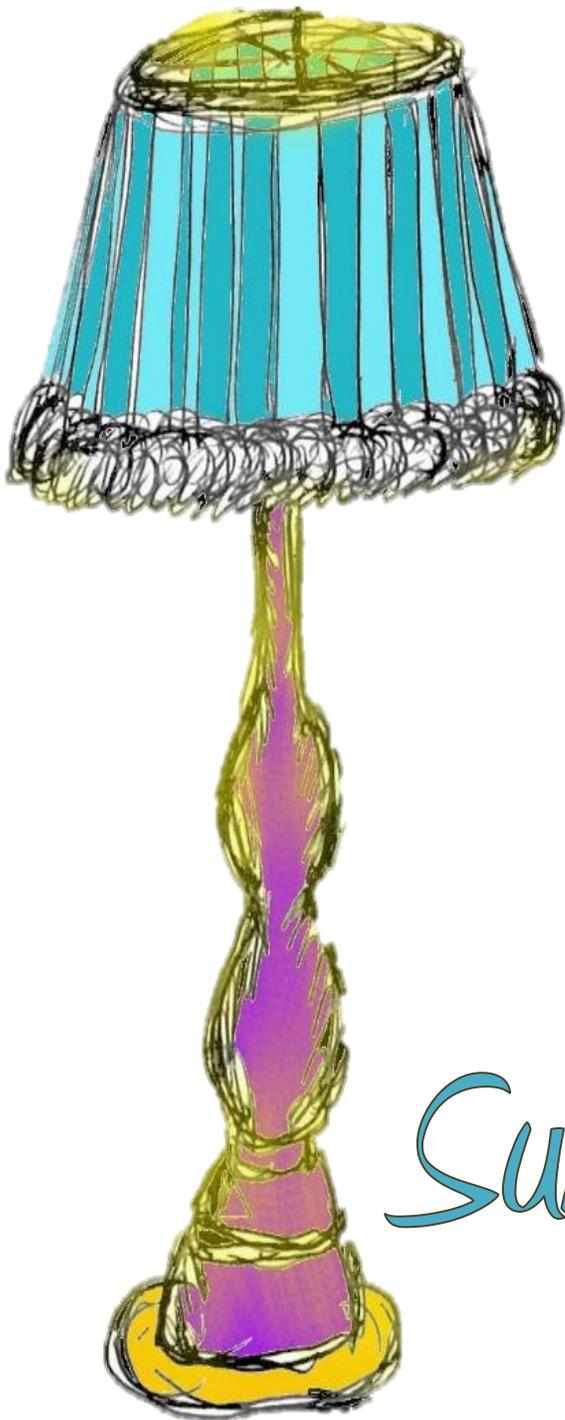


Teen Zine



Summer 2016

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Silver Mink: Chapter 5: Over the River – by Taylor Bradley

It's one of those mornings where I'm still so tired, I can't remember what I did yesterday. Let's see, it was the first full day with the fairy. I seem to recall a really ugly troll taking the book holding the information on the Silver Mink, and Moth gave it flowers to get it back. Then, we walked all day, and by night, it'd started to rain terribly hard. We found a small town called Nowhere. The woman at the Inn had two heads. Then...I think that was it. I went to sleep after that, right?

Oh, wait. I almost got killed.

Now I remember: A psychotic knight almost took my head off. Then, there was this woman named Lynn who had a ton of jewelry, this horrible trumpet player with puffy pants, and a princess. One would think I'd remember that quicker.

I don't know what time it is, exactly, but I can see the sun starting to come up. I need to get out of here before I run into those wackos again. Where's the fairy? Eww, she's like right next to me! Then again, that's kind of my own fault. "Moth, quit sleeping. I'd like to get out of here before that deranged knight wakes up and accuses me of trying to murder his princess by snoring too loud." Not that I snore.

"Uhhhhgg, too early." She sits up, looks out the window, and lays right back down. "It's four in the morning! We've been asleep for less than *three hours!*"

"Keep quiet, or those wackos will hear you."

"I'm not getting up. You can't make me!"

She's such a child. "Oh, yes I can. Because *I* am, and wherever I go, you follow." And sure enough, as I start to walk around the room, she's being dragged across the floor.

"Just because I have to follow you doesn't mean I have to fly."

"Have it your way, but when someone almost steps on you, you'll rethink things."

"Hmmm...good point."

Glad to know I cleared *that* one up.

"Carry me."

"Not if my life depended on it."

"I can yell for that crazy knight again if you want."

"Don't. You. *Dare.*"

"Then open your pocket."

"I hate you." But it's too early to fight for my life, and that knight is really nuts. So I do what she asks, though I hate myself for it, but what else is new? She flies into my chest pocket and I squirm as she does it. It feels like a worm going down my sock! And I know that from experience.

Once she stops moving around, I walk over to the window, make sure I've got the book, my staff, and then start to climb out. Moth pops her head out for a second.

"You know there's a door, right?"

"I told you, I'm not going to risk running into those mental cases again."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? Oh, wait, you're a man, you never know what you're doing."

"You have this way of speaking to me that motivates me *so much*, do you know that?"

"Hey, you're about to jump out of a window, I can say whatever I want to you."

"Shut up, so I can concentrate." I swing myself over the window and hold on by my fingers, the staff strapped to my back, and the book in my cloak pocket.

"Okay...I hope you looked down before you did this."

What is she talking about? There's nothing – "*Holy Hydra hiccups!*"

"Do Hydras *get* hiccups?" The fairy pipes, as I start to panic. "Oh, what's the matter?" Looking at her, I see she's smirking. "Did someone forget he was on the second floor?"

"Alright, no need to get hysterical," I say, more to myself. "Just use the staff to enchant yourself with a Levitation spell. Why didn't I think of that earlier?"

"You know how to levitate?"

"...No, no, I don't, that's probably why I didn't think to do that. But I *do* know how to turn the ground into butter."

"You learned how to turn dirt into dairy products before you learned how to fly? I think you took your spell book and read it backwards."

"Once again, quit talking to me."

"Kay, just try not to die."

Oh, I'll do my best, but no promises.

Ok, Mace, just lift your staff hand, cast the spell, and just fall into a pile of butter. I never thought I would have to use this spell. Alright, here we go. Lifting my arm to grab the staff, and "Ahhh!"

Apparently, I can't hold myself up with one hand.

"Did you almost fall to your death?" my pocket asks.

"No, I know what I'm doing."

"You say that a lot. Mainly when you have no idea what you're doing. Do you need my help again?"

"I don't need light magic to get me out of this situation! Just let me think."

"Maddock, you're tired and not too smart to begin with, so just let me do this. It's too early for all this."

"I can do this, alright?! I just need to think."

"Have it your way, but when you fall, don't land on me."

She's using my own words against me. I hate that. My arms are getting tired, though. I need to figure a way out of this, and quickly.

"Can't you just do the spell without your stick?"

"It's not a stick, it's a *staff*, and *no*."

"I've seen other sorcerers perform spells without magic sticks."

"Well, this spell needs a *staff*, so looks like the ground isn't going to be butter any time soon." Never thought I'd say that.

"That's it, I've got this."

"Get back in my pocket. I can do this."

"Too late."

She flies right in front of my face, and her hands begin to glow with energy. Oh no she doesn't. When I say I can do something, I can do it! I reach out to try to grab the fairy and *why did I just let go of the window, oh my God, this was a mistake, I'm too young to die, who's gonna come to my funeral, does anyone care, why is 'Q' a letter...why did I stop falling?*

Slowly daring to look at what just happened, I see that the branches from a tree are now wound around my ankles. That was *really* close! I was about another second from landing flat onto the ground, and either injuring myself, or possibly dying. Moth is yelling in my ear. "That was the stupidest thing you've ever done! You are *so lucky* there was a tree there, or you would be a pancake! And the ground isn't butter *or* syrup, so you would've been the *worst pancake ever!*"

"You can let go of me now."

"I mean, *really*, of all the times to be stubborn, you were hanging out a stinkin' *window* for God's sake! Why would you *do* that?!"

"Moth, I'm hanging upside down still. Hey, I even said your name. Now put me down!"

"I was trying to *help* you! But you're *so anti-light magic*, you would rather fall to your death than let me!"

"MOTH, ALL THE BLOOD IS RUSHING TO MY HEAD SO PLEASE GET YOUR BRANCHES OFF MY LEGS AND PUT ME DOWN!"

She flies in front of my face again, her feet nearly touching the mud. Her face is cherry red, and her tiny arms are across her chest. This is just like one of those looks my mom used to give my dad right before she made him sleep on the couch.

This cannot end well.

Magic energy emanates from her hands again, but she's still giving me a death glare. "Should've been more specific," she mumbles.

What did she mean by...oh, I get it now. Funny how things become so clear when your face is sinking into a pile of mud. After about a minute of letting my anger boil, I get up, only to slip and fall on my back.

"Serves you right," Moth says, even though, thanks to my *Vinctum* spell, she was so close to me, her wings are splattered with dirt.

"Let's just get back on track before I try to drown you in wet *filth*, alright?"

"You have this way of speaking to me that motivates me *so much*, do you know that?" she snaps.

"Put your fairy hormones aside for a while. Now, we're heading back into the forest."

"Uhhhggg."

"Are you going to be like this all day?"

"Does it annoy you to the point of madness?"

"It's getting darned close."

"Then, yes. Definitely."

* * * *

"Stop moving around in my pocket so much! It feels *horribly* awkward."

"*You're* horribly awkward!" she snaps.

"Great comeback. Really. Your creativity is astounding."

"I'm *tired*. I can't think of good ones when I'm tired."

"What a shame. I do so love the sound of your obnoxious little voice."

"I can't believe I have to spend *five more days* with you!"

"I know the feeling, believe me. And I don't see why you're complaining. *I'm* doing all the work. You're just a necessary part of my plan."

"*Plan*. Ha! You say that like you know what you're going to do next. That's funny, Maddock. You ought to give up sorcery and become a stand-up comedian. The only reason you know how to get to this mountain is because it's so big, you can see the peak wherever you go. Which reminds me: How exactly do you think you're going to climb that mountain? You have no supplies, so unless you know a spell to get up to the top, which I doubt, you have a massive canyon in your train of thought."

That last part makes my teeth grit involuntarily. No inch-tall, pea-brained annoyance is going to doubt *my* magic skills, *or* my intelligence. "We won't hit the mountain for two more days."

"So, you're making this up as you go along. Just as I thought."

"Do *not* doubt me!"

"If you actually had a *well-thought out plan*, I wouldn't be. It's one thing to drag me around against my will, like a piece of luggage. It's another to do it without even knowing *how* you're going to accomplish your goal, or *what* you're going to do *if* you accomplish it. That's something I'm really struggling to understand here, and it's not just because I'm sleep deprived. You want the Silver Mink because it can grant your soul wish of being the most powerful sorcerer in the world. Got that part. But *why*? That seems to be the key word with you. I mean, you don't even know what you're going to do once you have your wish, that is, *if* you survive this journey, Mr. Climb-Out-A-Window. So why are you going through all of this trouble?"

I stop, my toes curling up in my shoes, yank the fairy out of my pocket by her wings, and point a furious finger in her face. My teeth are still grinding when I start to speak, and my voice is more of a growl. "Do *not* doubt *me*, or what I can do, as I told you before, and *will not* repeat again, and never, *ever* question my motives. What I am doing is none of *your* concern, even if you're necessary to it. I do not have to *defend myself* to *anyone*, especially not an *annoying, stupid, little, insignificant fairy!*"

"Excuse me, but this insignificant fairy just saved your life!"

"Which, if you knew anything about the spell I cast on you, you would *stop doing!* Now, you're going to stop distracting me, and you're going to stay out of my pockets! If I have to walk on three hours of sleep, - "

"Less. Guess you can't do basic math, either."

"Then *you* have to fly! And you're not gonna whine about it either! That's final!"

Our eyes lock for a full minute or so, neither of us willing to be the first to look away.

"Typical sorcerer," she says, shaking her head. "You always have to be in control, and can never let anyone insult your pride."

And with that, she's silent. As I walk deeper and deeper into the forest once more, that entire conversation, or argument, or whatever it was, runs through my head over and over. It occurs to me that her only defense was that she *might* have just saved my life. But that was her choice. I didn't ask her to help me, she just did it. Therefore, I owe her nothing, and don't have to treat her any differently. But why did she do that? It's common sense that if I get killed, she's released from my Vincium spell. Why did she "save" me when my death means her freedom?

The mud is getting...wetter, if possible. That's a good sign. We're getting close. The ground isn't drenched just because of the rain from last night. It's from the...there it is. The river.

"Now you can stop whining about having to fly everywhere," I snap. "I knew there was a river in this forest, and now I've found it. How's that for a plan?"

The fairy flies up closer, wiping the sleep from her eyes for about the fiftieth time. "Yeah, great job, genius. And you're just going to *swim* to the mountain? Or do you know a spell that parts the river?"

...I knew I forgot something. But I can't let her know that. "Of course not, don't be preposterous. I knew that there would be – "My eyes scan the scene, looking for some way out of this. Wait is that a...it *is!* "–be a boat right over there!"

"Maddock, there is no *way* you could've known that would be there," she says, glancing at the long, wooden canoe on the bank.

"That's for me to know, and you to never find out, oh ye of little faith." Well, of little everything.

"Look, I can see your mood has brightened, which means less of a headache for me. And not to be the rain cloud on your little river ride, but doesn't this seem just a *bit* odd to you? We're in the middle of a forest, which is located in the middle of *nowhere* – "

"Actually, this is more like the outskirts of Nowhere. We got out of *that* crazy town a few miles back."

"You know what I mean! And yet, as far off the map as we are – not that you bothered to bring a map – there's still just a random, ready-to-go boat right here! Doesn't that seem a little...too good to be true?"

I roll my eyes, smirking, and start to pull the canoe into the water. "It's called 'luck.' Or possibly fate. Whichever, it doesn't matter. The point is this is exactly what we need. Now get in. This water's cold."

"I'm just saying, it's weird. And not in a good way."

"Just grab a paddle, and start paddling. Oh, wait, that's right. You're small and useless. But these things are heavy, and I can't do this myself."

"Did you just call me '*useless*?!' Just because I'm vertically challenged *doesn't* mean I can't do what you do!"

"Alright then, Hercules, prove me wrong."

"I *will!*"

"And how are you going to do that, Miss 'I'm a Plant Fairy, not a Water Fairy?' If you haven't noticed, we're *surrounded* by water."

"Yeah," she growls, shooting daggers. She flies over to the side of the boat, and makes odd hand gestures while her hands themselves glow a strange green. It sort of looks like a crazed conductor leading an invisible band. I may have driven her to madness.

Before my eyes, dark green plants shoot up from the water, splashing me slightly. Moth levitates them to the point where they're no longer attached to the bottom of the river, then wraps them around one of the paddles. "Plants grow in water," she finishes. She puts the paddle in the water, not even touching it. "I can't lift it, but as long as there are weeds around it, I can control it. Now, get your paddle, and let's get moving."

She's quiet most of the way here, then suddenly she's ordering me around. This just shows that female fairies are no different than regular women. But, we do need to get going if we want to get closer to the mountain by dark. I put my oar in the water and start rowing.

"I hope this proves light magic is as good as dark, if not better," Moth says.

"So you made plants grow, so what?" I snap.

"Well, I didn't see you thinking up a spell to make the canoe paddle itself."

"Are we really going to start this again? Dark is better, and that's that."

"Typical sorcerer," she begins.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm stubborn, pig-headed, power hungry, antisocial, and weird. Did I miss anything?"

"Yeah, you're paddling in the wrong direction, bone head! We're going in circles!"

"Whose fault is that?! *You're* paddling wrong!"

"I am *not!* You're doing it backwards!"

Oh, first she says I can't do magic to save my life, which is *wrong*, and *now* I don't know how to row a stupid boat! *Everyone* just seems to think I can't do *anything* right! They always have! And I *hate that!* "I will *not* be bossed around and judged by a little, bitty fairy!"

"Oh, but *I* have to listen to some power hungry sorcerer who has no idea what he's doing as he rags on light magic and my culture?! How is *that* fair?!"

"Things is: *Life's* not fair!"

The end of a paddle whacks the back of my head with a "*THUNK!*"

Oh no she didn't.

I slam my paddle into the water and soak the fairy. She falls onto the bottom of the boat, her wings now wet and incapable of flying.

She coughs, spitting the gross river water out. "Look," she growls, glaring up at me with all the fury of a woman scorned.

A really soggy one.

"We're both tired, stubborn people who, for one reason or another, are stuck together, and don't like each other," she continues.

"Thanks for the recap."

"But all this fighting isn't getting us any closer to your destination. So, for the sake of *both* our sanity, we need to quit arguing every five minutes. The sooner we get to the mountain and find your Mink, the sooner we can resume our regular lives, and never have to see each other again."

"You hit me with a paddle, then call for a truce?! How much of that water got into your mouth?!"

"Bickering is only *prolonging* this already grueling journey."

"Well, *you* started it!"

"And now I'm finishing it!"

For the second time, our eyes lock in battle. Only this time, I look away. She's right, as much as I hate to admit it. If we can just *mentally* hate each other, instead of verbally, this will go a lot faster. "Are you suggesting we ignore each other unless totally necessary?"

"The opposite, actually. As different as we are, there has to be *something* we have in common. Something we agree on. If we find it, we might be able to get along better. But first, we should sort out this paddling issue. We're paddling in opposite directions, which is why we're going in a circle.

As if I didn't know that.

"Ok, see, it was actually my fault," she confesses. "I'm so exhausted, I was paddling the wrong way, and didn't realize. So," she soars up into the air again. Guess most of the water missed her wings. "Sorry for calling you a bone head."

"And?"

"And for whacking you with the paddle handle."

"And?"

"You were right."

"And?"

"What else *was* there?"

"I'm milking the moment."

"Just paddle the canoe."

Though I still hate her bossing me around, we start paddling the boat once again, and this time head down the river, rather than spinning in circles. "So, how are we supposed to do this, this, communication thing you came up with?"

"Just...I don't know, talk, I guess."

"About *what*?"

"I don't know...where do you live?"

"You know where I live. You and your little fairy friends have been stealing from me, remember?"

"Again, *I* did not do that. A group of Wind Fairies did. I'd never seen you before the fire broke out. I just knew your name and basic appearance."

"Still not telling you where I live."

"Well, then, *you* ask something."

"Like *what*?"

"*Anything.*"

"Favorite shape!"

"That's really random."

"You said anything."

"Okay, rhombus, because it's like a demented square. What's your favorite kind of flower?"

"I hate about ninety-nine percent of nature."

"Then pick from the one percent."

"Polka-dotted Flugelhorn."

"That's only specific. And really rare."

"Where do fairies come from?"

Awkward pause.

"Well...When a mommy fairy and daddy fairy love each other very much--"

"Oh my God, stop, that was not what I meant, I really don't want to know that! I meant like where your species came from, not reproduction!"

"Oh, thank goodness, I really didn't want to go there."

See, we're learning. Hey, that can be my next question. "Where did you learn magic?"

You know, part of me saw this coming. "That's a long story." And more importantly, one I'd prefer not to tell.

"We're in a small boat, slowly paddling down a long river. I have time. C'mon, you made me relive fairy birth!"

"Accidentally...you're not gonna leave me alone until I tell you."

"See? You know me better already."

"Fine. My first teacher was a man with blue hair named Talon Scarletwound. I learned from him for four years. Then I went to learn from Horace the Horrible. That was horrible, no pun intended, and I left within the year. Finally, I went to a man with the most amazing name ever."

"Hugh Jackman?"

"Who?"

"I don't know. Continue."

"Viktor Vicardi Vayne."

"Ooh, alliteration. Sounds like an interesting guy. Wait, if you had three teachers, why don't you know a lot of spells and things?"

"Ummm...you already asked something, now I have to."

"Fair is fair, I guess. But that's gonna be my next one."

The river begins to part. The mountain's peak still towers over the trees, so I know we go right...wait...what's that noise? "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

But I'm not quite sure what it is, in fact. It's so quiet, I barely heard it over the sound of the water. It's probably nothing. We should just go, and keep going towards the mountain. I raise my paddle, preparing to turn the canoe, but before I do, the sound begins to get louder. Not by much, but it did. It's music. Some sort of singing.

"Maddock? Why did you stop?"

We should just keep going. Just ignore it. But I have to know more about it. For some reason, I just have to know where that song is coming from. Paddling on the other side of the boat now, it begins to turn left. We can always turn around.

"You know the mountain is the other way, right?"

"I know what I'm doing."

"I'm going to start counting how many times a day you say that. Why are we going this way?"

"I just need to find something out."

"Okay, as long as it doesn't take forever, or get us lost, or mauled by a bear."

"Right, because bears love attacking random boats in a river."

"I'm just saying, you seem to be a magnet for random danger. Like wildfires, troll attacks, running into nutty knights that want to take your head off and make it a trophy, or whatever that guy's issue was."

I can't hear the music over her talking, but since we just spent the last few minutes trying to get on "better terms," yelling at her to shut up might not be a good choice of words anymore. "I would appreciate it if you could be quiet for a minute so I can hear."

I can almost feel her smirk. "Well, since you asked so nicely."

The song is getting louder. It has to be around here. It's definitely a female voice. My ex-girlfriend, Kyrenia, the mermaid, pops into my head for the second time this week. She loved singing. But mermaids prefer saltwater to fresh, so I doubt that's the source of this song.

Splash! Water sprinkles onto my face, and I look over my shoulder at Moth. "Watch where you're paddling."

"That wasn't me! I got wet, too. Something in the water jumped."

"What did it look like?"

"It was really fast. All I saw was the tail. It was orange, with...sparkles."

I give her a look, similar to the ones mothers give when their child has just told a tall tale. "Sparkles. You expect me to believe that a large, glittery fish—"

"*There!*" she exclaims, and points in front of the boat. I humor her and look. She's telling the *truth*, surprisingly. Not far away, a large, orange, and shockingly *sparkling* tail is waving at us to keep coming forward. It looks almost identical to Kyrenia's, though hers was more of an aqua color.

"I don't like this," Moth says. "Maybe we should turn around."

"Nonsense, there's nothing to be afraid of." I keep paddling, and Moth follows.

"I'm not *scared*. I just have a bad feeling."

"Look, as soon as I find out where that singing is coming from, we can get back to finding the Mink."

"Singing?" she repeats. "What singing? I don't hear a thing,"

Is she going deaf? The voice has been getting louder and louder. Why doesn't she hear it? Whatever, maybe it has to do with her small ears, or the song can only be heard by awesome sorcerers who are on the brink of absolute power. Probably the latter.

"Maddock, I'm not sure if it's the lack of sleep, or if you're hungry for power, but I think you're beginning to lose it. If you ever had it, that is."

"Like I said, I know what I'm doing!"

"I believe that makes three times so far."

I'm about to snap at her, but before I can, two more tails come to the surface, one teal, the other red. The wave, just like the first one, and the song gets louder. Its owner, whoever that is, has the prettiest voice I've ever heard. It's making my head spin. It's the best sensation I've ever experienced. "Just keep paddling."

The song has no words, but that makes it all the more beautiful. Just the notes themselves are enough to make a man go insane. I have to find out who it belongs to. Nothing matters except that.

Wait, what am I thinking? The *Mink* is the number one priority, not this! The fairy's right, this is a complete waste of time. "Moth, we're going—"

The song surrounds me once again, its melody constraining me, its notes begging me to follow. I obey. We pass the three tails, and they continue to lead us.

"Are you feeling okay?" Moth asks. "You have a weird look on your face. Don't tell me you're getting seasick. We haven't even been in the boat that long."

But I barely hear her. The red, orange, and teal creatures have led us to a large mound of boulders. And atop of the largest one sits the owner of the voice that's been calling out to me all this time. She looks almost identical to a mermaid. Perhaps that's what they are, and this river connects to an ocean somewhere. That would make sense of how they went from saltwater to freshwater.

Her tail is a calm lavender shade, contrasting with her yellow coral bra, bordered with pearls. Her skin is flawless, unharmed by the sun's unforgiving rays. Her dark brown hair is carried by the breeze that suddenly struck up. And her eyes...They're bluer than the sea itself. Electric, almost diamond-like.

She calls out more, continuing the song I never want to end. The orange, teal, and red-tailed women, none of who are nearly as beautiful as their leader, pick up the tune and harmonize in a way that is truly intoxicating.

"You know you're drooling, right?" says a small voice. Who was that? I don't remember being with anyone. All I remember are those crystal-clear eyes, and that song.

"Maddock?" Is that my name? "You're acting weird. Like weirder than usual." I've never felt better in my life. "Wait...acting strange, a random boat, a song I can't hear, and four girls..."

I wish whoever that is would be quiet so I could hear the full majesty of the women's melody. I star deeper into the Lavender's eyes. They're windows, clear and shining. And all I want to do is open them.

My arms are paddling automatically, trying to get as close as possible to her. Close enough to run my fingers through her soft, healthy hair. Close enough to feel her breath on my face. Close enough for our lips to meet, and never part again.

“Maddock, stop! Those are *Sirens!*”

Something small, most likely an insect, grabs my hair, and pulls. I wave it off, trying to focus completely on Lavender. The talking insect continues to scream and shout, but Lavender begins to sing louder, and the others soon follow. I can only catch bits and pieces of the bug’s yelling.

“...*plug your ears, you...a trap...want to eat you...typical sorcerer...never listens...drooling over cute girls...gotta snap you out...owe me for this...*”

It pulls on my hair again, even kicks me in the nose. I’m tempted to squish the thing, but I don’t want to take my eyes off of Lavender. The boat is so close to her now. She slides forward on the rock, not missing a beat, and reaches an arm out to me. I paddle faster, wanting so much to caress her.

I’m at least a foot away from her still, but she extends her arm out further, pokes my nose playfully, then strokes under my chin. I nearly fall out of the canoe at her touch. Her voice, soft as it is, grows as loud as it can as she leans in closer. Her eyes stare deep into mine, and a strange feeling comes over me. Maybe love. Maybe lust. But whatever it is, it makes me feel sort of dreamy. I could almost fall asleep.

I close my eyes slowly, awaiting what comes next. This is it. I can feel her breath on my face, like an ocean breeze. She runs a hand through my hair, while the other takes a firm grip on my jaw. She stops singing, but the other three continue.

Suddenly, my anticipated kiss is interrupted as the bug lands on my shoulder, yanks my hair again, and interrupts the music with its own voice.

“*Oh, you stupid sorcerer, I know you probably don’t get a lot of attention from the girls. But, hear my warning. These women, well, they frankly wanna eat your face off. So, let’s turn around and paddle up the stream before these Sirens start to get cranky.*”

Moth sure picked a great time to burst into song. I mean, really, I’m kind of in the middle of something. And since when can Moth *sing*?

Moth. The troll. The psycho knight. The *Mink!* *What am I doing?!* I need to be planning out how I’m going to get up a mountain, not smooching a Siren!

Wait...smooching a... “*Siren!*”

My eyes shoot open, and I see to my horror, not a beautiful woman leaning in for a kiss, but a still pretty beautiful woman leaning in with *sharp, pointy teeth!*

THWAK!

A dripping wet paddle, wrapped in weeds, makes contact with the Siren’s face.

“Why didn’t I think of that earlier?!” Moth shouts. She’s pretty violent for a fairy, I realize. Maybe I should try to avoid making her mad beyond all reason.

A hissing noise fills the air, and unfortunately, I don’t think it’s the river. I chance a look and instantly regret it. Lavender’s eyes, once blue and inviting, are now blood red. Her hair, that just a moment ago was soft and flowing, is now greasy and sort of resembles mine right when I wake up. And her skin has gone from flawless to *seaweed green!*

“Oh, that’s why,” Moth explains a little too late.

I notice, terrified now, the other three: red, orange, and teal, have undergone the very same transformation. We – or I guess *I*, considering I’m their man target – am totally outnumbered.

“Maddock,” Moth is leaning in and whispering in my ear. “If you want to live, I suggest you and I paddle this boat like our lives depend on it. Because they do. Unless you know a spell that can help? ...I’m taking your silence as a ‘no.’ Can you swim? ...Once again, assuming you can’t. And we’re back to paddling.”

They’re getting closer. Slowly crawling over the rocks.

“When these girls hit the water, they’re gonna be rockets,” she continues. “We paddle till our arms fall off, okay? And *don’t* look back. Alright, on three...one...two...*NOW!*”

A barrage of splashes goes off, some from the paddling, four from the Sirens. “I thought you said to go on three?”

“I panicked!”

“You’re not the one they want to eat!”

"No, but I'd be a very interesting toothpick!"

"Are they still chasing us?!"

"What do you *think*?!"

"Well, you said not to look back, so I don't know!"

"Yes, they are still chasing us, because we are *canoe-jacking their canoe*! I *told you* there was something suspicious about a *random boat* in the middle of nowhere!"

"For the last time, we're not in Nowhere anymore!"

"How do we get out of this?!"

"I was hoping you knew!"

"This whole thing was your idea!"

"I didn't account for Sirens! Or trolls! Or crazy knights!"

"Did you account for anything?"

"Just keep paddling, and try to think of something!"

"Turn left! IF we survive, we'll still be on track to your stupid Mink!"

For the first time, I do what she says without snapping at her, or arguing, or claiming that I was already going to do what she suggested. There are certain times to do those things. In the middle of a life and death canoe trip isn't one of them.

"They're gaining on us!" Moth shouts.

We keep paddling for what feels like hours. Every second that goes by, I'm surprised they haven't caught us. Judging by the amount of splashing behind us, Moth is right again, they're much faster in water.

"What are our chances of getting out of this?" I ask, finally verbalizing the question that's been nagging at me for I don't know how long.

"Well, let's think: You're a mediocre-at-best sorcerer, and I'm a Plant Fairy. Neither of those things are helpful in this situation."

"Can't you just wrap them in vines, or weeds, or something?!"

"That'll take too much time! Where was I? Oh yeah, we're against four Sirens who, for some reason, really want to eat you. That being said, I'll put this in a way you can understand: We have a better chance of a purple cow from Mars falling from the sky than we do of surviving this."

Wow. I did understand that. "Well, if this is the end, I have some things I need to get off my chest!"

"Me, too! You first!"

"Dark magic isn't actually as cool as I made it sound. You can't even flip pancakes with it! Or get them off your ceiling! Do you know how many moldy pancakes I have on my ceiling?! *A lot!*"

"I don't have any friends! None of the other fairies think I'm cool!"

"I've only had one steady girlfriend!"

"I have a giant crush on this Fire Fairy, but he's a real jerk, and he has a girlfriend, but I still stare at his butt!"

"I'm a twenty-eight year old *virgin!*"

"...Wow, awkward silence."

"Yeah, thanks for that. What, did you run out of life regrets or something? Wait, did you say 'silence?'"

Slowly we both turn around and look behind us, though, the speed of our rowing doesn't waver.

...They're leaving.

"So...did we win?" I ask, after a moment.

"Umm...yeah. Yeah, I think we did."

We stop paddling, stunned.

"Purple. Cow." Moth repeats.

"From Mars," I finish.

"We thought we were gonna die."

"But then we didn't."

We look at each other. Everything is peaceful.

...Then we go crazy.

"We're alive!"

"Take that, you stupid Sirens!"

"We are the fastest canoers ever!"

"...Wait..." Moth stops celebrating. "Why is the boat still moving? We stopped paddling."

I glance over my shoulder, still amazed that my face hasn't been eaten. "It's because of the current from that giant waterfall I just noticed...wait..."

"Paddle the other way!"

"How did we not see that?! We really can't get a break today!"

"The paddling isn't doing *anything!*"

"I told you, we're stuck in the current!"

Slowly but surely, we inch closer to the end of the world. We just survive the Sirens, and now we're going to drown! This river *stinks!*

We're nearly over the edge! The sound of rushing water fills my ears. I never thought it would end this way. I always thought I would accidentally kill myself by mixing a potion incorrectly, or getting some crazy spell wrong. Falling off a waterfall to my death never seemed like something I needed to worry about.

Until now, that is.

But we still keep paddling, hoping, praying that we can get out of *this* situation as well. The rushing water is so loud now that when Moth turns to say something, I don't hear a thing she says.

"*WHAT?*" I shout.

"I asked you how far down it is!"

Why do I have to be the one who has to stare down at death?

We're on the threshold of the fall now, and it seems as if the world is going in slow motion. I look over, still desperately paddling, but stop when I see the inevitable. This is no ordinary waterfall. And those Sirens were smart to turn back. Because over this fall, is an enormous, swirling, *purple vortex!*

"*Well?!*" Moth shouts.

But I can't even answer. The boat is slowly falling forward in a way that's almost mocking.

What's beyond that whirlpool?

The boat is halfway over now.

What will happen when we fall into it?

Three quarters. We're falling.

Everything happens in a flash. A womanly shriek is heard. It's not Moth's, but I'm too scared to be embarrassed. We plummet and fall out of the boat. Freefall seems like it's in slow motion. The rush of the river begins to grow quieter. Our screams are inaudible. The impact of the water hits my back, and I'm pulled into the current. I don't know where Moth is. All I can see is the strange purple water swirling in front of me. I'm dragged deeper and deeper underwater. The center of the whirlpool seems to be glowing somehow. Not like the Sirens' eyes, more like a small sun.

When I hit the center, I lose all my senses. I can't hear. I can't see. I can't feel the water. I picture myself at the bottom of the mountain, looking up, excited to finally get to the Silver Mink, and live the dream I've been longing for. A dream I will now never achieve.

Then, slowly, everything shifts into complete nothingness...

To be continued...

I nod, but continue to stare at his jacket. How in the world did he fit that dictionary of a book inside his pocket?

He picks up on my confusion. "What is it?"

I hesitate before questioning, "How did that book fit perfectly into your jacket pocket?"

He smirks and answers with, "Inter-dimensional storage in the pocket of my jacket."

My eyes grow wide. "Really?"

He holds out the side of his jacket. "Here. Reach your hand in and feel for yourself."

My eyes grow even wider if that's possible. "What?! My hand won't like, fall off or anything will it?"

Griffin chuckles and shakes his head. "Nah, it won't fall off."

And so, reluctantly, I reach into his jacket. It feels like a normal pocket to me – wait, what's that? My hand grasps around the object and I pull it out.

"A pen," I exclaim at said object in my hand.

"Yeah," he takes the pen from my hand and puts it back in his jacket. "I don't really have an inter-dimensional storage pocket. If I did I would never be able to find anything. But the look on your face was priceless! You know, you're kinda cute when you're clueless."

I whack him in the shoulder. "Way to make me look like a dumb fool!"

He laughs again. "I won't hold it against you. I was the same way with some of the gadgets in the human world."

I cross my arms over my chest. "So how'd you really do it then?"

"I can conjure up any of my belongings at any point in time," he explains.

"That's it?"

He nods his head and then points across the room. "Look at the vase on the end table over there." I do, when suddenly it vanishes. I turn back to Griffin and sure enough, in his hands is the vase.

"Whoa!" I stare at the vase in awe. "That's really neat!" He then proceeds to tuck it into his jacket just as he did with the book. "Why do you do that?" I ask.

"Do what?"

"Act like you're smuggling it from a store."

"Oh," he looks at his jacket like he only now just realized what he did. "Force of habit, I guess. When I'm in the human world I can't really show off my magic, so when I do use it I have to disguise it. And placing as well as removing things from my jacket looks pretty natural."

"Unless it's like a vase or something," I point out.

"Right. Well, normally I wouldn't be conjuring up vases." He runs his hand through his hair and gazes at me with a small smile.

I stare back at him for a minute before the awkward silence returns. Gesturing towards the door, I ask, "So are we gonna go or...?"

Griffin blinks once, processing what I said. "Oh, right! Yeah...let's...let's get going." He reaches for the door knob when suddenly he stops and exclaims, "Wait!"

I jump at his sudden outburst. "What?"

"I..." he hesitates. "Sorry."

Just as I am about to ask why he's apologizing, he pins me to the door and begins to rub himself against me.

The close contact sends shivers throughout my body and my mind freezes. When I finally grasp the situation, I shout, "What the heck are you doing?!"

He stops nuzzling his head against the side of mine and looks me in the eyes. "Rubbing my scent on you." He says this as if it's the most natural thing in the world. And maybe in his world it is, but where I come from you don't just go up and wipe yourself all over strangers!"

“Explain,” I demand, while he resumes his mission.

His breath is warm on my neck and it sends another wave of goosebumps. “Every living being gives off some sort of scent. And yours is, for lack of a better word...” he leans his head in and breathes deeply into my hair, “-*Intoxicating*.”

And there goes another wave, this time not just from pleasure. He is starting to seriously creep me out!

“In fact,” he continues, “It was one of the first things that attracted me to you. And I don’t doubt that it would do the same to other beings, so by rubbing off my scent it masks yours a little as well as informs the others that you have been claimed.”

“Oh, so it’s like a dominance sort of thing,” I state. “Like marking your territory.”

Griffin finishes “rubbing his scent on me” and backs up, adjusting his jacket. I step away from the door and smooth out my top as well.

“I suppose. But if you think about it this way, your scent is coming onto me, claiming me as your own also,” he notes.

“Maybe, but yours is more important than mine.”

He waves off the comment. “That’s only because mine’s more recognizable.”

I let out a long breath. “Well, that was...creepy. Couldn’t you have warned me before you went all physical?”

“No, you would have pushed me away if I warned you ahead of time. And, admit it, you liked it,” he teases with an evident smirk.

My face heats up and I rapidly shake my head. “N-no!” I stammer. “It was the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen you do!”

“That was?” he questions, raising an eyebrow. “You really haven’t been around me long enough, dear. I can top that easily.”

I only stare back at him in response.

He smiles before opening the door. “Shall we go then?”

>>>>>>>>>>

The walk to our destination is a scenic one. Well, scenic in a peculiar sort of way. The trees that surround our house stand at least four stories high and the leaves are a wide variety of different sizes, shapes, and colors. Apparently we live alone in a little forest.

The sky is a light shade of pink, making it appear as if it is sunrise. There are no clouds of any kind in the sky and from what I can tell, no sun either. The sky just seems to be illuminating itself.

“What time is it?” I ask Griffin, who is walking with his eyes closed alongside me. It’s a miracle he doesn’t trip over anything. This pathway is littered with twigs, rocks, and uneven dirt, yet he moves gracefully as if the path itself is telling him where exactly to put his feet.

He automatically replies without opening an eye. “Eight-thirty.”

“What? But the sky, it’s...”

“Pink?” He finishes. “That’s its natural color.”

I continue to stare up at the sky. “It’s so beautiful. Reminds me of the sunrises back home.”

With my eyes to the sky, I don’t look where I’m going and end up tripping over a tree root. I lose my balance and fall forward, covering myself in dirt.

Griffin bursts into laughter at my clumsiness and I glare back at him. He offers his hand to help me up and I take it. “There, there,” he soothes. “I know you were just doing some trust exercises with the ground. Don’t worry, it’ll always be there to catch you when you fall.”

“Gee, thanks,” I reply sarcastically. I look down at my white shirt, now smeared with dirt. Why is it whenever I wear white I somehow ruin it?

I begin to brush myself off, when I accidentally whack off one of the buttons that decorate my shirt. “Oh shoot!” I exclaim, crouching down to try to find it. “The one day I go out I’m a fashion disaster.”

After a quick search of the area, I find the button, but just as I’m about to stand up, something catches my eye. A small, oval-shaped pendant lies half-hidden under a dried up leaf.

I pick it up and stand, wiping some of the mud and grime off of it. “What’s this?” I ask, holding it out to Griffin.

He takes it and holds it up to the light. “Appears to be an amulet of some sort.” He then walks behind me and places the amulet around my neck. “There you go. It’s yours now.”

I touch the pendant. “But what if it’s cursed, or poisonous, or enables me to shoot lasers out of my eyes?”

Griffin shakes his head. “There you go with that imagination again. Look, we’ll clear this up right now. How do you feel?”

I take a moment to concentrate on my body, both inside and out, for any mysterious changes. Finding none I answer, “The same.”

“Has anything bad happened to you since you put it on?”

“No...” I mumble. “But I didn’t have it on for very long!”

“Misty,” he soothes, “you’ll be fine. Not everything is infested with some kind of dark magic.”

I look down, playing with my ring out of nervous habit. He notices and stares down at my finger as well.

We’re both quiet for a minute before he whispers softly, “Not everything is as deceiving as I am.” I don’t look up, but drop my hands to my sides. He begins to walk off again and I follow a step behind him.

After a few minutes have passed, Griffin stops in front of a tree with a swirling, multi-colored vortex as a trunk. I stare at it in fascination, but before long I have to look away because it hurts my eyes and soon after a headache follows. Despite that, I glance it again for a second before looking away once more.

“This is a portal, one of the various forms of transportation we have in Enethia,” Griffin explains.

“Enelthia?” I repeat, glancing at the portal again.

“Yep,” he confirms. “That’s the name of the world we’re in right now.”

“That’s pretty sounding. So what other forms of transportation are there?” I ask.

Griffin begins to list them off, raising a finger for each one he names. “Wormholes, brooms, flight, walking, of course, teleportation – I can actually teleport a little bit.”

“You can?”

He looks away sheepishly. “Yeah, but just me and only a few yards away. It’s useless really. Plus, my ears always pop after I do it, which I hate. So that’s why I never really teleport anywhere – and I’m rambling.” He stops talking and holds out his arm. “Let’s just go. Close your eyes when you walk through. It could blind you.”

I hold onto his arm and close my eyes. We step through and suddenly a wave of nausea washes over me. It feels as if I just went down a roller coaster.

“Okay, you can look now,” he announces.

My eyes open for a split second before I have to close them again. I lean against Griffin for support and he holds me up. I take deep breaths to calm myself and after a few minutes I’m okay.

This wasn’t my first time going through some sort of portal. I did it when I first came here, but the second time wasn’t any easier.

I open my eyes again to find Griffin peering down at me, a hint of concern in his eyes. “You good now?”

I nod my head. “Yes.”

“Great.” He takes my hand and we start walking down a brick pathway. “There’s this doctor I know who specializes in humans and their needs while in this world. We’ll stop by there first, then hit up the supermarket.”

I laugh at his wording and he gives me a confused look. “What?”

“The way you said it.” I lower my voice to mock his and recite, “We’ll stop by there first, then hit up the supermarket.” I go back to my own voice and explain, “It sounds like we are about to commit some heist and rob the store.”

Now it’s Griffin’s turn to laugh. “I was planning on paying for the stuff, but your way works, too.”

I shake my head and look around at the town. It, surprisingly, resembles a normal town. Several different shops and buildings line the streets and every couple of yards stands a black street light.

There are no cars or any other type of vehicle. Everybody just walks to their destination. Creatures of every kind stroll past, some resembling humans, some completely indescribable.

I glance from creature to creature making sure not to stare too long at anyone. They are, after all, people to some extent and staring is rude.

It’s unbelievable, actually. I feel like I’m walking through a fairy tale. Like those stories my mom would always tell me before bed, not knowing that they actually fueled my imagination and kept me up.

Nervous excitement starts to flow through my body as I take in the atmosphere. I begin to swing my arm that was holding Griffin’s hand and he gives me a curious look. I smile shyly at him in response. He was right. I did need to get out.

Truth be told, I never really traveled anywhere. If it was farther than an hour drive from my house I would not be going there. I had too many obligations at home and we never had enough money to take the whole family somewhere.

We continue to walk when an amazing smell fills my nose and I stop instantly. Due to my sudden halt and the fact that our hands are still intertwined, Griffin is yanked backwards.

“Whoa, what’s with the hold up? We’re already lagging behind. We don’t need *more* distractions,” he complains, but I’m not listening. I’m too focused on the little café across the street.

Griffin follows my gaze. “Ah, Mimzi’s Café. I haven’t been there in a while.”

“It smells delicious. And it looks so...inviting,” I state.

He nods his head in agreement. “That’s Mimzi’s for you. It’s run by this very bubbly woman. I think you’d like her.”

“Mimzi?” I guess.

“No, actually. Her name is Judy, but nice try. Now, if I promise to take you there later today will you please continue to walk without stopping *again?*”

“Okay,” I agree, walking alongside him once more.

“Great,” he mumbles. “Now, let’s get this over with.”

>>>>>>>>>

The waiting room’s cool air kisses my face as soon as we enter the doctor’s office. Why does it seem like no matter what country, or world for that matter, a waiting room will always be at least thirty degrees colder than it should be?

Griffin instructs me to find a chair while he checks in with the receptionist. I scan the room looking for an open seat, which isn’t hard because there’s only one other person in here – an elderly man with a white beard so long it drags on the ground.

I decide to sit on a loveseat near the wide window and looks out into town. The streets are still flooded with creatures of every kind and the shops give off a vintage feel.

I continue to peer out the window when Griffin returns with a clipboard in hand. He sits down next to me, completely blocking my view of the window. Since I can no longer study the town, I decide to study him instead.

His hair is still a spiky mess, yet it almost appears to be an organized type of chaos. And his ears...I've never noticed before, but they are actually pointed upwards slightly. As is his small nose. Next are his lips, which like most guys', are chapped and dry. After is his neck, which...looks like a neck. All necks look the same to me. Finally, I note his structure. He's not scrawny, but at the same time he's no body builder. I guess I'd just label his muscle as average.

Without warning, Griffin looks up and catches me staring at him. He smirks while asking, "Like what you see?"

I look down and twirl a strand of my hair. "Can't complain," I admit.

He gives me a genuine grin before going back to filling out the paperwork. "Hey, what's your middle name?" he voices after some time.

"Why do you need to know my middle name?"

"It asks for your full name," he answers, tapping the top of the paper with his pen.

"It's Lilly," I respond.

Griffin raises his head to look at me. "Lilly?" he repeats.

"Yeah, I know. I have a weird name. And it got even weirder now that I changed my last name, but still. It's mine, it's unique, and I like it."

"No, that's not why I was...never mind," he looks back at the paper and scribbles down my name.

I watch him for a minute longer before pointing out, "Shouldn't I be the one filling out the paperwork? It is my appointment after all."

"True, but it's kind of confusing if you aren't familiar with Enelthia. Plus, my contact info is required so you would need me to fill out most of it anyway."

I sit back and cross my arms while Griffin fills out the rest of the forms. After they're completed, he gets up and turns them in just as a woman with huge, red hair emerges from behind a side door.

She calls out, "Elmer Aldon?"

The elderly man stands up and shuffles over to the door. I keep staring at him out of the corner of my eye, expecting him to trip over his beard at any moment, but he does no such thing.

As he passes the desk, Griffin stops him. "Aldon. Good luck with the trip to Moscow. It's one beautiful city."

Elmer replies in a scratchy voice too quiet for me to pick up from where I'm sitting. Griffin smiles back at him. "Thanks, I will. Tell the family I said hello."

Elmer nods before disappearing behind the side door with the red-headed woman. Griffin returns to my side and I ask him about Elmer.

"Aldon's a great guy," he starts. "He has a great family, too. Sweet wife with three kids and I think...four or five grandchildren? I met him a while back and he helps me with some things for work. He also runs a furniture store somewhere on the east side of town."

I nod my head a couple times, soaking in all the information about Elmer Aldon. The only comment I offer, though, is "he has a really long beard."

Griffin chuckles, but agrees. "Yes, yes he does. But hey, what can you expect from a retired wizard?"

"Oh, so he's a wizard like you?" I question.

"No, I'm not a wizard," he denies.

"Then what are you?"

He glances to the side, thinking it over as if he really doesn't know what he is. "Let's just say I'm a magical humanoid," he finally concludes.

Magical humanoid. That's the most he's giving me?

"Wizard sounds better," I state.

He crosses his arms. "Well, I'm not a wizard."

"Are you sure," I push. "Because you do magic-y things like wizards do."

"I am not a wizard!" Griffin shouts. The receptionist looks up from her desk and he lowers his voice.

"Sorry," he apologizes to her before turning back to me. "We really need to teach you more about magic."

Just as I am about to respond, a voice calls out, "Misty Phoenix?"

We both turn our heads to the sound of the voice. It belongs to the red-headed woman holding open the side door.

My heart rate increases when I remember exactly where I am and why. I stand up and take two steps closer to the door, but turn back to Griffin when I notice he isn't following me.

"Aren't you coming with?" I ask.

"No," he bluntly answers.

I glance at the door and then back at Griffin. If he's not coming with, then I have no protection whatsoever and I'll be on my own and most likely very confused.

My imagination starts to run wild again as I think about all the different kinds of equipment and tests they do behind that door. I try to take another step towards the door, but my body won't move. I've scared myself too much.

"Did you want me to come with?" he offers after a minute of me standing motionless in the middle of the waiting room.

I instantly reply, "Yes!"

Griffin signs audibly, but stands up and takes my hand. "C'mon, dear. You'll be fine." He pulls me over to the door and we both enter before the red-headed woman closes it behind us.



Freak Show: Chapter 2 - by Melanie Andersen

After our initial encounter, I've been staying out later and later to try and catch just the faintest glimpse of Leon, to no avail. I would spend as long as possible at the Square, calling out to him and waving a piece of meat in the air in hopes that he would show. I've been doing this so often that even Mom started to notice, and it's been harder and harder to get her attention these days.

"Kian," she starts, waving me over to the couch. I just returned from my daily trip to the Square, and collapse, exhausted, into the cushion. Annette had found my bike earlier today, as it had been stolen, and once she gave it to me I started biking through the Square over and over again in circles until I almost passed out.

"Hmm?" I question, trying to steady my breathing. Mom pauses a moment before speaking.

"You know, it's been an awful long time since we've talked, and I mean really talked. Seeing you occasionally at meals isn't good enough; in fact, I don't think it really counts unless we get a good conversation going. And I know this is mostly my fault, because I'm always in my room working on my next article, but I was thinking I've really got to up my mothering game, she admits, shooting me a sad smile.

"Okay, so you wanna talk right now. I get it. So...the weather's nice," I say, but Mom puts up her hand.

"No, not just now. Tomorrow. I was thinking you and I could go to the beach. Summer's just begun, and what better way to kick it off than the beach?" she asks excitedly.

"Summer started two weeks ago," I reply, gazing up at the ceiling. I know if I meet my mom's eye she'll guilt me into going, so I think it's best not to look at her at all.

"Come on, Kian, it'll be fun. You love the beach," she argues, and I abandon my idea of staring at the ceiling so I can glare at her.

"How would you know? You haven't taken me there since Dad and Jason died."

The tone of my voice catches Mom by surprise, and she's taken aback for a moment before regaining her composure.

"You're right," she agrees, her voice gentle. "I wouldn't know. You've changed a lot these past three years and I've missed it. So, how about we go to the beach together to...to discover whether you still like it?"

My face softens, and I nod, despite the fact that it'll probably be weird with just me and my mom going. Jason was my best friend, and since he left I've been pretty lonely. I find myself drawn to crowds, but I never go inside them; I just watch and wonder what sorts of conversations and adventures are going on. It's much easier to be on the outside, looking in, and letting your imagination fill in the rest than it is to be in the thick of the drama.

Maybe that's why I want to see Leon again. But it certainly couldn't hurt to go on my own adventure for once.

"Sure, yeah. I'd like that."

* * *

Mom is frantic, like going to the beach is some sort of prime business opportunity and if we arrive there at precisely eleven o'clock with a certain amount of sunscreen applied and two extra bottles she'll get a promotion.

"Mom," I say when she rushes into the kitchen for the tenth time. "Calm down. What are you even so worked up for?"

"It's been awhile since I've left this town," she whispers. "A long while."

Our town of Reverie Woods is one of those small-community type deals; all of the main buildings, like the town hall, post office, and shops, surround the park, and that makes up the Village Square. Then there's the Mayor's house, which is atop a hill that's incredibly difficult to bike up, and the residents' houses are sort of scattered about, in no particular order. And sure, there's a church and some random shops that didn't quite make it into the Square, but that's about it, because the whole village is cut off from the rest of the world by thick woods, and the only way out of town is to drive through them on a road which everyone calls The Link because it's the only link Reverie Woods has to the outside world.

So, it's not very surprising that Mom hasn't left, as no one really does. But it's *really* not surprising because, you know, I live with her, and so does she really think I don't know that?

"I know," I reply, heading towards the front door. "I haven't left either."

Mom dismisses this comment with a flick of the wrist and holds open the door for me, so I exit and hop into our dirty car. It's a weird green color and the paint's chipping, but it was the best we could do after our old car got totaled in the accident that killed my dad and brother. Mom begged the police, the scrappers, everyone really, to keep the car, despite it being smashed, covered in blood, and unsafe to drive. But it got scrapped anyways, because by that point Mom was a bit hysterical and everyone thought she was crazy. They threw her a bone, however. Well, it was actually a tire, and she

keeps it under her bed so she can still sleep with Dad. I never cared to mention that would mean she's also sleeping with Jason.

Mom shoves a key into the car and twists it, and the engine chokes to life. We pull out of the driveway and pass some houses before the endless expanse of trees is right in front of us, and as we drive down The Link I gape at all of them. Although I pride myself on being something of an explorer, it's been a while since I've gone into the woods, because schoolwork usually keeps me busy until dinner, and by then it's almost too late to go out. But now it's summer, and the time is coming for me to rediscover these woods.

We continue down The Link for forty minutes before we emerge out of the trees and into the sunshine, officially entering the town of Maples. Maples is by no means highly populated, but it's certainly got more people than Reverie Woods. It's also got one of the nicest beaches I've ever seen, not that I've seen any besides this one and the ones in TV shows.

Ten minutes later we're parked near the beach and I am toting two beach chairs and some towels down to the sand while Mom follows behind with a cooler. The sun's shining in my face and I peer out into the sparkling water. The ripples are calling out to me, telling me that I need to jump into the waves *right now*, and that if I don't something will be missing, something I won't ever get back.

I drop everything and run.

The freezing water slows me down as I try to swim farther out into the lake, memories washing over me with every stroke I take. Jason loved to swim, so the second we stepped out of the car he'd always race down to the water no matter what my parents tried to do to stop him. And me being the younger child, I would follow behind him, and then we'd both be drenched by the time our parents caught up and ordered us out of the water.

But it was worth it because the first moment we'd hit the water, it was like the rest of the world had vanished and it was just me and my brother swimming together.

I turn around and see my mom in the distance, waiting just on the edge of the water. As I near shore again, I notice the wide smile on her face and shine in her eyes.

"Kian!" she scolds, but it's evident in her voice she's not upset at all. "What did I tell you about running to the water? At least put on your sunblock first."

"Sorry," I grin. "Where'd you put our stuff?"

"Over here," she answers, leading me to a relatively empty section of the beach. Our chairs are up and our towels are laid on them, and as I sit down on mine I peel my wet shirt off and toss it on the ground. Mom hands me the sunblock and I rub it on myself as I survey the people here.

Ever since Jason and I were young, we made it a point to pick out one person and befriend them, I guess as a way to make trips seem more like an adventure. As we got older, Jason's choice for Beach Friend only became girls, and he usually tried to abandon me once he found one. And though I've gotten quieter over the years, especially around females, I've got a passion for adventure and it's not going to be a proper trip to the beach without a new friend.

There's a group of girls a little older than me who are tanning out in the sun and laughing, a boy with glasses who is building a sand castle, and a short girl sitting at the water's edge with the waves lapping over her toes.

I opt for the water girl, so I wave goodbye to Mom and sit down next to her. She doesn't react much, just shoots me a quick glance and goes back to looking out at the water.

"Hey," I greet, to which she replies with hello. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, just watching the water. It's so beautiful."

"Yeah," I agree. "I'm Kian. I live in Reverie Woods."

"Kylie," she responds, flashing me a bright smile. Her green eyes widen as she processes the second half of my sentence. "Wait...Reveries Woods? You're from Reverie

Woods?” When I nod, she shakes her head, sending her blond curls flying. “That must stink.”

“Ah, no, it’s not bad. Sure, it’s a little small and cut off from the rest of the world, but the people there are really nice.”

“Even the vampires?”

Her question catches me off guard. “Vampires?”

“You know, the vampires that live in the woods. My friend was walking there one day with her brother, and they said they felt like someone was following them, so they turned around and saw a glowing pair of eyes hiding in a bush. Creepy, right?” she asks, and I can hardly believe what she’s saying.

“You mean to say your friend saw a vampire in the woods?”

“My friend *and* her brother,” Kylie corrects, and then tilts her head. “Have you seen them?”

Have I? What if Leon was a vampire? His teeth were sharp and he bit me...and his ears, maybe vampires just have ears like that. I mean, who says Hollywood got it right? Don’t bats have fuzzy ears like he did?

Despite my uncertainty, I answer no, and she shrugs. “You probably just weren’t deep enough into the woods. But I’d avoid going there whenever possible. My friend says it was out to kill.”

Out to kill, huh? I think, turning my head in the general direction of the woods. *Guess we’ll just have to find out.*

* * *

“You got pretty quiet after talking to that girl,” Mom observes after we’ve been driving for a good ten minutes. “Was she your Beach Friend?”

“Ah...” I am overcome with a sudden alertness as we enter the woods again. It’s pretty dark out, and since it appears to be just us on the road, it’s the perfect time for creatures – even, say, a vampire – to abandon their hiding places and lurk about in the cover of night. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“It’s great that you’re keeping up the traditions Jason set. It keeps him close,” she states, and then adds, “Though, you could stand to have a few male friends, too.”

“Beach Friends aren’t actual friends,” I answer, still gazing out the window. “But I’m fine on my own.”

“Honey,” Mom starts, and I know this is going to a bad place from the tone in her voice. “You may be fine on your own, but are you really happy? I didn’t want to say anything, because I certainly have no right to criticize you when I have some things I have to work on myself, but I really feel like you need to get out there more. You visit Annette at night, right? Why don’t you ask her to introduce you to some of her other friends?”

“No, Mom, I’m good,” I reply, staring intently into the bushes.

“Kian, I’m serious. It’s been long enough. Jason would want you to have another best friend.”

Mom’s statements rip my focus off the window, and I feel a thousand words twisting themselves around in my throat, causing me to feel like there’s a bulge that I’ll choke on if I try to speak.

“I can’t just ‘have another best friend.’ That’s not how it works, Mom. You can’t just replace people, no matter how long they’ve been gone,” I argue, almost unable to spit those words out.

“Of course you can’t replace people, and I’m not saying you need to. I’m just saying Jason would want you to meet new people, you know? He wouldn’t want you to be all alone.”

“And how would you know that? Did you ask him?”

“Kian!” Mom’s voice is so sharp she scares herself, so she takes a moment to collect herself before continuing. “You know your brother. He always wanted the best for you, and he still does.”

“You can’t speak for the dead,” I retort, turning away from her again.

“Don’t say that!” Mom cries, still weighed down by the word *dead*. Death tends to do that; it becomes something so inexplicably terrifying that it gains a more defined form in our minds, a persona if you will, and just like with a real person, it doesn’t appear unless you call its name.

But of course it still appears, and believing otherwise would just be stupid.

“I’m fourteen, not four. You can’t dictate what I say,” I warn, “and you *can’t* speak for the dead.”

A flash of skin appears for just a second, illuminated by the glow from the headlights. Leon turns his head quickly, his eyes wide with fright, and he bolts like lightning into the trees. The fear from almost being run over caused him to drop the dead rabbit he was holding, and Mom nearly runs it over, swerving out of the way just in time.

“Who was that?!” she exclaims, partially confused and partially frightened.

Before I know what I’m doing, I feel a lie slithering out of my throat like a snake.

“You know that girl I met on the beach? Well, her name’s Kylie, and her dad is actually a hunter. She was telling me about how he was off hunting with her little brother instead of spending time on the beach with her. That must’ve been her brother.”

“Wow, I wasn’t actually expecting you to know who that was.” Mom then shakes her head in disapproval. “I wonder where the father is, because I didn’t see him. And I know I shouldn’t be talking, but he doesn’t seem like a very good dad.”

“Ah, yes, he’s not. That’s why I was a little quiet after; I felt bad for her,” I say, and I’m shocked at how easy it was for me to lie to the only person I’m still relatively close to. But the guilt I feel is quickly replaced with excitement at having seen Leon, because not only do I know he’s alive but he’s been catching food in the woods, and probably lives somewhere inside. The only thing keeping me from finding him is time, and the next day, as I’m more than a half-hour down The Link, I spot the rabbit Leon dropped, step off the road and into the dirt.

I figured waiting to enter the mass of trees until I found the rabbit would be a smart idea, considering that’s where Mom and I saw him when we were coming from Maples, and it proves to be one, because I actually spot imprints from Leon’s boots in the dirt and decide to follow them.

Leon must’ve been really desperate to get away from the road, because he left a trail of crushed branches and there’s even a spot where it looks like he fell from tripping on a rock he didn’t bother to weave around.

It’s kind of funny how he let me take him to my house and feed him, but when I’m with my mom all of a sudden he has to keep running for miles without stopping. I mean, sure, we *were* in a car and we *did* almost run him over, so that’s probably a normal response, but after fifteen minutes of following his tracks, which still haven’t gotten any neater, I realize there must be something else.

Now that I’m deeper into the woods, it’s no longer some pleasant area suitable for trail-walking. It’s almost become a beast itself, with so many thick trees and hills and dead branches that seem to be reaching out and trying to snatch me at every opportunity. Anyone with a brain would know to turn back now, as I can scarcely move without cutting myself, but I’ve never been the smartest of guys. I keep pressing forward. The woods seem endless. My breathing becomes strained, and as I spot a stream in the distance, I decide to take a break.

I hop over a fallen tree, but when I look up the sight causes me to stop in my tracks. There is a young girl, with what appears to be eagle wings stitched on her back,

washing her face in the clear water. She's humming quietly to herself, and I silently watch for a couple minutes before she abruptly stands up, almost toppling over. Her legs are thin as twigs, and I'm afraid that if she moves too fast, they'll snap.

The girl leaps over the thin stream and briskly starts picking her way through the brush, and so I follow her for what seems like hours until eventually she pauses before a large boulder. Kneeling down, she pushes the rock out of the way and crawls underground, disappearing from my sight.

After she's been gone for a bit, I approach it myself and carefully nudge it out of the way. Peering down into the tunnel, I can't see much of anything, but I take that as an all-clear and against all common sense, I decide to slip into the darkness.

It's bigger down here than I expected, and as I get further into the tunnel, the ceilings become higher and soon I'm able to stand. The tunnel seems to be made of two rooms; one is more of a living room and kitchen area, with two logs on either wall covered by animal furs, and a pot sitting above an unlit fire pit in the middle. I spot the faint glow of a lantern in the next room, and before I can process what's happening, I'm walking towards it, not slinking along the walls or conversing with the shadows, not even stopping until I'm right in front of it. It's resting atop a short table, and the light from it illuminates the rest of the room. There are piles of animal furs on the floor, probably functioning as some sort of mattress, and a proper, wooden bed with a quilt lazily thrown upon it. Curious, I step closer to better inspect it.

Bad move.

With my back turned from the rest of the tunnel, a being wraps one arm around my neck while the other covers my mouth, and I feel a tight grip latch around my ankles. My heart rate skyrockets and I try to scam, but my shouts are forced back down my throat. I claw at the arm around my neck, trying to break free, but all that does is cause it to become tighter. And just when I think I'm going to pass out due to lack of oxygen, my mouth and neck are released, but the creature with my foot pulls it out from under me.

My head hits the table, and everything is black.

* * *

Rosalie, the Triplets, and Skylar emerge from the shadows as I crawl out from under the bed.

"What should I do with him?" Tyson asks, hoisting the victim's body up. Rosalie gestures to the bed, so Tyson tosses him onto it as if he was a sack of potatoes.

I gaze down at his face, and my eyes widen.

"Kian!" I shout, in disbelief. "I should have known. His shoes look familiar, I thought, but then again, I supposed that maybe a lot of people wear those shoes, and then what if it wasn't Kian?"

"This is Kian?" Tyson questions, eyeing him up and down.

"Yes," I reply.

"We should've just dumped him out in the woods."

Tomorrow Will Be Different – by Umer Khan

Part 1

It was a really hot day in Alaska. Now, you might be wondering how that is possible. Well, it is possible. Especially under my circumstances. It really wasn't this hot before the hit. The hit happened about 7 months ago. A comet was coming towards Earth pretty fast. It was about two times the size of Earth. Before it came near Earth it got pulled into Mars' gravity field and got slingshot out of our path. The danger was gone for now. We didn't realize that it hit the sun. The comet when smack dab into the core of the sun. An article dating back to the year 2016 reported,

"Nothing can destroy the Sun. It is all powerful and can destroy anything that decides to come near it."

I have to agree with none of that. Obviously the sun can be destroyed with high tech super lasers. If you have been following the story so far, you know that the comet has passed the border of the sun without disintegrating. The asteroid hasn't done much to affect us all, but scientists have found that the sun is getting larger. I suggest that it is something that has happened before and that we just didn't pay attention to it.

"Ben!" My wife screamed. It wasn't pleasant when she screamed. It was like a bunch of air horns going off all at once next to your ears.

"Git in here quick, otherwise ye'll be an uncooked piece of haggis."

I always wondered why I married a maniac. I went inside my private house built in the forest. I was greeted by my 12-year-old daughter who gave me a hug.

"How was work today, daddy?"

"It's getting to the point where we can finally make the frame of the Falcon II."

"Woah! That's radical. Dad, can you take me to work tomorrow?"

I laughed, "Tomorrow is a Sunday. Nobody works tomorrow. Besides, didn't I take you last year?"

"Yeah, dad, but I want to go to Texas. That's where the real NASA is, right?"

Now, a few years back when I did work for NASA in Texas, I was the owner's assistant. Everyone knows that a good assistant needs their own assistant. Abby, my wife, was my assistant before she went insane. She really wasn't my assistant as she was my secretary. One day she walked in with Morgan Cruise Jr., the President of NASA. At that moment I realized how much time she was spending with him. I thought that she was having a secret affair with him. I rolled up my sleeves to my biceps. My arm was in the swinging position.

"What the heck are you doing," Cruise said.

I let all my frustration out on him in one swing. When I saw what I had done, I almost passed out. Cruise had two black eyes, a broken neck, and his jaw looked as if I had taken his head and rammed it into the wall continuously. An ordinary human couldn't do this, but I bench at least 300 lbs. every day.

"Oh, crap! Why did you do that?" Abby asked, petrified while she covered her mouth.

"I have my reasons, you have yours," I said angrily.

"Why don't you just change your last name to Cruise?"

"I don't understand," Abby said, confused.

The sirens of the police cars and ambulances wailed and I stood firm to take responsibility for what had happened.

"What happened?" the Sheriff asked.

"I'm sorry for what I did, but what I did has been done," I told him while he put the handcuffs on me.

"Dawg, you are screwed. You broke his jaw in several places. You also detached his nose from his skull," another cop said while driving me to court.

I went to court and the judge gave me 10 years in prison to control my anger issues. When I was released I was allowed to go back to Houston's NASA, but I didn't want people staring at me like my head's missing. After that whole shenanigan, I found out about a secret NASA facility in Alaska where they had a top secret going on and they wanted to hire me.

Abby went insane after a year of my existence not existing in the house. She was taken to a mental facility where people took care of her until I got back. She was always jittery like she had couple of caffeine pills when I left.

"So, daddy, can we go?" Christina asked as she snapped me out of my flashback.

“Sorry, sweetheart. How about some other time?” By that I meant when Morgan was dead.

“Ok, daddy. If you say so,” Christina said sadly.

Some parents can’t handle sad kids. I can’t handle spoiled kids.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! My alarm clock! I’m late! Crap! This is the first time I’ve been late for my job. I quickly got dressed and kissed Abby as I went to my 70’s Shelby. It isn’t the best car, but it’ll do. I got into my car and drove off at 90mph.

“Good morning, Mr. Khan. Sorry I’m late. I-” Mr. Khan cut me off.

“Ben Tinley. You’re fired.”

“Whaaaaa. I’m sorry, boss, I promise I won’t do it again.”

Mr. Khan burst out laughing, “You fell for it, man. I can’t believe you fell for it. LOL.”

I was so confused I didn’t know how to react. “Uh. Does this mean I’m not fired?”

“Of course, bro. I’m not going to fire my number 1 worker just because he is 1 hour late.”

“Oh, good. That’s a relief.”

We walked into the lab where we were building the space shuttle. We made it to bump the comet out of the sun and stop the growth spurts of the sun or die trying. It’ll eventually be hot enough to incinerate everybody and everything on Earth. The journey to the asteroid belt and back will take about 18 months. Mr. Khan had an idea that would’ve killed us like the dinosaurs. Mr. Khan, Abby, and I are going to save the world.

The construction of the space shuttle is going fantastic. We made the ship a life-sized replica of the infamous Millennium Falcon. We built it because we have a lot of money, it was easy to make, and sometimes we have to let our inner dork side out. (Cough, pun intended, cough.) We love the strength of the ship. It can pull 15,000,000 tons like I bench 5 lbs. Our Falcon has a little dark feature. It has a superlaser that can blow up planets or asteroids, if we need it to. We have cables that are the width of the Burj Khalifa which is the 5th tallest building in the world. If you are reading this in the past and the Burj Khalifa is still the world’s tallest building, somebody like my employee might’ve took the DeLorean out for a spin. Somebody like Nick Brody. If he does it is fine. Usually, he’ll make me angry, anger leads to hate and hate is the path the dark side.

Mr. Khan comes up with a bottle of Mountain Dew and asks, “Why does it take so long?”

I could see his hands jittering from the caffeine rush that had overtaken him.

“First of all, I think it is because of all the Mountain Dew you’ve been drinking. Second of all, it’ll take another year to compete the whole Falcon. Third of all, patience, my young padawan,” I said, taking Mr. Khan’s pop away.

“Ben, how’d you like a vacation?” Mr. Khan said.

I responded, “A...A vacation! That would be wonderful. I’ll start pack-” Mr. Khan cut me off.

“Well, too bad. You’re not getting one until we get back from saving the world.”

“About that. I’ve been thinking.”

“Congratulations, Tinsley! You’re finally thinking! What will happen next?”

“Mr. Khan, why did you put Abby on this mission? You know she is mentally unstable.”

“Exactly. This mission is all about technological advances! We have found a way to cure Abby. We can cure diseases that were once thought impossible to cure. Like the Tinsley disease. We have to leave the patient with a little bit of the disease, though. Otherwise, it’d be like taking the kidneys out and never replacing them. And also because the government requires at least 1 female on each mission. Since we’re going to work together on this, you can call me Umer.”

“Ok, Umer. So, who’s going to take care of Christina while we’re gone?”

“Who other than your old best friend Bill? I told Gates what he has to do. He’ll pick her up on the day we leave.”

“And are you sure that Abby won’t be harmed in any way?”

“Affirmative.”

The next day I brought Abby to the lab. As we were walking she was talking nonsense about haggis. And bagpipes. *What was her deal with Scottish culture?* I wondered. Her family is from Germany. Abby had a disease that doctors couldn’t identify, so they called it the Tinsley disease. They told me it was caused by a huge amount of adrenaline rushing to the brain, which damages the hippocampus. 7 years ago it was incurable. Today it is. As we were walking, Abby saw one of the emergency grenades (for robbers, if they break in and try to kill us) and thought it was an

apple. She tried to bite it and removed the pin in the process. I took it away from her and tried to protect the others by crouching on top of it. I was too late. It exploded in my hand and the ground rushed to my face.

I woke up in a hospital bed.

“Waz goin’ on?” I asked quizzically.

“Mr. Tinsley! Good! You’re finally awake. Just relax for a while so you don’t pass out,” the nurse said.

I raised my right hand and noticed something that wasn’t there before. An arm made of metal had replaced the flesh and bone one I’d had before.

“What the heck is this thing?”

“It’s the 526-B-Omni robotic hand. It’s the latest model. Your hand blew up while you were trying to protect your wife,” said a familiar voice from behind the curtains.

So many questions raced through my mind. “Who the heck are you? How’s Abby? Where am I? And, how do I get out of here?” I said, panicking.

“Nurse, can you kindly please move the curtain between us?”

The nurse moved the curtain and there lay Umer with a clump in his left arm.

“What happened to you? What happened at the lab?”

“When Abby grabbed the grenade, I was working at the next table over. I saw what was happening and ran as fast as I could to you and got Abby under a table. I came back and tried to help you disable the grenade, but it went off and I got bits of shrapnel in my arm. Now this cube thing is keeping the shrapnel from reaching my heart. Just like Iron Man! Abby has been taken to a facility where they have finished the surgery,” he paused for a second. “I guess you are part Skywalker. They all lose their right arms,” he said, grinning.

“I guess I am. Hey, Umer, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Ask away.”

“First, are you married?”

“I am not married. I am single and I plan on staying that way forever.”

“Why are you helping me and Abby?”

“I am simply testing my tech on her. Besides, what are friends for?” he said, and took a sip of Mountain Dew.

“Third, and lastly, why are you addicted to Mountain Dew?”

“It’s because I can’t drink cola or alcohol. I can’t drink alcohol because of my religion. Also, it’s bad for you. I don’t drink cola because it wears down bones because of the calcium carbonate. Besides, Mountain Dew gives me the caffeine I need for the day.”

“Fair enough.”

“Do you think you feel good, hon?” the nurse asked.

“I think so.”

“You’ll be discharged in about half an hour along with Mr. Khan.”

In that half hour I ate some smoked salmon with caviar and dill sauce. It was an amazing meal.

“Let’s go check on Abby,” I said. I stood up and started for the door. “Uh, I have no idea where I’m going, do I?”

“Yup. Give me a second.”

After 10 minutes we were in Umer’s air-powered Lamborghini. I always wondered what being in a Lamborghini would feel like. In 30 minutes we were parking in the lot at NASA, Alaska. In my parking space a brand new Bugatti had replaced my old Shelby.

“This is a present I am giving you, because you helped save a lot of my employees. We’ll talk about it later. For now, let’s see how Abby is doing.”

Part 2

When we got to Abby, she was still out from the surgery. Umer told me, “They gave her a couple of sleeping pills dissolved in Sprite with a nano chip. The nano chip is programmed to fly up her nose duct once she passes out. It’s basically like a drone, but 10,000 times smaller. It attaches to her hippocampus and this control blinks red when it does. Then the scientist presses this button and it takes out the disease, but leaves the ADHD part. Once she wakes up the chip will fall out and she’ll poop it out.”

“Dude, that’s ingenious.”

"Have you ever seen a drone that can cure people?"

"Hey, guys," Abby said groggily. "What's going on?"

"Good, Abby! You're finally awake. Lay back down, you might have a concussion," Umer said. "We'll explain everything."

"Oh, God! What happened to your arm, Ben? Yours, too, Umer!" Abby exclaimed.

"As I said, we'll explain everything," Umer said.

While Umer was explaining everything, I spaced out and thought about the YouTube video, *How Animals Eat Their Food*.

"Yo, Ben! You might want to listen to this part," Umer said. "So, I told Ben that if we took out the entire illness, it would more or less kill you. We found another way, which includes flushing the entire disease out and replacing it with ADHD instead."

His ideas were ingenious. He makes science awesome. He's just like John Hammond before he passed away.

"That's pretty cool, but when can I get out of here?" Abby asked.

"You can get up now. Get up slowly. You'll be a little disoriented at first, but after 10-11 steps, you'll walk perfectly fine...I'll be back in about 10 minutes after checking with the nurse about how your care was," Umer said, and left the room.

I grabbed Abby's hand and helped her off the bed.

"So, what happened when I had the disease?" Abby asked.

"First, you couldn't talk properly, and when you could, all you talked about was haggis and bagpipes. You couldn't drive, you couldn't be near others without Zelda."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. There's a Zelda poster behind you. You know how much I love Zelda."

"Now that you mention it, I do remember posters like that at home."

"That's basically what happened. One more thing. Every 5ish years you would develop a brain tumor that could've killed you."

"It's like I start singing that Kelly Clarkson song," Abby said.

I helped Abby walk a few steps after which she could walk perfectly again. Umer came into the room.

"Ah, this is wonderful progress. I see that you are walking. I came to see if you are well enough to come to training."

At that moment the alarms started beeping. Not like that wussy alarm clock beep. I'm talking about the full ear-piercing screech.

"Abby, Ben, follow me," Umer said.

We walked downstairs to Mission Control, Alaska. Umer tapped a few keys on the glass and the door opened. (We are huge geeks here. We made it to look like Tony Stark's glass door.) We walked in and all the computer screens said [ERROR: 695] except for one. We walked over there and the computer said, "Click ENTER to stop alarms and see what is happening."

"Press the button, already," I said, impatiently.

Umer clicked it and instantly the alarms stopped. All the computer screens went back to normal and we saw something that even amazed me.

"What is that thing sticking out of the Sun?" I asked.

The dude who was working on the computer told me it was a solar flare.

"It might harm us if it gets here. It'll cause power outages and make people go apocalyptic. It'll be here in about 5 months.

Another man working the ISS said, "Sir, the sun is getting bigger. It has already engulfed Mercury. It is coming for Venus and then us."

"We need to get to the Falcon and leave Earth by tomorrow morning," Umer said.

"How can we? The Falcon II isn't even read," I said.

"Ben. I've built about 5 Falcons. They were all just in case something happened to one. Also, Christina will be picked up by Bill in about 12 hours. Go home and spend time with her. And one more thing. What is your favorite form of entertainment?"

"I love puzzles."

"Perfect. And what does Abby like?"

"She likes to draw and sketch."

"Got it. See ya at 6 in the morning."

As Abby and I walked outside, I was reminded of my 3.8 million dollar gift. I gestured to the Bugatti, "Umer gave this to me as a thank-you for saving everybody's lives otherwise we would have died gift!"

"That's rad!" Abby exclaimed.

We went home and had our "last" family dinner for the next 1-2 years.

"Christy," I began, "you know how your mother and I have to save the world and everything, right?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, it turns out that the Earth is going to be dead soon if we don't stop the sun. We have to leave tomorrow. My good friend Mr. Gates is going to pick you up in about 2 hours. Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns?"

"That's so cool. My parents are saving the Earth while I watch it happen. You da bomb."

"Is there anywhere you guys want to go as a family?" Abby said.

"May we go to get ice cream?" Christina asked?

"Obviously, the answer is no. J/K. Let's go!"

We went to Coldstone and ate our favorite flavors. Bill came exactly when we finished eating.

"What up, homies? How y'all doing?"

"S'up, Bill? Long time no see. This is Christina. I hope she won't be any big trouble for you."

"Nah. I have three kids at home. She won't be any problem."

"Thanks again for helping us," I said to Bill.

"Christina, you have to be a good girl at Mr. Gates' house. If anything does go apocalyptic, you have to avoid giant crowds."

"I understand, daddy." She was covered in tears that I wiped away.

"Come on, Christina. We're running a bit late on time here."

"Goodbye, Christy."

There she went. Our little Christy left.

Part 3

We woke up at 5am in the morning. Abby went to take a shower. I went to wake Christina up and forgot about last night. My life must've been the hardest life to live in. I packed up everything we needed for the mission and left with Abby for NASA.

"What up, Dawg?" Umer greeted me as I entered.

"Ready for the mission?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Nick Brody will be in charge of this position while I'm gone," he said.

We sat down in the Falcon and prepared for lift-off.

"Good morning, folks, I'm Nick Brody, and I'll be your pilot from Earth today. Launch will be in 1 minute from now. You'll feel some major Gs, so it is ok to pass out. 10....9....8....7....6....5....4....3...2...1. Lift-off."

My body felt like it had been squashed and compressed. The things around me became darker and darker until nothing was left.

I woke up and noticed that Abby and Umer were out of their seats. I went to the back and found them watching *Jurassic Park*.

"Finally! You're awake. Wanna watch *Jurassic Park*? We just started," Umer said.

"Sure. Where'd you even get this movie?"

"It was my choice of entertainment. You asked for puzzles, and Abby wanted to draw. If you want to check your puzzles, they are under that tile."

I went to the tile and found a bunch of Rubik's cubes.

"There are exactly 498 cubes."

"That's rad!"

I spent about 3 months trying to figure a 3x3 out. It was fun. On our 5th month we were on top of Mars. On our 6th month I could solve half the cubes we'd brought. On our 8th month we arrived at the asteroid belt.

I could feel the adrenaline rushing through my body. It was cool. We saw an asteroid that was about 20 times the size of Earth. Umer and I went outside and "swam" our way to opposite ends of the asteroid. We hooked the cable there and went back to the ship. When we got back we were drenched in sweat. We told Nick that we got the asteroid and to code the Falcon to go to the sun. The Falcon was built to be resistant to heat above 3.5 billion degrees Celsius. We arrived at the sun faster than we thought we would. The sun had grown so large that it had devoured Venus, too!

"Dude, we have to pilot this by hand. It'll be the only way," Umer said.

"The asteroid behind us is coming at hurling speed of 16,000,000 KPH. Can't we go a bit closer and psyche it out and hurl it at the comet? According to my calculations, that will reduce the chances of it getting stuck in the bumpy core."

"We could give it a try."

We went as fast as we could and went down while releasing the cables at the same time. We saw the asteroid going slowly into the core and coming out the other end with a flaming ball of ice. We cheered and celebrated. The sun shrunk before our eyes and we were on our way home.

Epilogue

Christina entered her house for the first time in 1 ½ years.

"Wow, this place is really dusty," Ben and Abby said in unison.

"How about we get some ice cream with Umer and Bill?" Ben suggested.

"Let's go."



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Please join us at our next meeting!

Call the Info Desk for details (847-669-5386, and press 4)

Teen Zine is a publication of the Huntley Area Public Library's teen writers' club and includes members' work as well as submissions from area teens in grades 6 – 12. If you would like to submit your writing or artwork for review and possible inclusion in a future issue of the zine, please fill out a submission form (available at the library's Information Desk), or use our online submission form: <http://ya.huntleylibrary.info/tzonlineform>.