

teen zine

winter 2016/2017

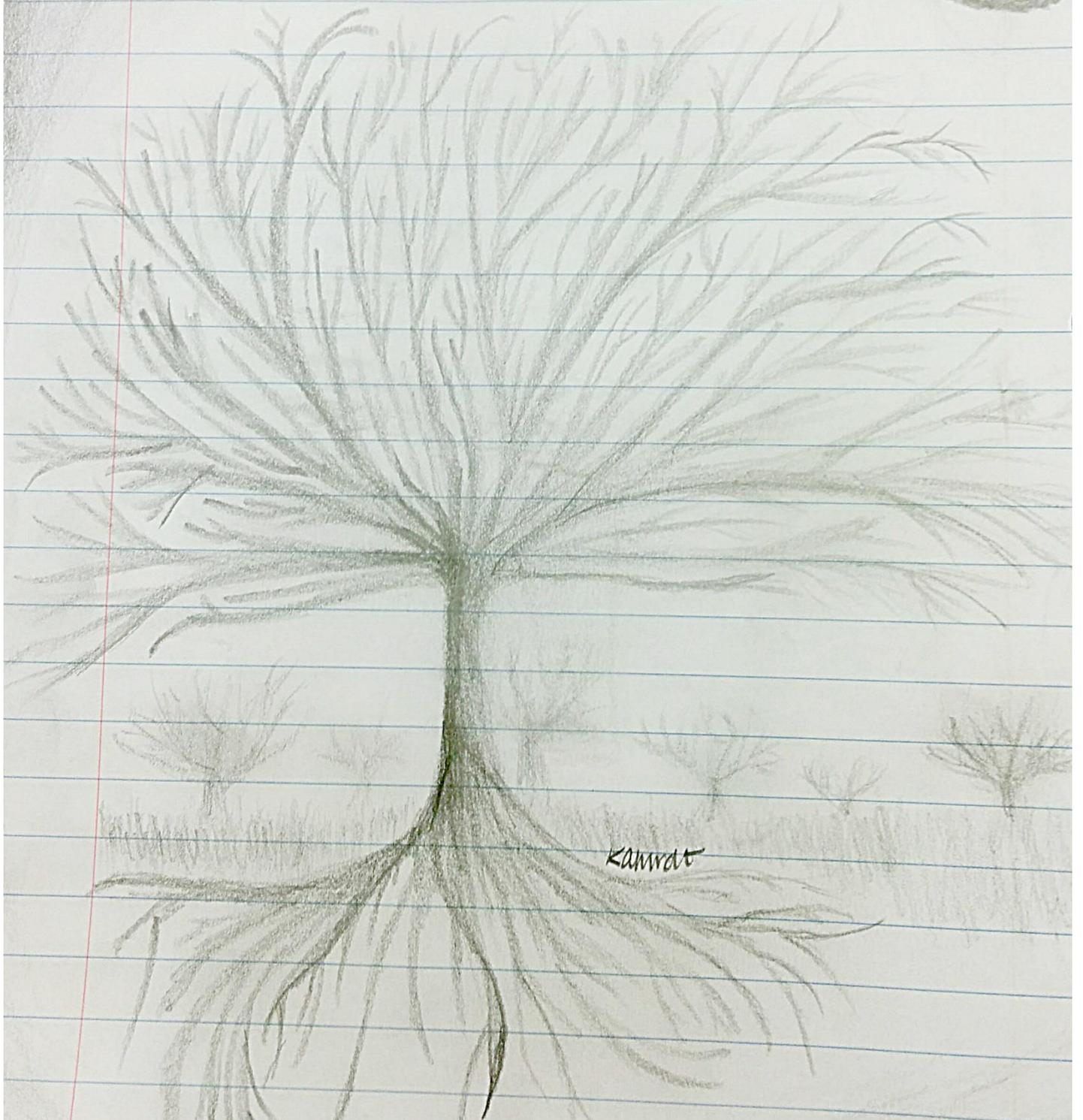


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Freak Show: Chapter 4 – by Melanie Andersen

They didn't touch the gift for three days. I know because I frequently checked back – I even spent a day carving symbols on the trees in the woods to lead me the right way so my trips would be a bit faster. After I noticed the book and pamphlet were gone, I decided to leave a pile of berries I found with a note that stated I didn't know if they were poisonous or not and that perhaps they should use the book to tell.

Those were gone the next day. And so I kept leaving little presents for them, like more berries, or some matches, when I realized I probably wasn't being as helpful as I thought I was. In fact, it probably seemed pathetic to them; a strange boy finds you living on your own, and what does he do? He leaves you unclean piles of berries that might be poisonous, piles of berries that will most likely get eaten by an animal before you can even reach them. What a hero.

So, that's why I'm anxiously sitting in a small room in the Reverie Times with an orange flyer clenched tightly between my fingers. I feel sweat collecting in my brow and swipe it away quickly when a stout, chubby man wearing a full-fledged mail-carrier uniform takes a seat across from me. His brown mustache is a shade darker than the rest of his hair, and because I'm so nervous, I decide to stare at that rather than his eyes, hoping that it still looks like I'm maintaining eye contact.

"I'm Don," he greets, reaching his hand out for me to grab. I release the flyer from my tight grip, wipe my sweaty hand off on my shorts and loosely shake it. He then gestures toward the brightly colored piece of paper in my lap and I pick it up and slide it over towards him.

"You have a job open as a newspaper boy?" I ask, and he nods.

"Yup. Summer's a good time to find kids willing to work," he answers, peering down at the flyer as if he's never seen it before. He picks it up and inspects it closer. "I do believe it says on here, though, that you have to be at least thirteen."

"I'm fourteen," I state, trying my hardest not to feel insulted.

"You are?" Don laughs heartily. "My bad. What's your name, kid?"

"Kian."

"Well, Kian, what makes you want to get a job here?" he questions. "Not many kids choose newspaper-delivery for their summer job. You have to wake up even earlier than you do for school."

"I know," I answer. "I'm prepared. I'm excited, even."

"Excited for waking up early?"

"Yes, sir. I'm a morning person," I lie to his mustache. "My mom works here, too. She writes articles from home, so she tells me how great it is to work for the newspaper, and I want to be a part of it."

"Sounds like you're the perfect kid for the job, then!" Don declares, and I grin. "It's pretty straight-forward. You get here at four. You pick up the papers, probably around one-fifty of 'em, and you deliver them to the right houses by six. Then you come here, I hand you twenty bucks, and you're on your way."

"And this is...every day?" I ask, pondering if this really was the best choice.

"Of course!" he scoffs. "Is that not the best part, knowing you're doing something good for the town every day?"

"It definitely is the best part!" I lie again. And then, for good measure, I throw in, "I really love this town, you know?"

And that, that was what completely won him over.

"I know, buddy, I know!" he gushes. "I swear, this town is one of the greatest places on earth. A real hidden gem. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

"Me, too," I reply. Though I'm not nearly as ecstatic about our strange little town as Don apparently is, I guess it's true; I really *couldn't* imagine living anywhere else, either, especially after what's happened. Had I been anywhere but right where I

am, I would never have met Leon. And if I can't watch out for him and the others, even from a distance, then who else will?

But I quickly find out that being someone's lookout is a lot less glamorous than it sounds, especially if it involves needing to wake up at three a.m. for a new job where you have *no* clue what you are getting into. Because, despite what you might see on TV where mischievous, though relatively happy-go-lucky children cheerfully toss papers onto people's lawns in the morning, delivering newspapers *sucks*.

Every morning at precisely four I get to the Times, say hello to the other paper boys, shove fifty newspapers in my bike basket and backpack and start delivering. Since I have one hundred and fifty papers to deliver, I stop back at the office a few times, and a barely have them all delivered by six. By then I'm worn out and ready to sleep the day away, but I can't. I've landed myself a few jobs mowing lawns and watering plants, and once I'm done with that, I trek over to the woods with a loaf of bread or a few bottles of water and leave it for the kids.

A few good things are coming out of my newspaper job, however. The first is that Mom is very excited that we're working for the same boss. I personally find it kind of weird, but she's happy because it gives us something to talk about and bond over. Even though discussing the newspaper gets really old really quick, to her it's just one more connection she's trying to make with me, and I can't complain since she's stopped obsessively candle-making.

The second is that I've made a friend in one of the other newspaper boys, Wendell. He and I are the same age and we used to have some classes together when school was in session, but for some reason we've never really talked. Every morning as we're shoving papers in our baskets, he tells me short stories about the people his parents meet at their pharmacy. With a laugh, he relays to me tales about men and women of all ages walking into the pharmacy with rashes and bumps and discolored skin, of children puking on their floor, of a lady entering with her poodle and asking if it's okay to give Advil to dogs. And the fact that I've made a friend I can actually introduce to Mom, a male friend, just makes her even happier.

After a week of working at the newspaper and taking up random jobs, I had made almost two hundred dollars, so I left a note to the children asking how many of them there were along with a pen and a pad of paper and had received a short, incredibly sloppy message in response: Forget it.

And now as I lie in bed, completely awake, I can't help but ponder what I'm going to do next. The kids are making it incredibly difficult to be kind to them. I know that's the point, to prove that they don't need me, but I just want to help them.

I flip over and sigh loudly into my pillow, my face forming an imprint in the soft cushion. My thoughts drift and I start to be lured into arms of sleep when I hear a loud thud on my window. I shoot upright and snap my head in the direction of the window, where I see a murky black figure through my drawn curtains. My heart rate skyrockets until I notice something on the top of the figure's head. Cat ears.

"Leon!" I hiss, ripping the curtains aside and throwing open the window. "You scared me half to death!"

"Oops," he shrugs, flashing me a half-smile, before it quickly disappears again. "You have to come with me, right now. Actually, you might wanna bring some bandages."

"Why? Did something happen?"

"I'll explain on the way! It takes a while to get there. I'll be waiting by your back door," Leon states, ducking away into the shadows.

I rush out of the room as thoughts flood my mind. What if someone got hurt? Would they even accept my help? It's fairly difficult to accept anything from me, but I've got try. I snatch the gauze out from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and quickly race to the back door, but not before taking some Neosporin, too, just in case.

"Do you really want me to come with?" I ask, handing the items over to Leon after unlocking the door. "I want to, but I don't think the others really like me that much."

"Oh, you're right," Leon ponders this for a moment, then suggests, "You had better grab some more things so I can pretend I just couldn't carry it all."

I nod and head straight for the pantry, where I grab some peanut butter, a box of Cheerios, and a box of granola bars, and then dash straight back outside. Leon eyes all of the food in my arms with a look of both hunger and curiosity, but he quickly shakes it off and instead instructs, "Follow me."

We both take off for the woods as fast as we can, and with Leon as my guide, we reach the boulder in no more than fifteen minutes. It's already pushed aside, most likely due to his hasty exit, and we quickly scuttle down the tunnel without saying anything.

The sound of us racing downstairs causes the rest of the children to disperse, revealing the dangerously thin girl with wings sitting up cross-legged on the bed. Leon runs straight towards her, and I follow, but am forcefully jolted to the side by someone grabbing my pajama shirt sleeve.

I turn towards the person who pulled me, who I am not surprised to find out is Tyson.

"I *told* you not to come down here--"

"--unless I was wanted. Leon wanted me to come," I defend, throwing Leon a quick glance over my shoulder.

He meets my gaze and whispers almost apologetically, "I don't know how to use whatever is in this tube, Kian. I can't read the instructions. It's too dark in here."

"Your claws would probably make it difficult, anyways," I respond light-heartedly, trying to clear the obvious tension in the room, but it just sets Tyson off again. His grimy hands take hold of my chin and he snaps my head back in his direction.

"We don't need you mocking us like all of those other privileged kids from their privileged families whose mommy and daddy just pay their problems away! He's got claws, and he'll sure as hell use them on you if you don't shut up and leave us alone," he snaps, somehow staring me down even though he's shorter than me. I swallow uncomfortably, as his hand is still roughly latched onto my chin, and glance over at Leon for help.

He pipes up, "I don't think Kian has a dad. I only ever saw him with his mom, and she can't buy away his problems, since she's a murderer who runs people over with cars. Murderers only create problems, you know."

"Your mother is a murderer?!" the child on the bed screams. Tyson, Leon, and I all turn to look at her and I think it's the first time any of us are really acknowledging her presence. Her face is colorless, though it might just appear that way due to the shoddy lighting, and her small hand is attempting to cover a wound.

Tyson and I make eye contact, and he gives me a slight nod before dragging Leon out of the way so I can get to the child unobstructed. He hasn't even commented on the food in my arms, so I set it down beside the light on the table. Leon hands me the gauze and Neosporin without a word, and then I turn towards the girl head-on for the first time.

She can't be older than ten, but the reason that is frightening is because she has a worn-out bandage stained with the deep color of rust wrapped tightly around her head, covering her left eye. Her exposed eye looks like glass that has been fogged up, and her voice is murky and quiet when she speaks.

"It was a raccoon," she murmurs, and grimaces as I kneel down and gently brush her hand aside. Leon audibly gasps, but it does not appear to be because of the wound. I shrug it off and take a good look at her forearm, which is covered in dirt and dried blood, and then gesture for Leon to come closer to me.

"Do you have anything to clean her bite with? Like some water and a rag?" I ask. She really should get a rabies shot, but I realize that's probably out of the question.

Leon nods and disappears into their living room, emerging a minute later with a beat-up bucket in one hand and a random scrap of blue cloth in the other. He hands the cloth to me and continues holding the bucket while I dip the ratty fabric in the water. As I carefully clean the bite marks on the child's skin, Leon trots off with the bucket again. She whimpers at the sting of the water, but allows me to continue without stopping. I tenderly wrap the gauze around her arm and once I'm finished I smile up at her. She returns the grin.

"Thank you, Kian," she whispers as I stand up. "Do you know my name? It's Skylar Crossgrove."

"That's pretty."

"Oh?" Skylar tilts her head slightly. "You think so? Tyson thinks so, too. He says that only really pretty girls have names like Skylar."

"That's because it's true," he states, appearing quite suddenly at my side and giving Skylar's nose an affectionate tap. He kneels down so he can be eye-level with her and smiles widely. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to pet any more raccoons?"

"No, they're evil."

"That's right," he agrees, kissing her on the head. Tyson then stands up and turns to me again, his face hardening. "I'm thankful you helped us out, and gave us half a box of Cheerios, but it's about time for you to leave."

"You probably have to sleep, don't you?" A silky, surreal-sounding voice questions. A young lady who appears to be only a year or so older than me arrives on my left side, a solemn expression on her pale face. Her red hair seems to have been cut shoulder-length by some sort of sharp rock, and while she has two wide, beautiful natural eyes, there is a third eye, a purple one, in the middle of her forehead. I nearly choke on my spit.

"Oh, uh, yeah..." *Stop staring, stop staring, stop staring.* "Er, no, actually. I have to get up at three-thirty for my job anyways. It's practically midnight now, so it's not really worth it. I can stay, if you guys want."

"That was Rosalie's nice way of saying she doesn't want you here anymore," Tyson interjects, folding his skinny arms.

"That's not true, Tyson. But," Rosalie starts, shaking her head slowly, "you still need sleep, Kian. But not just you - we need sleep, too, and we'd appreciate it if you would let us get to that."

I hold up my hand. "On one condition."

"You and your conditions, why can't you just-"

"Tyson, hush," Rosalie instructs. "Continue, Kian."

"I will leave only after you guys introduce me to everyone," I state firmly. Tyson lets out an exasperated sigh.

"But *why* do you even care?!" he demands, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Because I want to be your friend, and I can't be that if I don't even know who you all are," I answer.

"You'll never be my friend," Tyson mutters, but he juts out his hand for me to shake. I grab it and am surprised at just how strong his grip is. "My name is Tyson."

"I know," I respond as he lets go of my hand. "Do you have a last name?"

Tyson opens his mouth as if to argue, then sighs and shakes his head. "Mikhail. Though knowing that will be of no use to you."

"Fair enough," I accept, then turn towards Rosalie and extend my arm. She gently takes hold of it and shakes it slowly. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm sure." I can't tell if her response is intended to be rude or not, because the statement is rather conceited, but she said it with such sincerity. "My name is Rosalie. Thank you for your help, though I can't imagine you intend on aiding us with a silent mouth forever."

I'm about to reassure her when Tyson abruptly grabs my wrist and leads me out of the bedroom, into the living room. Leon is seated on a log bench on the left side of the room, gazing absently at the fire in the middle which had apparently been started while I was tending to Skylar's wound. Instead of going left, however, Tyson drags me to the right where the freakish three-in-one is lazily sprawled about on the other bench.

Staring at them still unnerves me, but I attempt to maintain eye contact with each of the heads as they speak.

"Introduce yourselves," Tyson barks, dropping my wrist. All of the heads roll their eyes in unison.

"Why? So he knows what to call us once he starts stopping by every day? Why does he need to know unless he's planning to visit us again?" the leftmost head asks, eyeing me up and down. Though all of the heads look relatively similar - same deep-set chocolate eyes, muddy hair, and log lashes - this one's features seem more pointed, cruel, and his tone of voice reflects that.

"He says he'll only leave once he meets all of the Freaks."

They call themselves the Freaks?

"What an ass!" he scoffs.

"Hey!" I feel the need to defend myself, though it is probably true. I mean, if I were hiding away from the rest of society, I probably wouldn't want some random kid to keep showing up either. On the other hand, I just wanted to help. It's not like I'm prodding into personal information or questioning how they ended up in this situation, since obviously *something* happened to bring a bunch of mutated kids to these woods. All I want is to learn their names!

"Oh, don't give me that. You know it's true. Either way, fine." They sit up straighter, and the boy who was speaking points to his face. "I'm Rixx, the eldest."

"I'm Eden, the middle child. But really, we're triplets, and it's all right to refer to us as such," the head in the center responds. Her voice sounds strained and trembles a little, as if she's trying her hardest to remain calm, though if anyone should be scared, it should be me. After all, thinking about the Triplets too hard is nightmare-inducing. Since Eden is in the middle, are they all technically female? How do they use the bathroom? How do their organs work? Were they born as Siamese triplets?

And Eden herself is no less nauseating. The dark bags under her eyes paint the picture of her losing sleep countless nights due to worry and terror, and her olive skin is littered with scars and cuts. The lengthy mop of hair that sits atop her head almost reaches her breasts, if she has any. I can't really tell, since the Triplets are wearing some sort of loose cream-colored tunic that is reminiscent of a potato sack.

Finally, the head on the right greets, "Hello, my name is Lonny."

Lonny's voice is sweet, which is kind of shocking, since his siblings are nothing of the sort. I suppose someone has to balance them out.

"I'm Kian," I respond with a nod, still forcing myself to maintain eye contact rather than dare to look at their body.

"Well," Tyson pipes up, snatching my wrist yet again, "you've met everyone. Time to leave."

Though my mind is swimming with questions, I did say I'd leave, and if I ever want their trust, I need to be true to my word. I allow Tyson to escort me back to the large mound of dirt I have to crawl up to reach the exit but before I drop down to my knees, he coughs and I turn to face him.

"Listen here, because I'm only going to tell you once--"

"You don't want me to come back, right? I know, you keep telling me," I interrupt, saving him the spiel. But to my surprise, he shakes his head.

"Don't interrupt me! You don't know me well enough to know what I am going to say," he snaps, folding his arms. "I *was* going to thank you for your help, though your choice of food for us is kind of insulting."

My face heats up, “Yeah, sorry. I didn’t know what you guys liked, and I was kind of in a rush...”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, though we weren’t begging,” Tyson points out. I half-smile at him before turning around and starting towards the exit. Just before I escape out the hole, I hear him shout out, “But just for the record, Skylar and Leon love strawberries!”

* * *

“Would it have killed him to bring some more bread? Who just eats straight peanut butter?” Rixx complains, glaring at the jar in his hand with a fierce intensity.

“Rixx,” Rosalie chastises from the other side of the fire, “we are starving. Peanut butter is better than nothing.”

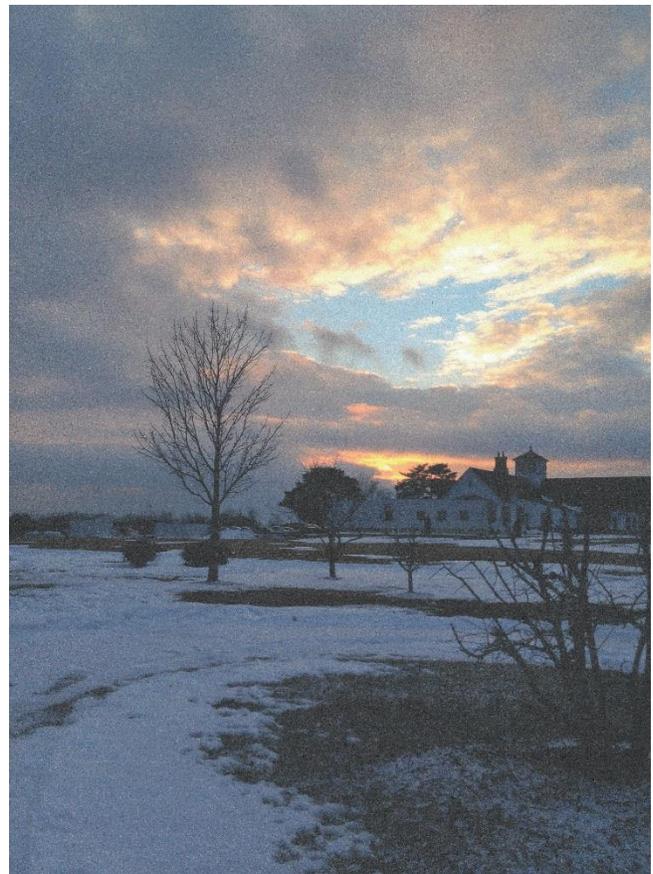
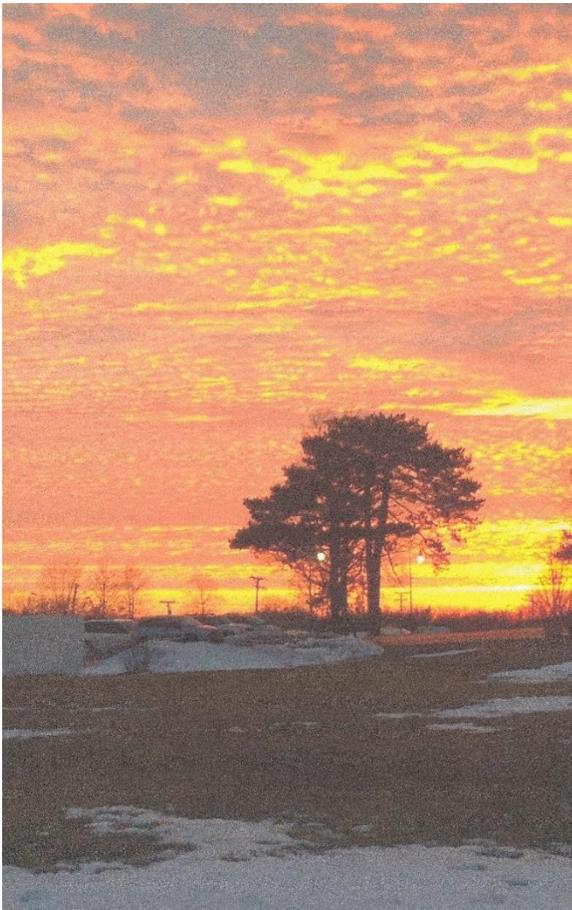
I leap off of the log and pad over to the Triplets, reaching out for the jar. Rixx is just silly. With a great deal of difficulty, I twist the lid off and shove one finger in the creamy substance. It feels funny. Quickly, I pull it out and lick the butter off my finger.

“Why were you so nice to him anyways? Normally your analytical nature makes you come off cold. You were acting weird.”

*“And what would happen if I wasn’t kind? Would he become violent?”
My ear twitches. I look over at Rosalie.*

“No.”

Photos by Rachel Miller



Now You See Him – by Taylor Bradley

Part 2

* * *

Slowly, sleep begins to leave, and I kind of wriggle around in my bed, like a fish, trying to will it to come back. But the morning noise won't let it. All I can hear are those annoying robins in the backyard, motorcycles revving down the street, that old Mustang rumbling into the driveway...old Mustang...*Oh, man, he's here!*

I've never gotten out of bed quicker in my life. *What am I supposed to do? I can't believe he thinks he can just show up again! I could call a friend, and try to see if I can hide out there. Aw, but Drake's at his grandma's, and Johnny has church till noon. And Dad will probably want to "reconnect" or "bond" or whatever he's gonna call it. News flash, Pop: You can't just waltz back in here and think everything's gonna be just how you left it. In fact, you're the reason nothing ever can be.*

I hear a key click into the lock. *I can't believe he still kept it.* Boots clomp into the entrance. Suddenly, my sister's high, innocent little voice fills the house.

"...Daddy?"

Oh darn, that's right. Mary Jane was only two when Dad left. God, does she even recognize him?

Then suddenly, I hear his voice for the first time in about six years.

"Hi, MJ."

I hear feet pound on the kitchen tile. "Dad!"

A stampede of elephants suddenly parades into the house as Zeke and Mary Jane rush up to him. I creep open the door a little to make sure I'm right.

There he is, on his knees, hugging them tightly, like he'll never let go. *But he will.*

He looks almost exactly the way he did last time I saw him: Dirty black hair that's short, choppy, and just kind of everywhere. Pale skin, blue eyes. Old, ripped up clothes that are partially covered in paint stains. And those boots. Those old, torn up, filthy, smelly work boots that used to sit by the front door.

I look away from them for a second to glance in the mirror. I look just like him. I always knew I did, but having him in front of me again makes me realize it even more. We have the same eyes. The same hair. *I hate that. I hate, hate, hate looking like him.*

I look back out into the living room and see Mom come into the room, juggling suitcases. Dad gets up and brushes himself off, like he's trying to impress her. *Uh-uh. You had your chance.*

"Here, let me help you there, Rose," he offers.

"No, I've got them, I've got them," she tells him. "Okay, I left a list on the table about everything that needs to be done around the house. Where's Griffin?"

"He's been staring at me through that little crack in his door for the last couple minutes."

"Griffin, get out here so I can say 'bye' to you. You're not spending your whole suspension sleeping and playing video games."

Busted. Again. I open the door all the way and walk up to them, making sure I don't even glance at dear ol' Dad. *I have to ignore him. All week, I'm totally blanking him. He walks back into the house after all these years, and expects all of us to just run into his arms again. Zeke and Mary Jane already made their choice. I can't really blame them. But me? I'm not gonna let him in. Not again.*

"Nice pjs, Grif," he smirks.

I look down at the *Muppet* pajamas I forgot I was wearing up till now. *Good one, Griffin. Great way to show your Dad how much of a mature person you've become, how you're not the child he remembers. I'm sure Kermit'll teach him a lesson.*

"Alright," Mom chimes back in, kissing Mary Jane and Zeke on their foreheads, "I gotta go, or I'll miss my plane. Love you guys. No fighting, okay? Behave." She turns around, kisses my head, and gives me one of her *looks*. "Especially you."

"Love you, too, Mom."

"Have a safe flight," Dad smiles.

She smirks. "Don't set the house on fire, okay? I don't want a repeat of the Thanksgiving of '01."

"Hey, that turkey looked undercooked. Are you ever gonna let me live that down?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." She thanks him one more time, and starts heading to the door. "Oh, Jack...could you do one more thing?"

"Name it."

"The minivan isn't working, the engine's making this weird noise. Zeke's starting wrestling soon, and I don't have time to take it into the shop. Can you look at it?"

"What kind of noise? Like a 'klunk, klunk, klunk', or a 'tick, tick, tick'?"

Zeke and Mary Jane start giggling. *Dad always uses such technical terms. Wait, am I smirking? No, no, no! Stay strong, Griffin! It's not that funny! Nothing Dad says or does is funny. You can't let him back in. You won't!*

"Umm....the first one."

"I can fix that."

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver. Kids, be good for your father. And Jack, don't make turkey!"

"I'm never living that down."

We all stand there and watch until her Cadillac is out of sight. *She really did it. She really left us with him.*

Dad opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, the house is filled with the sound of a yappy kind of bark. Scout slides on the tile as she makes her way up to him. "When did you guys get a dog?" he asks, over the noise.

"That's Scout," Mary Jane tells him.

"Yeah," my brother starts, hesitantly. "She was kinda 'Sorry your dad and I are splitting up, here's a puppy' kind of thing. Guess Mom forgot to bring it up."

Ooh, that's gotta sting. Replaced by a dog.

"Aww, she's so cute." Dad reaches down and pets her. Scout rolls on her back, happily. *A strange man opens the door, walks into the house, Mom leaves us with him, and the first thing our faithful animal protector does is ask him for belly rubs. Scout, sometimes I wish you were a Rottweiler.*

Alright, Griffin, it's Day Four of Dad-Mageddon. You've done great so far, but you can't slip. You need a new way to avoid him. All your friends are at school still, so that's out. What have I used so far? Sunday I just stayed away from him, even though he kept trying to talk to me. The next day, I stayed in my room until Drake got home, then went over there, but he's got football today. Yesterday was pretty easy, since Mary Jane puked in her PE class, and had to come home. Dad totally babied her all day: Making her soup, watching TV with her...taking care of her. No, no! You are not jealous! You're mad at Dad! He left you, remember? It's his fault everything's like this!

"You feeling okay today, MJ?" he's right outside the door.

"Yup, I'm all better. When I come home, will you play dolls with me?"

"Sure."

"Great! I'll be Barbie, and you be Ken, her boyfriend."

"Really? Huh. All this time I thought he was gay."

"What?"

"Never mind. You better go, or you'll miss the bus."

"Okay. Love you."

I feel so bad for her...

"Love you too, Honey."

Then why'd you leave her? Leave us?

Leave me.

"Griffin, you might want to get up, or your internal clock thing will get messed up."

"It's seven in the morning!" I yell at the door.

"And you're wide awake. That's your body's way of saying, 'Get out of bed.'"

I get up, even though I hate listening to him. He wants me to talk to him, or something, but I'm not falling for it. I make some toast, and go right back to *Halo*.

Before I know it, a little over four hours has passed. *He hasn't come to check on me. Guess he's figured out that I don't want him here. Good.*

There's a knock at the door. I ignore it and keep playing. He comes in anyway and sits on my bed, next to me.

"Wow. Video games sure have gotten a lot more violent since the last time I played 'em."

"You mean back when you had to use the controller to fight off the dinosaurs?"

He laughs a little. "Guess I walked into that one. So, I kinda wanna talk to you about something. Is there a pause on this?"

"Pause button's busted," I lie.

"Then can you shut it off?"

"I'll lose the unsaved data."

"Well, can you *save it* and shut it off?"

I give an annoyed sigh, save the game, and turn it off.

"So..." he starts, "I've kinda noticed you've been trying to avoid me lately."

"That's observant of you."

"Do you talk to your mother like this?"

"Why do you care how I talk to Mom?"

"Oh, c'mon, Griffin. Talk to me like a real person."

"My mouth is moving. Sound is coming out of it in the form of words. Gee, looks like I'm talking."

He stands up and looks at me. "Alright, seriously. Why have you been avoiding me all this week? I did this to try to connect with you kids again."

He's really starting to make me mad. "Really? That's interesting, considering the fact that you left us."

"So that's what this whole thing is about. I knew it. Griffin, just because your mom and I aren't married anymore doesn't mean I don't care about you all."

"You made that really clear when you moved hours and hours away from us."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Nope. Just me."

"Do you think I *like* not seeing you kids?"

"I would assume so, considering you told Mom you didn't want to have visitation with us."

"That's not what I said. I said, 'It would be easier for the kids if you had full custody of them, and that they stay with you most of the time. My new job is taking me far out of town, and packing all the kids in the car and carting them miles and miles just for a weekend isn't a very good idea. It's too much back and forth. Maybe some time, I could take them over the summer, but for right now, I don't make a lot of money, and I don't want to take the kids if I can't take the best care of them.' That is *word for word* what I told your mother, and I know, because those are the words that have been running through my mind every time I wake up in your Uncle Murray's smelly apartment, and I don't hear you, Zeke, or MJ!

"But even though I'm still working at a stupid motorcycle shop, can't find a better job, and go paycheck to paycheck, I still try to make space for what's important to me! I call you guys every night, unless I get off late, talk to your sister, and ask her how everything's going. I talk to your brother, and see how he's doing, and then I ask, 'Can you pass the phone to your brother,' and every time they answer, 'He doesn't want to talk right now.'"

"Well, what am I supposed to say to you?!" I shout. "You left us! You divorced Mom!"

"Yes, I divorced your mom! Because we weren't right for each other! Because we weren't getting along! Do you remember all those arguments we used to have over the *stupidest stuff*? Do you? Or have you erased all that from the picture, and drawn me as the bad guy?! Did you want us to keep fighting like that? Because let me tell you, it wasn't getting any better! We tried everything we could to make it work, so we could stay together for you three: We went to counseling, we tried talking about it, but nothing we did made it any better! We just didn't fit! So *yeah*, I ended the marriage. Because I wasn't gonna wait for it to get worse, for one of you to see us fight, or for your mom and I to turn into one of those couples that just want to kill the other. I didn't want to hate your mom, and I don't think your mom wants to hate me. So I ended it, and at a good time, because today, we can still talk, and we're still good friends.

"You've been blanking me because you're angry with me, I got that from the minute I walked into this house! You're mad because to you, I ditched all of you. But you know what? I think deep down you wish I was back! Well, now I am! *I'm right freakin' in front of you, Griffin!* And I've been trying to be here all week long for you! But *now* you're mad because I'm here! You don't want me to *stay!* You don't want me to *go!* Jesus, Griffin, *what do you want from me?!*"

And with that, he walks out of the room, his boots pounding on the carpet, and slams the door. I sit there for a minute, kind of taking in everything I just heard.

Then I just go crazy.

I punch the pillows, I scream, I just let *everything out!* Liam, Mom, Dad, Zeke, Mary Jane, that girl in English class that wouldn't go out with me last year, that senior that always rubs it in that he beat *Halo 3* before me, that book worm that spoiled the ending of *The Storyteller* for me, and all those stupid freshmen that don't know how to walk in the halls!

I lay on the bed, breathing heavily from the sudden tantrum. I don't know how long I stay there, but eventually I hear a light scratching at my door. Scout wants to see what I'm up to. I lay there for a little while longer, but the noise persists. I get up and open the door just enough for her to wiggle herself in. She runs in a little circle around me, then looks up. A rubber ball is in her mouth. *But I don't want to play.* I just lay back on the bed, and pretend she's not there.

She continues to look at me with that irresistible face. I sigh, and sit back up. "Alright, you win." I bend down and take the ball from her. She pants, excitedly, as I prepare to throw it. Tossing it across the room, she bounds after it, barking happily, and quickly brings it back for Round Two. I throw it again, but this time it hits the wall, bounces back, and rolls right under the bed. *Game over, I guess.*

Scout barks at the bed, every few seconds looking up at me. *She's not gonna stop until I get her stupid toy.*

Getting up again, I lay flat on my stomach and look under. It's in the corner, mocking me. *Alright, if I just get the ball, I can toss it out of my room, Scout will go away, and I can go back to...whatever the heck I feel like doing after my "chat" with Dad.* I reach my arm under, since it's all I can fit. I feel around trying to find the dumb ball. *No, that's lint. Dust bunny. Old underwear? Okay, that's kinda gross. Wait...what's this?*

There's something hard and flat under my hand. I grab it and upon pulling it out, I see it's a large, old book. It's dark blue with a gold border. It's kind of dirty, and on the front is the word "Memories" in the same gold color. *I totally forgot about this. This is my old photo album.*

The dog finally gives up on the game and goes to lay down by the air vent. But I've kind of forgotten about her. *Just put it back. Put it back and you can forget it all over again.*

But you want to know what's in it. What did you put inside?

If it was that important, you would have remembered it. Unless...it's something you wanted to forget.

Oh no...I know what's in here.

Don't open it! Just...throw it out, or something! Or hide it.

But you tried that already, that's why it was under there.

I have to open it. I don't know why I want to torture myself like this but...I just have to look at it again. Just one more time. One more time, and then I'll have no problem getting rid of it.

Dust comes up like a cloud as I flip it open. *I forgot how many photos I took when I was little. Some of the pictures are kind of random, like one of a squirrel in the yard, or Mom cooking something. Others are more important, like my kindergarten graduation, and birthday parties.*

And there they are. Pictures of me and my family. All together. Back when life was...not...this.

There's one of us in Wisconsin Dells, in front of the animatronic clock tower that tells the tale of the Pied Piper. We're all smiling, except at this point, Mom was still pregnant with Zeke.

Dad holding Zeke for the first time, and a four-year-old me looking at him, thinking what a great big brother I'm gonna be.

Gee, I sure lived up to that. But either way, once again, we're all smiling in the picture. Even Mom, who just finished child labor.

One of all three of us celebrating New Years, but I'm not quite sure what year we're celebrating.

One of us at Brookfield Zoo, standing next to the statue of a gorilla. Who's taking these pictures? Some random stranger?

Another few pages and Mary Jane is finally born. Dad's crying, I'm glad I have a sister, and Zeke's poking her. *Great first impression, dude.*

Page after page, my grin gets bigger, and the hot tears in my eyes are getting harder to fight. *Every picture in here, we're smiling. Where did those smiles go? When did they leave?*

Was it when Mom and Dad started having issues?

When he left?

What?

Why can't we be happy?

...Why can't I be happy?

I close the book gently, and look at the wall. I just kind of think. About everything. About nothing. About my life. How it's the same, and how it's changed. *I want to be that smiling kid I saw in those photos. I want to see that family smile back at me. Why can't that happen?*

Then it occurs to me.

Maybe...maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the reason my family can't be happy. Mom's been trying everything to help me, but I just won't let her. Zeke's been begging for my attention, but I ignore him. Mary Jane, too. All she wants is to hang out, and I always shut her down.

That answers my second question. Why can't I be happy?

Because I won't let myself be happy.

I complain about issues in school, and when Mom tries to help me out, I just let it go in one ear and out the other. Why fix the problem when I can mope about it for days?

I always wanted siblings, and now that I've got them, I pretend they don't exist.

I waited for six years to see my dad again. He's right. I missed him. I wanted to see him again. Now he's here, and I've spent all this time being a jerk, and waiting for him to go away again.

It hurt when he divorced Mom. It might always hurt. But part of me understands now why he did it.

He wanted to see us again. I think I've always known that. And I bet when he gets a better job, and a house away from Uncle Murray, we'll be seeing a lot more of him.

But all this leaves me with one more question:

How do I fix this?

Hours slip by. I haven't eaten lunch. Mary Jane and Zeke are already home. I had to let Scout out of the room so she could go outside. Still nothing from Dad. *But what did I expect?*

All this time I've been trying to think of a solution. I owe Mom a serious apology when she gets back, I know that much. But what do I do right now? With Dad, and my brother and sister? I need something. One thing that can tell them all what I need to say, without me having to write a whole speech. I'm not really good with my words. C'mon, Griffin, you gotta do something. You have to have one idea in your head. Something that'll just make all these issues disappear.

...That's it. That's it!

I jump up off the floor, put the photo album on my bed, and empty my bank. *Found one!*

Running out of my room, I try to find them all. I need to get them all together for this. Lucky for me, they're all in the same place: sitting in Mary Jane's room in little tiny chairs, around her small tea party table.

"Oh, Barbie, I love you more than my glitter tuxedo," Dad/Ken says.

"Oh, Ken, you don't know what that means to me," Mary Jane/Barbie swoons.

"Why am I doing this again," Zeke asks, holding another male doll.

"You're ruining it," my sister tells him.

"Who even is this guy?"

"I told you, that's Allan, Ken's best friend! Didn't you read the box?"

"Now, MJ," Dad starts, smirking, "we all know your brother doesn't read."

"At least I don't walk around the house in *Muppet* pajamas," Zeke gestures to me with the doll. They all look at me.

I can't do this. What if it's not enough?

But I can't do nothing, and this is all I got right now.

I walk up to them quietly, and hold out the quarter. They're all silent as I perform the trick. Suddenly, POOF! Gone.

"Whoa!" Mary Jane exclaims, beaming, "How'd you do that?"

"A magician never reveals his secrets," I tell her.

"Taught him everything he knows," Dad winks at me, and leans back in the child-sized plastic chair. A huge weight comes off me. *Now I know it's okay. By that wink, and the stunned expressions on my brother and sister's faces, I know somehow, they got the message.*

I love you, Zeke and Mary Jane. And I promise to be a better brother.

And Dad, you're right. I did miss you. I've been missing you since the day you left. I just had to let myself finally admit it. I want to see you again. I will see you again, if it means I have to walk to Uncle Murray's. You're my dad, and even though you might be far away, you're always there when I need you.

That's why you came here this week. You knew, somehow, I needed you.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

I never stopped.

"Can you do it again?" Mary Jane asks. "Please? Pretty please, with Ken's glitter tux on top?"

"Alright, alright." I turn for a minute so she doesn't see where I hid the quarter. Holding it in my hand, I suddenly get this feeling that...everything is gonna be okay.

And I smile.

"Okay, here we go. Now you see it..."



Image by Julie Olsen

Raccoons are Evil by Hannah Bradley



Bite Marks and Bullet Holes, Part 2 – by Gecko

He killed my mother! He killed her!

“YOU MONSTER!” I screamed as I pulled out my gun and faced my father head on.

“What are you gonna do? Shoot me?” he scoffed. “You don’t have the guts to sho...”

He never finished his sentence.

I AM YOUR ALPHA NOW I roared through the pack link ***PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS. THIS PACK IS NOT OUR ENEMY***

I turned and faced my pack as they dropped their weapons and knelt. The fighting had stopped. It was over. Or so I thought.

Bang!

Bang!

Two shots.

Two shots that caused my heart to stop.

I looked over and saw the girl with midnight black hair, the one who fell out of the tree, clutching her side. She raised one of her hands and it was covered with blood.

MATE my wolf cried.

“NO!” I screamed as I ran to her. She dropped to her knees, swaying from the blood loss.

I dropped down beside her and held her close. She’s losing so much blood. “Get the pack doctor!” someone screamed, but I tuned it out. All I’m focusing on is my dying mate. I don’t even realize I am crying until I see my tears splash onto her face. She stirs in my arms, opening her deep purple eyes. My mate is beautiful. She smiles at me as she looks into my eyes, and with that, her eyes close.

“No, you can’t die! I’ve just found you,” I cried.

The pack doctor came over and got to work pulling the bullets out of her side. He finally pulled them out and her skin started to close really fast.

“How did she heal so fast?” I asked the doctor.

“It’s the mate bond you two share. She should be all healed up in a couple of days. So, now if you would follow me, we can put her in the infirmary.”

I held my mate close as we walked to the infirmary. I ordered my fighters to help with the wounded and repair damages. As we entered the hospital wing, I felt a presence behind me. I turned, and standing behind me was the Alpha, the Luna, and their son.

“Oh, my baby girl,” the Luna called as she came over and caressed her daughter’s face. “You finally found your mate. You have to be ok. Not just for us, but for him, too,” she murmured.

“Wait, you’re not upset or blaming me for this attack?” I asked, shocked.

“Of course not. We are partly at fault as well,” the Luna replied as her mate held her.

“May I?” their son asked as he reached for my mate. I nodded and loosened my grip on her. He grabbed her body and held her close.

“Damn you, and your stubbornness,” he laughed as he held her.

“Axel, give her back to Ky,” the Alpha ordered in a serious tone.

“What is it?” he asked as he readjusted her in his arms. “Oh, shit!” he swore as he handed her back to me. Her wounds had started to open up. The second her skin touched mine, they began to close again.

“What happened?” Axel asked.

“The mate bond that they share is what is keeping her wounds closed at the moment,” the pack doctor responded, as he brought over a gurney.

“Oh, I see...Oomph.” Axel started before being tackled by a blonde-haired she-wolf.

“Axel! You’re alive, thank god!” she said as she clung to him.

“Yes, Tina, I’m alive,” he replied, hugging her back.

“Wow, perfect timing, Tannis,” Axel stated. “Your mate was about to rip your Alpha’s head off.”

“Alpha!” the redhead squeaked.

“Alpha Ky of the Blood Moon Pack,” I introduced myself.

“He’s mates with my sister,” Axel pointed out.

With that news, she screamed.

“Would you guys keep it down? Injured she-wolf trying to sleep here.”

Phoenix’s POV

Ugh. I was just trying to get some sleep when these yahoos started parading around my room.

“Phe, Phe,” Annabella yelled as she tackled me.

“Oh my god, get off me!” I screamed. “You are crushing me!”

A loud growl arose at my statement. It sent pleasurable tingles down my spine.

Another growl arose, which made Annabella shiver as she was picked up off of me. Her face was a deep shade of red.

I only now noticed that I was not, in fact, in my room. My room was silver with black accents, but this room was glaringly white. All white.

“Where the hell am I?” I roared?

“Geez, sis, you trying to give everyone in the hospital wing a heart attack?” Axel said from my left side.

“How did I get here?” I asked in reply.

“Don’t you remember anything?” Tina asked.

“Let me see. Hold on,” I said as I moved and sat cross-legged and started meditating.

I felt the darkness consume me and I went under.

Ky’s POV

I watched happily as my mate woke up. It had been three days since I last saw her beautiful eyes and now they were finally open again.

That was until Tannis’ mate tackled her.

I growled at the she-wolf that was hurting my mate. Which caused Tannis to growl at me and pull his mate away from me.

I had zoned out on the conversation until I saw my mate close her eyes and start meditating.

“What is she doing?” I asked.

“She’s speaking with her souls,” Axel replied, as if that were an everyday occurrence.

“Her what?” I returned.

“You know how werewolves have two parts? Human and wolf?” Axel started. I nodded and he continued, “My sister has four.”

“Like four parts?”

“Exactly,” Tannis’s mate Annabella said. “She has human, wolf, mermaid, and dragon. Her dragon is so cool.”

“How is that possible?” Tannis asked for me.

“She was stillborn when my mother gave birth, but her eyes were open,” Axel said. I held my mate’s hand tighter. “I remember it like it was yesterday. Her eyes – they were like stone. The irises were black. My mother was devastated. Her first girl was dead before she could even live. That day was the solar eclipse. In honor of the moon goddess, our whole pack went down to the sea. At the front of the procession were my mother and father holding Phe in between them. They laid her down on the shore on a silver blanket, waiting for the tide to take her out to sea. It was heartbreaking for the whole pack. Even though she was only hours old, everyone was connected to her. As the tide came in and started to take her away, the solar eclipse happened. The whole beach went dark except for Phe’s blanket.”

A silver light covered her from head to foot. It was the moon goddess. When the eclipse was over, a woman was on the beach holding Phe. Phe was giggling as the woman smiled at her. The woman walked toward my mother and handed Phe to her. She blessed our pack with a gift no other pack had ever had. She gave us the gift of another shift. The ability to shift into merpeople. Phe, of course, got two extra shifts. The moon goddess left us after that, and when Phe opened her eyes, they were a beautiful purple.”

I was silent during the whole thing. I was just floored. My mate was dead, but then she was granted life by the moon goddess, who then granted the whole pack with a second shift. It was just too much to process.

“I think your Alpha is gonna faint,” Tina said to Tannis.

“Tannis already did,” Annabella replied.

I looked over and, sure enough, my all-powerful beta was sprawled out on the floor. Annabella grabbed the pitcher of water from the side table and emptied it all over him. He didn’t even stir.

“Axel, can you drag him out, because Phe is gonna wake up and I think her and her mate need to talk,” Tina said as she linked arms with Annabella and walked out.

Axel said nothing as he picked up my beta and closed the door behind him. Phe woke.

Chapter 9

Phoenix’s POV

“Welcome back!” Celia screamed as she hugged me, getting me soaked in the process.

“Mermaids,” Roset huffed, puffing out a ring of smoke.

“Oh, don’t be a party pooper, Roset,” Celia shouted back at the uninterested dragon.

“Both of you stop fighting. You’ll give me a headache,” I intervened.

“Sorry,” they both responded.

“Where’s Lava?” I asked, looking around for my wolf.

“She’ll be back soon,” called a voice from behind me.

“Hi, mother,” I replied as I hugged the moon goddess.

“Hello, my dear,” she said as she placed a kiss on my forehead.

“Were you the one in control of me last?” I asked as I stepped back from her.

“No, dear, that was Roset. Her dragon ability helped you heal even faster,” she replied as Roset nodded her head.

“Then how did I hear Lava’s voice?” I asked.

“Since she was your original shift, she was the one who recognized your mate.”

"Oh, I see," I replied. "So, Roset, care to share my memories with me?"

The violet dragon nodded and held out one of her claws for me to grasp. Immediately after contact the world began to spin.

.....
"Mate!" I cried, as I snapped out of my trance.

"Whoa, careful there," called a voice, as a hand reached out to steady me.

"Here they are." Roset held out her clawed foot for me to grab, and when I did, the memories came flooding back.

"Mate!"

I snapped out of my meditating breathing hard.

"Whoa, are you ok?"

"Ahh!" I screamed, jumping out of bed and ever so gracefully landing on my butt.

"Oww!" I cried in pain, as I tried to stand back up.

"Here, let me help you."

...To be continued.



Photo by Rachel Miller

Differences Aside (a Labyrinth Fanfiction), Part 1 – by Taylor Bradley

“Alright, c’mon, Toby. One more time. You can do it!” Sarah pulled the lever on her baby brother’s *See n’ Say* for what felt like the thousandth time. The arrow in the middle began to spin, and ended up landing on the cat. A robotic voice came out of the speakers and explained, “*The cat goes meow.*”

Sarah set down the toy and looked at Toby expectantly. “Now you say it,” she grinned. “What does the cat say? C’mon Toby, say ‘meow.’”

Toby only looked at her and giggled. Apparently watching his sister make a bunch of animal noises was very amusing. But Sarah was starting to give up hope. Toby should’ve started to pick up words. He was the right age, and he was a very smart baby. But for some reason, he hadn’t figured out even the simplest words, like ‘Dada’ or ‘doggie.’

Sarah sighed, but her smile remained. “You know something? I’m starting to think you can talk just fine and you just like watching me make cat sounds.” She got to her feet and began to dance around, singing, “Meow, meow, meow, meow, meow, meow, meeeeeooooowww!”

Toby laughed even harder, an excited, innocent laugh. The storm outside raged, thunder boomed, and lightning crackled across the sky. Usually, bad weather would frighten the baby, but he was too distracted by his Cat Sister.

“Meow. Meow. Meow, meow, meow!”

A symphony of sounds had filled the room. Thunder. Rain pounding on the windows and the roof. Laughter. Cat sounds. But throughout all of the noise, one stood out to Sarah.

“*Hooo. Hoo, hooo.*”

She stopped meowing instantly, fear gripping her. *It’s not him.* she told herself. *You defeated him. You didn’t summon him. He’s not here. It’s just an owl. Just a regular owl. Stop. Being. Paranoid.* She looked back at Toby, who looked like he was getting tired. *It is getting late.* she realized. *I should probably put him to bed before he gets cranky.*

“C’mere, Toby. Oh, you’re getting so big.” He squirmed a little in his favorite red and white striped pajamas as she picked him up, then laid him in his crib. Sarah smiled as Toby looked up at her with his bright blue eyes. “Still wide awake, huh? Or at least you’re trying to be. Alright, what do you want, hm? You want a story?”

And there they were. The very words she had spoken four months ago. Back when she detested her half-brother, and her stepmother, Karen. That was why she had done what she did. *That’s why I summoned the Goblin King.* Sarah admitted.

“*Hooo, hoo. Hoo, hoo, hooo.*”

She jumped at the sound. *It’s just an owl. But...but I was just thinking about him. What if...?* She glanced at the window. A memory struck her mind like the lightning outside: A white barn owl tapped at the window and goblins popped up out of nowhere. When she looked back at the window, the Goblin King himself was standing in it, looking pleased with himself.

Sarah’s breath caught in her throat, and she shook her head vigorously. It was just her imagination. He wasn’t there. He wasn’t coming for Toby. He could only do that if she wished it and she would never make that mistake again. She loved Toby. He was family. Glancing back into the crib, she saw Toby was asleep. *Good. This was starting to get scary...*

* * *

“Sarah?” Karen called. “Sarah, we’re leaving now.”

“Wait, wait, let us say goodbye!” She ran down the stairs carrying Toby along with her. “Bye, Karen,” she said, wrapping her free arm around her stepmom. “Have fun at the movies.” She let go of her and latched onto her dad, kissing his cheek. “Say bye-bye, Toby.” But again, he only giggled.

“I know it seems like we go out a lot, but we try to limit it to once a week.”

“And it has been a week, so you’re free to go.” Sarah smiled. “I haven’t watched Toby since last Friday.”

“Thanks for being so understanding,” Karen grinned. “Your father and I need some time out once in a while.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Get out of here, you crazy kids!”

Karen laughed. “Alright, just make sure you brush Toby’s teeth extra well. Now that he has all of them, I don’t want them yellow.” She wrapped her scarf around her neck and opened the door.

“We’ll be back around midnight,” her dad explained. “Don’t wait up. Be in bed by ten thirty. Deal?”

“Got it.”

“Thanks again, honey. Have a good night.”

"You, too." And she closed the door behind him. Stepping away from the door, she listened intently.

No storm.

No thunder.

No wind.

And no owls.

Good. Sarah thought. *That's the way it should be.* She hadn't seen or heard the owl since the last time she'd been left to watch her brother. After a few days she wondered if it was just her imagination. After all, how could she have heard one owl over a raging storm?

The night went on as usual after that. She fed Toby and made herself some macaroni and cheese. Then she finished her science homework and started her math while he was watching *Blue's Clues*. The night seemed to fly by, and before she knew it, it was Toby's bed time. When she picked him up, he was already half asleep, and therefore, didn't put up much protest. She laid him down in his crib, placed Lancelot the bear next to him, and shut off the light. "Good night, Toby," she whispered.

That was one of the easiest nights with him, I think. Sarah smiled, heading into her own bedroom. It was all downhill from there.

* * *

Sarah's room was decorated with many theatrical, some even childish things. The shelves were full of books of every genre, but mainly fantasy. The walls were also full of wooden shelves, each holding a teddy bear. Only one was empty. It had held Lancelot, who now belonged to Toby. Her bed was made neatly, with many pillows and white sheets. A tack board held many playbills, from *Little Women* to *The Wizard of Oz*. And finally, there was her vanity, which was full of lipsticks, blush, a sparkling tiara she used as a prop, and a copy of the book that had changed her life.

The Labyrinth.

She sat down and picked up the book. *Weird how much dust can accumulate over just a few months.* she thought, flicking through the pages. Memories floated to the front of her mind: Meeting Hoggle, choosing a door knocker, getting stuck in an oubliette, rescuing Ludo, asking permission from Sir Didymus...and fighting a final battle with Jareth in the Escher Room.

"Sarah, look what I'm offering you: your dreams."

His words echoed in her mind. It had been his last resort. She was on the brink of defeating him and he thought he could bribe her. He thought wrong. She had learned a lot during her trip through the Labyrinth: She couldn't take everything for granted. Nothing was as it seemed. True friendship requires forgiveness. Life's not fair. All these things combined to show her one thing: Jareth had no power over her.

The eyes of the Goblin King reappeared in her mind. His bright blue one sparkled, while the brown one seemed a bit dull. She shook her head again. Why did she keep thinking of him, of all things?

You need to clear your head. she decided. *You need to talk to someone. Someone you know will listen.* She looked into the mirror, took a deep breath, and spoke, "I need you, Hoggle."

And just like that, a face appeared in place of her reflection. His face was very lined and aged, most likely from stress. His eyes were dark green, yet gentle and inviting. His nose was bulbous, ears pointed, and his hair – apart from his light brown eyebrows – was wispy and white. "Sarah!" The dwarf shouted, happily. "What a surprise to hear from you again so soon. I'm glad you called. How are you? Is everything alright?"

"Nice to hear from you, too," she smiled. "I'm alright. Just watching Toby again. I just put him to sleep, actually. And, yeah, everything's okay. I just needed to talk, you know?"

"Well, you always got me," Hoggle grinned, proudly. "By the way, last time we talked you told me you heard an owl around. Have you seen it since? It could be--"

"Jareth," she finished. "That was my first thought, too."

"I swear, if he's trying to spy on you, I'll march straight up to his castle and...and...uhh...give me a minute."

Sarah laughed. "That's alright, Hoggle. I'm sure you'd give him what he deserved. Besides, I haven't heard a hoot out of it. I'm starting to think it was just my imagination.

"Oh, good. Glad to hear it." Hoggle's eyes suddenly grew a bit wider. "Oh! I almost forgot. Speaking of Jareth...something weird's going on."

Fear took hold again, and her muscles tightened. "What do you mean? What's he doing?"

"Nothin'," Hoggle explained. "That's the thing: No one's seen hide nor hair of him since you defeated him. And that's not all: Now the goblins have vanished."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't seen one of 'em all day. I mean, sure, they're a buncha good-for-nuthin' drunks and maybe they're all just getting over a rough hangover...but that...and Jareth staying up in his castle for months..."

"You think he might be planning something?"

Hoggle frowned, but slowly nodded. "That's the way it seems."

"What should we do?"

"Well, the guys and I...we were wonderin'...do you think you could...come back?"

Sarah was taken aback. Go back to the Labyrinth? Run it all over? Risk falling into another Goblin King plot?

Hoggle's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Sarah..." She looked up. He paused as if the words coming out of his mouth hurt. "Last time, we were all together facing him. And I felt safe, so I was brave. But now...we don't know what he's doing but we *do* know he's not happy with us. 'Specially me." He said the last part quieter than the rest, and began to rub the back of his neck. "Even though we defeated him, he's still a lot stronger and more powerful than us. Thing is, Sarah," he looked up and met her eyes, "we're scared."

At that moment, all of the fear and panic in Sarah disappeared. She realized that this time Jareth would go after them as well, not just her. They wanted her to be there so they could feel protected by the person who defeated him. They wanted to feel safe in case they had to fight him again.

They needed her.

She took a deep breath and set *The Labyrinth* back on the dresser. "How do I get there?" Hoggle's face brightened. "Last time he brought me there. I don't know any other way."

"Haven't you figured it out? The mirror. It's a portal through our worlds. That's how we can talk to each other. That's how we can all be there for you when you need us. Step through it, and you're here.

"Alright, I'm coming. Wait, what about Toby?"

They both pondered this for a while. Hoggle broke the silence. "Bring him along. For all we know, Jareth wants you to leave him so he can snatch him back and make you play his entire game all over again."

Sounds like something he would do. "Well, in that case, give me a few minutes. I'll have to pack a baby bag. I don't know how long this journey will take, but I have to be home before Karen and my dad come home at midnight, or they'll get worried." She glanced at the clock. It was only seven o'clock. She had five hours.

"Oh, don't worry. Time works different in the Labyrinth," the dwarf assured her.

Sarah walked back into Toby's room and picked him up. He squirmed and made protesting noises. Apparently, she had woken him up. "I know, I know, you just went to sleep. But this is for your own good. I'm trying to help you. If I'm going to face the Goblin King again, I need to make sure I don't make the same mistakes."

She walked around her house collecting things she might need. She got a few jars of baby food, bottles, formula, diapers, the baby carrier, some random food from the fridge, baby powder, the first aid kit, *The Labyrinth*, and Lancelot. Then she laced up her running shoes and looked around. *I guess that's all I need.*

When she went back to her room, the mirror was empty. Sarah slung the baby bag over her shoulder, sleeping Toby on the other, and stood on her dresser. "A portal. So I just...step into it?" She looked into the mirror. Her reflection seemed to call to her, beg her to come closer. She stepped hesitantly towards the glass. *If I do it wrong, I walk into glass, probably fall and break my mirror, not to mention possibly hurt Toby. But...what other way would it be?* She touched the mirror with her toe and gasped. It went through. The glass was almost like liquid. She took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and stepped through.

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Photo by Rachel Miller

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Please join us at our next meeting!**

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

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