I rushed into the Georgetown building and sped into the first dorm on the first hallway. It was mine. Compared to all the other boarding schools I've gone to; this one has the most room space. It's almost as big as one floor in my house.

Paramount Grove, the school I go to now, is the only place I really remember calling home. It's a boarding school in Zurich, Switzerland and one of the best prep schools in the world. Some of the best scholars in Europe are teachers here. The sports teams always make it to nationals. It had been my mom's dream to go here. She was a journalist, aspiring to make a hit story that would capture the attention of readers around the world. One night when she was working, she got a letter from the school. It said I was accepted into both

schools (Paramount Grove is the literacy and arts school). My mom instantly signed me up for Paramount Grove and shared the news with me.

I went into my bedroom. It's one of the only places I can find peace now. The pink walls felt like home, at least, how I remember it to be. My bed was trashed with Plushmallows and other stuff. In a way, it seemed like I was back in my little house in New York with my mom, dad, and brother. "Oh mom, why can't I take a flight back to NYC and be with you and everyone else. Life here is different and too weird" I said to myself. It's like this sometimes for me. I know my family wanted the best for me, but why did they have to send me away, halfway across the world.

My little window shined the sun's bright light onto my face. The warmth of the waves felt nice and comforting after last night's shivers and chills. I snook a little peek at the outside grounds. The window was small, but it was enough to see all of campus. The swim team had just won another match against Copper Cove. Everyone was buzzing in the pool. It was a hot day in mid-November, quite rare; it had been the first in many years after all. Some of the older-school kids were rushing to the Limmat with a boat they found a few weeks ago.

*Ring! Ring!* I leaped. But I turned around and found and found that the TV was turned on. It was my brother. Alex, my brother, had been acting strangely over the past few months as well. He rarely called anymore and barely acknowledged my existence. Last month, he forgot to call me for Halloween. But it was stranger than before. It was an emergency call. That triggered me to

press accept. I leaped onto my bed and glanced around my room, just for caution. The bean bags were neatly lined against the wall. The pink one looked especially overused. I looked down at my bed. There it was, the locket. I hadn't used it since the night before, but somehow, it was on my bed. I had no time to ponder. Alex was on the screen and his face was pure panic.

"Lena," he said out of breath. His face was worn down and it looked like he was in an old abandoned house. Spiders were crawling on his face and what looked like blood was all over his jersey. *Oh great*, I thought. Alex was here to scare me after Halloween, but extra scary. The usual prank of the month. I rolled my eyes at him, but he didn't joke back like usual. His face was fixed into worry and panic.

"Lena, listen. This is important. It's not a joke. Run away from Paramount. Bad things are going to happen if you stay. Then it's only a matter of time before they come after everyone. Mom and dad are already fleeing to San Jose. I'm joining them in a week. They told me to tell you to go to Lyon, France. You should be safe there for a while. Just run. Your life depends on it" The screen started glitching and I couldn't make out the rest of his words. I could only make out a "...ger" because he completely froze. I pressed a button and cut the call. Mom and dad would never go to San Jose at such short notice. They would never ask me to leave school and go to Lyon. Alex was faking and it was official. He was trying to mess with my head. I let my body fall onto the soft blankets and pillows on my bed. I felt my eyelids droop and then...



A young girl walking across from the baggage claim to the exit of an airport. The girl is still quite young, around eight or nine. She lets her short amber-brown hair flow across her neck and her shaggy bands cover the tip of her eyes. They - her eyes - had a little more than average beauty to them. One was a fiery shade of violet, like the night sky on a clear moonlight fluorescent night. The other is as gray as fog. She was mildly tanned all over and had freckles from nose to eyes. She was wearing overalls, as she always did.

“Daddy, I don’t want to go. I want to stay at home,” she said.

“Lena, you’ll be fine. This is the best school in the world. You won’t get another opportunity like this. Plus, you’ll have so many new friends!” her dad responded.

“Ok,” she said solemnly. She wasn’t the type who was used to standing up for herself. She was however, sweet like sugar, smart like a dolphin, and as magical as a dream. Her parents were from a middle-class family in America. Her dad owned a small business he called “Books with Collins” and her mom worked as a journalist. Her mom traveled the world, writing stories to share in the local paper. It was her that sparked her interest in writing. You see, she wanted to be a famous author when she grew up. Paramount Grove Academy for Fine Arts was one of the top tier schools worldwide. It had been mom’s dream to attend the school and now Lena had been accepted. The school was in Zurich and since she was too young to go alone, her dad accompanied her. “Well, there kiddo, I better get going. My flight back home is going to take off anytime soon. Remember, my number is written on your bag and you can call

me anytime you want." Her dad's eyes were locked with pride. With one last glance at his daughter, he turned away. The little girl wanted to cry on spot and through a fit, but she knew it wouldn't be any good. She was on her own. She figured the only way she would get to school was by taking the bus. But just then, a small, petite woman walked up to her. "Hi. I'm Caroline Jameson and this is my son Brandon. I am the international director for students at Paramount Grove. I see your father followed my instructions. You are Eleanor Collins, aren't you?"

She was baffled. This lady, out of everyone in the airport, knew her name. She mentioned the school. Excited as she was, the girl was quick to say yes. "Excellent. Follow me and we will get you to school. I think you will enjoy it a lot."

The journey wasn't long. Mrs. Jameson drove Brandon and the girl to the academy. Brandon had an obvious resemblance to his mother. They both had blonde hair and blue eyes. They reached the academy. It was beautiful, unlike anything Lena had ever seen before. The walls were lined with murals and the ceiling was so tall every person in New York, stacked on top of each other, wouldn't reach the top. But the building was amazing. It had a medieval look to it.

"It looks like you two will be in the same room. Walk up the stairs, take two right turns and one left. Then, find the room with a 193 embedded on it. Good luck to both of you two."

The girl rushed over to the wrong room. She had gone to the stairs leading to the basement. Brandon, the little boy, followed her. He was just as naive as she was, unaware of the mess they were going to get themselves into. The steps creaked as they went further and further down. The basement gave an eerie feeling. It was pure scary. Not a single living soul was down here, not a single breath. They reached the final step and stepped onto the hard concrete floor. It looked ancient, not used in decades. But then they heard someone coming. Loud, thunderous footsteps were coming from a distance. The two hid in a small bag on the side of the room. The footsteps were coming closer and they sped to the bag. They jumped in and stayed as quiet as possible. A small peep hole was there. The girl eyed her surroundings through it, and she was terrified by what she saw next. Ten men were in the center of the room, formed in a perfectly even circle. Weird scribbles of lines were drawn around them, almost making a drawing. A chant arose among them. A look of pure fear spread along Brandon's face. He grabbed the girl's wrist and yanked her to the stairs they rushed out of the basement. Still, the girl managed to get a look at one of them. They were dressed from head to toe in black. Not a speck of skin was shown and their hair was covered in black, shaggy bangs. After what felt like minutes of climbing, they finally reached the top step. Eager to get out of the scene, they ran and fled. Something, just feeling its presence, was evil. It fueled above the magic in fairy tales. It was powerful and ancient, a force as old as time.

They began to scream. They didn't care if no one would believe their story. They had lived through it and that was all the proof they needed. A teacher in

the near distance came to them and asked why they were screaming in Silent Hall. Too afraid to talk, they just shrugged as if nothing had happened.

"All right. Let's make a deal. None of this ever happened. We should both never speak of this. Tonight, never happened." Brandon was trembling in fear when he spoke. "If my mom finds out, she'll have both of us in big trouble."

"Deal," the girl locked her words in a promise, and she was willing to keep it for the rest of her life.



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I shot out of bed. "He was one." I shook with terror. That night was the most terrifying in my young life, and history was about to repeat itself.

## Chapter 3

The days flew by. It was May 18th one day and then May 20 a second later, or at least it seemed. Finals were a day away and nothing was on my mind besides that. As I walked by the library to return the *The Large and Big Book of Biology Facts*, I overheard the same chant I had all those years ago. Vaguely because of thought and out of instinct, I dashed into the neighboring classroom. The walls were echoing with sound today, mostly because the Dean of Security had requested some of them to be rebuilt. Crash! The sound buzzed in my ear for a few minutes before wearing off. Someone, or something, had broken something large. But there was nothing that big in the next room. I stuck around for a little longer, this time trying to hear what they were saying.

"We don't have time. When the moon sets on the first day of the Day of Eternal Night, our world shall be encompassed with forever darkness. No light, hope, or anything will be present. Everyone will suffer much more than the Dark Ages. This will make the Dark Ages look like a Camelot." The voice was deep, but didn't have the sense of darkness I felt on the first night. The voice didn't have any reactions or feelings in the statement. Whenever something was said, it was plain. The voice just said things.

"Maybe it's time she knew the truth. The girl lived her whole life in the shadows, not understanding the power and influence she has. Pérshëndetje will be the right time. The new power will step forward and claim the title as heiress" the voice continued.

"So that's your solution. To bring a tiny, little girl as a supreme sovereign of the Realms Beyond. She can't control it. You saw her yourself. That first test only worked because Enki gave her the weapon. I knew I shouldn't have positioned him here. This is why we only let the senior guardians at the meetings!" A different voice said this. It was a girl's, but it was too sinister to be a girl.

"So, what do we do?" the last voice said. It was quite squeaky. To this nobody responded. But then, the silence was broken. A swoosh sound, no multiple echoed throughout the room. Just as they were there, they were gone.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about what they said. *What was the first day of the Eternal Night? Who was the girl they were talking about? Who were they?* The questions buzzed in my mind. Finals seemed like my biggest priority just a second ago, but now, something bigger was coming.

"Hey there Ms. I'm-so-busy-thinking-I-can't-talk-to-anyone." It was Monica. But she seemed bubblier than the day before. Why was she happy? Her parents had forced her to quit soccer? I set these questions aside and decided it was best to tell her what was on my mind.

"Let's go find Brandon; I need to tell you both something"

We journeyed around campus trying to find Brandon. After an hour, after searching the food trucks, library, his room, and every classroom, we managed to find him. Brandon was with his mom, and someone else I didn't quite know.

"See, these are all the things I'm talking about Brandon. You need to quit..." she stopped when she spotted us entering the room. "One sec. Girls, what are you doing here? My office is closed now."

"We just wanted to talk with Brandon, only for a few minutes." Mrs. Roberts was only going to let Brandon off the hook if something big was happening. "The annual Theatre Actor Show is here and Mrs. Calicoi wants everyone in drama to come to the auditorium." It was lying, but it was for a good reason. Brandon and Monica might as well have been the only people who would believe me. I certainly know the school counselor wouldn't after last time.

After several long minutes of awkward silence, she finally budged. But Brandon had to be back in two hours. *Perfect!*

"We have the Theatre Actor Show?" his face was puzzled.

"No. I needed to talk to you. Something bad might happen" I began to narrate everything to them from the black man to the meeting I had heard about a few hours ago. But they didn't have the reaction I wanted them to have.

"Lena, do you need to go to the nurse? There's no way any of that happened. This school has a very protective security system." Brandon said.

"I agree," Monica replied. Her voice was filled with concern and deep thought.

I was hurt. My closest friends didn't believe me. If they didn't, who would. Anytime now, they would think I was crazy and send me off to the school psychiatrist. I knew better, but I couldn't help myself. I threw a fit, on spot. But

that's when it hit me. I forgot to mention Alex. Brandon always believed him, for some reason, and I knew Monica would believe Brandon. So, I told what happened with Alex. Just as I thought, his eyes lit up with acknowledgment. I'd got him and Monica too. Silence broke out among us. It was like that first day when things started happening.

"Let's wait a few more days and see if anything else happens," Monica finally said, managing to stop the silence and awkwardness.

With that, our conversation ended. I had secretly been hoping the whole time that nothing was going to happen for the next few weeks. Summer only comes once a year. But Monica was right. Bad things could have happened to us anytime soon. We didn't know when the Eternal Night was, or how bad it would be.

## **Chapter 4**

The final day of the school year came. I hadn't bothered unpacking. After all, I couldn't afford to go back home again. But I was homesick. I missed my parents and our little house on the cul-de-sac of 5th Avenue. Despite him ignoring me for the whole month now, I couldn't help but miss Alex. I whipped out my computer and started typing instantly. For a second, I hadn't figured out what it was I was doing. As I read the words, I found "ticket prices". Zürich to New York City was 727 dollars. I summed up the money I had made this year.

"\$283. Rats!" I exclaimed. I must have said it too loudly though because one of the students in the hall had paused by the door for a sec. It would be a repeat of all the years before this: summer school at Paramount.

Everyone was crowding the halls with suitcases. Some people were talking about their plans for the summer. The Martinez twins were going skiing in the Alps. Some of the other kids were doing a group trip touring Europe. Everyone was doing something exotic, except me. I scanned the halls for my two roommates. They were nowhere to be seen. *Maybe they already left*, a voice inside me said. It was the one that had my deepest darkest fears. I searched some more. Finally, I gave up. I crashed back in my room. I was going to have to make some adjustments with just me and 900 square feet of room. I walked back into the hallway and passed an elated looking Monica. I turned back. Monica was here. Right beside her was Brandon.

"What are you guys doing here? Aren't you supposed to be packing to go home?" It felt like I was asking a million questions to them.

"We're staying. I checked with my mom and Monica checked with her parents. They're okay with us staying for one summer." Brandon had made my day saying that. I was worried I was going to have only teachers and a few second graders for company.

The information was little, but still a lot to process. My two best friends at Paramount were actually going to spend the summer with me. My heart skipped a beat.

For the next hour or so, we just walked around campus, saying goodbye to our friends, seeing if anyone was going to stay. Around noon, we grabbed lunch from the campus food trucks. It was time to celebrate. School was officially over. Once a year, the students threw a huge party on campus. Tonight, it was finally going to happen.

"Party Comity! Sign up for the party comity!" student council members said anyone who passed a stall. Crowds were coming from all directions. It almost overwhelmed me just as much as everyone else. Being head was one of the best things that could happen to a person at Paramount Grove. Previous heads created an exclusive society. It was a huge opportunity to join. Leaving a Monica racing after me, I dashed to the nearest stall, also the only stall. I raced past mobs of 7th and 8th graders and I made it to the front of the line. Head hadn't been filled yet, so I grabbed a pen from the booth and scribbled my name on the slot. The person behind me filled the final slot. The word spread

like a game of telephone and crowds of students disappointedly left the never-ending line. After everyone left, it was just me standing by the booth. I rushed back to a now panting Monica and told her the news. After I finished, she jumped up and down in excitement. But we were soon interrupted.

A tall and scrawny lady walked over to us. Black, shaggy hair awkwardly hangs over a small, oval face. It was still young, but was lived-in at the same time. Piercing amber eyes were set gracefully within their sockets, watching enthusiastically over the campus. She was so familiar to me, like a long-lost relative. When I finally had the nerve, I asked her if we had met before. She didn't answer; she just smiled at me. It was warming, the smile. But it quickly changed from a smile into a frown. Her eyes were filled with sadness. She stroked my hair one time and then smiled again. I realized she couldn't talk. I pointed to my throat and made an X with my hands. and she nodded eagerly. She was beautiful, like the people I read about in mythology books. She handed me a scallop shell and left. I could see her shadow move into the horizon sky, streaks of sunlight pressing against her. And then, with a poof, she was gone. I glanced down at the shell. The smooth feeling it had gilded against my skin. The rigid patterns of its red and white bumps textured my hand in the same way.

But there was something strange about the shell. When I held it in my hand, I couldn't help but feel calm, but angry. I felt angry for no reason. My face muscles began to tense. My eyebrows scrunched up and my mouth became stiff. I had forgotten Monica was still here with me. She sensed something was wrong, because before I knew it, she yanked the shell out of my hand and let it

fall onto the soft sand of the volleyball court. Instantly the anger drained from my body, but so did the energy. With the pencil pouch abandoned on the side of the court, I picked the shell up and carried myself to Georgeton Hall. The shiny shell felt magical in my hands. I felt I could wield its power. "They're coming. They're coming" It kept echoing in my head until I managed to force myself to sleep. Little did I know that that warning saved my life. If you feel yourself here, stop immediately. They're coming for you. Don't make the mistake I did by following the path.

## **Chapter 5**

Summer break felt better than the times I had to stay before. My two roommates managed to lighten the mood since school ended, mostly by causing mischief around the school. It was the most fun I had since last fall. The hot summer sun lit the dorm up and let the warm light rays bounce around. After a long spring of nothing but rain, the sky finally began to clear up. The sun was high, the birds were chirping, and the small crowds of people were buzzing. It was perfect, almost too perfect. It was the hot summer day of July 17, though when things started to get really strange again.

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you!" a crowd of people sang. I was in the center of a room, about the size of a classroom. A table lined with birthday sheets was situated in front of me. The beige cream cake was adorned at the center of the room. Everyone was looking at it. It wasn't one of the flat one-layer happy birthday cakes that everyone was used to seeing at the bakery. Oh no, it was much larger than that, and quite more beautiful. The layers were stacked on top of each other, all five, as if they were on a snowman. But for most, it wasn't the height that made it a feast to eye upon. It was the design. The thin golden frosting intricately placed a vivid scene on the cake. It was one everyone had experienced in childhood: going outside. Tiny branches curved from the main stem and atop them were birds of every color and variety. Golden flowers, physically perched onto the cake, blossomed as if they were real. But, aside from the beauty, a chip was cut off from the cake, a rather large chip from the looks of it. And that was the biggest mystery of them all. At least, that was what we thought. Decorations lined the walls, many

saying Happy Birthday, and presents of every shape and size were stacked all around the room.

It was my birthday. I had invited around a dozen guests, mainly everyone who was staying at school for the summer. Fourteen candles were placed on the golden flowers, one for each flower. Slowly, I blew them all out.

"Make a wish," someone yelled from the back of the room.

*Easy. I wish for things to be great next year. Maybe I could spend the summer back home.*



As fun as the party was, it was exhausting. A tired me wearily walked back to the lounge. I passed the locker rooms. Most of them were empty, but mine wasn't. From the day a couple months ago, I had kept the shell; it was intriguing. Most shells didn't feel magical. This one did. Monica had slapped it out of my hand, but that didn't stop me from touching it occasionally. Every 2nd Tuesday, I would sneak out of the dorm and come here. Most times were a failure; the security systems were activated at exactly 12:00 AM, but today was perfect. I turned the lock to 36, then 14, then 8. Bling! The door opened. At the center was a small box. It was made of pure black velvet and caparisoned with pearls. I gently lifted the box, and there it was. The shell was exactly where I had put it. This time was not going to be a failure. I grabbed it

with both my hands. The anger sprouted from my head and reached my feet. I didn't let go.

"Ultimum esto unum fō nse, Cave domina rubra. consensu et cura" The voice was faint, but I remembered it. It was the one from the first night I got the shell. "Ultimum esto" I puzzled. But then it clicked. "Latin. Be the last one of use, Beware the red lady. Consent and heed" Suddenly, I wasn't in control of my mouth. Words that I didn't mean to say were said. "ter carpe viam. Testam mihi dedit et scio scio. Volo adire terram incognitam , sed fac solum amicos non sentire"

The ground began to shake. Cracks were formed in the previously perfect floor.

"Lena!" Brandon and Monica rushed in through the backdoor. Their feet became just as wobbly as mine. A force of current swooped both my feet in the air. Then I saw it. The fabric of reality began to rip itself apart. The air felt like it was splitting into two. Lockers were flying and bumped into each other. Like fabric, the air began to rip apart. The gently sewed stitches weren't there anymore. The most peculiar thing happened next. A void started to form. The black dot appeared out of thin air. The room began to freeze. As the dot grew bigger and bigger, I could see something on the other side. It was acres of barren land with a few trees in the distance. There was something strange about this land though. It was a dark shade of navy purple on one side and magenta pink on the other. I couldn't make out what it said, but in the center of the land was a sign. It was an old wooden one, like sign boards. An urge

came to me, to step into the hole that had popped. It would be the best getaway. If I wrote a story on it, I could become a successful author! My feet were paralyzed in shock, but I managed to take one step. Little by little, I made my way to the portal. I was only an inch when I heard Brandon yelling at me. "Lena, don't do it. We don't know what's in there." His voice was shaking and his body was trembling with fear." But his words didn't change my mind. I stuck my face in, then my body. With the first step I took, I knew I was no longer on Earth.

From the other side of the portal, I heard footsteps. They were racing towards me. A turned around to see Monica and Brandon jump head-first into this world.

"Never do that again," Monica's voice was too sinister to be her own. It was grim and solemn. I felt something wet slide against my cheek. I looked up to see if there was any rain, but there wasn't. It fell down to my jaw, and then dropped onto my shirt. Drying my now red and puffy eyes, I looked around. The land wasn't as barren as I had thought it to be, but the ground I was standing on certainly was. It was hard glass. Underneath was pure dirt. Startled by Monica's words, I dropped the shell. A glass shard pierced right through the middle and Poof! It was gone. I saw the rift/portal begin to close. In a matter of seconds, the fabric had stitched itself back together. It was clear now; we were stranded. I looked helplessly at the setting sun in the far distance. *Was this what Alex was trying to warn me about?* He had mentioned a word that ended in -ger. The only word I could think of like that was anger. "Why did you do that?" This time it was Brandon. She hadn't been angry at me

in so long, I almost believed it wasn't her. I was scared, frightened. We couldn't find a way back home.

"This is all your fault Lena. If you hadn't touched the shell and went through the portal, we would still have been at your party, having a good time. Now we don't know where we are or how to get food. For all we know, we could get eaten alive or starve to death!" Brandon's words were so harsh, they pierced right through my heart.

"My fault. I didn't ask you and Monica to leap through the portal and follow me. I would have been fine on my own." But I knew he was right. "Let's just work on getting out of here, okay?"

And that was what everyone was willing to hear.

## **Chapter 6**

Night and day passed, and so did life. Cliffs and rocks spread out the land for the most part. It was almost as if life was drained from the rocky terrain of nothingness. It was strange though. Lots of things have been strange, but none of them felt this magical. I glanced at the open land. Not a single living soul besides us seemed to be in this land. The vegetation we had stalked up was reduced to nothing in a matter of days. The evident decision had come; we had to leave.

The nights were freezing. Dawns were stony, the little trinkles of warm air breathed sighs of relief they were released into this world. We needed air though, warm air. We couldn't wait for the ever-never warm air. By the third day of our stay, we lit a bonfire. I can't describe what the warm, cozy air felt like.

"I will never take the heater for granted again," Brandon chuckled.

By the fourth day, we had officially decided it was time to go. With the small amounts of fruits and vegetables we gathered, we set off in the distance, farther and farther away.

Sun was what helped us along our journey. We hiked in the path of the sun: east to west. The stoney formations had turned from a wasteland to an Alice-in-Wonderland Forest. Shrubs grew, flowers bloomed, and most importantly, the trees did too. Animals of every nature roamed and grazed the abundant plants and animals. While it wasn't an oasis, it sure felt like one.

We only took a break once in a while to catch our breath. By the late afternoon, we came across the first sight of civilization: a small abandoned cottage! It wasn't big. The logs that made the cottage were cut proportionally to match the pillars of the house. The tiny balcony was set up for a holiday. The party treats were left on the tables, molding from the time they've been out. Knock! Knock! Knock! We knocked three times to see if anyone was there. The dark moonlit night illuminated the doorstep. Waiting seemed like it lasted for hours. With no response at the door, we opened the door. The gentle creak sound against the birds chirping softly spread across the land. Lightning emerged and the animals began to scatter, away from the house. Candles and the southern exposure illuminated the candescent quality of the room. It wasn't as big as our dorm, but it would have to do. I started to gaze around. A small and cute leather sofa was at the center, but it was stained severely. The walls were decorated with pictures of somebody from a long time ago. At least by the looks of it. The ground echoed with sounds of murmurs and chills. I sat on the ground, as it was the only hygienic place in the room.

"It's not much, but we can survive," Monica said, almost reading my mind.

The night was cold. The exposure brought the cool air from outside into the house. The small fire we lit earlier in the day finally burned down. It was good for giving comfort.

Night turned to midnight at the strike of 12 on the antique clock on the wall. No one had slept yet, just tossed and turned. After realizing that no one was

going to do anything, we got up and decided to head outside. We had run out of food and anyways needed to find more.

The moon was almost down and the sun began to rise. The animals began to come out again. From the looks of it, the time was around 5 AM. Panicked, I rushed to find Brandon and Monica. Sometime during the night, we had been separated and now I was lost, scared, and homeless. I rushed through the bushes, pricking myself a few times, letting drops of blood fall to the ground.

"Young lady, may I help you?" I jumped around to find what could be described as a person mixed with a demon. He was a man, around 5'9' by the looks of it. His dark straight hair covered his shoulders. But what surprised me the most was three things: the furry head, the cat-like features of his head, and the purple marks on his cheeks. Other than that, he looks like a normal person in very formal attire. I froze. It was the most peculiar thing that had happened all summer.

"I'm sorry for bothering you, but nobody your age is allowed in these parts. Are you lost? I'm rather excellent in directions and guidance." This cat-person was my first hint to run, but I didn't. I stayed perfectly still, only nodding my head to ask for directions.

I led him to the cottage. Brandon was sitting on the front step. I rushed over to him, only to be followed by the thing I just met. After yelling his name five times, he looked up. His face gleamed for a sec, but just as soon faded into shock. He was staring in the direction of the cat-human.

"Lena! Nice to see you. Can I talk with you for a sec?" Brandon rushed me inside. "What is that thing, and why does he look like a cat crossed with a human?"

"I don't know. Maybe he could help us get back. He's our only chance for now." I hissed back.

We stepped outside finding the cat-man still standing where we had left them. Monica was right behind him, urging us to run away. We fought the thought.

"Children, I would like you to spend the night at my place. It is rather comfy compared to where you are staying now. It is the least I can offer to you."

We were paralyzed in shock. My parents had always taught me to not follow strangers, but here, we didn't have a choice. I dragged Monica out of the bushes and the three of us followed the cat-man out of the woods.



We reached the clearing of the trees. It was more beautiful here than any other place I had seen before. The cherry blossoms bloomed in the mid-summer sun. A small bridge was created to guide visitors above the crystal-clear lake. On the other side, was a house. It was small and beautiful, certainly better than the place we were staying now. We stepped into it, following the cat-man.

"Can I call you Fuzzy?" Brandon blurted out from the tip of his mouth. "Fuzzy" did not respond, but grinned and nodded in approval.

"Children, could you please tell me who you are and what you are doing here. It's far too dangerous for kids your age to be here. I might be scary now, but it is nothing compared to the things you are going to see. Oh right. Where are my manners? Please have a seat."

Without thinking, we sat down. Fuzzy smiled. It was obvious he didn't get many visitors.

"I'm Lena. Those are my two friends, Monica and Brandon. We're a little lost and we need to get back home. By any chance, could you help us?" Monica was still comprehending my words. *Are you crazy? We can't trust him*, she shot back.

"I see. You are Silva Invitis. Many don't know of it. They choose to be ignorant. I think you are one of them, but..." Fuzzy trailed off for a sec. He seemed to be studying us, almost as if we weren't human. Fuzzy looked down at us. I looked puzzled, thinking why we weren't frightened.

"What's Silva Invites? I don't think we studied it in Geography or Social Studies back at school." Monica questioned. Although she was usually wrong when it came to studies, this time she was perfectly right.

Fuzzy looked at us in utter bewilderment. He was probably thinking we were stupid or very illy educated. But he seemed to also enjoy it.

"Silva Invitis is one of the nine territories of the Land of Unknown. It is the only known kingdom in history to have just forest. No one wanted to live here for so long, thus the name. Previous to this, it was the clearing of a prison. But soon, the prisoners escaped and made the land grow. Now, they are fugitives, wanted in every territory except this one. The Magicals tried to capture them, but to no use. My house might be the only safe place in this region."

"What are the other regions?" I inquired after taking a long moment of thinking.

"Well, there's the Ira, Exspectatio, Gaudium, Fides, Metus, Admiratio, Tristitia and Fastidium. We are currently in the Golden Era, though Sky My News says that it is about to fall. There have been riots across the world."

"Each kingdom has their own ruler. Exspectatio is ruled by Queen Letitia and her husband King Keanu. They are trying to restore the peace after what happened last summer. They rule the largest kingdom. The trees are always blooming, and the citizens are the happiest ever seen. They anticipate everything, even disappointment.

Princess Candace is the heir apparent to the throne of Gaudium. The current monarch died last week and the funeral is expected to be today. She is feisty, but also quite jolly. Fun fact: she was my friend when I was younger. Gaudium is the fourth largest, but has the most citizens.

Fides is the smallest kingdom, pushed to the side. King Maynard was punished for his misdeeds and given Fides to run. The kingdom is at a breaking point.

Tristitia and Fastidium as the twin kingdoms. They are ruled by twin sisters: Larisa and Lorelei. Finally, we got Admiratio. Elsla rules it.

Metus is a rather interesting kingdom. If you visit, you'll see. Their ruler, Chester, is a veteran warrior, until he was struck by Pantophobians. Now he and the entire kingdom are in a desperate stage"

He finished. But I still wondered why he left the last kingdom.

"We need to get home. A lady gave us a shell. I opened it and we traveled through a portal here. Is there a way we can get home?"

Fuzzy started to think deeply. He was on the verge of concluding we were crazy or aliens trying to attack. Finally, a lightbulb hit him.

"There's a spell, an imaginary one of course, but it could work. The All-One-Eye is the only spell known to create that magic. I have a book on it right here." He went to a nearby shelf and collected a book and scroll.

"This scroll is a map of the world and the book will help you achieve the spell. I hope it helps. By the way, when you get all the items, meet me back at my house. I will turn them into a portal."

## **Chapter 7**

We spent the night at Fuzzy's, thankful for a decent place to stay. It feels like being a fugitive when you're lost, scared, and don't know anything about where you are. When you're with a home, you don't know any of this. It's a scary feeling, one of anger and sadness, but overtime, you might get used to it. That's how I felt on the first days of this trip.

It was early morning and the birds were chirping, the clouds were dancing, and the animals were out and open, ready to start their day. It's a strange thought, but sometimes, I wish I could just turn into a bird and fly away from all my problems. I knew it would never work, but it was a pleasant dream to think about.

"Breakfast!" Monica yells from the bottom floor. It made me smile. She sounded just like my mom, during the times I was still at home, out of trouble. I calmly made my way down the steps, unaware of the dangers awaiting me the moment I stepped out of the door. Breakfast, thankfully, was not one of those weird health diets everyone was trying out back at school. It was just scrambled eggs, toast, pancakes, and a glass of OJ.

"I had to run about 6 miles in the morning for that, so you better not complain," Monica chuckled as she was making breakfast for everyone else. It tasted good, plus, it was the first complete meal I had in a week.

Fuzzy leaped down from the stairs, followed by Brandon. "Here's some food for the trip. I just packed some water, fruits, and broccoli." He handed me a

duffel bag. Unzipping it, I saw the book, scroll, and all the food. My eyes widened in happiness and a smile appeared on my face. He grinned from ear to ear. It was very evident I was happy.

"Thank you so much!" I squealed and gave him a bear hug.

"Help me!" He mouthed to Monica, but she just laughed. I joined in with her and soon I let go.

"Are you two sure that you're ready for this? Great warriors, even kingdoms have fallen to the alluring attraction of the spell. Europa the Great fell in his conquest to retrieve it." Once again, he expected us to be shocked, but we stared at him blankly. Fuzzy didn't explain this time, however.

I stared emptily on the ground. Was it really possible for us to do this? The campus at school was hard enough to navigate. Would we be able to navigate an entirely new world? *I sure hope so.*

"I think we are." I wasn't brave or courageous when I said this. I was being goofy, thinking this chapter of my life was going to be just like those fantasy books stacked on the top shelf of Paramount's library. I locked eyes with my friends'. They seemed more certain than me, like we were going to be home by tomorrow. They were brave, though and it was only logical for me to trust them.

"Fuzzy, you should come with us. You know this place so much better than us." Brandon begged as we headed towards the door. Fuzzy and Brandon had clicked in an instant last night. I had never seen that happen before. Maybe

that's what happens when three tweens get transported to a different world and meet a strange, but friendly cat-man.

"Children, I'd love to, but I can't. The world is not ready for me. They won't accept me for who I am, only how I look. I don't want to stop you from going back home. I can't do that to you three." He let out a deep sigh. His cat eyes began to whimper a little and his ears began to tuck back. He turned away from us.

"Lena. You're special. I can just feel it. Be careful. That's all I can say." Fuzzy made us quite uncomfortable, so we left.

"I wish you three only the best. I'm rarely useful. This has been the opportunity of a lifetime." He said finally and shut the door.



None of us spoke for the first quarter of the trip. Our minds were wandering, almost as if we had no priorities. I let out a huge sign. It broke the on-going silence no one could seem to take.

"I'm just thinking about what Fuzzy said to me. He said I was 'special', but I don't know why." I spoke. It pushed the burden of saying that on my shoulders.

"Maybe you're magical!" Monica teased me.

"I guess. Also, we just wound up in another dimension. Shouldn't we sightsee a little. We have a map after all. That way, we can get all the things we need to go home and also have a little fun. We could be saviors and tourists!" I squealed at my idea. It was a nice idea. Monica nodded her head. We looked at Brandon, but there was something strange about him. For starters, his prosthetic arm was acting weird, like it did during the first incident with the man in all black. His face began to tense and then he yelled "Get cover!"

I dove into the bushes opposite of us. I didn't see where my friends were, but we had bigger problems. A loud bang came from the distance. Blood red roses dropped from the sky. Clouds began to rage angrily at the ground and a second later, there was lightning. Where the lightning was a second ago, a woman stood. She was as pale as ebony, piercing with evil. Her rosy red cheeks illuminated the long dark hair she let flow down until her hip. Her medieval red gown flew to her legs, where a classy pair of high-heels were present. She was beautiful, like a rose petal. Yet, there was fear in my heart, to not ask her for help. To leave her alone.

She craned her neck in my direction. A perfect 80-degree rotation. My heart sank. Blood came from her wrists. But it wasn't normal blood. It was talking, angrily. I thought everything before this was scary, but this was pure terrifying. A tiger emerged behind her. It was pure white, with striking blue eyes. Embedded on its forehead was a Petunia: the flower of anger.

"Firosa, come girl. I have a special treat for you today. There are three children in these woods. I can't imagine why they would be here, but" the lady began to

mumble the rest. My brain flashed on: she meant us. The tiger was going to eat us alive.

"But I don't want you to eat them. One is, how do I say it, filia mea. I can't believe my sisters thought I was incapable of doing this. The fifth day of Eternal Night is coming within a three-week deadline. Then, we shall see. That porcelain doll, oh her prophecy shall come true. I will avenge the girl. " Hissing followed. Maniacal laughter spread through the forest. Creatures of very disturbing nature came into view.

"Today, my associates, is the night of the Prima Aetemae Noctis et Mortis. Let Tabitha come forward."

A plump and stout lady came to the front of the crowd. She was a witch, although I had no examples to compare to. She began to chant a mysterious tongue unknown. Monsters began to cheer. They roared in approval.

"SILENCE! I think filia mea might have learned too much. Scatter!" The beasts disappeared into thin air and then only she was here. With a murmur, she disappeared.

## Chapter 8

"I think it's time we look at that map" I gasped, out of breath. It had been nearly an hour since we began running away from the forests. But, unsure about direction, we ran in circles. I hadn't taken out the book or the scroll, so by noon we were officially lost again. I found pleasure in the fact of knowing that we at least had a map and way to get home.

"Any landmarks?" Brandon asked. We scanned the area. Besides the dense bushes, the peppermint trees, and the gumdrop trail, we didn't spot anything. *Wait, a candy forest.* I scanned the map. The rustic paper had faded over its life and some of the letters were covered with inkstands, but the map was still in good use. My eyes only looked at a small section of the map: it was a candy land. The gumdrop pebble stones led on a winding path to a bridge. The bridge was surrounded by a small community of houses. Tiny illustrations of gingerbread men and women scurrying around were amusing to look at.

I set my eyes on the book in the satchel. It was something my mind was urging me to do. Perhaps, it would be the answer for us to go home. We didn't really have a choice. It was either read the book or be lost in this land forever. I touched the sandy brown, lacy cover of the book. Something was embroidered on it that I hadn't noticed before. In sea-foam blue, the words Journal 1 were written. I slowly yanked it out of the satchel. Crossing my fingers, I opened the first page and slowly began reading.

*To whom it may concern,*

*This book might be the only way you can achieve what you are looking for. At first, I might sound crazy, maybe even in need of help. But every word I say is true. A lady once took me to a land years ago, I was a little girl then, unconcerned about almost anything. But this world was different. It was completely different from ours. There were no wars, famines, or disease. It was an oasis in the midst of darkness. The lady who took me told me not to get too attached, for it was soon going to fall into ashes. But a girl can dream, can't she.*

*I set out on a quest to find a way to come back whenever I wanted. So, I set out on my adventure away from my tiny village on the outskirts of Fides. Quite a task would be impossible. The society I used to live in is quite judgmental. If any one of them were to find my quest, they would call me a lunatic and taunt me for as long as I shall live.*

*To get to the knowledge I seek, I must find a person who actually knows of this world. Yet, no such person virtually seemed to exist except the lady. That was what I thought, until I remembered The Last One. He was one of the barons, who were overthrown by the Spirits about 50 years ago. Rumor has it that he works as a trader. Last year, he was on the Black-market's favorite trader list. Warrants for his arrests have been issued in every territory, region, and kingdom known. But, no one had caught him yet. His trade routes are very hidden, making it almost impossible for people to find him.*

*The farmers have been acting strange though. When the clock strikes midnight, they all run into the woods. I've heard the words several times, last and one, but*

*never thought of it seriously. The warm summer day of the harvest season was the perfect time to go. Every soul would be tending to their crops, while I could easily slip into the forests. And that is what I did.*

*Using the old farm clothes my father used to own, I slipped into the night. I dashed towards the forest. The overgrown thorn pits and trees made it almost impossible to see. It was as if luck was the only thing I could rely on. After about six hours of searching, I was at the border of the forest. And that was when I saw him. The Last One was an old man. His wrinkly eyes and skin were left to camouflage in the darkness. I saw him with a small boy, about 8 years younger than me.*

*"This will make you the most powerful person alive when you grow up, okay" the Last One said. The boy eagerly scurried off in the direction of the bordering territory. I walked up to the old man and asked: "Are you the one known as 'The Last One'?". He didn't smile or do anything. But after a second, he responded.*

*"Yes. Now what do YOU want? I have to move soon." His voice was harsh, just like his words.*

*"Sir, I would like advice. I have been to a different world. It is filled with wonders never heard of before. I wish to return. Is there any way I can do this?" my voice was stern, trying to match the voice he was showing me. The Last One chuckled. He was amused by this.*

*"Give me 10 gold coins and I might tell you." I showed through my pockets and placed the coins in his hand.*

*"There is a spell. Quite ancient. If this is what is true to your heart, I advise that you ask Lady Agatha. She is an expert on this. Just say 'I need the Kindly Five'. You will find her in Silva Invites. She is the last of the candy houses."*

*If I had been more intelligent, I would have chased after him, asked him if there was an easier way to get the details, but I followed my heart and raced into the forest.*

*I had been told since childhood to not go into this territory and now I realize why. The forest was dense and cluttered. With every sound, I stumbled to my feet, afraid I was going to be eaten alive. Morning had almost come, but I persevered, and in around two hours, I found the candy houses. They felt magical. Soon enough, I spotted the cul-de-sac of the neighborhood. I ran as fast as I could, filled with excitement. and joy. I knocked three times and an old lady answered.*

*Just like the old man had said, I said, "I need the Kindly Five". Realization dawned on her face, and a moment later, she welcomed me inside. The rooms were trashed. I would have thought they were abandoned if I hadn't already known someone lives here.*

*"You wish for the Serello." she asked me kindly. I nodded, not quite sure what it was.*

*"Pay close attention to what I am about to say. I am allowed to say it only once in a decade." She stirred small pieces of fabric into a large cauldron. Then, she added a pinch of powder on the shelf.*

*"Used to wield power and glory, yet results were rather gory, when it wrote our human story in the eyes of wiser men, it is weaker than a pen. From the forges of great labor to an angry man at power, it is strong enough to overpower.*

*From the warrior to his clan, it protects the tiny fighter. Like the armor he wore, but a lot lighter. Isn't meant to jab, but protect. To the people who hid in fear, they used it when enemies came near.*

*A curse that was broken by a little heart. It in return gave the little girl a little fun*

*When the soul went away from her, she used this to help remember*

The rest of the text was smeared heavily. There were still three more items.

"That was deep." I said after finishing. My two friends were still reading, but they finished a few minutes later. Their faces were filled with as much surprise as me. It was time we started a quest of our own.

## Chapter 9

"Used to wield power and glory, yet results were rather gory, when it wrote our human story in the eyes of wiser men, it is weaker than a pen. From the forges of great labor to an angry man at power, it is strong enough to overpower. What could that mean?" I stared blankly at the paper. My eyes were sore from staring at words that made almost no sense. It was one of the old theater phrases I heard mother and father talk about when mother was busy coming up with another new story. I wasn't the expert in this field; Brandon was. He seemed to know almost every simile, metaphor, and phrase in the English dictionary. But he wasn't here; he was hunting some nearby animals for food. I was.

I pondered for a sec. *What wields power and glory? It must be a weapon.* *Perhaps a spear. It has something to do with anger.* I browsed my brain for a second. That's when it clicked me, a sword. Swords represented anger, violence, and revenge in Romeo and Juliet. It would mean the same thing here.

"It all makes sense!" I yelled in happiness." We have to find the sword of Anger." I scanned the scroll once more. *Ira means anger in Latin.* By now, my heart was practically leaping with joy. We were one-eighth of the way getting home, as soon as we found the sword.

I sprinted to the forest, hoping to find either one of my friends to share the news with them. I almost felt like Little Red Riding Hood, but I knew what happened. I carefully walked now, not wanting to attract any more attention. I walked and bumped into a tree stump in a few minutes.

A voice behind me said something, "Serves you right for not looking". I slowly turned back. It was just Monica, by a small campfire. There were a couple of

logs to sit on and branches made a small campsite. Well camouflaged, we wouldn't have to worry about being eaten during the middle of the night.

I raced over to her and began jumping up and down. At first, looking at her reaction, she must have thought I lost it. So, I told her what I had found. In a matter of seconds, we both began jumping like excited fairies.

It was supper and quite a feast we had. Aside from the cooked salmon and duck, we had a few wild berries and nuts.

"I must say Brandon, you are a good hunter and cook. I'm impressed." I remarked. The meal was just like the ones we used to have at Paramount. The thought of being back home made me homesick. I pushed the idea out of my mind. Dinner was quite jolly. We told Brandon about our first hint on getting home. Glee filled his eyes, and before we knew it, the three of us were plotting the fastest way to get to Ira. The time was around 10 PM, and we had finalized a plan. We would go to the clearing and find a driver to take us to the Column de Spec. We would row the rest of the way and finally reach Ira. The trip would take about three days.

The moon was still high in the sky. The birds were sleeping, tweeting in their sleep. Faint snores from the animals came in every direction. My eyes shot wide open. I tried to remember why I was getting up so early, but then remembered. I quietly wrestled my friends to get out of bed, almost waking every creature in the woods. I whispered the plan in their ears, and both of them shot out of bed. We crept into the night, leaving everything except the satchel with the book and scroll. My eyes had yet to adjust to the night, and we

constantly ran into things. I began to see more clearly in a few minutes, however. Just 20-50 yards away from us was the clearing. Remaining as silent as possible, my friends slipped towards it. I followed, like the tail of an animal. Our hard work had paid off.

The grass was the only thing I could see for miles. Occasionally, I saw a small twig or branch, but that was about it. Dawn emerged from the darkness and lit up the land. We were far from danger, but Brandon couldn't help but seem shaky. The road finally seemed to appear, and after around an hour or so, we came across our first cart. It seemed almost medieval. After begging, we ultimately persuaded the driver to let us go on the back of the cart.

The drive seemed reasonably long. It was good for me. I had time to process everything that had just happened. Would anyone at home believe me if I said anything about this? *Of course not, Lena.* At max, Alex would. I dozed off for a few seconds and then

There was a sudden jerk. I woke up only to find that we were no longer by the forest. From the looks of it, we had reached Ira. The distinctive yellowish grass was our first signal. It was by the coastline. Out in the distance, I could see bays forming into oceans. mermaids and fish alike danced. I almost forgot what I was doing, until I remembered home. I set aside the happy parts of me and marched forward.

The stony gate surrounded most of the kingdom. In the center, I could see a tall tower, but that was about it.

"There's got to be some way in, right?" Monica turned to me. Of course. It was usually me who had to come up with solutions. I could feel the anger rising in me, but I channeled it. In, out, In, out. I followed the pattern.

"Our best bet might be jumping. Climb any tree tall enough and jump. I dare you" Daring was the sort of thing I expected out of Brandon. What I didn't expect was this dangerous of a dare. Yet, it was our best idea.

A tall oak tree was relatively close to the wall. I was a squirrel, practically scurrying up the branches. I saw a large crate of flour, deciding it was a safe and soft place to land. I jumped. It was the experience of a lifetime. The air was almost sharp enough to pierce me and I was eager to land on the soft edge.

"Aaah!" I heard someone scream. I quickly hopped out of the cart and saw Monica on Brandon as they dropped through the sky.

"Let's find a safer thing to do next time" I said, panting from exhaustion.

The town was elegant. The glass was elegant and the streets were neatly maintained. That was until we neared the in-skirts of the place. In an instant, the millionaire neighborhood turned into an abandoned, apocalyptic city. Graffiti was on every window and door. The wood and plastic were beaten up and reduced to bits. A big sign board was plastered in the middle of this region. It read:

## **Ira: Land of the Unhappy and Mad**

**Rules: Only be Mad. Anyone who isn't shall be severely punished, prosecuted, exiled, or banished from the Realm.**

**Everyone must work in the forges. Walk thirty more yards and enter the forges.**

**Intruders shall be prosecuted.**

"This is going to be a lot harder than I thought," I said. I started acting mad, to fit in. They might have thought I'd gone mad, like this land was affecting my brain somehow. Gesturing to my friends and whispering the plan, they soon began acting all mad.

It came to me how different societies could be. Ira almost seemed unnatural, artificial from the world I have come from. Was it even possible to feel only one emotion?

I had wandered off in the distance, towards the shops. *Creepy*, I thought. An eerily feeling came to me. A gust of cold wind appeared in the fragile atmosphere and I felt as if I wasn't alone anymore. Gulping, I managed to turn around, eyes wide open. I told myself it was only the wind, or my friends playing a childish prank on me. But it wasn't. Only white air.

Time seemed to stop after that. Everything was perfectly still, like the first night. I ran, only to find that I was running in circles. For the first time since we got here, I actually saw the world. I didn't just see the scary or lonely parts

of it, but everything. The small patches of yellowish grass on the side, the tiny sampling tree in the distance, the color of my kitty t-shirt, everything.

I made out two figures in the distance. I knew them instinctively. As if this was all a childish game, I continued my stomping. It had a rhythm to it, the song we practiced in band. Their faces lit up, and I was soon reunited with my two friends. I decided not to tell them about my citing of what seemed like a ghost. We had enough on our mind.

We stomped towards in all directions known to man, and soon enough, we saw a tunnel leading underground. The forges. I lit up with hope.

"We better take a look at the journal. Might give us a better picture of how to get the sword," Brandon suggested. It was an idea all of us seemed to agree to.

I opened the satchel and found the journal. We opened the page to the leaf bookmark placed right at page 10. There was something peculiar though. The pages were smeared in the red paint, or blood.

The author must have been in a life-or-death situation. The hand-writing was hasty. Ink spills were everywhere. Most of all, the book seemed as if it were written by evil itself.

*Ira, Land of Mad. It's never been easy to enter or escape. The land has gone; it's no longer spirited. I was only a young lad back then, but I had seen it. In a matter of seconds, the land had changed from every kind to only anger.*

*The Iran sword is without a doubt almost impossible to collect. But it can be done.*

*First, step into the forges. The underground tunnel traps intruders. Feel pure hate and hate alone to be allowed entry. Channel the energy from your heart. Think of the most depressing or sad event in your life. It does not matter what I feel next. The forges are a jungle. Every footstep could be a trap. It was designed so that only eligible people may be present.*

*As your next step, navigate to the far ends of the room. You shall see a glass table. Walk directly into it. The pain will be short-lasting. This is the entrance to the sword's whereabouts.*

*A pillar shall be present in the center of the room. It reaches the very top of the room. There will be a small gap. The Irian Sword is here. Grab it as fast as you can and run. It is quite special to those of this region.*

I was exasperated after reading this. Our best bet at getting home was deceit and thievery. My stomach churned. It was not going to be a pleasant day.

"How do we get the sword? According to the author, we have to climb a large pillar," Monica said. Her voice was just as shaky as mine felt.

"It's a forge. We can get some daggers and use them for support while climbing," I hoped my plan was going to work.

It was half past 3 in the afternoon when we struck. We gently walked towards the forges. I tried to channel my anger. I remembered the time at school when

I was humiliated in front of the entire grade because my brother was reading my diary in a call I put on speaker. Like that, I tried to remember every time I disappointed someone. I remembered how scared I was when all of this started. Slowly, I began to walk in the forges. The force that made the barrier slowly slipped through my skin. In a matter of seconds, I was in. I watched as my friends followed my actions. Soon, they were in too.

We stepped through the rock staircase. It was burning, even with our socks and shoes. Steam arose from all directions. I felt sweat coming down from my forehead. It was hot. In some ways, it was pleasant. We had been freezing for days. It was warm. But the amount of heat made it unbearable.

"So, this is how hot Africa is," Brandon chuckled. He hadn't said a word all day. It caught us by surprise when he did.

Following the instructions of the journal, we watched our step. I had collected a few rocks outside and tossed them every few yards. We were safe. I saw Ira's citizens for the first time when I was the final step. They matched the description of the billboard: mad.

Irians were broad and stiff people. They stood in one place all the time. Somehow, they seemed to channel their anger into creating weapons and artifacts.

There was something strange though. The citizens were cuffed by the legs. Most of the chains weren't any longer than a yard, presumably.

"I don't get it. They're chained. How do they live their life in one yard?" I whispered.

Brandon shrugged and Monica just stared.

The weapons we were supposed to use were scattered all over the massive room. Daggers were at the far-left corner.

"We can't move freely. How are we supposed to just walk over there and grab the daggers?" Brandon questioned.

A smirk came over my face.

"Lena, what are you thinking?" Monica asked.

"I hate it when you guys know when I'm thinking. Anyway, we're from the news. They can move freely." I elbowed the man standing in the corner.

"Fine," they both sighed. We walked towards the corner of the room.

"3,2,1, ACTION! Hi, I'm Candace Evergreen, Sky My New's newest reporter. For all those fans at home, I hope you enjoy this bit," I said, pretending to be a reporter. The guard was struck with confusion, looking at his face.

"Sir, can you give us a tour of Ira's forges in this episode of Sky My News?" I continued.

"S-s-sure" he managed to mutter.

We walked around seeing all the artifacts and treasures of the area. At last, it came to my attention that there was a glass table at the end of the room.

"That's it for this episode. Thank you so much, uh" Monica chimed in.

"Roberto, please," he said.

"Is it okay if we can take a couple of daggers to show everyone back at the studio?" Brandon asked. Roberto managed to nod and we went over to the box of daggers.

Then, we ran to the glass table. Our cover had been blown, but it was fine. All we needed now was the sword.

We all ran straight through the glass. It pricked. I turned and found a cut. The cut was deep. Crimson flowed from the wound in a steady pour. *It would be over in minutes*, I told myself.

We were in solitary confinement now. A red carpet lined the floor and specks of gold were present everywhere. Just as the journal said, there was a pillar in the center of the room.

"Make a soft landing for me when I jump down!" I exclaimed.

The daggers were still in my hands. I placed both daggers into the granite. They pierced it. Over and over again, I did this.

"Lena! You're still at the bottom. I don't think our parents are going to have any more excuses for why we've been missing for a week!" Brandon said.

"Geez, thanks for the support," I murmured.

I got the hang of it in a few minutes. Swiftly gliding and stabbing the granite with the daggers. It was rock climbing, but more dangerous than imaginable. I was half way through. From here, a drop would be fatal. There was something else too. The column was starting to shake. Little by little, I swayed back and forth. There was no more time for sightseeing now. I had to grab the sword in seconds.

The daggers weren't going to help me anymore. I had to rely on the cracks. If I had been any larger, my hands wouldn't have supported my weight.

I set my eyes on the sword. It was calling out to retrieve it. With determination, I grabbed the sword with one hand. I let go of the cracks holding me and dropped.

The sky was plain and I felt the air piercing my lungs. I had the sword though. At last, I was on the ground.

"One out of eight!" I said and slowly got up. It took some time to sink in though, but it finally did. We had collected our first item for the spell.

"Guards!" I heard Roberto exclaim. Great! We had to escape a room with no windows or doors.

"Quick! Get the journal!" Monica managed to say. My heart speeded and my hands dashed into the satchel. I flipped the pages and...

*You've managed to get the sword congrats. Now, to find a way out, run into any of the walls. Like the entrance, they feel emotions. A door will open only if you've got pure desire and fear to get out. The door will take you outside the walls.*

I yanked my two friends by the hands and we raced into the walls. It didn't hurt. Our bodies slipped through the solid wall. Darkness was the only thing I saw. It was terrifying. No door appeared in sight. My yearning to get out grew stronger and stronger and then something magical happened.

Red flowers grew from the ends of the void. They closed in on us and suddenly a bright light was nearing. A door had opened. I stepped out and we were back in the meadows lining Ira.

## **Chapter 10**

That night, I felt the sword in my hand. It was beautiful, a possession worthy of a king. I stared up at the open sky. I had never seen it like this before. The stars twinkled in the midst of night's pitch-black sky. I saw the moon up in the sky. The crescent I never had time to see before was finally before my eyes. All I could do was smile. The night was surely going to be peaceful.

Dawn broke the silence of the night. A small sparrow had come close to my face and dropped a worm, being hospitable and giving me breakfast. I felt the soft, warm air against my face. It was almost homely. I got up from my grass comforter and opened the journal once more. It was evident we were going to need it more and more as the journey continued. My friends had just woken up, a few minutes after me, stretching.

"Rise and shine, early birds," I said as I was scavenging for any food nearby. Outside of Ira, the land was calmer, less angry and scary; it was peaceful.

In the last couple of days, I had learned the art of scavenging berries. The rabbits had taught me to follow them whenever it was dawn. They seemed to have a marketplace dedicated to food. I would give them a few twigs in exchange for a morning breakfast of berries.

I made my way back to camp. During my time at Ira, I realized the importance of quickness. I figured it would be best to find some of the other items for the spell rather than sightsee the local forests.

Brandon was reading the journal when I got back. There was a petrified look on his face as if he had just seen a ghost. In some ways, I could tell it wasn't that. But in others, I just felt an eerie presence among us.

I sat down beside him; it was the only thing I could do before setting off once again. I gently took the book from his hands and almost immediately, Brandon's eyes shifted. I set my eyes on the pages now. The next item on the list was once again a riddle.

*From the warrior to his clan, it protects the tiny fighter. Like the armor he wore, but a lot lighter. Isn't meant to jab, but protect. To the people who hid in fear, they used it when enemies came near.*

I was dumbfounded by the sentences in front of me. It was as if the mere words were as dangerous as the task was. I read this once again.

"Do you know what protects a fighter or what is like armor?" I asked Brandon. He shook his head slowly. I had expected it, but for some reason, I felt like he was letting me down. I just felt the anger rise in me. We were three stranded kids, who were relying on a journal from a stranger as help.

I clutched my hands together and noticed it was causing me to be mad. *Ira means anger, Lena. The sword can control your emotions. The others might too.*

"Leens, Lena, ELEANOR" Brandon said, shaking me, "We've got to get Monica. I think I found the answer to this next item."

My eyes lit up. We had a chance to go home now. I scampered through the fields, searching for Monica. She was nowhere in sight. By mid-day, I had searched almost every inch of the clearing. There was still no sight. I was about to give up hope when I saw someone lying. I walked about fifty yards and there she was. Monica was staring up at the sky. There seemed something almost unnatural about the way she was doing it. She looked like her sole was sucked out of her body. The eyes that once held cheerful blue eyes were now pure black. Her once auburn hair had turned into a shade of dark brown.

All I could do was stare. I was in shock. It had only been around 10 minutes since I left. It wasn't possible, even in an alternate world. Paralyzed and shocked aren't even the best words for describing how I felt. It was something much more powerful. Little did I know about how it was going to help me. I dragged her by the elbows to the campsite last night. It felt wrong to leave her in the fields, all-alone. The only thing left to do now was drag her around until she regained sensed.

I whistled as loud as I could and called Brandon's name with all the strength my voice had. A small worry came from the bottom of my heart. It could have been just as likely that Brandon was in the same stunned state that Monica was in. I shunned the thought out of my head. My days of having bad thoughts were over. It was time to focus on getting back.

The sun was setting. I had almost given up on calling Brandon. But then, something magical happened. A silhouette appeared as a shadow at first. Then, as it was emerging closer and closer towards me, I could make out the

shape of a boy with blonde hair and a prosthetic hand. Brandon. I raced towards him, knocking both of us. I had a bit of a laugh, but then he saw Monica. We raced over. I felt my heart beat and thump louder and louder as we got closer and closer.

"She isn't, you know," I said, placing my hand to check her pulse.

"Don't come closer," Monica said. It wasn't her voice though. It was a darker, much deeper voice; the voice of an ancient spirit. "One week until the fifth day of the Eternal Night. You must go home by then, or history will repeat itself again. Seven more items are on the list, don't trust the stranger in your midst."

I saw the color of her eyes return after that. Blue shown into their sockets. The black faded and the familiar red hair returned. The girl I'd known for so long had finally returned.

"What happened? I was just roaming and then I fell," Monica said, feeling all of her. I just looked at Brandon, and he looked at me. We didn't say a word, but somehow, we had a conversation in our eyes, telling us not to tell Monica the truth.

"You just fainted probably," I said.

"Yeah," Brandon chimed in. It was enough to persuade our friend. She just shrugged and moved on.

"So, Brandon, what was it you figured out?" I asked. I saw a smirk cover his face and then a flash in his eyes.

"I read this over 100 times and I found out what the riddle was saying. A warrior has a sword and shield right."

I nodded, trying to keep up with his thought train.

"Well, we have the sword, that jabs. Now we need a shield that protects."

It was genius. That was all I could manage to think about.

"What kingdom though?" Monica asked.

"That is for Ms. I-Know-Latin to answer," Brandon smiled.

"Thank you. Well, the people who hid in fear are in a kingdom called Fear. Metus is fear in Latin. Gosh, these kingdoms must have been created eons ago." I spoke. It's a selfish trait, but I also loved getting the answer right.

"Basically, we're finding the Shield of Metus," I continued.

"What are we waiting for then? We have a shield to find!" Monica exclaimed. At least in my opinion, for a person who was possessed a few minutes ago, she seems quite hyper.

We were still by the Irian trade routes. Few exports were coming out of the kingdom walls. Luckily for us, the last cart to Metus was just departing. I had run out of gold coins, so I slipped through the back. The cart was crowded with spices of every kind. It was hard not to sneeze. But we had to be quiet. Spices couldn't make sounds, humans could. In a matter of seconds of getting

on the cart, it seemed as if I was allergic to everything on my ride. It was like WW2, complete silence.

I was on the verge of sneezing when I had to hold it in at the last second. It was almost traumatizing. I hadn't looked at my friends the entire trip. I was too scared to after the prophecy of the Eternal Night. It hurt, the more I learned about the scenario I was stuck in.

I managed to sleep most of my thoughts for the journey. I would occasionally wake up with every thump and turn on the road. Sometimes, I craned my neck to check to see if we had arrived yet. For most of the ride, I just saw foothills and seas in the distance. No other people besides the ones in the cart.

Too-too-too-toom! Too-too-too-toooooo-toooooo-toom!

I shot out of the cart. It was a trumpet, a royal one by the sounds of it. Monica was already outside the cart, gesturing for me and Brandon to do the same. We slid out and darted away as fast as we could.

I was still running until I realized that the wall had an opening. It was a servant's entrance. It was perfect for us to slip in.

Nothing amazed me as much as Metus's structure. For it was neither a town with a palace at the center of an urban city with skyscrapers taller than imaginable. My eyes were quite shocked to see this, but the entire town was a maze.

"H-h-h-hi. W-w-w-welcome to our t-t-territory of M-metus. H-hope you e-enjoy your v-visit. T-today is the h-h-h-harvest f-f-f-festival. T-t-trumpets will be s-s-sounded every s-s-six m-minutes"

"We are in the right place, right? I've never seen so many people afraid of, well, everything. Speaking of which, where is everyone? Do they have pantophobia?" Brandon asked. He was the first person who didn't seem afraid in this area,

"The speaker said Metus, so yeah," I sighed. This was going to be a long chapter of our lives. Then it occurred to me. The maze was their home. The citizens of Metus were too afraid to be seen, so they built their houses in the maze. That way, no one could find them.

"Let's take another look at the journal. It's our only guide," I said.

*Metus is rather an interesting place. No one has an explanation for the weird behavior of its citizens. Perhaps it was the curse placed on the town all those years ago. Or perhaps when the pantophobians struck. Either way, watch your back. Security guards from all the kingdoms are here to protect the citizens. The only time of the day everyone is allowed to come out is 3 PM. This is the golden hour, a truce created a few centuries ago.*

*Sneak in at the golden hour. The maze is almost impossible to navigate, for intruders and thieves. But, for those with a pure heart, the maze will help. The king's staff are watching the shield at all times. They are as still as rock, like the*

*security guards. Sneak the shield out. You will know you have arrived by the concrete.*

"The time's going to be three in twenty minutes. Let's get ready," I said. There was something about my voice now. It sounded confident, almost authoritative. To some level, it felt good.

At 2:55, we struck. We entered the maze. After walking around two dozen meters, I began to see something strange in the walls of the maze. There were doors, well camouflaged. I tried to open one. Locked.

"The doors are the entrance to their houses. They live in the corn maze walls!" I mouthed. A perplexed look shot into my friends' faces. But slowly, they realized it too. The citizens of Metus are too afraid to even be in the open. They built this maze so that no one could navigate it and they would get lost trying to find them.

MeTube had given me an idea. There was a strategy where if you took two rights and one left, you would reach the heart of the maze. Then, if you took two lefts and one right, you would cross the maze. My heart heaped in joy.

I started using hand-signals to indicate words. In a matter of seconds, we had gone from stuck to having a solution. In almost two hours, we had no dead ends. That was when I saw it. Below us, the ground began to glow various shades of green. It was guiding us to the center. That was when I remembered. We were past the Golden Hour. From here, we had to go sleuth to not get caught. The maze was tricking us by helping us.

I felt someone breathing on me. Brandon was staring right at my face, but completely still. Monica was trying to eye me to be as still as possible. I saw two arms behind me swaying. They were purple with Metus SO embroidered on them. My heart sank. We were so close only to be so far from home. This guard was going to catch us and throw it in a facility for criminals. He might take away the sword.

"Freeze. Golden Time is over. Who are you?" the Security Officer said. He was harsh in his words. They sent a chill through my spine. *This* was it. I held my hands in the air. It was accepting defeat. My friends stared at me.

"Officer, I assure you we are here with no intent of harm. Our parents are trying to overcome the spell. They hope to make us proud, courageous citizens. They sent us outside to retrieve some corn for dinner," Brandon said thinking of the tip of his brain. I just stared at him. We were breaking the rules, and he was talking about picking corn.

"Foul. You young gentleman will come with me. These two ladies will have back-up. I will tell the king, and you will be exiled in the cruelest domains," the guard continued. "Take ten minutes to remember each other. It will be some of your last"

I sighed. This was the end. I couldn't think for a second. My mind was swirling in circles. I could feel it hurting in all sorts of places. Then, it hit me. The guard would be away for ten minutes. We could run away to the center from here and run as fast as we could.

I had lost track of whether we were on the right or left. It had taken some time, but I finally started the pattern. In some ways, the walls were the same. It was obvious one house was exactly the same as the last. It was ideal. Mazes always confuse me. I was surprised I had navigated this one. Little by little, I saw a glimmer in the distance. Then, I saw specks of gold. My mind raced once again. We were near the sword. I could just feel it.

My feet began to slow down. They were sore from all the walking. I hid in the corner of one of the dead-ends. There were no guards here. Just for a minute, I had time to think. It was my first day. My leg was practically aching. The shoe top had opened and I felt that blister at the back of heel that I tried for so long to ignore. But I couldn't. I couldn't ignore the blister, or the deep gash in my arm.

I slowly got up. My entire body was aching; it was tired from the soreness. I remembered the times at home where I could just snuggle up on one of the Plushamallows or just jump on my bed. It was warm to think about at first, but it hurt to think too much.

When I was finally on my feet, Monica had already started moving. She was impatient to move, probably because she got tested for being bipolar last summer. Ever since, she's been even more jumpy.

We started walking faster now. I was anticipating more and more often now that I was so close to the shield. With this, we would be a fourth of the way home. I could almost feel like I was at home.

It was just beautiful. That's all I can say. The elegant shield was just eye-catching. It was just how it was described to be. Gold specks glimmered the edges. It was painted in red and white. Embroidered with rubies, sapphires, and diamonds, I could see a crest. It must have been the warrior's family symbol. I just couldn't help but cry. We were taking away something that belonged to a rightful owner. I just felt selfish and miserable. I felt someone touch me by the shoulders and gave me a pat on the back. I turned around. It was both of my friends.

I had enough courage after pouring out poems of emotions. I had promised, to myself, that I was going to return them. I gently tugged on the rim. It was light, but heavy, flimsy, but strong; it was just marveling. I grabbed it with both hands. Then, I felt myself putting the shield on my left wrist. It was a perfect fit. There was a bit. of a memorial linked to the shield. However, it was designed for couldn't have been much older than me. It was dedicated to his memory, maybe.

I just stared at the ground for a few seconds. Until now, I hadn't noticed it either. It was glowing with colors. Colors from every distinct origin and nature from murky brown to radiant plastic pink. It was dancing.

I joined along dancing until I couldn't stop. It was funny; I had so much fun from just a little hop and twirl. Monica ended joining me with Brandon following her. I managed to get a piggy-back ride and Conga line. It soothed the feelings I had before. As soon as we all broke out laughing, the colored

floor seemed to stop being colorful. The color had faded. *Of course*, I thought. It sensed our emotions. But we were in Metus, not the land of Joy.

I just walked after that. I remembered the left and right pattern. Now it was left-left-right. I was starting to get the hang of it. I smiled and chuckled a little. It was one of the first times in my life where I felt that this world wasn't so bad. It was rather temporary though.

I saw the end of the maze and I rushed, unaware of the fact I was still in the grounds of Metus. That was until I saw a guard at the exit.

"Halt! Stop! That is our king's priceless heirloom. It was created in..." he didn't get to finish. I was already running, faster than the wind, sun, and sky combined. Monica and Brandon were trying their best to keep up. Their panting breaths allowed me to realize mine.

The wall was so close. All we had to do was find the entrance we came through, slip out, and never enter again. After all the bad experiences at school, I never thought this would end up in my top 5.

The plan executed smoother than I imagined. No guards were guarding the outskirts of the maze, only the inside. My two panting roommates looked at me with furious eyes, like the first day we got here. I knew they were just joking. I had only left them for a second.

"Come on, let's get out of here. I'll buy us every restaurant on Earth when we get back home, okay," I said.

## **Chapter 11**

Midnight struck on the chime of the hour hand hitting twelve on the rusty old clock. I stood, eyes glaring at the moon in the starry sky. She is my next hint for getting home.

I was in the banks of the Kingston Sea. The clear, seafood water fizzled in my hands as I picked some up and sprayed it all over my face. The quiet night was eerie. Winds from far away made gushing sounds. The leaves quietly rustled. A coast guard was on the beach, snoring away in a small, outskirts cottage by the very far ends of the beach. He could not see me. Only I could. Even Brandon, the one holding my hand as I walked around the sand, couldn't see me. It was too dark, and too quiet.

It was perfect timing. We had come for artifact number three. According to the journal, the moon's only friend was here. They were my next treasure.

Then, I saw her.

A faint noise was what I heard next. It was small, belonging to the voice of a very quiet soul indeed. It was whispering something in my ear: "you're not the one. She is the last," Over and over again, it did this. I felt a chill go through my spine. I turned to my side. Brandon wasn't there anymore. I had only been a second since I had last felt his soft, warm hand in mine. Surely it was only a trick. I raced over to the chairs a couple had forgot to bring back home. In case of an emergency, we told Monica to stay. It was the first important order we had given her. She was bound to be here. How wrong was I.

The chairs were just as empty as when they were abandoned. Only a single piece of bird dung was on them. A slug was on the other, hoping to get some rest from the long day. *It had only been seconds;* I kept on thinking to myself.

People can't just disappear into thin air. Someone must have kidnapped them, or it was magic. I shunned the thought of either of those. It was hard enough being stranded in a world with two friends. It was going to be almost impossible without them.

Suddenly, the air became chillier. The ocean seemed to stop. The wave in the far-off distance had dropped, terrified to get out of the water. I just stood, numb in all my senses. My legs couldn't move, although my mind was urging me to get into the sand and sink into its various layers.

I had only felt this way three times before: the first night at Paramount, the day the black man showed up at our school, and when she was in the woods. I cowered. My body seemed to finally listen to my mind and in seconds, I was on the ground piling sand on me. I had left only a small hole to peep and breathe.

A bright, but black light flashed through the entire beach. The coastguard woke up from his deep slumber and the door creaked.

All around, black leaves appeared from nowhere. They were circling in a particular spot. Feathers, stones, almost everything black had joined. Then, they all shattered to the ground. In their place, was the lady; the very one I had

seen in the woods. Her beautiful features attracted the guard to come near. He showed no fear. When he got closer however.

"STILLABUNT!" she shrieked. He dropped down, shunned. His limbs couldn't move and his mouth was frozen, like the school.

The next thing was the most stupid and bravest thing I had ever done. I leaped out of the sand and scattered over to the poor fellow. He was still breathing, but all his eyes could do was point at the moon. He couldn't be fixed. Suddenly, I saw shadows forming around me. They were from dark souls, those who were regarded as pure evil. They swirled around me and soon enough, other items began to join. I felt my body being lifted into the sky. Then, everything went black. I couldn't see a bit. A bang sound followed, loud enough to destroy my eardrums. Then, I was back.

I landed with a big thud. My body ached more than ever before. I had a few muscle tears and stretched limbs. I didn't feel like getting up, it was too painful. Instead, I decided to roll over and see where I was.

It was a patch of densely populated trees surrounded by more and more populated areas of trees. In other words, a forest. I just played on the ground for a few hours. At dawn, I had enough energy to walk a little and explore. The place was familiar, but I couldn't seem to remember it. *Maybe the walk will help*, I thought.

For a long time, all I could see was just trees. On the occasional sight of a squirrel or any living thing, I would jump hysterically. But those only came

ever so often. You can imagine my excitement when I suddenly came across a house. It had logs as pillars for the patio and the inside was exactly as I remembered. That's when it struck me. We were back in Silva Invitis. I moaned at the thought. *This was the stained cottage.*

I had never realized how quiet the cottage was. I never had time to explore it as well. *Might as well make the most out of being in the woods again*, I thought. There was a poster I had never noticed before. It was filled with finger-paintings and other childish artwork. I gently tapped a few. They were made of cardstock paper, stiff and firm. I walked outside the house. Brandon and Monica had suddenly disappeared. Perhaps they got transported to the woods as well.

By noon, I had gotten most of the ground. I had searched through all the tiny clearings and scanned the deep forest. Still no sign of a blonde boy with a prosthetic arm and redhead girl with freckles all over her face.

As I went farther and farther inland, the forest became more and more compact. It was remote with only a few bugs for company. I was about to give up hope when it all suddenly changed.

"Lena, get down!" a voice hissed at me. I was wary. After everything that had happened, it could have just been the lady at the beach. I turned around and equipped myself. I still had the sword and shield. But the satchel, the journal, and the map. All of them were gone. From every nook and corner, I scanned if anyone could have said that. There was nothing.

Warm breath. That's what I had felt on my back. Instinctively, I turned around. My heart almost melted. There he was.

Soft, smooth, ginger fur covered the body of a tall, large cat-man. It was licked and groomed to perfection. I gazed up. One foot taller than me, I saw his head. It was the same amber eyes. Whiskers stood still on their owners' faces. I've been emotional throughout the journey, but never cried as much as right then. Fuzzy had helped us so much, even with his curse and struggles. He had given us the journal and the map.

"Why so upset? Let's go back to my house. Your friends are there, he said. I knew Fuzzy was trying to cheer me up. When he said the word "friends" I felt a big burden on my shoulders lift. They were safe. The two best things that ever happened to me were safe.

Fuzzy guided me back to his house. I remember the first time I made the trip, not trusting him. I was so naive back then.

The orchard blossoms had grown a lot since last time. The babbling brook was still there. Although I only knew Fuzzy for a week or so, he already seemed like a father or guardian angel to me.

We stepped inside. The tarnished little parlor was as welcoming as it had ever been. On the couch, I saw two familiar faces. Their eyes were shocked to see me. Brandon and Monica were safe. They were having a good time. It was all I cared about.

I ran over to them and gave the biggest hug in history.

"Lena, we need to breathe!" Brandon exclaimed as he got out of my grasp.

"Sorry!" I spoke. It had just been the happiest moment of my life.

"Children, you are in grave danger. It's too late now though to go back," something in his eyes made me think Fuzzy was talking about the lady at the beach.

"Lena, remember when I told you that you were special? It is because I can sense that you are the first true-hearted person in your family's bloodline," he continued.

"Wait, hold up. You know my family from Earth? Also, my mom and dad are not evil. Alex, well, he's a little crazy, but definitely not evil," I said. I had never seen Fuzzy before this adventure. How could he possibly know my family that I lived with for eight years. Surely, they would have told me.

"Oh, you poor thing. I think it's time you learned the truth. You might want to settle down. It's quite a terrible story, especially for someone your age," he said.

"It was many moons ago on the stroke of midnight. It was centuries ago. A tribe, then known as the Gaecaus, had recently moved into the sacred area. This place is now known as Silva Invitis, though it is not as beautiful as it once was. Alas, I do not know all the details. But I know the basics. The region has been home to another tribe already: the Agoniqu. On the first night of the Gaecaus's arrival, battle broke out. Competition for land was fierce. The chiefs had to decide. But there was a problem. They were brothers. Of course, the

brothers didn't know that. They had been separated at birth. When they touched hands, the most miraculous thing happened. The land grew. It grew in size and health.

But this Golden Era wasn't going to last forever. On the 1000th anniversary of that day, a new power would come. She would rule the realm better than anyone in her bloodline before. But to do this, she will have to succeed her mother. By law, this can only happen if the sovereign passes away.

I was only a young man, around twenty or thirty. At the time, I was a young guard, working for Her Majesty Queen Estrella of the Realms Beyond. It had been the opportunity of a lifetime, or so I thought. Little did I know how much I would suffer from this.

From the great seas surrounding us to the mountains, there had always been a problem. At many times, families consisted of eight people, each feeling one emotion for a majority of the time. Fights would continuously break out on which feeling was better. We were on the brink of extinction. That was until Estrella was sworn in. She came up with the idea that everyone should be split based on their personality. Every person whose dominating feeling was anger was set into Ira. Everyone who was afraid was in Metus. So on like that. But that only caused more problems. People began to feel more emotions and soon it spread. But it was too late. Our territories had been designated and designed. Each was given a ruler to watch over the citizens, but they still had to follow the rules. Eventually, rules were passed that you could only feel one emotion.

I was one of those people. I am originally from Admiratio. But that all changed when her majesty's guards arrived. They were seeking to find recruits for the army. Everyone knew that the queen's guards were society's socialites. I was the first to scamper through and sign up. Tryouts were the next day, and I made the team. I have to remind you though that I was a normal man, not a cat one. I was transported to the castle the next day. It was the most beautiful thing I had set my eyes upon. Everything has seemed so perfect. Again, I was quite wrong.

It was around my third or fourth week at the palace when I noticed things were beginning to seem strange. The queen's servants seemed closer to her than usual. The royal advisor was nowhere to be seen. But it was one dreadful night that I discovered the truth. The queen had a kid, unknown to the rest of the world. Even the council didn't know about her. However, Estrella was greedy. She had recently found the elixir for immortal life. However, she could still be killed. She didn't want her child to be not the throne. So, she asked the guards to take the girl away, to a far-off land. In their all-black wear, they stealth through the kingdoms. However, they were unable to find a place to keep the girl. That was until they discovered the shells.

The shells transported them to a new world. There, they took the baby to an orphanage and left her.

I had heard all of this. Of course, I always had a nasty habit of sleep-talking. A servant had come into my chamber and she heard me say the plan. Devastated, that maid told the queen and she exiled me. To make matters

worse, she placed a curse on me, turning me into a living hybrid between a cat and a man.

Lena, there's a reason I just told you that story. *You* are Estrella's daughter. From the moment I met you, I could tell you were your mother's daughter. You have her red eye and your father's gray eye. Your aura was another thing. From the moment you were born, your mother was trying to get rid of you. She sent you to Earth. I presume you know the rest of the story.

Guards, I assume, were in every place you traveled to. They are your mother's guards.

It was prophesied when you were born that the day you and your mother will see each other again shall be the Eternal Night. The sky will go cold and the day shall be night alone. Today is that day.

"Today, you will face your destiny and become ruler. I know you can do it. End the suffering of our people. Do it for me, for them," he stopped and pointed at my friends.

But I was too stunned to do anything. All I could do was cry. I cried for long periods at a time. My whole life, I had been lied to. My family never told me that I was adopted. I was a stranger to Earth. I was the person born in one dimension and raised in another. Was I even human? My mind swirled and it made me sick. For the first time ever, I felt like running away. But I couldn't do that. Earth was my home and I was going to get back to it. I was going to see

who my actual mother was. The mother wanted nothing to do with me. I stiffened a little.

"Let's meet my mother," I said

## **Chapter 12**

It was all finally happening: the purpose for my trip to the Realms Beyond, my destiny. I suddenly felt something I had never before: fear. It wasn't like the fear where you are worried the school bully is going to pick on you today. It was a primitive fear. I was meeting my mom for the first time. I didn't think of her as my mother. Not at first. I thought that I would never.

Our journey was the most peculiar one. Fuzzy said that the palace was in the sky, higher than the moon. He said our best bet would be the Coswebs, huge, bird-like creatures in the forest. It was migration time. We needed to catch one by the afternoon.

Brandon was sitting beside me. We had a few minutes just to talk, catch up. It was one of the only times we were ever alone. Unfortunately, we were interrupted before we could get started. Based on descriptions, we had been interrupted by a Cosweb. It was more beautiful than I imagined. The Cosweb was about the size of a medium sized truck. It was a blue bird, similar to a blue jay. From the looks of it, it had been trying to spy on our conversation. *A cosweb!* I quickly hopped on top of the bird, Brandon following my lead. Together we shouted Monica's name. She trampled down from a tree. I have to admit, it was quite funny to watch.

Once we were all settled in, we tugged on the feathers. Angered, the bird soared into the air, trying to get us to stop. We yanked on. Soon, I could see the palace. It was beautiful. That was all I could say. It was made of pure marble

lined with columns of gold and silver. I gently lowered the creature onto the landing. Slowly, we crashed onto the main entrance. I was furious. We were trying to be heroes, not clowns from the circus.

I opened the large doors. They were the most massive ones I had ever seen. A thought suddenly dawned in my head: this was where I was going to live if I became queen. I squealed at the thought.

I searched through the rooms. First, I went to every room from the ballroom to the servant's quarters. I had given up. It had almost been six hours of just exploring.

That was when I thought of the room. My mother would be in her chambers, relaxing in her room. I envied the thought. If my mother hadn't abandoned me when I was a newborn, this would have been my home.

I knocked on the doors, three heavy hard times.

"I'm coming. Please Chandler, those doors are quite expensive," a voice said. The voice was familiar. I could just remember it.

The doors creaked open and then I saw her. She was the lady at the beach, the one who appeared out of nowhere. She was the one who had appeared in the forests. My fists raged in anger. My mother was her.

"Constance," she began.

In my best false voice, I said "Hello mother. Nice to meet you for the very first time. I'm Eleanor Autumn Collins II. I assume that you wanted to get rid of me as an infant."

Okay, fine. That wasn't the best get-to-meet-you sentence in history. But I was in pure hatred.

All my mother could do was just stare. There was pure hatred in her eyes. It was obvious she never wanted me.

"I have come to take back what is rightfully mine: the throne," I said. It was in a rather sophisticated voice. Brandon and Monica just stood, slowly backing away from me.

"Constance, Eleanor, whatever your name is, *you are* my daughter. I always imagined a stronger person," she said after examining my scrawny arms and legs.

"I asked to duel. Do you understand me?" I asked. My fury was rising. I needed to get done with this.

"Alright, we shall duel. I will get the ballroom arranged. This will be a private affair, so your little friends have to go," my mother said in a mocking tone. It was as if she wasn't taking the prophecy or me seriously.

"Fine," I said. My voice was neutral, but inside, I was a mess. I was happy, but sad. Most of all, I was just mad. Mad at my mom, my adopted family, this world, everything for confusing my life.

I looked at Monica. She had my sword. I checked my hand. The shield was still on it. Monica, hands trembling, passed me the sword. Instantly, my energy rose and so did my anger. Over time though, I had learned to channel that energy.

The Eternal Night had started. I felt the room become colder. I looked outside. The sun had been in the air a few seconds ago, but now, it was replaced by the moon.

I just looked at the arena. It was like a theater. Thousands of seats were facing the stadium, each a soft plush velvet or a stiff hard chair. Right in front of me were two seats.

The arena itself was just a cold hard floor. Boulders were lined at the corner, presumably to make sure no one else saw the event. I glanced outside for a second. It was raining. The drizzling drops fell down and soon it was pouring.

I just looked at myself for a minute. I wasn't the girl I was last month. Old Lena could never have fought a sword fight or befriended strange creatures. She could never have handled the fact her biological mother and her were going to battle. I kept on confronting myself that I would win. That no matter what was going to happen, I would try my best. They were nice to think about, but were rather short lived.

Mother walked into the room in a gown. I almost laughed at the sight. There was no way she could do this.

I glanced at the table. Two gentlemen were sitting there now.

"Are you ready, little girl?" mother said. The way she said it aggravated me so much. I just couldn't stand it.

"I'm ready," I said. I was finally confident in my words. My mother had no right to scare me.

A loud trumpet blew. It indicated we were starting.

The problem was, I didn't know how to sword fight.

"Young lady, why are you fighting this battle? Swords are for adults and boys. Are you one of them?" he questioned. I could tell he was having fun. I didn't want the smirk on his face to grow even more. I handed in the sword and the shield. That was when I realized I had made a big mistake.

The trumpet blew again. I stared at the guard with a frightening look that made him back off.

My mother took the first strike. Her long, sharp blade aimed for my chest. I moved side-ways. Right now, I am defending. I wasn't ready for offense quite yet. My mother tried hitting various parts of me. I dodged each one. The situation became more serious. As we fought more, I began to realize: every strike could kill me if I didn't doge them. After skewing up courage, I finally tried my first offense. I tried aiming for the arm. It would be good practice. As fast as I could, I flung the sword in my hand. But I had missed it.

I began throwing various hits at my mother's direction.

As the fight went on, I became better and better. I felt more confident hacking and slashing. Almost all my shots were close misses. The minutes flew by. Time didn't seem to work in this scenario. Either it was operating too fast or too slow.

I set my target on trying to knock my mother's sword. I had seen fencers do this before. I advanced forward, at high speed. It was like the sabers I loved watching on TV. I kept my sword in my hand at all times, firmly gripping the ends. I clashed with my mother's sword. The tension was building up. At any moment, I could have lost my grip. Then I would have become an easy target. But then, I saw it. My mother was using both her hands for the fight. Copying her, I used all my force to push the swords in one direction.

Building up pressure and speed to fling it across the room, I used up all my energy. My mother seemed to be losing hers too. Finally, his hand slipped. The sword fell and scattered to the far-left corner of the arena. It was too far away to get there. Now, my mother was defenseless against me

I so badly wanted to pierce the lady in front of me. The one that abandoned me when I was young and wanted to hurt me. But something stopped me.

"I can't. I just can't," I said softly. It was barely audible, but she still heard it.

" I can't harm you. You might have wanted to harm me, but you still mean something to me. Believe it or not, you're the only mother I remember. That's why. Hurting you would be just as bad as destroying the Realms Beyond," it

was a deep confession I made. It was true; every word I said was. I couldn't hurt her because she was a part of me.

The clock in the center of the room chimed midnight. The large hour hand struck heartily and the sound echoed.

Slowly, I saw the red from mother's pupils drain from their owner's eyes. They were soon replaced by purple, a soft shade of purple. Her sinister red gown was replaced by a more cheerful and mild blue one. The pitch-black dark hair that had once been on her had changed to a shade of blonde. The person I was staring at now was completely different.

"Child, I beg you forgive me. It was never my intent for any of this to happen," she was crying. Never in my life had I seen an adult so helpless.

"It's fine. I'll forgive you in time," I said gently.

Mother wiped off some of the tears. The heavy make-up applied was now reduced to black eyeliner drooping down her face.

"You had a chance to kill me, but you didn't even after everything. Why?" she asked.

"Like I said. You're a part of me. You're my mother. How could I hurt my own mother? It would be my greatest sin," I said. I walked over to her and gave her a hug. Unexpectedly, she embraced it again. It seemed to go on forever, until it didn't.

"I owe you an explanation. I assume you know some of the story like sending you to Earth. Would you like to know the full version?" she asked. It is gentler than I had ever heard any speech before.

"I was just 20 when it all happened. I had recently become queen. I tried to give my people everything: happiness, joy, wealth, and freedom. So, I created the regions based on emotions. However, this idea was widely disposed of. But it was too late. Many hated me. Some, so much, that they placed a curse on me. A group of rebellious witches had cast a spell saying I could never love. All I could feel was hate. When I had you, I was just bitter. I was selfish because of the curse. I never wanted to hurt you," she said.

"Wow," I said. It was all I could manage to say.

"At the time, I didn't know it, but this curse could be lifted. It could be lifted by love," she continued.

"When you came back, you didn't hurt me. You showed me love, which broke the spell," she said, finally ending.

I walked over to my mom. I felt tears forming in my eyes. Her story had been so sad. She never meant to hate me; she wanted to love me but couldn't

"I never knew that happened to you and that you were so nice. It's unfair no one knew," I said softly.

"I always thought of naming you Constance. Did you know that, Eleanor?" she said softly, trying to lighten the mood. I shook my head vigorously.

"I believe these belong to you," I said, handing back the sword and shield. My mother gently took them from my hands.

"I've been meaning to ask you this for a few minutes now. Do you want to stay and become queen or do you want to go back with your friends?" there was some concern in her voice.

It was so hard for me to think. My mother seemed so nice and being queen seemed really cool, but something stopped me again.

"Mom, as much as I'd love to stay, I want to go back home, to Earth. My life has been there for so many years. I want to have a life. I promise I'll visit. I'll check every shell on the beach," I said a little soberly.

## **Chapter 13**

I spent the night at my mother's palace. She had invited us to stay, after the terrible experience last. She even invited my friends. We were each given our own rooms. They were massive compared to the large dorm at Paramount.

Mother had known I was leaving. She always made me hug her or spend every last minute we had together. It was fun. But I was still a little shaken after everything that had happened.

I never admired the palace as much as I do now. For the past few days, I've called it my home and I'm proud to. I feel like a new person now, but in ways, this trip has been the best.

On the final day of my stay, I begged Mom if we could go see Fuzzy. Skeptical at first, she inquired who he was. After explaining the whole story, she let us go, only if we came back by sundown.

Instead of going on a giant bird, me and my friends were properly escorted and a flying chariot. It was magical.

"Soo, your mom's a queen! How cool is that!" Monica chimed in, breaking the silence that had been going on for the past few days.

"Yeah. It's kind of awesome," I admitted. I loved my mom. It was painful to go, but I know it was the right thing.

"You guys, look. I'm sorry about all of this. I never meant for us to get stuck in a different dimension and become lost," I said. My voice trembled a little. With that, we all hugged, one three-way hug.

"Lena, this summer with you and Monica has been the best. It beats staying at school or going skiing in the Alps. We had the adventure of a lifetime!"

Brandon said. I smiled at him and he smiled back.

The cart landed right in front of the bridge that was above the brook. We knocked three times on the door. Slowly, it opened.

"Lena! Monica! Brandon! What a surprise. What are you three doing here?" he asked. We explained everything that had happened. The smile on his face slowly began to vanish and was replaced with a neutral mouth.

"Well, that I never expected. Estrella really did suffer," he said.

"We just came to say goodbye. My mom is taking us back home," I said. I was on the verge of crying. "I just wanted to let you know that you are the best cat-man in the universe."

Fuzzy got emotional. We all did.

Just like we promised, we took the carriage back to the palace. This time, we let Fuzzy join us.

It was a short ride. The chairman had become quite cocky and started riding as fast as he could.

Mom was waiting for us at the gate.

"Lena, I got the portal working. I had asked some of my men to get the objects and I concocted a quick spell to turn them into a portal," she gestured to the door in the middle of the room. I eyed it closer. It was the door to our dorm. Never had I been so happy to see that door in my life.

"Mom, this is Fuzzy, the guy I was telling you about," I said.

"Oscar, is that really you?" she asked.

"Yes, it is. Remember when I worked for you?" he asked.

"Of course. Let me undo that curse I put on you," she said. With the flick of a wrist, she turned the cat-man into a real man again. Fuzzy was a redhead with long, groomed hair. He has a small beard and thick arms and legs. I was astonished when I first looked at him.

"Lena, Brandon, Monica, I think it's time," my mother said. She walked us to the door. My friends were more than eager to rush in, saying a quick bye. I, however, stood for a few seconds.

"Mom, Fuzzy, thank you so much for the best summer ever. I will never forget you," I said. Then, I stepped into our room.

I waved from our room. They waved back. I smiled and nodded. The portal soon closed and we were back at school, on Earth.

No matter how far apart we are, I'll never forget the Realms Beyond.





# ECHOES OF THE PAST

BY SHRIYA MADHAVAN

## Chapter 1

It was the night before New Year and I had received the news of my father's death. It was like an icy breeze on a harsh winter day. I knew it was an inevitable fate, but it still seemed unreal.

The chill in my spine glued me to my seat and the dim-lit room filled with dread and sorrow as I opened the crease of the envelope. Why couldn't I have done something and saved him? My mind interpreted the symbols to mere words, but to my heart, they meant it had ended.

"Dear Kwane Smith,

It is with sorrow we inform you of your fathers passing. We express our sincere sorrows."

A whirlwind of emotions encompassed my soul. Death had given me its final signal, that I would always be haunted by the loss I suffered, and that one day, I too would succumb to its grasp, never to be heard from again, just like it did for everyone in Hausa.

I picked up a quill and parchment and started to endeavor myself into a world long forgotten. It was just me and my thoughts, drifting me into the world I once called home.

Hausa Nation: July 19, 1769:

I felt the warm, comforting rays of the sun bask upon the land as I gently weeded our family's plots of land alongside my sister, Farida. Our hands moved in harmony as we worked hard to extract every bit of pesky crabgrass left.

Farida was my younger sister and had just turned seven last month. But she wasn't like the other kids. She found chasing the rabbits or playing tag with the other kids to be pointless and was instead wiser and solely dedicated herself to her responsibilities.

"Kwane!" she gently exclaimed in an adorable voice, "I finished weeding all of those plants over there!", she pointed to the plots of lands to our right. I smiled and gave her a Kuka, a traditional sweet as a token of my appreciation. Farida was my world. I did not know if it was only because I was her brother or she was just special, I felt I would do anything for her.

As the day went by, and Farida and I continued our duties, I began to hear the sound of armor rattling. I initially avoided confronting it and thought it was my tired brain. My only goal was to finish my work and find comfort inside. But a feeling urged me to glance in the direction of the incoming sound.

My heart sank as I saw what was approaching us. It was something I had begged to never see: a Baturiya.

Babu, my grandfather, had told me stories of the Baturiya when I little. He told me that they were once part of our species, but were much more foul and self-entitled, believing everything was theirs to keep. The Baturiya believed they were a self-declared master race, dedicating to leaving the land in vestiges.

"They arrived on our lands years ago, during the distant past on vessels armed with weaponry. They called them 'ships'. The Baturiya had their own culture and beliefs, far different from that of our own. We celebrated our differences, however. But that all soon changed. They noticed our abundance in precious metals and had decided instead to find a method of domination. Those we thought where our friends became our enemies. They stripped us of our traditions, languages, and beliefs and enforced the methods of the colonizers. Those who did not agree with their method of life would be gone." Babu said. "Kwane, promise me that if you ever see one, you will guard and protect your family to the last minute."

In the distance, the sound of footsteps, the synchronous rhythm of horse hooves, and the sound of the armor bashing against each other continued to grow louder as the soldiers and their allies marched forward towards our peaceful village. Farida and I looked at each other with fear in our eyes. We were terrified to move and were holding onto the plants we had been tending to. Every bone in my body told we should flee and find refuge somewhere far

away. But it would have been to no avail anyway. Within a matter of minutes, the storm of Baturiya was now upon us and it seemed fate itself had declared that this will be the end.

"Kwane, Farida! Get inside right now!" My father exclaimed. I turned to look at him and noticed his eyes darting in the direction of the danger. The Baturiya were now insight and they were coming for us. Sensing the urgency in his voice we rushed inside our thatched hut. Our hearts raced and our anxiety built every passing second. Our father stood by the door, guarding and protecting us from the danger. He was our sentinel. The soldiers drew closer, their uniform beaming like pearl white ghosts intending to inflict harm on us.

The village square, once a place of happiness and joy was now a sight of terror: Children trembling, families hugging each other, and elders whispering silent players in the hopes of a better tomorrow. The once bright day where the sky was a perfect shade of blue and not a single cloud was spotted had now vanished and changed into an array of grey ominous clouds. They were Babu's sign something was bad was about to happen.

The British officer, on horseback, approached us. His authority was clear as he gave commands to those below him in a powerful and strict fashion. His gaze pierced my soul and sent shivers down my spine. Soon, I heard a quick thud at the door and it soon burst open as a man daringly made his way inside.

"By the order of the King, you are now subjects to the King of England!" his voice said demandingly. I could see the mean, wicked smile on his face as the general eyed us. My identity felt destroyed at that second. Everything I had valued before this was no longer valid and I would now be under the governance of some foreign ruler I did not agree with. I felt my skin turn a dark shade of red with anger and rage surge throughout my veins. I knew this was unfair. But what struck me the most was that this man believed that he and his kind were above the rest of us and our culture, heritage, and history was never important.

I let my emotions control my mind and cloud my judgement. I felt an impulse to do something. Without thinking, I clasped my fist together, and pounded him in the chest. Blood spewed from his mouth and body and it sent a violent message around the room. For a long second, everyone just stood, staring at me. Then I looked at myself, and what I had just did. "*None of this would have happened if you hadn't destroyed our peace,*" I thought. Our once calm house was a battle scene.

The guards stationed nearby witnessed the brutal fight and soon came rushing over to aid their fellow member. Their faces slowly turned to face me. At that moment, I saw their expressions: fear and rage. They came darting towards me, their positions beckoning for full blown fight. Soon, all became mayhem. My family and I were fighting for our lives, our freedom, and most importantly, our culture. Whereas they were here to strip us of everything we valued.

Suddenly, I was ambushed from the back. A power-hungry man gripped my wrists tightly as I struggled to fight back and soon, I lost the privilege of motion. It soon became clear I was being arrested. I would reap what I sow. Farida begged and bawled on the ground, screaming her lungs out to the mercenaries that would soon take me away. But it was too late. The man who grasped me told her to shoo and threatened to take our parents with him otherwise. She

quietly obliged and ran away to the other side of the room. *Real life monsters.* The gusty winds blew in my eyes and the Baturiya dragged me on the uneven and wretched ground towards the harbor, where I was then considered waste and thrown into the back of the ship: in a small yet cramped room. The vessel soon departed and my life on the water felt like an eternity.

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The ship soon left the harbor. I began thinking of everything that had happened and how brave and strong my father had been. I admired his hero acts. I always knew him as a farmer and distant cousin of our leader. But now, I was curious to learn more from him and just ask how he had survived through everything. I wanted to know his struggles and how he had protected his family all these years.

## Chapter 2

The days of my life on that ship was a dystopia. The days grew longer and intolerable. The environment did not help. It was hostile and was always cramped. We were packed like fish and squished to the point were getting up would be a miracle. To the men above, we were not human: we were cargo, objects or goods at max.

I cast a long glance at the window stationed in our quarters. The view was almost always the same, an isotropy. The blue murky waters of the ocean moved in small ripples and currents. A rare but rewarding sight, the crowd of us inside would gather to see an emerging wave, soon surrounded by a school of fish. The fish worked together to fend for each other. Working together, not apart always made them stronger. I only hoped this realization would dawn upon the crewmates as it did for me.

"Ahh! It's too warm and humid in here, I tell you!" a man with an exaggerated accent spoke in the deck above us. I envied the Baturiya for having a luxurious lifestyle above, filled with food and water at dispose. However, down here, I had to fight almost 100 other people to even get a scrape of the leftovers. I told myself that things would change and within a few days, I would be back with Farida, in our safe little home in Hausa.

Yet soon, I began to warm up to the people I shared my living space with on the ship. I was surrounded by people who had lost everything as well: their families, their homes, and their way of life. They had come from nations around Africa and began to form a common language we could all understand. Throughout the journey, we spoke in quiet and near silent voices, making sure no one could hear us. It was comforting to know I wasn't going through this alone and others like me were there too. Yet, it served a reminder of the cruelty of the outside world.

I had always distanced myself from the others for some reasons. I felt I couldn't have the connection with the men here like I did with my family or old friends back in Hausa. That was until, one eventful day. Our first dinner in 8 days had been served to us and it felt like an event of celebration. I sat alone in the corner, fidgeting with the small piece of ply wood that had come loose from the hull.

"Not having fun? I can't argue with you. These fellas are enthralled over their own doom and are too blind to see it. By the way, my name is Malik," a fellow said, coming to me. I greeted him and said it was nice to meet him.

After we discussed an array of topics, I found the courage in my soul to share my story, the entire thing, not just the summed version for the daily banter. Surprisingly, he shared my story. He and his father were taken away and now his mother and six siblings had to fend for themselves. We embraced each other and soon became as thick as thieves.

As days turned into weeks, I only thought of my family, of Farida's cries and innocence to this outside world, and the promise I made to Babu. I was determined to restore my old way of life and go back to the way things were.

The journey was arduous and toilsome one. Yet, finally, one day, we arrived in a land unknown to anyone I had met before. It was a place of adventure and opportunity. I overheard one of the crewmates call the place a city named Boston. It was an area in the north called the Americas.

The ship docked in Boston Harbor slowly, and for the first time, in so many weeks, I felt reunited with a force of nature: the sun. It cast a warm glow on me and I vowed to never take anything for granted again. But soon I realized my fate was never going to be the same. The tides had changed I now had a new life in Boston. I did not know what adversities I would face or what would happen to me, but all I knew was that wit and determination would be my strides of power.

I soon came to know more about my new location. Boston was one of the many cities in the colonies and was near the coastline. It was famous for its bustling port and its temperate forests and tall trees. Arrays of buildings from colonial style homes with wooden beams and thatched roofs to tall brick buildings lined the cobblestone streets. In the alleys, people hustled from place to place. The streets teemed with laborers, merchants, and heavily clothed people.

For the first few days of our stay, we were housed in a small yet locked room. It provided no amenities but I still believed it was better than nothing.

However, the day finally came where everything would unravel. In the early hours of dawn, the captain our ship lined us up along our way to a marketplace. Today, we were to be sold to our masters in America. Any sense I had felt of being human still disappeared into the cold air as I now became a slave.

The auction block in Boston was a place of crowds. In the center of the marketplace a stall had been set up where we were each individually placed on a high stage above the ground. Hundreds gathered to bid for us to see which one fits their needs to the best. They glared at us with disdainful eyes as they were picking out which one of us was worth the most.

I was the third last to be presented. The auctioneer began by highlighting my work ethic, my age, and my strengths. He proudly joked that I was once part of a farm and would be perfect for any man growing tobacco in Virginia.

I felt anger course through my veins again just as it did in Hausa. Yet Malik had comforted me throughout our journey and even taught me some strategies to deal with it. My value seems to increase among the buyers. Whispers chanted: "He would be perfect. I would bid a lot"

The bidding soon began and it was an intense hour. "The man who proposes the most money for my free services would get to own me" I watched my fate "Do we have any bids?" the auctioneer questioned the audience.

After a few minutes of careful deliberation in the crowd, a hand shot up, filled with stiff hard coins.

"600!" he exclaimed.

"900!" another followed.

It went on for a few minutes until finally, the gavel fell and I was sold to a well-dresses man who appeared to be a plantation owner. He would be my master and my duty was to obey and follow his every command. My reality finally sank in: I was an object to be bought and sold. I was yanked off the stage and Malik was after me. He was soon sold to an American governor as a servant. His new owner yanked him away but we were able to lock eyes for a second. For a while, it just seemed like we talked through our eyes. *Don't worry. We'll get through this together. We've seen adversity. We'll face it again and remain strong. I'll try to stay connected.*"

The life I had in Hausa was now a distant memory. I was uncertain if I would have the experience I had there again. I was leaving behind the bonds of family and my community was now embarking on a journey into the unknown.

## Chapter 3

I remember the last longing glance Malik gave me. His words became a reminder to me that we could prosper through anything and the light would see the end.

I was dragged out of the market place by my new master, followed by a group of other enslaved individuals.

I looked up and soon faced him. Mr. Harrison was a man of strict virtues. He was sole heir to a plantation in Virginia. Speaking was frowned upon and prohibited and would come with harsh and dire consequences. We were soon boarded into a small and compact wagon. This would be our home until we reached the plantation. I stared out the wagon's side and noticed the vast amounts of people in this new land. It gave me hope that even if just one had a kind heart, they could help me get back home.

We arrived at the plantation in a few days and I was given no time to rest. We were immediately stationed in the vast fields. I came to know this would now be my daily routine. We were forced into a gruesome amount of stressful and painful labor. I felt horrible that there were so many like me who had faced the same fate.

One day, as the sun set, I felt overwhelmed from the work I had accomplished and decided to reward myself with a small time for thinking. I imaged how privileged my life was before, the amazing people, community, and culture. Within a split-second, my peace was disturbed. Mr. Davis, the man Mr. Harrison hired to oversee us slaves in the plantation was approaching me with a menacing look on his face. He readily equipped himself with his belt, ready to strike at any act of wrong doing.

"Don't even think about taking a break here," he said. With that, I was mortified and began scrimmaging back to work.

I had always hoped my fate would turn around. But as the days turned into weeks and weeks into months, I soon accepted my life would always be same dehumanizing routine on the plantation. Yet, only one thing kept me going, my desire for freedom and go back home safely.

One hot summer day, the lot of us were working toilsome in the fields, harvesting crops. Suddenly, in the background, I heard shots of cannons and we glanced at each other, fear in our eyes. We abruptly stopped working, anxious to see what had caused the commotion. Soon enough, they started coming closer and closer. I could feel the danger rise as my world was once shaken again.

Mr. Davis continued to inspect us, making sure we were still working. A British officer on horseback, leading a group of several troops in the area, came marching towards our plantation. It sent a tremble down everyone's spine as the officer began speaking in a hushed voice to Mr. Harrison. *Was this it? Would I be shipped away again to somewhere worse?*

I soon learned that over the past few months, the British army had been recruiting enslaved individuals in the promise that we would be offered our freedom in exchange for service. My heart raced as I began to realize my opportunity at freedom. It was something I could not ignore.

The officer began riding around the plantation, explaining the terms of this offer. We would be enlisted in the army and in the output the British won the war, every individual would be given their freedom. I knew it was a path of risk and danger, but it was worth it. I would reunite with my family and my life would be back to normal.

I marched forward along with the others who had chosen to enlist themselves and we vowed our allegiance to the British. The officer gave a simple nod and we were given our new army uniforms and training to become soldiers.

## Chapter 4

Training for the British in the army posed its own challenge and came with a tough schedule, but I learned many useful things such as following orders, wielding a musket, and marching in groups. It was a struggle, yet my freedom drove me through anything.

Soon, the days passed and I grew accustomed to my new way of life. I came to know more about my leading officer. He was strict person yet he embodied a sense of equality. He taught us discipline and skills necessary for war. But I found myself wanting to stand apart. Even if the British did not win the war, there was a hope I would be rewarded my freedom for my loyalty.

"Hey, Smith! Why don't you do us all a favor and stay on that plantation you came from. Also, why don't you go and do the chores for the lot of us, since you're so used to it," Nathaniel Spears said. Smith was the last name given to me when I enrolled in the army.

Nathaniel Spears was my fellow soldier in the army. He had come from England and had served his country for a long time. He abused his power to intimidate the new recruits. Thus, he had made it his life mission to terrorize me for my background. It only made me more determined to prove everyone wrong and make it.

John Kensington was a reasonable and fair person in the army. He treated everyone with the same kindness and respect and I admired him for that. He was curious and interested in getting to know me. John, like many in the army, was from England and came from hard-working middle-class family. He traveled across the ocean to America in the efforts of starting a business and becoming rich. But it never worked out and he signed himself into the army for employment instead.

I had the chance to join John on his missions and duties throughout town. We would sweep through the different corridor shops to find necessary items for the troops. It was one simple day like this that would change my life. It was a breezy autumn day. The trees around us moved gently and the air turned icy chill. John and I were stationed in the city on patrol duty, looking

for local militia and any information they had on the revolution. The local militia was the local army ready at a minute's notice for war.

Soon, a downpour began as huge glistening raindrops fell from the sky. It turned into a big storm. John and I lost each other in navigation. My clothes were drenched and I started searching for a place that would give me shelter for the night, I finally stumbled on a tavern. The Green Dragon, its name, was decorated with flags of all the countries on the exterior. The moment I stepped inside, I was warmly greeted by a staff who gave me a room to stay. I had never received so much kindness in this land, or for a fact, ever since I left Hausa. I made my way to my room when I heard mysterious voices coming from the other room. They were speaking quietly and muffled but I could make out what they were saying.

"We don't have time anymore. We should just continue with our original plan, Warren" a man exclaimed. He carried a grotesque and still voice and I judged he was in his 30s.

"Either you risk the lives of 600 men or you just wait a mere few hours. The choice is obvious," another man declared. He seemed to be Warren and the two parties went on and continued to rage in their battle. But then I heard something that stopped me in my tracks. It was valuable information to the British.

"My men have gathered intelligence from sources that the British are planning a march to Lexington and not New York. However, we had just deployed General Washington and all 600 of his troops for reinforcements in the wrong place. The city of Lexington is left unguarded and now, we only have a few soldiers left. I suggest that we call in everyone for a meeting at Buckman first thing in the morning to discuss the matter."

The door gently began to creak and I sought refuge from being caught in the plants behind me. I gently crouched and masked my figure from view. A whirlwind of emotions and thoughts began to cloud my head as I imagined the possibilities of this. *How did this information even reach the Americans? It was highly classified and only known by the army.* Yet, in that moment, an idea struck my head. If I informed the general or anyone in the ranks, I would heavily rewarded. I would never be frowned upon. I dashed into the muddy

streets and raced into the first I carriage I found to inform my superiors of this.

John had escaped the storm and we ran into each other at the army headquarters.

"Smith, Kensington. I must say, this is impressive. I would have never expected you to make this profound discovery. I will share this with others in the morning meeting. Till then, amazing effort." General Albert Loftbher praised us. A sense of amazement filled my heart. All I thought of was I made him proud and impressed him.

Dawn was upon us and General Loftbher gathered almost twenty of the most invincible soldiers and called me to step forward beside him. He elaborated on the current situation and the new information the Americans received. "The Americans are sending two skilled and efficient militia men to watch over their residence: Paul Revere and William Dawes Jr. We have received word that the main purpose of their visit is to warn the rebel leaders: Samuel Adams and John Hancock. We need to make sure Revere and Dawes are arrested before they rouse the local militia and warn the leaders. Campbell, Baker, Spears, Harris: you will lead this mission. The rest of you, be on your guard and always be observant!" Loftbher directed his plan of action.

Then, an idea stuck me. This was my next chance to prove how dedicated I could truly be. I looked at the general and soon began, "Sir! I am devoted to the British cause and it would be the utmost honor if given the chance to be a part of this mission."

Without any judgement, General Loftbher agreed to this. His approval was a sign of relief for me. I would now be a part of the mission to capture Dawes and Revere.

## Chapter 5

The early morning hours of next day were filled with anticipation and excitement. I lay in bed when the knocker came, banging my door. It was my cue to wake up and get ready. He was a nice person, but in the morning hours he was a menace. I rose from my bed, but my mind and body still gruesomely tired from the night before. Now here I was, ready to start one of the biggest days of my life. I quickly donned myself in the red and white British uniform and sprang to find my teammates. But when I found them, I was shocked. None of them were in uniform and instead dressed in colonial outfits of frilly beige shirts and long black pants.

"Must have not heard Smith. I guess Loftbher did not find you important enough. But since you are here, and I'm a righteously nice person, I will find it in my heart to tell you that we are going undercover. Guerilla warfare style. I myself was personally against it, but commands are commands" Spears said in a sarcastic voice.

The situation grew tense as I felt my face turn a deep shade of red. I found myself looking for Loftbher. To my surprise, when I met him, he didn't even look me in the eye and instead rushed me towards my new clothes. Maybe he just forgot I was a part of this. I stared at my new garments. They were tattered, old, worn pieces of clothing. They looked as if they belonged on the streets.

"You will perfectly blend with the colonists. If you looked perfect, Dawes would know something was off. He's militia." he explained.

By the time the sunrise started, we set out on our journey. Not knowing what was ahead, we were ready for anything. The cold morning air posed our first difficulty. The tattered pieces of cloth were the only warmth I had. We faced several challenges on our way. We were as secretive as spies making sure to have a path only through dark and mysterious places. Seemed almost the environment was protecting us and the secrecy of this mission.

Hours passed as we traveled the vast landscapes of the region. In a distance, I eyed something that looked like a village. We soon approached it, and I was right. There were children and so many members in this community. But they

looked different than the people in Hausa. The kids here wore clothes fabricated from animal skins and hides and decorated their clothing with beads and symbols. Their clothing each told a story as I began to notice it more intricately. Suddenly Spears began shouting, "By the name of the king, I order you to move now!" They seemed frightened and did as they were told immediately. I noticed one boy in the crowd who couldn't have been much younger than Farida, most likely only five or six. He started to cry after staring in the eyes of one of my fellow soldiers. He ran away terrified like he had just seen a bear. The boy was just like me except I had been fortunate to grow older and faced adversity and he had to suffer it young.

"Harris, we cannot be scaring children now. We have more important things to worry about." I said in a polite voice.

"You won't shut up, will you Smith?" he said in a hatred voice. The look in his eyes pierced my soul in half.

I was still scared by the events that happened and refrained myself from discussions with the rest of the group. We then began to venture out of the forest and within a short amount of time reached a clearing. This led us to Lexington.

## Chapter 6

The city of Lexington was a quiet and peaceful place. The people lived in colonial houses and lived a very normal life. We had to blend in and cautious to not do anything suspicious as there is a possibility the locals were already alerted of our attack. The goal of our mission was straight forward: capture Paul revere and William Dawes Jr. before they could meet their leaders.

We moved as quietly as we could making sure to remain stealthy. The stress felt upon us was significant, but in our hearts, our mission was what mattered most. We entered the village center and decided it would be best to split up and cover more ground. In the alleyway I decided to take a few minutes of rest, but in the corner of my eye, I noticed a shadow lurking in the distance. I quietly crept up closer until I noticed I was standing in the presence of an American celebrity, Paul Revere. He exactly matched the descriptions I heard about him: shabby brown hair, strong sharp face with powerful witty eyes. He was dressed in simple clothes.

Then I thought, "*This is Paul Revere. If I capture this powerful man, I am sure to get my freedom.*"

I was watching every move of him, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. He jumped off his horse and it soon dispersed. Just as I was about to make my move, Wiliam Dawes Jr arrived on a horse. He had blue eyes and strong sharp face with dark messy hair. His clothes matched Revere's style of simplicity. I knew it was undistinguishably him. With all the chaos from Dawes's arrival, Revere had managed to spot me and I could no longer sneak upon him.

Revere took his gun in self-defense. I pulled out a pocket knife and quickly jabbed Dawes. Dawes was in pain and warned Revere to get away as quick as he could. But Revere just stood there in shock. I was able to capture Revere just in time using his current state of emotion. I turned and looked back and saw Dawes was furious and trying to escape from the place. This broke out into mayhem in the city.

## Chapter 7

We fled the streets of Lexington soon after, and the entire way, I could feel a deep sense of pride. It was because of me the British now had Paul Revere in custody. I began instilling confidence in myself. I was a loyal soldier and had served a honorable task, capturing a rebel icon.

"Revere, it seems as if luck is on your side. I might have not finished you off in Lexington, but your mission ends now." I began in a strong and powerful voice.

"I only may have been captured, but there are still those who will withhold our virtues of freedom." he declared, his voice filled with patriotism.

I could see how he continued to fight for himself, even though he was helpless now. But his words didn't unhinge me even a bit.

We then boarded onto two carriages and I was solely placed in charge of overseeing Revere. He began slowly expressing himself to me.

"Do you even know what you are fighting for? Do you truly side with the British?" he asked me wholeheartedly.

Without any hesitation, I responded. "Yes, I do", even though I was not quite sure of my choice. My victory was what mattered the most to me. Every attempt he tried to change me, I blocked it.

After travelling some distance, we took a short break. I needed some help from my fellow soldiers so I walked near their carriage. It was then when overheard the conversations they had.

"It was an intelligent move of the general to send Smith on this mission. Then, as we're done with him, he'll be dead of in a few weeks." Spears and the others joked as they laughed and chatted over drinks.

I had always known I was never welcome in the army, but I had never expected it to be as cruel as this. Even after all my accomplishments, I wasn't even valued in their eyes.

Revere's question of my loyalty to the British struck my mind again. *Had I ever truly supported the British?* I kept questioning this to myself.

Revere used a moment of my silence to express his thoughts. "Kwane, the British have been unjust to the Americans for so many decades now. We are not the bad people, we are just fighting for our basic rights. We are fighting from our hearts. Can you really say the same for yourself? We will never treat you the way these men do."

It struck me like a arrow what he said and I started pondering of my true intentions. I had never truly sided with the British. In my pursuit of freedom, I had lost all morality and was willing to do anything. I was selfish to look at only me, but blindly ignored the suffering of a million other people.

Revere could see the wheels turning in my head. "You still have time to change your ways, to do what's right for the greater good," he said. His words echoed in my mind. I started to realize my mistakes and that my actions were biased to my own good and not that of a true cause.

Our carriage soon halted to a stop and my team members had decided it would be best if I stayed with Revere. We were moved to a cold brick cell.

I was alone with Revere. I couldn't help but wonder if they had purposely isolated me with him. *Had they betrayed me?* It didn't matter. I decided to use this as an advantage to learn more about the American forces and their mission. I asked more about his side of the story and Revere started explaining everything. I delved deep into a discussion, learning the ins and outs of several things. I soon began understanding the bigger picture.

Just as I was about to hear the last bit, the door started banging fiercely and then suddenly, it was kicked upon by none other than William Dawes Jr and a few minutemen.

He and his men took no hesitation on attacking me. I just about to be pounded on when suddenly, Revere stepped forward, intervening.

"Dawes, stop! Kwane no longer sides with the British. I've seen it for myself." he said.

"Revere, don't be so gullible. He's tricking you into thinking he's changed so that you believe him. When you need him the most, he will turn on and betray you." Dawes responded coldly, the harshness present in his voice.

"Dawes, don't you remember what I said about you to Warren all those years ago. He believed in you, and till this day you've only proved him right." Revere remarked. "There are so many people out there who crave for our fall. We should not turn down any allies we have. Kwane is a true, honest man who will support our cause."

Dawes thought through Revere's words and finally accepted his view. He rested his weapons. I gently removed the cuffs from Revere and freed him from all constraints.

Dawes looked me in the eye and said, "I appreciate your support to our causes. You may be British, but you understood us. If you are interested, we would first like you to meet someone."

## **Chapter 8**

In my chronicles, I have ventured and seen both the good and the evil. The evil prospers at times of darkness, but the good always sees the light of day. I will remember the day that changed my life forever. To me, the carriage rides are a beacon of hope. They symbolize an enlightenment, a new beginning and dawn for a story. I was fortunate to be on one today.

After our travels, Dawes led me through the massive hallway decorated with artwork and vases.

"Dawes! I see you're back. Who's this young man you brought you?" a man with a long white beard and thin figure asked, turning to me. He seemed to me a man of power and wisdom.

Dawes soon shared my story to the man and I was acquainted with Dr. Joseph Warren, a leader in the American Revolution.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir!" I said. I couldn't believe I was meeting one of the key leaders in the revolution.

I felt fortunate to be acquainted with these gentlemen. I watched all the struggles they overwent in the collective fight for independence. Dr. Warren became an idol to me for his wisdom and leadership. He became my mentor and helped me charter through the unknown.

## **Epilogue**

The war continued to rage for several years. Over time, I couldn't stand my British uniform anymore and shed it. I signed my allegiance to the United States of America. Finally, one day, the Americans emerged out of battle, victorious and pride filling their hearts. I felt a leap of joy that I was one of them. Then, one day, I received a document with a personal letter.

"Dear Kwane, you have helped us instrumentally in this fight for independence. As your fellow American, it would be the utmost honor to give you this.

My eyes filled with tears as I read through the words. It was my freedom. I was officially I free man in the United States of America.