

Cookies & Magic

and other stories

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كافة الحقوق محفوظة للناسر والمؤلف

لا يُسمح بإعادة طبع أو توزيع أي جزء بأي طريقة، بما يشمل ذلك التصوير أو الطباعة أو التسجيل الصوتي أو أي وسيلة أخرى إلكترونية أو غير إلكترونية، دون إذن كتابي مسبق من الناسر، ويسمح فقط في حال الاستعانة ببعض الفقرات لغرض النقد والدراسة، طبقاً لما تحدده قوانين واتفاقات حقوق الملكية الفكرية

Cookies & Magic

and other stories



مؤسسة
الكاتب
العربي
The Writer Operation

Dedication

*To those looking for an escape from
reality and to those who have nothing
better to do, this is for you.*

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Chapter One

Classmates

I enter class and head to my seat in the mid corner of the class. I sit down, and there is almost no one else in class. Slowly, other students file in.

My hood hides my face so that no one can see me, but I can see them; it's just the way I'm comfortable, especially this early in the morning and especially because this is a new school, and I'm still not used to all the new faces.

A few minutes later, after all the students are present, our teacher arrives.

"Good morning. Today, you have a pop quiz,"
He announces.

Everybody groans. I don't.

Look, I don't flaunt this around, but I work hard for tests, I'm a good student. But I'm not an insufferable know-it-all - at least, I don't think I am. I study not to be smug but to graduate and get a degree someday.

Anyway, I've studied just in case, so I'm not worried.

Our teacher Mr. Zaher, starts passing papers to students as he says: "The marks you get on this pop quiz affect your total grades, I don't want to see anyone cheat, talk, or cause irritation to other students while you're taking the test"

They pass them to others behind them until we all have papers.

I lean down on my paper and begrudgingly put down my hood so I can properly see. I write my name and lean closer to the test paper,

'First question' I say to myself

I start writing my answer when I hear the echo of a loud frantic male voice:

'What's the answer to number 1?'

I neither hear nor feel anybody react.

I raise my eyes to Mr. Zaher's desk, but he's sitting there quietly correcting workbooks.

'Weird,' I say to myself

I go back to solving the test.

For a few minutes, everything is quiet.

'What's the answer to number 4?' The same frantic voice asks again.

I look again to the teacher and he doesn't give any indication that anybody has talked.

'What is wrong with everyone?' I say to myself in disbelief.

'I ask myself the same thing every day,' the voice says.

'Okay, I'm probably being delusional'

'This is weird,' the voice says

'Tell me about it,' I say, deciding to assume the voice was a figment of my imagination.

'So, there is someone else!' The voice exclaims.

'Stop, stop, stop, you need to concentrate,' I tell myself

'As if that will help' the voice scoffs.

'I'm clearly going crazy'

'Nah, I don't think so,' the voice reassures.

'I think I have to cope with my brain talking to me, but please keep it down, will you?'

'Last I've checked, I'm not a brain'

'Shut up anyway, I need to concentrate'

'Since you're here, can you tell me the answer to Uh... all of it, actually?'

'No, I can't, shut up,' I say as I try to concentrate.

For a while, the voice doesn't talk at all that I convince myself I was imagining it all.

'Phew, thank God,' I say

'Thank God what, you're done? Help me, please,'
he begs.

'Ughhhh, leave me alone,' I think

'I don't think so. Help me with the test, and I'll shut up'

'Why can't no one else hear you? That's so unfair.' I
whine

'It's obvious, it's inside our heads'

'What's inside our heads?'

'This conversation, smarty pants.'

'You mean I'm crazy?'

'Or I'm crazy'

'What?'

'What I mean is we can hear each other's thoughts.' He
explains like he's speaking to a seven-year-old.
Honestly, the nerve.

'Do you mean telepathy?' I ask

'Yeah, Telly whatever.'

'You're a student in Mr. Zaher's class, taking a pop quiz
right now?'

'You really had to remind me?'

'Had to make sure, I mean this is completely normal speaking in 'each other's heads'

'Now that we've established that, can you help me with the test?'

'Who are you?' I ask as I raise my head and scan the desks for him.

He's a boy, obviously, staring into nothing and talking to me like some stupid...'

'Woah woah, I can still hear you'

'Right, you're still there,' I grumble, practically rolling my eyes.

'Trying to find me, huh?'

I continue to scan the class, and we have five boys in class, so it will be easy to find him.

It's obviously not Amr, the smart kid; he's writing in his paper.

And not Mostafa because he's sneakily flirting with Shahd, not Ziad, because he's making a joke to the whole class

'Woah, stop, you think too fast'

'I'm not sure if I should take that as a compliment.'

'It is'

'You're only flattering me because you need help'

'Shouldn't I?'

'You wish!'

'Please, I need help'

'Stop being such a drama queen'

'Does that mean you're going to help?'

'Tell me which one you are first, and I'll think about it'

'I'm just not comfortable with the girl I'm convincing to let me cheat, knowing my name'

'That doesn't help your case'

I look at the clock at the front of the class, 'Ten minutes left'

'Help me'

'Convince me,' I say

'I could tell you a secret'

My heart leaps for a second as I consider.

'This was kind of my favorite trade, but not anymore.'

'Well, I had to try'

'Yeah, I almost fell for it, though.'

'Eight minutes left people' The teacher announces.

'Please,' he says

'Why didn't you study in the first place?'

'I was at the hospital with my mum'

'What happened?'

'My sister can't talk or walk'

'Oh my God, what happened?'

'She's just been born'

'You're a sicko'

'So, I've been told'

'Anyway, what's her name?' I ask curiously.

'We haven't named her yet.'

'A baby girl, that's sooo cuteee!' The gushing escapes me. I just love babies.

'Does that mean you're going to give me the answers?'

'Keep on dreaming'

'Ughh, come on Aya'

'How come you know who I am?'

'Seriously? I can't hear my own thoughts over your obnoxiously loud thinking'

'If you could hear me, then why didn't you write the answers?'

'You think too fast'

'Everybody thinks too fast, we're all fluent at it.

'Not all of us obviously,' I add.

'I choose to be the bigger person here,' he sniffs.

'Besides, I'm not the smartest person in class

'Puh-lease, if Marwan and Jana are smart, you're Einstein.'

"Are you done with your paper?" I ask, ignoring what he said. I feel a faint blush taking over my face.

'Pretty sure it's done with me'

'It just needs some logic. You must have a bit of that'

'I'm not sure about that,' He mumbles.

'You know my name, it's fair enough that I know yours,' I argue

'Not happening'

'Well, I'm not giving you any answers then'

'Three minutes left, people' Mr. Zaher declares.

'I can't tell you my name, you won't give me the end to it, whoever I am.'

'And I can't give you answers,' I say

There's silence for some time, I break it by saying:
'It's just a quiz you know'

'I just want to set an example to my sister'

'Who is a day old?'

'Teach them young I always say' he shrugs -I can somehow tell it's a shrug-

Silence

'Soo, you're not Amr, Mostafa or Ziad'

'Ugh, you're still on about that?' He shakes his head exasperatedly.

'So, you must either be Mohamed the cool kid, or... Zayd'

I focus all my mental power on preventing the blush from creeping up my neck and cheeks, and I'm interrupted by a chorus of

'Ice-cream Ice-cream Ice-cream Ice-cream'

'What in the name of'

'Skateboard skateboard skateboard skateboard'

'You need to stop'

'I can't let you know who I am'

'And screaming random gibberish will help that?'

'Well, yeah, I see you still don't know who I am.'

He was right.

Silence again.

'UGHHH fine, remember that joke Ziad made last class, the really suggestive one'

'Yeah, the one about -'

'Yes, that one, you don't need to repeat it. Anyway, it was about Something Mr. Zaher said. That's what this test is all about'

A lot of thoughts come blurring together, and they're not mine.

Good, he's thinking

'That's it, I got it,' he says, and I feel the relief in his words.

'Two minutes people' Mr. Zaher lets us know.

I suddenly get an idea; I get a note out of my backpack and start writing. When I'm done, I look around me to check where each of the two boys is, Mohamed is in the desk in front of me to the right, Zayd is in the one in the far back of the class.

I look to check where Mr. Zaher is, he just started collecting papers.

On the front side of the paper - the one that will face Mohamed I write 'Zayd', on the back I write 'Mohamed' I raise the paper and clear my throat. A few heads turn, including Mohamed in front of me.

'Mohamed?' His voice comes back.

'You!'

'Me, Hey, why did you write Mohamed on the paper?' He asks, a hint of something I can't place in his voice.

'You're Zayd'

'I'm Zayd'

Chapter 2

The gates to elsewhere

I walk in the street, my head down, ignoring the people around me.

They're all soulless. I mean it literally. That's what happens when you're too vain, when you stare at the mirror for too long, that's what happened to them, What I spent most of my life being scared would happen to me.

That is also why my head is down; we're surrounded by mirrors, they're everywhere. This is the city of mirrors.

Tall, abandoned apartment buildings with broken windows arranged in large, separated squares and mirrors scattered around everywhere.

All of that held in within large walls.

'Why are you here?' you might be wondering.

I'll tell you: this is my job, walk among the soulless, study them, write about them daily, to determine the changes in their behavior (which are basically non-existent)

That's not the easiest thing to do with your head down. I can only take small peeks of their appearance when I'm sure there is no mirror on the next corner.

You know how they say eyes are windows to souls, this cannot apply to the soulless; They look exactly like normal humans except for their eyes, they have no eyes. The gaps where they're supposed to be blank, and through the gaps you can only see pitch blackness. They also wear old worn-out clothes, an effect of time, I guess.

'Why don't you destroy?' them -the mirrors not the soulless - I hear you ask; We can't, I mean we literally can't, they're indestructible.

'Who put them there?', I hear you ask again; We don't know.

I can tell you the whispered rumors though.

Some say they're (the mirrors) put there and that we're an experiment and that some people are somewhere out there watching us. I don't believe that. That's too unrealistic. What I believe is that those mirrors are portals to another world. Or other worlds perhaps. Which may seem unrealistic to you, but I have my reasons.

I came here with a plan, and if it works this will be my last day here. Yes. My plan is to get away. And if it does work, then minutes from now I'll hopefully be somewhere else. I'm trying not to think of what would happen if it doesn't though.

I decide on the mirror I want to go through, it's the last one on the left side of the path. I make sure to keep my head down as I move towards it.

Now I'm standing in front of the mirror, which is on the left side of the street I'm in. I stare at its frame. It's unlike any of the others, which is why I chose it. The others are all black-framed and square or rectangular. This one is circular, and its frame is golden. Majestic. I know.

I don't know what I'm hoping for, but what happens next isn't on the top of my list.

As soon as the tips of my index and middle fingers touch the cold mirror, I feel a rush of electricity go through my veins, so I withdraw my hand quickly and I feel like...my head doesn't feel right.

Right then, the soulless turn to face me. Literally all of them just turn and stare at me for a couple seconds.

I thought they couldn't see us, according to the elders' words.

So much for being the wise elders. These thoughts go through my head in those two seconds as I look into their empty eye sockets which I find the most interesting in them.

As if looking into their eye sockets activated something, the soulless start moving in my direction intently, I start to panic, and touch the mirror's surface again, hoping that this time a portal to another place would open.

Nothing is activated, and the soulless just keep getting nearer and nearer, and as they do, I notice they're moving in a quicker pace than they usually move in.

I take that as my cue to start running. I run back past them and turn to another street. Even though they're faster than they usually are, I'm still faster.

But they keep running after me. This is the most active they have gotten since I started working here three years ago, when the last person quit. Wait, he didn't quit, he just stopped showing up and then was missing when they looked for him in his assigned apartment. I was told all of this when I was first given this job.

It hits me; the soulless are put there-not because of the whole staring at the Mirrors thing-, but to guard the area.

Which emphasizes even more on my theory about the gates to elsewhere; what else could they be guarding? And where else would the guy before me have gone?

I figure that they will stop running after me once I reach the city borders, so I keep running-the empty streets making it easier- and they keep following me. A lot of thoughts race through my head as I keep moving forward; tiny whispers that I know don't belong to my inner voice start nagging me. This creeps me out. I can't even hear what they're saying, so I ignore them, but I have a feeling they're going to get louder.

I find myself at the city borders, I open the metal door after quickly punching in the code. I get out and quickly shut the door behind me. I turn to look; they've stopped chasing me and have gone back to strolling aimlessly.

Phew that was a close one.

I start to relax as I head back to the car station.

When I get there, I get my card out to scan it at the entrance to the station, where I can see many other people going about their business. I press my card on the machine, and it scans it, then the screen shows my information Citizen 7899, male, African, dark hair, grey eyes. It beeps and lets me through onto the platform heading back to the city.

In front of me is the line of waiting cars on the railway, I choose my car; the usual black with dark windows and get in after I face the facial recognition screen next to the car. I sit in the backseat and stretch my tired limbs.

Remember what I said before, about the whispers getting louder, I was right, I can hear the thoughts, and I can now recognize the words.

The words seem welcoming and homely. Urging me to go back. But the car has already started moving.

I'll come back.

When the car stops at the city center station and the door opens, I get up and find myself face to face with a group of officers, dressed in all black and wearing sunglasses.

'Citizen 7899, your presence is required at the chief elders' council. ' One of them says.

'Is something wrong?' I ask.

'You have the right to remain silent' another one answers

'Look if this is about leaving work early, I'm using one of my free da-'

'Stop talking' the officer in the middle says with a deep voice.

'I have rights as a citizen' I say but nobody answers me, so I choose to remain calm and save my dignity.

Come... Come back.

I let them escort me to the chief elders.

Come.... come back.

The loud whispers continue on the way, and I zone out, at least that's what I assume happens, because the next moment I find the officers escorting me out of the car.

When we start walking up the grand staircase that leads to the entrance, I don't feel nervous, I've been here before, and I know the drill. Be respectful, don't look them in the eyes, talk only when addressed.

The last time I was here -if you were wondering- was when I got my job. Only one person gets to have this job so I "should feel honored" as the elders say.

We enter the large circular council room, and they seat me on the chair that's surrounded by barricades. There are also seven seats surrounding me. They're empty.

'The elders will be joining you shortly' one of the officers says and then they all leave.

I look around me and listen to the whispers again.

Come...come back.

When my eyes move to one of the chairs again, I find that it isn't empty anymore, when I turn my head to look at the other chairs, I find them inhabited too. The elders arrived without me noticing.

I get up and look down when I remember where I am.

Come...come back.

The chief elder - a man with a long grey beard wearing purple robes- gestures for me to sit down so I do, still keeping my eyes down.

'Do you know why you have been called here citizen 7899?' he asks.

Leave them...they are not good... come back.

'I'm afraid not sir' I answer as beads of sweat start forming on my forehead.

'It has reached our attention that you have touched a mirror, is that not true?'

"It's true sir, but-" I stutter out as I get up again.

"And you are fully aware that this is breaking to-"

"I am" I say and peek at his face.

His face softens and he drops his frown, I start to grow suspicious right then.

"Sit down boy" he says

I hesitate to do what he asks but a look from the officer at the door tells me to oblige.

I sit down and he continues:

"We need you to go back home and get some rest, it's for your own good"

"Thank you, sir, but I really don't need it. "

"It's not a request" and by that he ends the trial, and the officers accompany me home.

When we get home, I get out of the car and wait for them to leave but they don't, so I figure they have orders to keep an eye on me.

What are they planning on doing?

I sigh as I climb the couple of stairs at the entrance and get on the hover, I close my eyes think of my apartment number and when I open them, I get off the hover and my black apartment door opens after I face it. I check the window facing the street and I find the officers still there.

I sigh as I sit on the couch and close my eyes, but the whispers just keep going on and on, urging me more and more to go back.

Come...come..., The soulless... they're following me...Elders...magic mirror...come...come back...the soulless. A cold hand touches me...come back.

My eyes burst open, and I feel the beads of cold sweat on my forehead, now it's slipping down my neck.

I check the window, it's dark outside, I find the officers still there but then a plan forms in my head.

I open the door and call the hover it appears a second later, I quickly get on it and think of the mirror and moments later, the hover starts ascending, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding in.

It heads to the window, so I open it, and we head to my destination.

I keep myself balanced as the hover heads to the city of mirrors. It's ten times scarier than it is in the morning. I steady myself as the hover descends, it finally comes to a stop right in front of the mirror.

I don't look at it, and instead touch its frame.

This time, I get a different feeling, yes electricity rushes through my body again, but this time I feel the mirror shining like it's reflecting bright light, blue and red light. Moments later, the sound of sirens reaches me. That explains the mirror shining.

My heart leaps as the dreadful feeling of being trapped haunts me.

I've run out of options; I have nowhere to go, except ...

I look at the mirror, not its frame, but the reflecting surface.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and walk straight into it.

Chapter 3

The morphs

'It all started on my birthday five years ago. Well, not really, it actually started 17 years ago, when I was born. Let me tell you: My parents are really nice folk, they live in this fancy house, with a pool, a backyard and a huge kitchen, at least that's how it was when I left. Like I said before, five years ago, I left home, well I was sort of taken away but that's not the point ,as I was saying, it was the night of my twelfth birthday I was about to go to sleep, the lights were off, and I was about to slip into bed, when I felt the window creak, I thought nothing of it, but as I closed my eyes, I heard whispers of female voices: "What're we waiting for?"

"We can't just take her without explaining, can we?"

"Ummm, that's what we do all the time"

"Shhh, you're going to wake her up" an authoritative voice silenced the rest. '

I felt my heart pounding and I raised the bedsheets to cover my face. I started to think about going to my parents' room, but I shook the thought away and told myself I was dreaming.

Boy was I wrong; they were not a dream. I felt the voices moving closer and I gripped the bedsheets even tighter around myself, I reached for the Swiss-army-knife under my pillow and held it tightly.

Somebody grabbed the fabric and pulled it away. I jumped out of bed and started waving the Swiss-army-knife around "I have a weapon, and I'm not scared to use it" I squeaked, but as soon as I saw their faces I froze; they were beautiful, their bright blue diamonds of eyes stared right at me in the moonlight, I could also see their dark skins. I widened my eyes; they looked just like me.'

"Who are you?" I asked after what felt like a lifetime of staring.

"We're the morphs" the same authoritative voice said, and when I saw the speaker, she seemed to be older than the rest. Before I could say anything, darkness engulfed me and after some resistance I gave in to it.'

' I squeezed my eyes and reached for my phone on my bedside table, but there was nothing there and my hand met the air instead, I struggled to open my eyes and when I did, I didn't recognize my surroundings, I was in a large tent illuminated by sunlight, I was on a bed made of straw as I could guess. Weird paintings and symbols covered the walls, they were all different shades of blue. '

'Panick started to engulf my heart, memories from the previous night all came to me and I had difficulty breathing, that's when the tent's entrance in front of me was pushed open, and the eldest girl from the group entered, but this time she was alone.

"I see you're up" she said cheerfully

"Wh-,wh-"

"I know this feels overwhelming but I'm going to explain everything, first I'm sorry about the way we took you, but it seemed like you were going to resist, so we had to put you to sleep"

My head was filled with a million questions but the only word I could get out was: "why?"

"I know how you feel, you're scared, confused and maybe angry, but that's okay, everything's going to be okay, my name is sky, I need you to calm down and listen to me carefully" '

'Fast forward to present day, I'm now seventeen, and I've been with the morphs five years. They're my family now. Today we're moving. We do that very often, so they can't find us. Our transportation changes

every time, sometimes we travel in the air, sometimes the water, other times on land, or snow when we're somewhere with it. Today, we're travelling in the air, we have everything packed in a huge net and as soon as the sun rises, we'll be off.

"Are you all ready?" Sky asks.

We all nod, as we stand on the net and try to cling onto it with our feet, some of us surrounding the net from the sides.

"On the count of three, one...two...three! I concentrate hard, and a couple of seconds later, we're in the air, I keep holding on to the net, it's easier now that I have claws, I flap my arms to move upward and look around me, I'm surrounded by a flock of giant birds they're huge, regal, beautiful. I look down at my claws and remember I am too; huge, regal beautiful, oh yeah and an eagle.'

There you have it, a typical day in the life of the morphs- uh oh trouble ahead and advancing- I channel the thought to the rest of the flock. Ahead of us is a plane, one that is advancing on us and fast.

'Get down, we'll fly low for a while and then land' sky's voice buzzes in my ear.

We descend as fast as possible without losing balance. I see a feather and realize it's mine, one from my head to be specific. A deafening sound washes over us as the shadow of the huge plane passes over us for a few seconds and then I can see the ground below. We fly like that for a couple hours, maybe more.

Reflected light from a close-by water surface hits me and I scan the ground below for it. Once I spot it, I tell the others, and we descend towards it. It's a river, I can see it stretch as far as my eyes can see, which is a lot by the way.

'we'll change into freshwater octopus form' sky's voice echoed in my head'

I close my eyes and concentrate for the second time today, recalling the octopus's appearance from memory, and I hover in the air for a second then feel myself fall into the water in my new form. I hold onto the net with a couple of my tentacles and move forward with the rest, a few minutes later, we're back to our normal pace and move with agility through the river, surrounded by wilderness.'

After a couple of hours of gliding in the river, Sky announces that it's time for a break, so we move to the bank of the river and change back to human form one by one and pull the net out of the water. Sky and Jamila make a fire and the rest of us arrange our temporary camping site.

Minutes later, we're all sitting around the fire, the crisp morning air sending chills down our bare arms. 'We still have about a hundred miles ahead of us, this river ends in ten so it's not of much use to us' Sky started

'We can take Arctic wolf forms' Kiera suggests

'They're not fast enough' Max notes

'How about snow leopards, 40 miles per hour isn't bad we'll get there in two hours and a half' I suggest

'And they're beautiful' I add after a second's thought.

'Mmm, not bad Samar'

'Thank you, Sky' I answer'

So, it's settled, after a couple of hours of rest we change to Snow leopards and pull our net behind us, we're in the middle of a wood that doesn't have many trees so it's easy for us to run.

As we move on north, the air gets colder and colder and I'm silently thankful for our fur.

'It's snowing!' I exclaim and most of the older girls sigh, the younger girls though share my excitement, although I'm the sixth to oldest member I'm still as excited as I was when I first joined the morphs. We've recruited ten members since then, and in approximately ninety minutes we will have recruited our eleventh. Oh, right I forgot to mention this before; New members appear in our dreams and so, whenever a new member turns twelve, we know it. '

The reason why we recruit members and are recruited in the first place is that once a morph turns twelve her ability shows and it gets out of control, if we don't take her the energy will consume her and she'll turn to the dark side. It has happened before, at least that's what the older girls tell me.

When sky and the rest would go recruit girls, some of the girls would refuse to go with them and a couple of days later, they would just know that the girls were no longer what they were. That's why they do all they can to take them with them, but some of them would prove impossible to take, they would react fast and refuse to listen, scream for their parents or burst out

crying. The thing about recruiting is that you can't take someone who in the heart of their hearts doesn't want to be helped.

Remember when I told you we were always on the move, so they won't get to us, I meant those who went to the dark side

' The morphs go back as long as civilization was there, they're all over the world and they're very rare that's why there're only sixteen of us, at least sixteen who have discovered their ability.'

' Did you hear that!' sky asks

We all stop to hear what she means, and sure enough I hear scrunching of leaves some miles away.

I smell it before it's within sight, a bear. so, we're in Canada now, I didn't realize we'd come this far.

'Quick! change to black bears!' sky orders.

Moments later the bear is in front of us, it's enormous, dangerous and black it looks like it was planning on attacking but then wisely changed its' mind. Although I too am a bear now, I still feel intimidated by the real bear in front of me. I can't imagine how sky feels when she is the one in the front of the pack.

'Stop, Samar' sky says in my head with a hint of boredom in her voice

'Sorry, Sky' I apologize

We can hear each other when we're in animal form and it's really awesome but sometimes it gets annoying, especially when you're with me.

Sky steps forward as if to challenge the bear. She stands on her hind legs to seem bigger and looks the bear in the eyes. The bear stares back for a moment but then steps back with its head to the ground. Sky growls and the bear slowly backs away then turns its back on us and runs away.

'We'll stay in bear form until the woods' end' sky decides.
We all murmur agreement.

'For the rest of the way I talk to Willow who is the fifth recruit and my closest friend. As I said before, we all look alike, with blue eyes and a dark complexion, the only difference between us is our hair, it differs in shades of brown, mine is light brown, short and curly, Willow's is long and straight, she has kind eyes that immediately stand out from the rest of the girls' eyes, she is the first of the girls for me to get used to, second is sky, although she might look to you like a cold,

authorative person and nothing more, she has a very kind spirit and she's like a very young mother to all of us.

' When a morph reaches the age of thirty, she leaves the rest and goes to an unknown place to all the rest, no she doesn't die, I know what death is; what happens isn't death it's... I don't know how to explain it, but it's peaceful.'

' When we reach the edge of the wood, we change back to human forms and change our appearance to look different so as not to attract unwanted attention.'

'Let's take a bus next time' I sigh

'To be honest this was one of the most inconvenient recruit missions, but the good thing is that it's almost over.' Sky agrees

We leave our things with the younger recruits and Jamila volunteers to stay behind to watch over them. When sky, Willow, Max, Tiffany and Sam start heading toward the city ahead and I move to go with them, sky raises an arm to stop me.

'You're not coming Samar'

'Why not? I haven't gone with you guys a single time that's not fair ' I whine.

'You're not ready, yet '

'But why? I've seen a dream too!'

'Because' Sky sighs like an exasperated mother 'yours was different'

'I didn't lie, you have to believe me. Please, Sky, take me with you' I plead.

There's a moment of silence where I silently pray for her to say yes.

She sighs in defeat

'Fine, we'll take you, but don't freak her out, okay?'

'Funny coming from the girl who drugged and then kidnapped me' I mumble

'Samar?'

'Fine, I promise'

'And then we set off, when we reach the city, we navigate through the dark streets until we reach our destination.

We stand in front of a two-story house; the light of a street lamp casts the front garden in shadows. It looks cozy with a hammock hung between a couple of trees and a swing. We all turn to look at the window on the second level which we know is the one and head

quietly towards it. Conveniently, the window is open, which makes our task easier, although opening it wouldn't have been a problem '

'We change to our normal appearance and then Max stands right below the window, Willow next to her, then Sam and Sky on their shoulders and last me, forming a human pyramid. It's hard, but nothing is a problem with enough training. I jump in quietly and pull Sky who in turn pulls Sam and so on until we're all standing in the room'

'Hmm, the room doesn't look like a twelve-year-old girl's room ' Sam notes quietly.

And indeed, the room isn't girlish

I shrug my shoulders trying not to say I told you so. We slowly move towards the bed and my heart is pounding loudly. Right before we uncover the bedsheets, a small figure jumps up from the bed with fists raised and a cute aggressive face. One that looks just like ours, except...

We all gasp and I fight a grin that's threatening to break on my mouth, because standing in front of us is a boy, a twelve-year-old boy'

'I didn't think I was that scary' the boy whispers and then he takes a look at our faces and then gasps himself, then a hint of a blush appears on his light brown skin.

'We're pretty, I know' I say before I can think about it more.

'Samar' Sky warns in a low voice

'Sorry' I say

'Who...who are you?' the boy asks with a shaky voice.

'You're a boy' I say smiling in triumph.

'I'm a... boy' he repeats confusion apparent on his face.

'See I told you so' I say, as if his confirmation is all the proof I needed to what I have been telling them for the last few days; I had my first dream about the new morph three days ago, the rest had it too, but theirs was different, they saw a girl, and I... saw a boy as you've probably concluded by now

'But how?' Willow asks aloud.

We all look to Sky for guidance.

'This is where our dream said we were going to find the morph, whether he's a boy or a girl doesn't matter, we have to take him' Sky announces with confidence.

We all turn to look at the boy, he stares back with orbs identical to mine and everyone else in the room.

'Uh...What're you talking about?' he asks

' You need to come with us ' Sky says

'You mean like leave?' he asks with his eyes widening.

Sky was about to launch into a short explanation of everything but then the boy's face breaks into a wide grin, and he jumps up and down in excitement'

We all look to each other in confusion, none of them has ever experienced a recruit excitedly agreeing on leaving with them, and although this is my first time coming inside one of their rooms, I know from personal experience that this isn't what's supposed to happen.

'Kid, you do realize that you'll never see your parents again, right?' Max asks

He freezes for a moment, and we wait for him to start disagreeing, but then he shrugs: 'I'm adopted'

That doesn't make us any less surprised, but then Sky heads toward the window so we follow behind her, and the boy follows.

When we're all on the ground we head toward the woods, the boy takes one look at the house and then turns his back on it following behind us.

'So, what's your name' I ask

'It's Murph' he answers

'Hear that Sky, his name is Murph' I call to Sky who is at the front of the group'

She doesn't answer and I feel her rolling her eyes at me

'Anyway I-' I start but then we all hear a scream from the edge of the wood, the same place where we left the others to be specific.

Sky changes to a cheetah and breaks off running and the rest follow her.

'Get on my back' I tell Murph as I change to a cheetah, but when I look back to him, he is a cheetah himself. With no time to be confused about him knowing about his ability I start running. He follows.

I know that ahead of us are the girls who are no longer girls.

I increase my speed so I can catch up with the others.

I turn to Murph while running

'Welcome to my world' I channel the thought.'

Chapter 4

A Story

Soraya picked up her step in the chilly November evening, heading to her new employers' home, she was to babysit for them, she was doing the job temporarily for the money that she needed to leave the country. And she was late.

Soraya was a twenty-year-old with big dreams and little chances of achieving them. She wanted to do her best so that when she failed; she'd have done all she could.

And now she was there, she rang the doorbell and stood waiting. Moments later the door opened and in front of her stood what looked like a butler, he was an old man wearing a suit and a bowtie. The site was unusual for Soraya as she was used to babysitting for middle class folk, never rich people; that's why this was an opportunity she could not miss; she would make such good money from it.

She cleared her throat "Hello, I'm here to babysit" she said.

"Come in" he stepped aside to let her in. He sat her on a chair in a salon and told her to wait for the 'Master and Lady'.

Ten minutes later a fancy looking man in a navy suit and a woman in heels and a red silk dress walked in.

" We trust that you know everything and what to do, we will most likely be back after midnight." The man said that and headed to the door.

"Don't interfere with anything related to meals, that's the chef's job." His wife added and they were both out.

To her that was very confusing; parents usually gave her lectures about how to handle their children before leaving her to it but those looked like they didn't care.

"Rich people" she muttered as she climbed the stairs up to where the kid was. Facing her was a hallway with doors left and right and one directly ahead.

She didn't remember being told which room the child was in, so she decided to head to the one straight ahead. The hall was chilly, and she felt goosebumps crawl up her arms.

She knocked on the door and slowly opened it, the room was somewhat small, with a twin bed in the corner and a bedside table next to it. Compared to the rest of the gleaming house it seemed...neglected. Sitting on a small rocking chair in the middle of the room with his back to her was a child, five or six years

old she guessed. The online application that she had filled had told her she was to babysit a three-year-old. 'Probably too busy to notice they have another kid' she thought to herself. Getting more annoyed with the parents by the minute.

"Hey there!" She said in the upbeat voice she used with children "I'm Soraya. What's your name?" She continued as she approached the child, the wooden floor creaking with her every step.

The rocking chair rocked back and forth. The child not turning around

answered in a quiet, flat voice: "Hello Soraya, I'm Samy" and then without missing a beat: "Do you want to hear a story?"

"Sure, why not" she answered, a bit put off; she would normally get asked to tell the story herself.

"Once upon a time there was a little boy, he lived with his mother and father and-" a distant child's wailing broke into Samy's sentence, but he continued in a whisper from which she couldn't hear anything, Soraya turned towards the door and then looked back at Samy.

She thought that must be the other child she was to babysit.

"I'll be right back Samy" she said hurriedly and got up.

She opened the door and followed the crying to one of the rooms, she pushed the door open and there was a small bed and when she moved closer, she saw a little girl in it.

"You must be Lily" she whispered as she lifted the wailing toddler into a sitting position.

"I'm Soraya" she whispered and started singing a lullaby to get her to sleep. That was when the butler entered the room.

"Why is the child crying?" He asked alarmingly.

"I don't know I was in the other room with-"

"Which other room?" The butler interrupted.

"Samy's room" she answered

The butler frowned.

"How do you know about Samy?"

"What do you mean? I just saw him in there.

Without answering the butler left the room.

She frowned and then shrugged.

After Lily fell asleep, she quietly tiptoed out of the darkened room and went back to Samy's room, the rocking chair was there but he wasn't on it. She looked around the small room but couldn't find him, so she went back to Lily's room and sat on a chair next to her bed.

She was starting to get a weird feeling about this place: the nonchalant parents, the kid that disappeared, the horrified butler.

She pulled her phone out of her purse and looked up the house's address. Newspaper headlines bombarded her screen.

Child found dead in bathtub. El Bakry child watery murder! El Bakry Murder Mystery, who did it?

She clicked on one of the articles and started reading hurriedly, her heart started to beat uncontrollably, her hands started shaking. Murdered...No proof...Parents...Drowned.

She had been sitting with a ghost. And he had probably been murdered by his parents, who were coming home around midnight.

Her mind started racing. What was she going to do? Leave before they got there? Act Normal till they got home, then get paid and leave? What about the poor kid? Was she going to leave her? And Samy... Samy was a ghost...

She sat for what felt like hours contemplating what to do. Then her mind was made. She headed to Lily's room, where the little girl was still asleep and carried her. She then hurried out of the room but did the classic pillow under blanket move to make it seem like Lily was in her bed to postpone suspicion as long as possible.

She tiptoed along the Hallway to the stairwell which she went down cautiously in an attempt to avoid creaky steps, all the while her heart beating. Finally, she was at the bottom. Ahead of her was the door and behind her a door leading to what she assumed was the kitchen. It was ajar and she could hear movement from inside although there were no lights on. The door started opening slowly with the squeaky sound doors tend to

make. There was the shadow of a man stepping out. So, then she threw caution to the wind and started running towards the door. She shook the circular doorknob, but it wouldn't open. She tried the other way and managed to open it. Just as she ran down the steps, she felt her hair being pulled, but it was a feeble attempt, she was now out of reach. She ran to the metro station, all the while with Lily asleep, her head lying on Soraya's shoulder. She could only breathe out once the metro started moving.

She fumbled for her phone in her purse then looked up the address again so she could read the news in the safety of the metro. There... she found a different article, dated twenty years back and near the bottom there was a picture... a picture of a large crowd of journalists and neighbors, as well as an ambulance and a fire brigade, all gathered in front of a burning house, but there, almost invisible amidst it all was the butler she'd left back at the house, looking exactly as he did now, as if twenty years hadn't passed at all. She started reading the article, more confused than ever before.

...What was previously thought to be a case of domestic homicide turns out to be a shocking case of quadruple homicide. After the oldest Kelany son was found drowned in the bathtub of his bathroom, the very next day brings us news of the rest of his family following in a brutal fire from which there have been no survivors.

Soraya looked down at Lily, then slowly put her down next to her on the bench, the girl woke up and looked at her with staring eyes and a smile slowly creeping across her face: ‘Do you want to hear a story?’

Chapter 5

Neighbours

'Hello?' Ibrahim says to his friend on the phone.

'What's up?' His friend asks

'Listen, I wanted to tell you something.'

He takes a deep breath and launches into his long-thought explanation.

They had settled everything; his friend Thomas was to come later that night with a couple of other friends, and they were going to finally get done with it all. He was finally going to get to the bottom of the thing that'd been bothering him since the first night he'd spent at their new place. That was a year ago.

He had picked today because his parents were out and his sister staying over at her friend's place. He locked all the doors and windows and sat waiting for his friends, who were due to arrive any minute.

The truth was that for every single night of the last year he would hear shouts and screams from the neighbors' house and it would always end abruptly with the same sound; gunshot.

Ding dong

Finally. He was starting to think they weren't coming.

He opens the door and standing in front of him are his three closest friends, the two at the front; Yahia and Ramy and behind them; Thomas

'Come in' he moves out of the way to let them in.

'So, what's this all about man?' Yahia asks curiously, brushing his light hair out of his eyes –a move that annoyed Ibrahim to no end- as he opens the fridge looking for food.

'Thomas didn't tell you?' Ibrahim inquires, glaring at Thomas.

'He only said we were up for a thriller night' Ramy answers, rolling his moody grey eyes.

'Sit down, I'll try to make it quick' he ushers them all down around the kitchen table, Yahia now with a sandwich in hand.

"Please don't interrupt me" he says with a glare in Yahia's direction.

Yahia raises one hand in surrender –the other being occupied by the sandwich- and mimics zipping his mouth.

"You know I moved here last year, right? Well, every single night for the past three hundred and sixty-five days I've been hearing the same events happening at the neighbor's place, every single night. Screaming then gunshot. The first night we panicked, dad called the cops who seemed bored, like this happened all the time, and when they came to investigate, the house was empty, which is weird considering that we'd seen the neighbors earlier that evening, a young man and his wife. The whole of the first week was a nightmare, every night waking up to the same noise, after a couple of weeks though, we got used to it, as long as we weren't getting hurt it was okay, and the neighbors never even talk to anyone, it's been like this for the past year as I've told you already, but I can't take it anymore, I'll die with my curiosity if I don't get to the bottom of this, and I can't do it alone' He concludes and after a moment's silence Yahia exclaims : "sick"

Ramy is staring in awe.

Thomas looks thoughtful.

'So?' Ibrahim asks

"You already know my answer" Thomas says firmly.

"I'm in!" Yahia says as he gets up to brush crumbs of bread off his torso.

'Count me in too' Ramy says after a moment's thought.

'What's the plan then?' Thomas asks

'We're going to break into the house' Ibrahim says simply.

'Guys come here' He calls to the others while peering through the window at his neighbors' house.

'That's the wife' he points at the young woman who's wearing a forget-me-not blue dress, fifties style, actually everything about her was fifties-based.

'Why is she all dressed like that?' Yahia asks

'No idea' Ibrahim answers, frowning at the lady.

"Is there anything we need to know before we go in?" Ramy asks

"Well, they never seem to go out after dark." He starts " The gunshot happens at 1:13 am and I once woke up early in the morning and there were no signs of a break in or any such thing."

"And I presume you were warned before moving in?"

"of course we were" he rolls his eyes.

At 12:45, 28 minutes before the finale, they move quietly across the lawn heading to the neighbor's backdoor. Ibrahim ushers them into the house quietly; the backdoor is always unlocked. They enter and although he knows nothing about the house except the locations of the rooms facing his house, they all follow him as if he owns the place.

He knows the gunshot comes from the master bedroom so he tip-toes to what he hopes is the closet opposite it and the others file behind him quietly. He ushers them in one by one and by some miracle they all fit in. The only source of light is Thomas's glow in the dark watch.

It's 12:53 now twenty minutes left.

Fifteen minutes... ten now...five...four...three...

He turns to his friends: "Guys, can you hear that?"

"I think I do" Thomas whispers back

"Is that noise... birds chirping?" Yahia asks uncertainly

- "Uh oh" Ramy sounds alarmed
- "Open the door quietly and let's get out of here" he continues

As Ibrahim slowly opens the door the sunlight coming from the window confirms their doubts; they had fallen asleep. Thomas checks his watch, it says 6 am so they quietly slip out of the house, seeing no signs of damage as they do so. No dead person's body, no bloody walls. They see something weirder; the furniture and everything in the house is old, not just old-fashioned, but actually old and dusty, the wallpaper on the walls is ripped and all the surfaces covered with layers of dust.

They all stare at each other as they cross the road to his house.

He tells his friends to be quiet because his parents must be sleeping still.

"I can't believe we actually did that!" Ibrahim exclaims when they're back in his living room. "How could we have simply dosed off!" He continues.

"The real question is: What the hell?" Yahia exclaims.

"The house is empty" Thomas says quietly.

"So, no one lives there?" Ramy follows the trail of thought.

"Guys this is stupid. What about the neighbors?" Ibrahim shakes his head.

"They were never there" Thomas answers.

"Oh, so they're ghosts?" he snorts

"Is there any other way all of that could've happened?" Ramy's eyes almost roll out of their sockets.

"Give me your laptop Hema" Yahia says suddenly.

"If you're thinking of looking the house up, I've already done that" Ibrahim replies.

"Just get it here and watch the magic happen"

Minutes later Yahia is sitting on the couch his legs on the coffee table and the laptop on his lap; he is typing away, occupying the silence with the clicking sound of the keyboard. "Aha!" He finally exclaims.

They all gather round him to see what he's indicating. A photograph from a newspaper of a very familiar couple in front of a very familiar house faces them, with the date 25th of July 1956. They all start reading silently.

"At exactly 1:15 am, the local police station received a call from a citizen living in "Hay Al Zuhoor" reporting that he had heard a gunshot directly before his call and asking for the police's help, adding that the sound came from his neighbors living across the street.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, who had moved into the neighborhood two months before the incident, were found dead-" The image on the screen changes.

"Hey, I wasn't done yet!" Ibrahim protests, realizing that Yahia has intentionally changed the page.

"That's the only important part. You need to see this now" he points to the screen.

Another piece of news, but this one not on the front cover as the other one, instead it's on the side in a small font size and titled: "House for sale" The date said July 30th, 1956, so the house has been on sale for almost 70 years with no buyer.

Yahia then switches to page after the other, showing them all the horrible incidents that have happened to clerks selling the house and people attempting to buy it.

"So, the neighbors are ghosts" Ibrahim finally concludes

Chapter 6

Purpose

Mourad had failed to not fall asleep, he had been really trying not to. You see; weird things tend to happen when he does; everything he dreams of turns to reality and the dream this time was not a good one.

How he usually managed was by avoiding falling into deep sleep, he would put multiple alarms to wake him up one hour and a half into sleep, he would get up and go drink or eat something, watch some show or just busy himself with anything to push the sleep away from his eyes. Then, after all sleep was gone, he would go back to it after setting another alarm of an hour and thirty minutes, and it would go on like that till morning. Of course, the bags under his eyes were now a constant friend because of that. But today was another story; his alarm had not gone off or he hadn't heard it when it did, whichever, the result was that he'd had his full nine hours of sleep along with a dream, more a nightmare really.

He knew that no matter what, the dreams had a way of coming true.

Later that day his friend called. Naturally he was moody because of everything and let it out on his friend, who didn't take it well, they both said horrible things and the call ended with a resolution never to talk again.

Now, he was having lunch in the living room and stood up abruptly then stomped up the stairs to his room, which in contrast to the living room was dimly lit. He sat at the wooden desk which had his laptop on it, typed in the password, his hands starting to sweat, and then dove into the endless maze that was the internet.

That night he didn't set an alarm for every hour and a half. Instead, he just went to sleep after putting the scents he needed around him and wearing light cotton pajamas. He took a deep breath and started whispering the words he'd memorized earlier, then he gave a long sigh and closed his eyes.

When he next opened his eyes, he found himself in a dark area, dimly lit with a blue light and felt someone's breath near him. He looked to his right. No one was there. When he looked to his left, he saw numerous bodies lying on the cold floor like him.

Mourad slowly got up and took a steeling breath. He looked around him and found he was on a trail of what looked like black marble moving straight ahead as far as his eyes could see, seemingly endless. The bodies lying on the ground stirred. There were about

twenty other people. And from what he could see they were all of different nationalities.

"I made it" one of them exclaimed as he got up

"Wow, I didn't think anyone else would be here" he said in reply.

He noticed that they understood each other even though they were speaking different languages.

"I'm Steve" the guy introduced himself, he was about his age and had long curls and like him and everyone else on the trail was wearing clothes of cotton.

"Mourad" he shook Steve's hand.

"You know what you're here for, right?" Steve asked

"Yeah, I brought myself here, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I'm doing this for fun though"

"What are you here for?" Steve asked curiously

Mourad had a feeling this shouldn't be public information, so he quietly explained his problem.

"Cool" Steve whispered.

By this time everyone else had got up.

"Let's get going"

Everyone started moving forward now. When Mourad looked around him, he noticed that they were all young about his age or a little older, he'd thought they'd all be here for the same reason, to stop their dreams from coming true. He'd sat for hours the previous day, entering shady websites, all to find a solution. After hours of research, he finally found what he was looking for.

He had to come to this place during his sleep and walk the trail in order to get out and supposedly the dreams would end after that, at least he hoped so.

As they walked, he heard a girl behind him talking about the nightmares she had and with a jolt he realized she was like him, so naturally he turned around and introduced himself.

"Hey I'm Mourad"

"Sarah" she answered

She had light hair that he couldn't properly see the color of in the dark.

"You're like me" he hurriedly said.

" You're like me?" She asked

They started exchanging stories about their problem and he felt relieved, not being alone through it all. He started conversations with the other people walking around them and he got to know the reasons they were there, only he and Sarah had their dreams come true some of them were there because of curiosity and some like Steve were there just for fun, the rest -including a dark-haired girl with high cheekbones -admitted to being there because of a problem but wouldn't talk about it. The one thing they all had in common was research that had gotten them there.

After some time of walking and exchanging stories, a sudden warmth washed over him and he looked around to see what the source was and noticed that everyone else had paused too. Ahead of them on the once dark path was a source of golden light, on the path itself and around it. They approached it and as he moved closer, the figures started to sharpen, right there he saw his friend -Adham- whom he had had the fight with, he was grinning at him and gave a salute as he drew closer

'What's up man?' Adham asked him.

'Adham is that you, what're you-' but then he paused as he realized what this was, around him were people he knew: Friends, family, but also characters from games and movies he'd played and watched, and some that couldn't even be called people that he could vaguely remember. They were all surrounded by a golden haze and were all his dreams, the good ones, and he didn't realize how cold he'd been until their warmth covered him like a sunlight after swimming for a long time.

'It's good to see you guys' he smiled at them all. He then looked behind him to see the people with him on the trail also greeting figures with a golden haze around them, but he found he couldn't see their faces, as if they were invisible but for the golden haze surrounding them. After some time of chatting with his favorite people, he realized he had to move on.

'I'll see you guys later' 'I hope' he added internally. Then moved on. The others followed soon after.

The journey was uneventful for some time when all of a sudden, Mourad felt the presence of something cold and dark, he felt it in the chill that went up the back of his neck making tiny hairs rise.

"Everyone stop" he heard a man give the order, he looked at him and noticed he was the eldest among them, in his late thirties or something, he was one of those who didn't want to talk about their problem.

"Stay still, until I say you can move" he said in a low but imperious voice.

"We're in the land of nightmares if you talk to any of them, you're never getting out, so I advise you not to"

They kept moving, now more cautious than before.

Mourad thought about all the times his dreams had caused him problems, from small problems in school to bigger problems like the time someone broke into the house, and that further strengthened his resolve to get rid of the curse.

After some time -Mourad couldn't tell how long-, he heard an echoing scream come from the front of the group, his heart skipped a beat and he -along with the others - started to panic.

"What's going on?" He asked the closest person to him who was the eldest guy in the group.

"Quiet! Look down and don't talk to anyone" He whispered in a gravelly voice

As the group slowly but surely moved forward, accompanied by the fading sound of the same chilling screams, Mourad heard gasps as they passed by one particular spot on the trail. His curiosity got the best of him and he looked up, he saw the girl -with the high cheekbones and dark hair surrounding her face- on her knees being pulled into the darkness and he could see tears on her face and slowly her screams quieted down into deafening silence. The people around him seemed as shocked as he was. For a moment there was no sound or movement, then the eldest of them whom Mourad didn't know the name of yet broke the silence "Keep moving, like I said, no one talk to them" he repeated.

Who's them? Mourad wondered as he resumed walking. Who grabbed that girl? What did he get himself into?

The group resumed walking and Mourad found Steve next to him again.

'Hey man'

"Hey"

Then they fell into silence. As they moved however, Mourad saw them and it brought a chill to every inch of his skin that he didn't think would ever go away, dead rotting bodies of his loved ones and friends , people that hated him and a tall slender figure of a woman , pale skinned and wearing a long black cloak , but her face was the worst of all, her pupil -less eyes seemed to be staring at him , he didn't know how, and worst of all her mouth curled in a horrible smile. He was about to open his mouth yell at her to go away when he felt an arm on his, he looked to his left and saw the eldest of them. He had fallen behind and could see Steve and the rest moving ahead. This reminded him of what happened to the girl before and he looked down and fell silent at once. A little while later he looked up and saw Adham, he was about to greet him again when Adham started yelling at him and his body started to slowly rot. Mourad shuddered and looked down at the silver trail they were walking on, resolved not to look up again until they reached their destination.

After some time of walking continuously and in silence the leader started speaking;

"We're here, everyone focus"

Mourad stood on his tip toes to look ahead through the crowd and saw what looked like a storm that was twisting within itself but not spreading -as if enclosed in a transparent circular tank- and a dark lake below it. He remembered what he had read online and what he was supposed to do. He took a deep breath and let it out.

As they got closer to the storm, people at the front started approaching the stream of water, some treading slowly and some running. He saw the leader move with resolve and pass through.

I need to get out of here, I need to fix things with Adham, he doesn't deserve this. I need the nightmare to end. He repeated these words over and over in his head till he got to the edge of the lake, although there was no air current, his body felt chilly. He took a steadying breath and stepped into the lake. It was cold. He saw Steve step in next to him and head right to the storm. As Mourad observed, he noticed Steve couldn't get through the waterfall. 'No purpose' he whispered, horrified. He shook his head and kept walking through the shallow water, his purpose in mind.

He could picture the horrible woman and the dead bodies and everything else and felt his resolve strengthen further. He started running at the storm then finally with a yell entered through it. He was suddenly engulfed by a deafening silence, the sound of everyone else gone, he walked on in the haze of grey and blue and fell face forward into cold water,

The realization hit him all of a sudden that all that had happened was because he believed it was going to, he was just helping it out.

The sound was all back, the splashing of water, the sound of the gasps of everyone around him and the whistling of the enclosed storm behind him. He could see he was in a dark long river, waist deep in the water, but he could see a light ahead and started moving towards it. Panting and shuddering, he moved forward through the abnormally cold water. The light was so close now he could see it in the form of a large orb. It was blinding. Still, he moved on until it was right Infront of him. He took one last deep breath and swam straight through.

Chapter 7

Broken

'Why does everything that I love get broken?' Safeya sighed as she picked up the broken pieces of her favorite mirror.

The battle was approaching, and she'd considered that mirror a source of good luck. way to go with that, she thought.

Their kingdom was to go into battle with the kingdom next door. Whoever won the battle would rule both kingdoms. She was the daughter of the army's commander and she'd been training her whole life for something like this.

The pale light breaking through the windows into the castle made her body ache for sleep, but she'd been training for this for months and months.

She walked through the castle halls, and as she walked, she felt someone's presence next to her, she turned and there he was, tall, broad-shouldered, shoulder length dark hair as beautiful as ever, sharp facial features and the rarest eye color; purple. The prince Fares.

"Your highness" she curtsied as they walked.

"Oh please" he shoved her at the shoulder.

They were raised together, ran in this very hall together as kids.

The king and her father were friends way before the king came to rule after marrying the Queen. So, herself and the prince were destined to be friends even before either was born.

"You'd think one turns sober by such things as battles" she mused.

"You'd think one would quit using titles after being married to the person in question"

They were destined to be married as well. Everyone could tell they were in love for the longest time. And so, the news of their marriage was no surprise to anyone who knew them; from family to friends and even to servants at the palace.

They headed to the kitchens, where the few staff members that were awake huddled together at the table, having breakfast.

"Your highnesses" they stood up and curtsied when they saw the prince and his princess.

"Are there by any means lemon biscuits available?" She asked waving off the formalities.

At once a tray full of those biscuits was in her arms and she and the prince ate.

When they were done, they thanked the staff and headed out.

"Leave us some for when we get back" the prince called behind his shoulder.

"Anyways, we should move faster, the army is waiting in the grounds"

They were to head to the battlefield and put up their tents in wait for their opponents' arrival.

The journey was a day long to the middle ground between them and their opponents.

They'd become enemies because of love. The prince's brother had fallen in love with the opposing kingdom's princess, but her father didn't approve of the connection, as he had already had another prince in mind for her, one from a more prosperous kingdom. And one evening, as the prince walked out of his princess's palace grounds, he was shot in the back. And the rest as they say was history.

When they got to camp after the long day and everything was set, they rested for a few hours then started training, she the prince and all the other soldiers and fighters.

The hilt of her sword still cold in her grasp at the first grasp of the day, she stood straight facing the prince and at the count of three they launched into combat.

She swiped her sword to his unguarded side, but he saw it coming and deflected it. Their swords clashed loudly and she took advantage of the busy moment and unsheathed her dagger, closed in on him in one swift movement and held the dagger to his neck. For a moment she felt proud of herself but the next she found herself in his position, her own dagger to her throat.

"We've gotten better" he grinned

"Yeah, we have" she agreed and grinned back.

For the next hour they trained with the other soldiers giving and receiving advice. At last, after they had some sleep and hints of light started showing, they heard their opponents' march across the green valley.

The army arranged itself; Archers with their bows and arrows, behind them soldiers with armor, swords and daggers, and behind those the knights with their shining swords and more foot soldiers at the back. The enemies were roughly the same number.

"STAND TALL FIGHTERS, WE'VE BEEN PREPARING FOR THIS BATTLE LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW WE'RE GOING TO WIN" The General - her father's- voice rang through the battlefield.

For a moment their eyes met, and he nodded at her with a smile of reassurance.

She was on her dark stallion, amongst the other knights and next to her was her prince.

She looked ahead then felt warm fingers touch hers, she grasped his hand in reassurance, to herself as much as to him.

"We can do this" she whispered

"I know" he answered.

Then a horn sounded from God knew where and they launched into battle with a strong battle cry.

The archers started shooting their arrows and some hit the enemies through their chain mails and helmets. When the enemies were too close for archers to shoot, the foot soldiers launched in followed by the knights, she slashed her sword around, her aim true. She could feel her comrades around her fighting with undeniable skill. The enemies also had knights so she was fighting those. A knight in the enemies crimson red attire came at her, a vicious look in his eyes and before she knew it, her horse was falling to the ground, neighing in pain, the vicious knight had attacked him, and now she was on the battle ground, literally.

She reacted fast, she had prepared for such an occurrence, she forced herself to injure the enemy horse's front right leg and before the knight could react, he was falling. Now they were equals.

On the ground the knight got up and they faced each other, she couldn't deny he was good but she was faster, within minutes he was on the ground and she was moving on.

Stay away from the knights she reminded herself.

The fighting went on for some time, with her battling and injuring soldiers.

The sun had fully risen at this point and was burning the back of her neck.

More time passed; the sun was almost down. Then, when it was too dark to see, out of nowhere the horn sounded and it was a sign for both armies to draw back. The remaining soldiers headed to their tents together. They hadn't lost many, but some were wounded and needed tending to. They were to continue the battle at sun dawn.

Safeya sat near the fire they'd lit up and watched as her fellow soldiers huddled closer and flaunted of their battles.

She'd Killed for the first time that day, it wasn't like she hadn't known she would have to, but she hadn't known it would feel this way. She shook her head and reminded herself that these were the enemies, they'd killed the crown prince, only for disapproving of him for their princess.

King of Crescent castle -Sufian- had insisted he had nothing to do with the crown prince - Jawad's- death. In fact, he blamed them for his daughter's running away after the prince's death. Of course, neither side believed the others' claim of being innocent and war was their only solution.

She felt the warmth of someone next to her and looked to see Fares sitting there.

"How are you?" He asked seeing how shaken she was, although she was trying to hide it.

"No one prepares you for the feeling of blood on your hands" she mumbled, she hadn't wanted to mention that to him, considering what with his older brother and everything.

His eyes softened and his next words were: "Truly "

They sat in silence for a while before the other soldiers started singing an old song about their kingdom and they joined in.

"Safeya, up" A voice pulled her out of a restless sleep.

Safeya opened her eyes to the sight of her comrades getting ready for battle in the faint light coming in from a gap in the tent. She was sharing a tent with a number of them after insisting to her father it wasn't necessary to mount a tent just for her and Fares; the time would come for them to spend more time together, but during a battle was not it.

Standing above her was Kawthar already dressed. Once she'd seen Safeya's eyes open she turned and left the tent, more light rushed in before the tent closed behind her.

She got up and started dressing hastily and when she was done followed outside.

She could see the previous night's campfire remains and the logs they were sitting on.

Most of the soldiers were already outside polishing their weapons or practicing combat.

The view of the valley was breathtaking, and she hadn't taken much notice of it the previous day. The green stretch of grass and warm colored sky. It didn't seem like a day for a battle.

After a hasty meal of whatever they could scrape together before the battle resumed, they got in formation like the previous day and saw their enemies on the hill across the valley.

She'd gotten a replacement horse as hers was still injured and the moment the horn sounded she was moving to engage.

The first knight she faced was on a white stallion and she couldn't shake the familiarity from him. She reminded herself that all soldiers looked alike in armor; she herself was unrecognizable under the helmet and chain mail. She attacked first and felt like her opponent wasn't very enthusiastic about the fight, he was moving toward the edge of the battle and forcing her along.

"Do you need help?" A voice yelled from nearby -Fares-

"NO, I got it!" She yelled back and in that moment her opponent looked to the source of Fares' voice, and she took the chance to launch her body at him and they both fell crashing to the ground. She held her sword at the Knight's neck and then he slowly raised his hand and dropped his helmet.

She gasped; it was Jawad.

She heard Fares gasp nearer this time, he hadn't listened to her and had come to her aid anyway. She looked towards him, but something was wrong; he was not astride his horse and he had his hands on his chest and fell to his knees. She let her sword go and jumped to him just in time to catch him before he fell face first to the ground.

She sat on her knees and examined him, not quite grasping what was happening, Jawad was there too right next to them.

"Fares- Fares look at me, she could now feel his warm blood on her fingers, he had evidently been stabbed from the back. She cut off part of the linen shirt underneath her chain mail and frantically started tying it around the wound, going around his torso.

His eyes were still wide in shock. He looked at her with his strikingly violet eyes and then darted them to his brother, she couldn't tear her eyes from him to look at Jawad.

"Fares, you're okay, it's just a wound " she blurted as she kept her hands over the wound, knowing it wasn't true.

His eyes drooped.

"No no no, stay with me" she snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

"Jawad, y- you're alive" he gasped out.

"This wasn't supposed to happen" Jamin's voice cracked behind her.

"It's okay" Fares said quietly after giving him a long look, as if looking into his soul. His voice was tiring and slowing.

His eyes darted back to her.

"It's okay" he repeated now to her.

His head was in her lap now and she pushed his hair away from his face.

"Shh- preserve your energy" she soothed.

"No, Safeya it's okay. Eat some lemon biscuits for me, will you?" He rasped a hint of a smile on his face.

"No no no , Fares don't you dare close your eyes, you're still here, you're still here, I'm with you"

"I'm glad you didn't say your highness"

She laughed despite herself.

He looked to his brother who was now on the ground next to them, then to Safeya again.

His chest was rising and falling agonizingly slowly now. His lower lip started to tremble. "I'm scared." He whispered to her, as if fearing any of his comrades might hear him.

Safeya removed her hand from his chest and held his hands tightly.

"Shhhh, you shouldn't be scared when I'm with you" She whispered as quietly, silently praying. Then she heard him whispering incoherently.

He smiled at her and then his eyes darted up and stared into nothing, he was gone.

For a moment Safeya just stared not daring to believe he was gone. She pressed her ear to his chest trying desperately to listen to what wasn't there. How was Fares, her Fares- It couldn't be, she was sure there had been a mistake, he was the better one at combat after all. He was her best friend, her secret keeper, the love of her life and now he was here in her arms, still, dead.

She couldn't believe it.

This had to be a very long nightmare she would wake up from any second.

She was blinded to the battle around her. It was almost as if it had... stopped. She let go of Fares' hands, still tight in hers, swiped at her face and looked around her; the fighting had stopped

She looked at Jawad now for the first time since she'd first seen him.

He had a hollow look on his face, still staring at his brother's body.

She gently got her legs out from beneath Fares' head and got up to face Jawad.

He stood up too.

How could you? She shoved him.

We thought you were dead!" She shoved him again.

He didn't resist.

"WE MOURNED YOU! **HE** MOURNED YOU!"

She didn't stop shoving him

"And this, this is because of you!"

Fares, the people who were dead, and those she'd Killed.

A hand came between them, a girl's, she looked at her. The girl too was in armor and had a helmet in hand.

Her face was dirty with mud and her hair a mess, but she wasn't wounded.

Safeya looked closely at her and her eyes widened in recognition.

Princess Sabba'.

Jawad's love.

She looked from her to him, not believing her eyes.

Then she realized what had happened.

The girl looked at her, her eyes silently pleading for her to hear her out.

But she couldn't. They had run away together and left them all to this mess they had caused. How selfish, how immature, how-

She shoved the princess aside and held Jawad by his collar

"He's dead because of you" she whispered, angry tears reforming in her eyes, then she punched him repeatedly until she felt someone -or several people pull her away. She couldn't breathe, dark spots started obscuring her vision until everything went dark.

The next time she woke up was in a hospital bed. She looked around her and realized she was back in the palace and that it was morning. She looked to the seat next to her involuntarily, expecting him to be there, he was always there when she was sick. Her eyes pooled with tears.

So, they had returned home, the battle was over. She got up and after some time of convincing the nurse - who told her her father had just left-she was quite alright, she was given reluctant permission to head back to her quarters.

As she headed back to her room, trying not to be noticed as much as possible, she heard snippets of conversation. She knew the whole story now; The prince Jawad had been shot indeed, but it hadn't been fatal. He had then left a letter and run away with princess Sabaa'. The letter had been intercepted by a spy from another kingdom and never reached the king. They had arrived to stop the battle after hearing about it, but were too late. That's what she filtered out from the rumors and exaggerations, but all that didn't matter to her now, she just wanted to sleep, and hope to wake from the nightmare she was in.

When she entered her room, the first thing she saw was the broken mirror on her bedside table. She held part of it in her hand not taking in the wound it left behind.

"Why does everything that I love get broken?" She sighed.

Chapter 8

Quality time

"A little help here" I shout to the guys.

"I'm a little busy at the moment" Shady shouts back

"Yeah, me too," Mohamed shouts

If you're curious about where we are or what the heck we're even doing, I'll explain; We're in the ps22 world, in case you live under a rock and don't know what that is, you can basically plug yourself into any game of your choice and boom! You're in the game's world. Technology! What can I say?

We're playing a game. A classic. It's a game where we fight aliens - tall green monsters with a big head, and fully black eyes- on EARTH, can you believe that?

I've never even been to earth, the last person in my family to have actually lived there -and only for a brief amount of time- was my great grandpa.

The Aliens' purpose is to separate and kill us, and so far, they're succeeding, not the killing part, though. Our Target is to survive for two hours in the game. It takes place in a... -what's its' name? yeah jungle- Jungle. We started the game fifteen minutes ago and things have not been looking up for us throughout that time. Right now, as you've probably collected, I'm surrounded by a group of aliens and their numbers keep increasing.

My brothers, Loay, Mohamed and Shady are "busy" fighting other aliens so I'm trying to shoot as many of the ones surrounding me as possible, but it's only a matter of time till I'm outnumbered. If you're wondering, I consider myself a match to seven of them - although that's not what Loay says-. I sigh and throw my gun away when its' battery dies, and it surprisingly hits one of them before it heroically falls. I'm busy doing my happy dance when I'm rudely interrupted by Loay calling: "Ro 'aa", not the time for your happy dance. "

"Instead of useless advice, give me a hand," I Yell

He extends his hand.

"Seriously, Loay!" I flare

He quickly eliminates the remainder of his enemies and dodges the aliens surrounding me swiftly to stand in front of me. To be honest, he's the best out of the four of us at this game, but I'd never say that to his face. Then again it might be because he's the eldest out of the four of us.

"Step aside, peasant," he tells me.

"Hahaha, very funny cause last I remember I've been holding them off of the rest of you for most of the game now.

"Just take the stone and stand back, violet," he tells me, starting to shoot the huge sticky creatures.

"Who has it?" I ask

"I gave it to Mohamed," he tells me.

I Dodge the aliens and move away, scanning the area for Mohamed.

I see him cornered by two aliens against a giant tree, the stone hanging from his neck.

This stone is our portal back to our world. Since we've started playing, we made an agreement to give it to the least of us in danger at any given moment, so it doesn't break or get lost or anything.

And if you're wondering what happens if it gets lost, well, don't.

I run to Mohamed and tell him to throw me the stone. For your information, this stone is extremely fragile and can break if grasped a tad bit too tight, and yes, I just asked him to throw it to me. Desperate times desperate measures. He understands and struggles to

take it off while shooting at the two aliens, he throws it at me and time slows down as the green crystal floats towards me in slow motion. I reach up to catch it, my sweaty hands above my head, when it almost touches my hands, I close my eyes and wait for the feel of it in my palm, but to my horror I don't. For the record all of the previous happened in five seconds - more or less - but it seemed like minutes to me. That happens sometimes in the game; some actions go in slow motion, and everything in the game slows down for a few seconds to keep the suspense going.

Anyway, the moment is over, and I see the green powder of the shattered stone on the floor of the jungle. I crumble down to the ground and put my head between my legs to prevent myself from puking. Yep, I have nausea.

"My weapon!" Loay exclaims from afar

"Guys, what happened?" Shady questions.

Mohamed, the only one who knows what just happened, stares at me, his face half-horrified, half-sympathetic; Horrified because he's surrounded by once two, now three aliens with no weapon, sympathetic because the guys are going to give me a hard time after what I just did - the guys meaning Loay-.

"Retreat," Loay shouts to all of us. I turn and head to our secret hiding. Yes, we play this game enough to have a hiding place. I feel the rest of them behind me.

"What the heck, Ro 'aa!" Loay exclaims

"I...I... It...it fell" I stutter out while running.

"It was my fault, Loay. My aim was kind of off, " Mohamed says.

"Let's just wait until we get to the cave and handle things there." Shady ends the discussion.

As the aliens start chasing us. I shoot both of them thankful looks that I'm not sure they catch.

If you haven't guessed it yet, Shady is the wise, trouble-solver, he's also the second oldest of us. Loay, the leader, Mohamed the kind one -at least the kindest of us- and he's the youngest of us, and lastly me, the clumsy one that makes up for it by being a know-it-all in game manuals.

A few minutes later, we're in our cave. We sit in a circle, and after Loay has lectured me for a good few minutes the three of them blurt out: "What now, Ro 'aa?"

"This never happened before now"

"What do we do?"

"SHUT UP" I snap

The three of them freeze and stare at me, I can be scary when I want to

"I'm trying to think," I add, calmly this time.

They stay silent and I think for a moment.

"How long have we been here?" I ask

"Twenty minutes," Shady answers after checking the time tracker. Yep, we have that too.

"The game ends in an hour and forty minutes. We have to survive until that time's up. We've got no weapons whatsoever," I say

"So, we have to stay in here until the time is over," Shady follows my line of explanation.

"Yeah, since we have no weapons," I say

"There's no way that this is happening," Loay interjects.

"It's our only option man" Mohamed says.

Loay stays silent for a moment, but then he sighs and says: "Fine".

"So instead of fighting aliens, we are going to talk," I tell the guys.

The three of them stare at me and then Loay bursts out laughing, but when he realizes no one else is, he stops and says: " Ro 'aa, you're not serious, are you?"

"I actually am, we are going to play an old game called Truth or Dare, Mum told me her grandma used to play it with her friends" I tell them

"Explain this truth or dare thingy," Loay says and Mohamed and Shady nod along.

So, I start explaining what the game is, and then we start playing. And honestly, we're having more fun than we had playing the game, we ask questions and do dares, we added our own thing to it; whoever wins gets to choose the next game we play and so far, I'm winning; I'm the most okay with spilling secrets.

An hour and forty minutes later, we're back in our living room. We unplug the wires from our wrists and get up.

"Well, that was fun," Loay says

"And you Ro 'aa get to decide what we play next," Shady says.

"Is this the part where we hug?" Mohamed asks.

"Nope," the three of us say at the same time and grin, we high-five and fist bump, and I do my happy dance again, uninterrupted this time.

Chapter 9

Utopia

Day 7 of not drinking water

Status: Alive.

Look, it didn't start on purpose but since I started avoiding drinking water, things have been very different.

Everything is so clear now.

I've started noticing things now, like the way people walk on the streets with glazed over eyes and a slow gait. And don't get me started on the food, God, I get shivers even thinking about it.

For the last few months I've been researching this whole thing, trying to figure out who did what and why, a lot of questions as you can see.

A plan is forming in my head and it needs a bit of nerve to execute but I've got to trust my gut.

Let me go back to the start, I'm Adnan, 19 years old and it's the year 22 A.A (After Apocalypse, otherwise known as World War III). I, my family and the rest of the world live on a number of isolated islands very far from each other, at least that's what we've been told, I don't believe anything they say anymore, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. I know they did this for a reason, I just need to find out more. No one can know about this, I can't tell anyone what I'm seeing, I can't trust any of them.

Day 37 of not drinking water

Status: Alive

I head outside, it's still morning. As I walk amongst the zombies as I've started calling them, I notice something new: the buildings look horrible the paint is faded, large holes are in some buildings exposing everything inside people's homes, the streets are trashed and you can imagine the smell.

And where is the government in all that? Living luxuriously of course.

The first part of the plan is to get everyone to see what I see.

I've been working for so long and have probably broken so many laws in the process, but I've finally done it and it's ready; Water purifying draught. I had to sneak in many books from the shutdown public library, some about plants and some chemistry related and have had to try many versions of the draught on myself and to make sure the portions weren't too much that I'd lose sight of what I now know. I also had to give the final product a trial period, to make sure it actually works, first on myself for a couple of weeks then when I was sure I was okay I started putting it in the water

supply at home, that was a couple of weeks ago, I can feel my family coming back. I don't need to mention that all this has to be done in secret so the government doesn't find out and take me away to who knows where. People have been taken before never to be seen again.

I'm getting closer. I can see it looming ahead of me; The water supply tank. I run the last few feet to the bottom of the long ladder leading upwards. I look around me to check there is no one. I don't think they put this into consideration. I never see anyone that looks like an authority figure in the streets. I start climbing and a couple of minutes later I'm at the top. I push my weight unto my arms and onto the small area surrounding the cylindrical tank.

I pause for breath for a few seconds then push the large metal door. For a second there my heart leaps as I think it's locked then a stronger shove forces the door open.

I push my hand into my pocket but before I can reach the vial to pull it out a yell sounds from below.

'Hey! Who's up there!?'

'It's Greg' I yell back -with my most convincing impression of Greg whom I know is supposed to be here today working on who knows what but happened to be sick- hoping the distance acts as a camouflage for me. My wearing the dark blue attire the rest of the workers are wearing is also helpful. I hold my breath for a second then he laughs.

'Thought you were taking the day off'

'Well, here I am' I call back.

For a second, he stares at me in the dark, then he waves his hand and goes off. I breathe out a sigh.

I get back to work. I push my hand all the way into my pocket and extract the phial. I carefully uncork it so as not to spill anything outside of the water tank. The cork flies off and I pour the contents into the tank.

As I head away, I don't look behind me and try to attract no attention from the workers in the area by keeping my head down and walking at a casual pace.

For the next few weeks, I note the changes in my family and everyone else around me. They're walking less like zombies and more like people just waking up from a long sleep. And soon I'll need to initiate the second part of my plan; letting them in on everything so I can use their help.

I wake up to some trouble. They've found a cork in the water tank and they're trying to find the intruder. My walks around the city in the early morning help me gather as much.

As I sit for dinner in the kitchen with my parents and brother, I look around at them: they're more awake than ever. Now is the time, especially when the government is starting to get suspicious.

'Guys, I need to tell you something.' They all look up at me from the poor-quality food we're supposed to eat.

'Can you look around you and tell me what you see?' I continue.

They look through the window to the twilit outdoors, with the destroyed buildings and the cut open rubbish bags.

'It's ruin' my brother speaks first; in a tone I haven't heard him use in- I don't know maybe ever. It's real, not with glazed over eyes or a monotonous voice.

'Exactly, and we need to do something about it' I answer not being able to hold back a small smile at being able to talk to them like normal people again.

'What can we do, son?' My dad asks as he scratches his beard.

We're standing Infront of the city hall. All of us. The whole city. And this is a result of weeks of discreet communication to spread word about our plan without alerting the government to what's about to happen, to the plan which is about to take place.

'Charge!' I yell and the people around me and behind me echo it with yells and chants of their own. We push the doors open. But they're surprisingly unlocked. I had expected them to be securely shut and surrounded by or having guards inside. But after we get inside, I'm proven wrong by the quiet, empty entrance hall that meets me. It has a long unoccupied dust-ridden desk with old fallen over stationary items: papers, documents pens and paperclips.

The room is musty, like it hasn't been opened in a long time. I sense some kind of trap.

I move forward to the door leading to the next room; the governor's office I suppose and ask a few others to follow me. What meets me inside leaves my mouth agape.

Infront of me, on a long table in the middle of a dark room is a group of old men looking tired and sickly.

They look up at me.

I stop and stare at them not knowing what this all means.

'I see you've all woken up' A man wearing a crooked white wig speaks from the head of the table, with a surprisingly defeated tone.

'What- I don't' I start.

'You did this I assume?' The man I take to be the governor asks.

It starts dawning on me as he starts explaining; there are no resources being hidden from the rest of us, there have been no resources at all since WWIII, which is the reason the government did what they did.

It's too much for me. I back away and sit down on the floor. I sit there for a few minutes while everyone else is shouting and demanding answers and explanations.

I get up and the people take some time to quiet down and then I start talking, addressing the governor.

'We need food, how can we make that happen?'

He shakes his head 'The soil is not good enough for that, it grows very limited crops and in a very weak state'

A man sitting near him speaks 'We've been rationing what canned goods we've been able to find that haven't gone bad, along with the limited crops.'

Then we need to fix the soil. But how can we do that? I start thinking that we need to look through books from the public library, then it hits me. I leave them all standing and run back home. The streets are empty on the way there, everybody's in the city hall. I crash through my house's door, run up to my room and remove the wooden tile under my bed where I'm keeping all my books and the ingredients I was testing for the water purifying draught. I rummage through the items in the hiding spot and finally find them; the books about plants I got from the library weeks ago, the information I need has to be in them.

For the next few hours, I read and underline important things, then I head out for a soil sample. After I'm done with everything, I head back to the governor in the city hall.

'The problem with the soil is the lack of nutrients'

'Tell us something we don't know kid' the governor -who's sitting along with all the other officials in his office- says and lets out a sigh, as if to say this is a waste of time.

What was I expecting? of course this information isn't enough. What we need is good soil, I got samples from land that grows little crops and some from lands with no crops and then compared the content of all the samples.

What we need is more potassium and magnesium for the soil. Where can we get potassium and magnesium? I rack my brains for any information I've read in the books that could be useful. Banana peels and eggshells were sources of potassium in the past, but they're out of the question now, since we don't grow bananas anymore and there are no more chicken or other birds to get eggs from.

'Blood' I gasp.

Everyone in the room turns to look at me.

'We can extract potassium and magnesium from blood. We won't be able to get much at a time, but it can work.'

I guess the answer was within all along.

Chapter 10

Cookies and magic

It was early morning when Nanees forced her eyes open and heavily got out of bed. She had a job to get to. She got ready lazily and headed out of the house, her eyes burning from lack of sleep. She had stayed up late with Auntie the previous night, being told of her youth's adventures -on the other -less mundane-islands- which she really hoped to have the likes of someday.

She walked through the early morning streets of the island not looking forward to the day's work - not that she wasn't an enthusiastic person, but that job wasn't what she really wanted. Instead, she waited for night when she would meet Auntie for tea. She could hear the birds singing in the trees and held her cardigan close to her to shield her from the morning chill.

She arrived outside the shop and the bell rang announcing her entry. She headed to the storage room and greeted the two girls who were working the shift with her, put her bag there and went back outside to stand behind one of the cash registers. She was starting to wake up and as a result cheer up more.

'Good morning Mrs. Toll, I see you've got the days' shopping done' she said cheerfully as she greeted her first customer.

'Good morning honey, how's your day going?' Mrs. Toll asked cheerfully back.

'Oh, you know, the usual ' she answered with a smile and a shrug as she put the lady's groceries in a bag for her and waved her goodbye.

The day went on until it was finally time to go home.

"Goodnight, everyone" she waved as she left. A bounce to her step as she smelled the evening air.

She reached the door of the small house next to her own, rapped a tune on it and waited.

She heard movement inside and the scraping of a key into the door, then she was greeted by the smiling face of Auntie, whose fluffy grey hair was wrapped in a low bun and who was wearing a fluffy rose-colored robe and slippers.

She threw her arms around Auntie's neck and was greeted by arms around her waist.

'Good day?' Auntie asked

'Oh, Auntie you know the answer' she shrugged and couldn't help a smile as she entered; the house smelled like cookies. It rarely didn't.

After they made tea and put the cookies into a plate, they sat in the small garden in the backyard.

The grass was a little too long and there were night bugs flying around them, but to Nanees it was perfect.

They had just finished a particularly funny story from Auntie's childhood when she suddenly said: 'I worry about you Penny'

Nanees' heart gave a quick leap.

She looked up at Auntie.

'Even if you don't talk about it, I know this isn't what you want'

'What do you mean? I'm perfectly happy'

Auntie gave her a knowing look.

'That's all I want' she smiled sadly.

After the nice evening of chatter had long turned into night it was finally time for Nanees to get back home. 'Good night, Auntie'

She said as she gave her a quick hug.

'Good night honey.'

She headed to her house, prepared for bed and soon was asleep. What she woke up to the next morning made her wish she'd remained asleep; She woke up to pounding on her door. She blindingly searched around for a light and once she'd opened a curtain to let in some, she rushed to the door, her heart pounding. It was her other neighbor, there to tell her Auntie had passed. She received the news with shock and disbelief. There must've been some mistake. She stood there not knowing how to react, then the next few hours were a blur and that night she couldn't stop crying.

She couldn't go to work for a couple of weeks but then she finally had to because she needed money. She forced herself to get ready that morning and headed to work. On her way she reflected on the last conversation she'd had with Auntie.

'What do you mean? I'm perfectly happy'

'That's all I want'

The truth was that what she had was indeed not what she wanted. What she wanted was to become a magician's apprentice and she had a particular magician in mind. He used to live on the island of good

magic and then moved on to the island of dark magic never to be heard of again. She knew about him through one of Auntie's stories. She said she'd seen him climbing up invisible steps to get through the crowd in one of the markets on the Island of good magic and that she hadn't seen anything like it before. Although there were islands of magic, people that were actually good at it were rather rare and even rarer to spot, because they mostly preferred isolation.

'Hello Nanees'

One of her coworkers broke her train of thought.

'Welcome back Nanees' Her other coworker chimed in.

'Hey guys' She smiled weakly, the usual bounce in her voice absent.

Halfway through her shift, and right after finishing with a customer she took a breath and closed her eyes. She opened her eyes and let out the breath then ran to the back office before she could change her mind. The store owner Mr. Zeki, who was sitting behind his desk looked up as she entered abruptly.

On her way home she felt a little of her bounce coming back. She was doing what Auntie would have wanted.

She got out a huge green backpack she had above her closet with more compartments than any in the world and started filling it with all her worldly possessions and all she thought she would need. Clothes, both light and heavy, Auntie's cloak, books, money and pictures of her Parents –whom she did not really remember- and Auntie.

Before the crack of dawn, she was up and ready to go. People from different islands weren't allowed to the other ones, so, she had to be really quiet and careful. She slung her backpack over her shoulder took one last look behind her and headed out.

Her bag weighed her down, but she ignored the load and focused on the journey. Her house was a fifteen-minute walk from the island's western border, so she quickly got there. The island border was a small gate that reached to her waist, behind which hung a long fragile wooden bridge connected by rope to the other end, where the island of good magic lay. She took a steadying breath and opened the gate. Looking behind her one more time she then looked ahead and started her slow journey across. She had to be very careful because the extra weight on her back weighed her down. Every creak made her heart fall down to her

stomach and every swing made her want to be sick, but she never stopped until she was on the other side. There she let out a breath.

The island of magic like her own island, had beautiful nature, but where the island of no magic was orderly and manmade, this island was wild, everything was everywhere all at once.

She needed to locate the sorcerer. And to do that, she needed to retrace his steps. What she knew was that he used to live in a cottage on the northern border of the island of magic, before he moved to the island of dark magic and then disappeared completely. The journey would be two days on foot.

She started walking on the trail that moved straight away from the bridge. For a while she just walked between trees and could hear the creatures of the woods. Then she started hearing other sounds. People chattering and the sound of many animals. 'I must be at the market' she thought, which gave her an idea. She started rummaging around in her bag till she extracted her mother's golden necklace, it was one of the few things left behind by her mother after her death. It was precious to her, but she knew her mother would have

wanted her to be happy and she needed to trade the necklace for that.

At her first glimpse of the market she gasped, there were colors everywhere, even her most colorful clothes were nothing to this. And she always wore the most colorful outfits. There was a little boy twittering to a bird that stood on his palm, a woman conjuring hair at a beauty parlor and many others just doing their own kinds of magic. It was so... Well... magical.

She went into a pawn shop where an elderly man with a grey beard and small round glasses stood behind a wooden counter, and she handed him the necklace. He was surrounded by antiques on the wooden walls. From ancient looking jewelry to precious gems and even to old furniture.

'What can this get me?' She asked handing him the necklace.

He replaced his glasses with a magnifying lens and examined the necklace for a few minutes.

'Why I'm willing to give you a hundred and fifty golds for this.'

'Is that enough to get me a horse?' she asked hopefully.

'It's enough to get you three if you know where to ask' He winked

She ran with the bag of money and followed the directions the man had given her to the place where she could get a horse. She saw a blur of stalls and merchandise all around with people behind counters and others examining the goods and she smelled various aromas; from delightfully smelling baked goods and fried foods to beautifully scented perfumes and bukkhoor. She longed to stop and look around, but she had to stay focused on her goal.

Finally, she was there and bent to her knees while stopping to catch her breath in front of the stables. From her position, she could see rows of stables containing horses of different sizes ranging in color from milky white to coal black. Right as she was ready to go in, she heard a rough male voice speak. 'No money, no horse, lady.' and the woman must've been pushed out because next moment there she was, a tall woman who looked like she was in the fifties of her age and dressed in a dark cloak and boots. She was disgruntledly walking away flicking her hand in a rude gesture as she marched off. Before the man could react, Nanees was in his face.

'Excuse me kind sir, how much for a horse?'

He looked her up and down with her large backpack and clothes which were in various shades of green, brown, orange and blue. She didn't look like she was from around the place, and she was younger than most customers he had. But as long as she had money, he wouldn't mind what she looked like.

'50 golds for my best horse' he gestured to a large chestnut brown horse with silky golden hair in a stall behind him

'How much for your second best?' she asked with an abashed smile, she had the money, but she might need some later, so she needed to be economical.

He rolled his eyes concluding she was playing around and could not pay for his second best nor his laziest horse.

'You're like that old hag, can't pay, expecting special treatment because of who she was.'

'Who was she?' Nanees asked ignoring his offensive tone.

'She was the advisor of our last ruler.'

'What happened to the last ruler?'

He narrowed his eyes.

'You're not from around here are you'

'of course, I am' she blinked and smiled innocently.

'But my parents have always shielded me from the world. So, I don't know much about anything.'

He gave a grunt that put her under the impression he was still suspicious of her, but he finally answered.

'The last ruler's advisor was sent on a mission to claim a potion for her master who was ill at the time and desperately needed the potion to heal him. Only she didn't have what it took, and he died after waiting for the potion in vain.'

Nanees gasped. She felt sad for the previous ruler although she had never known him. Then she got inspired. 'Get me your second and third best horses please.'

The man looked down at her with a scowl and raised his palm. 'That'll be seventy-five golds.'

She opened the bag of money the old man had given her and started taking out coins one by one to the man's surprise. A few seconds later, his scowl fell, and he started counting after her.

'And seventy-five, there you go good sir.'

He gave a quick bow.

Nanees ran out while the man prepared her horses. She looked left and right a few times and just when she was about to give up, she spotted her black hair in the braided bun and ran that way.

'Excuse me ' she shouted as she crisscrossed through the many people in the market. Who stepped aside and looked in surprise at her giant backpack.

The woman finally turned, and her dark eyes fell on Nanees.

'Can I help you?' she frowned.

'Just one moment please' Nanees gasped as she raised her palm up. She tried to catch her breath as quickly as she could before the woman lost interest and continued her pace. A few moments later, she started speaking.

"Well, I saw you back there and I know you need a horse and- well- I need a guide through the dangerous areas ahead and what better guide than the king's council woman.

The woman looked about to say something but then she paused for a few heart beats.

'How long away is your destination?' she asked.

'I'm not exactly sure but it's on the northern border of the island of magic'

The woman narrowed her eyes for a moment and then she asked

'And from there I get the horse?'

'Of course,' Nanees beamed.

'Then we have a deal' she raised her hand to shake Nanees' and when Nanees took it, it felt rough.

Nanees went back to get the horses, and the woman went along with her. When the man saw her with Nanees his eyes widened as he understood who the other horse was for. The woman didn't look abashed, she just stood there, hands behind her back giving the man looks that indicated she would love nothing more than to throttle him.

Nanees gave her the second-best horse, a large grey one. And took the third best, a beautiful white and brown one. Soon they were moving away from the market and the people there.

'So...' she started

'I don't like small talk' the woman interrupted before Nanees could say anymore.

'Me neither, I like big talk'

'Allow me to rephrase, I don't like talking'

'I just wanted to know your name'

'You don't know my name?' The woman looked taken aback for a second then she recovered.

'I'm Khawla' She answered

Nanees didn't feel like Khawla was going to ask for her name, so she offered it herself

'I'm Nanees'

'Didn't ask'

This didn't dampen Nanees' spirit.

'So where are you headed after you drop me off?' she asked

'None of your business' Khawla answered with a scowl.

'Delightful' Nanees said.

Now that they had the horses Nanees guessed the journey would be reduced to half as long as on foot, so it'd take them a day.

She wasn't sure she could trust Khawla with her story but she needed to talk about it to someone else. She decided to wait till proven that she was trustworthy.

They journeyed in near silence for hours excepting the instances where Nanees tried to converse with Khawla to find out more about her, which Khawla either ignored or shut the questions down. Then they finally stopped for the horses and themselves to rest.

When Nanees got off her horse she felt very sore and tired and was glad she could sit down in a small clearing with her back against an old oak tree after she'd fed the horses.

It was nearly sundown, so they were going to rest until the sun was up again.

'Tie your horse to that tree' Khawla pointed at a nearby tree with grass growing beneath.

'Yes Ma'am'

After tying her horse Nanees rummaged through her backpack for a few minutes until she finally extracted a bag of fruits and some dried meat she'd purchased at the market. She extracted another bag and split the food into two equal piles then offered the other to Khawla. She took it with a grunt that may have been a thank you. After eating the delicious stuff Nanees leaned back against her tree and let the drowsiness win.

She blinked her eyes into wakefulness and realized it was still dark, but the kind of dark building up to sunrise. She looked around, first, she noticed her horse wasn't there, then her heart fell to her stomach as she noticed Khawla wasn't there either, and neither was the horse she'd given her. She got up and started looking around as if a solution was going to present itself any minute, then she heard them still a little away but surely there, the steps of a person and a horse, or rather two. A minute later they were in the clearing, Khawla and the two horses. Nanees' heart was moving back up to its' original place, but she was still confused.

'What happened?' she asked the ruffled Khawla

'Next time I'll tie up your horse' she scowled.

Nanees looked behind her, her horse was there but it looked injured.

'What happened?' she repeated the question with more alarm.

'It got loose and fell into a trap after your lousy knot.' she said as she tied it to the tree.

Guilt bubbled inside of Nanees as she rushed forward to stroke the poor stressed horse's mane. Then she reached into her pack and extracted first aid kit.

She cleaned the wound in the horse's leg with water then she tied it up tightly. Then, she stroked the horse again until it finally fell to sleep. Then she sat back down against her tree.

Khawla hadn't left her; she'd come back even though the injured horse must've caused a lot of trouble to get out. Not only that, but it was also going to increase the journey's duration. Nanees was grateful and now knew that she could finally trust her.

'So, let me get this straight, you have no magic and are heading to work as a sorcerer's apprentice? ' She said as they rode their horses through the forest in the early morning light.

'Precisely' Nanees beamed

'You do know you'll get shipped right back if you're caught, don't you?' Khawla asked her with raised eyebrows.

Her smile faltered 'I know' she sighed.

They continued through the forest in silence until they reached the outskirts of a new town. There were farms and cottages lining the pathway into the heart of the town, where there was a large crowd gathered in front of a stage where a man with a beard was standing,

waving something around. As they got off their horses and moved closer, pulling their horses along. Nanees realized what he was holding was a piece of paper, as she got closer still, she realized it was a picture. Closer, a picture... Of her. Her unmistakable red hair. She took several steps backward and bumped into Khawla.

'It's me' she whispered. They turned around as casually as they could, heading away from the crowd. The people coming their way, heading towards the gathered people would probably soon recognize her. They needed to get away. Now.

They took one step towards the trees behind a farm, but a yell from behind them told Nanees that it was too late to hide. But it wasn't too late to run.

Nanees didn't think of riding the horse as they ran. She could hear the angry crowd behind them getting closer. They were just running past the small cottage behind the farm when the cottage's door opened, and a hand reached out and tugged at her arm. She was pulled into the small dark space, her horse along with her. Then she heard the door close. Khawla was still outside. Hopefully, no one would have anything against her for running.

Nanees blinked her eyes in the darkness and could hear someone fumbling around with a match until finally a kerosene lamp was on. She could see her savior; A boy of about her age. Dark hair falling over golden eyes. He was smirking.

'So, it's true you're from the island of no magic?' he asked.

Nanees weighed him up, although he had such a mischievous smirk on his face, the curiosity in his eyes betrayed no bad intent. At least that's how she saw it.

'Yes, that would be me' she gave a humorless smile.

'What's your name?' She added.

'Nuya'

'Nanees' she offered

'I've noticed' the boy was now looking out through a small window.

'Thanks for getting me out of there' she said gratefully.

'I have a favor to claim' he said simply, turning around.

She searched his face trying to guess what it was he wanted.

'Take me with you' he finished.

She was surprised 'You want to come with us?'

'Yes, I've got more potential elsewhere' his eyes glinted with mischief.

'I'm only heading to the border of the island' Nanees said narrowing her eyes at him. It seemed like he wanted to head on to the island of dark magic.

'Then accompany me as far as that.' He said as if the matter had been settled.

'What's your magic?' She asked despite trying to hold in her curiosity.

He gave her a dimpled smile. 'I can find whatever anyone wants to find'

'woah'

Then she recovered herself ' I'll have to ask my fellow traveler'

She headed to the window and saw that there was no one outside presently.

'Here take this' Nuya handed her a scarf to hide her hair, which would give her away in an instant.

'And change into something less conspicuous.'

She looked down at her skirt and blouse and then sighed. He was right.

'Well excuse you' she said when he remained standing there after she'd fished out a brown linen dress from her large backpack.

He gave her a Wink and quietly left the cottage for her to change.

After she was done and had gone out with her horse. She looked around but couldn't see anyone.

'Pssst' she heard someone hiss from behind the cottage and after going around it and its' untame rosebushes, she saw that Nuya and Khawla had already met. It looked like they were not getting along.

'Khawla this is Nuya. Nuya ,Khawla. After explaining the situation to her moody friend, it didn't look like she was going to agree. 'I owe him Khawla' Nanees reminded her.

'I can help you reach what you want' Nuya spoke to Khawla

'What makes you think I'm looking for something'

'Everyone is, Advisor'

She sighed 'He's your problem' she shot at Nanees.

Then Khawla and Nanees got on their horses and looked down at Nuya. He got onto Nanees' horse and attempted to hold onto her.

'Hands to yourself' she scolded him

He grinned and held onto the saddle. The horse started galloping through the forest but its' injured leg was hindering their progress, so they moved Nuya to the other horse, behind Khawla, who didn't seem very pleased with the new arrangement.

They went on until sundown, keeping themselves to the path -that had been Khawla's only warning-and then stopped for the day.

'So let me get this straight you want to be the sorcerer's apprentice, but you don't have any magic.'

'Yes, what about you? What made you leave?'

He seemed reluctant to talk.

'Come on you know both of our stories' she begged

'Who tells you I know hers?' He nodded his head at Khawla, who was sitting against a tree opposite them.

'Everybody knows Khawla's story, apparently' she whispered not wanting her to hear them.

He sighed.

'Alright, I'll tell you'

'Ever since I can remember, people have been using my abilities to get things they want. No one I ever thought of as my friend ever was. I got sick of it and figured I should do it at my own terms.'

Nanees looked at him reproachfully.

'And you think going to the island of dark magic is the way to go?'

He shrugged.

After the night's rest they woke up at the crack of dawn for their last day of the journey. They saddled up the horses and were on their way. The morning chill surrounded them, and the early birds chirped away. The woods were getting wilder the closer they got to the borders. Auntie's stories moved to the front of her mind, the ones of adventures beyond the borders, back when that was allowed, before the hostility between the people of magic and the ones without had formed. Nanees remembered stories of Auntie's adventures with her magical friends, retrieving magic plants from rivers, climbing up mountains and soaring down. It was all very enchanting. And then there was the story of a near death experience after crossing to the island of dark magic. Auntie never said what happened, but

she warned her never to go there, to which Nanees laughed and said that she couldn't even get to the island of the good magic to get to the island of the dark one.

'Nanees we're here' Nuya called from Khawla's horse on her left. She stopped. In front of them was a large wooden cottage, with overgrown grass, weeds and flowers around it and cobwebs filling the corners of windowsills.

Nanees looked at Khawla. She seemed surprised.

'He's not here' she said briskly.

'We have to check' Nanees decided firmly. She jumped off her horse and headed towards the door, the path to which was obscured by more grass. She knocked loudly a few times then tried to push the door, first with her hands then with her shoulder. She fell forward when it opened and was faced by a large fierce black creature. It was a large wolf, and it was staring at her, standing on its hind legs. In a second, Nuya was Infront of her, his arms raised protectively, as if to shield her. Khawla ran in, observed the situation and then did the most unexpected thing; She moved forward, past a surprised Nuya and touched the creature's nose. A voice spoke from out of nowhere. A grave man's voice.

'Venture beyond where the black birds sit. Over the lonely dead man's pit. Through the forest of the creek. To find the one whom you seek. The wolf disappeared as if it were vapor. Then there was silence.

The three of them exchanged looks. 'Well, that's that' Nuya shrugged, recovering his bravado and walked away.

'Where are you going?' Nanees demanded as she turned around and followed him out.

'I'm doing what I told you I wanted to do' he yelled back.

'Let's go ' Khawla said from behind her.

'What?'

'You heard what was just said in there' Khawla said.

'The deal was to this point; I can't force you to go any further'

'I'm coming with you ' Khawla said and that seemed final. They mounted their horses and followed Nuya. They caught up with him moments later near the edge of the woods.

'So, you think going to the island of dark magic is the way to go?' Nuya mocked her.

They dismounted their luggage. Mainly Nanees' backpack and some food they'd bought on the way. Then they removed the saddles and let the horses go. They couldn't get them past the borders ahead.

Nanees could see the ravens sitting near the edge of the cliff. And ahead of them, in the darkening sky was a long rope extending between their island and the island ahead: The island of dark magic. There were no guards or semblance of security here; the law was known, and there were few stupid enough to break it.

'You'll have to leave this behind' Khawla motioned to the large backpack.

Nanees had an agonized look on her face; that pack carried her life's belongings. But she would have to make this sacrifice and only take the necessary items with her. She took out a pair of old worn-out leather gloves that had been given to her by Auntie, her old diary, a sweater and Auntie's cloak in case it got cold.

They walked towards the edge and Nanees looked down and instantly regretted it. There was a dark seemingly endless chasm, and she could hear the sound of silence from below, it was unnerving. Khawla, with their pack of food on her back held on to the rope that was bound around a pole fixed deep in the ground, she moved her legs off the cliff and for a second, they all

held their breath. When nothing happened, she started her progress across by moving one hand Infront of the other. Nanees couldn't imagine how she would be able to do that. Her heart was beating violently and a part of her wanted to back away, but the braver part of her rooted her there and waited for Khawla to get to the other side before doing the same she did. But first, she slid on her leather gloves and secured the small bag in which she carried her sweater, cloak and Diary.

She turned one time to see Nuya smile at her in what he thought was an encouraging smile but was actually just him gritting his teeth; he was scared too. Then she let her body leave the cliff and she began her journey across. It was quickly darkening, and she hoped darkness wouldn't fall completely before she and Nuya were both safely across. After five minutes, she was halfway across and her arms were in agony. She was glad to have thought of the gloves before doing this, otherwise her hands would've been raw by now. She didn't stop because she knew if she did, she wouldn't be able to continue. She tried not to look down again and instead, looked ahead at Khawla's figure ahead, standing and looking at her, behind her was a dark wood; The forest of the creek. Nanees had to get there. She wanted to be the sorcerer's apprentice.

She had to be.

With a last move of her arm, she was at the other end. And she felt Khawla pulling her up; for her eyes were closed; too tired and too scared of what lay beneath; The lonely dead man's pit. She fell on the ground and panted for a while until her breathing finally eased. She could hear rushing water behind her and could feel the twilight's chill around her. She pushed herself up and extracted her sweater. She slid it on and then looked ahead, at Nuya who was almost across with a bag of his own. Soon, he joined them and they decided they would call it a night and only go into the forest in the morning.

Nanees was shaken awake by Khawla and after eating bread and a bit of fruit the three of them headed into the woods. Waiting till morning proved pointless because as soon as they had gotten inside the forest, darkness fell around them.

She glared around, trying to see anything and waved her arms in front of her, looking for her friends.

She hit something.

'Watch it there' someone growled.

It was Khawla.

'Sorry'

She heard fumbling to her right side, where Nuya was supposed to be, then it was dark no more, as Nuya held a large torch with a red flame.

'Hey where'd you get that?' She exclaimed.

'Back at the cottage' he motioned backwards.

'That's not a normal torch, it protects against-,' Khawla paused and looked up.

A pair of red eyes looked down on them. Then they seemed to multiply.

'them' Khawla finished in a whisper.

Nanees didn't want to know what they were. It would only increase her panic.

'Stay close' Khawla said to her and Nuya in an imperious voice and Nanees felt like a child. But she was glad to be one in that moment. The three of them moved closer together and they moved Nuya to the middle with his torch. They continued with the creek to their left, trees all the way around, and red eyes looming above. Every so often, what seemed to be a hand, a very pale hand, would slowly glide towards one of them but then Nuya would shove it away with his fire. They continued like this for hours and Nanees felt like there would be no end to it. Thankfully, she was wrong.

Finally, they were out of the forest and could see the sun again. The creek opened into a large lake; they followed it for a while until they arrived at a magnificent stone tower.

'We're here' Nanees breathed in disbelief. They approached the tower and soon realized there was no entrance where one was expected and started moving around the tower looking for one, when a voice called from behind them.

'Who are you who dare trespass?' It was the same grave voice from back on the other island, in the cottage.

Nanees turned around and there he was, with a bushy grey beard, dark blue eyes and a frown upon his face, wearing a light brown cape.

Khawla looked around from next to her and Nanees saw the frown fall. Khawla moved forward and shook hands with the man. Nanees' mouth fell open. She didn't understand what was happening, how Khawla was shaking hands with the sorcerer she'd wanted to work for for the longest time. She looked at Nuya who seemed surprised too, then back at Khawla and the sorcerer who seemed to know each other.

'Wait, what's happening here?' She asked, feeling a little left out.

Khawla looked at her as if examining her for a reaction.

'You know him?' Nanees asked incredulously.

'I came to ask your help, but I no longer need it' Khawla continued.

Nanees was confused but she quickly intervened.

'I want to be your apprentice' she said as she followed him.

He looked around at her and had a faint smile of amusement on his face.

'I have no magic, but I can-'

He gave a dry laugh at this.

'Even if you did have magic, I don't need an apprentice.' he said and started moving away towards the forest.

'Wait, I can really help arr-'

'No one can help me ' he muttered and continued his retreat towards the forest; it seemed he was going out when they caught him.

Nuya moved forward and blocked the sorcerer's path.

The sorcerer rolled his eyes and sighed: 'What now'

'Good day to you Mr. Sorcerer, sorry we kept you' Nuya said shaking hands with the sorcerer and giving him a strong shoulder pat, the sorcerer looked irritated but allowed it.

Then he left and Nanees fell to the ground in shock. He hadn't even given her a chance. His mind was already made, and he wouldn't allow its' changing. He wouldn't even agree to help Khawla whom he seemed to be friends with. She was so stupid to think this would work and now she was an outlaw because of it. She was so utterly-

'Nanees' Nuya snapped.

He seemed to have been calling her without her noticing.

She looked up at him with a tear-streaked face.

'Don't tell me you're giving up that easy.' He continued in a lower voice now that he had her attention.

'What else can I do? I gave up everything and came all the way over here'

'You had nothing to give up' Khawla said all of a sudden.

'How dare you-' Nanees started with angry tears in her eyes.

'You left because you had nothing back there'

Nanees' heart fell, she knew what Khawla was saying was true.

She's right Nanees thought, wiping away a single tear.

She had nothing back home and if she left now, she would have nothing here too. She needed to stay and be persistent. But How-

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of stone shifting. The tower. And Nuya was standing Infront of it, his hand extended.

'How did you do that?' She inquired in surprise.

'I used his blood' Nuya grinned and showed her his extended hand that had a silver ring that he kept clicking to push a spike in and out.

'Brilliant' Nanees smiled back.

'Not bad kid' Khawla gave a faint smile herself.

'Ladies first ' Nuya bowed them in.

The inside of the tower was an assortment of items cluttered around. Half the circular wall was completely covered in books except for a single row full of jars of varying sizes with contents she had no idea about. There was a long table containing more jars and several, large, leather-bound books laying open. Nanees headed to the bookshelves and stood Infront of them then something caught her eye, a piece of parchment sticking out from underneath the lowest shelf and when she leaned down to pull it out, realized that it was a rather long one. She scanned through it and realized it was a potion recipe and then noticed that all ingredients had a small tick next to them. All except one. Flower grown in the shadow of the great dragon.

She quickly rolled up the parchment and put it in her small bag. Nuya and Khawla were still looking around. 'Let's get out of here' she motioned.

They gave her questioning looks.

'Let's go!' She repeated and ran out of the tower.

Once they'd both followed her outside and they'd walked a safe distance from the tower she turned to face them and unrolled the parchment to show them. Then she told them her plan, addressing Nuya and not Khawla.

'That's crazy.' Nuya said grinning all the same.

'You can't do that' Khawla said a grave expression on her face.

'You have no idea what you're up against'
She continued.

Nanees still wouldn't look at her, she didn't want to talk to her. She felt betrayed. All this time Khawla had known the sorcerer. Not only that, but it also looked like she was already going to him when Nanees made her the offer of a horse for guidance. Nanees felt stupid for trusting her.

'As much as I don't want to admit it, Khawla's right'
Nuya said reluctantly

'I think we should wait for the sorcerer to come back and try talking to him again' he continued.

They waited for the sorcerer to get back in front of his tower and after a couple of hours he finally emerged from among the trees. He didn't look very surprised that they were still there but not very happy about it.

A gap in the tower wall opened and he entered, not objecting when they followed him in. He started a fire and put a cauldron on top of it then rummaged around in the jars on the table. Nanees raptly paid attention as he put in the plants, he had gone into the forest to get. Fumes started snaking through the air and as she stepped closer Nanees could see the pale purple color of the potion.

She was shocked when after placing it in a glass, he drank it in one sip.

'What is that?' She asked with interest.

'A laxative' the sorcerer answer in irritation.

Nanees blushed and quickly mumbled an excuse and ran outside.

She heard someone behind her and looked back to see Khawla. If Nanees didn't know any better, she would've said Khawla was looking abashed.

'Look, Kid, I didn't know this was the sorcerer you were talking about when we first met.'

Nanees blinked, looking rapturously interested in a slug making its way through the grass.

'I only realized we were after the same sorcerer when we got to his old cottage on the island of good magic.' Khawla continued

‘So, you weren’t using me?’ Nanees looked up, her eyes glistening.

‘I could never’ Khawla put her hand to her heart, looking sincere.

‘Especially not with you’ She added in a quieter voice, that Nanees wasn’t completely sure she’d heard correctly. Was Khawla seriously showing emotion? Toward her? She’d thought the woman tolerated her at best.

‘You made me realize I never lost what I was trying to restore.’ Khawla continued.

‘What was it?’ Nanees asked tentatively.

‘Trust; Your trust in me, despite my past made me realize that I never needed anyone’s approval, just the right people’s’

Nanees didn’t know what to say so she just hugged Khawla tightly. She felt a tentative hug back.

Later they all sat for supper: Soup made of different herbs and edible fungi that Khawla had got for them. To Nanees’ surprise, Nuya was still there when she got back from her foraging with Khawla, he informed her that he would be tagging along to see her become an apprentice and she really appreciated that of him.

'If it will be alright with you, we would like to stay a few days to rest from our long trip' Khawla said briskly to the sorcerer.

He looked like he wanted to say something else but then 'Of course, you and your...' he eyed Nuya and Nanees. 'Friends are welcome for as long as you need'

Nanees wondered what kind of past they had in common that had the sorcerer in her debt like that, but she wouldn't pester Khawla for information, trust she had learned was earned. After supper the wizard disappeared up the stairs in the middle of the tower room, so Nanees took the opportunity to try to impress him. She started arranging all his jars back onto the shelves and added labels to the ones she recognized and asked Khawla for help with the ones she didn't. She then headed to the kitchen, where she started preparing cookies using Auntie's recipe, which she had kind of memorized over years of seeing Auntie make them.

After she was done and was finally taking the cookies out of the furnace, the sorcerer entered the kitchen.

'What're you doing in here?' He asked

'Cookies' she displayed the tray with the steaming goods.

'Have one ' she beamed.

He warily took one and ate it.

Immediately he choked and sputtered it out.

'What's wrong with it?' She asked feeling hurt.

Through his coughing fit he motioned for her to try for herself.

She took a bite from the nearest one. It was dry and sour and worse of all: salty. She had used too much flour and salt instead of sugar. She must've remembered Auntie's recipe incorrectly.

'I'm really sorry, that's not how it was supposed to turn out.'

The sorcerer gave a grunt and left the kitchen.

She sighed. But she wasn't giving up.

The next time the sorcerer was out of sight, she took the time to dust the bookcase in the living room then she headed outside for some fresh air.

She was given a room in the tower with a small bed, a dresser and a bedside table, the stone floor had a pale sort of red carpet, and the window facing the door overlooked the forest. It was a pretty sort of room.

Every day after that first day, the sorcerer would enter the kitchen in the morning to find Nanees making cookies. She'd decided to try making them again the next day and they still didn't taste like Auntie's. So, she made them the next day and the next and the one after that until it became a habit of hers. And day by day the sorcerer started smiling when he heard the scraping in the kitchen every morning. Most of Nanees, Khawla and Nuya's activities consisted of foraging, fishing and preparing food. In the time they weren't doing that, each sat on a chair somewhere in the house -mostly the living room- and did their own thing. Nanees journaled and tracked her cookie recipe adjustments, Khawla read books from the sorcerer's library and Nuya tinkered with curious items the rest had no idea where he'd acquired them. Each day that passed, Nanees expected they'd reached the Sorcerer's limit with his hospitality, but still, she was proven wrong every day.

That was how their days went for eight weeks. Nanees thought the wizard must've really liked Khawla or he owed her a great favor for him to let them stay that long. He grumbled less now when Nanees followed him around, and she tried not to pester him too much with questions about what he was doing. If she didn't know any better, she'd have thought she was

starting to grow on him. Then one night she went up the winding stone stairs to her room to sleep following Khawla and Nuya who had just done so as well, when she heard faint sobbing coming from downstairs. 'I'm sorry my dearest' the person croaked in a voice so faint, that she wouldn't have heard if she were two steps above. She waited until the voice had quieted its' sobs and went silent then she headed down the stairs, where she saw the sleeping figure of the sorcerer in front of the dying fire. On closer inspection, she saw a piece of paper dangling from his hand over the side of the armchair he was in: it was a drawing of a woman, a very beautiful woman with long dark curls wearing a grey dress, next to her stood a tall man with a brown goatee and spectacles.

Behind them was a cottage. The cottage they'd left at the border of the island of good magic. So that must be the sorcerer's wife. Or must have been. Her heart gave a pang.

She headed up to her room and was just fluffing the pillow to sleep when she felt something underneath. A piece of parchment. Once she had extracted it, she raised it to the moonlight seeping in through her window and remembered.

The potion she found the first day there.

There, in the moonlight, she noticed something she hadn't before. The back of the page was a bit sticky, like something had been attached there and wasn't anymore. She flipped it around and to her surprise she saw the words: Iya and I 732. The photo she'd just seen. She flipped the parchment back to the potion and scanned the ingredients, then flipped it to the back again. It dawned on her what the potion was for, and she knew what she had to do.

Nanees was out of the tower by dawn, and on her way to get the flower that grows in the shadow of the great dragon. She didn't know where the dragon was, but that wasn't going to stop her from finding it. She knew the direction they'd come from so definitely not that, she also knew the direction that ended with the pond where they went to get ingredients for food. So, she knew the way to go: A trail that started at the back of the tower. She started following it, steeling her nerves. She was doing this for the sorcerer.

For a few minutes, nothing eventful happened. Then all of a sudden, a large creature standing on two feet roared at her. She could see its large fangs, its red eyes eying her, its long bunny ears-

'Wait, you're a bunny monster' she said in awe.

Focusing more on its eyes she found them not on her, but on her small shoulder bag. She slowly took it from her shoulder and opened it, right at the top was a paper bag containing a few of her cookies, she opened it and extracted one. The bunny's eyes moved with it as she raised it.

'You just want some cookies, don't you?' She asked softly and then threw it in the air and the bunny jumped forward to get it. She threw him another one and that too was engulfed, then the bunny sat on the forest floor and waited expectantly.

'I only have two more' she said tentatively and showed him the bag, then lay it down in front of him on the floor. In a few seconds both cookies were gone. The bunny moved closer and sniffed at her, its head level just below her shoulder. She held her breath while his fuzzy white fur brushed her arms, then he turned around, started to walk slowly and looked back at her expectantly.

'You want me to follow?' She asked and his response was to turn back around and start walking away, a little faster now. She looked ahead, where she was supposed to continue to reach her target, but the bunny had gone left, off the path, where Khawla had explicitly warned against.

The next morning when Khawla knocked on Nanees' door and got in, she was faced by an empty bed.

She sighed. 'That stubborn girl'

Downstairs, as the sorcerer went into the kitchen, slightly put off by the lack of noise, he saw a tray of cookies sat next to the oven, he tasted one and closed his eyes to enjoy it better, it had a rich flavor to it, it was the best Nanees had ever made, the best he had ever had. He headed out of the kitchen and to the living room expecting her to be there, but she wasn't. There was only the picture he was holding the night before.

He hurried up the stairs and to her room where he saw Khawla standing, staring at the empty bed.

There on the side table he saw it: the parchment with his potion ingredients. The potion to bring back his wife. He stared from the parchment to the empty bed and back.

That reckless girl.

The sorcerer woke Nuya up and they were off within minutes. Meanwhile Nanees had decided to go with her instincts and follow her bunny, she followed it for what she estimated to be half an hour's walk off the path. The trees were starting to get closer and closer together and the forest darker, not because of the time but because the sun couldn't reach it. She could hear the leaves cracking beneath her feet and also from ahead of her, as the figure of the bunny still moved ahead, looking back occasionally to check she was there. Where are we going? she was wondering for the hundredth time when finally, she could no longer hear the crackling leaves ahead or see any movement. She walked tentatively forward into a massive sunny clearing where the first thing she noticed was a pretty violet flower growing in the shade -no the shadow- of-

Looming ahead was the greatest creature her eyes had ever beheld. A large beast with blue scales and steam coming out of its nostrils -which could fit her comfortably-. Her heart was beating wildly her whole body shaking. She was even close to not breathing, as she was scared that even the smallest disruption would rouse it. The dragon. The great dragon referenced in the sorcerer's scroll.

The bunny looked back at her and nodded its' head slightly as if to say: I did what I could, the rest is up to you, then ran off and she was left alone in front of the beast. She took a moment, or maybe a few minutes to steady herself, then took a single step toward the flower, which was on the beast's left side. She cringed and waited for the blow, but it never arrived, so she slowly took another step, then another, until the violet bloom was within reach, only one step away. Then it all happened quickly. The dragon's eye burst open, an enormous orange orb. And it was staring right at her, as it had known she was there the whole time. Then it exhaled fire through its nose. Fire that burned her outreached hand. She gave a cry and fell back.

The dragon rose and stalked closer as she pushed herself away. She saw it stretch its head back, about to burn her to ash when suddenly someone jumped from the trees nearby and onto the neck of the beast, who in the surprise of the sudden attack, halted its own.

The person holding on to the dragon's neck was Nuya , and he wasn't alone, Khawla ran out of the trees with a battle axe, followed by... the sorcerer.

A wall of blue flame grew and separated them from the dragon, conjured by the sorcerer. They were protecting her. Nuya was still hanging from the dragon's neck, Khawla brandishing her axe, and the sorcerer waving his staff about to cast a spell.

She knew what she had to do: the least she could for the sorcerer, she crawled across the clearing around the wall of flame to the dragon's shade, to the flower.

"Nanees!" Nuya yelled from the dragon's neck. That was a fatal mistake; the dragon turned around and faced her inhaling a long breath and then -

'Nanees!' Nuya yelled again, then realized the mistake he'd done: the dragon had shot flames at Nanees and he couldn't see her anywhere in sight in the clearing below through the haze of smoke.

When the flames and the smoke that followed were gone, so was Nanees.

There was a collective cry from the sorcerer, Khawla and Nuya. Nuya and Khawla started looking frantically around the clearing, whilst the sorcerer attempted a spell to put the beast to sleep. In the bushes and behind tree trunks they looked. They'd almost despaired when Nuya saw a curled-up figure in the far corner of the clearing. Nestled in a cloak. The same cloak she'd packed the night before her departure, unknowingly carrying a protection spell through it.

The cloak she'd held on to because it still had Auntie's smell.

The sorcerer having finally put the beast to sleep was now behind Nuya , Khawla next to him, all looking at the hunched-up figure who was starting to stir. The cloak was pushed aside and staring back at them, eyes wide and shiny with tears was Nanees.

The next few hours were a rush of movement none on Nanees' part as she was forcibly carried by Khawla to the Sorcerer's tower. They layed her down on the couch and there was a flurry of activity, where each of her three companions came forward with something to give her. Nuya took off his cloak and covered her with

it -never mind that she was wearing her own- Khawla kneeled down and swore fealty to her -regardless of Nanees' furious blush and refusal- and finally the sorcerer, after asking Nuya and Khawla to leave them alone offered her what she had hoped and wished for most of her life, an apprenticeship and a family. She could've sworn she saw tears in his eyes as he told her about his wife, how she'd fallen ill and nothing he -or Khawla- did could help her. About the potion that was the only hope he had of bringing her back, how he'd been collecting the rare ingredients on the list for years, with Khawla's help, as her magical talent was foraging for magical herbs and plants, and how he'd finally decided to stop because when he'd gotten to the great dragon, it had talked to him, showed him the consequences of bringing his wife back. He would have to give up the greater part of his humanity as a price to bring her back, and his wife wouldn't be happy to be back.

The wizard told Nanees how he had realized he could never bring his Iya back, but he had never accepted it.

‘Until last night. Because of you, you brought hope back in and made me remember I’ve lived a happy life with her, that’s it’s time to let go and find new joy instead” he said quietly, his eyes having a faint gleam to them.

"Then you scared us all by disappearing"

"I wanted to get you the last ingredient for your p-" Nanees started but stopped at the gentle shake of the Sorcerer’s head.

And as she lay there, she had an epiphany; she did have powers after all, powers that got her the exact people she needed to survive, and not just now, but also throughout her whole life; with Auntie, in life and death.

And them; her found family.

THE END

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