

A low-angle photograph of a tall, modern skyscraper with a blue-tinted glass facade, surrounded by other city buildings. The building is the central focus, reaching towards the top of the frame. The glass reflects the sky and surrounding structures. Other buildings are visible on the left and right sides, creating a sense of a dense urban environment. The overall color palette is dominated by the blue of the glass and the white of the sky.

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The 700 Club: Part 1 – by Melanie Andersen

Chapter 1

My college dorm started out with three miscellaneous stains on the blue carpet and a large crack on the wall beside my bed. Now, as I pick myself and my newly-empty coffee cup off the floor, I'm certain there will be four.

It's not like I'm overly hygienic – after all, I'm not even going to attempt to clean that stain up – but my roommate, Georgia Beemer, is something of a disorganized mess. Since she is an art student, her easels and sketchbooks are strewn all above the floor, just waiting to be trampled on. More than half of her creations have gotten the stamp of approval from someone's foot, but this time I actually didn't trip over one of her masterpieces.

I tripped over her guitar instead.

"You know," I state, nudging the neck of the guitar out of the way with my foot, "I'm starting to think you want me to break my favorite mug."

"That's your favorite?" Gigi questions, raising an eyebrow, but not looking up from the sketchbook in her small hands.

"We've been roommates for the past two years and you're meaning to tell me you don't even know which mug is my favorite? That's just shameful," I tease, sitting cross-legged on my bed that's on the opposite wall from hers.

Our dorm is pretty much the same as any – you walk in, and on the right side of the room there's a cluttered desk and farther down, in the corner, there's a bed that happens to be just as cluttered. On the left side of the room there's two stuffed dressers, and in the corner there's a bed that looks like it belongs to someone who has a vague sense of how to properly fold blankets. Between the two beds, on the back wall, there's my desk. My textbooks are stacked on it in a neat pile and the only prominent sign of disorder is my random coffee cups, which I may or may not hoard.

And then, of course, there's Gigi's random junk everywhere.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologizes sarcastically, setting down her pencil and sketchbook. She leans back on her pillow and finally makes eye contact with me. "You're just upset because you didn't get an A on that history essay you were working on, aren't you?"

I sigh. "It's not just history, Gigi, it's–"

"It's *magic history*, my major and most favorite class in the world," she mocks, raising her voice a couple octaves in an attempt to mimic my higher register.

"I sound nothing like that."

"Says you. I'm the one who has to listen to you go on all day about Professor Longtails or whatever."

"Lontelle," I correct, stretching from my criss-cross position to put the mug on my desk without getting up. "She's pretty much the best teacher I've ever had."

"She must really make history come alive, huh?" Gigi comments, picking up her ebony pencil again and turning back to her drawing. She tilts her head to get a better look at it, which shakes her copper-colored waves. I notice her sea green cat-eye glasses slowly slide further down her face. I keep reminding her to get those tightened.

"Well, actually, their history involves a lot of death, so making it 'come alive' wouldn't be the phrase I would use. People kept executing the Enchanteds for being witches up until a hundred years ago or so."

"Uh-huh," Gigi nods, narrowing her eyes at her sketchbook.

"Although, technically speaking, they're more powerful than witches. Witches use a lot of spells and potions, while Enchanteds just use the magic that comes from within them. So, really, we have more of a reason to fear them than fear witches, but since they're such a minority we could easily kill them if they don't..." I trail off and frown at my roommate, who is chewing the back of her pencil absentmindedly as she stares down her drawing. "Are you even listening?"

"Uh-huh," Gigi nods, narrowing her eyes at her sketchbook.

"Gigi!"

"What?" she questions, snapping her head in my direction. When she sees my helpless pout, her face softens. "Oh, don't be so upset, Alexis. You know I'm not as interested in this stuff as you are. I literally know of only one Enchanted, and that's your brother's wife. Her magic isn't even that cool. Doesn't she, like, light lightbulbs just by touching them or something?"

Yes, Gigi is correct. My sister-in-law, Amorie, has the short end of the stick when it comes to magical powers. Oftentimes my brother glorifies it to other people, saying his wife manipulates electricity, but it's not like she can zap

lightning bolts at people. Still, when I first found out Andrew was in a relationship with an Enchanted, I flipped. Magic captivated me ever since I found out that it was actually real, way back when I was a little girl. I'm not crazily obsessed like I used to be, but I have to admit that there is something about magic that never ceases to interest me, even if it is just lighting bulbs.

"So she doesn't have the most riveting power. I'd like to see *you* do that with your pinky finger," I retort, crossing my arms. Gigi cracks a sly smile.

"You got me there, you dork."

"Oh yeah, because the girl who just spent the past week drawing a cat wearing sunglasses should be one to talk."

"What? It's cute!" she defends, holding her sketchbook out to me so I can take a better look at it. I give a quick nod of appreciation. "And I just listened to you rant about witch trials. I may be a bit strange, but you are most certainly the dork of this dorm."

"Shut up."

Gigi laughs and tosses her sketchbook onto the floor, tucking the pencil away behind her left ear. She pauses a moment, thinking, and then finally smirks at me. "I think I might clean up a bit tomorrow."

"I'd like to see that, mug-murderer."

Gigi feigns offense just as my phone starts to ring from my back pocket. I pull it out of my pants, look down at the caller ID and see that it's Andrew. He normally only calls me on weekends, as our chats tend to stretch out for hours, and it's already almost seven o'clock. I shrug off my slight suspicion.

"What's up, Andrew? Calling on a Wednesday, I see," I greet, pulling out my legs from under me and swinging them off the edge of my bed.

"Never mind that." His voice is shaky and comes out almost in a whisper. Immediately my heart starts pounding faster.

"Are you okay?" I ask, not entirely sure I want to know the answer. I'm usually an optimist, but his tone is not very promising.

He sighs. "I am, but I wanted to know if you've spoken with Amorie recently."

"Amorie?" I parrot. Gigi glances over at me – she's trying her hardest not to pay attention to our conversation by scrolling through her phone, bless her – and I shrug.

"She was supposed to grab a quick bite with me during her lunch break at one, but she never showed up. I can't get ahold of her, no matter how many times I call. I called her boss and he said she never returned from her break, but she didn't even take it, at least not with me," Andrew explains, spitting out his words so fast I barely have time to process them. And once I do, they still don't make any sense. Amorie isn't the type to forget a date with Andrew, no matter how busy she is. They've been married for two years already, but they still haven't left their honeymoon phase, and I'm starting to think they never will.

"What do you think happened to her?" I question, forcing Andrew to pick one possibility out of the hundreds of explanations so he doesn't drive himself crazy not knowing which one is correct.

"I think," he starts, inhaling deeply as if to prepare himself, "that she's having a family emergency, and left work immediately to tend to the situation. Her phone probably broke, and she didn't bother to use anyone else's because the situation is too dire."

I'm not one to condone pessimism, but his story has so many flaws in it that I almost feel myself get choked up. Still, I swallow my logic and give him a small, sad smile.

"Okay, then that's what happened unless we're proven wrong," I state, not even giving him the option of considering any worse options. "Have you talked to the police about it?"

"No, I'm planning on filing a report right after we're done talking. I wanted to give her a few hours to show up or call or *something*, and then I started asking everyone I knew if they saw her..." Andrew sighs again, and it sounds like he's on the brink of tears. "I didn't want to call you, because I knew that if you said you don't know where she is, then she's really gone."

A hint of guilt creeps its way up through my body. I know it's not my fault, but I feel like I should have at least some inkling as to where she might be. After all, I like to think that Amorie and I are as close as most blood siblings are, and the thought that she might be in danger somewhere makes me feel sick.

"I'm sorry," I try to say, but it comes out a whisper. "I wish I could help."

"Please, let me know if you see her," Andrew begs. His desperate pleading tugs at my heart, but I try to ignore the overwhelming fear building up inside me for Andrew's sake.

"I will. Let me know if anything happens," I request, attempting to maintain my composure.

"Okay," he agrees, and then adds a quiet, "I miss her so much," before finally hanging up.

Chapter 2

No matter how much you love a class, it's near impossible to focus when you know someone close to you is missing. I am typically a very active, outspoken student (although a somewhat sarcastic classmate), and my complete silence today during all of the lectures caught the attention of more than one teacher and a handful of students. No one really knows me well enough to ask what's wrong, however – no one besides Professor Lontelle and Gigi, anyways.

Try as she might, Gigi has always had some difficulty staying out of other people's business. Though she made a conscious effort to give me privacy when Andrew called yesterday, the second he hung up she bombarded me with questions. We're both curious by nature, and granted, I probably looked like I just got hit by a bus, so I understood why she might have gotten a little bit worked up. But frankly, answering all of Gigi's rapid-fire questions about a situation you hardly understand gets tiring real fast.

Nevertheless, I told her the gist of the situation and I must admit, she handled it well. Most people wouldn't know how to react learning that their best friend's sister-in-law mysteriously disappeared, but her comforting hug and words of reassurance almost succeeded in convincing me that Amorie really is okay.

Until Andrew called again a few hours later informing me that her missing person report had been successfully filed, which triggered an onslaught of more questions that I answered by flicking off our light switch, curling up in blankets, and turning to stare at the crack in the wall until I fell asleep.

Professor Lontelle isn't as easily avoided as Gigi, however, and as she waves me over to her desk after class ends, I know I'm about to endure some serious grilling.

"So," she begins, clearing her throat quietly. "How is my favorite student today?"

"You call everybody who talks to you after class your favorite student," I reply, rolling my eyes. I've gotten pretty good at dodging questions, but I know Professor Lontelle won't fall for my antics.

"Maybe I do, but even so, that makes you my favorite student right now," she comments wittily. "But you're not avoiding the question, Alexis. Why don't you pull up a chair, and we can talk some more? My next class doesn't start for another hour."

I drop my backpack at my feet and fetch a random chair from a nearby desk, positioning it in front of hers so we're facing each other. I take a seat and begrudgingly make eye contact with her.

There's really nothing intimidating about Professor Lontelle – she's only about 5'4" with silky hair the color of honey, and she just recently turned thirty, so she's got a youthful glow about her that most of my other professors lack. In fact, she and I are, to put it simply, friends. But the fact that I'm slightly emotionally unstable and she's the most analytical person I've ever met is already setting up this conversation for failure.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asks, completely to the point. Why does it seem that everyone I know has an endless amount of bluntness and curiosity but no delicacy?

"Well, it's somewhat of a family crisis," I admit, and so she rests her chin on her small hand, prepared to listen to a lengthy story. "I don't want to get into all the details, especially since I don't know a lot of them myself, but basically my sister has gone missing and nobody knows where she is or what she's doing. We don't even know if she's safe."

"Oh my goodness. That's horrible! I am so sorry that happened," Professor Lontelle apologizes, looking genuinely surprised. I'm not entirely sure what she was expecting, but I can say without a doubt that that was not it. "Have you notified the police?"

"My brother did yesterday, but as it turns out, there's not much they can do," I reply with a shrug. "They're conducting a small investigation as the circumstances were pretty suspicious, but since she's an adult, she's legally allowed to cut basically everyone out of her life if she really wants to. Not that I'm saying that's what happened."

Professor Lontelle ponders this a moment before responding, "I don't suppose you believe anything bad has happened?"

I nearly laugh. "Last night instead of sleeping, my brain decided to come up with a list of every morbid thing that could ever happen to a person and then imagine that thing happening to Amorie."

The short professor shakes her head slowly. "Don't do that Alexis, you'll drive yourself insane. Though, I do wonder why nothing about it was on the news."

"Well, she has only been missing a little over a day. I don't think it's exactly a national emergency yet," I joke, but there's really nothing funny in what I'm saying at all. In fact, everything I'm saying is way too casual for how I should be acting. It seems my attempts at remaining cool and collected with Andrew yesterday morphed into a sort of terrifying calmness that makes me feel even more guilty than I already am.

"Don't use your humor to mask your feelings; that's very unbecoming," Professor Lontelle chastises, reading my mind. *I can always count on you to call me out on my bullshit, Professor.*

"Well, then." I peel my eyes away from her and stare at the clock on the wall above her head, because if I keep looking at her shocked face I might burst into tears. "What do you propose I do?"

"That depends. What do you want to do?"

"What do I want?" I rip my eyes away from the clock and force myself to restore eye contact with Professor Lontelle. "I want to know what happened, and I want to find Amorie unharmed. I want to see her smile again and I want to see my brother's expression when he realizes that the love of his life is not really gone forever. That's what I want. But I don't believe that any of this has to do with wants. That's not how life works," I answer, slightly taken aback by the passion in my voice. I'm not much of a sap, but there is something about the relationship between my brother and Amorie that fills my heart with more joy than I would get by being in a relationship myself. Nothing makes me happier than seeing those two together.

"And why doesn't life work that way? I see no reason you shouldn't at least attempt to find her," Professor Lontelle replies. "At least inform the news people about this."

"I highly doubt that's going to do anything. If she was just casually milling about the streets my brother would have found her by now."

"Oh goodness, you're starting to sound like me. My cynicism is rubbing off on you." The Professor laughs. "I understand what you're going through must be unspeakably difficult, and I will pray for Amorie. I'm just worried that this will damage your heart of gold."

"Whatever gold you seem to believe is in there, I will protect, don't worry," I reply, flashing her a smile. I stand up and pick up my backpack. "I'll handle this. Thank you for the advice."

"You're welcome. And email me her profile, won't you? I'd like to be able to recognize the missing sister-in-law of my favorite student if I see her," she requests as I head out the door. Once I'm through the doorway, I turn around and throw my hands up in the air.

"Favorite student? But I'm not even in your classroom anymore!"

* * *

While taking on an entire investigation at twenty-one seems a little ambitious, especially given the fact that I eat ramen noodles for dinner pretty much every night, I'm shocked at just how useless the police are. They've questioned a few people as to where they last saw Amorie, if she has a history of running away from her problems, and if she has been acting strange lately or struggling with any mental health issues – all questions Andrew had already asked, and all that led to nothing. So even though trying to find an answer as to where she went and what she's doing is an entirely stupid decision, it's not completely ruled out.

Andrew is holding on surprisingly well, given the circumstances. He's taking a temporary break from his job at a programming company in order to help with the effort to find his wife, and even though practically no leads at all have been found, he's remaining optimistic. Or maybe he's just in denial. Either way, he's a lot calmer than I would be if my spouse were to suddenly disappear.

The strangest part of this situation is that no matter what you consider could have happened to her, there's always flaws. If she ran away, what triggered this? If she was kidnapped, how would someone manage to nab her in the middle of the day from her workplace, and why? If she had a family emergency as Andrew seems fond of believing, why hasn't she contacted anyone in over a day?

I roll this around in my head awhile as I absently start doodling in my calculus notebook. While nothing about her absence really makes sense, any sort of motivation for it is completely unknown. No one, not me or Andrew or the police or any of Amorie's friends or relatives has any idea where she could have gone, and it seems that unless someone tries to look beyond the surface of this, it'll remain that way.

I sigh as I close the spiral and push it further up my desk. My classes ended at four o'clock today, and I'm only one hour into my homework but already brain-dead. Most of my teachers have been pretty nice about not calling on me in class today, as my expression probably gave them a warning to ease up a little, but the amount of homework I have to do is still pretty tedious.

Then again, after someone you love leaves you, things that used to be important, like homework, seem to lose their value at a startling rate. Which of course means that an hour of homework is all I'm willing to put up with today.

I stand up and pull out my phone, checking to see if I have any texts from Andrew with updates, but there's nothing. Disappointed, I slip my phone into my back pocket and in a split-second decision decide to grab my coat and go for a quick walk.

The second I exit the dorm building, I regret bringing my coat. It's quite warm out for October, and while the sunshine is pleasant, I know that the extra heat is just going to make me want to end this mind-clearing walk faster.

Shrugging off this mild inconvenience, I start wandering about Belheart University's campus. While my school certainly isn't the largest or most prestigious, the amount of care it puts into maintaining its grounds is pretty impressive. The grass is still a vibrant green even at this time of year, and the small flower garden in front of the main library catches my attention for a fleeting moment as I stroll past it.

A couple of other students are also loitering about the scattered buildings that make up our campus, but I pay no mind to them. I do my best to shut out everyone and everything else, and to focus on the only thing that really matters at this moment – my sister-in-law.

For as long as I've known Amorie, she's always been smiling. Even in the most distressing of situations, she's the one to lighten up the room with her contagious, bubbly laugh. In fact, before my brother got with her, he was as cynical as Professor Lontelle. But now, now he's maintaining hope when it almost seems foolish to.

I wonder if that's a good thing.

I shake my head as a small grin dances on my lips, trying to fight off oncoming laughter. Despite sarcastic humor being pretty much my only method of coping with pain (along with blatantly ignoring it), multiple times I've been yelled at for joking around at incredibly inappropriate times, the way people sometimes get chastised for doing that at funerals. Little do most people know, it's not because we're cruel; it's because we miss somebody too much.

My phone starts to ring, causing my heartrate to skyrocket in hopes that Andrew has some good news. My hand flies into my back pocket and I answer it without even seeing who's calling.

"Alexis," a familiar voice greets solemnly. I release all of the breath I didn't even realize I was holding in. It's not Andrew, that's for sure; it's one of my childhood friends, Lauren, who had long since moved a couple towns away. We still keep in touch, however, but right now is a pretty anti-climactic time to realize you want to check back in with someone.

"Oh, Lauren, how are you?" I ask out of politeness, despite not really wanting to talk right now.

"I heard the news, that's what's up," she answers.

"About Amorie?"

"Yes."

"How did you know about that?" I question, thoroughly surprised. As far as I'm aware, there's still nothing in the news about this, so how did she even find out?!

"Andrew called me yesterday, asking if I knew where she was. Frankly, I didn't even really know *who* she was," she admits with a sheepish chuckle. The purse amount of desperation it would take to actively seek out your sister's old friend in order to ask her if she's seen someone she's never even met twists my stomach in knots.

Amorie and Andrew don't deserve this, and if Amorie's disappearance really *was* a personal decision she made, I'm going to have to find her just so I can yell at her for a few hours.

"Oh." As it would seem, feeling my stomach tie itself in knots really impairs my ability to form intelligent sentences, too.

"I just wanted to know if you two were alright, and if you heard from her yet," Lauren says. "I also want to apologize. I really don't know anything."

"You don't have to apologize for something silly like that; I wasn't expecting you to know anything. Actually, I wasn't even expecting Andrew to call you in the first place. I can't tell if it's sweet of him to ask someone with such a loose connection to her for information or if that's just a really bad use of time," I comment, turning on my heels so I can start walking back to the dorms.

"It's both," she decides. "But please tell me the both of you are still hanging on. I assume you are, because your humor is definitely intact."

"Oh, we're both as fine as we can be. It's just such a difficult concept to fully wrap your mind around that no matter how many times you think about what could have happened, it seems like nothing *really* could have happened, and that this is just a drawn-out nightmare," I confess. I can practically hear Lauren nod through the phone.

"That happens a lot," she agrees. "It's denial."

"Woah," I start, stopping in my tracks. "Woah, woah, woah. Andrew's definitely in denial, so you're spot on there, but me? He's convinced she's just at her dying grandmother's bedside for god's sake. I, at least, realize that there's a possibility she could be in real trouble."

"Sounds like you're in denial about being in denial. That also happens a lot," she replies with a laugh.

"Whatever." I dismiss this conversation with a flick of my wrist, not that she can even see it through the phone. "I'm going to head back to my dorm, so I'll talk to you later. Let me know if you hear anything, and I mean *anything* about Amorie. Even if it's that a friend of a friend caught a glimpse of a girl who's about 5'6", has light brown hair, and blue eyes."

"Alright, I'll keep an eye out. Let me know if anything happens, okay? I hope she returns home safely," she says, and then for good measure she adds a quick, "I'll be praying for you guys."

I place my phone back into my pocket just as I re-enter the dorm building. My room is on the second floor, and I almost trip on the stairs as I make my way up, most likely due to my lack of sleep.

At this point in time, the only thing that really sounds appealing is going to bed, but since it's not even six yet I know Gigi's not going to let me even touch my pillow, and my suspicions are confirmed when I open the door to our dorm and see her stuffing random piles of papers into a large black garbage bag.

"You're actually cleaning?" I exclaim, closing the door and hanging up my coat on one of our coat hooks.

"You bet," she replies, giving me a gutsy thumbs-up.

Twenty minutes in and I'm the only one actually cleaning while she just stands, scrolling through her phone. At least she's holding the trash bag.

And, hey, cleaning makes a pretty convenient distraction.



Photos by Rachel Miller



Rise from the Ashes (continued) – by Sam Andersen

Chapter Two

Dreams are odd things. Especially when the dream feels so realistic you forget it's a dream entirely. And when reality starts to blend into your dreams, all you get is a mess of confusion. A mess of horrifying confusion.

My current dream started off more as a memory. My dad and I were "fairy catching" as he liked to call it. We would visit the fields of weeds and flowers near the playground about a mile from my house and try our hardest to find fairies hidden in the greenery. We would go once a month at sunrise, since that was when fairies were "most active."

"Misty!" he calls to me. "I found them!"

I rush over to my crouched dad and kneel down next to him. The flower-like weeds stand tall and just underneath is a patch of dandelions. On the golden tufts are several small sparkles of light. The fairies!

I reach out and delicately scoop a few into my hands. The colorful sparkles dance around to a song only they can hear. Their tiny feet tickle my palms and I let out a giggle as they continue their dance.

My gaze flickers to my dad whose face is glowing with an expression much like my own. He puts his hand on my shoulder and peers down to watch them as well.

When I look back at the fairies, their lights have dimmed out and the dancing has stopped. Before I know it, I feel a liquid seeping between my fingers. The fairies are melting in my hands!

I shriek and fling the remaining goo into the field. The weeds begin to grow tremendously and wrap around my legs. They pull and I fall to the ground in time to see my dad dragged away by more overgrown foliage.

"Misty!" he yells to me as his form becomes smaller and smaller.

"Daddy!" I thrash within the weeds' grasp, but the harder I struggle, the firmer their grip becomes. "Don't go!"

"Misty!"

"Misty!"

"Misty!"

I bolt upright, my mind still half-asleep. The first thing I notice is the sound of the VE. I never turned it off before I fell asleep. The second thing I notice is I'm no longer the only one in the room.

Panic seeps through me as I glance around the room at the creatures staring back. One man towers seven feet or so and his curly yellow hair frames his square face. Near him stands a woman with shiny, silver hair and claws so long they make my blood run cold. Another man with a bald, egg-like head stands to the right of them. He has no ears at all, but instead has an extra eye in the middle of his forehead.

I switch my gaze to meet the red eyes of the last creature in the room. He stands around my height and has blond hair with vibrant streaks of red making it appear as if his hair is on fire. This man is none other than Griffin Phoenix. My husband.

"Morning, dear! Didn't mean to wake you, but I wasn't expecting you to be passed out on the sofa when we came back," he says while running a hand through his hair. "Sleep alright?"

I think back to my nightmare, but nod anyway. No use trying to explain it.

He seems satisfied with my weak nod and moves on. "Great. Introduction time. Misty, this is Welford Albatrose." He waves in the general direction of the three-eyed man. "And these are the Billiards, Landsome and Silvana." The large man gives a curt nod while the claw-lady raises a hand in a sort of wave.

Griffin turns on his heels so that he's facing the group. "Everyone, this is Misty."

"Wow, Phoenix, I have to admit I seriously thought you made her up," starts Welford. "I mean, *you*. Married. To a *human* no less, which you met, wedded, and bedded within three months. You see where I was coming from when I said I didn't believe you?"

"Oh ye of little faith," he responds. "If I set out to do something it gets done."

I focus my gaze on the carpet while the group continues to talk about me as if I weren't in the room.

"She seems a little young," Landsome chimes in.

Griffin defends, "Well, I'm young, so that would make sense."

"You're a different kind of young."

The conversation continues and at some point Griffin sits down next to me. I slowly inch away to the point where I am pressed up against the sofa's arm. If I am discreet enough about it, I could make it into the kitchen without much of a scene.

I keep my eyes down and stand up during a moment of heated debate between the men. Moving like a ghost, I make it into the kitchen without much of a hassle. Relief washes over me as soon as the door closes, separating me from the monsters.

"Hey, Misty. How's it going?"

I scream at the scratchy voice and whip my head up to see a small troll with huge ears and beady eyes sitting on the kitchen table. Once recognition hits, I release a breath. "Hi, Ram. Don't scare me like that."

Griffin calls from the living room, "Everything alright in there?"

"Fine! But you're running out of food!" the troll shouts back.

"Ram, if you eat all my food again, so help me I will--"

"Yeah, yeah. You're fine, Houdini. Go back to gossiping with the girls."

I met Ram the same day I met Griffin. The two were traveling around for Griffin's magic act and when the deal was made between the magician and I, Ram was alongside us the whole time. He's actually the only one I feel comfortable around. Which is saying a lot since he's a smart-mouthed troll.

"So, how's the married life?" Ram asks casually while munching on a block of colored cheese.

I lower myself into the chair across from him. I'm sure I won't be missed in the living room. "It's nothing like I imagined, that's for sure."

He takes another bite. "It never is."

While that may be, there are some things you imagine that should be true. Like your husband is a human, and the two of you will continue living on Earth, or that his friends won't be something out of a story book.

Ram must have guessed what I was thinking because he says, "Hey, it's not so bad here. Just a little different. You'll get used to it in no time."

"If you say so," I mumble. A moment of silence passes over us. Ram tears off another chunk of cheese and tosses it into his mouth. "I think that's gone bad. If you keep eating it, you'll get sick."

He shakes his head. "I'll be fine. Trolls are like goats; we can eat anything."

A small smile makes its way to my lips. Silence encases us again, but the atmosphere is more comfortable than it was outside. Every now and then, an uproar of laughter drifts in from the living room, but neither one of us makes a move to find out the cause.

After a few minutes, Ram finishes his cheese and stretches his arms. "You're pretty quiet," he notes, aiming his charcoal eyes at me.

I stare down at my clasped hands resting on the table. "I don't know what to say." What kind of conversations can you hold with someone of a different species?

Ram pauses to think, "What's your favorite food?"

"Key lime pie," I answer without missing a beat. "The café I used to work at made excellent pie, especially key lime." He nods and in turn I ask him his favorite food.

He scoffs. "It's too hard to pick one. That's like asking a mother to pick her favorite child. Then again, Mom always did have favorites."

The thought of Ram's family stirs my curiosity. "So you have siblings?"

"Yep. Fifteen of 'em."

"Fifteen?!"

"Oh yeah, and let me tell you, I was not one of the favorites. She did like me over some of the others, though."

And I thought my family was large. Six kids is nothing compared to sixteen. I wonder how his family gets by. I'm about to ask him what his home life is like when the kitchen door swings open. Griffin strolls in and immediately heads over to the pantry. He scours the contents inside for a minute before giving up and turning towards Ram and me. "What are you two anti-social butterflies doing in here?"

"Being social with each other," Ram answers.

Griffin crosses his arms. "You wouldn't like to be social with the rest of us out in the living room?" His gaze shifts between the two of us, indicating the question was intended for me as well. Ram shrugs, causing Griffin to roll his eyes and head towards the cabinets. "Do we have any tea?" he asks while throwing open several cabinet doors. I know we do and, in fact, I know which cabinet it's in, but I keep quiet and let him find it on his own.

Ram stretches and moves from his perch on the table to the chair across from me. He rests his head in his hand and nonchalantly asks, "So when are you going to take care of the problem?"

"I have many problems, Ram. You're going to have to be more specific," he answers without looking up from the back of the tea box he found.

"Try the Godzilla temporarily sealed under Fenal."

A stronger uneasiness than the one I'm accustomed to fills me. I look towards Ram for clarification or elaboration, but he keeps his gaze on Griffin. Griffin, in turn, sighs before setting the box on the counter and facing Ram. "I'll get to it, okay? I just want the magic to settle and strengthen before I nearly get killed again. In the meantime, I have other matters to deal with."

Ram switches his focus to meet my eyes, but instead of speaking to me, he states, "It's been almost four months, Phoenix."

Griffin hisses, "Ram. I know."

"I just want you to be prepared." With that, Ram hops off the chair and disappears behind the kitchen door.

Griffin releases a heavy sigh once the door shuts. His gaze travels to me, and he looks as if he only now realized I was still in the room. I quickly break the eye contact. I feel him stare at me awhile longer before he instructs, "Make the tea and meet us in the living room." He then proceeds to follow Ram.

I close my eyes and reflect on the fact that I know nothing about the works of this world. The creatures and the monsters and the many dilemmas that plague my husband. Or my husband in general for that matter. But knowing there's an underground monster which could surface at any moment only pushes my dim outlook on this world further.

I fetch the kettle from underneath the sink and set the water to boil. Another round of laughter drifts into the kitchen, only causing me to feel more like an outsider. Of course, the only way to stop being one is to make your way inside.

A high-pitched whistling interrupts my thoughts. I turn off the stove and hunt for some acceptable teacups. A set of four solid navy blue cups sit in the first cabinet I open. Nothing else is inside, so I search through the rest of them. Inside the farthest cabinet are two cups – one red and one black – mingled with a few china plates and glass bowls. This kitchen's organization is a confusing mess.

With the mismatched teacups and steaming kettle placed on a silver platter (found while rummaging through the other cabinets), I take a deep breath and remind myself that I don't need to be scared. I'm safe here.

I push open the kitchen door with my shoulder and as soon as I step foot in the living room the cups begin to rattle on the tray. *Calm down. You don't have to be scared.* I swallow and steady my grip on the tray.

"I'm telling you, a search will only be a waste of time. If you don't know what to specifically look for you will never find it." Griffin glances up once I set the tray on the coffee table.

Just as I am about to sit and make myself as invisible as possible, the three-eyed being, Welford, grabs one of the blue cup and raises it in my direction. I stare at the cup in puzzlement while he continues the conversation. "Well, what other means are we to take? She was the only one who knew how to-" He stops short and waves the cup at me again, this time making eye contact. I'm still at a loss. He rolls his eyes and demands, "Tea."

I immediately fumble for the kettle and pour the hot liquid as gracefully as I can manage. As soon as I finish, Griffin holds up the red cup and carries on where Welford left off. This world has very traditional roles.

My hands begin to shake violently again as I pour a clumsy stream into his cup. *You pour coffee all the time, Misty. Tea isn't any different.* Only it is when you're serving monsters.

I set the kettle back on the tray and quickly sit down on the farthest side of the sofa. The room is silent, and I can feel eyes on me, but I refuse to look up.

Griffin's voice cuts through the quiet. "Are you okay?" I nod without looking up. "Really?" Another nod.

A deep voice (Landsome's as he is the only one I haven't heard speak yet) questions, "Does she talk?"

"Yes," Griffin answers. Then in a quieter tone, "She just hasn't recently."

Welford chuckles lightly. "Oh, I would love that! A wife who does not speak. No more complaining, or speaking out of place." Yep, traditional roles.

"Sad to say, unless you are married to a mute, those women don't exist," a sarcastic feminine voice cuts in. I glance up slightly at the claw-lady. She has her arms crossed and a small frown decorates her face. "You should learn to appreciate what you have, Albatrose."

Silvana redirects her focus to me and our eyes accidentally make contact. I hold her golden-eyed gaze while she stares back just as intently. "My, your eyes are striking."

The compliment catches me off guard. I quickly look down and try to fight the small smile appearing on my lips. I end up giving into it when Griffin agrees. "Aren't they? It's like staring into an ocean of sapphires."

"Speaking of gems," Landsome cuts in, "the last ingredient is a garnet."

"Just a regular garnet?" Griffin asks.

"No. There is a certain garnet it calls for."

"How the hell are we supposed to find that specific garnet?"

"There's a guardian. We find him, we get the gem."

I stare at the twisting dark leg of the coffee table and allow my thought to drown out their conversations. I wonder how my sisters are. If Iris has been released from the hospital yet or if the whole "Elixir of Health" was actually a sham and she's still clinging to her fading light. If Mom is having an emotional breakdown because *another* one of her children ran away. If my brother is faring better than before he left.

If they are wondering the same things about me.

A movement to my left pulls me back from my mind. Griffin and the others all stand and make their way to the front door. He turns and calls to me, "Are you coming?" Silvana and Ram look back at me as well, while the other two are already out the door.

I shake my head even though I'm not entirely sure where they are going. It wouldn't matter anyway. I'm still not up for exploring outside of the house.

"You sure?" he presses. I only shake my head again. Even if I did want to go, I'm not dressed and there's no way I would make the others wait for me.

Griffin gives me one last look as if he can't believe I don't want to join him and his strange entourage. I pull away from his burning gaze and he leaves soon after. The door firmly shuts behind him, abandoning me with my thoughts.

The freezing feeling from earlier returns, but it morphs into a burning sensation causing my body to break out in a sweat. I stand up and begin to pace around the room. Walking helped the few times before.

I carry the tray into the kitchen, pour the still steaming tea down the sink, and wash out the two used cups. If I distract myself, the uneasy feeling will diminish and there's certainly enough to occupy my time with.

I start with the kitchen. Soon enough, all the cabinets have been emptied with their occupants scattered across the counters and kitchen table. I pause to admire the array of random silverware, dishes, small appliances, and cans. Already, I had to toss out a few of the expired cans (and the ones that were revolting (i.e. freeze-dried cockroaches).

Nothing matches, but even so, I attempt to create some sort of order. All the dishes live in the upper left cabinets. Turns out there are a total of eight cups (four blue, two purple, one red, and one black), five plates (four white with black calligraphy, one solid black), and three bowls (same design as the white plates).

A slight ringing echoes in my ear like an alarm's ghost after the siren has been shut off. I busy myself with repairing the remainder of the kitchen, but with silence as the only background noise, the ringing enhances.

"Maybe if I talk to myself it will make whatever this is better." It didn't.

I pick up a large wooden box the size of a cat. It easily weighs the same as a cat, if not more. Four different knobs decorate one side of it and the top is a type of black screening. I turn it over and a plaque on the bottom reads: *Fundaa's Radios established in 1745. A radio!*

I play with the leftmost knob and static soon follows. The next one adjusts the volume while the third one doesn't appear to do anything. The last knob switches between stations. I toy with it until a melodic voice fills the room backed by a gentle tune.

"-Shouted out across the field, but the meadow turned the echo to a whisper-"

I fall back into one of the rough wooden chairs and stare at the radio. The voice flows as sweet as honey, and the ringing in my head stops.

"-Would have stayed, but every cry became a whimper-"

My stomach growls, interrupting the song. I prepare myself a bowl of soup now that I know where everything is. Worry sets in when I see how low the food supply is getting, but he should know about that. He eats here, too.

The song ends once I sit back down and start eating. An overly enthusiastic voice announces, "And that was Eclipse's *Echo Meadow* off of her new album *Magic Three* releasing later this month." Her chipper voice resumes the ringing and I groan in annoyance. "And she's coming to perform at Fenal Festivanza. I just know she'll kill the crowd!" Unable to bear her shouting, I turn off the radio and finish my soup.

My next target is the living room. I use the towels from the kitchen to dust the shelves lining the back wall. I wipe the bindings of various books, reading them as I go. *The Makings of a Man, A Magician's Secrets Revealed, Timing is Everything, Potion Masters, Au Revoir Rabbits: Disappearing Tricks for Experts*. Why would a real magician need books on how to perform fake magic?

I move on to dust the few empty birdcages and other small sculptures strewn about the room, but a sharp pain in my stomach causes me to stop short. I feel my lunch start to make its way back up and I rush to the bathroom in time to throw up a stream of black liquid.

Panic erupts in me at the sight and it's as if someone flipped a switch inside my body. Instantly everything aches and I break out in a sweat again. I abandon my task and instead crawl into bed in an effort to sleep off the impending illness.

My mind drifts between consciousness and sleep. I think of my family again and what they're doing right now. Whenever now is. Was this how Iris felt when she was dying of pneumonia? Did she lose track of time and reality all together?

At some point Griffin barges into my room, only he's not Griffin exactly, but a darker, larger version of him. And it's no longer my room, but the meadow from my dream earlier.

Scary Griffin pounces and throws me to the ground. He climbs on top and pins my arms in the dirt as I struggle and scream. "Know your place!" he snarls, an inch from my face. Then, like before, the melting comes. Scary Griffin's grip loosens as his form melts onto my skin, cool and wet just like the spring rain.

My eyes open, but it takes a moment to blink away the darkness. When the colors finally return, I see Griffin towering next to me. I shrink back, unsure if he's real or not.

"You're finally awake," he states softly, answering my unspoken question. "What the hell happened? You seemed fine yesterday." Yesterday? How long have I been sleeping?

I try to lean over in an attempt to read the nearby clock, but the effort alone sends my head swirling. I relax back into the bed and lift a hand to my forehead. A damp cloth lays across it.

My eyes travel up to Griffin's crimson ones. He stares back with uncertainty. "You need to talk to me, Misty. What happened?"

The thought of trying to explain how I feel when I don't even know myself exhausts me. I close my eyes and slowly shake my head. Nausea overcomes me again, but I don't have enough energy to throw up.

Griffin grunts in annoyance. "Misty. Speak."

I don't move.

"Misty!"

Tears sneak out from under my closed eyelids and my throat becomes drier than the scorching desert it already was. I roll over to my left side, away from Griffin, and start to cry. My head pounds harder with each sob. The cloth slips off, but I make no move to grab it.

"Hey." His voice is softer. He reaches over and grabs my shoulder, gently turning me back to face him. "Ocean Eyes. Tell me what's wrong so I can help."

The pressure in my head lessens the longer he touches me. I look up to him with teary eyes and squeak out, "I don't know. I'm hot. I'm cold. My head's ringing..." He removes his hand from my shoulder and the pounding rushes back. "Please, make it stop...please..." I bury my face in my pillow and lay limp.

The room is quiet for a few minutes, and when I lift my head, Griffin is gone. My eyes fill with tears again, and I lower my head in defeat. Figures he would leave. HE's very good at disappearing, especially around me.

"Turn around or you'll suffocate yourself."

I manage to flip to my back. The room begins to spin slowly, but I can see Griffin standing next to me with a round glass bottle filled with a clear liquid in his hand. He removes the cork in the top and instructs me to sit up. Once I do, he shoves the bottle into my shaking hands.

"Drink it and you'll be fine within ten minutes. Possibly longer, actually. You look really ill," he notes with crossed arms.

I pour the liquid down my throat without a second thought. Any chance at relief I'll take. It tastes like metallic water, but it goes down easily and soothes my throat.

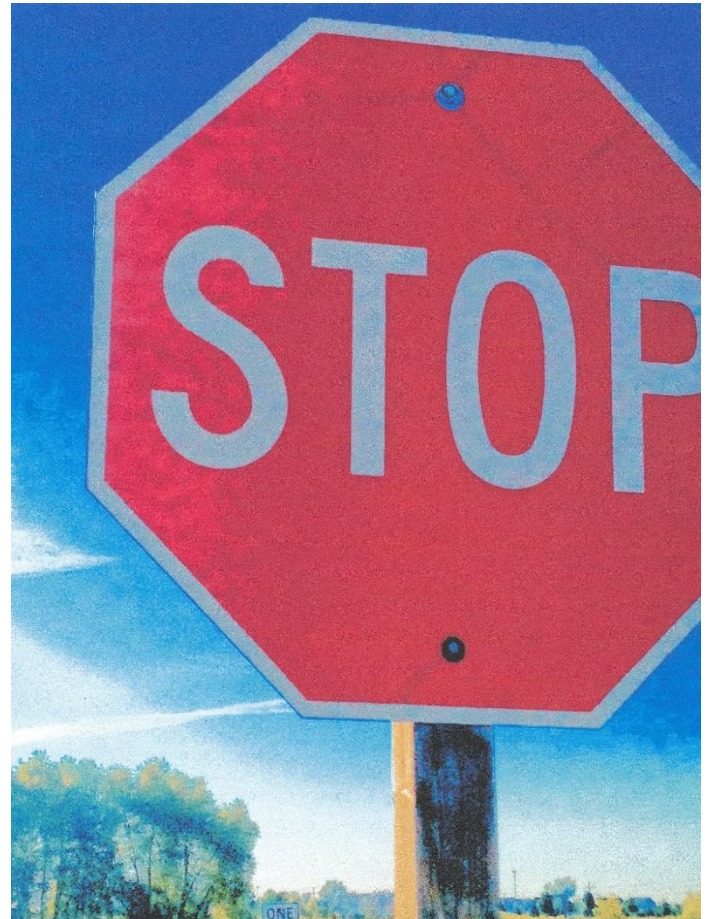
Griffin watches me finish it off, then takes the bottle back and stuffs it into his jacket. “Now, calm down and let the elixir do its magic.” I comply and lower myself back under the blankets with a sigh. He watches me for another minute before exiting silently.

For the first time since yesterday morning, I feel calmer- less disoriented. The feeling doesn’t last long, though, as my stomach starts rumbling. It feels like waves are crashing inside and before I know it, I’m violently vomiting on the carpet. More of the black liquid comes with each heave, staining the red oriental carpet. It looks as if someone spilled fifty bottles of ink on it.

Griffin returns in an instant, glancing at me, then staring at the carpet. When he looks back, his eyes are wider and filled with worry. “That’s not supposed to happen,” he says, as if it’s my fault. “That’s not supposed to- you’re supposed to-” He dashes out of the room without finishing his thought and I’m left with my misery.

When he comes back, he’s talking into a black hourglass-shaped object held next to his ear. “I gave her an Elixir of Health and she just threw it up. Along with a lot of magic.” A muffled voice comes from the other end, and Griffin shakes his head. “I swear, if I’m killing her-” The voice cuts him off and this time he nods. “Yes. Thank you.” He taps the top and bottom of the object before hiding it in his jacket and turning towards me. “I called the doctor. He’ll be here soon. You will be fine.” I’m not positive which one of us he is trying to reassure.

Photos by Rachel Miller



Miraculous Fanfic – by Olivia Schlossmann

Pro-Prologue:

"I SHALL DESTROY PARIS!" the Akumatized victim screeched as he knocked down a building. The citizens scream and run away from the teetering building. Ladybug and Cat Noir rush in to save those who are still in the skyscraper. They saved all but one.

Prologue:

"Pound it!" Ladybug and Cat Noir said after they defeated their latest villain.

"I have to go, bug out!" Ladybug said as she turned to swing out of sight.

BEEB! BEEB! Suddenly Ladybug turned back into Marinette.

"Don't look!" she cried, throwing her hands up to cover her face.

"I think it's too late for that," Cat Noir replied. "And right now, I need you to follow me."

Cat Noir took off running and Marinette sighed as she sprinted after him.

"Marinette," Cat Noir started as soon as they were both in a smallish alleyway, "let me show you who I am beneath the mask." After he transformed, he took her hand.

"You're...you're Adrien!"

Part One:

15-year-old Mya awoke in the rubble of a fallen building clutching onto her mother's ring.

"Why am I—" Then the memories came rushing back. "No...Ladybug...Cat Noir...they left me..." Mya slips on the ring as she starts to cry.

"A girl forgotten and alone. Go, my Akuma, and bring her justice!" Hawkmoth said as he let the purple butterfly go out into the world to find Mya.

Mya sat in the darkness, tears still running down her face, watching a butterfly flying towards her. It lands on her ring and disappears, then Mya hears a voice in her head. "Hello, Lady Noir, I am Hawkmoth. With the power I'm giving you, you will be better than Ladybug and Cat Noir. You will be the best superhero ever! All you have to do is get me Ladybug's and Cat Noir's Miraculous!"

"Yes, Hawkmoth, I shall bring Ladybug and Cat Noir to their doom!" A black film enveloped her body, then disappeared. Mya stood upright and walked out of the rubble.

Part Two:

Adrien sat at his computer staring at Alya's Ladyblog.

"All this time I didn't know. How could I have been so stupid! All the evidence points to Marinette!" Adrien exclaimed. "How didn't I—"

"Magic," Plagg interrupts. "Magic keeps people from finding out unless the miraculous holder tells others to their faces."

"You had to interrupt me?" Adrien stares pointedly at the Kwame.

"What? I didn't want you repeating the same thing over and over."

Just then the computer screen's Ladyblog was replaced with a girl's face. The girl had black hair, violet eyes, pigtails, and cat ears.

"Hello, Paris! I'm Lady Noir, and I've come with an im-purr-tant message. I have come to have revenge on the so-called superheroes. Meet me where my riddle says,

"What building has the most stories?"

"That's the riddle! Hope you can find the paw-lace, bug out!" Then the screen went back to the Ladyblog page.

"Oh no," Adrien whispered. "Plagg! Claws out!"

"Noooooo!" Plagg yelled as he got dragged into the ring. Adrien transforms into Cat Noir and jumps out his window after leaving a note that he was at the park.

Cat Noir walked into the Dupain-Cheng's bakery.

"Hello," Cait Noir told Mrs. Dupain-Cheng, "I need to see Marinette."

"She's at the park," Mrs. Dupain-Cheng replied, astonished.

"Thanks!" Cat Noir said over his shoulder as he ran out the door and to the park.

Part Three:

After Marinette saw the Lady Noir video she ran out the door, "I'm going to the park," she called to her mother. When Marinette got there she looked around and saw Cat Noir sitting in the tree in front of her.

"Hello, kitty," she called out.

"Hello, Princess," Cat Noir replied as he climbed down from his perch and stood in front of Marinette.

"Do you know the answer to the riddle?"

"Uhhh..."

"It's a riddle, so it doesn't mean how tall..."

"A Library!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, the one with the most stories is, or should be, the Bibliothèque François Mitterand!"

"I'm not convinced."

"Libraries have books, books have stories, Bibliothèque François Mitterand has the most stories," Cat Noir explained impatiently.

"Fine, but I need to transform."

"Then do it," Cat Noir replied.

"I can't do it here! Not in public!"

"Then I'll wait up here while you run off and transform. Call me when you're back in business." He climbed up the tree as Marinette ran off.

Part Four:

Cat Noir sat in the highest branches in his tree. His eyes followed Marinette as she disappeared into a clump of buildings. A few seconds later his rod started to vibrate. Cat held it in front of himself. The small screen was occupied with Ladybug.

"Hello," Ladybug started.

"You done?"

"Yep."

"Where are you?"

"I'm coming right now."

"I'll be waiting." He put away his rod and scampered down the tree. Cat Noir looked around and saw Ladybug striding toward him from an alleyway.

"Let's go," she told him, and swung off. Cat smiled and sprinted after her.

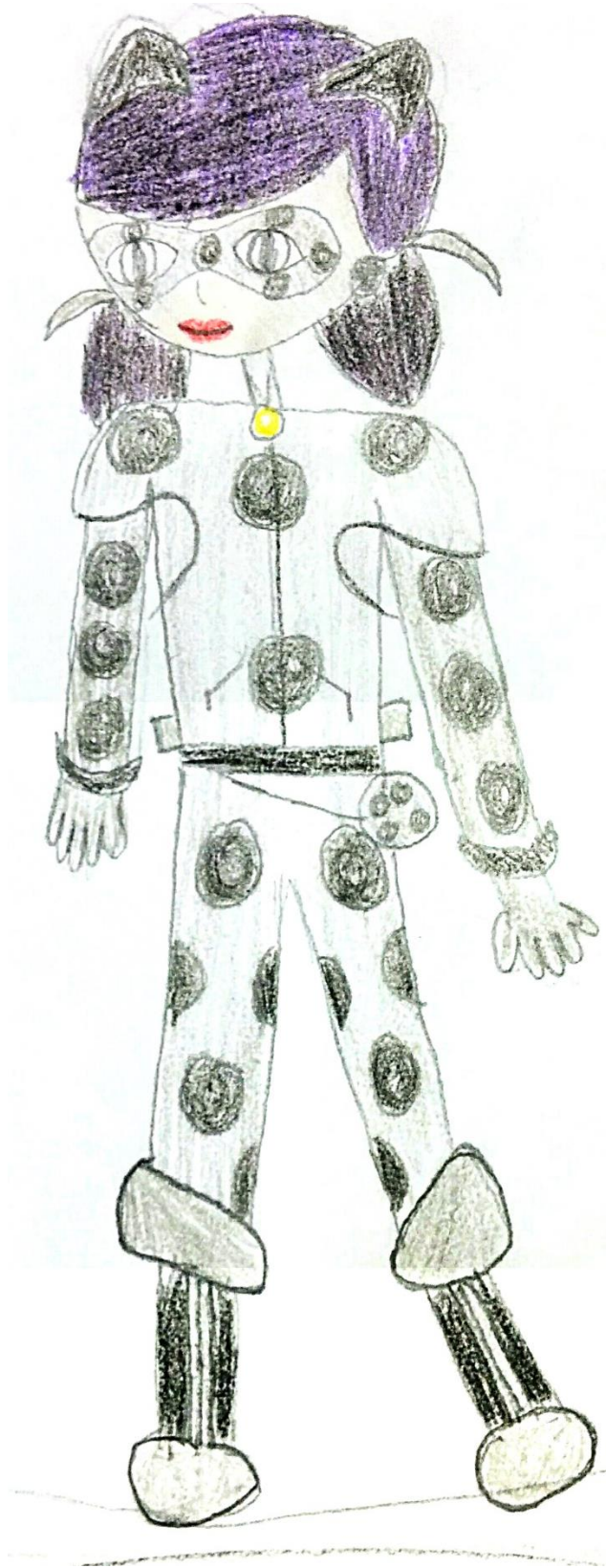
"Where do you think she is?" Ladybug asked.

"Maybe inside," Cat Noir replied

"Maybe on top of the towers."

"Maybe hidden in the garden."

"Maybe behind you." Ladybug and Cat Noir spun around to see Lady Noir.



Ladybug – by Olivia Schlossmann

Differences Aside (a Labyrinth Fanfiction), Part 2 – by Taylor Bradley

Slowly, Sarah opened her eyes. It was as dark in the Labyrinth as it was in her world. She could barely see. After a minute, her eyes adjusted and she could make out the walls of the Labyrinth...and the castle beyond the Goblin City. *That's where I'm going. Again.*

Sarah was standing in front of the door to the Labyrinth. *It feels like I just did this yesterday.* She bounced Toby gently on her shoulder. "Well...come on, feet." She stepped up to the door and reached out for the handle, but before she could touch it, it began to swing forward. Quickly, she jumped back as the door creaked open, breaking the quiet of the night.

"Sarah come soon?" asked a gruff voice.

"She said she needed time to pack and get her brother, but she should be on the way, yeah."

A lantern lit up the faces of her two best friends. "Ludo! Hoggle!" she shouted, happily.

"Sarah!" the two yelled in unison. Toby squirmed and wiggled.

"Oh, sorry, we'll be quieter," she whispered. Hoggle walked up to her holding a lantern. She got down and hugged him, then tried her best to get her arms around Ludo's giant build. He was an enormous creature with long, brown fur, massive hands and feet, horns on the side of his head that curled down, small but pointy teeth, floppy dog-like ears, and small brown eyes. On the outside, Ludo looked a bit ferocious, but he was really a gentle giant who could get along with anyone.

"Wait, where's Didymus? And Ambrosius?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, they left a few days ago for another kingdom. Ambrosius had a vet appointment. They should be back in a week or so. Nothing was wrong with the dog; it's just a long journey."

"I see. So, it's just the three of us this time."

"Sarah come to help." Ludo grinned.

"That's right, Ludo. Whatever the Goblin King is up to, we're going to stop it." She turned to Hoggle. "Has anything else happened other than the disappearing goblins?"

Hoggle thought it over for a minute. "Ummmm...no, not that I know of. Ludo and I were just checking up on everything: The Fireys are still playing with their heads, the Four Cards are still giving riddles, one Door Knocker is still deaf, and the other is mute, the Junk Lady has even more junk in her trunks...think that's everything."

"If that's the only thing, it's a good sign," Sarah said. "Maybe we caught it early." She looked at Hoggle and smiled. *Maybe this won't be like last time. After all, I've done this before. And I have two of my most trusted friends with me.* She laughed to herself. *And to think, when I first met Hoggle, I thought he was a fairy-killing monster.* Realization took a good whack to Sarah's face. "Hoggle? Where are the fairies? Last time they were right here by the entrance."

The dwarf gasped. "You know what? I forgot about them! Boy, some Fairy Exterminator I am! Come to think of it, I haven't seen *them* all day either."

"So the goblins *and* fairies are missing. That's even weirder. The goblins make sense, I mean he's the *Goblin King*, but what would he want with fairies?"

"Got me," Hoggle shrugged. "But we ain't gonna find out just standing here." The doors creaked open again, revealing the enormous maze. Hoggle and Ludo began to walk towards it, but Sarah lagged behind, hearing the Goblin King's voice, as if he was right behind her, whispering in her ear.

"You have thirteen hours in which to solve the Labyrinth before your baby brother becomes one of us...forever."

Sarah looked at Toby, who was sleeping on her shoulder, his small fists holding her shirt loosely. "You're not going to get him this time," she told the castle quietly. "I'm not the same girl who summoned you months ago. I know your Labyrinth, and I know you. Therefore, I'm not going to make the same mistakes. I've played your game before, so even if you want a rematch, I assure you, Goblin King, you will *never* have power over me.

"Sarah?" Hoggle called from around the corner. "You comin'?"

"Yeah, right here."

She caught up with them and the three and a half of them – counting the sleeping baby – walked along the narrow pathways of the Labyrinth. "It feels like I was just here," Sarah mumbled.

"You mean you think we went in a circle?" Hoggle asked.

"No, I just mean a few months goes by so fast. Everything is so familiar."

"Yeah, seems like yesterday you were runnin' through this thing as clueless as ever...no offense. You beat it eventually. And it's a rat of a king. Now you just have to do it again. And it'll be easier this time, because you know what to expect."

Sarah smiled, some of her anxiety leaving. "That's true. I've done this before. I know to watch out for oubliettes, tell the Helping Hands to throw you up instead of down, and never eat peaches."

"Yeah...sorry about that."

"Hoggle, it's alright. You made up for your mistake. You were scared, so you did what you did, but then you came back and helped us fight Jareth." A shiver ran up her spine. She usually tried her best not to say his actual name.

"Thanks, Sarah," Hoggle smiled. "You're a true friend. Speaking of which, what you 'spect he's up to this time? Think he's after the baby? Revenge? Both?"

"I'm not sure. It's all...very weird. Missing goblins tells me he's planning something *big*, which is why he needs his, ummm...minions. But the fairies? That throws me off."

Sarah stopped suddenly. *That's it.* she thought. *That's why he took the fairies.* "It's a distraction."

"Wuh?" Ludo asked, tilting his head.

"He only took the fairies to keep up from finding out what he's really up to. He's trying to throw us off his trail."

"Like a red herring?"

"Exactly, Hoggle." Sarah nodded. "So, what we need to do is ignore the fact that they're missing. What's most important is that neither the goblins nor their King have been seen in a while."

"Right. Let's keep going," Hoggle agreed, along with a grunt from Ludo.

He almost tricked me. Again! If we kept thinking about the fairies he could've had us right where he wanted us. Curse you, Jareth! Whatever you're planning, you won't get away with it. This is just like last time. I defeated you then, and I can do it now.

"So, how have things been these last few months?" Hoggle asked, after a few more twists and turns.

"A lot has changed, actually. I mean, Dad still doesn't notice me a lot, but Toby and I are getting along much better. Guess you just sort of form a bond once you save someone from a crazy Goblin King, hm?"

Hoggle laughed. "Guess Jareth *is* good for something. But what about your, uh, stepmom?"

"Karen? Things are good between us, too, I guess. I mean, I appreciate her more and don't look at her like an evil witch anymore."

"Yeah, but that had nothing to do with the Labyrinth. What changed?"

Memories flooded Sarah's mind. Ones she had pushed back long ago. "I...I don't know. It...it doesn't matter. What matters right now is stopping Jareth." *Darn! Said his name again.*

"Uh...yeah, right," Hoggle said, a bit confused. "So, then, what's the plan?"

"Well, I guess we have to figure out just what he's doing before we can plan against it. For all we know he could be...I don't know, at a four-month hair appointment or something."

"Good one, Sarah, but really, what could he be doing that takes that long? Other than pouting. Bet losing to you really damaged his ego."

"That's alright. He has so much, it'll heal quickly."

"True."

"If I had to guess, I'd say revenge. I don't think he wants Toby this time. He wouldn't need goblins for that really, right? He could just do it himself if he really wanted to. No, I think it's me he wants now. He wants a rematch to show his will is stronger."

"Well, he's got you. You're here now. Maybe...maybe that wasn't the best idea."

"No, Hoggle, if was good to bring me here. If you hadn't, I couldn't help. He wants me, he's gonna get me."

"What Sarah do?" Ludo asked.

"I'm not sure yet," she smirked. "Maybe mess up his hair."

They laughed a kind of laugh only good friends can share. But it was interrupted by an odd noise that echoed through the walls.

"Did...did you hear that?" Sarah asked, the smile fleeing from her face.

"Think it was Ludo's stomach."

"Wuh?" the beast questioned. "Nuh uh."

"Well, what else could it have been? Face it," Hoggle stated, "something just didn't agree with you. Nothing to be ashamed of 'er nothin'."

"Nuh uh. Not Ludo."

"I don't think it was him," Sarah said, quietly. She stared up at the tops of the Labyrinth walls as if expecting something. *Something's out there.* she decided. *And it's not friendly.*

Again, a ferocious sound tore through the silence. "A'right. It wasn't Ludo, I guess," Hoggle agreed. "But...but, I ain't never heard anything like that. Sounded like...like a lion, 'er something."

"Ludo scared."

"It's alright," Sarah said. But she wasn't quite sure exactly who she was reassuring. "Whatever it is, I'm sure we can handle it."

"Uhh...yeah, right," Hoggle nodded, though he didn't sound too certain.

Sarah took another step, trying her best to focus on the task at hand.

Snap!

"Careful, Sarah."

"That...wasn't me."

They stood, frozen as popsicles. Something was close. Something was angry. Something was after them. Sarah was paralyzed, staring at the tops of the walls. Waiting. Dreading. Fearing.

Everything was silent. No one moved. No one spoke. No one took a breath. After a minute she began to wonder if maybe they were safe. *It might have left. Maybe it was just Ludo stepping on something without knowing. Maybe –*

A monstrous roar echoed through the Labyrinth, pounding on Sarah's skull as the beast leapt onto the wall in front of them. It was nothing like Sarah could have imagined: Rocky, dark gray skin, a build like a large dog, bat-like ears, sharp teeth, blood-red eyes, large hands and feet, and enormous wings.

Sarah's breath caught in her throat as it eyed her, growling. "H-H-Hoggle? What is *that*?"

"Run!" the dwarf screamed, darting down the next turn with his limpy little legs.

Sarah and Ludo exchanged glances, both in shock. The creature bared its teeth and leapt from its perch. The two ran after Hoggle, screaming.

"Hoggle?!" Sarah shouted. "Hoggle, where are you?" The creature pursued them, taking flight. "What is that thing?!" *This isn't right.* she thought, frantically racing down another path. *I didn't see this last time. I didn't know Jareth – the Goblin King! – had monsters like this! He just had goblins! That's where his title comes from! Goblin King, not Gargoyle thing!*

"Sarah!" came a familiar voice. Hoggle! But she couldn't tell where it was coming from. The roaring and running had woken up Toby, and he was crying right in her ear.

"Hoggle? Where are you?!" She darted left, Ludo on her heels, and saw him a few feet in front of her. "Hoggle, what do we do?!"

"This way, just keep runnin'!" He went down the next path, and they followed, wondering how long the monster was going to keep this up. Sarah turned Toby the other way, so he couldn't see the monster anymore. Her heart was racing and she was *really* glad she was wearing gym shoes. What was going on? What had happened to the Labyrinth? Before, it had seemed like a crazy place full of zany, yet nice people all ruled by a total pig! But now...now it had *monsters*?! Sarah couldn't understand it. "Where are we going?!"

"Forwards!"

"But what are you-" But he had gotten too far ahead to hear her. She just had to trust he had a plan. They ran for who knew how long, and Sarah felt like they were going in circles. Every so often she turned around to see if Ludo was keeping up and if, perhaps, the Gargoyle had gotten sick of chasing them around.

That didn't seem like it was going to happen anytime soon.

"Hoggle?!"

"Almost there!"

"Almost *where*?!"

"Just keep runnin'!"

I hope he knows what he's doing. Sarah thought. *When did the Goblin King get the power to summon Gargoyles?! Then again, his powers are kinda all over the place: teleportation, crystal balls, poisoned fruit, illusions, not to mention he turns into an owwww "WHOA!"*

Her train of thought was interrupted as she fell through the ground itself, down, down, down into a large hole. She landed flat on her back with an "Oof!" while clutching Toby to her stomach. "Ouch. Alright, that one hurt. Oh, Toby, are you okay? It's okay, don't cry." She sat up and started bouncing him, then looked around. "Ludo! Are you hurt?" He got up and groaned, but nodded after a minute. "Good. Hoggle?"

"Over here, you two." The dwarf was standing over in the corner, holding a set of keys. "Pretty good plan, huh?" Lead us to an oubliette so the monster would lose us."

"Hoggle, you're a genius," Sarah told him, walking over to hug him again. "Do you know where all of these are?"

"Most of 'em. They usually don't move as much as everything else in the Labyrinth. Only the walls shift most of the time. The things in it, like the oubliettes, rarely do."

"What about the castle?"

"It's never moved an inch. I don't think it can."

Good. Maybe if the walls cooperate we can remember how we got there last time, so I can give the King a piece of my mind! I mean, unleashing monsters on your innocent subjects? Too far, your Majesty! Kings are supposed to protect their people, not attack them!

"Darn," Hoggle mumbled, as a bunch of cleaning supplies tumbled out of the small door he'd unlocked. "Broom closet. I always mix that up." He closed the door and put the lock in its right side. "Why is there a broom closet down here, anyway? Not like anyone who gets stuck down here is gonna feel like cleanin'. Here we go!" The door swung open again, revealing a long, stone pathway. Sarah remembered this from last time, walking with Hoggle, and, once again, getting duped by Jareth, who had been disguised as a beggar.

Ludo nearly got stuck in the small doorway, but they thankfully all made it out of the oubliette. The hall was dimly lit, and a bit damp. Toby was fine through the stone-faced False Alarms they passed, but started to whimper when it got darker. Sarah started to bounce him on her shoulder. "Shh, shhh, it's okay. Nothing scary down here."

"Right," Hoggle nodded. "Long as we don't run into the Cleaners, or a dead end, or Jareth when we aren't prepared, or get stuck in the Bog of...oh, you're trying to comfort the baby. Got it. Well, we'll be outta here soon. See? Here's the ladder."

"You two head up. I can't carry Toby and climb at the same time." She got down on her knees and placed Toby on the ground. Sarah rummaged through the baby bag, took out the baby carrier, strapped it on, then put Toby inside. He laughed a little and looked up at his big sister. *Wonder if he's old enough to remember anything from last time. Would he recognize the Goblin King? Is he going to remember me wishing him away for the rest of his life?! With every rung Sarah grabbed, her guilt weighed heavier. Things were different between them. Toby wasn't a bother anymore. He was her brother. She was happy to look after him.*

Well...she didn't get urges to wish him to foreign lands with psychotic monarchs.

Sarah poked her head through the circle of light at the top of the ladder and saw Hoggle and Ludo waiting for her. Ludo helped her out, while Hoggle covered the hole up with the large, brown pot that hid it. In the distance she heard a furious roar. "What was that thing?" she asked nervously. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Me either," Hoggle confessed.

"Looked like some kind of...rock monster. Ludo, have you seen anything like that before?"

"Nuh uh."

"Well...guess we can add that to the list of clues, right? Missing goblins, and now stone creatures. What could the Goblin King be *doing*?"

"Perhaps if you'd turn around," said a man with a thick British accent, "you'd find your answer."

Fear grabbed Sarah around the neck. *No...it can't be. How did he know we were here?* She glanced at Ludo and Hoggle, who both had a frightened look on their faces, and their backs turned away from the voice and towards the roaring and growling. Slowly, all three of them turned around to face the new person.

There he was. Jareth, the Goblin King himself.

He looked exactly the same as the last time they'd met: blonde hair that was teased and wild, and calico eyes – one watery blue, the other brown. He was dressed in a white, puffy pirate shirt, black leather vest, dark gray pants that looked to be a *bit* tight, and long, black heeled boots that went up past his ankles. Around his neck was an odd-shaped

silver pendant with a gold circle in the middle. It was so unique that part of Sarah wanted to get a closer look at it, to see if there was some sort of meaning behind it, but there was no way she was getting that close to Jareth's chest.

The only thing that looked different about the Goblin King was his current position. Sarah spoke quietly, but tried to sound confident, reminding herself of those six special words. *He has no power over me.* "Is there...any particular reason you're hanging upside down?"

Even though he was topsy turvy, Sarah could still make out his eye roll, followed by a sarcastic smirk. "Oh, well, you know, sometimes I just feel like finding a random spot in the Labyrinth, tying my ankles together, and hanging myself upside down to make all the blood go to my head. I'm weird like that. No, the goblins have apparently been setting these little rope traps all over the place again. So when I get them back, I have to kill them. And I don't mean that metaphorically."

Toby wriggled in his carrier, again making Sarah wonder if he remembered the Goblin King. "But the better question is," Jareth continued, "how and *why* you're here again, Sarah. Although I already have an idea..." he glared menacingly at Hoggle.

"Leave him alone," Sarah growled.

"Or what?"

"Well, you aren't really in any position to make threats. You have no power over me, remember? Even when you are *over* me."

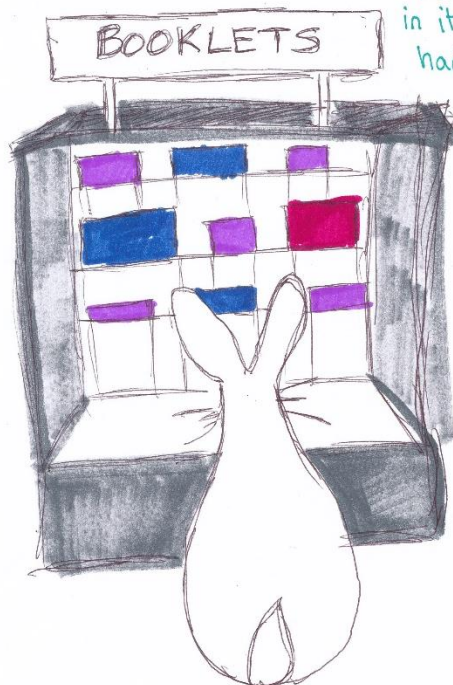
Illustrations by Hannah Taylor



The Bunny and the Lamp: Part 2 – by Melanie Anderson, illustrated by Karin Thogersen, YA Librarian

The Bunny and the Booklets

One fine morning while out for a stroll, the ever-curious bunny stumbled upon a vendor selling the most magnificent booklets it had ever seen.



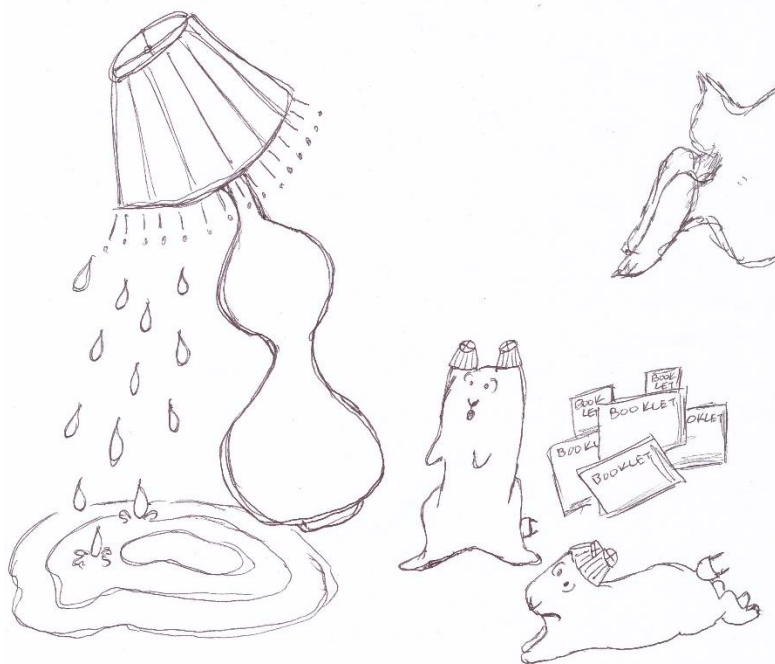
For the second time in its life, the bunny had fallen in love.

Except this time, instead of a spouse the bunny would be gaining a job.

Excited, the bunny rushed home to inform its family of its new job.

The lamp was worried, however.

The booklet-selling business changed people.



With one of the parents gone, the household was left in chaos.

The bunny children channeled their worry into destruction while the lamp just cried.

The bunny was too busy selling booklets to notice, however.



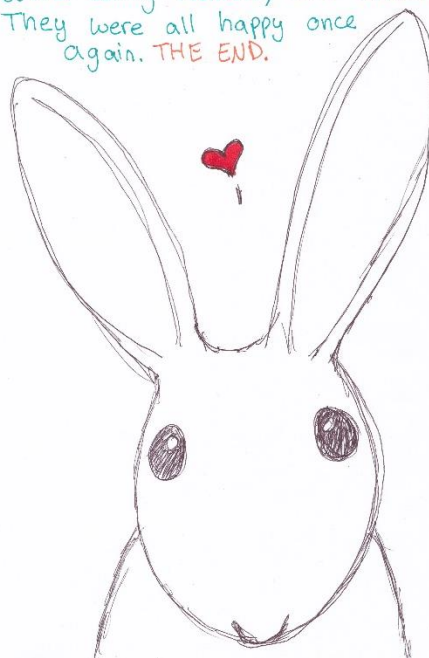
Sick of seeing the lamp in despair, Expensive-Looking Rabbit vowed to throw out all of the booklets and pamphlets in the house and get the bunny to return home again.



Mustering up all their cuteness, Glowball and Expensive-Looking Rabbit begged the bunny to come home.

"Please," they cried. "Let us be a whole family once again."

Realizing the children were most important, the bunny abandoned the shady booklet-selling business, and returned home. They were all happy once again. **THE END.**





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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 <http://www.huntleylibrary.org/teen-zine/>.