

Grace Mahony's Fiction Sampler

by

Grace Mahony

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Sponsor: Catherine Lewis

Second Reader: Lee Schlesinger

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Introductory Essay

When I was a child, I had a reputation among my teachers for reading during class and while walking in the hallways. It's a miracle I never hit my head on a pole. I read so many fantasy books that my mom tried to incentivize me into reading books she chose, such as *Jane Eyre* and Steve Jobs's six-hundred-page biography, both when I was in 6th grade (which I didn't understand and I didn't finish, respectively).

Surprisingly, it wasn't until high school that I seriously considered becoming a writer.

I wrote a couple of articles for my school newspaper and an odd short story for assignments here and there. Privately, I wrote fanfiction and developed my own original characters in notebooks, and showed no one. Everything changed for me at an author panel one day—I met one of my favorite authors, C.S. Pacat. She asked me if I was a writer. I hesitated at an answer. I wasn't published, I was just a depressed high schooler in a unicorn T-shirt who kept everything to myself. I didn't want to be an impostor, so I wavered, “well, kinda, technically...”

She responded, “If you write, you're a writer.”

I'd never felt that kind of validation in my life before.

Perhaps it's cheesy to say, but I believe language is capable of profound connections between humans across space and time. Words on the page have driven me to tears and laughter. I want to tell stories that make people feel and experience.

I write for the same reason I watch movies—to escape and to explore.

Alongside my practically obsessive nature with books was an equal obsession with movies. My mom constantly likes to bring up the fact that when I was four years old, I watched *Home Alone* on VHS five times in a row. I'm fascinated by movies—the eye-catching visuals, the arrangements of shots that told a story, the way the actors embodied the characters and interacted with each other. I was able to escape the real world and explore the world of the movie. (I love anime as well, especially the work of Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai.)

It was an embarrassingly long time before I realized I could write for movies too. This is why I'm studying both creative writing and film. My brain is oriented for visuals, which is why I tend to focus more on the physical aspects of the story when it comes to my writing. Every crook of the finger and strand of hair must be accounted for (though I'm trying to do it less). I've learned to develop my writing to make space for the reader as well. I tend to try to over-explain things, to make sure 110% that anyone who reads my writing will understand what I'm trying to say. Now, I've learned to write with greater nuance. I don't want to hold my reader's hand as if they were a child—I want to open a door and invite them through.

Inspiration strikes in the most random of places—one of the short stories I'm most proud of, *The Town of Arietes*, was inspired by a real girl and her black goat. A friend and I visited a sheep and wool festival in upstate New York three years ago. In a tent, I was struck by a girl with long blonde hair spinning wool. It felt like a fairy tale come to life, even if she was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. Later in the day, she participated in a goat show with the only black goat. A beautiful young girl caring for a black goat, an angelic-demonic pairing I would've never imagined seeing in real life, remains stuck in my mind even now. I came up with *The Town of Arietes* on the long drive home as the night settled and my friend dozed in the passenger seat.

In *The Town of Arietes*, an unnamed narrator finds themselves in a small town after their car breaks down. The town is mysterious and empty and the narrator is saved by Ella after nearly getting attacked by ravens. Ella and her black goat, Nyx, accompany the narrator around town, taking them to her house to meet her mom and then to the mechanic. The narrator ends up attending a funeral of a towns person and meets the Mayor, a supernatural entity with a deer skull for a head. The narrator reveals their unresolved grief for their mother and the Mayor gifts them with a seed. They drive off in the morning with a newfound sense of hope.

Battle Horses came about when I watched a YouTube video of artists drawing horses based on their name. Racehorses tend to have really wacky names, such as Dust Commander and Burgoo King. These artists took their names literally and drew horses that commanded the wind and liked burgers. I thought, “why not make this a real world?” and thus, *Battle Horses* was born—horse girls meet *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. I think this could be developed into a middle-grade story with a wide appeal to horse girls of any age.

Julianna Vitano is the dark horse (heh) finalist of the International Battle Horse Derby with her Water-class horse, Steamboat Billie. The reigning champion, Alessandra Lucid, is also Julianna’s rival and classmate from school. The final race is hot and intense, but after Alessandra’s horse’s powers backfire, Julianna emerges as the winner. She’s more concerned for Alessandra, but Alessandra vows that she’ll race against Julianna again and reclaim her title. Julianna looks forward to it.

The Road to Tanastra (working title) started with *Star Wars* and ended up far, far away from *Star Wars*. I was inspired by the fandom concept of roleswap!Skywalkers, an alternate universe in which Luke became the prince and Leia became the Jedi. From there, I merged this idea with an older swords-and-sorcery story I wrote two years ago and developed the characters

of Alastair, the sweet prince, Alissa, the tough princess, and Theo, the lone hunter. After I came up with the protagonists, I had to come up with an antagonist. I didn't want to do the typical fantasy "evil empires" and "Dark Lords" tropes. I decided on a natural disaster and what's more disastrous than a plague?

Unfortunately, I inadvertently predicted the future—from essential workers to negligent governments to baseless discrimination to vaccination cards. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and I realized how more alike my characters and I have become, I couldn't have predicted the greater emotional insight that I have now. In the second chapter, a chapter that might've not existed in normal circumstances, Alastair is alone in an isolated house, forced to grapple with his loneliness while dealing with seemingly endless tasks that keep piling up. Alastair observes that it seems like no time has passed at all, even though it's been years, trapped in a cycle that feels like a prison, an observation I share with many during my time in quarantine.

My currently untitled alien story has been around with me the longest, since I was fourteen years old to be exact. It was a work-in-progress then and it's still a work-in-progress now. Yue is a human on a former capitalist colony on Mars. Earth has been abandoned and is now a tourist spot for aliens across the galaxy. With the colony's technology beginning to fail, Yue takes on the mission to go to Earth and find a way to save their home. Along the way, they meet a kind alien named Alekar, who's a part of a shifter species that can change from a human-like appearance to a wolf-like form.

I'm still developing this story. I want to explore topics like cultural appropriation, fashion fads, and how far someone would go for the right "look." Plus, since this is such an old idea that's come far from the original concept, I'm still juggling how far I want to keep going.

I want to write lots of different types of stories, from young adult to middle-grade to fantasy to science-fiction. My inspiration comes from observing my surroundings and absorbing the work of others, like C.S. Pacat, Leigh Bardugo, N.K. Jemisin, and more. As much as I want to escape and explore, I also know that the real world is never far behind. I want to go far with my writing while still keeping the sensitive and emotional touch I know I have. Like the fantasy author, Brandon Sanderson, said, “go deeper, not farther.”

The Town of Arietes

As you creep slowly up the road, your car lets out a rumble, then stops next to a small sign that reads, “Welcome to the Town of Arietes!” You get out of your car and lift the hood, but you can’t even begin to comprehend what the problem is.

The sun is setting, casting the sky in shades of red and gold. At this high elevation, you see the vast expanse of forest, colored in dark green and umber, and a singular bird, circling and circling around without beating its wings. You were driving for a while now and from the direction of the sun, you can tell you were driving west, but you struggle to remember where you were driving to or even where you were from. You squint at the sun, perhaps hoping it will give you an answer.

It doesn’t.

You need to find a mechanic, get your car fixed, and keep driving until something comes back to you. You shut the hood. You don’t want to leave your car behind, your hands lingering after you close the hood, but there’s no better plan in mind. You thrust your hands into the pockets of your aviator jacket and turn to walk to this town called Arietes.

Swathes of fallen autumn leaves cover the road like a blanket of orange. Your boots make crunching sounds as you approach the town. You fiddle with the chain of your locket. What looks to be the main street of the town stretches out before you and you step onto the concrete sidewalk. You see squat brown and gray buildings, shuttered storefronts, and neat piles of fallen leaves. Snow-capped mountains stand looming over the distant horizon. There’s not a soul in

sight. The croaking of ravens pierce through the air; black wings cast flitting shadows in the light of the sunset.

“Hey, newcomer,” says a voice from behind you.

You jump and swerve around. You didn’t hear any footsteps, but a girl stands behind you. She’s wearing a pair of overalls and a thick red plaid coat. Long blonde hair reaches down to her waist. She looks to be about twelve or thirteen. On the end of a green leash, she’s accompanied by a jet-black goat.

The gaze of the girl’s blue eyes and the goat’s goat eyes disconcert you. You take a step back and clear your throat.

“My car broke down on the edge of town,” you say, “I’m looking for a mechanic. Do you know where I can find one?”

“Merle is the only mechanic here and he’s on the *other* edge of town.” The girl’s lips smack as she talks. “I can walk you there.”

She blows a chewing gum bubble. It’s kind of annoying.

“Thanks, but I think I can manage,” you say.

“Nah, man, I gotta walk you there. This town’s unique. You don’t know what to do if you wander.”

“I think I can figure it out as I go along,” you say. You turn away. “Thanks for your help though.”

You continue down the main street. The girl and her goat catch up to you and they match your pace. More wings flap in the air.

“Dude, don’t look at this like I’m bruising your pride or something. I’m walking Nyx here anyway. This is our route after all.”

You continue walking. The girl doesn't relent. Her goat lets out a whine. The ravens' cries turn into a cacophony, their noises pound into your head.

"Hey." The girl stops you with a hand to your arm. "Take this. Give it to the birds."

She shoves a piece of bread into your hand. You look at her incredulously, but she nods at you sagely. There are so many ravens watching you from the trees now, their black beady eyes expectant. You hold up the bread and a single raven darts off a branch and snatches it in its beak. The rest follow, releasing the trees and the wind from their cloying presence. Your headache immediately subsides and you let out a gasp of relief.

"Hey, man," the girl says, "I told you. Here ain't like other towns."

"Okay, fine," you say. "Just take me to the mechanic. That's it. Alright?"

"Dope. I'm Ella by the way." Ella shakes your hand. "And I already introduced Nyx."

The goat, Nyx, lets out a *baa*. The three of you start down the road.

"So, you come to Arietes on purpose or you just happen to come by?" asks Ella.

"My car just happened to break down by here, that's all," you say.

"Where you headed?"

"West," you say, because you have no better answer. Ella only nods in response.

The wind blows around you, twirling leaves in its wake. It sounds desolate now without the incessant din of the birds. You shiver.

"Are there more people here or is the official population here just one girl and one goat?"

"Tonight's a special night. Everyone's gettin' ready."

"What's tonight?" you ask.

"Hey now, I can't go around revealing my town's secrets to a stranger," says Ella with a smirk on her face. "Tell me something about yourself. Why're you going west?"

“I...” Your voice catches. “I don’t really know.”

Ella’s gum smacks in her mouth. “You an amnesiac?”

“No.” You scratch your head. “I—I remember. I know I remember. It’s on the tip of my tongue. I’m sure I’ll know when I’m back on the road again.”

Ella nods. Nyx sniffs at a holly shrub in front of a darkened barber shop, its red-and-blue swirling pole unmoving.

“Now you answer my question. What’s everyone preparing for?”

“A funeral,” Ella replies. “We’ll see more people when we get deeper into town.”

You feel as if there’s nothing more to ask, so you stay silent. Ella blows another chewing gum bubble. The sunlight warms your skin as if you were butter on a pan. The only sound now is the *clop clop clop* of Nyx’s hooves on the sidewalk.

Soon you and your companions exit the ghostly main street, shuttered storefronts turn into large, simple houses. Most reach only two stories and each is painted in an uncommon color, like magenta and green and indigo. Flower boxes on windowsills overflow with herbs and blooms, scenting the air with fresh sweetness. A memory tugs in your brain, but you can’t piece it together. You come across a box of purple flowers hanging from a cream-painted house. Your eyes tingle and you clutch your locket tightly. Your palm begins to sweat.

“Hey, man, you okay?” asks Ella.

A breeze makes you blink. You take a few deep breaths and feel the sunlight warm your skin again. Your exhale comes in shudders. “I’m fine. Let’s just keep walking.”

“We can take a breather if you want. My house is right down this road.”

“I guess I could go for a glass of water if you don’t mind.” You notice your tongue feels like a blob of sandpaper in your mouth.

“Yeah, of course. Come on, it’s the blue house on the corner.”

Walking down this neighborhood now, you finally get some evidence that people actually exist in this town, besides Ella and her goat. The faint sound of a lawnmower, a dog barking, the sight and smell of a neat row of fruit pies cooling at an open window. You’re startled when you see a plump woman in an apron set down another pie. Is she feeding an army? Is this for the funeral Ella said everyone was preparing for? Whose death was so important that the entire town was going to be in attending their funeral?

Coming up to Ella’s blue house, you see a woman raking leaves in the front yard. She’s wearing a denim jacket and a red bandana over her blonde hair, the shade the same as Ella’s. When she looks up at the three of you approaching, she smiles, but her lips quickly purse together when she notices you. Her blue-eyed stare is intense and frightening, like the slimmer of a knife. You slow your pace as Ella rushes up to her. Nyx the goat rubs his horned head against the woman’s legs and she scratches him behind the ears.

“Hey, mom!” she says, beaming. “I found a newcomer by the edge of town.”

“I see,” Ella’s mom says. Her gaze remains on you. “Where are you guys going?”

“To see Merle. Car broke down.”

Ella’s mom nods. You take your hands out of your pockets and straighten your posture. Something about this woman really makes you not want to disappoint her. Making a good first impression sounds like a good idea.

“Ella has been a great help,” you say, hoping she doesn’t hear the waver in your voice. “I promise no harm has or will come to her.”

Ella’s mother seems to soften at that. “That’s quite a promise. It’s really Ella who’s protecting you here.” She puts down the rake and unties the bandana from her hair. Blonde wisps

escape her ponytail. “Why don’t you come in for a quick sit-down. I whipped up some cider and you all look thirsty.”

“Thank you.” You bite at the dry skin on your lips.

“I’m Abigail, by the way,” she says, walking to the front door.

The inside of the house looks mostly as you expect—wood furnishings, a gray sofa worn with use, the coffee table hidden under piles of papers, a little bed likely belonging to Nyx, lace curtains on the windows, and every available wall space covered with paintings of deer. You freeze. Stags, bucks, doe, hinds, all alive with strokes of brown, orange, and speckles of cream spots and shiny, onyx eyes. Most of their antlers are too big to fit the frame. Not every deer faces you, but you feel all their stares send shivers across your skin. They know. You’re the interloper and they know it.

“You like? I paint them, all folks who live around here.” Abigail brings out a tray laden with cups and a pitcher. “Are you okay with a little hard stuff? It helps with warmth.”

“I’m—I’m old enough for it,” you say, your eyes leaving the deer. “These deer live in the neighborhood? I can’t imagine one sitting down long enough for a portrait.”

“They stay still a bit if I ask,” says Abigail. “Most of the time, they want to take the painting home once I’m done with it. I actually just sent a painting over to the Mayor. He’s always wanted an Abigail original.” She laughs, it’s a warm, bell-like laugh. It calms you a bit.

“I see,” you say, sipping at the cider. Its apple and cinnamon warmth permeates your body and the tinge of alcohol buzzes straight into your brain and sizzles to your fingertips. “This is great cider. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. We don’t often get guests around here.” Abigail pours a cup for Ella and Nyx, placing his on the floor beside him. You resist the urge to stare at the goat lapping up the cider. “Your car broke down, you say?”

“Yeah, it’s an old machine. My mom—” You stop, words clog up your throat. Ella looks at you. Abigail gives a patient smile. Your fingers move to the locket on their own.

“Your locket hers too?” asks Abigail.

“Yes, it—it is, it was...” Your words fumble out of your mouth like fish flopping onto a boat deck. “Um, yes, she gave it to me...”

Don’t cry in front of this person, you tell yourself. Your eyes blink rapidly.

“It’s a nice piece. Looks like real silver. You take care of it now.”

“Uh, yes, of course.”

Ella swallows the rest of her cider. “Hey, mom, we should go. Gotta get to Merle before tonight’s thing.”

“Of course,” says Abigail. “I hope you get your car running again soon, stranger.”

You nod as you chug the rest of your cider, its sweetness almost sickly now and its heat pools in your stomach. Nyx *baas* in protest when Ella pulls him away from his unfinished drink.

“Hey, look, sorry about that. Mom’s kinda touchy about new people,” Ella says once you’re out and away from the house. “My dad was one, you see, and...”

“I get it,” you say hurriedly. “Please, I just—I just wanna get home.”

“I gotcha,” Ella says. She tugs at the green leash. “Come on, Nyx.”

Nyx lets out a *baa* and nudges his horns into Ella’s leg.

“Hey, man, why you gotta be like that?”

You all walk together with paces matching, not in a rush, but not slow either.

Right out of the neighborhood, Merle's garage stands out like a sore thumb. First thing you notice is that there are no fallen leaves in sight, leaving the dull, gray concrete exposed. A rusting maroon convertible stands on cinder blocks in the garage next to a tow truck. The air is chillier now. The sun's light now only a bleeding cut on the horizon. You wrap your jacket tighter around yourself.

An old man sits on a lawn chair by the open garage door, a baseball cap covering his shoulder-length gray hair. He appears to be napping, but you don't see his chest rising and falling with breath or his mustache fluttering with exhale. Panic creeps up your throat. Your fingers reach out, shaking, towards him.

"Hey—"

"Hey, Merle!" Ella shouts.

The old man then lets out a long, droning snore. You sigh with relief. Ella steps closer.

"HEY, MERLE!" She smacks the man's shoulder. "YOU GOT A CUSTOMER!"

Merle awakens with a jolt, his arms waving wildly. A frightened Nyx tugs Ella away before you can grab her. Merle calms down in an instant. He lets out a groan.

"Ella, my girl, I told you. There are better ways to wake me up!" His voice is deep and echoey, like a well.

"Yet it gets harder every time," says Ella. "Every snore gets you closer to the ground, Merle."

Merle chuckles. "It's where we all go, my child. I can only hope that the Mayor will oversee my funeral as well."

Your teeth clench at the invoked imagery of dirt, mounds of it around gray headstones spotted with bird droppings. Men in black robes and women in black veils dance behind your eyelids when you close them. Your fingernails dig into the flesh of your palms.

“Who’s this? A newcomer?”

“Yeah, uh, car broke down on the other side of town.” Ella kicks your shin and your eyes fly open.

“Ow!” You rub your leg with your other foot. “Yes, my car’s not working. I know it’s late, sir, but do you think you could take a look at it?”

“Of course, got nothin’ on my schedule now that my sleep’s been snatched,” Merle says with a pointed look at Ella.

Ella doesn’t react, only chews on some gum. A new piece, you suppose. “Not going to the funeral tonight?”

“Nah, my bones can’t handle that no more.” Merle walks over to the tow truck. “Let’s drive. Might just get back in time for—”

A *clop-clop* sound interrupts him. You turn around, expecting Nyx to be loose, but it’s a deer. A doe to be precise. A normal doe would dart away at the sight of humans, but this one strides confidently up to you, like a jock who knows their prom date will say yes.

She bites your sleeve. You try to yank away, but the doe’s teeth hold firm. More does emerge from the surrounding trees.

“Hey, what the—”

“Oh,” says Merle, “looks like it’s already starting.”

“Dude, we gotta go!” says Ella.

“But—what—”

“Everyone in attendance. Except for old geezers.”

The doe’s insistent now, her teeth stretching the fabric of your sleeve. The other does crowd around you. Panic bubbles up within you. “No, I—I’m not from here—”

“Stranger or not, the Mayor sent for you, man,” says Ella, pushing you forward.

“Please... I can’t—I can’t take another funeral.”

Ella stops, as well as the doe at your sleeve.

“We can’t ignore a summons from the Mayor, I’m sorry,” says Ella. Her voice is soft. “Just stay in the back, close your eyes, and it’ll be over before you know it. Nyx and I will be there with you.”

Nyx nudges at your legs. Tears threaten to trickle from your eyes.

“But why—why does...?”

“Mayor knows a lot of things,” says Merle. “Probably a reason why you’re being summoned. Heck, probably a reason why you’re here at all.” He scratches his chin. The back of his hand is a valley of veins. “I’ll check your car on ahead. Likely be right runnin’ when you get back. Just make it through, okay?”

Just make it through. Somehow those words strike deep into your heart. Made it up the mountain. Made it through the town. Made it to... now, a funeral for a stranger. Officiated by a mayor of a town full of mean deer who love paintings of themselves.

You nod. You’ll make it through. You’re not alone after all.

The deer lead you into the forest. A girl with hair the color of spun gold and her goat with an inky black coat follow close behind. You step off the concrete and into the forest.

The sun’s fading light cast the trees in eerie shadows. You feel as though you’re walking through a sepia photograph. The dusk is warmed, however, by fiery torches held aloft by the

townspeople, dressed in white cloaks. They swarm around you in droves alongside does and stags, as well as other forest animals. Squirrels and chipmunks scurry around your feet. You hear the wing beats of birds, camouflaged in the swelling night.

You see a clearing ahead and that's when you see the pyre. Your throat catches. The body on the pyre, covered by a white sheet, is sprinkled with the petals of purple flowers.

Ella places a hand on your arm. You're able to focus again. You see the townspeople, white cloaks billowing around them like bedsheet ghosts, surround the pyre. You can't see their faces under the hoods, but the feeling of the gathering is somber, but somehow also sweet. You smell all the smells of the town around you: apples, cinnamon, herbs, and leaves. The mountain air carries a whistle. The flames on their torches flicker. The people are silent and still.

The sound of footsteps approaching cause the townsfolk to look up and push back their hoods. It's almost thunderous in nature, you swear you feel the ground shudder with every beat.

"The Mayor," Ella whispers in your ear.

The Mayor steps in front of the pyre, in full view of everyone, holding a torch. A white cloak wraps around a crisp black suit. His hands are claws, his feet cloven hooves, and his head is that of a deer skull with only red specks of light for eyes. The antlers on his head are both vast and tall, like wings of bone.

You try to gulp, but your throat is dry. Ella hangs fast to your arm. You feel Nyx's furry body against your leg. Sweat pools beneath your collar. Your limbs are frozen in place.

The Mayor holds his torch aloft. The townspeople and the animals bow their heads. He sets his gaze upon the pyre. Your sweat turns to ice.

You take a deep breath. All at once, everyone, even the animals, even Ella, even Nyx, lets out an exhale.

You exhale. Everyone's torches, save the Mayor's, are extinguished. He holds it high once more, then casts it upon the pyre. The fire catches instantly, the flames lick the sky and everyone cheers. Your skin prickles with the unnaturalness of it all. Why? Your fists clench. Why is no one sad about this death?

The flames sink and the sparks from the fire flutter amongst the crowd like fireflies. The Mayor's arms are outstretched wide as if accepting a hug. More and more sparks dance around the townspeople, who are now cheering and crying and everything in between. You hear Ella snuffle beside you.

This must be the end, you think, I've had enough of this funeral. I'm done with shadows. I've got to get out of here. A firefly spark flits around you. You bat it away.

Then you see her...

"Mom!"

You yank out of Ella's grasp. You push past the people and the creatures.

"Mom!"

She flees from you, but you feel the rightness of it in your bones. You catch the shimmer of chestnut hair, the unmistakable scent of mint, a whisper of a bell-like laugh. This is where she's been, you think, trapped in this strange town, unable to get home.

"Mom, wait—"

She breaks through the throng and runs into the forest, her form melding with the shadows between the trees.

"No, stop—"

Nyx rams into your legs and you fall face first into the hard-packed dirt. He lets out an angry *baa*, but you don't bother trying to get up. You sob into the dust. "Mom, please..."

Strong hands wraps around your arm, lifting you up. It's the Mayor who sets you gently on your feet. Hot, fat tears streak clean lines down your dirty face. A white handkerchief appears in his hands and he begins wiping your face like a child. You turn to the forest, its cold tendrils chilling your skin. The Mayor shakes his skull head, pulling you closer to the heat of the burning pyre.

"I can't follow her there, can I."

The Mayor's gentle strokes on your face pause. He nods.

"She's gone—she's gone forever... And I—" You tug at your locket. Your voice dissolves to hiccups.

The Mayor takes your hands, your small human ones engulfed in his beastly claws. Carefully, so as not to scratch you, he places a purple flower in your palm. It begins to decay, turning brown and brittle. The petals turn to dust. You let out a small sob.

The Mayor's hands close yours once more into a fist. You look into his red, glowing eyes. You can't read an expression on his skull face. He opens your hand again and you see...

"A seed," you say.

The Mayor nods. He pushes it towards you as if to say *it's yours*.

So tiny and fragile, like a baby bird, your hand closes around the seed and you hold it close to your chest. You look up at the Mayor. "Thank yo—"

His hand lunges out at you. You fall to darkness.

You wake up in your car with a line of drool down your chin.

Then, it hits you all at once. You jump out of the car and you see you're no longer by the town sign, instead on a strip of unassuming mountain road. You search your pockets frantically.

There, in your left jacket pocket, you find a crisp, white handkerchief. Unfolding it gingerly, like a present, you find the seed. You let out a sigh, relieved that the memories of Arietes weren't a crazy fever dream. A piece of paper flutters out. Picking it up, you read, in thick pencil strokes:

“Dear stranger,

What a crazy night, huh! Sorry I lost you, but Nyx tells me you're safe and Merle says your car's all fixed. I asked the Mayor to deliver this to you, so I hope it gets to you before you leave. Sorry again. We didn't get to say goodbye. I personally prefer “see you later” anyway. Hope you come back to visit Arietes soon. I think the birds like you now.

See you later,

Ella”

You press the seed and the letter to your chest for a moment, next to your locket. Something in your body feels lighter now.

You get back in your car, which starts up easily. You're no longer by the sign that welcomed you to Arietes, but the sun begins to rise over the mountainous horizon. The seed feels warm in your pocket. With wheels towards the sun, you drive east.

Battle Horses

Julianna was the type of horse person who fed her horse first at dinnertime. She felt the most comfortable in stables, rather than surrounded by people, even if they were also horse lovers like her.

Even if they were also International Battle Horse Derby finalists, like her.

Julianna watched her horse, Steamboat Billie, chew her greens and oats. Her shimmering, blue-gray coat, freshly brushed, looked like moonlight or fish scales; it was fitting for a Water-class horse like her.

All magical horses belonged to one of the four elemental classes, though not all horses were magical. Julianna was the one who delivered Steamboat Billie three years ago at her grandfather's ranch, a filly descended from his most-prized stallion, Blackwater Rapid.

When Billie was born, Julianna felt it in her bones that she held a champion in her arms. Now they were at the most famous horse race in the world. Julianna was no longer just a nobody from a middle-of-nowhere town in Maine.

The reporters and commentators took back predictions and sputtered praise at the underdog on a Water-class horse. No Water-class had won since Genevieve Owens on her horse, Selkie Queen, in 1960, whose magical ability of turning into water got them a historic win.

As the night settled over them and her stomach grumbled, Julianna wanted to dig her heels into the dirt a little longer. Then, her stomach let out a long, almost painful whine. Billie's ears perked up and she looked at Julianna.

“Okay, okay, I’m going,” she said. Before she left, she refilled Billie’s water trough to the brim. “Make sure you drink all that before bed, okay?”

Billie let out a snort. Julianna couldn’t help but chuckle.

Julianna had hoped she stalled enough so that the cafeteria would be empty, but no, she spotted the other finalists chatting at a table with empty trays and cups around them: Cora Cavalier, on the Earth-class horse Vermont Ritz; Yumi Golden on Fire-class horse Comet Kai; and Johnathan Brown on Air-class horse Hi-Fi Hellspawn.

The press dubbed it “The Elemental Battle of the Century.” Not even in Genevieve Owen’s year had there been one of each of the Elemental classes as finalists in the International Derby. It would’ve been fitting, Julianna thought, if the last slot weren’t reserved for the reigning champion.

Sitting in the back and looking like she didn’t have a care in the world, reigning champion Alessandra Lucid, jockey of Air-class horse Thunderclap Champ, talked to no one, only sat alone with her eyes closed and earbuds in her ears. Even with her face relaxed, she looked tough, her fair skin marred by a ghostly-white scar that ran down the side of her face from eyebrow to chin, an accident from her first national derby. Her long, blonde hair was plaited over her shoulder.

Julianna’s eyes lingered on her for a moment longer before she turned away so no one could notice. Alessandra hasn’t talked to anyone outside of her team during the whole event, not even her.

She bit back a long sigh. Julianna hoped no one would rope her into a conversation. She had no energy for dealing with people right now. Getting food into her stomach was her top priority.

Working her way through a Salisbury steak, Julianna's mind wandered. She was keen to watch coverage and recaps of her semifinal race earlier that day. She reached for her phone in her jacket pocket. *Just YouTube or ESPN*, she reminded herself, *no Twitter or Instagram*.

Before she could turn on her phone, a figure approached her table. Julianna mentally prepared an excuse as she looked up. It was Alessandra. Her cold, gray eyes gazed down at her.

“Hey, Vitano.”

Julianna resisted the urge to stand up, to be looking at her and not up at her. Instead, she raised her chin, hoping it made her look like she shouldn't be messed with.

Alessandra simply smirked. “I saw your semifinal today. It was cool.”

Julianna's brain went into dial-up mode. What was Alessandra really saying? Was there a hidden meaning under the words?

“I'll see you tomorrow,” she said, before turning away. She dumped her trash and left the cafeteria. Her long, blonde braid swung down her back.

Julianna didn't register that the other patrons were watching until there was an eruption of whispers. She saw the three other finalists looking at her.

“How come she didn't talk to any of us?” Cora grumbled.

“I've never heard her do that before,” said Johnathan in a low voice.

Julianna's teeth grinded in her mouth. She turned to the three jockeys. If she didn't stop them now, the rumors could fly out of control. The Twitter threads would be endless.

“We went to the same jockey academy, that’s all,” she said. “Just some friendly competition.”

Julianna could see Cora Cavalier’s phone already in her hand and gritted her teeth harder.

It wasn’t public information, but it wasn’t exactly private either. Anyone could look up the Quebec Jockey Academy records and find that Julianna Vitano and Alessandra Lucid attended at the same time. If anyone went deeper, they would find that they even lived in the same dormitory. Go even deeper, they would find that Julianna attended a dressage class that Alessandra was a TA for in her seventh year.

Perhaps the most glaring thing that any researcher or journalist would find most interesting, however, were the winners of the Quebec Junior Derby ten years ago: seventeen-year-old Alessandra Lucid in first place and sixteen-year-old Julianna Vitano in sixth.

Did Cora Cavalier have a lot of followers? Would the press find it?

Of course! Julianna chided herself, *she’s a finalist!*

Julianna didn’t want to watch Cora’s fingers typing on her touchscreen. She hastily dumped her own trash and headed back to the jockey dormitories. No social media until after she won that trophy.

To many people’s surprise, Julianna wasn’t the type of jockey who trained right before the big race. Even though Julianna’s anxious side wanted her to do it right up until the last second, Julianna knew Steamboat Billie would just be exhausted and no good when it came to the final.

With no training on the following morning’s schedule, Steamboat Billie could rest her muscles and not use up her magic. Julianna, on the other hand, didn’t like to sit still. Her mom

always urged her to try meditating, but being left alone with her thoughts for an extended period of time tended to drive her into a spiral. She didn't like to sleep in either, she'd been trained since her academy days to wake up at dawn.

So, with time to kill, Julianna found herself at the Battle Horse History Museum. It was a grand building that looked more like a mansion than a museum, bathed in warm, golden lights with exhibits framed with velvet curtains and ropes. It wasn't Julianna's first time here, but it was her first time in disguise, dressed in jeans, a black hoodie, and a snapback hat with her own horse printed on it. It was the pinnacle of conspicuousness, Julianna thought as she put on the hat before she left her room, no one would think that a jockey would wear their own merchandise.

One of her favorite spots in the museum was the History Trot, a giant room shaped like a track that displayed the history of Battle Horses and the history of the Inter-Derby. Julianna was fascinated as a child seeing all the pictures evolve from blurry black-and-whites to glorious high-def color. She would stand in front of the screens that played clips from famous events on repeat for what felt like dozens of times until her mother gently pulled her away. Still, as an adult, Julianna felt the swell of fascination in her chest.

The beginning of the history wall started with a giant picture of the first known horse to have magic: a sleek black mare appropriately named Peppercorn. Ever since her owners discovered her abilities, more and more horses around the world began to develop their own.

Julianna walked along and scanned the newspaper clippings of the time: "Horses Growing Too Powerful?" "Can Humans Tame the New Horse?" "New Study on Possible Cause of Mutant Horses." She stopped in front of a portrait of a man in a white lab coat. His thick-framed glasses and his beaklike nose were his most dominating features and his shiny black hair looked almost wet in the grainy late-19th-century photo. The scientist, Patrick Hunt,

who discovered the mana seed that causes horses to develop their magic and developed the current elemental classification system. A mutation of the poppy seed, the mana seed only affected a percentage of animals of the *Equus* genus.

Julianna's eyes trailed over pictures of rainbow-colored zebras and a donkey that blew bubbles. She felt a little bad for them. Horses always hogged up the spotlight, especially in the States.

The history wall between then and now portrayed numerous events in horse history. Julianna walked slowly past clippings of horses that were suspected in murder cases, news videos about the Supreme Court case of *Hunt v. Aromax* in which Patrick Hunt's grandniece advocated against unethical lab testing of magical horses, and propaganda posters and videos from World War I, where the name Battle Horses came and stuck, and World War II, which featured soldiers atop horses in military gear and little ponies collecting scrap metal with kids. Julianna always couldn't help but laugh at the Uncle Sam poster that showed him and an Air-class horse dressed like a pilot flying in a plane together.

Then, there was the International Derby wall, starting with a photo of the founder of the races, Jeremiah Cook, with the derby's first ever winners, Olaf Watson and his Fire-class horse Onion Chef, in 1921. Julianna always thought Jeremiah Cook looked a little bit like her grandfather, with his olive skin, bushy beard, and ear-to-ear smile.

"I always thought Onion Chef looked a little bit goofy," said a voice beside her.

Julianna froze. Even from under her cap, she could tell who it was.

"Don't you think so? His eyes are huge! They follow you around," said Alessandra.

Julianna turned to face her. Her outfit was similar to hers: thick jacket, black jeans, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders, plus a plain black hat. A pair of aviator shades were tucked into the neckline of her shirt.

“What are you doing here?” Julianna asked before she could think. She couldn’t be following her, could she?

Alessandra unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it into her mouth. “This is a public place. I’m allowed to be here.”

“No, I mean—” Julianna froze as she heard a tour group pass by behind her. When they passed, she slowly relaxed.

Alessandra smirked. “Scared of getting caught? You’re allowed to be here too, you know.” she said with a joking lilt.

“No, I’m-” Julianna tried to keep her voice from rising. “If we’re even in the background of some tourist’s photo and they post it on Instagram and someone points out the two people who kind of look like Julianna Vitano and Alessandra Lucid, the tabloids and bloggers will have a field day and then our history will get out and spun stories and conspiracy theories will start flooding the Internet!”

Alessandra raised an eyebrow, but her smirk seemed to get a little wider. “Our history?”

Julianna felt heat from the tips of her ears to her cheeks. “You know what I mean. They’ll find out we went to the same academy, lived at the same dorm, attended the same classes.

They’ll find the Junior Derby we were in ten years ago.”

They’ll weave tales about the underdog underclassman and the rivalry with the reigning champion that rose from the schoolyard track.

But it was a rivalry, thought Julianna, just not to Alessandra. Julianna would never forget all that haughty look Alessandra gave her all those years ago after their Junior race.

“We were just classmates. Lots of people were classmates,” said Alessandra, blowing a bubble with her gum.

Julianna practically bristled. It annoyed her to see how indifferent Alessandra looked. She never took Julianna seriously, not then and not now either. She couldn’t understand what she didn’t know.

It was the year after Alessandra graduated. Dani, Julianna’s best friend from her hometown, were classmates too, but that didn’t stop rumors from flying about their relationship when a photo spread on the school forum of them sharing a bed. *Dani was heartbroken, her boyfriend dumped her*, Julianna tried to explain, *I’m just a friend who comforted her*. Dani moved away after they graduated.

What was the possibility of a journalist finding out about that hellish year? It might not seem great, but the probability wasn’t zero.

Julianna wasn’t completely out yet.

And Alessandra, spared by way of ignorance, didn’t care.

Julianna tried to mentally snuff her anger out like a candle. To cause a scene here would definitely reveal them. She needn’t waste her time with someone who didn’t care when they were “just classmates.”

“I’m going back,” Julianna mumbled, before turning away.

“You’re not gonna see the rest of the museum?” Alessandra asked. Julianna couldn’t tell if she was being condescending or genuinely confused.

“Not with you!” she snapped back and power-walked out of the museum. It wasn’t until Julianna was at the sidewalk corner that she hoped no one in the museum noticed her outburst.

She shook the thought from her head. She was spending the rest of her morning at the stables with Billie and focusing on nothing else but the race that loomed ahead.

Was it just coincidence, or did the powers that be find out and thought it would be funny?

Julianna pondered this as Alessandra strapped on her Canadian flag next to her. She hadn’t looked her way once since they were lined up together for the opening ceremonies. On Julianna’s other side, Cora took selfies holding her American flag as if it were her boyfriend. At least she had the decency to say hi beforehand. Next to Cora, Vermont Ritz’s brown coat looked fresh and well-brushed.

Julianna’s mind wouldn’t stop racing and the dull roar of the spectator stands didn’t help. Are they lining the finalists up based on geographic location? Well, that wouldn’t make sense with the lineup: Alessandra from Canada, Julianna from the States, Cora also from the States, Yumi from Japan, and Johnathan from England. Racing times? That’d be too on the nose. People would notice and call the administration out.

Julianna looked up and down the line. Coat color, maybe?

“One minute to start! One minute!” an assistant called out.

Julianna’s whole body went stiff. She quickly tightened the large American flag that was attached to her belt.

“Hey.”

Julianna turned to Alessandra, who looked straight ahead.

“Focus on a fixed point. Ignore the stares.”

“What?”

Alessandra didn't reply, but her Air-class stallion whipped his storm-gray mane. Thunderclap Champ's yellow eyes seemed to look through Julianna. She promptly turned away. Darn that cool-named horse and his trademark stare.

The commentators' voices echoed throughout the arena outside. A thunderous applause followed. The assistant waved his hands.

“Gates open in... three... two... one!”

The gates swung open. Alessandra didn't look at Julianna as she trotted out of the gate. Julianna's brain clicked into place and she guided Steamboat Billie forward in step with the other jockeys.

She'd been in this arena just yesterday for the semifinals, yet somehow it felt like a totally different world. The Battle Horse International Derby was the most-watched event of the year, rivaling the Super Bowl. That knowledge alone almost caused Julianna to stop entirely. She felt a cold chill despite the hot floodlights. She was definitely sweating. Was her face getting shiny? Were dark spots showing up on her jacket?

No, wait, she was wearing her helmet; her jacket was black.

Julianna took deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. She heard the announcer shout her name and the cheers that followed, but she tried not to break her concentration.

Find the fixed point, she told herself, *focus on Billie beneath you*. Her horse's strong muscles kept her mind grounded.

Before she knew it, they'd made the round and they were back behind the gate. Her flag was taken from her hands and her belt unbuckled. The final race was next. Julianna tasted sweat on her upper lip.

The other jockeys looked just as sweaty as Julianna. Yumi let out a long breath when her flag was unbuckled. Cora quickly took off her helmet to check on her hair. Johnathan and Alessandra, the only returning finalists, looked unfazed. Julianna wondered if they were just better at hiding it.

The bows and frills were done. Now, it was time for the real reason everyone was here. Steamboat Billie sensed her anticipation. She shook her blue-grey mane and flicked her ears.

"This is just like any other race. We do it as we always do," Julianna said, more for herself than Billie.

Julianna could sense a change in energy in the air. Yumi was doing some nerve-calming exercise, tracing something on her hand then putting it to her mouth. Johnathan seemed to be mediating, or just resting his eyes.

"Good luck, everyone!" Cora called out from her steed. "And thank you all for watching my pre-race livestream!" She said that last part to her phone, blowing it a kiss. A stream of hearts floated on the screen.

Julianna stole a glance at Alessandra, just as she stole a glance back. She turned away.

Voices—so many voices—echoed throughout the arena. Julianna could see the track through the slats of the gate. Any second now, the bell will ring.

The countdown signals echoed.

The bell rang. The gates snapped open.

The Battle Horses were off.

Roaring cheers and shouts rang out from the spectators. The thundering rumble of hooves drummed like a thousand heartbeats in Julianna's ears. Her focus was razor-sharp. One and a half miles per lap and they had to do three.

All five horses drew in close to the inner side of the track. Vermont Ritz was taking the front with Thunderclap Champ following close. Comet Kai, Hi-Fi Hellspawn, and Steamboat Billie clustered together a length behind.

A familiar burn began to ache in Julianna's thighs. Her mind filtered through hours and hours of research and racing footage. Yumi's Comet Kai didn't do her signature Sun Spark move in the first lap, which left opponents temporarily blinded and eating Comet's dust. This likely meant that all the racers will save their horse's powers for the second or third lap, when stamina was lowest.

Julianna kept steady, her momentum in tandem with her horse's gallop. Positions didn't change through into the second lap, when a low ring caught Julianna's attention. She changed her grip on Billie's reins and slowed her gallop. Just a bit.

A high-pitched squeal blasted through the air. Hi-Fi Hellspawn's short, golden mane stood out in spikes like a porcupine. Julianna's brain rattled and she felt her ears strain, but she moved back into the blindspot that Hell Pitch couldn't reach effectively. It lasted almost half a minute. Julianna could see Vermont Ritz faltering. Cora leaned dangerously off-balance. Did the sound knock her out?

Alessandra and Thunderclap took the inner lane. Hellspawn sped up, coming in second. Comet's speed didn't change. Julianna guided Billie into the inner lane and brought her back to

her faster gallop, going in to pass Yumi and Comet Kai. She didn't risk taking a glance to see if Hell Pitch affected her. Julianna was here to win.

Coming up on the curve, Billie was taking the lead on the pass. Dirt kicked up between them and Julianna felt it in her left eye. She blinked rapidly, feeling her eye water.

A bright light flashed from Julianna's right. Was Comet seriously doing his Sun Spark move now?

For a moment, it looked as if Yumi was riding the sun. As soon as the flash came, it went. Julianna saw black spots swimming in her vision. She refused to put her butt down. She visualized the track in front of her. They must be nearly done with the curve now.

The black spots refused to go away. An idea popped in Julianna's head. She closed her right eye and opened her left. She could still feel the dust and water in her eye, but at least she could see clearly. Billie galloped faster. Comet Kai ate their dust.

Only Johnathan and Alessandra stood in her way now. Thunderclap hasn't used his move yet and Julianna knew it would be saved for the final lap. The cooldown rate for Hellspawn's move would likely prohibit them from using it again so soon. There was rarely enough time to use a move twice, even in a three-lap race.

Julianna wondered if this was the time to use Mud Trench.

They passed the checkered flag. They were in the final lap now. The hoofbeats became rhythmic to Julianna. She could practically feel the lactic acid coursing through her arms and legs. Billie snorted, her nostrils flaring.

"Billie," she said, just loud enough, "Mud Trench, now!"

Billie snorted again, louder this time, and her blue eyes glowed. The ground rumbled. All around them, giant trenches formed on the track, the mud squelching and sputtering. These

trenches were huge, larger than the ones on the training track this morning. Forget trenches, there were almost canyons.

“Billie!” Julianna cried out. They couldn’t jump these! They would get trapped in their own trap!

Hellspawn tried to maneuver around the reformed track in front of them, inhibiting their speed. Julianna and Billie were catching up.

Billie shook her mane and galloped faster. That feeling, that ineffable feeling pooled in Julianna’s gut.

Her heart told her to trust her steed, so she did.

Billie leaped, graceful like a bird, over the trenches. Julianna felt Billie’s hooves as if they were her own feet. They landed just right, not too close to slip. The underdogs were now the powerhouses.

Beside them, Hellspawn’s front hooves slipped into the mud and Johnathan flew from the saddle. The airbags in his jacket activated. In the dust, Julianna made out his balloon-shaped outline. She stifled a laugh. That would look really bad for her if it were caught on camera.

Only half the track was left now and Alessandra was still in front of her.

She and Thunderclap were still in the lead by three-quarters of a length. Did Alessandra feel threatened enough by Julianna and Billie to use Thunderclap’s move? Or did she still think they were sure to win without it?

Use it, Julianna dared, I’m ready for it.

They were coming up to the curve now. If Alessandra was gonna use it anywhere, it was at the curve.

Julianna felt the hairs at her neck stand on end. The smell of ozone permeated the air.

It was happening—Clap Strike, the move that got Alessandra two consecutive championship wins.

It was also the move that Julianna and Billie trained for the most. Today will reveal to them whether all that training will be worth it.

Before Julianna could even blink, she felt a force strike the ground to her right. The smell of something burnt flooded her nostrils. Julianna swore to herself. Clap Strike wasn't emitting actual lightning, but getting hit would mean temporary paralysis.

The best part about Clap Strike was that the hits were completely random.

Julianna lips curled into a smile. Strikes hit all around her, close and far. Goosebumps crept all over her skin, under her clothes. Only luck could save her now.

She felt a strike hit behind her. The swirling dust kicked around Billie's hooves. She urged her to go faster. The final curve loomed ahead.

Alessandra's blond hair flapped like ribbons under her helmet. Thunderclap's galloping speed was constant, but Julianna could see the heavy rise and fall of his ribcage. He must be on the last legs of his stamina.

An opening between Thunderclap and the inner side of the track, too small for any horse to fit—other than a Water-class, known for being slim. Julianna guided Billie forward.

It was a tight fit. Julianna could practically feel the millimeters between her and Alessandra charged with electricity.

Just a little faster, Julianna urged, willing her thoughts to reach Billie. She leaned into the curve. She thought she felt Alessandra's boot tap hers, ever so slightly, but her mind didn't register. All that existed were the finish line and the sound of hoofbeats pounding the ground.

Just a little faster, just a little faster, just a little—

A loud horn snapped her back to reality. Sweat coated Julianna's face. The crowd's roar was wild. People jumped from their seats, cheering and waving flags.

Ah, Julianna realized. It was over.

Julianna looked around. The track was empty, save for her team rushing out to meet her. Alessandra was right next to her a second ago.

There, a few feet away, Alessandra kneeled beside Thunderclap. He was on his side. Smoke curled from his left flank.

Julianna resisted the urge to vomit. Billie's hard breaths filled her ears as they slowed down, farther and farther away from them. As Julianna felt strong hands help her off her saddle, a team of medics dressed in blue and yellow swarmed Alessandra.

Julianna was in a daze even when the trophy was placed into her hands. She didn't remember the automatic answers she gave to the press. She didn't even remember if she smiled when Billie was draped in roses.

It was only back in her room did her brain click back on again. She placed the trophy on her bedside table and turned to her manager.

"How's Alessandra?" she asked.

Her manager, Remi, looked at her incredulously. "You just won the world's most famous Battle Horse race and your first question is about your competitor?"

Julianna's lips pursed into a frown. Remi held up his hands.

"Alright," he said, "from what I heard, she's not terribly injured, but Thunderclap on the other hand... we'll see."

"What happened?"

“You were there, weren’t you?”

Julianna looked away. “I-I don’t really remember. It happened really fast.”

Remi placed his hands on his hips. “Clap Strike hit him.”

“What?”

“I know!” Remi waved his hands in the air. “In all of Thunderclap’s three-year career, he’d never been hit with his own move until now.” He shrugged. “But I guess, as far as probability goes, it was bound to happen.”

“Oh, I see.” Julianna’s head drooped. She sat on her bed and rubbed her thighs. The adrenaline was replaced with a soreness she’d definitely feel for the next month.

“Alessandra might make it to the Winner’s Party tonight, who knows,” said Remi.

“Speaking of that, before you get ready, I want to talk to you about your Wheaties sponsorship.”

“Hey, guys! Here I am with the newest Inter-Derby champion! Julianna Vitano!” Cora held up her phone, her face a little too close to Julianna’s. “Juli, do you have anything you want to say?”

Julianna sputtered. “Oh, uh, thank you, Cora.”

“Ohmigod, girl, you’re so modest!” said Cora, playfully tapping her on the shoulder. “I love your dress. Who are you wearing?”

“Oh, um, my nana made this for me.”

“No way, your grandma made this?” Cora aimed her phone to film the dress. It was a sky-blue halter dress that reached her knees, overlaid with a dove-gray sheen that sparkled. Julianna rubbed her arms. She didn’t have the heart to tell Cora that it was also the dress she

wore to prom. Cora, on the other hand, looked like she never stepped onto a horse track in her life with her white V-neck and six-inch heels that were definitely designer.

“Okay, Juli, I’m gonna show everyone around. I’ll catch you later, the viewers have so many questions for you!”

“Oh okay,” Julianna said as Cora walked into the main room alone. She made a mental note to resist watching her livestream later. Her makeup was probably sweating off already. Julianna took her coat check ticket and walked into the main room.

If there was anything that Julianna hated about derbys, it was the afterparties. When she was a rookie, Julianna could get away with skipping out. The Winner’s Party was an absolute must, and Julianna was already late.

Ignoring the gold-and-roses decor, Julianna only had one goal in mind: finding Alessandra. Julianna wobbled on her two-inch pumps over to Remi, who’d already dazzled a small group with conversation.

“Remi.”

“Ah, Julianna, you’re finally here!” said Remi. “Come, let me introduce you—”

“What a historic win!” a lady in a pastel dress said, shaking Julianna’s hand. “Never in my life have I ever seen a race like that!”

“Truly magnificent,” said an older gentleman, “I was right near the finish line. My heart was pounding! Not good for my blood pressure.”

Julianna nodded and laughed politely. Any attempt to leave might be noted and posted on the Internet. She was trapped by societal convention. Darn Remi...

The group finally dispersed to the free bar. Julianna grabbed a champagne flute from a passing server and took small sips. Her eyes scanned the crowd, determined to pick her out. Was she not coming?

Julianna itched for her phone in her purse. Did she risk checking social media? She might get caught in scrolling hell.

Then, her eyes caught movement, blonde hair, and a quick stride. Dressed in a black suit was Alessandra, slipping through an emergency exit.

Julianna put her glass down and walked along the walls to follow. She didn't have time to get caught by social interaction again.

The venue's garden was dark, lit only with street lamps and the full moon, and smelled of fresh-cut grass. Closing the exit carefully behind her, Julianna's sweaty skin instantly cooled. Alessandra's footsteps echoed and Julianna followed, heading towards the central fountain.

Alessandra stood alone, framed by the rainbow lights of the fountain and lit a cigarette.

Their eyes met. Alessandra looked surprised to see her.

"Oh hey," she said, taking the cigarette from her lips.

Julianna only replied, "Hey."

Alessandra's eyes flicked up and down. "That's the dress you wore to prom."

Julianna didn't know how to respond to that. She resisted the urge to stare at Alessandra's exposed forearms and focused on her eyes.

Something in her gut twisted. It wasn't her fault, but Julianna couldn't help but feel like it was.

"How's... how's Thunderclap?"

Alessandra let out a smokey exhale. A clump of ash fell from her cigarette.

“He’s gonna be okay, but this was probably his last race,” Alessandra replied.

A heavy weight settled over Julianna’s shoulders. “Oh.”

The cigarette dropped to the ground and was snuffed under Alessandra’s boot.

“We both know Clap Strike is a wildcard. There was always a chance that we’d draw the double-edged sword. Don’t think it was your fault.”

Julianna sputtered. “I- I-”

“No, I know you. You were thinking that.” Alessandra smiled. It wasn’t her usual smirk. It looked sad, almost pained. “You won. Even if we weren’t hit, I know that you’d have won anyway.”

Julianna didn’t feel that truth. To her, this win felt half-won.

“Do you see me as your rival?” Julianna asked.

Alessandra’s fingers fiddled with her lighter. She laughed. “You’re still going on about that?”

Julianna felt her cheeks and ears grow warm and resisted the urge to punch her. “Yes and I’m just as serious about it as I was when we were students.”

Alessandra slowly walked closer to her. “I’ve been watching you ever since you made your jockey debut. Ever since you won the Junior Derby the year after we raced together.” She stood in front of her, the moonlight and the fountain lights casted her blonde hair in an ethereal halo. “Of course, you’re my rival.”

Even with two-inch heels, Alessandra’s gray eyes stared down into Julianna’s brown ones. Time could’ve stopped right there and Julianna wouldn’t notice. The only thing on her mind was resisting the urge to kiss her.

It was Alessandra who broke the spell first. “Come on, let’s go back before they get worried.” She took off her suit jacket and draped it over Julianna’s shoulders.

“Thank you.”

“And, you know, Champ became a father last year,” said Alessandra as she held open the door with a grin. “Don’t get too used to that championship title.”

Julianna couldn’t help but smile back. “We’ll see.”

The Road to Tanastra

Chapter 1

The city of Tanastra looked different at night. The roads and storefronts bustled with people in the daytime, filling the air with noises and smells. In the darkness, Alissa felt that one wrong turn even down a familiar alleyway would cause her to never find her way back.

The cobblestones beneath their feet still shone faintly from yesterday's rainfall, causing a faint glow from the light of the half-moon in the sky. Alissa made sure her hood was up, tightened her cloak around her against the night chill and stayed close beside her likewise hooded companion. Black plume feathers stuck to her friend's cloak like stubborn burrs. Alissa almost felt the urge to pluck them off, but it was an unnecessary action since Shae would just get more on her clothes anyway. She tightened her grip on the strap of her staff slung over her back. Her missing shield was a weight she still wasn't used to not having, even after six months.

Black wings beating caused the light of the moon to flicker for just a moment. Alissa looked up. They approached their destination—the back of a modest house two stories tall, dim lighting illuminated faintly from the first-floor windows. Above on the roof and rafters of the house, a dozen ravens perched quietly, staring expectantly at Alissa and Shae with their shiny black eyes.

Shae extended her arm, wrapped in a leather gauntlet, and a raven flew down to perch. She brought the bird close to her face and stood still for a moment before turning to Alissa and letting the raven fly away.

“He’s with three other guests in the front room. No one on the second floor. Best time is now,” Shae said with her hands.

Alissa nodded.

“After you?” Shae asked, nodding to the second-floor window railing.

“I insist. After you,” Alissa replied, signing as fast as she could with one hand.

Shae nodded and Alissa moved to the side to give her space. Shae walked up to the wall of the house and shook out her hands. With practiced precision, Shae jumped with all the force of her legs and magic, grabbing the window railing with nary a sound. Her hood slipped and her long, glossy black hair slipped free. The ravens around them hopped in their spots as Shae lifted herself up and got her footing in the railing. She pulled out a rolled pouch from her pocket and selected the right tools, unpicking the window lock and getting herself inside.

Alissa walked up to the house as soon as a rope dropped in front of her, specially knotted in increments. She tested its strength and gave a thumbs-up to Shae, who saluted in return. Alissa inhaled until her lungs were full and exhaled until her breath ran out. She was not a raven mage, but she knew the air and sky.

Air and sky, please supplement my strength and aid me in my weakness. The familiar sharp smell permeated her nostrils and Alissa smiled. With a determined grasp of the rope in her left hand and her feet secured to the bottom knot, Alissa pulled herself up the rope. She felt her body supported, her weight lighter than it was in training. Her heart swelled in her chest. She thought her relationship to the sky grew too weak after all those years spent in the plague hospital.

Careful not to make too much sound, Alissa pulled herself higher and higher. A sharp pain sliced through her right side and Alissa stiffened. She felt her eyes well with tears. She tried

to lift her other hand to wipe them away, but then Alissa was reminded that she no longer could. Her right prosthetic of an arm waved uselessly in the air. Her hood slipped, letting her long, blonde braid slip free, and Alissa's urge to cry came harder.

Shae grasped her shoulders and helped her over the window railing. Alissa held on as tightly to Shae as she could with her left arm. Her feet landed on solid, wood floor and Alissa sighed in relief, still clutching to Shae. She patted her gently on the back and Alissa forced her grip to loosen.

“Thank you,” she signed.

“You did great,” Shae replied with a gentle smile. Alissa smiled back.

Shae rolled the rope back up as Alissa surveyed the room. Arne Gimilsson truly let his Avigardian roots shine in his home. Tapestries depicting familiar scenes from old sagas adorned the walls. Above the cold fireplace hung an antique sheathed sword, its hilt showing regular polish and care. The dark wooden headboard of his bed was carved in familiar geometric patterns. Alissa's fingers traced the design of a longboat. Seagulls and crashing waves echoed faintly in her ears.

She pulled her fingers away and took stock of the room. It wasn't completely clear if this was truly Arne Gimilsson's room. Their intel said it was, but Alissa wanted to be sure. The room was fairly modest for a merchant.

A *click* made Alissa turn. Shae slid open the top drawer of the desk in the corner of the room and was flipping through its contents. Alissa came beside her.

Shae dug into the drawer and took out all of the books and documents, handing them to Alissa. She stuck her hand in again and smiled. The drawer's false bottom popped open, revealing papers inside.

“Be on lookout.” Shae said, pulling out a small notebook and pencil.

Alissa nodded and situated herself beside the bedroom door. Pressing her ear against it, she heard the faint sound of voices. She strained to hear, but she couldn’t make out their words. From her other ear, Shae’s pencil made quick scratches against paper.

A loud dull thump jolted Alissa. She pressed her ear harder against the gap of the door. She heard male voices shouting and the cry of someone younger, much younger. Alissa’s hand trembled. The next sounds was the creak like a door hinge and footsteps down a staircase.

Shae was still preoccupied with Gimilsson’s documents. Alissa knew she shouldn’t be out of Shae’s sight, but if the intel was true...

Alissa hated to act within Shae’s lack of hearing, but she knew Shae would likely pull her away from taking risks. Her footfalls were feather-light as she crept her way out of the bedroom. She pulled her hood up and brought her scarf around her face, just in case.

Through the railing of the stair’s upper landing, the rest of the house’s interior took Alissa’s breath away. The dark wood-paneled walls, the stone fire pit in the middle of the first floor, even the candle fixtures decorated with antlers, all reminded her of Avigard. She almost wanted to sit down on the fur-covered chairs, sniff them to see if they smelled like the ones in her home.

Alissa snapped back into focus. There was a problem—no one was here. Arne Gimilsson or the three other guests Shae mentioned were nowhere to be seen or heard. Alissa swore the sound of the child was real.

She crouched close to the wall, careful about creaking floorboards. Where did they go? She skipped the stairs and took a leap straight down to the first floor, calling upon the air to make her landing light.

Alissa stood for a moment in the main room. Nothing. Gimilsson didn't know he was being watched, did he?

They're somewhere in here. Hiding places are common with rich men.

Alissa examined the other rooms of the house as quickly as she could. The kitchen was empty, the fires cold and dark. A pile of unwashed dishes balanced precariously in a bucket of dirty water. The hallway opened to more empty rooms, smelling stale and dusty. Alissa wiped her tickling nose with her scarf.

The tapestry in the hallway caught her attention. It was half-hung, hanging from a single corner. Alissa held up the other corner. It was new, not as aged as the ones in the bedroom, its colors still bright in the darkness.

The central figure, with long ash-gray hair and arms of stone, stood in the mouth of a mountain cave with a crowd of people behind them. The landscape was verdant and lush. A formation of birds flew in the sky, a rainbow behind them.

It was one of Alissa's favorite images—Ing the Storyteller showing the Avigardian people the aftermath of the First Flood.

Alissa, stop getting distracted! Maybe she shouldn't have come. All of this Avigardian stuff was making her homesick.

But, there was no going back now.

She examined the wall behind the tapestry, but it was plain. She looked around and her eyes fell on the rug beneath her feet. It was well-worn, its vibrant reds faded, and distinctly not Avigardian. Alissa felt a petty twinge of annoyance. The Daenan rug threw the whole Avigardian image of the house way off.

She kicked the rug aside. As she suspected, a trap door. Typical.

Footsteps came up behind her. Alissa whirled around. Shae looked harried and slightly panicked. She waved her hands.

“Why did you leave?” she said, her hands moving hard and fast. “This is unnecessary!”

“I heard a child. Might be in danger.” Alissa pointed to the trap door. “They must be in here.”

“We don’t know what kind of magic they have,” Shae replied. “Gimilsson could manipulate the house to crush us.”

“The house looks neglected. It might not respond.”

“Still risky.”

Alissa’s mind sought for an answer. Shae’s magic was stronger, but the wingbeats of a hundred blackbirds might alert them. Plus it would take too long to summon enough to incapacitate four people.

Alissa looked at Shae. “I have an idea.”

Shae’s hands gripped the handle of the trapdoor, two ravens perched on each shoulder. Between their legs were buckets of water, taken from the kitchen. Alissa tested her magic and the water responded minutely, moving in tiny waves with the motion of her hand. Her staff nestled in the crook of her elbow, thrumming with energy.

Water wasn’t strong with her, but it was enough. Alissa looked at Shae and nodded.

Shae, as lightly as she could, wrenched the trapdoor open. It still made a loud groan and Alissa heard the voice of a man.

She dumped all of the buckets in. Alissa felt the water on the edges of her fingertips and moved the water to cover as much floor as possible.

“Hey! Hey!” a voice cried out. Hard footsteps approached.

With a grunt, Alissa threw her staff. Her magic made contact with the water, pumping it with lightning.

Oh, lightning! Alissa cried out to her magic. *Fell my targets, but keep them alive!*

Currents zipped up her arm. She swore she felt it in her right arm too and let out a cry as she halted the flow. Thumping sounds of something falling on the ground followed. It must be Gimilsson and his friends.

Shae patted her back. Alissa gave her a smile in return and pat down her hair. It stuck up in funny ways every time she summoned lightning.

Shae went down the trapdoor ladder first and signaled a thumbs-up. Alissa let out a sigh of relief.

The inside of the basement was fairly small, filled with crates and barrels. A table just barely fit inside. A boy, skinny and barely out of childhood, was strapped with leather belts on his wrists and ankles tied against the table legs. Shae swiftly removed the gag from his mouth and the boy coughed and sputtered.

“Thank you,” he cried. “Thank you.”

Alissa looked at the four adults passed out on the ground. The largest man with light brown hair and a gray-streaked beard in desperate need of a trim was probably Arne Gimilsson. The structure of his face reminded Alissa of her father. She examined another one, a woman with long brown hair and wearing a worn dress of once-high quality. She was still breathing.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” Alissa told the boy. Shae unbuckled the last restraint.

“Thank you,” the boy said again, rubbing his reddened, raw skin. “I... I thought I was dead.”

The boy's skin was pale, the sickly kind, and his hair flopped over his eyes. He couldn't be more than thirteen years old. Alissa's stomach grew heavy.

"Let's get out of here. Send a raven to Professor Patria," she said aloud and to Shae. Shae nodded and offered her back to the boy. He understood and gingerly wrapped his arms around her neck. Alissa followed them up the ladder.

Shae went outside to send the raven. Alissa and the boy sat on the fur chairs in the main room.

"What's your name?" she asked, keeping her tone gentle.

"Casper," he replied, his voice small.

"Casper." She smiled, but she worried her twisted insides would betray her anxiety.

"We'll get you to safety and treat your wounds. You have nothing to be afraid of anymore.

Caspar nodded meekly.

"Are you Arne Gimilsson's son?"

Caspar shook his head. "My ma was a maid. She—she died from the plague."

"I'm sorry."

"Mister Arne, he—he allowed me to stay. I helped in the kitchen, with deliveries and errands. He told me he had a special task for me tonight, when all the guests came over."

His shoulders shook. Alissa wanted to rub his back, to help him feel calm, but he sat on her left side. She tried for a pat on his shoulder.

"He kept calling me his son's name—Arin. I—I don't understand!"

"Arin?"

Tears spilled from Caspar's eyes. "He died too!" He exploded into full-blown sobs.

Alissa wrapped her arm around him, letting him cry on her shoulder.

“The plague got my mother too. I know, it’s so hard,” she said as he quieted into whimpers. “When I caught it, I had to leave my brother behind. You remind me a lot of him.”

“You caught it?” Casper sprang back.

“I had it. I beat it. I’m one of the lucky ones.” Alissa held out her left arm prosthetic. Underneath her sleeve, they could hear the creak of hinges and wood.

“Oh.” She let his hand drift over her arm. “I miss my ma.”

“I miss my mother too.”

“But you still have your brother, right?” Casper asked.

“Yes, but—”

Shae entered the room. “Raven sent. We better head back. Give him medical attention. Professor Patria will probably take over from here.”

“Thank you, Shae.” Alissa stood up. “Can you walk?” she asked Caspar.

“Yes, thank you.” Casper stood and wordlessly grabbed her left hand. She wished she could squeeze his hand back. Instead, she threw her cloak over him to keep him warm.

The sky was not as dark as when they went into the house. The moon was not as high and Alissa could hear the dawn birdsong.

Shae tapped Alissa’s shoulder. Her long, black hair bounced in its natural curls as they walked. It was less like they just came from a stealth mission and more like two friends on a morning stroll.

However, Shae’s expression was serious.

“I should tell you. Gimilsson’s documents. They mentioned...” Her hands stopped in midair. “Your family. Your father and brother.”

Numbness shocked Alissa’s body. “Shit.”

The Road to Tanastra

Chapter 2

tw // blood, animal death (not animal killing)

The teapot over the fire began to whistle, but Alastair was too immersed in his book to notice.

The jade pendant that nestled in the hollow of the prince's throat grew warmer, in spite of the cold rain. His companion smiled softly, holding aloft the red umbrella to keep him dry, disregarding the spillage of rainwater on his shoulder. The prince silently placed his hand on the hilt of the umbrella to tip it gently, their fingers intertwined, to cover both of them equally...

The fire sizzled as bubbles overflowed from the clacking teapot lid. Alastair looked up and put his book down, rushing over to grab a cloth.

“Ah!” A glob of water splashed on the back of his hand as he took the teapot off the fire. He rubbed at the burn, just another to add to his collection of evidence that he was hopeless in the kitchen. The largest burn, about the size of his thumb, on the back of his right hand, was still pink and slightly mottled, evidence that Alastair should never cook bacon again and that his healing magic still needed work.

With the teapot safely quiet, Alastair sat back down at the kitchen table and picked up his book again.

‘Your Highness, a little rain won't harm me. I'm a water spirit.’

The prince felt warmth creep up the back of his neck. ‘Still, it doesn't feel right that most of the umbrella should go to me.’

'You're the prince. Why not?' The water spirit's smile held no hint of malice or mischief. The prince found himself looking away. Their intertwined fingers held steady on the umbrella's handle.

'No, I... ' The prince struggled for an answer...

Scratching at the door brought Alastair out of his immersion. He put his book down again with a groan. It shouldn't matter, he knew what was going to happen. This wasn't his first reading or even his second for that matter, but without the next book in the series, all Alastair could do was try to recapture the feelings he felt the first time he read those words.

It wasn't hard. *The Tale of Ten Thousand Silver Teardrops* was a very good book. It was just a shame that Xinghuai translations took so long. That, and the fact that a plague basically stopped anything and everything in his country for three years now.

Alastair opened the front door and the autumn chill raised goosebumps against his exposed skin.

"Hello, you," he said to the dragon that crossed his threshold. Claws tapped against the wooden floor and a leathery wing brushed against his calf. Amber eyes blinked up at him and an azure blue head bumped his leg. Alastair reached down to pet the dragon's head, avoiding the little horn nubs.

"Are your horns bigger now?" Alastair asked, crouching to pet with both hands. The dragon simply looked at him, then moved away from his hands to go to the fire. It curled up its tail, unadorned of the spikes of adulthood, and laid down, its back to the flames.

"Too lazy to make your own flames so you come to mine, I see," said Alastair with a chuckle. Neither pets nor pests, dragons did as they pleased. The people of Avigard were both beholden and ambivalent about their comings and goings.

Alastair stretched out his arms and his back, feeling a bone pop. Sunshine streamed in through the open door and the windows, which were quite dusty. Red leaves and dirt scuttled in with a breeze. This was going to be a good day. Alastair could tell from how fresh the air smelled.

He grabbed a bag of feed and his cloak and went outside. The bag felt a little light. He made a note to himself to write it down for his next list of necessities for the next courier arrival.

Besides Alastair, the only other living beings, besides the azure dragon's occasional visits, were his four chickens. Sifa, Nora, Nath, and Klor were black-and-white feathered beauties. They flocked to Alastair when he entered through the little gate, clucking away.

“Hello, everyone, sorry to keep you all waiting,” he said, tossing the feed.

While the chickens were busy pecking for food, Alastair checked the coop. Only one egg nestled inside. He sighed.

Even if it's just one, I'm still tired of eggs, Alastair thought to himself. He clicked his tongue, already tasting the all-too-familiar hard-boiled texture.

He couldn't bring himself to prepare one of the chickens. He knew how to do it, though only in theory. His bodyguard, Erik, used to take care of that.

It was all arranged near-perfectly two years ago, idyllic to a point when Alastair forgot why they were here in the first place. Alastair really thought they could weather it out in the little isolated cottage without any problems. Erik took care of the heavy work, while Alastair picked up everything else. They joked that if they could get Erik's husband to join them, they could be a family with Alastair as their son.

Now, Erik was gone and Alastair had no idea if he was even still alive.

Soft clucking took Alastair out of his own head. Klor looked up at him with her black beady eyes.

“I know, I shouldn’t be so ungrateful. You worked very hard to make this egg. Thank you.”

Klor didn’t respond.

“Well, not you specifically, but you know what I mean.”

Klor looked at him.

“How long has it been since Erik left? I don’t even remember what I did yesterday. Time is so strange...” Something in his throat twisted as he spoke.

Klor clucked and pecked at the ground near his feet.

Alastair let out a small chuckle. He was certain that the only reason he hadn’t gone mad was his talks with the chickens. Everything he needed was here. He could almost forget the outside world.

A crash from inside the house made Alastair jump and the chickens scatter.

“Oh, shit.” He ran inside.

The water from his teapot spilled, soaking the wooden floorboards, still emitting ribbons of steam. Something small was zipping around the house and the azure dragon, still too young to get its wings right, leaped and knocked things off every surface to catch it. The small thing let out a twittering sound and landed on the rafters of the house—a bird. It must’ve flown in through the door Alastair left open. The azure dragon climbed up the support beam, leaving claw marks in its wake.

“No no no!” Alastair ran to the dragon and attempted to unhook it. The dragon thrashed in his hands, wrestling itself free. Its wings whacked Alastair in the face.

The bird took off, wheeling in circles and completely missing the open door. Alastair pushed the door open wider.

“This way! This way!” he said, as if the bird could get the message. It flew and flew, beating its little wings as the dragon was on its tail.

Finally, the bird made for the open door to freedom. The dragon didn’t let up. Alastair yelped as the dragon leaped on him. He felt claws dig into his arm and shoulder as the dragon launched off of him, flapping its wings to catch up to the bird.

“Ow.” At least the commotion was over. Alastair relished the quiet for a moment. “Ah, oh.”

Pain sliced through Alastair’s left hand. Blood gushed from two long wounds, probably from the back claws of the dragon when it leaped on him.

Alastair flexed his fingers and more blood welled, shiny and ruby red. His head swam and his body went cold, but Alastair couldn’t take his eyes off his own blood.

This was something different. This broke the monotony. The world of the cottage hadn’t had the color red like this since Erik left. Alastair was frozen, transfixed. His mouth hanged open like a drowning man for air.

Blood ran in rivulets across his pale skin. Alastair pictured Erik walking away, his red cloak trailing behind. He pictured the ocean as it looked from his old bedroom window.

The *drip-drip* sound of his blood hitting the floor broke Alastair out of his reverie. A wave of light-headedness rushed over him and he caught himself before swaying dangerously.

“Oh, All-Mother...” Alastair’s mind was still swirling, unable to form a coherent thought. He moved purely by instinct and stumbled over to the cupboards. He had to stop the bleeding. The concentration needed for healing magic would be impossible. He applied pressure

with a clean cloth and sat at his kitchen table. Deep breaths in and out. The panic subsided gradually, though his lightheadedness brought his head to rest on the table.

Alastair focused his mind on the coolness of the wooden table, on the texture against his skin. He could still move his hand, which meant the wound was fortunately shallow.

I think I still have some magnuswort ointment, Alastair thought to himself. I should get more water before it gets dark. I have to tidy up. Did blood get on my clothes? I hope the wound doesn't fester...

“No, stop,” Alastair said out loud. The twisty feeling was roiling in his stomach again. He pressed gently on the wound again. Alastair wanted to cry, but he couldn't. Although he felt the prickling sensations, it wasn't quite enough.

Breathe in, breathe out. In, out...

With ointment and bandages applied, the pain of his wound was reduced to a manageable throbbing. Only a few trickles of blood leaked through, but Alastair forced himself not to stare. If it left a scar, at least Alastair can tell a somewhat less dull story than his other scars from cooking.

Alastair thanked the All-Mother that his book was thankfully spared from the scuffle. His teapot as well, but not a drop of water was left. Two circles of blood were dry on the floor and Alastair didn't even want to try to use magic to get it out. He had enough blood for today.

The sky was a blaze of red and orange with a soft purple hue. He could make it to the river and back before it got dark if he left now.

Taking care to not agitate his injured hand, Alastair got his buckets on a yoke over his shoulder and set out. The door was properly closed behind him. Clucking sounds followed him until the cottage disappeared over the curve of the slope.

The sounds of the river finally calmed Alastair's mind. He let the sweet air and the spray of water cool his skin. The walk down the slope was easy. It was the walk back that Alastair dreaded.

"If Erik were still here, he could've carried the water," said Alastair.

Water continued to flow down the river, crashing white waves against black rocks.

"Not just because he's strong! He told funny jokes too! And he likes the classic sagas..."

Likes or liked?

The river did not speak. Alastair brushed aside the thought. *Erik is neither alive nor dead until I see him.*

He brushed aside his blond hair, which was longer than he remembered, and fished out his adderstone. Tied to a leather string, his adderstone was a comforting weight in his palm. The surface of the gray stone was smooth with years of handling with a near-perfect hole bored right in the center.

"Look! We're back at the river where I found you!"

The adderstone did not speak.

"Yes, yes..."

With the adderstone against his chest, Alastair, ignoring the dull throb of his injured hand, concentrated on the rushing water before him. Eyes closed, he smelled the air, listened to the roar and rush. He knew how the water felt between his fingers without touching, how it tasted without drink it. The water caught hold of him. Alastair opened his eyes.

As gently as gathering a blanket in his arms, Alastair pulled water from the river and placed it into his buckets. Not a drop of wetness was left on his clothes.

“Thank you,” Alastair said to the river. He always said thanks, especially for the river that came from the mountain of the All-Mother. He was sure she appreciated it.

With the buckets secured over his shoulder, Alastair took a deep breath and hiked back up the slope. It was harder to breathe. Tightness in his chest bloomed quickly, but Alastair pressed forward. All he wanted to do was make a fresh cup of tea and read his book and he wasn't about to let his frail disposition stop him.

Salty ocean air and crashing waves against a stony beach, thousands of shoes tap-tapping against cobblestone roads, sounds and smells of playing children in the rain season, colorful rainbows of vibrantly dyed cloths flapping in the wind, the steamy sweet pork buns of the Xinghuai district, chicken coated with spices so hot it made you sweat from the Daenan district, salty fish and vegetable soup with black bread from the Avigard district that reminded him of home...

The memories carried a twinge of pain, but they were motivating.

The smell of iron hit him first.

“What?” He almost didn't believe it at first until the smell overwhelmed his nostrils.

“What? What?”

Alastair put down his buckets and ran into the cottage. The only other things that could bleed were-

Three bloody masses of meat and feathers littered the chicken yard. The nausea hit Alastair first.

“Sifa? Nora... Nath? Klor?”

A brisk wind scattered black and white feathers across the dirt. Was it a fox? A feral dragon?

“Does it even matter? They’re dead,” he said.

With those words, everything turned even quieter.

Was it strange to miss the sound of clucking?

Wordlessly, thoughtlessly, he went to collect firewood.

Dusk settled around Alastair like a blanket placed upon his shoulders. Three bodies lay atop the makeshift pyre. Alastair couldn’t tell which chicken was missing. Whatever killed them probably took it for their dinner.

Adderstone in hand, Alastair concentrated. Images of the rivers flowed into his mind. The stone grew warmer. The earth, the mountain, the fire, the birth—Alastair brought the stone to his lips. He could feel the body heat the stone absorbed on his sensitive skin. This was the magic he and the stone shared. He knew the stone and the stone knew fire.

Around the bodies, an orange ring bloomed on the naked wood and expanded, turning into small flames. The fire consumed—wood spit and crackled. Smoke stung his eyes and nostrils. The smell of cooking chicken reminded Alastair of the roasting pits during winter festivals. Sparks flittered from the fire, flying to the sky like snowflakes falling up.

“From stars we are born and to stars we return,” Alastair prayed.

Despite the heat, it still felt cold. The vestiges of winter still hung in the air in spite of the budding trees of the valley. He brought his fingers to his mouth to breathe some warmth into them and to distract himself from the prickling behind his eyes.

He looked up at the sky, dark-blue and gray. The trees were turned into darkened silhouettes. His cottage still stood, wooden and thatched. There was laundry to clean, foraging to do, lists to make, and dusting, always dusting...

The tears finally came. Hot streaks turned cold on his skin. Alastair crouched and hid his face in his hands.

“I can’t take this. I can’t...” he whispered. A sob escaped his lips. “Mother... Father... Alissa...”

In his mind’s eye, his father’s eyes were always closed, his hair and beard turned gray with age. His sister only came to him in profile, her face cast in shadow. His mother... their mother...

They were never together in one memory he had. All he could picture was them turning away. Alissa’s long hair the color of sun-dappled wheat—just like his, like their mother’s—swishing over her shoulder. His father’s tall stature—a family trait that skipped over him—atop his horse dressed in polished leather, their crest over the creature’s neck.

His mother came to him in half-light. Her oval-shaped face, the drape of her golden hair, the specific shape of her nose that Alastair could trace in his sleep, was illuminated in his mind’s eye. The shadows under her eyes were fainter, her blue eye stared at him. She smiled, but like most of her smiles, Alastair could tell it took her all of her effort as if she were lifting boulders instead of the edges of her lips.

Her voice didn’t come to him. She didn’t reach out to him. She only folded in on herself and only her smile remained, floating in darkness, alone.

What did her voice sound like again? What would she tell him?

“Why am I here?” *Why am I alone?*

Alastair knew the answers, but he didn't want to say them.

Because the world outside is riddled with plague and uncertainty, and I am the last prince of Avigard.

“Damn this plague!” he shouted. “Damn this curse! When will it end?!”

Alastair took in a gulp of air, hard and deep as if he were drowning. He cried a fortnight ago and before that, he always felt better afterward. This would all repeat, tears and the taste of salt, alone, invisible hands pressing him smaller and smaller, the tightening sensation around his nose...

He'll feel better in the morning, push his situation to the back of his mind until it comes to the front again. He'll cry about it, then he'll feel a little better again the next day.

The thought made him feel twisted inside. Who was he trying to fool? Himself?

“Probably,” Alastair whispered to the darkness behind his eyelids.

Again and again and again—this pattern, this cycle, with no escape in sight.

There will be no other days like this, but every day after will be just like the yesterdays and the days before—reading the same books, cooking the same food, staring at the same shape of the forest around him. This funeral for friends—this irreversible subtraction of something dear to him—was a blip in the seemingly endless days of his isolation that stretched out before him.

Alastair wrapped his arms tighter around himself, trying to feel the warmth and pretending, just for a moment, that it was someone else's arms around him instead. With darkness as his companion, he could pretend he wasn't as alone as he actually was.

Am I even a prince? Alastair hadn't felt like a prince in a long, long time. The world outside was not the same place he knew anymore.

“Alastair?”

Oh, goodness, were the memories this loud? Alastair buried his head deeper into his arms.

“Oh, my prince, Alastair...” The gentleness of the voice made him ache.

“I’m the prince of nothing,” he said, his words muffled. His eyes felt swollen and itchy.

A hand pressed against his shoulder. Oh, he must be hallucinating. Avigard definitely had no use for someone like him now.

It was when the hand nudged him that Alastair finally looked up.

“No, what...”

“Yes, my prince, it’s been so long.”

Dark brown hair shone in the dying light of the fire. Long, black lashes framed dark eyes. Though her face was etched with lines of wrinkles, her unmistakable softness convinced Alastair that he was either dead or she was real. He reached over and grasped her hand. His fingers tingled at the contact with another human being.

“Brigitta?”

“Yes, yes, Alastair, my prince, I’ve come to finally take you home.”

Untitled Alien Story

Chapter 1

“The only good thing about Bachalaran ships is that the doors are so big,” said Alekar, entering the cockpit. He sat in the co-pilot seat and groaned. “But everything else is still small.”

“Big horns, small butts,” said Yue. They checked the flight controls, every layer covered in dust. Alekar sneezed, kicking up another wave of dust. He sniffed, rubbing his lupine nose with a furry paw.

Alekar patted his hair, which was now brown instead of blond. “Please let’s just see how this works and get out of here.”

“One second, I need to figure this out.”

In a scrap metal yard, beggars can’t be choosers. It was a miracle that this ship was intact at all. Luckily, it resembled the ones Yue knew. There was a steering gear, control levers, various dials and radars, all labeled in what Yue presumed was the Bachalaran language. Yue didn’t want to go out to ask the shopkeeper. Minimal interaction meant minimal chances of being discovered.

“This starts the engine.” Alekar pointed at the big red button on Yue’s dashboard.

“You read Bachalaran?”

“I know enough.”

The big red button was very compelling. Yue pressed it and held. The ship rattled and creaked. Alekar’s hand wrapped around Yue’s, still hovering over the engine button. Yue’s stomach flip-flopped.

“It is an old ship,” Yue reasoned, but their senses were on high alert for smoke or fire or both. Sweat trailed down their face. “Do you smell smoke?”

“No, but...” Alekar’s long ears flicked back and forth. The rattling subsided to a low growl.

“Okay, now it sounds good. Let’s keep it low-altitude.” Yue untangled their hand and pushed up the control lever. The engine roared. Alekar whimpered, but didn’t say anything.

As long as the ship didn’t fall apart on them, Yue could work with it. It will take some time to learn the Bachalaran language, engineering, ship models, and any other relevant stuff, but Yue was willing to put in the work. Anything was worth doing to get back home.

With sweaty palms on the steering, Yue maneuvered upwards.

The ship went forward.

“Um...” Alekar’s golden eyes were filled with worry, looking out the windows. The piles of scrap in the junkyard moved past them at a glacial pace.

“Give it a minute.” Yue urged the steering farther upwards, but that only increased their ground speed from glacial to snail. Their stomach was no longer queasy, but their heart beat at a furious pace.

“Yue...” Alekar started before sneezing again.

With a loud thwack, Yue cut the engine. Half-running, they hit the latch button to open.

“You said this ship was operational!” Yue barely contained their voice from shouting. The discount ship creaked conspicuously from their weight as they jumped from the latch door. Dust kicked up from every surface.

“You can operate it,” the Bachalaran shopkeeper replied, his diamond horns glinted in the high noon sun. It was hard to tell from his voice if he was making fun of them or just didn’t care.

Do goat-people even have emotions?

“It’s no better than an oversized car. Ships are meant to be *flyable*. That’s their operation!”

Yue pressed their hands against their face. There was no point arguing with a goat-man who was chewing on a piece of wire like a toothpick and looked as if they were staring at something a million miles away.

“25,000 bachs, take it or leave it,” said the Bachalaran.

“I wouldn’t take it for 5 bachs,” Yue replied. “Just give me the 10,000 for my scrap and we’ll be on our way.”

The metal wire clicked between the Bachalaran’s teeth. He shrugged and headed back inside the office. Yue followed. Alekar’s large footsteps thumped behind them.

“I’m sorry that it didn’t work,” Alekar said. His fluffy tail drooped.

Yue pinched the bridge of their nose. The irritation in their gut subsided into a cold emptiness. “Don’t apologize. I’m sorry.”

Alekar waved his hands. “No, no! I thought this place would have a good ship. I’m sorry!”

“No, I yelled and stormed off. I’m sorry.”

“No, no—”

The shopkeeper poked his head out the office door. “I don’t have all day, lovebirds. My poker club is starting soon.”

They both sputtered, but the shopkeeper already closed the door.

Alekar turned to Yue, but Yue rushed ahead. They were now warm from head to toe.

“I’m gonna change,” Alekar called out from the RV.

“Okay!” Yue called back.

Alekar shut the door behind him. Yue looked around. In the growing dark of the campground, they were alone.

By the time they got back to the RV campground, the sky was already filled with stars. Back on Mars, they could see stars, but dust storms would cover the sky for months. When they were able to see the stars, Yue’s father would spend every night in front of his telescope, scribbling and charting as best he could. None of them could look with their bare eyes, it was always through windows and helmets. Plus, the nighttime temperatures were basically lethal.

On Earth, even though it was the same stars, it was a whole new experience. They looked more vibrant, more luminous, more *everything*. Standing in the desert in Nevada, with a bite of chill in the cooling night air, the rebuilt city of Las Vegas and all its sounds and lights out of mind, Yue stared up at the stars. They remembered home.

That’s why Yue had to find a way to get back.

A new sound caught Yue’s attention, the sound of a vehicle. In the distance, a pair of headlights appeared—another RV.

The RV shook beside them. Alekar was almost done with his change. Yue stepped around to stand in front of the door.

The other RV came closer and parked some distance away from them. It was a sleeker, newer model than Alekar’s. Water tanks were strapped around the back.

“Hello there!” A pair of wide, iridescent eyes blinked at them in the darkness. A European, with shiny blue skin and an oxygen collar around her neck, waved a webbed hand from the driver side window.

“Ah, hello,” Yue replied.

Their RV engine cut off. Two Europeans came around, the one Yue saw and a new one with a slightly greener skin tone. Their oxygen collars hissed. Both of them wore large tie-dye T-shirts and cargo shorts.

“My name is Polopa!” said the blue-toned European, holding both her webbed hands out in the European fashion. Yue took her hands. They were cool and slightly damp. “And this is my partner, Kalaka- oh.”

Kalaka stumbled back around the RV. Sounds followed. The green-ish tint wasn't natural then.

More stumbling in their RV followed. “We've been so excited to visit Earth. They've been jumping around ever since we landed. I promise we'll keep them down so as not to disturb you,” said Polopa.

Half a dozen small European children ran out, all in matching tie-dye colors.

“Race ya!”

“No fair! Earth gravity is stupid!”

“Are you okay, Ka?”

Polopa let out a series of whistles. The children stood still. “Moisturize yourselves before any playing! And don't run off, we're having dinner soon.”

The children nodded. The tallest, presumably the oldest, began unhooking the hose attached to the water tanks.

“I must say, your human shift is amazing!” said Polopa, turning back to Yue. “You must’ve been on Earth for years, haven’t you?”

Try a couple of weeks. Yue smiled. “Yeah, but time sure flies by on Earth.”

Polopa’s ear fins wiggled as she laughed, which sounded like a dolphin. “Is the white streak in fashion or...?”

“Ah, no, just can’t get it right, you know.” Yue ran a hand through their hair, long black locks with a snow-white streaks taking up the front. It wasn’t a shifting tell, just a large patch of poliosis.

“And you’ve chosen East Asian features, is there a reason?” Polopa’s wide fish eyes were alight with curiosity.

Because I am East Asian! Yue wanted to shout, but Alekar’s practice script kicked in their head. “Spent some time there. Got used to it.” Newcomers always asked probing questions, but at least they were more gullible.

“Are you out here all alone?”

“No, ah-”

At that moment, Alekar opened the door. “Hey, Yue-”

Polopa gasped. “A Luardian!”

Alekar faltered, ears flat against his head. “My mother is Gliessi, actually.”

Yue didn’t fault Polopa’s reaction. Their own was the same when they first met (except Yue punched him in the nose). Alekar’s wolf form, especially coming out of a dark RV like a cave, was frankly frightening. But, like Alekar’s human form, even though he was big in size, he was a puppy at heart.

“Ah, he’s with me. We’ve been together for years. His mother really is Gliessi, like me.”

The lie rolled off Yue’s tongue effortlessly. It wasn’t the first time they’ve had to use it.

Polopa glanced anxiously at her children, all spraying themselves with the water hose, then back at Yue. Alekar slightly retreated back into the RV. A balloon of anxiety swelled in Yue’s stomach.

“I... I just don’t know if Luardians can eat seafood,” she finally said.

“I like seafood,” Alek replied, opening the door back up, ears perked. As if on cue, his stomach let out a monstrous growl.

“Well, then,” Polopa laughed, “would you like to join us for dinner?”

After Kalaka finished being sick and Polopa brought out the cooler full of food, some of their children swarmed around Alekar.

“A Luardian! Cool!”

“My mother’s Gliessi, actually.”

“Is it true that Luardians can bite people’s heads off?”

“Ah, I haven’t done that-”

“Is it true that Luardians howl at the moon?”

“That’s Earth wolves.”

Yue built a fire, a small one, at Polopa’s request. The oldest child, crouched beside them, watching them flick a lighter at the dry flint they collected.

“I saw a film once where they built a fire with a mirror and a pair of glasses,” the child said.

“We need the sun for that,” Yue replied.

“You can’t do that with the moon? It’s so bright.”

“Nope, not enough heat.”

“This isn’t enough heat?” The child flapped their bare arms.

Yue resisted the urge to chuckle. Any place was probably much warmer than the ice-moon of Europa.

A small lick of orange flame licked at the wood. The child *oohed* and *aahed*, bringing their face closer.

“Be careful. It’ll hurt you if you touch it,” said Yue.

“Ah! Is this fire?” Polopa crouched next to them. “It’s so much more beautiful in real life. Humans made this all the time?”

The children squealed and laughed. Alekar was attempting to carry six of them at once, four of them hanging from his arms like monkeys. Kalaka looked up from their camping chair, then put their cold towel back over their eyes.

“Maybe we can cook some of your seafood?” Yue offered.

“Cook? Really?” Polopa clapped her hands. “I’ve always wanted to cook!”

With a combination of tools and ingredients from both of their vehicles, everyone was soon entranced at the sight of roasting oysters, nestled with lemons and herbs. Even Kalaka recovered enough to stand overhead, watching intently. Yue felt like a conductor in an orchestra, arranging and rearranging the oysters with their tongs.

“It smells divine!” Polopa sighed.

“Can we eat it soon?” a child asked.

“Almost, wait for it to cool,” Yue said, plating the finished oysters.

Alekar sat beside Yue, still as a statue save for his wagging tail. He was no doubt starving by now. Yue smiled.

They passed the platter to Polopa first, who took one and held it like a jewel in her webbed fingers. She let out a low whistle. The other Europeans responded in kind. She slurped up her oyster, then moaned in delight.

“Oh, my...”

More slurping followed. The children’s eyes widened.

“This is so yummy!”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth. You’ll drop it.”

“Can I have more?”

“Can we cook the urchins too?”

“I don’t know how to cook urchins,” Yue replied, with a smile.

The oldest child looked up. “They fixed Gurgle, right? Can’t it tell you how to cook urchins?”

Alekar turned to Polopa. “Can Europeans eat land animal meat? I have some Gliessi cow steaks.”

“Oh, my, Gliessi cow? Are you sure?” Polopa asked, while her hand reached for another oyster.

“Please, I insist. It’s the least I can do after welcoming me to share dinner with you.”

Alekar’s tail was wagging a storm. Yue smiled and popped an oyster into their mouth.

The fire crackled, sending sparks up into the starry sky.