

Conception

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Synopsis

This is a book about a girl named Bryn, her abrupt transition into adulthood, and the journey that followed. It is a work of fiction, a tome of high fantasy and intriguing curiosity, a codex of monsters, magic, and manipulation, a compilation of action, adventure, mystery, suspense, and just a bit of humor. This is the tale of a woman who took the worst that Ortha had to throw at her and turned it into something wonderful.

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Chapter 1: In Which Bryn Awakens to an Unwelcome Guest

Bryn's eyelids fluttered as a sliver of morning light crept over her face. *Wake up*, it whispered to her. *You need to wake up now. You have a long day ahead of you, and it won't be easy.* Bryn didn't want to listen, but she couldn't shut the light out. She couldn't do much of anything right then. Thoughts floated at the edge of her grasp like butterflies, but the more she tried to pin them down the more they managed to skitter away from her.

Her eyes continued to twitch in response to the light. Finally she managed to conjure a question. *Where is that light coming from?* It wasn't the most relevant question, but it was a start. Having that question gave her a foothold on reality, something she could concentrate on. If she could answer that question, she would exist again.

Slowly, deliberately, Bryn opened her eyes. The light rushed in, penetrating her naked eyeballs with an intensity that sent a shudder down her spine. It was only one of the many sensations she was feeling at the time, but it was the one that she was able to focus on. If she could endure the assault of the sun reaching into her, she could figure out where she was.

It was a narrow alley, barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast. The sunbeam was peeking in from the alley's exit, sneaking its way through the filthy maze of the city's buildings to deliver its message to Bryn. *Wake up.* Bryn was beginning to understand what it was saying, but she wished that she didn't. She wanted to go back to sleep.

Bryn *hurt*. That word danced and swirled in the maelstrom of her thoughts. It wasn't nearly the right word. She needed a better word to identify what she felt, a stronger word, a word that could express what her body was trying to tell her in some language she couldn't begin to comprehend. She had never heard this language before. It was impossibly brash, with no room for subtlety and no apologies for that shortcoming. It was an efficient language, reserved strictly for situations like this one – situations where the only words you need are the ones that make up the essence of life itself.

Kiema, she thought. *That's right, kiema. I can heal myself with kiema. Which color was it again?* The thought seemed strange to her; surely this was something she should know by rote. Under the circumstances, though, trapped as she was in a whirlpool of thoughts fighting to make their way to the surface, she was grateful that she managed to

recall the word kiema at all. With great effort, she screamed at her body in its own crude language to move her arm, to reach her hand into her satchel to grab a handful of kiema.

Which color? her body replied, mocking her. Or maybe it was her mind. She didn't really know at this point, but it sounded like it would listen to reason. It sounded like Bryn. *Which color?* it repeated. Bryn dipped her mind's hand into the murky pool of memory to try to reclaim a piece of knowledge that every child knows. Her mind-fingers snagged on something, a very crude memory but a strong one, a song to help children remember the absolute basics of magic. She was thankful that this memory had been drilled so strongly into her. She seized upon it, letting its familiar melody anchor her in the turbulent waters. She sang the song in her head, her body singing along in a duet that felt like an echo of the times gone by.

*Kiema colored like the rain,
A pretty gem to heal your pain.
Kiema colored like the grass,
A building block for things of mass.
Kiema colored like the spark,
A trusted tool to warm the dark.
Mix the kiema to your will
And all your dreams you will fulfill.*

Bryn repeated the song in her head like a mantra, until her thoughts finally began to settle and still. *Blue*, she thought. *Blue is the color of healing*. She started to call out to her body to reach for the blue satchel. *Yes, end this pain*, she thought, as she urged her arm to move.

Are you sure? her body responded. *You're forgetting something*, it told her. Now that things were becoming more clear, Bryn knew what the voice was telling her, but she didn't want to listen. She didn't want to hear this. She wanted the pain to end. This couldn't be true.

Bryn cringed as she shifted her pelvis on the unforgiving stone pavement. Raw, visceral pain screamed at her with primal ferocity, wailing in that terrifying language that her body had been violated in the worst ways possible. Brutally, with no mercy or compassion. Tears streamed down her cheeks and a sob erupted from her throat as she translated the language into thought.

Rape, was the word Bryn arrived at. It felt at once completely alien – Bryn had never considered rape to be a word that might some day apply to her – and simultaneously sickeningly familiar. It had happened to her. She *knew* it, intimately, and she did not want to.

Her attacker had not spared her any indignity. Her raw vagina was as ripped and torn as the dress she wore. It was her favorite dress – really beautiful, she thought, splashed with orange tones and cream-colored autumn leaves across the fabric, as if they were falling from the bush of hair on her head – but now it was ruined. She loved the way the dress complemented her skin, but as she peered at her exposed flesh through the corner of her eye it was covered all over now in blues and purples, the familiar shades of brown only peeking out here and there as if it were hiding from her rapist.

Is this really happening? she thought. *Where was I last night? Why was I wearing my favorite dress? Why can't I remember?* Now that she could concentrate on individual thoughts again, she thought she might be able to answer these questions. But their answers continued to elude her as she struggled to ignore the pain that shook her body every time she budged. *Do I still have my satchels?* she wondered as she tried to turn her head far enough to see her hip. Reaching for them would be futile anyway if they weren't there.

After minutes of preparing herself for the ordeal, Bryn forced herself up from her prone position on the ground to put her back to the alley wall. She couldn't help but whimper as she did so, a pathetic yelp that slipped past her bloody lips as she tried to suppress it. She hoped that no one on the street could hear; she did not want anyone to see her in this condition. She might have to resort to calling out for help, she knew, but she thought she might be able to move on her own soon if she tried. *Wherever you go, someone is going to see you*, the voice in her head told her, *unless you can find a way to get healed*.

From her upright position, she could now see her belt. She guessed that her assailant ripped it off of her and threw it down the alley during the attack. The thought of a grubby pair of hands pawing at the delicate brown braid made Bryn sick to her stomach, but she suppressed the bile that rose in her throat. It would hurt too much to convulse and let it out. Her satchels looked like they were still attached to the belt, and they didn't look like they had been emptied. *Why wouldn't he steal my kiema?* she wondered, but at that very moment the question

didn't seem very important to her and she chose to be thankful for her fortune instead.

You're still forgetting, the voice said.

Shut up! Bryn replied. She didn't want to hear it. The pain was too much for her. The voice was being entirely too dispassionate.

You won't forgive yourself, it insisted.

I won't forgive you if you don't shut up, she replied as she fell to her elbows.

You know you can't do this, it said, calmly, rationally, without malice or humanity.

I will do whatever I damn well please, she retorted as she willed her muscles to make the motions necessary to crawl towards the satchels. Her bare, plump nipples, now marred with dozens of bite marks, scraped across the pavement, grating at her will to survive. Her face, caked over with ruined makeup, was being freshly recolored by the sweat and tears that dripped from her in caulky droplets as she pushed the limits of her body. Her hair, usually pulled tight and coated with oil, was a mess of matted frizz pasted to the sides of her face. Her freshly polished nails had been broken and split during the attack, but now they gripped the stone bricks of the alley pavement with determination as she made the seemingly interminable trek.

We will get through this, the voice said with finality as she reached the belt.

Give me one reason why I shouldn't do it! she screamed back at the voice.

You know very well why you won't do it, the voice answered. Bryn stared at the blue satchel with a longing that she had never known in her seventeen years in the world. It would be so easy to gobble down handfuls of blue kiema, suffusing her being with the power of the gods, allowing her to direct the blue magic to repair the damage to her body. But the voice was right. Giving in to that need – committing that act of barbarism – would destroy her soul. The pain of her guilt would endure forever, and no kiema could heal that pain.

She would have to endure the pain for the sake of her baby.

Chapter 2: In Which Bryn Reflects on the Origin of Ortha

Bryn didn't know she was pregnant. Not in any real way, based on evidence or proof. It was a feeling in her gut, a strange certainty that she knew was absurd but believed anyway. Her rapist had impregnated her with his evil sperm, sperm that could very well carry genetic instructions for building another rapist. The thought of his fluids squirming inside of her filled Bryn with an overpowering wave of sickness. This time she did empty her stomach, despite the pain it caused. Nothing could stop the tidal wave of disgust that rose in Bryn's throat and spilled out into the cracks of the alleyway. She was right about how much it would hurt.

She was pregnant, and she was certain of it. That was why she wouldn't be able to heal herself. Kiema, for all its worth, was at best a mixed blessing from the gods. Bryn, briefly resting to recover from her trek across the alley, began to wonder if blessing was the right word. She had never been very devout, but like most people she considered herself to be one of the Discarded, the followers of the gods who abandoned humanity. What other kind of gods would allow this kind of brutality?

The beliefs of the Discarded were almost a little depressing, but mired as she was in her pain Bryn could understand why so many people took comfort in them. According to the Discarded, there is a singular omnipotent god, Whyat, whose thoughts and will, if such things even exist, are so foreign and incomprehensible to mere mortals that they cannot possibly hope to understand his motives. Whyat created the universe, everything in it, and the rules that govern its contents.

For whatever reason, Whyat created three sacred children, who, unlike Whyat, had personalities and temperaments the Discarded could understand: Darblun, Burgona, and Verdan. Darblun, the eldest son, was completely self-absorbed and obsessed with his own entertainment. Burgona, the middle daughter, was perpetually jealous of the attention she believed to be lavished on her brothers by their father, and wanted nothing more than to destroy anything that they created. Verdan, the youngest son, wanted nothing more than to live in peaceful co-existence with his siblings, and would do anything to pacify them. These demigods were each granted a divine body made of liquid crystal: blue, red, and green respectively in descending order of age.

One day, during one of his inexplicable and capricious whims, Whyat created the world on which humans now live, called it Ortha, and

gave it to his children as a present. Ortha was shaped like a shallow bowl and filled to the brim with the earth and water that form the geography of the land. Inside the bowl, Whyat placed the plants and the animals and the people that once made up the complete picture of life on Ortha. Pioneers who attempted to explore beyond the rim of the Orthan bowl inevitably failed to return; whether they simply trundled off into oblivion like a parade of lemmings or whether they moved on to some other life beyond this one is unknown. Bryn used to think that such an expedition was motivated only by insanity, but her current turmoil was making her question humanity's origins too. *How far would I have to be pushed to be motivated to learn the answers?* she wondered, considering her current situation.

Whyat's unexplained, dispassionate gift of Ortha to his children was met with conflict and turmoil, unsurprisingly given the demeanor of his children. Darblun believed the bowl belonged to him and him alone, that his father was showing him favor for his years of dutiful fidelity. Verdan, on the other hand, believed the bowl belonged to him; his nickname was the Builder and he saw a rich canvas that awaited eagerly for him to deliver his mark. Burgona had no idea for which of the two brothers her father had intended the bowl, but she was certain that it was not meant for her, even though her father deliberately placed it in all of their hands at the same time without a word.

Humanity was forged in the heat of the ensuing conflict as they endured the struggle between the siblings. The contents of the bowl shook, rattled, and spilled over the edges as the children fought for control of it. Verdan abandoned the conflict first. Fearing that the contents of the bowl would be lost entirely, he used his godly powers to cover the surface of the bowl with a translucent blue film that would seal the contents inside. He decided that it would be better to let one of his siblings have it than to destroy it, but they had no such reservations. Darblun and Burgona battled furiously for days, leaving the denizens of Ortha in chaos as the two godlings bled liquid crystal over the surface of the bowl. The blood seeped through the coating that Verdan had created, tainting it with impurities as it fell into the bowl, settling on the land and in the sea. The entire experience had come to be called the Upheaval in the annals of history.

Darblun eventually overpowered his sister, sending her running away in anger. He played with his new toy for a while, tearing off the lid that Verdan had created and making his marks on the geography of the

land. Supposedly Waalort, the city that Bryn lived near and the one that she assumed she was in now, was actually founded in the aftermath of Darblun's remodeling spree. Bryn did agree that the terrain to the east of the city with its four smooth lake-filled valleys and three sharp, cusped mountain peaks could be mistaken for the imprint of a fist if one squinted hard enough from far enough away. If that were true, Waalort was founded immediately to the west of Darblun's imprint in the aftermath of the Upheaval, and Bryn now lived in the suburbs farther west of the city. After some time, Darblun and his siblings lost interest in the toy in favor of new ones, and Ortha and humanity were left to their own destinies, discarded by the gods that created and shaped them. Abandoned, perhaps forever, by their progenitors.

The blood from the conflict hardened and became solid crystal, the crystal that the humans of Ortha eventually would come to call kiema. The conflict had been long and bloody; tainted kiema was abundant throughout the land. A small amount of untainted kiema existed as well, spread during the initial conflict before Verdán's forfeit. Rare green kiema was always safe to consume as a result, but it was impossible to know whether red or blue kiema was tainted. Modest applications of tainted kiema did not harm the user, and excessive uses of untainted kiema would harm the body just as easily as tainted kiema. Even with all of the processing that was required to turn wild kiema into a safe and usable product, nothing seemed to remove the taint introduced by Verdán's barrier. Kiema was once so abundant that it blanketed the countryside; now, it could only be found in remote and hard to reach places, generally buried and mixed in with the earth itself.

The only surefire test for the taint was completely impractical. Mothers who ingested tainted kiema during their pregnancies inevitably gave birth to monstrous abominations instead of human children. Such births were common during the years when kiema was poorly understood, inviting dozens of new forms of unnatural life into the world. These new creatures bred and cross-bred with each other, growing in number and ferocity as a plague among the people, torturing and pillaging the lives of pure human beings and of each other. It took human governments years to organize and expel the monsters from their cities and to educate the people about the dangers of kiema use during pregnancy, and they eventually invoked draconian legislation to prevent pregnant women from consuming tainted kiema. The cities were heavily guarded by an elite police force, while the people who had to live out-

side of the city limits were trained to fend off monsters on their own. Still, even in the modern era with all of the knowledge they had, kiema poisoning was a problem for many children, and even when mothers cut themselves off from kiema completely, a small amount of tainted kiema used around the time of conception could lead to monstrous traits in the children. Those people who were nearly human with minor monster traits, the kiemara as they had come to be called, were tolerated at the edges of society but rarely given the dignity that “real” humans were entitled to by birthright.

Bryn was grateful that her mother had planned her pregnancy carefully. The kiemara were regarded as a violent and devious people; even if Bryn didn't think that stereotype was necessarily true, she wouldn't want that stigma to be placed on her own child. Her brief introspective respite from her situation was broken by a sudden, sickening realization: statistically, her rapist was more likely to be a kiemara than a human. Even if she avoided tainted kiema entirely, her baby could still be a kiemara. It wasn't guaranteed; she had heard of instances where a human and a kiemara produced human offspring. As distressing as the idea was, she knew it was possible. Right now, with her body crawling with pain and violation, Bryn chose to believe that her baby could still be spared a fate of uncontrollable violent tendencies and ostracization.

That still left her with the dilemma of what to do now, though. Even if her instincts were wrong and she weren't pregnant, she couldn't take the risk. She would use no red or blue kiema until she knew for sure. That just left green. It wouldn't let her heal herself, but it would help her get to someone who could, hopefully discreetly.

She reached down into the green satchel, sending thunderous aches up and down the muscles in her arm as she pulled out a crystal. *Just five crystals*, she thought, *that will have to be enough*. Green kiema was expensive – it was both rare to begin with and incredibly useful for just about everything. She put the crystal on her tongue and let it dissolve with the familiar flash that she had experienced a thousand times before. That commonplace sensation was now a comfort to her, one of the only familiar sensations she had felt all morning, and one that delivered a small boost of confidence that she would survive after all. She sensed the power flow through her bloodstream, into her fingers the way she'd been taught, and she tensed and flexed them as best she could to shape the power into the form that she wanted. Simple, loose, cotton.

Under ordinary circumstances, her mother would kill her for wasting green kiema to create a dress out of nothingness, but her mother would understand one day. She hoped to replace the dress that was ruined, but even on a good day her mastery of green kiema could only be described as amateur. It was a lack of experience rather than talent: knowing that she could never really afford much green kiema, Bryn thought her education was better spent elsewhere. Her fingers trembled and her hands shook, but she managed to get the shape of the dress about right. The color was orange throughout – probably because she had been thinking of her old dress when she cast the spell – and far too bright for her skin tone, not that anyone would be looking past her bruises to notice the mismatch. Adding a pattern would have been hopelessly difficult given the tremors that made her hands feel as steady as Ortha during the Upheaval.

The dress fit very loosely, but that was intentional since it made it easier to slip into without lighting her bruises on fire again. After removing her tatters and replacing them with the new dress, she realized that she should have been more practical; her face was still bloody, beaten, and sopping, and her hair would only go so far towards hiding that. She probably should have made something with a hood, but in the heat of the morning sun that might have been just as conspicuous.

She had wasted too much time as it was trying to brace herself for moving with her injuries. She was pretty sure that several ribs were broken, as was her nose, but her legs seemed thankfully intact despite the trauma they had suffered. She would be able to walk for a little while. But where would she go? *The police?* That would probably be best, but she hesitated to do so. She didn't really trust the police. She still secretly blamed them for taking her father away from her, even though she knew that they were doing their jobs and that he deserved his punishment. They would probably find a way to make this her fault, and arrest her. *The hospital?* Most people could deal with a problem like this on their own; hospitals were for the terminally ill, those with really rare, poorly understood conditions, and, of course, pregnant women. They would ask too many questions, and she was sure she'd just end up dealing with the police again if she showed up at a hospital.

Who can I trust in Waalort? She didn't know many people who lived in the city. Her classmates were all suburbanites like herself, as were most of her mother's friends. There was one person who came to mind. His name was Edger Barrington, and he was friends with her in

elementary school. They weren't really close friends, but she remembered going to his family's new apartment in the city for his going-away party when he left her school. If she was anywhere near the part of town that she thought she was, that apartment would be her best chance of getting help without attracting too much attention.

Bryn stumbled to her feet and collected her things. She tied her belt on as best she could around the baggy dress and hooked the heels of her shoes around it, opting to go barefoot since she didn't trust her balance at the moment. She did her best to smooth the dress out and make herself more presentable as she shambled to the end of the alley. A whiff of some kind of alcohol – whiskey, she thought, though she was hardly a connoisseur of alcohol – breezed past her nostrils as she walked, briefly sending her to her knees under a wave of nausea. She didn't have any memory of the previous night, but she knew, somehow, that this smell had been on her attacker's breath.

It was hard to tell herself that this fact was important, but she did, and committed the smell to memory. *I may be weak and broken now, but I won't always feel this way.* Her fists balled at her sides as she rose to her feet again, her muscles screaming for her to stop but her will propping her up. *When I recover, I'm going to track this bastard down and make him pay for violating me.* She made the vow in the dim light of the alley, oddly hoping that Verdán would be watching over her and listening to it. If the gods were real, Verdán was the only one of them worth a damn in Bryn's estimation. She hoped that he would help her today, but as vulnerable as she felt at the moment, she knew that she could only rely on herself.

She stumbled to the end of the alley, and out onto the street. No one was out yet, leaving the city with an abandoned air to it. Bryn understood the feeling of abandonment all too well as she started down the street, head buried low and arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Chapter 3: In Which Bryn Meets a Kiemara

Bryn felt an eerie sense of disquiet as she pushed her legs down the vacant street, one after the other, right, left, right, left. The muscles in her lower back strained to hold her steady to protect the rest of her body from the gentle shocks delivered every time her heel connected with the rigid pavement stones. The pain felt different in public, somehow. When she was in the alley, she was free to really feel the pain, process it, deal with it. She had a brief respite from the concerns of the world at large then, and she only had to worry about herself. Now she was back in the world again, but it wasn't at all the world that she remembered. She felt weak, and afraid, like she didn't belong anymore and didn't know who she was or what she was doing there. She had been so focused on the physical pain of the rape that she had failed to brace herself for the emotional impact it would have. As more tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, she did the only thing that she could and continued to move forward. Every step would bring her closer to something different, and something different had to be better, right?

The photorbs, small floating street lights formed with red and green kiema, were beginning to fade as the sunlight crested more buildings and flooded the street with its radiance. Bryn expected the light to bring her comfort, but instead it made her feel more exposed. She wondered how long she would feel this vulnerable. Paranoia set in, and she felt like there were eyes watching her despite the emptiness. *That's really weird*, she thought. *There isn't anyone here. Even this early, I should have seen someone by now.* It occurred to her that she had no real reason to believe that her attacker had actually left her; for all she knew he could still be following her.

Her instincts were good, but even with how alert she was they failed to protect her from the sudden attack from above. An eardrum-piercing screech blasted through the silent morning air as a shadow descended on Bryn. She turned her head skyward a moment too late and reeled as the world spun out from under her, pain overwhelming her face and torso. When she regained her bearings, she was on her side on the ground several feet away with a terrifying silhouette between her and the rising sun. It almost looked like a person, standing on two legs the way it was, but the legs were too thin and boney, and the arms covered in feathers and scales. It pelted out another shrill cry from a curved beak framed against the sunlight before turning its gaze back on Bryn. Its eyes glowed a bright magenta, bright enough to compete with the corona pouring in from behind it. Bryn felt a spray of saliva as a long,

slimy tongue slithered out to lick the edges of the beak. This thing was looking for breakfast.

“Not gonna happen,” Bryn said, defiantly, with much more conviction than she felt at that moment. It hurt to stand, but she would be dead if she didn’t, so she did. “I have had a very bad morning,” she spat at the creature. “You may think you’re the baddest thing since the Up-heaval, but you’re not even the worst thing I’ve seen this morning. What the fuck do you think you can do to me?” The creature seemed to respond to her bluff, but it wasn’t exactly backing down, either.

Posturing and attitude would only get her so far; she needed a plan to back up her threats. Any other day she’d already be blasting fireballs at the creature – she was always a natural with fire, maybe she inherited it from her father – but that wasn’t an option without red kiema. *Attack or defense?* she thought. She glanced to the sides of the street for a weapon, and the creature’s sudden lunge made the decision for her. No time for a weapon she couldn’t even be sure she could swing. In one surprisingly graceful motion, she snagged a handful of about ten green kiema from her satchel and dove to the side. Her ribs screamed in agony but she held tight to the crystals and forced them into her mouth, immediately raising her hands and beginning the motions needed to build. Thin, stone. She built up a stone cocoon around herself, embedded in the pavement, as the creature’s frantic claws slammed into a rapidly materializing wall.

Stone required more kiema than fabric as a general rule, and the ten crystals wouldn’t be enough to cover herself completely, but it was all she had time for. She was weak so she kept her spell simple, meaning she had less control over its ultimate manifestation. She guessed that the creature was pretty weak, so instead of durability she focused on coverage, imagining the barrier like a spider web, with holes the creature could barely poke through. Its claws were far too short to rend Bryn’s flesh through the gaps. It didn’t seem strong enough to break the stone, but soon it started probing the holes with its beak. *Some of these holes are too big, it’s going to be able to bite me*, Bryn realized. But she shouldn’t waste any more kiema on this pathetic thing. She was going to need it in the coming days. As she writhed in her cage to avoid the beak, electric pain shot through her wounds, and Bryn realized that she didn’t have much of a choice at this point but to use more.

As her hand fumbled at the mouth of her green satchel, a palpable wave of force washed over Bryn. The wave that Bryn felt was inci-

dental, she realized; the real force of the blow was on the creature. Its beak was wedged tightly in one of the larger holes of the protective wall when the force hit, violently upending its torso like a rag doll with its head lodged in place. Bryn heard a loud *crack* in its neck, and soon the creature's beak was simply sitting motionless in her improvised shield. Someone had rescued her. It was clearly the signature of a basic force spell formed with red kiema.

"Hello?" came a man's voice. She couldn't see him at first, between the obstructions of her barrier and the creature's limp body. "Is someone in there?"

She started to give a cry of thanks, but hesitated. She was grateful, certainly, but this was a total stranger based on his voice. Ordinarily she'd be falling over in praise for anyone who saved her life, but now she saw only danger and risk in opening up to him. This wasn't Bryn. What had the rape turned her into?

"I'm in here," she said cautiously. "Could you help me out?"

"Of course," he said as he began tugging on the creature. It seemed lodged in the hole pretty tightly. "Are you alright? You certainly have a strange way of defending yourself. You must not be from around here, or you'd know not to walk these streets alone in the morning."

Obscured as he was by the webbed structure, Bryn thought he was fairly attractive at first with his neat, short-cropped hair and bulging muscles. He looked like one of those men who were just born with all of the right features, like he didn't even need to try to be an adonis, and like he wasn't even aware that he looked the way he did. She thought this in a purely judgmental way; sex was the furthest thing from her mind at the moment, especially given the fiery tempest that still raged in the rawness of her nether regions. Besides, her initial judgment was replaced quickly as she got a better look. His eyes glowed magenta and his ears had tufts of fur on their highest point. Those two observations alone were enough to mark this man a kiemara, not to mention the tail peeking out of the black leather chaps he wore. Any willingness to trust this man that Bryn might have had evaporated immediately.

"Yeah," she said, focusing on getting out of there. "I'm just passing through." The man gave a puzzled look as he fiddled with the pockets on his chaps. Bryn guessed that he kept his kiema in those. Everyone had their own system for keeping the colors separate and accessible; Bryn's brightly colored satchels were unusually childish for her, but she had grown attached to them. With his tight fitting white shirt showing

off a body sculpted from marble and the precision of his gait, she guessed that he wasn't new to this fight. Maybe he was a plain-clothes policeman?

"Are you a cop?" she asked.

The man belted out a laugh before popping a few pieces of red kiema into his mouth. "You really aren't from around here. A cop wouldn't be caught dead in this neighborhood. Or I guess if there were a cop in this neighborhood, he'd be dead already. Lie still." The command irritated Bryn, but she knew it was good advice. He was about to shatter the cage Bryn had put herself in.

"Then what are you? Some kind of vigilante? A guard?"

"Something like that. Someone has to protect these people, and the cops sure as hell aren't going to do it," he said. Bryn felt the power flow into the man, pass through his fingers, and then into the stone. She felt a series of vibrations in her creation and braced herself for the impact, but it never came. Instead the stone seemed to break down into dust. She wondered what words he was able to use to be so... gentle, was the only word she could think of, but it made her squirm uncomfortably. The man knelt down on one knee and ran his fingers through the dusty barrier to disperse it. His hand briefly glanced against the side of her abdomen as he did so, and she reacted instinctively and violently, lashing out with a kick that tore open more wounds on her privates than she could have hoped to inflict on this man.

"Whoa, lady, I'm trying to help," he said as he caught her leg, impossibly fast. He had enhanced his reflexes with blue kiema, unsurprisingly. He did seem to know what he was doing at least, even if she did feel skittish about him.

"I – I know, I'm sorry," she said, and genuinely meant it. She didn't want to be so distrustful, but she couldn't help it. "I've just had a bad morning."

"I'll say," he said, as he leaned close, his penetrating magenta eyes taking in her face and body. She knew he was looking at her injuries and not her curves, but she felt violated anyway.

"Back off," she growled as she shoved him away from her. She tried to stand up quickly, but her wounds made that impossible. She had no choice but to gather her energy and force herself slowly to her feet. To his credit, the man was smart enough to not try to help her stand.

"Do I know you? You look familiar."

"I don't think so." *Unless you're my rapist*, Bryn thought.

"Why haven't you healed yourself?" he asked, with a glance at her blue satchel. The look that Bryn gave the man was laced with angry poison; she imagined that she looked more terrifying than the monster in that moment. The man didn't even flinch. "Oh. Oh, I see," he said. *Does he?* she wondered. Men were usually pretty dense about women's issues. "I'm not much of a healer, but I can help a little," he offered.

"No thanks," Bryn said as she brushed the remaining dust off of her new dress. "Thanks for your help, but I had the situation under control. I hope you're not expecting a reward." *Why are you being like this?* she asked herself. *This isn't you, Bryn. This man saved your life.*

Quiet, she replied. *If I want your opinion I'll ask for it. I just want to find someone I know and can trust.*

Just because you know someone, you can trust them? the voice replied, clearly unconvinced. Bryn stopped responding, letting the question hang in the air of her mind.

"No, I wasn't," the man said, clearly insulted. "I didn't mean to do whatever I did to piss you off," he said as he turned his head to go. "Please be careful out there, it's not safe for someone who's... in your condition," he said. "If you ever need help, I'll be around here. My name is Slaterin, though most people around here call me Slater. What should I call you?"

"Don't call me," Bryn said as she backed away from him and retreated as briskly as her legs would carry her. She didn't turn to look back at him, but she was certain that she had hurt him. She didn't really mean to, but she wanted to keep her distance.

It wasn't until several blocks later that she began to regret her reservations. Slaterin clearly knew the area pretty well; assuming he wasn't her rapist – an assumption Bryn was willing to make but not totally confident of at that very moment – he could be invaluable in helping to track the rapist down. He might already know something for that matter. What if Bryn wasn't the first person to wake up in that alley like that? What if she wasn't the last? The thought of another girl going through this sickened Bryn once again, but the adrenaline from her encounter with the bird monster had steadied her gut and her resolve finally. Why did she have to be such a bitch to him?

Don't blame yourself, came the inner voice again. *You're the victim. You've been through a traumatic experience. You need time to*

heal. Bryn thought the voice was her subconscious, but the thoughts seemed so out-of-line with her emotions that she wasn't sure anymore.

I don't have time, she thought. *Life isn't going to stop for me. I'm sure my mother is waking up everyone she knows to find me by now.* Bryn didn't have a curfew exactly, but she had never been out this late before. She may not have her memories of last night, but she doubted that she was expected to be out all night under any circumstances. But she couldn't let her mother see her like this. She would find Edger first and get him to heal her. The encounter hadn't taken that long, but people were beginning to shuffle onto the street to make their way about their days. *What day is it?* Bryn wondered. *Probably a weekend?* It felt like a Sunday, but some people worked early even on Sunday. Bryn tried to cover up as best she could as she made her way across the final street, pausing to let a leviboard heaped with carcasses pass by, its driver giving her a nod of courtesy as she passed. *So many dead,* she thought, noting that all but one were the carcasses of monsters, many of which looked like the bird that attacked her. *What kind of place have I woken up in to be filled with so many monsters?* It didn't really concern her at the moment, but it was unusual, to be sure. It might make her search more difficult in the long run.

Bryn paused before entering through the front door of the apartment building. She'd rather not involve his parents if she could avoid it. With some hesitation, she entered the alley beside the building instead to see if she could find the fire escape. The ladder was up, but she took off her belt and heaved the heavy end with the satchels to wrap around the lowest rung. The effort brought on more pain still, but Bryn was getting used to it at this point. The fact that she managed to get the ladder without magic gave Bryn a sense of hope and bought back some of the autonomy she'd worried she'd lost that morning. She could still be resourceful and care for her baby at the same time.

Casey? she considered. *That would work for a boy or a girl.* She groaned a little as she scaled the ladder, carefully, one rung at a time. Enduring the pain now would make her stronger, and there was something satisfying about succeeding despite it. Seven stories of rickety metal stairs later, Bryn found herself near the window of what she thought would be Edger's apartment. *Please let him be here,* she thought.

Chapter 4: In Which Edger Heals Bryn

Bryn had to stretch dangerously out onto a ledge to get near the window to Edger's room. She peered just past the edge and saw him there, laying in bed. He was bigger than she remembered, much bigger. He had really grown up, but then again, so had Bryn. She was suddenly very aware of the bite marks that scarred the surface of her breasts. When she last saw Edger, they were kids, and neither of them even knew what sex was. Would he be thinking about it when he saw her now? Why was she? She didn't think that she would ever want sex again after this morning, but then why was her heart racing? *You're about to fall and break your neck; that might have something to do with it*, came the voice in her head.

Edger had tossed most of the sheets from his bed over the course of a sweltering summer night, so his midsection was barely covered. He tossed and turned, adjusting himself down there, seemingly trying to ignore the insistence of the beast that the cloth barely covered. Bryn felt ashamed and guilty, but she couldn't bring herself to look away. Edger's scruffy stubble was really filling in, as bright and orange as the short curly hair on his head, and as thick and soft as the jungle on his chest. Bryn wondered where the trail led as it headed under the sheet. Was he much older than Bryn? He looked older than she expected. She definitely didn't expect to find him so attractive. He was a gangly thing as a child, but Bryn supposed that she was probably a bit scrawny herself and she had filled out. Why did she expect less from Edger?

Still fully asleep, one of Edger's large hands finally came to rest on his lap, slowly rubbing the discomfort. Bryn gulped and nearly fell from the ledge, banging her hip into the window to stabilize herself. Her muscles screamed in pain as Edger shot up in bed and scrambled to cover himself. *What in the hell are you doing?* she thought. *This is no way to get him to help you!* Edger frantically crawled around in a circle his bed to get a better look at the window, and he blinked several times before settling down on his knees with his sheet covering his lower half, chest still exposed.

"Aubryn?" he asked in a whisper. She couldn't really hear him, but she could make out her name on his lips. She nodded. He cracked the window. "What in Ortha are you doing out there?" She wasn't sure if it was anger or embarrassment in his voice and on his face, but it didn't last long in either case. "Oh gods, you look awful. What happened to you?" He looked back at the closed door to his room as he quietly opened the window to let Bryn in.

"Gods, Edger, I'm so sorry about this," she broke down in tears as she flopped through the window and onto the bed. "I didn't mean to see you with just – I mean – I wasn't expecting you to be –" she trailed off.

"Whoa, Aubryn, shh," he said as he put a hand on her shoulder. Bryn flinched at the contact, but she tried not to pull away. "It's okay, I'm fine, I don't care about it. Keep it down or you'll wake up my parents. Let me put some clothes on."

Bryn sat with her eyes closed, silent tears pouring out in steady rivulets. Edger awkwardly slipped some underwear on with one hand as he balanced on one leg, holding a tight grip on the sheet with the other hand. He let the sheet fall afterwards, and Bryn guiltily eyed a brief peek as he slipped into a pair of tight-fitting black cotton trousers. The trousers wouldn't have been that tight on a normal person, but Edger had grown the thighs of an elephant since Bryn last saw him. Not that he was overweight; he was just, well, *thick*. The thin smeared brown shirt he slipped on found its fabric similarly stretched under his burl. *What is with men and muscles today?* she wondered. *Are they always this intimidating, or am I just more aware of it after what happened to me?* She didn't have the answer, and she didn't see herself finding it with any confidence.

"OK, tell me what's going on, Aubryn."

"It's just Bryn now," she said through sobs. "Oh gods, I'm in so much trouble, Edger, I don't know where to begin."

"Just relax, I'm here. You're safe. Take your time." Bryn was grateful. He put a hand on hers, but she pulled away.

"I'm sorry, but – I mean, I can't –" she stammered. Edger immediately pulled away and put his hands up defensively.

"It's alright, Bryn. Whatever you need. Just let me know. I'll get my kiema," he said in anticipation.

"Thanks," she said, grateful that he was being so understanding. She thought that she would be able to count on him. He had always been such a sweet kid, but time does change people. One look at him told Bryn that Edger was not the same boy that she once knew. But she still thought she could trust him.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Edger couldn't hold back a question any longer, "You have some kiema, Bryn, so why haven't you healed yourself?" Bryn's eyes burst like a dam in the floods

of the Upheaval. "Gods, I'm sorry, I don't know what I'm saying," he said. "Please stop crying." He looked at his door nervously. "Here, at least let me heal you."

Bryn nodded as she wiped her face with her dress sleeve. So what if she ruined it with the last bits of her makeup? She watched Edger consume several crystals of blue and green kiema, and even a red one towards the end. Blue for healing, green because healing someone else was just fundamentally different from healing oneself, and red, she guessed, because the extent of her wounds clearly warranted a general boost to the energy output. She only half-watched as Edger formed more than a dozen inscrutable gestures with his hands. Edger clearly knew what he was doing, but using that much kiema would light up his room like a beacon to anyone in the apartment who was even half-awake. She hoped his parents were heavy sleepers.

Although it was possible to heal small wounds remotely, Bryn knew that her wounds were too severe for that. Edger would need to touch her, fingers to flesh, to heal her. She didn't want him to touch her – the very thought of anyone touching her right now was almost unbearable – but she needed him to. She whimpered as she pulled her dress up and over her head, exposing herself completely to Edger. She turned away, unable to look at him.

"Just do it," she said. "Please get it over with." She felt Edger's hesitation even as she looked away; he was not enjoying this any more than she was. She was putting him in a terribly awkward situation, but she had no choice.

Slowly, gently, she began to feel pressure on her face. Edger's meaty fingers stroked their way across the gashes and rips in Bryn's smooth skin, knitting together flesh and absorbing dead blood as they traveled, leaving behind a mild numbness in their wake. The delicacy of his touch contrasted sharply with the look of his hands, surprising Bryn with a tenderness that reminded her more of the Edger she expected to find when she came here. She turned to watch him as he continued his work, staring intently at his face as he sat in a deep concentration, lightly molding her nose back into its normal shape.

Edger moved down from her face to her neck, onto her arms and shoulders replacing black and blue flesh with milky brown, eventually making his way to her chest. He hesitated, looking her in the eyes before continuing, but she nodded and he went on. She squirmed as his warm fingers caressed her bosom, comfort and discomfort battling each

other awkwardly in the quiet of the morning. Edger lingered no longer than was necessary to repair the damage, gently resetting her ribs as he made his way down to her abdomen, once again with more certainty.

He paused again when he reached her pelvis, and said, "Bryn, I can feel what's down there. I don't think that I can do this for you." His voice cracked and he flexed his fingers, power still coursing through them.

"I won't make you," Bryn said. Edger was clearly not comfortable with this. Suddenly, perversely, she felt like *she* was raping *him*. "In fact, I don't want you to if it makes you uncomfortable. I didn't come here to take advantage of you. I just needed help from someone, and you were the only person I could turn to."

"I'm so sorry, Bryn," Edger said as he delicately skirted around her vagina, repairing the neighboring damage, restoring scarred and bloody flesh to nubile purity. "I just can't do it. Even feeling the pain the way I can right now, I can't imagine what you've been through. I understand now why you didn't heal yourself, though."

"I'm right, then?" she asked, nervous but expectant.

"I'm afraid so," he whispered, clearly as aware of the implications as Bryn was. He went back to his work in silence, treating her legs and feet. The rapist had been very thorough in his beating. If she was drugged or enchanted as she suspected, was the beating really that necessary? The tenderness of Edger's touch gave way to a more clinical feeling as he had her turn over to get a better approach to her backside. The intimate moment that they shared had passed, probably forever Bryn realized, and a certain kind of regret came over her that, under different circumstances, there could have been something between her and Edger. But, with things the way they were, Bryn knew that there were insurmountable boundaries that had just been erected between them. She would be forever indebted to Edger, and she hoped that she could call him a friend moving forward, but romance was not going to be in their future.

When Edger finished and the light faded from his fingers, Bryn sat up carefully and covered herself with her dress once again. Edger had done fantastic work – *Has he been training to be a doctor?* Bryn wondered – but her entire reproductive system still howled with a bluster that was hard to ignore. Still, she felt leagues better than she had a few short minutes ago. After looking down at herself and smoothing her hair

back, Bryn looked hard in Edger's eyes before diving into his arms in a hug.

“Thank you so much for being here,” she said, as she rocked him from side to side. “You have no idea how grateful I am.”

The hug was interrupted by a man clearing his throat.

“You know you don't need a hundred marks worth of kiema to lure pretty women to your bed, right son?”

Chapter 5: In Which Bryn Is Determined To Keep It

“Dad! Burgona's bottom, how long have you been there!?” Edger panicked. He pushed Bryn off and stood up, then awkwardly turned and sat down, covering himself with the sheet again. *Even with the awkwardness, he's still a teenager*, Bryn thought. She would have been amused if she weren't in such unsettling circumstances.

“Long enough. Well, aren't you going to introduce me to my future daughter?” he asked. Bryn thought Edger's father, Chesnan Barrington, was angry at first, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye that convinced her that he was more amused than anything else.

“It's not like that, Dad,” he said, nervously. Chesnan just raised an eyebrow. “Her name is Bryn. You've met her before. Aubryn Dandaster.”

“Aubryn!? By the gods you've grown,” Chesnan said, suddenly flustered instead of amused. *Oh gods*, thought Bryn, *he was there long enough to see more than I would have liked. Now I've made both of these men feel like perverts.*

“Uh,” she stammered, unsure of how to respond. “Thanks, I think, Mr. Barrington.”

“Edger, can I have a word with you in private?” asked the father. Edger stood up and walked over to his dad. They whispered, but Bryn could barely make out most of their conversation.

“Your mom would kill me if she knew you were doing this up here,” he said.

“We weren't doing anything, Dad!”

“I know what I saw, Edger. You were wasting kiema on that poor girl just to get her in the mood.”

“No, really, she needed my help,” Edger said as he bit his lip. Bryn knew that he didn't want to say why, for her sake.

“I'll bet she did,” his father said wryly. Bryn couldn't let Edger take this any longer. She had already ruined his morning enough as it was. This whole fiasco was spiraling out of control, and Bryn needed to establish some order for the sake of her own sanity.

“Mr. Barrington,” she interrupted sweetly, “Edger's telling the truth. He was being a perfect gentleman. *I came to him*, because I had a problem.”

“Bryn, no, you don't have to explain it to him,” Edger started, but Bryn stopped him.

"No, I don't want you to get in trouble. Mr. Barrington, I came to Edger because I hoped I could trust him, and I think he's done an incredible job of proving that trust. You should be proud of him." Edger blushed a bright crimson as he watched the skeptical look on his father's face. "I came to Edger because I had been severely beaten last night, very near here. At least two of my ribs were broken, and this was the only safe place I thought I could make it to. I needed him to heal me because, well... I'm pregnant." It felt good to say the words, to get the mess out of her mind and into the world, even if she had sugar-coated the connection between the beating and the pregnancy.

Chesnan's eyes lit up like enormous photorbs as he looked at his son.

"No, sir, no, it's not his!" Bryn clarified quickly. "In fact, I haven't seen your son in years, not until this morning. And he didn't touch me in any way other than to heal me. He has been an amazing friend to me despite the unreasonable position I've put him in. You should be proud to have raised such a decent man."

Edger shrugged and scrunched up his face as he rubbed the back of his head. His father looked his son over carefully.

"Gods, boy. You've got her head over heels for you. I knew you had talent with those hands, but this is a bit excessive, don't you think?" He gave Bryn another, slightly salacious look that made her feel uneasy again. "Wish I'd had the gift for it when I was your age."

"Come on, dad. Please just leave. I'm handling things. And for both our sakes, please don't tell mom about this."

"I can't just go. This is a fine mess you're involved in, and I'd be a terrible father if I didn't help." He looked at Bryn again, having recovered once more from his admiration of her body and behaving like an adult again. "Aubryn, why on Ortha are you keeping it?"

The question blindsided Bryn. She hadn't even considered abortion as an option. This thing inside of her, this product of some horrible monster's uncontrollable desires... it was an innocent thing. It didn't deserve to pay for its father's sins. Raising a child would be hard, and it would completely derail the plan that Bryn had for her life, but could she really kill something so innocent? As she shifted nervously, feeling in her loins the harsh reminder of the attack, she understood why most women wouldn't want the memory and couldn't fault them for making that decision. But Bryn was a determined woman. She could be strong for the sake of her unborn child. She could turn these painful memories into

fuel for a raging fire of retribution, to protect other women from a similar fate. She could turn tragedy to joy, and it had nothing to do with kiema or the gods or magic.

Standing there under Chesnan's scrutiny, she made that decision. She would use this experience to grow – no, to thrive – and she would raise the most beautiful baby in the world. Her assailant had taken a lot from her that morning – her innocence, her virginity, her expectations of what her future would be like, and her faith in humanity – but she would never let him take away her power to decide her fate.

“Sir, I will not abort this baby. It deserves a chance at life, and I can give it one,” she said as she stood up a little straighter. Edger let out a deep breath as she said the words. Bryn wasn't sure if it was relief, or admiration, or concern for her well-being, but she was sure that he felt strongly about her decision.

“Aubryn, you have no idea how hard it is to raise a kid in the world these days. You're still just a kid yourself.”

“Everyone becomes an adult some time,” she replied with more certainty than she had a right to, given the uncertainty of her day so far. “I became one this morning.”

“Me too,” Edger said to himself, drawing glances from both his father and Bryn. Bryn suspected that he was sincere, and probably correct.

“Gods, you're serious,” Chesnan responded as he looked at the two of them. “Are you sure you're ready for the responsibility?”

“No,” Bryn admitted. “I'm not sure of much of anything at this point. But I will find a way to bring this baby into the world, and I will make sure that its care is my number one priority. I will put even more care into raising this child than your son put into healing me.”

“If that's the path you want to take, then at least let us help you,” Chesnan sighed. “Have you told your parents?”

“My mother, you mean?”

“Oh, right, I forgot about...” he began.

“No, it's okay, I wish I could forget about it too. It's refreshing, actually,” she admitted. “Whenever I introduce myself to someone new, they get a wide-eyed look on their face and say, ‘Are you related to Rudy Dandaster?’ I'd rather just not talk about it.” Chesnan seemed more than happy not to discuss it as well. “And no, I haven't seen my

mother yet." Bryn regretted the words as soon as they spilled off her lips.

"Wait, you haven't..." Chesnan trailed off, realization dawning on his face as he reconsidered the blood on Bryn's makeshift dress and connected the dots between the beating and the pregnancy. "Aubryn, were you just raped?" he asked. Bryn flinched and averted her gaze, effectively answering the question. "You have to go to the police. Gods, I apologize for my behavior. If I had known, I would never have been so flippant."

"It's okay, sir. I'm dealing with it. Edger has helped me tremendously."

"I'll say you're dealing with it," he replied with a look of disbelief. "By the gods, I don't know *how* you're dealing with it, but you are. I swear, if my daughter were raped..." He trailed off in silence before turning to Edger. "I'm sorry for how I've been acting, Edger. I wish I had a fraction of your decency."

"It's okay, Dad. You couldn't have known. Besides, I just did what anyone would have done." Bryn thought back to Slaterin for some reason, and his offer to heal her earlier. Would he have had the decency to avoid violating her a second time? She doubted it.

"No, Edger. Not everyone would have treated me the way you did. I'm glad that I came here instead of taking one of my other options. Do you really think the police would help me, Mr. Barrington?"

"They would definitely try," Chesnan said, which was about the answer that Bryn expected.

"Exactly, they would *try*. I don't need *try* right now, Mr. Barrington. I need *do*. And I intend to see my attacker punished." She felt her fists tighten at her sides as she declared her intention.

"I understand how you feel, Aubryn, I really do. But this is no game. Especially if you aren't willing to use red or blue kiema. You're going to be very vulnerable."

"I am *not* vulnerable," Bryn said quickly.

"I know, I know. You're clearly determined, and that's important, but you shouldn't try to do this alone. That's all I'm saying," he said, defensively. Bryn felt she had pushed a bit too far, that he might think she was just compensating for feelings of weakness after the morning's attack. He could think what he wanted, but Bryn knew the truth of it. She was sincere. Maybe it was the catharsis of healing, or maybe it was just

her natural inclination, but Bryn was prepared to face her assailant head-on regardless of the consequences.

"I'll take that under consideration," she said. "I certainly appreciate the help Edger has given me already, and maybe he can help me some more in the future. If he's willing to, I mean."

"Gods, of course, Bryn. I don't even know if I'll be able to sleep tonight, knowing what happened to you. I have to do something about this too." Bryn wondered just how much of her pain Edger felt while he healed her. He really did seem to understand just how broken she was before she regained her resolve.

Edger's father nodded approvingly, to which Bryn replied, "And as much as I'd like to stay and continue thanking you for everything, I really need to go. My mother must be a complete mess."

"I'll take you home, Bryn," Edger said. "If I can borrow the levi-board, dad."

"Sure, of course," Chesnan said, shaking some thoughts from his head. "Be very careful out there, you two. I mean it. I'll not have you running off half-cocked and getting yourselves into more trouble."

"We'll be on our best behavior, Dad. I promise."

"I mean it!"

"I know," Edger said as he and Bryn began to leave. "I'm going to grab some more kiema, too, if that's alright. Just in case." Bryn wondered how someone as fit and capable as Edger could sound so nervous and scared, but he did. The experience of healing her had shaken him pretty badly. She would have to find a way to make it up to him.

"You'd better. We can afford it. I don't want you hesitating, son. The first sign of trouble, you hit someone with everything you've got."

"I will, dad," he said. Bryn wondered if he really would, though. She had seen his gentle side. She wasn't sure that he had the capacity in him for the violence that would be required once she found the rapist. That was okay, though. She wasn't likely to find anyone today.

Maybe with time she could build a real friendship with Edger and help him prepare for justice. She watched his face as he concentrated on driving her home, basking in admiration and gratitude for everything he had already done for her. She hoped to repay him somehow.

Chapter 6: In Which Bryn Contemplates the Future

"So you've been training to become a doctor?" Bryn asked as Edger navigated the tight corners of the city streets. "I never would have guessed, back when we were kids."

"I don't know why you would have had any reason to," Edger replied. "We've probably said more to each other today than we ever did as kids." It was an exaggeration, but Bryn knew what he meant. He had always been quiet and reserved as a kid.

"But you always wanted to be a doctor?"

"Well, no, I guess I didn't."

"I thought so. What changed?" Edger glanced at Bryn but didn't respond. After a few awkward moments, she backpedaled. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"No, it's okay. I'm just not sure what to say. Everyone has to do something with their lives, right? A doctor is as noble a profession as any. Burgona's bottom, I already got to do something good with it today."

"I'll say," Bryn agreed. The swear sounded strange coming from Edger's mouth. She needed to try harder to see him as the man that he was now rather than the boy that she remembered from childhood. "Speaking of which, today is Sunday, right?"

"Yes, Bryn," Edger said, sparing a glance from the road to check on her. "Are you having some memory troubles?"

"I am. I think my attacker got rid of a few days in a thorough attempt to make me forget him." Today was Sunday, and the last thing she remembered was going to bed Wednesday night, so that left Thursday, Friday, and Saturday completely unaccounted for. "For him to take so much... that means I probably knew him, doesn't it?" Bryn shivered, but Edger didn't seem to have a reply. "Don't worry about it. No one said finding my attacker would be easy."

Edger seemed more than willing to change the subject. "Anyway, I've told you my dreams. What do you want to do with your life?" Edger asked.

Bryn choked up a little before she could speak. "Well, I was going to try to become a member of the Order of Whyat," she said. "Until today, at least."

Edger gave a surprised look, "Really? You have the grades for it?" The Order of Whyat was the Ortha's most renowned association for the advancement of kiema research.

"I do. I did, at least. And the work they do is so important. I wanted to be a part of that. Ortha is in a lot of danger," she said, staring off at the horizon above the city skyline. "A lot of people are so blinded by a myopic view of today's problems that they don't see the cliff that we're headed for."

Edger twiddled his forefinger as he took the turn that led past the city limits and into the suburbs. Edger's leviboard seemed a little strange to Bryn. She thought that it might be humming, or vibrating, but it felt like it was coming from inside her head. She dismissed the noise as a figment of her imagination, probably brought on by stress. "Like what?" he asked.

"For starters, we're using more and more kiema each year, becoming more dependent on it than ever. We're going to run out of it. Sooner, not later. Green will be the first to go. You can already see the prices skyrocketing for it. Not only will we have no way to support our current way of life, but our economy is going to spiral out of control. Anarchy will break out, and people will race to secure as much blue and red kiema as they can before it's too late."

"Gods, that's bleak," Edger said, his face going even paler than it usually was. "How long do we have?"

"I can't really say. You know how the government works. They'll just keep telling us that there's no problem and that we shouldn't worry. I'm sure someone knows how much green kiema is left in Ortha, but they're not making that information public. If I had to guess, I'd say a few decades worth, tops."

"Decades?" Edger asked incredulously. "You mean this is going to happen in our lifetime?"

"I think it's very likely. Unless, of course, we do something about it."

"Did you have something in mind?"

"Well," Bryn said. "I mean, I don't have all of the answers, but I think I have some ideas for ways to replicate some of the more important functions of kiema using more abundant, reusable sources. But unless I have time and access to the resources of the Order of Whyat, I don't see my ideas amounting to much of anything."

"Maybe you could still apply," Edger said. Bryn laughed a bitter, angry laugh. "No, I'm serious."

“Oh come on, Edger. That’s impossible. Even if I could use blue and red kiema, the entrance exam is notoriously difficult. And you know women are given a tougher time on the test than men.” It was a truth that wasn’t often voiced in polite society. Whether it was a fair assumption or not, everyone expected women to raise children some day. Why admit them to a prestigious institution just so they could abandon their responsibilities before they’d done their due diligence? Bryn hated that fact, but hating it didn’t change it; women had to work even harder to prove their value than men did, plain and simple.

“Maybe,” Edger said, an edge of regret in his voice. “I just think it would be terrible for you to let today derail your life. You don’t deserve what happened to you. It sounds like you had a bright future ahead of you, and even more important it sounds like you really wanted to achieve something. I don’t think you should give up on that just because it’s going to be difficult.”

Bryn sat in silence as she savored the sweetness of Edger’s words. “I’d like to agree with you, but there’s a difference between difficult and impossible,” she said with a sigh. “Besides, tracking down the bastard who violated me and preparing to raise a child in this world is going to use up all the time that I have, anyway.”

“I know you want revenge, but I’m not sure that you’re going to find it as fulfilling as you think you will,” Edger said, his voice taking a dark edge. Bryn was more convinced than ever that something serious had happened in Edger’s life between when she knew him as a kid and now, something that transformed him in a deep, fundamental way. He didn’t seem to want to talk about it, though. Bryn could understand that. She would just have to give him time.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. “I guess it can’t hurt to try.” She reached a hand out over the side of the leviboard to feel the wind as it passed by. The wind was refreshing, but what she really needed was a shower and a change of clothes. Maybe she would be as optimistic as Edger once she had those things.

“You’re really amazing, Bryn,” Edger said. “I don’t know anyone else who would be able to recover from what you’ve been through the way you have. It’s okay to take time to deal with your pain.”

“It happened. I can’t change that. I may not have control over what happened, but I have control over what I do about it. I’m not going to mope and feel sorry for myself. I’m sure a lot of other women would

do that, but that's not who I am, Edger. If I have a problem, I'm going to solve it."

"That's the spirit," he said. "I think you should try to follow your dreams, still." Edger gestured as he slowed and turned the leviboard onto Bryn's street. "Maybe preparing for the exam and tracking down your attacker aren't really so different from each other. You may be able to do both at the same time."

Bryn was only vaguely hearing the words Edger was saying at that point. Her house was well out of sight at the end of the street still, but based on her luck so far today she knew immediately that it was the origin of the billowing column of smoke in the distance.

Chapter 7: In Which Bryn's Day Gets Even Worse

"This is fucking unbelievable," Bryn said as she leaped from the leviboard before it came to a full stop. The shock as her legs hit the ground made her privates flare with a dozen daggers, but her attention was entirely on the rapidly disintegrating structure that she once called home. There was almost nothing left of it; most of the second floor had collapsed completely. Her neighbors were all crowded around the smoldering ruins, but her mother was no where to be seen. *Come on, Verdán,* she thought. *Please tell me my mother was out looking for me instead of inside the house when this happened.* Bryn didn't pray often, but she was beginning to take comfort in it. She needed a little comfort right now.

Edger followed from the leviboard as soon as he was able to stop it, but Bryn was already charging headfirst into the flames. Some of the neighbors were conjuring winds with red kiema to direct the flames away from their own homes, but no one seemed willing to spend the green kiema to summon the water needed to extinguish the flames. Edger muttered a curse under his breath as he followed Bryn into the house, fumbling for red and green kiema from his pockets as he ran.

"Slow down, Bryn. You're going to get yourself killed," he shouted. Bryn didn't pay him any mind as she bounded over a fallen support beam, burning her hand in the process.

"Mother!" she shouted, gasping for breath amidst the smoke. "Answer me, damnit!" She spun around in the center of the rubble, trying to see through the smoke. Her mother wasn't answering, and the heat and smoke was overwhelming. Sweat mixed with soot and dripped heavily into her eyes, forcing her to blink repeatedly as she continued to call out. Suddenly the smoke began to disperse as a cold mist descended on Bryn, sheathing her from the flames. She could barely make out the figure of Edger about ten feet away, muscular arms stretched as high as they would go, yellow light dancing from his fingertips, spraying a cascade of water out and over the chaos. *Great,* Bryn thought. *I'm just digging myself deeper in debt to him.* She sighed, and settled for being grateful that he was probably saving her life again.

"I don't think she's here, Bryn," Edger said. "Wouldn't she have stopped the fire if she were?"

"Not if she were asleep, or..." Bryn trailed off. Or unconscious. She didn't have to finish the sentence. Edger, like anyone else who ever knew Bryn even a little bit, would know exactly what Bryn was thinking.

"I'm sure it wasn't —"

"I'm sure it was," Bryn said. "I can't believe he would do this." She tore through the rubble as fast as she could without regard for herself, desperate to find some sign that her mother was not here. The walls and floors of the house were dangerously unstable from the damage, but Bryn didn't let that slow her down.

"It doesn't make any sense, Bryn. Your dad is in jail, for starters. And why would your dad attack your mom? I know he did some awful things, but he still loved his family, right? Right?"

Bryn didn't know the answer to that question. It was hard to believe that a terrorist and a serial arsonist could care much about his family at all. If he had escaped from jail, why wouldn't he come after her mother? She's the one who turned him in, after all. All for Bryn's sake. Bryn always resented her mother a little bit for doing that, just as she resented the police for taking him away. But right now, standing in the rubble of the one place Bryn thought she would still find comfort and stability, she thought she finally understood the difficult choice her mother made for the first time in her life. If she could just find her, she would hug her with all her strength and apologize for how she'd treated her all of these years about her father. How could he do this?

"I don't know what to think right now, Edger," Bryn said with more animosity than she intended. Edger didn't argue and focused on the search. Bryn saw him swallow some blue kiema and rub his eyes, no doubt giving him an easier time piercing the veil of the smoke. She realized her hand was dipping into her blue satchel, and withdrew it swiftly as if she'd been bitten. It would be so easy to give in, but she had to think of Casey. *Casey?* she thought. *No, I can come up with a better name than that.*

Their search went on in silence for a few more minutes as the shower extinguished the flames, but neither of them turned up anything of use. Edger healed the burns that Bryn suffered in her haste, and as they left the remains of Bryn's home they sat down in a heap of exhaustion, covered head to toe in soot. Bryn's new dress was ruined, and Edger's shaggy orange hair was smattered all over with black, like a calico cat. It didn't look right on him at all, Bryn thought, as she tried to process what was going on here. She barely flinched when Edger's thick arm wrapped around her and pulled her in close to him.

"Gods, Edger, what have I dragged you into?" she asked as she stared into the distance.

"I'm here by my own choice, Bryn. Don't worry about me. I'm much more worried about you. Are you okay?"

"No," she said as she shakily wiped the soot from under her eye. "No, I'm most definitely not okay. This is just too much." She looked off at the horizon again at the translucent rim of Ortha's bowl, just barely shimmering in the west as it reflected the morning sun, mocking her with its reminder that her world had been abandoned by the gods. "We really have been discarded by the gods, haven't we?"

"I don't know what to say, Bryn."

"You don't have to say anything. It's enough that you're here." She gave herself a few minutes to accept the comfort of his physical presence before she shrugged his arm off and pushed herself to her feet. She brushed her hands off on her dress, only really succeeding in smearing the char around even more. This was no time to sit still and mope. She needed to talk to her neighbors before they dispersed.

"Mrs. Scarsbad," she called out wearily to the elderly woman who lived next door. "Are you okay, Mrs. Scarsbad?"

Mrs. Scarsbad snorted before answering, "Yes, Aubryn, I think so. Thankfully Lani here was around to beat the flames back from my house."

"I'm sure someone else would have helped if they got here first, Mrs. Scarsbad," Lani said. Lani Maunbraut sometimes came over to visit Bryn and her mother when she was very young. She was about seven years younger than Bryn, far too young and sweet to be catty, but Bryn couldn't help but feel that there was a subtle jab being made at her for not being there that morning. *Sorry I was out getting raped*, Bryn thought dryly, but she didn't say anything. There was no reason to take out her frustration on little Lani, especially since it sounded like she might have saved Mrs. Scarsbad's house.

"I'm glad you're okay. Did you see what happened?"

"No," Mrs. Scarsbad said with a grump, "I can't say that I did. I just smelled the smoke, looked out my window, and ran out of the house as fast as I could." Bryn sighed. "Come on, dear, you don't need me to tell you what happened here." Lani looked away, not wanting to see Bryn's reaction to that comment.

Bryn wanted to bitch at the woman for kicking her while she was down, but instead she just took a deep breath and asked, "Did you see any sign of my mother?"

"I'm afraid not, dear," Mrs. Scarsbad replied.

"I'm really not sure about this," Lani said, nervously, "but I think I saw a man running at the end of the street when I got here. He was pulling a woman by the arm; it might have been your mother." Bryn brushed a stray strand of hair off of her face as she felt some tension lift from her shoulders. The vein in her forehead was throbbing. She must have used a lot of red magic to control the flames. She looked like she was on the verge of burnout. Bryn had the same trouble when she tried to direct wind; fire was just far simpler than wind to her. "I'm really not sure though," she said. "I don't want to get your hopes up too much. A lot was happening, and it happened really fast. It could have been anything. I might just be remembering it that way because I want it to be true." She gave a little snuffle as she wiped a small tear from her face. "I like your mom. She used to give me cookies when I was little."

"Oh, Lani," Bryn said, moving forward to give her a hug, but stopping before she covered her with soot. She brushed her hands off as best she could and took Lani's hands in hers. "You are so sweet. I'm sure you're remembering it correctly. I'm sure she's fine. She'll be back and making cookies for you in no time." Bryn wished that she believed the words that she was saying, but at least she could try to convince Lani. Lani nodded and seemed comforted, and that was enough for Bryn. "Thank you for keeping Mrs. Scarsbad's house safe. You did a good job."

Bryn left the two neighbors and returned to Edger's side. She sat down again, trying to think about what to do next. The neighbors eventually cleared out and returned to their homes once it was clear that the fire had stopped.

"Brave kid," Edger said. "She's awfully young to wield the kind of magic it would take to keep the flames back using only wind."

"I doubt she knew she had it in her. Crisis can bring out the best in people," Bryn offered.

"I hear that," Edger said, simply, patting Bryn on the leg. For the first time since the attack, she didn't recoil at the touch. So much had happened so fast, there was just no time to dwell on the pain. She had to keep moving forward.

"I was wondering," Edger said carefully, "while you were talking to the girl. I mean, I don't really see how it makes any sense, but the timing... this can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Bryn laughed a cynical laugh she had apparently picked up over the course of the morning. "I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks so. I was worried I was being really paranoid."

Edger scratched his beard, pulling his hand back with a fresh layer of grime that he rubbed on his shirt, smearing the already textured fabric with more colors. "What on earth could these attacks have in common?"

"I have no idea, Edger. But I intend to find out. Tomorrow. I will find out tomorrow. I'm afraid of what else might happen today if I keep up this pace." She let herself lean back and lie flat on the grass of her front lawn, looking up at the sky.

It was a stroke of luck that she had chosen to lie down the way she did. She would never have seen the attack coming if she hadn't.

Chapter 8: In Which Bryn Learns About Vulprin

"Twice in one day!?" she shouted to Edger as she rolled to the side to avoid the massive shape barreling towards her.

"Huh?" Edger said, caught completely by surprise. A second form swooped down on Edger's seated body, grabbing him by the shoulders and lifting him off the ground before flopping down on him with its full weight. These were the same bird creatures as the one Bryn encountered earlier, but they looked a great deal larger. There were also more of them on their way.

"Vulprin?" Edger grunted as claws dug deeply into his shoulder. *Never heard of them*, thought Bryn as she swallowed a handful of green kiema and prepared the words she would need for a conjuration. Edger was in trouble if he couldn't reach his supplies; this was no time for austerity. "What are vulprin doing out here?" he growled as he strained to reach his pocket. The creature on top of him had no trouble forcing Edger's arms back above his head, holding them both down with ease with just one of its iron talons. It gripped his legs with its own, leaving its last arm free. It let out a bone-breaking ululation as it sliced deeply and repeatedly into Edger's abdomen.

The other that had landed was shaking off a beakful of sooty earth, trying to clear its way to see Bryn. It cleared its eyes just in time to see a deft upward slice from a longsword that had materialized in Bryn's hands, cleanly separating the abomination's misshapen head from the rest of its lopsided body. She let her momentum carry her over the crumbling corpse as she swung the sword in a windmill motion, bringing it down hard on the second vulprin's back. Even with the full strength of her two-handed assault, though, the creature seemed to be more annoyed than injured. She had managed to draw its attention from Edger, though, as a third creature descended on her from the side.

Bryn struggled to regain the balance to dodge the incoming vulprin, moving in what felt like slow-motion. As Bryn braced for the impact, the creature was hurled to the side, buffeted by a powerful gust of wind.

"Lani, what are you doing!?" Bryn cried out as she saw the child running toward them, arms extended fully in front of her with magenta sparks scattering wildly about her. She must have still been watching Bryn when the attack began. The vein in Lani's forehead was engorged and her face was flush, cheeks puffed up with kiema like a squirrel hoarding nuts. No wonder the girl was able to stop the flames earlier; she was just using as much raw, unconcentrated force as she

could muster. *Gods, she's going to kill herself.* "Release the magic, Lani. Release it now!"

"I can't," she cried, desperate and terrified. The magic had taken on a life of its own. With Edger in deep trouble and Lani on the brink of magical burnout, Bryn reacted instinctively, lunging forward with a precise blow from the hilt of her sword directly to Lani's forehead. *Did I just do that?* Bryn thought with horror as Lani's tiny body flailed and rebounded to the ground from the blow, falling in an unconscious pile with magenta sparks sputtering out around her. Bryn felt briefly weak in her knees, but she also felt like she had used far more force than she actually did. With how hard she thought she was swinging that sword, she would have expected to launch Lani's little frame a foot off of the ground. She must have been more exhausted than she realized.

Bryn didn't have time to decide whether the move was brutal or merciful before the two threats converged on her. She thought she remembered seeing two more of them in the sky that would be joining the fray soon, too. With both of these vulprin focused on her, she might be able to buy Edger enough time to heal himself. She had kept a tiny bit of the magic in her fingers when she made the sword and she used it now to toss a handful of sand in the face – if you could call it a face, with one of its eyes drooping precariously out of its socket and with its beak twisted and contorted like a piece of paper that had been crumpled and smoothed out again – of one of the creatures. She tried to parry the attack from the other creature, but she had already been on the precipice of exhaustion before the battle began and she couldn't keep her legs steady under the weight of the blow from a creature half again her size.

She fell, but managed to go to her knees instead of flat on her back. *Come on, Edger,* she thought, sparing a glance for him. He was still splayed on the ground; she couldn't be sure if he was moving or not. He wasn't going to be rescuing her, and hopefully Lani would stay unconscious and not provoke the things further. That just left Bryn, in a weak position, with two monstrosities on her. Her red satchel called to her; she could think of a dozen ways to wipe these creatures off of the face of Ortha if she gave in to that urge. *Why are you keeping your blue and red satchels if you're not going to be willing to use them in times of need?* asked the familiar voice in Bryn's head. She dismissed it; this was no time to discuss philosophy with her inner devil's advocate.

With no other options, Bryn cringed as she dropped the sword she had created so that she could roll forward and past the talons of

one of the loping monsters. The creatures collided briefly, giving Bryn a moment to climb to her feet, and she wasted no time in running. She hoped the creatures would follow; she didn't want to abandon Edger and Lani to them, but she needed to buy some time. She hated leaving the sword, too, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

She hurried to the rubble of her house. Even in its current condition, it was familiar ground for her, especially after the extent of the search she made for her mother. A glance to the sky confirmed Bryn's count of two more enemies that were circling closer and closer, ready to close in and finish the job if the land-bound monsters continued to fail to subdue Bryn.

Bryn found the spot where she would make her stand, whirling around to spot the two creatures she heard crashing through the debris behind her, putting her back to what was left standing of a kitchen wall. She couldn't spare the attention to look through the gaping holes in the roof at the vulprin swooping in from above; she was just going to have to pray that they would be attacking the same way that the others had.

All four of the frothing nightmares screeched and howled in piercing tones as they approached Bryn from every direction. Bryn swallowed the lump in her throat, elbowing the wall behind her with all of the force she had left. *The upstairs bathroom should be directly above me*, she thought. *Time for some luck for a change.*

As she expected, the wall collapsed around her and the vulprin. Unlike the vulprin on the ground, though, she was prepared for the further collapse of the floor above, expecting the heavy porcelain tub she used every morning to drop. *If it flips over*, she hoped beyond hope as she took her eyes off the creatures, *you have to be inside it when it lands. You have to! It's the only thing that can protect you right now!*

It was the best plan that Bryn had, but it didn't quite work. She managed to stop herself from diving under the tub as the floor above gave way, dropping the tub straight down, rather than tipping it over and rotating it. Fortune didn't entirely abandon her, though, as one of the grounded vulprin smashed to the floor with a sickening series of cracks and snaps, utterly flattened by the heavy basin. The other three – and Bryn as well by the time it all settled – were scattered and dazed by the crash of debris and soot that filled the air. *Two down*, she thought as she coughed repeatedly in the thick cloud of black that had been cast up. *What's your plan now?*

Bryn scrambled to her feet, grunting loudly as her vagina howled at her again. She felt a lot less grateful for Edger's chivalry than she had earlier. She didn't let the pain slow her down though as she made her way back out of the house. She knew the terrain, she had the advantage. *Get the sword, prepare a surprise attack.* For a change her plan came together exactly as she envisioned it, and she cleaved the neck of a third vulprin as it exited the ruins in a blind rage. *The neck is their weak spot,* she thought, thankful for every bit of knowledge about these things that might help her survive this encounter. The remaining two burst out of the top of the house instead of through the door, taking to the sky again. They hovered momentarily, watching, while Bryn made her way to Edger's body. He had lost a lot of blood, and he was unconscious. Sword in one hand and with both eyes on the sky, Bryn slapped Edger in the face with the her other hand. Hard. When he didn't respond, she did it again, and again.

He groaned, but Bryn couldn't do much else for him. "Pull yourself together," she said, pleading with him. "I don't want you to die." The vulprin were turning their attention to Lani. The thinking of these creatures was completely alien to her, so she couldn't be sure, but Bryn felt like this was just a ploy to draw Bryn out, like they were targeting her specifically. Ploy or not, it was going to work. She couldn't abandon Lani to these things, especially not after knocking her out the way she did.

"You want me, you filthy overgrown chickens?" she shouted as she stood, bracing her sword on her hip with both hands. "I'm not afraid of you. I've just taken out three of your kind, and that's just a fraction of what I've accomplished this morning." For all her bluster, she was struggling to hold the sword straight.

"*Weaaaaak,*" croaked one of the birds as it circled past. *They can speak!?* Bryn thought with alarm. "*Weaaaaak,*" echoed the other in agreement. Bryn's grip on her blade slipped a little as she dealt with two revelations at the same time. These creatures were far more human than Bryn would have believed, she could see as she watched their eyes and faces carefully. The second revelation was that they weren't talking about Bryn.

"*Neeeed liiife,*" one of the creatures sputtered, the words forming unnaturally from the smacking of the vulprin's tough tongue against its beak. Bryn thought it was begging her. She took one hand off of her sword, resting the tip on the ground and feeling her abdomen. *They're attracted to what's growing inside me,* she thought with dismay. This

was not normal for monsters, not remotely normal; it wasn't as if pregnant women everywhere needed bodyguards, though those who could afford it often did choose to hire some due to their restrictions on kiema use. *Is something wrong with Quinn? Quinn? No, that name's no good either. Please let my baby be normal.*

They want life, the voice in her head came again. *You should probably give it to them. Blue kiema, right?*

"I think I understand," Bryn called to the birds, tentatively. She hesitated as she reached for her blue satchel. The creatures squawked and clattered as she moved her hand, but they maintained their circular pattern. She considered her actions carefully as she shook a handful of blue crystals in her palm.

With care, she threw a single piece of kiema up into the air, towards one of the vulprin. Its tongue slithered out and latched around the crystal, drawing it around the beak to a hole that Bryn could only assume was some kind of nostril. It sniffed and growled, throwing the crystal to the ground.

"Poooisson," it growled, and it began to descend on Bryn.

"Wait, wait," she said, returning the handful of blue kiema to her satchel and drawing out a green piece instead. "How about this?" The creature repeated its inspection on the new piece.

"*Wrooong, wrooong, wrooong,*" it cried. It was in pain, Bryn realized. Part of her felt a little good about that, since these things had terrorized her. But even with how hard she had grown over the events of the morning, she couldn't help but feel some pity for these things. They didn't deserve the things happening to them any more than Bryn did. *Or any more than my baby. I can't let her turn out like this.* She didn't know why she picked the word "her", but it felt right. She wanted a baby girl.

"Let's try one more thing," Bryn offered, dropping the sword to the ground completely and putting both hands up in a defensive gesture. She walked a few feet out into the open lawn where it was clean, and upended her entire satchel of blue kiema. *Blue kiema is the kiema of life. Maybe they smell the taint on it. But some of it has to be pure, right?* She backed away from the pile, inviting the creatures to inspect it.

Her breath held as she waited for the creatures to sift through the mound of crystals. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Edger begin to sit up, fingertips glowing red, and she gave him a sharp look and

waved to him to stop. He looked puzzled, but to Bryn's relief he did stop whatever it was he was about to do.

Suddenly one of the creatures let out a sound that could only be described as joyous, despite the hideous visage that it erupted from. It swallowed one of the pieces of blue kiema in a throaty gulp, hopping from leg to leg as it savored the divine feeling. Bryn blinked in disbelief; not only did she think that the creature was just able to tell the difference between tainted and untainted kiema, but it also visibly transformed as the crystal worked its magic. It stood up a little straighter, the haunch on its spine seeming to smooth out and straighten. Its eye that had been dangling precariously out of its socket seemed to pull itself back in, the cloudy veneer on the surface giving way to a bit of clarity. For a moment, even, Bryn thought she saw a human being peering out of the creature's face. The transformation was stark and alarming, but it faded within minutes, and the creature soon found itself hunched over and lopsided again. It sat down placidly next to its fellow, who soon also found a piece it deemed acceptable, also going through a similar transformation before settling down on the ground. The two vulprin docilely pawed through the pile further after initially satiating themselves, analyzing each crystal individually and meticulously. In a pile of about four hundred crystals, only those two were deemed acceptable by the creatures.

"I don't believe it," Edger said as he came to stand next to Bryn, watching the scene unfold. "Did you just do what I think you just did?"

"Start a revolution?" Bryn asked half-jokingly, as the many implications of this discovery began to settle in.

Edger laughed, his face breaking out into a wide grin. It was the first time Bryn had seen him smile since their reunion. It looked good on him, even under all of the blood and soot. Even though Edger's healing magic absorbed dead blood into it, there was still a lot left on his clothes.

"I guess even the worst of days has some good in it," Bryn said. "Plus now I have this badass sword," she joked as she bent to pick it up, feeling some genuine emotional relief for the first time all day. She gave it a flourish as she struck a pose for Edger, smiling through the grime and the sweat. The vulprin were too preoccupied with sifting through the pile again to take notice.

"I wish I'd gotten to see you use it. It looks – I don't know – *right on you*," he said.

"Yeah, about me using it," she said as she shifted her stance and bit her lip. "Can you give me a hand with Lani?" It was a simple matter for Edger to revive her, and Bryn braced herself for Lani's response.

"Oww," she said, rubbing her forehead and pouting. "You hit me, Bryn! I can't believe you did that!"

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," Bryn lied – maybe – poking a stiff finger on Lani's forehead. "You were out of control, girl."

"I just wanted to help you." Lani looked at the ground.

"You can't help anyone if you're dead. What you did was very dangerous. You understand that, right?" Bryn was concerned that the girl didn't know how close she came to destroying herself.

"I know it was, but I thought you were going to die!" Something about this conversation was really bothering Bryn. Why was she the person disciplining this little girl?

"Lani, where are your parents?" Lani's lip started to tremble and her eyes welled up with tears. "Lani!?"

"Oh, Bryn, I'm so scared," she said as she grabbed Bryn and tried to bury herself in her shoulder. "I don't know where they are. They left three days ago and haven't been back since. I didn't know where to go. I was too afraid to leave the house, and I just kept hoping they'd come back. That's why I saw your house burning so quickly. I've just been watching the street for mom and dad."

Bryn, think about this, came the voice that had been pestering her. *You've got enough on your plate already. You've got a rapist to bring to justice, a kidnapped mother of your own to find and rescue, a pair of twitchy monsters that may or may not be willing to cooperate with you once they realize you're out of food for them, an unnamed baby growing inside of you that somehow attracted those monsters to you in the first place, and, oh yes, let's not forget your ambitions to join the Order of Whyat and save the world from the brink of economic and environmental ruin. And your vagina is killing you.*

She wished she could kick the voice in her head, especially for the last reminder. Instead she gave Edger an apologetic look and squeezed Lani tight. "I'll help you find your parents, honey. Don't cry. I know exactly how you're feeling, you know?" Lani nodded with a snuffle.

“We’ll get through this together, somehow.” The voice in the head may be right, but it was almost like it knew that Bryn would feel too much guilt if she didn’t do something.

Edger looked at the vulprin, then at the desolate remains of Bryn’s home, then at Bryn and Lani’s embrace. “I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t have any other plans today,” Edger sighed. Bryn shared a weak smile with Edger as she thought about what she would do next.

Chapter 9: In Which Edger Understands Bryn Better

As much as Bryn wanted to take Lani home immediately so that she could get cleaned up, she knew that the first order of business was to figure out what to do with these vulprin. *They might be calm and harmless right now, but who knows how long that will last?* She sent Lani off to home and told her that she would meet up with her there once she finished things here.

“Edger, I'd never encountered a vulprin before today, but you seem to know something about them at least. What can you tell me?”

Edger scratched his head, trying to remember whatever it was he might have said. “Did I give that impression? I don't really know much about them, except that they're city monsters. I've seen a few, I guess, ever since the Rat Hole swallowed our apartment.”

“The Rat Hole?” Bryn asked.

“Yeah. When we moved into our apartment, my dad was excited. It was a great place for us. But I guess time changes a lot of stuff, because the nearby neighborhoods have gone to shit. A lot of kiemara moved in, and one morning three police officers were found burning in the middle of Voell Street. After that, the police didn't patrol that street, and crime got worse, so it just kind of expanded from there. I don't know who called it the Rat Hole, but it's a fitting name. Dad keeps saying we need to move, but I think we can't really afford it. He likes to pretend that we're still well off, and he wouldn't ever tell me if we were having money troubles to my face, I don't think. Hopefully I can help them out once I get my certifications in order.”

Bryn wanted to ask so much more about Edger's personal life, to really catch up on how his life had been since they last knew each other, but she had to stay focused on the problem at hand. “So the police normally keep the vulprin under control in the rest of the city?”

“Well, yeah. That's a big part of their job. Vulprin and other monsters.” Bryn was skeptical about everything involving the police, but she figured that Edger was probably right about this.

“Why do they stick to cities?” Bryn wondered aloud as one of the creatures pointed something out to the other.

“How should I know?” Edger asked. “You know more about these things than I do, Bryn.”

“So you're saying you don't have any useful advice on what we should do with them?” she asked.

“Burgona’s bottom, Bryn. What do you want from me?”

“I’m sorry, Edger, I didn’t – I didn’t mean it like that. You’ve been more than useful,” Bryn said, immediately wishing she’d chosen different words.

“Oh, well, that’s good, I’m glad I’m useful. Tell you what, maybe you should make a collar for me when you make a scabbard for your new ‘badass sword’.”

Bryn wasn’t well enough reacquainted with Edger yet to know whether he was just giving her a hard time or whether he was genuinely upset, so she decided to err in favor of caution. She liked Edger, and she needed him.

“Come on, Edger, you know that’s not what I meant.” She tried to look innocent, but that was the problem. She had to try. It wasn’t an instinct anymore. The events of the day had shattered Bryn’s easygoing nature and replaced it with something that she didn’t yet understand or have any control over. She was being unnecessarily manipulative.

Edger grimaced. “I know, Bryn. I’m trying to be understanding, here, since you’ve been through a lot today, but... Well, so have I. You haven’t even asked me if I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, thank you,” he snapped. Bryn thought that might be the end of the discussion after an awkward stretch of silence, but she didn’t want to leave it that way.

“Edger, I came to you this morning out of desperation. I hadn’t even thought about you for years, and I saw you as a solution to a problem, not as a friend that I should reconnect with. That’s just the kind of person that I am,” she confessed.

Edger seemed to soften a little. “At least you admit it.”

“That doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you as a person or that I wouldn’t be ecstatic to count you as a friend.”

Edger seemed skeptical that Bryn was just trying to tell him what he wanted to hear. People often seemed that way to Bryn when she chose her words carefully.

“Hell, Edge, I’m willing to have this insufferable conversation with you just to make sure you feel validated as a human being. Doesn’t that show that I care?”

Edger gave Bryn a dumbfounded look that eventually faded into one of understanding. “Actually, yeah. It does. I’m sorry, Bryn. I was

still thinking of you as the girl I once knew." He gave her a penetrating look, like he was really seeing her for the first time. "I won't make the same mistake again."

"Good, I'm glad that's settled," Bryn said. Moments passed.

"Did you just call me Edge?"

"I think I did."

"My mom calls me Edge."

"Too bad, that's not going to stop me," Bryn said with a coy smile.

"There," he said. "That was genuine." Bryn blushed, mostly because he was right. Maybe she wasn't a lost cause after all.

"Well, I'm glad that we just had that little heart-to-heart," Bryn said, "Really, I am, but it still doesn't solve this problem."

"What are we going to do with them?" Edger asked.

"I don't know." She dropped to a whisper, in case the creatures could understand her. "I mean, we could kill them. I killed three of the others. But after seeing their transformation, I'm just not sure that I can bring myself to do it. There's something human in them."

"I know what you mean."

"Don't get me wrong, the other three got what was coming to them," Bryn clarified. "I don't care if you're human or not; try to kill me and I will end you."

"That seems fair."

"I just wanted to make sure that we established a moral baseline. But as for where the rest of that line is," Bryn sighed. "I have no idea."

"The academic in me wants to cage them and experiment with them to see what we could do about sorting out tainted and untainted kiema, and to see what we could learn about the relationship between monsters and blue kiema. I highly doubt that vulprin are the only monsters that react this way. Between the two of us, we could probably get them into a cage."

"And store them where, Bryn?"

Bryn's face contorted after being reminded of an unpleasant fact that she hadn't really had time to process. "Oh gods, I'm homeless," she said hollowly.

"I was kind of wondering when it would hit you," Edger said, patting her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you might want to stay with Lani anyway, and if not, I'm sure you can stay at my place. We'll have to have a little chat with my mom about it, but I'm sure she'll take you in." Bryn gave a sigh of relief. One less problem to deal with.

"In any case, it doesn't matter. I can't cage these things, you know that, not if they're in some way human."

"Yeah, I didn't think you would," Edger said. Bryn wondered if Edger was using this whole conversation just to try to understand her thought process a little better. *All the better if he does*, Bryn thought. *If he can understand me better, it will make our lives easier.*

"We could, I don't know, just walk away? I don't really want to leave all of that blue kiema around, but I'm not sure they'd be happy if I tried to gather it up and take it away. It's not like I'm going to use the kiema anyway."

"What happens when they need more?" Edger asked.

"Can't that be a problem for someone else?" Bryn asked. "I mean really, Edge, I just don't want to be in charge of who lives and who dies."

"I won't blame you if that's what you decide," he answered, but Bryn wasn't sure she believed him.

"There is one other thing I could try," she considered. "I mean, I could just try talking to them."

Edger looked at the creatures, then at Bryn. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

Bryn walked slowly towards the creatures, trying not to appear threatening. The vulprin glanced at her as she approached, but they mostly focused on the pile of kiema. "Can I sit with you?" she asked.

One of the creatures looked at her and tilted its head, even farther than it already was tilted on the monster's crooked neck. Bryn took it as a yes and sat down on the other side of the mound. The creatures still seemed mostly disinterested.

"Do you want more of this?" she asked. Both of the creatures turned quickly to pay attention to her finally, and nodded their heads up and down frantically before settling again.

"I'm sorry that I don't have any right now," she said. "Do you think you could wait for it?" The creatures exchanged a look but didn't seem to have an answer for her.

"If I can get you more by tomorrow, will you promise not to hurt anyone?" she asked.

"*Youuuuu kiiiiilled theeeem*," one of the creatures drawled, weakly gesturing towards the corpses of his companions.

"I did, and I'm sorry for that. I nearly killed you, too, because you were attacking us. I don't want to fight you, though, and I don't want you to fight anyone. If I can, I'd like to help you."

"*Heeeelp?*"

"Yes. I don't want you to have to suffer. I'd like to take care of you so that you don't feel like you need to attack people anymore." She really couldn't tell if they were understanding her. She waited to see if they would make any more effort to reach out to her, but they just went back to sorting the pile.

"Okay. I don't know how else to communicate with you," she said, "but I'm willing to take a chance. I'm going to move this pile of kiema into the ruins of my home. I want you to stay there with it, and not go out and look for more or attack any innocent people for more. I will be back tomorrow with more, and if you're still here, I will give you any of it that you want. Okay?"

She stood up, and began scooping the crystals back into her satchel. The vulprin squawked a bit as she did so, but they didn't stop her. *I guess they've seen enough of it by now to know the rest is tainted*, she thought. She carried the satchel into her house, looking back at the creatures and gesturing for them to follow. When they did, she led them into the center of the house, where there was the least damage, and dumped the contents again. The creatures settled around them once again, looking at them and sniffing at them sadly.

Bryn started to just leave, but stopped herself. She walked up next to one of the creatures, and, trembling, she placed a hand on its shoulder. The creature shook and sputtered, spreading its feathers in a display of unease, but it didn't stop her or try to push her away.

"Gods, I hope I'm not making a mistake here," she whispered as she turned and left, rejoining Edger outside. "Please be careful and safe here."

"I take it they were okay with the situation?" he asked.

"I hope so. I really have no idea," she admitted. "But this is the best idea I have at the moment. I'll need to get them some more blue kiema for tomorrow, somehow."

"I've got access to plenty through school – there are entire vaults that are just filled with the stuff. You have to check it out and keep a detailed tab of how much you withdraw, but if I just keep swapping it out, I should be able to find some untainted pieces without anyone noticing."

"That sounds like it should work," Bryn agreed, thankful that at least one of her problems had an easy solution. "That might even work for a while, assuming these things are willing to cooperate. Are you sure you don't mind helping me with this? I mean, I've already asked way more of you than I deserve."

"Bryn, if I say something a little mean, will you get upset with me?" Edger asked.

"I'll... try not to," Bryn offered. Edger gave an innocent grin.

"Today's been the most exciting day of my life, and it's all thanks to you," he said. "I know I should feel awful about the things that have happened to you, but if they hadn't happened, I wouldn't be here."

"So you're... glad I was raped?" Edger looked peevishly at the ground. Bryn let the words sink in. "That's actually not that mean," she sighed. "When you put it like that, I'm kind of glad I was raped, too. Of course, I'm still going to track down the fucker that did this and cut off his balls, but that doesn't mean that I can't be happy about our reunion. Now come on, Lani's probably freaking out, and we both need to get cleaned up."

Bryn made her way down the familiar street, looking back at her old house once with regret.

Chapter 10: In Which Bryn Takes a Bath

"Come on in," Lani called as Bryn and Edger approached her front door. "I went ahead and started a bath for you."

"You're a kitten, Lani," Edger said, rubbing his hands on his shirt. "You go first, Bryn. I'll just wait out here until you're done so I don't make a mess everywhere."

"Oh, no, come on in. I'll clean up after you. Just give me a minute to cover the sofa with a sheet and you can lay down while you wait."

Bryn didn't wait for them to figure out the logistics. As soon as she heard the word "bath" she was bounding down the hallway, looking for the bathroom. As fatigued as she was, she was drawn to the warm moisture seeping out from the room in the rear of the house. She closed the door a bit too hard in haste, nearly tripping and falling as she threw her sword to the ground with a clatter and disrobed. Bryn plunged into the steaming water with abandon, moaning heavily as her greasy body slipped under the surface, sloshing a fair amount of the water over the lip and onto the floor where it drained beneath the house.

She was on fire momentarily from the heat, but she didn't care. This water was the best thing she had felt in her life, even better than the relief that Edger's fingers granted her earlier. She recalled the experience momentarily, feeling guilty that she had put Edger in such an awkward and embarrassing situation, but at that moment she didn't care. She just wanted to savor the feeling. With the muck and the sweat, the morning's troubles just melted off of her mocha skin, leaving a cloud of treacherous black memories floating in the bathwater.

She sighed with relief, blowing bubbles as she submerged her head and rubbed her face vigorously. She fumbled for the soap without looking, busy removing the crust of makeup and grime that had caked onto her cheeks. She applied the soap liberally, repeatedly, desperately, as if it would wash away the events themselves, not just the memories.

She paused, while so taken in her reverie, to think about those memories. As painful as some of them were, she wished that she had more of them. She would rather know what happened to her last night than not, no matter how painful it was. The fact that she couldn't remember anything about the night even now truly worried her. Intentional and enduring memory removal would require a very talented hand even if done under direct contact; infusing such an ability into a drug or a ki-etella for someone else to use without kiema would limit the effect. Bryn had been assuming that she would start to remember snippets as the

day went on, but so far the only thing that even remotely triggered any memories for her was that smell of whiskey.

“Just turn your mind off, Bryn,” she said aloud to herself. “You’ll have plenty of time to deal with these problems later.” She focused on relaxing her muscles, realizing just how tense they were. Gently, she used a finger to probe her still injured region, wincing as she repeatedly contracted and released her muscles, feeling waves of searing water beating against the insurmountable cliff of her womanhood. She endeavored to apply as much soap as she could stand, knowing that she would regret infection even more than the temporary pain she felt now, hoping that she hadn’t already missed the opportunity to sanitize herself. The process was difficult but cathartic, and Bryn felt much better for having done it.

There did remain one thing, though. Her hair. It bothered her the most, so she saved it for last. She once again dipped her head under the surface, going all the way down, now, pulling the asperous mane back behind her neck and squeezing it. The hair soaked up the water, remaining coarse but becoming pliable as her fingers came away with a slimy black film. It took a great deal of stroking and cajoling to convince the contaminants to abandon their new home. Several blackened towels later, Bryn was finally beginning to feel like a human being again. She idly supposed that this transformation probably felt a lot like what the vulprin had experienced about half an hour ago.

She realized that the water was beginning to cool, so she began to empty the tub. She was careful to try to contain the mess, both from ruining the bathroom and from spilling back onto her. She took the opportunity to clean the sword using the last of the pail of fresh water, but the orange dress was not salvageable. Fortunately Lani had even had the forethought to prepare one of her mother’s robes, even if it was long enough to drag on the floor behind Bryn, sopping up some of the remnants of the bath. *She’s a thoughtful girl, and brave and smart. And likely to get herself hurt if I draw her into my mess. I’ve already screwed Edger over, but I can spare her.* She tied her hair up tightly in a bun before wrapping it with a towel; she doubted that Lani or her mother with their naturally silky blond hair would have any solutions that would help her tame it once it dried.

After tidying up as best she could, she left the bathroom to re-join Edger and Lani, both fixated on the photube in the living room. “You should see this,” Edger said as he stood up, carefully wrapping himself

in the soiled sheet he'd been laying on as he started to make his way to the bathroom. He paused as caught his first sight of Bryn, all wrapped up in clean cotton. "You look nice," he grinned.

"Oh please," Bryn said with a punch to his shoulder, "we'll see how you look when you're done." He wasted no time as Bryn sat down on the sofa. Once he was out of the room, Lani let out a little squeal.

"Whyat's breath, Bryn, he's so cute! How long have you two been seeing each other?" Bryn was taken aback, simultaneously trying to process Lani's wild misunderstanding of the situation and what she was seeing on the photube.

"Oh, Lani, it's not like that. We're just friends." *Oh great*, Bryn thought, *they're talking about my father on the news.*

"— official reports are saying that Ruddicus Dandaster, mastermind of the terrorist attacks seven years ago that left over twenty members of the Order of Whyat dead and many more severely burned, has in fact *escaped* from Waalort penitentiary —" came the strangely articulate voice of a kiemara woman whose r's rolled like a lioness's purr.

"Yeah, right, Bryn, I don't believe that for a second," Lani said in an excited whisper, looking back towards the bathroom. "He's been talking about you nonstop."

"Oh really?" Bryn said, only half-listening as she tried to pay attention to the news. "What did he say?"

"— unofficial eyewitness reports are saying that Dandaster was spotted fleeing the scene of another arson on Gransen Circle in the Waalorten suburbs, this time not of a military installation but rather of his *own home* —" The broadcast cut to a live interview with one of Bryn's neighbors. She realized that the police would be investigating the ruins of her house, and hoped that the vulprin were smart enough to hide. She stood to look out the window to see if she could see the interview while Lani continued to try to engage her in girl-talk.

"He said that you saved my life and that he really admired you for it because he didn't think he could have done the same thing. I asked him if he thought that I *wanted* you to hit me, and he got really upset and said it was for my own good. He's pretty mean, but he looks hot even when he's dirty. Especially when he's dirty," she said. Bryn tried not to listen to the words Lani was saying. *You're what? Twelve years old? Slow down. You've got plenty of time to ruin your life on a boy still.* She sighed as she looked out the window. *Plenty of time.*

“— I swear, if it wasn't Rudy it was Darblun himself. I was neighbors with Rudy for fifteen years before that whole mess so I know what he looks like —” said an emotional lady from the neighborhood who Bryn knew had moved in less than a year ago, long after her father had been incarcerated. Her words weren't interesting, but Bryn was interested by her physical position, both as she saw it from the window and as it was being showed on the photube. She never would have noticed it if it weren't for the broadcast.

“Lani, dear, why is this chair here?” she asked. It was rotated to face the window instead of the photube. Something about it seemed very out of place.

“That's daddy's chair. He likes to smoke kiema there.” In the background of the newscast and her conversation with Lani, Bryn heard a brief line of song from Edger. She figured he must be enjoying his bath as much as Bryn did.

“Blue kiema?” she asked, not really needing the affirmative answer that she got. Smoking kiema was kind of an older way of recreationally consuming it that had gone out of style, but there were certain effects that could only really be sustained for a long time if you took care to inhale the kiema smoke slowly and in tightly controlled amounts. *Why did Lani's father sit in a chair that faced directly at the front door of my home?* Bryn worried as she thought some pieces were falling into place. She was afraid that she knew the answer to her next question too.

“Remind me, Lani, how long have you been living here?”

“Let me think,” she said, counting on her fingers. “I think it was just before I started school, so I was about four, I guess. Seven years ago, I think?” Seven years. When her father was locked up. It could be a coincidence. *No, no, no, no, no. Do not let the Maunbrauts be involved in whatever's going on here. I want her to not be part of this. She does not deserve this!*

“You said your parents disappeared three days ago?” she asked, again getting confirmation. What day was it again? Sunday? Three days ago would have been Thirdsday. Did Bryn remember anything from Thirdsday this week? Just how long had she been out of it? Where was Bryn while Lani's parents were disappearing? And how long has her father been on the lam? Bryn didn't think the newscast had included that detail.

“You're really smart, Bryn. Did you think of something?”

“Not yet,” Bryn lied. “I’m just trying to go over some facts again.”

“Thanks, Bryn. But if you want to talk about Edger, we could do that, too.” Bryn was beginning to suspect that the girl had a crush on Edger. Maybe she was giving Lani too much credit earlier by calling her smart. Still, she seemed a little strange, not quite like the Lani Bryn knew. She guessed that everyone grows up some time, and hormones change the best of us.

“What I’d like is to change into some decent clothes,” Bryn said, flopping the damp sleeves of the robes around. “Do you think I could use some of your mother’s things?”

“Oh, yeah, Bryn, I’m sure she won’t mind. I don’t know if you’ll like what you find though. You always dress so much prettier than she does.”

“You’re so sweet, Lani. Where’s her bedroom?”

“Upstairs, on the left. Just take whatever you want. I’ll go pick something out for Edger from daddy’s clothes.”

“Oh, no, I’ll take care of that, too,” Bryn said, hoping to get a chance to snoop around in the process. “You just go see if he needs anything from you. It’s starting to get on in the afternoon, too, and we haven’t had anything to eat. I’m sure Edger’s stomach is growling like a caged dog.” Lani giggled and went off to knock on the bathroom door, leaving Bryn to her own devices.

Chapter 11: In Which Bryn Inspects the Bedroom

Bryn hurried up the stairs to Lani's parents' room. She did take her time choosing an outfit before she began the search. Lani wasn't exaggerating about her mother's clothes; the choices were not very good. She liked the pair of tan capris that she picked out since they were loose and light and easy to maneuver in. The only bra that fit was black, and the only shirt that she even remotely liked was a high-cut white chiffon that billowed strangely at the waist and was held up by skinny shoulder straps. She tried them on together, and it looked far sluttier than she would have liked since the bra was so dark, but she didn't think she would come up with anything better. She started to go with a pair of flimsy flip-flops, but decided that she needed to be a bit more practical and chose a pair of sandals with four leather straps to hold them securely in place. She grabbed a thick leather belt for her satchels, and that helped a bit with strange trim at the bottom of the shirt, but the large oval gold buckle was more ostentatious than anything she would normally wear. She chose the belt because it looked strong enough to hold the sword, at least until she had the chance to make a scabbard for it.

She grabbed something quickly for Edger, laughing at her options and eventually giving up on getting anything she thought he might like. She got a pair of black silk pants that flared near the feet and paired it with a collarless dark blue shirt with large gold buttons running up the center that would hang more than a foot below his waist. She tried to picture it in her head, but every time she just laughed. She would have to try to keep a straight face when she saw him in it.

She took one last moment of vanity to clean her nails off and put on a small bit of makeup. Too many of her nails had been ruined at this point, so she decided to just clean them all off and trim them close for a more natural look, since she didn't have the time to make them look any better. Besides, if the next few days were anything like today, nails would be a waste of time. But she couldn't bring herself to not put *any* makeup on. She just used a bit of rose-colored lipstick and a little bit of foundation to smooth out some of her blemishes, and by the end of it she finally recognized herself in the full-length silver mirror. She reached out to the person in the mirror with one of her hands, meeting its reflection. *I recognize you*, she thought. *Do you recognize me? Am I still this woman I see before me?*

She tossed Edger's clothes on the bed as she began to snoop about the room. *If you were some kind of spy, where would you hide evi-*

dence of that fact? She sifted through Lani's mother's jewelry, but none of it seemed infused with kiema. It would be easier to tell if she enhanced her own senses with blue kiema, but that obviously wasn't going to happen. Still, Bryn guessed that not every spy used kiema-infused super-gadgets like fiction would have you believe; there were more than enough mundane ways to spy and report information that drew less suspicion.

Eventually, Bryn felt a click as she felt around the edges of Lani's father's armoire. A hidden compartment opened up, stuffed nearly halfway full with large paper marks. *Gods, she thought, that's at least five million marks. It's worth more than this house. Even if the Maunbrauts had been in a hurry, if they were leaving of their own free will they would have taken this money with them, right? Unless they were planning on coming back for it. Are we safe here? Does anyone else know this money is here? And how did they come to obtain it, anyway?* Bryn was sure the money was important, but she couldn't figure out how it might play into a story that involved spying on her house.

At first she considered leaving the money where she found it. It wasn't hers, and it was theft no matter how she rationalized it. But there were too many reasons to take it. With her house burned down and her mother missing, she was completely broke – she didn't even own the clothes on her back. If she had the money on her person, she could protect it for Lani's sake in case someone other than Lani's parents came looking for it. The reason that pushed her over the edge was the most important one of all. *I need to provide for Eden, she thought. No, she's not an Eden either.*

She did say to take whatever I wanted, Bryn thought, but she still felt guilty as she stuffed a few of the bills into the bra and the rest into one of Mrs. Maunbraut's purses. She'd ditch the purse once she retrieved her satchels, but she'd left them in the bathroom and she needed some way to get the money from the armoire to there without Lani finding out about it.

Should I tell Edger? she wondered. *Probably. But maybe I should wait until I need to. He might not be okay with me taking it, and if someone is looking for it then it might be better for him if he doesn't know where it is.* Bryn didn't like keeping secrets from Edger, but she thought he would understand.

Bryn continued the search, but she doubted she would find much more. After the rest of the furniture seemed to be all very stan-

dard, Bryn checked the floorboards and the walls, knocking softly to see if anything was hollow but nothing seemed unusual. Eventually she climbed up on the bed to inspect the top of the ceiling fan. She didn't see anything, but when she ran her hand over it, she felt a smooth bump over the wood grain. *Tape?* she wondered. *I guess anything could have been taped there. Whatever it is is gone now, though.* Bryn decided that she wasn't likely to find much more of use, and that any real clues to the Maunbrauts' disappearance or involvement in her affairs had been removed from the house at least three days ago.

I wonder if Edger has any talent for psychometry, she thought. *He seemed to really feel my pain as he healed me, but I guess reading memories off of people is a very different thing from reading impressions off of things. It's a rare gift that requires a lot of dedication, and surely he would have mentioned it by now if he could do that. I might want to think about finding a diviner, though.*

I guess Emera might know how to do it, or she might know someone who does. She figured that she would find her friend at school tomorrow. Emera could probably help her with her amnesia about the night of the rape. Based on her couture – or lack thereof – when she awakened, Bryn guessed that she had been out in the city somewhere enjoying herself, and that meant that Emera, Saffler, and Nighra were probably there too. She worried about seeing her friends again, wondering if they would see her the same way as she looked at the familiar yet alien person in the mirror. *Oh gods,* Bryn thought, *I hope they're at school tomorrow. What does it mean if they aren't?* She shoved the thought away; no sense worrying about something that might not happen. She considered calling them on the auditel, but she wasn't ready to talk to them yet. She needed to tell them what happened in person.

Bryn knew that if she waited much longer, she'd draw some suspicion, from Edger at least if not from naive little Lani. She scooped up the clothes for Edger, took one last look in the mirror, adjusted her hair into a bushy ponytail, and hustled down the stairs. Lani was waiting outside the bathroom door, and she looked excited when Bryn appeared.

"Oh wow, you look great! I didn't even know that my mom had those clothes," she said. Bryn didn't think she had done very well, but Lani actually seemed to mean it. "Let me see what you picked out for Edger," she said. She turned over the pants and shirt, frowning a bit. "That's the best you could do?" Bryn shrugged. "Oh well, I'm sure it will

look good on him anyway.” Lani knocked on the door, “Are you almost done in there, Edger? We have some clothes for you.”

“Yeah,” came the muffled response from behind the door. “Just put them inside the door. Lani opened up the door wide and put the clothes on the side of the sink, taking a generous gander towards the tub in the middle of the room. Bryn reached in without looking and pulled her out, shutting the door. She thought she heard a deep chuckle from Edger.

“Just give him a minute, Lani. Oh, actually, just one second,” she said as she opened the door again quickly. Edger had stood up in the tub, clearly expecting not to be interrupted again. “Sorry Edge, I need my satchels,” she said, looking him in the eyes but seeing everything. She gave him an innocent smile as she reached for her old belt and sword.

“Come on, Bryn, really?” he said. “Grow up, already.”

“I have,” she laughed as she closed the door, “when will you?”

“Hey, what in the hell is that supposed to mean?” Edger asked. Bryn was thankful that Lani didn't seem to understand the joke; that was the last imagery the lusty little girl needed. Bryn hurried to the living room again, slipping the money from the purse to the blue satchel.

“Oh, what was I thinking,” Bryn called to Lani. “This purse isn't going to go with my satchels at all. I'll be right back, I'm just going to go return it.” Lani was just sitting in a chair the bathroom door, waiting for Edger.

Bryn opened the closet and threw the purse quickly inside, almost without looking. Almost. In her haste to pick an outfit earlier, she missed something very important. Most of the clothes here were either tacky or just for a person older than Bryn, but that wasn't the only reason that Bryn had had trouble finding something good to wear. Instead of looking at the trees, she saw the forest this time; most of these clothes would fit Mrs. Maunbraut, but there were dozens of outfits that definitely wouldn't. There was even one that looked like it was tailored for a kiemara with a pair of tiny vestigial wings on its back. She moved over to Mr. Maunbraut's armoire and closet, finding the same thing. She backed out of the room, mind racing.

“Is everything okay up there, Bryn?” Edger called. *Think, Bryn.- Maybe they enjoyed going to costume parties or something, that would explain the unusual outfits.* Bryn knew that explanation wasn't good enough.

You must have seen Lani together with her parents at some point in your life, right? Just once. Surely she came over with her mother once, right? Have you really only ever seen her or her parents alone?

Lani must be a shapeshifter, came the voice that Bryn didn't want to believe. It sounded ridiculous, and she had almost no evidence for it. That explains the lack of control over strong red magic – shapeshifting so precisely and for so long would probably require extreme asceticism to blue kiema. Didn't she seem kind of sturdy when you knocked her out, too, like she had too much mass packed into that tiny body?

She's not just a shapeshifter. She's been deep undercover for seven years, building a persona that you will trust implicitly. And today she's finally making her move, whatever that is.

Bryn's stomach churned and she thought she was going to throw up. *Please tell me that I'm being paranoid, she thought to herself, this time sure of the origin of the thoughts. I like Lani. I don't want her to be a part of this. Burgona's bottom, I hope she won't know that I know. And why is she interested in my family, anyway? It must be because of my father, but why? Government conspiracy? Revenge? What on earth is she playing at, and how do I keep her from finding out that I know long enough to figure out what her game is? A shapeshifter? I don't believe it.*

The voice in her head seemed almost argumentative. She never would have considered the idea of Lani being a shapeshifter if it weren't for the voice's insistence and stubbornness. The evidence was flimsy at best, and shapeshifting wasn't exactly a popular discipline. Bryn was walking a fine line, and she needed Edger. Alone. It was time to find an excuse to get out of here.

Chapter 12: In Which Bryn is a Good Cop, and Edger is an Aloof Cop

When Bryn returned to the living room, Lani and Edger were sitting there in awkward silence, snacking on cheese and crackers. Edger's outfit was as wrong for him as she thought it would be, but she was no longer in the mood to laugh and didn't feel like she would be able to do so without it sounding forced. Lani looked at her with the same innocent look she'd had all along, but now that look was terrifying and sinister in Bryn's eyes.

"How was your bath, Edger?" she asked, trying to remain nonchalant but having trouble taking her eyes off of Lani, as if the girl might suddenly lunge at her, transforming into some abomination made of teeth and claws. Bryn had to remind herself that she had known Lani for seven years now, and had never known Lani to wish her any ill will. She even risked magical burnout to save Bryn's life just an hour ago. If she was a mole, whether she was a shapeshifter or not, she didn't want Bryn dead. That wasn't much comfort to Bryn, but it was something.

"It was fine until someone interrupted it near the end," he said, wryly. "And then I had to put this on." He stood up and turned around in a circle with his arms held straight up in the air. "Was this really the best you could do? How old are these clothes, anyway? Was this ever in style?" Lani ogled at Edger's backside as he turned, without apology.

Bryn didn't want to talk about clothes. Lani had encouraged her to go through her parents' things. *Why pretend to have me search for her parents if it would lead me to this conclusion? Did she make a mistake? Underestimate me? Or does she want me to find her out? And what would it mean if she did? Why not just come out and say it?*

"Yeah, I'm sorry about the outfit," Bryn said. "We should probably just head back to your place so that you at least can put something normal on." Bryn went to the window that had a clear view of her house, and she could see that the police were now on the scene. There were no signs that the vulprin had been discovered, but surely the bodies of the dead ones had been.

"Oh, you're not going to leave already, are you?" Lani asked. "You haven't been here that long. I thought you were going to help me find my parents."

Bryn tried to treat Lani in the same condescending way she always did, but it sounded forced to her. "Oh, honey, I will. I've already started working on it. But it's going to take me time to find some clues and assemble them into something that makes sense."

"It's okay, Bryn. As long as we aren't out in public, I can endure wearing these clothes for a while. They're actually pretty comfortable. I'll just watch the 'tube while you ask Lani the questions you need to ask."

"Questions?"

"Yeah, questions," he said. "You know." His voice became very deep and gritty, mocking one of the characters on the crime show that he was watching. "When did you last see your parents? What were they wearing when they disappeared? Have they ever disappeared like this before?" Those kinds of things." Bryn rolled her eyes. Apparently Edger was a big fan of police procedurals. That would explain why he had enjoyed his little adventure this morning; maybe he thought he was like a character in one of his favorite shows.

"You seem to know so much about it, maybe you could help," Bryn offered. He shrugged and leaned back on the sofa.

"If I think of something important, I'll be sure to mention it," he said as he went back to the photube.

"Boys," Bryn said with exasperation, and Lani giggled. For a second Bryn forgot her suspicions and shared the laugh. "But he does have a point, I guess. I should start with the basics.

"Tell me, Lani, what do your parents do for a living? I'm sure they must have told me before, but I don't remember." Bryn needed to confirm her suspicion that Lani was her parents, and the best way to do that would be to catch her in some lie.

"Dad is a kiema miner at Jom Mine over by Darblun's pinky." Bryn figured she was referring to a mine in the farthest valley to the east of Waalort, though the name didn't mean anything special to her. Kiema miners were crucial to pretty much all life across Ortha. They worked in incredibly hazardous environments where the danger ranged from the natural, things like cave-ins and noxious fumes, to the supernatural, since wild kiema had been known to do strange things to monsters and men alike. The refined, processed kiema that Bryn carried in her satchels was a radically different product than what you would find in the wild. The kind of kiema that the government actually allowed you to purchase had to be strictly handled to ensure that it was safe for consumption. These regulations were necessary to prevent another monster epidemic like the one that followed the Upheaval.

It was also the perfect cover story. Kiema miners had to work alone because the first symptom of wild kiema toxicity was extreme paranoia. For a time, people tried many different strategies to work in teams, but every attempt ended in failure, the teams cannibalizing themselves, even literally in some of the most extreme cases. Now, people went into the mines alone, armed to the teeth with their best wits about them. They would spend hours gathering wild kiema, and return to the surface stark-raving mad, where, if they were lucky enough to be left alone for an hour, they could recover from their madness and return to sell the raw product to someone who would turn it into something acceptable according to the government's standards.

"Oh, I didn't realize. That's a really tough job," Bryn said apologetically. *Forget about your suspicions while you ask the questions, and just pretend that this is the little Lani you used to know. She's young, brave, and precocious, and she likes your mother's cookies.*

"It's pretty hard, but he always said he was really good at it. And that he had to, to support the family." *Kiema miners are paid well for the risks they take, Bryn thought, but not the kind of money that was in that armoire. If Lani is her parents, then that is her money. She'll realize it's gone sooner or later. One problem at a time, Bryn.*

"And how about your mother? My mother used to babysit you pretty often when you were younger, so I'm assuming she has a job."

"She's a secretary for Senator Cimarron." *A secretary?* Bryn thought with surprise. That wouldn't be nearly as easy of a cover story. She would be busy, and she would have to deal with people constantly, so she would always need to be around. There just wouldn't be enough time for Lani to go to school and for her mother to be a secretary if they were the same person.

You're assuming that Lani went to school. You've never been in the same school because of the age difference. And for that matter she could just be lying. The voice in Bryn's head was becoming a real nuisance. She thought that it had been a side effect of whatever caused her groggy awakening this morning, but it seemed to be getting worse, not better.

"Senator Cimarron? The chair of the domestic security committee?" Bryn looked at Edger with surprise when he spoke. "What? I watch a lot of news," he said. Bryn wasn't surprised by his knowledge, though. It was exceptionally salient information, especially given how lit-

tle attention Edger seemed to be paying to her questioning. Maybe he was more attentive to the situation than he seemed. *Gods bless you and your unassuming demeanor, Edger*, she thought. *At least one of us is a decent actor.*

So Lani says her mom works for the very man in government who initiates policy involving the police force and the prison system. Bryn would eat her new outfit if there weren't some connection to her father buried in that factoid, assuming it was even a shadow of the truth. She found herself wishing that she knew more about her father, about why he had done the things he had done. What possesses a man to turn against the government and destroy so many lives? He must have had a reason.

"Wow, your mother works for a very important man," Bryn said.

"You know, Bryn, you don't have to keep treating me like a kid," Lani said, and Bryn nearly staggered away from the window. Edger glanced at her but pretended to be focused on the photube. "I'm eleven years old now. I'm practically an adult."

"Oh, of course you are sweetie," Bryn said as she looked down at Lani's eyes and suppressed a sigh of relief. "I just can't help but see that four-year-old girl begging for another of my mom's oatmeal raisin cookies whenever I look at you," she lied, her stomach twisting in knots. "But no, I can tell you're an adult. You're handling yourself amazingly well for someone whose parents are missing." Bryn tried to add as much genuine emotion as she could by continuing, "I don't know how you're doing it. It's tearing me apart that I don't know where my mother is."

"Well, my parents have been gone for three days, so I've had some time to get used to it," Lani said. "Besides, they are always so busy, so I spend a lot of time alone anyway. Things haven't changed that much, for me. I think you were probably much closer to your mom."

I don't know, Bryn thought. *You can't get much closer than actually being someone.* But she didn't say anything of the sort.

"Well," Bryn said. "I think that gives me a good place to start. I can go see if anyone at your mom's office has seen her since you did. They might know something more. I'll stop by there after school tomorrow. How does that sound?" Bryn asked. She wasn't sure if it was a good idea to announce her plans to Lani, since it gave her time to pre-

pare against them, but she had to give Lani something before she could leave.

“That sounds like a good idea. Really, Bryn, I can't thank you enough for doing this. You're so smart, I'm sure you're going to find them really soon.” Lani walked over and gave Bryn a hug. *Gods I hope little Camryn is as sweet as this thing is pretending to be. Nope, that's not her name either.*

“Are you ready to go, Edger?” Bryn asked.

“Whenever you are. I'm just following your lead.”

“Thanks for everything, Lani. I'll be back tomorrow night.” Bryn let the door close behind her and started walking to the leviboard. Edger by her side, hunched over so people wouldn't be able to associate his face with his outfit. Not that there was anyone to see him, really, but Bryn understood his reserve.

“So,” Edger said as he activated the leviboard. “We agree she's a shapeshifter, right?”

Bryn stumbled climbing onto the board, “Burgona's bottom, Edge, where did you pull that one out of?”

“She may think she's got a good poker face, but I can see right through it.”

“How? Magic?” she asked. As an up-and-coming doctor, Edger would be an expert with blue magic, which included both healing and self-enhancement. She'd never heard of a way to see the talents that other people possessed, and would expect many people to want such a gift if it were possible. Lani didn't have any of the tell-tale signs of kiema use either, for that matter, such as glowing hands or an aura of power, probably because she smoked the stuff to hide them.

“No, Bryn. I can just tell when people are lying to me,” he said with a shrug. Bryn thought about the money. “Don't worry, I know you're keeping something secret from me even after all we've been through today, but I'm not going to pry. I trust you'll tell me when you're ready. Which is a lot more than I can say for Lani.”

“Okay, so you know she was lying about something,” Bryn said. “How did you make the leap to shapeshifter? I had a lot of clues that you didn't have.”

“So you agree that's what she is?”

"I don't know for sure," Bryn hedged, "but it's the best explanation I have." She felt dirty for listening to the voice in her head.

"If I tell you my evidence, you have to promise me two things. First, you'll tell me yours."

"I can do that," Bryn agreed. The money had nothing to do with her conclusion that Lani was a shapeshifter.

"Second, you have to promise not to laugh, or to judge me."

Bryn held her breath as she worried about what would come out of Edger's mouth next. She nodded for him to proceed.

"Well, to be honest," he said, face lighting up bright red. "Her boobs were twice the size whenever she was alone in the room with me. I don't even know if she knew she was doing it."

"Her boobs?" Bryn asked in disbelief. "I'm busy putting together clues about how I've never seen her and her parents together, how she's far more dense than a human being her size should be, how she can't wield red kiema with any sort of control, and how she has enough clothes to outfit a circus freak show, while you, Edger Barrington, are staring at a pair of eleven year old breasts? How do you live with yourself?" she asked in exasperation.

"Trust me, Bryn, there was nothing eleven years old about *these* breasts," Edger smirked lewdly.

"Fucking unbelievable. Men." Bryn turned away in feigned disgust as the leviboard began making its way back to the city.

Chapter 13: In Which Bryn Gets a Decent Night's Sleep

Mercifully, in Bryn's opinion, the rest of the day was uneventful. She and Edger returned to Edger's apartment and Chesnan and Hazela Barrington were more than willing to host Bryn as a guest after they heard about the disaster at her home. The fire meant that Edger and Chesnan didn't even have to get creative in explaining the situation to Hazela; she would have to be a real nag to turn away someone who just lost her home, and Hazela was anything but a nag.

Now that she wasn't bruised and bloody, Bryn had a chance to really take in the Barringtons' apartment. It was moderately-sized and well-furnished with two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, a dining room, a full bathroom, and even a laundry area. For city accommodations, it must have been expensive. After some snooping at the plaques hanging on the walls, Bryn guessed that Chesnan was the sole breadwinner of the family and that Hazela took care of domestic affairs. She sensed Hazela's hand in the purple decor, complete with a subtle lilac aroma.

Bryn was intrigued by Chesnan's many awards that covered most of the walls of the living room. *Most Enduring Enhancement*, read one, *Strongest Reaction*, another. The most ostentatious award read *The President's Award for Innovation in Body Modification*. Body modification was a pretty nebulous term in Bryn's mind, so she wondered exactly what it was that he did. With Edger's interest in medicine and natural talent with blue kiema, Bryn surmised that Chesnan's profession was centered on aesthetic concerns, like breast growth and face lifts and that sort of thing. Still, *Strongest Reaction* left unanswered questions.

Body modification would include shapeshifting, thought Bryn. I might want to ask Mr. Barrington about that at some point. He might also have some insight into the vulprin problem. She filed these tidbits away in her mind to pursue at a later time.

Edger had mentioned that their family was once very well-off but were now having money troubles. These awards made her oddly sad, giving her the impression that Chesnan was trying to harken back to a glory he could no longer sustain. Bryn suspected that whatever "body modification" Chesnan was involved in was an elective, luxury experience that people simply couldn't afford anymore as the price of kiema rose. *Kiema is so vital to Ortha, she thought. The scarcer it becomes, the more the effect compounds itself. Mr. Barrington's services will surely cost more, and people will have even less money to spend on*

them. Bryn felt like she was standing on the brink of a crumbling precipice, looking out over a deadly chasm as a cheering crowd was running headlong toward her and the cliff. *It makes my problems seem small by comparison*, she thought, trying to simultaneously distance herself both from the overwhelming image and from her own troubles but not really succeeding at either.

Returning to the living conditions she would be expecting to have for the near future, Bryn started with her sleeping arrangements. The plush plum couch had a prominent view of the family's 72-inch photube; she couldn't remember from earlier but she figured that Edger had a smaller one in his room as well. All the more a sign of the money they once had. A shimmering tapestry – apparently a kietella made of green and red kiema, kind of like the photubes, Bryn guessed – dangled from the lilac-painted wall behind the couch. The tapestry depicted the battle between the children of Whyat over Ortha. Bryn hoped that its glow would dim during the night, or else sleeping on the couch would probably give her nightmares. *Don't worry, Bryn*, came the voice in her head. *You've got plenty of nightmares coming for you tonight without the help of modern art*. Bryn agreed with the voice without any objections, for a change.

Edger changed into a much more fitting outfit of dark blue denim jeans and a faded tan t-shirt with alternating orange-and-brown stripes along the chest. By the time he and Bryn were settled, it was well past lunchtime, so the pair grabbed a snack of apples and peanut butter as they flopped on the couch and watched something mind-numbing on the photube while they waited for dinner. Bryn was famished; Edger's healing touch earlier drew on Bryn's vitality heavily and in her haste to get out of Lani's house she neglected to grab anything to eat. She could already smell the enticing aroma of garlic coming from the kitchen, so she tried not to gorge herself on the snack food. Her patience paid off.

"This is delicious, Mrs. Barrington," she sputtered between mouthfuls of tender, juicy pork loin. "Are you a chef?" she complimented.

"Oh, no, Bryn. I've just had years of experience cooking for my family. You pick up some tricks along the way, as you might imagine."

"Calling these tricks is like calling this apartment just a place to live. You've outdone yourself, really, on all accounts," Bryn said, mean-

ing every word. She dove into the garlic mashed potatoes headfirst and savored every creamy forkful.

"My goodness, Edger, Bryn here has become such a polite lady. You could learn a thing or two from her," Hazela said.

"Come on, mom, please don't embarrass me in front of Bryn," Edger said. He scratched his scraggly reddish-orange beard, an affectation that Bryn was beginning to pin down as feigned nervousness. Feigned, because Bryn was becoming more and more convinced that Edger knew more about dealing with people than he pretended.

"Oh, Bryn, I remember when you were just a little thing at our housewarming party. How old were you two, nine? You had poor little Edger in a twist," she said.

Chesnan let out a loud but awkward laugh. "I had forgotten all about that." Bryn suddenly felt very self-conscious.

"Mom," Edger warned with an unspoken threat hanging in the air.

"Our little Edger had such a crush on you back then. He was so excited when we got your RSVP that you would be coming."

"Come on, mom, Bryn doesn't need to hear this!" Edger pleaded. Chesnan looked apologetically towards her as she raised an eyebrow at Edger.

"Oh really," Bryn said, enjoying making Edger squirm. "Please tell me more."

"I think he said something like, 'I can't believe it! I thought I'd never see her again.' I felt a little bad for him to be honest, but it looks like things are working out after all." She gave Bryn a wink.

"As wonderful as your son is, Mrs. Barrington, and as much as I like to tease him, we're really just friends. Honestly."

"That's even better," Hazela said with a mischievous look on her face. "The best relationships are built on a solid foundation of trust. Why, Chesnan and I started out as 'just friends', too, for several years." Edger was very intent on his food, not willing to even look in Bryn's direction.

"That's very sweet," Bryn cooed. "What finally brought the two of you together?"

Hazela laughed like a woman half her age and tried to cover her blushing cheeks. "Oh, I don't know that that's really an appropriate discussion. Let's just say that I was very impressed by his magical tal-

ent." Suddenly Bryn had a much better understanding of his accolades. Her jaw dropped, but she quickly covered it and let out an incredulous laugh as she looked at Chesnan. A sex mage!

"So that's what you do for a living," Bryn said, emboldened by Hazela's seeming lack of shame.

"Guys, come on, this is not fair," Edger wailed, but they showed no signs of stopping.

"I'm afraid I'm guilty as charged," Chesnan said with a lewd look at Hazela. "I spent years working on certain techniques since I knew I needed some kind of *edge* to win my darling's love. Until I could show her my worth, I knew I was just like any other guy to her."

"Oh, honey, you know that's not true. You could have asked me out at any time and I would have said yes," she said. "But all of that training really paid off. It gave you the confidence you needed, and it showed me that you were serious about me." She leaned in close to Bryn and half-whispered, "And the payoff was nothing to cry about, let me tell you."

Bryn kind of wanted to cry, actually. Their love was so transparently sincere, and their story sounded so romantic and innocent. It reminded Bryn of that morning, and how her love life would never be that simple. Between the impenetrable wall she had erected because of the rape and the fact that she would in nine months be a single mother, she didn't see a path to love that would be anything but difficult. Edger was sweet, and under different circumstances there definitely could have been something simple there, but her feelings hadn't changed. Having Edger touch her so intimately when she felt so weak and vulnerable had really ruined that opportunity.

She felt her eyes moisten, so she knew she had to try to lighten things up. "Tell me that's not how Edger got his name, from the *edge* you created to woo his mother," Bryn asked playfully, and Chesnan gave a small but churlish nod. Bryn erupted in laughter and Edger buried his face in his hands. "And you're just okay with Mr. Barrington's line of work?"

"It pays the bills, and he saves his best for me. And it's not all sex... some people just want to feel better about themselves," Hazela smiled as she reached out for Chesnan's hand. Her light gray eyes gazed over at him and he smiled back before leaning in to give her a kiss. "We're quite happy together, and that's what matters more than anything, dear. Living a full and happy life. Other people will judge you,

tell you what you should do, tell you what you have to do, tell you what's proper and what you can't do. But it's your life, Bryn. You get to choose how to live it. I couldn't be happier with the choices I've made."

Bryn smiled broadly at Hazela, truly inspired by her words and her openness. Bryn was nowhere near ready to be as open about her own life, but she liked hearing about someone else's. She was right, Bryn realized. She didn't need to have a perfect romance the way the Barringtons did. She just needed to make the best decisions that she could given the circumstances that she was in. If she did that, if she had any control at all over those potentially victorious moments in her life, she could find a way to be happy.

"It sounds so wonderful," Bryn admitted. "Honestly, Edger, I'm surprised that you're an only child." She grinned at Hazela again expecting to get an approving look, but this time she felt a sudden and palpable silence descend on the dinner table. Hazela stared down into and through her plate, and Edger's face shifted from being terribly embarrassed to being on the verge of tears. Bryn didn't need Chesnan's explanation to know that she had stumbled into tragedy.

"We did have a daughter, Bryn, many years after Edger. She's no longer with us," he gruffly mumbled into the silence.

Bryn started to apologize, but thought it best if she just didn't say anything. Everyone at the table picked at their food and avoided meeting each other in the eyes. Money troubles and a daughter taken long before her time. Hazela may be happy with the decisions she had made, but Bryn realized that even their beautiful love story was fraught with adversity. It was a small relief, actually, but Bryn still felt guilty that she had dredged up memories that were obviously still very raw for these people.

Bryn peered sidelong at Chesnan. Was that the cause of his money trouble? Had he spent a lot of money to try to save her, and did it affect his performance at work? And Edger, was he becoming a doctor because of what happened? Bryn suddenly felt much more like an intruder than a guest.

After several long, awkward minutes, Edger finally stood up and took his plate to the sink. "I'm going to go watch *Honor Among Thieves*. I think there's a new episode on tonight."

"I think I'll join you," Bryn said quickly as she followed him out of the dining room and into the living room. She had only ever seen commercials for the show, but she knew it was a heist show where the

protagonist had to go against his do-gooding nature to join a band of thieves so that he could eventually free his lover from being kidnapped in a case of corporate espionage. *Why can't my problems be that simple?* she wondered as she sat down on the couch next to Edger. She sidled up next to him in silence, close enough to feel the warmth from his body but not close enough to actually touch him. Edger seemed content to sit there with her just like that, and for that she was grateful.

Hours later, the family turned the photube off and said their goodnights. Bryn's eyelids drooped heavily and fell even before she could get her clothes off; she would have to find time to do some shopping tomorrow after school and before returning to the ruins of her home. Her mind drifted off to realms unknown as the embrace of the couch, still warm from Edger's body, engulfed her senses.

Chapter 14: In Which They Go To School

To Bryn's surprise, she did not have the nightmares she expected, or if she did, she did not remember them upon waking. She was also surprised to find that, despite her exhaustion, she was wide awake and alert before the sun even rose.

She left the comfort of the couch to go peer out at the pre-dawn sky. Her legs felt hopelessly awkward as she rose. Her vagina still felt sore, but it wasn't feeling nearly as raw as it had when she fell asleep. She was reminded again that some evil bastard had forced himself into her, beaten and battered her, and he was still out there somewhere, probably nearby. *You could always just let it go and move on. You don't have to get revenge*, said the voice in her head, and Bryn was more convinced than ever that it was not just her subconscious speaking to her. What it really was, though, she had no idea. *Maybe kiema poisoning? That might explain my paranoia. I hope to Verdán that that isn't it, for the sake of Brett. Nope, that's name is no good either.* She ignored the voice as she quietly stepped out onto the balcony.

Edger's apartment building was on the southwest side of town, and the apartment's eastern exposure on the seventh floor of an eight story building gave a glorious view of the city skyline. Dozens of unique and stunning skyscrapers filled the city, created long ago when green kiema was abundant. The photube broadcast spire was the tallest, with its spindly core that looked like Verdán had reached down himself and twisted the thing as if it were clay, one big spiral walkway leading all the way from the first floor to the thirtieth, mixing obsidian and pearl like a thin swirled ice cream cone.

There were two very large buildings on either side of the broadcast spire. The first was an enormous black cube rotated to rest on one point, suspended by a field of red kiema that licked the bottom of the cube, giving it the appearance that it was on fire. Bryn wondered which way the building would fall when there was no longer enough red kiema to sustain the effect. The building was owned and operated by Roseta Industries, and they were primarily involved in kiema production and refining, so they would probably have access to kiema long after the rest of the world lost it. If Lani's father existed, which Bryn doubted at this point, they were who he'd go to to sell his product.

On the other side of the broadcast spire lay the Order of Whyat headquarters, starkly juxtaposed against the Roseta Industries cube. The Order of Whyat headquarters was a cylinder composed of twenty levitating white rings stacked on top of each other, suffused with a faint glow that provided a little bit of light to the entire city even at this hour.

The levitation could be achieved with only red kiema, but they mixed green and blue kiema into the effect anyway for purely aesthetic reasons. Bryn suspected it was to draw a contrast with Roseta Industries. There was tension there, Bryn knew, between the practical and profit-driven motivations of industry and the idealism and humanitarian motivations of academia. *Like it or not*, Bryn thought sadly, *someday you won't be able to use kiema for something so frivolous as aesthetics, and then you'll both glow red. Maybe then you'll figure out a way to work with each other instead of against each other.*

The very center of the city hosted Waalort Pagoda, the primary seat of government where the President presided and the Senate debated. That was where Bryn would hopefully find Senator Cimarron and get some answers later today. It was a large building, built more for function than for form, looking almost humble under the highly stylized structures elsewhere in the city.

Just beyond Waalort Pagoda in the eastern part of the city, Bryn could barely make out the flat and long strip that made up the high-end commercial district. Part of her really wanted to go there today to spend some of the money burning a hole in her pocket. She *did* need to replace her wardrobe, after all. *What good is money that you can't spend?* she wondered. She then reconsidered that thought – she had managed to find a use for her blue kiema yesterday even if she couldn't use it herself. *I need to stop thinking about what things are so that I can think about what things could be. But I guess that's easier said than done.* She did need clothes, though, so she would have to find a thrift store to rummage through. She could at least pretend that she found a little bit of money in the wreckage of her home.

One thing she couldn't avoid, though, was the need for green kiema, and a lot of it. She was going to be relying on it heavily in the months to come, and with her windfall from Lani she could actually afford a lot of it. She just needed to think of a way to hide it.

Continuing her survey of the skyline, Bryn came upon the part of the city that she never liked to look at, the gaping hole in the south-east. There used to be a tall, stately building there, the Karmin Garden, dedicated to government-sponsored military applications of kiema. That was the last in a series of buildings that fell to her father's arson spree. It had been such a beautiful building, covered from the ground up with ivy and other creeping vines, an entire building that almost seemed alive with green verdancy, in stark contrast to the white and black stone that

made up most of the buildings in the rest of the city. But in the end the vegetation only made it easier for her father to burn. Bryn often wondered why the building looked the way it did, given its purpose, but she didn't suppose that it mattered much anymore.

Beyond the man-made structures Bryn could see those made by the gods: Darblun's Mountains and the shimmering bowl of Ortha. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw some vulprin flying around in the sky, searching the early morning for easy prey but coming up empty. Of course, they might not be vulprin at all; there were plenty of other flying monsters out there to worry about. Bryn clutched her abdomen and wondered why the things were seeking her out. She eyed her sword nervously. She would definitely need to have it with her, but it would raise a lot of questions from pretty much everyone, and she wasn't sure how it would go over with her school. She would probably have to tell them that she was pregnant, at least.

She considered the sword further. *I made that thing in a matter of moments, and it's not half-bad. I never thought I had talent with green magic, but I've never really had much of a chance to play with it either. I can do much, much better than this.* She realized what that meant, though. She was going to have to deal with Dr. Umbronn. No one dealt with Dr. Umbronn. At least she could be guaranteed she would have his undivided attention.

Bryn took a last look at the breathtaking view, marveling again at how expensive this apartment must be, and what that meant about Chesnan's talents. She hoped that Chesnan and Edger were wrong about the Rat Hole swallowing this place up. In any case it was time to wake up Edger, since he would need to drop her off at her school in the suburbs early so that he could get to his own academy in time. Hazela didn't need the leviboard that day, and Chesnan had offered to walk to work, claiming that it would be good for his health. Bryn guessed that there was a time when the family had a second leviboard, but that was probably the first of many luxuries that they've had to give up.

She knocked gently on Edger's door. "I'm up," he said, and she heard muffled stumbling around the room.

"Good, I'd like to get going soon. I need to stop at a kiema store on the way."

"Can you really afford that?" he whispered as he opened the door. Bryn hadn't considered that he would be dressed in a school uniform; they both attended private schools, but Bryn's dress code was lax

enough to let her get away with what she had taken from Lani's closet. The crisp white scrubs fit well on Edger's hard physique. Most aspiring doctors would be in good shape, Bryn realized, since they would have the knowledge and talent to train their bodies more effectively than others, and presumably they had some notion of discipline. She wondered why she had never made the connection before, and why she was making it now.

"That's a discussion we'll have on the way," she said, procrastinating. She had to tell Edger about the money. She didn't like hiding it from him, and he might have ideas about how to use it effectively. And now that Bryn was convinced that it was Lani's money, she thought he would be safer knowing that she had taken it than not.

The pair finished up in the apartment and made their way to the leviboard. "Can I drive?" Bryn asked.

"What? Are you crazy? Dad will kill me if you wreck our leviboard. Do you even know how to drive?"

"I've taken a class on it," Bryn said, shakily. "I know how it works."

"That's a no, then," Edger said.

"Not exactly."

"Bryn, I'm not going to let you drive my dad's 'board just because you want to manipulate some red magic." Like most other magically infused kietella, the leviboard required kiema to function, generally red. But Bryn didn't have to ingest the kiema to wield the magic; she would just manipulate it through the board, and her baby would be safe. She had to admit that Edger had her pegged on that point.

"That's not why I suggested it," Bryn said. "Or at least, that's not the only reason I suggested it." Edger watched her with a skeptical look on his face, waiting for an explanation. "I know it's paranoid, but I've been attacked by the vulprin twice now. I'm worried that a monster is going to attack us while we're traveling, and I might have trouble defending us without red kiema. If I can be the one focused on driving, you can be the one chucking fireballs at them."

"Sunbeams," Edger said.

"Sunbeams?" Bryn was perplexed by his response. Was it a curse she'd never heard before?

"Yeah, I've never been very good with fire. I was able to conjure the mist yesterday, but that's about the extent of my ability to wield

the elements. And even then, water is more about green kiema; the red kiema just gives it the push it needs to let the matter itself get the job done. I think I'm just not very effective with red kiema in general. But light, for some reason, I understand really well. Maybe it's because of all the time I spend watching the photube," he joked. "I mean, I'm not trying to say that I'm defenseless. You'll see when it's time to use them that sunbeams are not a bad weapon. I just wanted to let you know in advance that you won't see any fireballs from me."

Bryn was a little worried that the worst thing her defender might be able to do was to give the monsters a sunburn, but it was still more than she could manage given the pregnancy, so she would have to take what she could get.

Edger could tell that Bryn was doubtful. "Really, Bryn, it's going to be fine." He looked at the leviboard, and then at Bryn, and then back at the leviboard. "I can't believe I'm going to let you do this."

"I can. We both know that it's only sensible," Bryn said, sweetly, glad to get her way. If she could keep this up, she and Edger would get along very well.

Bryn took her position at the front of the leviboard while Edger unlocked it with a sequence of precise finger taps. The Barrington's board was shaped like a flattened matte black comet, with an oval shape on the front where the driver sat and two long pointed tails trailing off behind that housed the red kiema that powered it. When the vehicle was moving, the tails radiated waves of red, adding to the celestial shape. Not every leviboard was shaped or painted that way – the one carrying corpses, for instance, was just a long blood-red rectangle – but it was the most common shape. The same kiema that moved the board also projected a nearly invisible field of force around of the board to deflect wind, rain, and any other particulates that might affect the driver's concentration. Not that it would be an issue today – it hadn't rained in weeks as far as Bryn could tell.

Sometimes when Bryn saw a leviboard, its shape would remind her that the gods had toys that they played with more than Ortha, like comets for instance. Given Bryn's concern with the future of humanity, she wasn't sure that the gods were wrong to feel that way. But maybe it was just her imagination that the gods were playing with the comets; for all she knew, they, too, could just be junk that the gods had thrown away.

The early hour and the direction – leaving the city rather than entering it – meant that there was no traffic to speak of. Even so, Bryn came dangerously close to colliding with many things along the way: other leviboards, pedestrians, even an aquasource at one point. Edger nearly reached out and took control when he saw that one coming, but Bryn managed to avoid it just barely at the last moment.

“Are you sure this is safer?” Edger asked once they reached the city limits, worried that he might distract her from the threats on the cluttered city streets if he spoke up sooner.

“What?” Bryn asked, “I did fine.” Edger sighed.

“I think you had something you were going to tell me before we stopped at a kiema store,” Edger reminded Bryn.

Bryn’s concentration slipped a bit as she bit her lip, making her swerve a bit before getting back on the road the way she was supposed to. “I found something in Lani’s house that I didn’t tell you about. I wasn’t sure that I should, but that was before I became convinced that it was Lani’s, not her imaginary father’s.”

“So that’s the theory then? Lani and her parents are one and the same person?” Bryn thought that Edger had worked that out when they agreed that she was a shapeshifter, but she supposed that they had never actually said that Lani was all three people.

“Yes. I found a lot of money in the armoire in the bedroom. A *lot* of money. Way more than could be explained by anything remotely like Lani’s cover story.”

Edger hesitated. “How much money are we talking?”

“I could probably buy your apartment building from your landlord, and pay for it in cash,” Bryn said. Edger let out a loud whistle in surprise.

“Verdan’s blood, Bryn, you took it!?”

“I took it before I knew that Lani was up to something. I thought I was protecting it for her sake, back when I thought she was just a vulnerable little girl. Plus,” Bryn admitted with more than a little bit of shame, “I really needed the money.”

Edger was silent for a few minutes as Bryn parked the leviboard at a kiema store just outside of the city. It was the first one that she saw with a reasonable price for green kiema – just under three hundred marks per pound with about two hundred crystals per pound. She wondered at the fact that she considered this a reasonable price. It was

twice as expensive as it was just a year ago. Red and blue kiema were only about four and five marks per pound, respectively. They had not grown in price nearly as fast as green. She paused before getting off the board to go into the store.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

“No,” Edger said after some hesitation. “I’m just surprised. I wouldn’t have expected that from you.”

“I know, I almost can’t believe that I did it. In the end, I knew it was my best chance to give my baby a chance at a normal life.” Bryn knew what it was like to live in near-poverty. She and her mom had been allowed to keep their bank accounts by the government as part of the deal that her mother made when turning in her father. That money would not last forever, though, and her mother had trouble finding and keeping a job because of her husband’s reputation. Even when she started going by her maiden name, Taupeka Lemont, she still had difficulty hiding her past. It made Bryn and her mother’s lives very difficult at times.

Edger hopped off the leviboard, heading into the store, Bryn following soon after. It was your typical kiema store, containing two enormous glass bins of red and blue kiema, a smaller one of green, and another small area with non-magical sundries like food, cleaning supplies, and other necessities in daily life. Two grizzled security guards patrolled the aisles to prevent shoplifting and to protect the merchandise. Bryn pulled a green plastic bag off of a hook by the door – protocol insisted that any crystals you removed from the giant troughs must go into these cumbersome bags, to help the guards better monitor the activity in the store. Bryn looked at the bag for a second, pensively.

“If I were smart, I’d have us go to multiple stores, also,” she whispered to Edger. “But I don’t think we really have time for that, and this place is the cheapest one we’re going to find.”

“Okay,” Edger said as Bryn grabbed a second green bag. Both of the guards and the short old cashier perked up and started watching her carefully. She was grateful that they were doing this at such an early hour – the one other customer in the store at the moment didn’t seem to pay her any mind as he filled his red bag.

Bryn nonchalantly walked over to the green tank and put the first bag on the scale, turning the knob all the way and letting the fine crystals pour out at full speed.

The cashier called over to her from a few feet away as the two guards walked to block off the aisle, "Miss, please turn off the faucet," he requested. Bryn complied. The sword on her hip was now feeling unnecessarily hostile just by being there.

"I'm going to need to have some payment up front if you think you're going to walk out of here with that much green kiema," he said.

"Oh, I intend to pay," she said. She and Edger stepped back from the tank. She had hoped not to attract attention, but she was prepared for this eventuality. In particular, she made sure that she only had as much money as she intended to spend here in her bra, so that the cashier wouldn't think that she had more. In reality, she was still only spending a fraction of Lani's money, but it was still orders of magnitude more than a typical person would spend at a time. If the guards knew just how much money she actually had on her, she would have worried about getting out of this place alive.

"You know most businesses get better prices by buying the stuff wholesale directly from Roseta Industries," the cashier said carefully as Bryn removed a stack of bills from her bra.

"I am including an extra two hundred marks as a sign of good faith and as payment for your discretion, should anyone ask about me," Bryn said. She was saving far more than two hundred marks on her purchase by shopping at this particular store because of its low price and the sheer quantity she was purchasing, but she didn't remind the cashier of that. The cashier, Sagus by his name tag, nodded as he accepted the money, dismissing his guards with a sharp flick of his wrist.

"By all means, fill 'er up," Sagus said. "I'll be happy to have your business any time," he said as he counted the stack, checking it carefully for counterfeiting.

"You should get a blue bag too, Gradio. Our friends will want something to play with tonight," Bryn said. Edger didn't miss a beat in responding to the fake name that Bryn decided to use on the spur of the moment, and he started filling up a bag. She wished she had his talent for nonchalance. She suspected the heroes in his favorite photube shows did stuff like this all the time, and that he was just emulating them. Bryn tossed the cashier another smaller stack that his eyes drank in greedily as she returned to filling her two bags.

When she was done, she looked down at the two bags, filled to the brim. *That is a lot of green kiema*, she thought. *Forty pounds for about one hundred twenty thousand marks after the bribe. Eight thou-*

sand crystals. I could build an entire house with that much kiema. To think that I wasn't willing to use more than ten crystals at a time to defend myself yesterday morning. I hope you're watching, Verdan; you may have lost your blood for this, but I'm going to put it to good use.

She carried the first bag out to the leviboard and let Edger carry out the other two. She paused to consider her satchels. After making sure nobody else was around, but in front of Edger, she transferred most of the money to the red satchel, leaving a half a pound of red kiema in there just in case and giving Edger the rest of her red kiema. She filled the blue satchel with four pounds of green kiema, and the green satchel with half a pound of blue kiema. After the switch, the satchels all looked more or less like Bryn's satchels did normally. But she was now a walking arsenal of matter creation who had millions of marks worth of money on her. This was a temporary solution; she really needed somewhere safe to hide all of this stuff. She would store it in her locker at school as soon as she got there, but that was also a temporary solution. She hoped that Dr. Umbronn's tutelage would yield something useful.

"You don't think you're being a little paranoid?" Edger asked. "No one is going to notice or care that you're carrying around that much green kiema."

"Edge, you may not have noticed this, but nearly everyone we've met in the past two days has had me under a microlens. I really don't need to take any chances."

"Fair enough. I hope you know what you're going to do with all of this, though," he said, gesturing to the bags that were still mostly full. They had stowed them securely underneath the seats at Edger's suggestion. Bryn thought it might be a commentary on her driving, but she wasn't going to bother to make a big deal out of it.

"I'll think of something," she said as the leviboard began to glow and trundle off onto the street, a bit less maneuverable with the extra weight. It wasn't much farther to the school.

"We are going to pass through a wooded area up here," Bryn mentioned to Edger as they went along. "You may want to get ready just in case." Edger fumbled in his pockets for a handful of blue kiema, consuming it and tapping his eyes and ears gently with a few small gestures, then dug out a handful of red that he just sat there holding, looking in every direction while fastened in his seat.

They floated around a bend in the road and into the woods along a narrow, winding road. It was much darker under the canopy of the trees, especially at this hour, but Bryn was still able to see the road at least and she was sure Edger would be able to sense any signs of life. In the quiet morning, the hum of the leviboard was very distracting.

"I think you need to get your leviboard fixed," Bryn said. "Doesn't that hum drive you nuts?"

"That hum? I don't hear anything, Bryn," Edger said, quickly revising his statement, "Shh! I hear something! There's something off to our left, coming in pretty fast," Edger said, his eyes following something in the woods that completely eluded Bryn's senses. Bryn felt a knot grow in her stomach. *Sunbeams*, she thought pensively, half wanting to let the leviboard slam to the ground so that she could take up her sword.

"Three hundred feet and closing," he said, a look of intense concentration on his face as gobbled up the crystals and began to wiggle his fingers.

Bryn began to hear the thundering footsteps, closing on the leviboard rapidly. She heard tree trunks crack and snap as some enormous thing plowed through them without slowing. She was starting to make out a silhouette that looked to be about fifteen feet tall and just as thick.

"It's a behammon, Edger. Blow it up already," she said, sweat forming on her brow.

"I know what it is, Bryn. I need it to be closer. Two hundred feet now."

"We do *not* need it to be closer. We need it to be the opposite of closer. Or at least on fire," she said, swerving dangerously near a thick tree thanks to a combination of distraction, darkness, and a road shaped like a snake.

"It's behind us now, following the road," he said, rotating his seat to face the back of the leviboard. Bryn glanced back, barely able to make out three sets of tusks on either side of a mass of prehensile tentacles that covered its face. *Even better*, Bryn panicked, *it's a male*.

"Edger, I swear by every god, if you do not kill that thing right now you will not have a chance to be torn apart by it. I will take care of you myself!"

"There, thirty feet," Edger said. Bryn looked back at the gruesome monster that was nearly within reach. She could smell its sulfurous breath heaving and panting as it desperately stretched its gooey tentacles in Bryn's direction. Its five slanted eyes, each as big as a melon, would have looked like a perfect pentagon if the glowing magenta irises weren't darting from side-to-side independently of each other. Its skin was covered all over by layers of golden scales, ranging from fine inch-long needles on the face to sharp foot-long daggers on the legs. Bryn couldn't turn away from the horrifying sight. Its mouth opened wide, splitting open a gaping hole in the mass of tendrils, revealing four rows of sharp teeth as its battlecry shook the leviboard.

Edger finally made his move, flicking a single finger in the behammon's direction. Bryn wished that she hadn't been looking. For a moment she was completely disoriented as her vision was overwhelmed by searing white light. Edger thankfully took control of the leviboard and brought it to a stop before it crashed. It took a full minute for her sight to return to normal. When it did, she looked back at the monster that had nearly overtaken them. There was a perfectly sculpted cylinder two feet in diameter, going straight through the creature's chest the whole way from breast to behind. The flesh within – or whatever this monster had that resembled the flesh of creatures created by Whyat – was charred black and cauterized the whole way through.

"Sunbeams," Bryn said, shakily standing up and inspecting the creature up close, nudging its massive head to make sure it wasn't still alive. She didn't know how it was possible, given how many of its internal organs must have been obliterated by the beam of concentrated power that Edger used, but the thing actually let out a pathetic moan as she did so, before finally settling, the glow fading from its eyes.

"I tried to warn you," Edger said, matter-of-fact. "Come on, let's get going before any more show up. I'm going to be a bit weak for the next hour or so." He went back to one of the passenger seats and flopped down in a heap, wiping a handful of sweat out of his beard.

"When this baby is out of me, you're going to teach me how to do that," Bryn said. Edger just smiled weakly as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest.

Chapter 15: In Which Bryn Chooses a Class

Bryn and Edger reached the Saggiset Academy well before it was time to start, giving them ample time to sneak the sixty pounds or so of green and blue kiema into Bryn's locker.

"Thanks for everything, Edger. Really. You don't know how much it means to me, what you've done."

"Are you sure you want me to leave?" he asked. "I don't mind skipping school for a day if you need me here." Bryn thought that he sounded hopeful. He was excited about the idea of being a vagrant, Bryn thought. She couldn't help but find the sneaky look on his face anything but adorable.

"You're incorrigible," Bryn said, shaking her head. "I don't need to bring you down with me. You've got a brilliant career ahead of you; I won't see you slacking off for my sake. Besides, how would I explain you to my teachers."

"You could tell them you've hired a bodyguard," he said. Bryn thought he was joking at first, but then she realized that actually wasn't a terrible excuse. Everyone would have seen the news, so every eye was going to be on her this morning, and she had every reason to have a bodyguard. But these people also knew that she couldn't afford such a thing.

"No, Edger," she said, with a just a hint of regret. "I've got to figure out how to get by on my own. I can't have you here every day. But I will see you tonight."

"Fine," Edger said, clearly a little disappointed. "I'm here to help, however much you're willing to let me. Should I pick you up after school?"

"No, I'll find a ride with someone else. I'm going to try to go shopping for some clothes, and I might get a leviboard of my own."

"You can definitely afford it, but won't that attract attention?"

"I'll think of something," she said.

"You can keep saying that all you want, but one of these days you'll actually have to do it," Edger joked.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Get out of here. I'll meet you at my house around seven o'clock. I'll bring the blue kiema we bought this morning, but if you can bring some more that would be good too."

"And what if Lani is there?" Edger asked. Bryn gave him a deadpan look.

“Then I’ll think of something.” She started to walk away, leaving him standing there, but after two steps, she turned around and ran to him, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. “Thanks again,” she said as she let him go and walked back into the school without looking back to see his reaction.

The school building was on a cliff at the top of a hill overlooking Lake Fush, even further out in the wilderness than the Waalorten suburbs. The building itself consisted of an outer ring filled with traditional classrooms with seats, books, and a phogram in the front of class where the teachers could write whatever they needed for the lesson they were giving. The hallway of the ring was lined with lockers for the students. The enclosed outer ring contained an inner circle that had various open-air practice grounds and an amphitheater in the very center. Bryn was the first student to arrive at the amphitheater that morning, unsurprisingly.

The Saggiset Academy was unusual. It was primarily intended for self-motivated students, and they seemed to be a dying breed in Ortha these days. Bryn had chosen to come here. It was one of the more expensive private schools, but her mother understood that Bryn cared about her education very much, so she was willing to support Bryn. Bryn hoped that the knowledge, training, and experience she gained here would help her support herself and her mother in a future that continued to look ever more uncertain by the day. “I *will* find my mother,” she said to herself in the empty amphitheater.

Every morning, the entire student body of about one hundred students gathered in this semicircle with the teachers lined up on stage. The students had ten minutes to decide with which teacher they would train that day, based on the topic that the teacher had chosen. There were ten teachers, but some were favored more than others, so a typical class had about fifteen students. There was a trade-off of course; if everyone always went with the best or their favorite teachers, then the class size would get too large and the students would suffer from a lack of individualized attention. Some of the teachers were better at general, non-personal lectures, so they usually had the biggest classes, while others only really worked well in a one-on-one setting, so they’d often end up with fewer than five students a day. It was up to the students to be responsible for reallocating themselves accordingly, and for the most part they did a good job of sharing.

A few of the more overbearing students (Bryn included herself in this group) were known to be obstinate. Once they made a decision for the day, they never changed their mind, and they often chose teachers like Mrs. Pepriche or Mr. Canberra, the Academy's experts on pure red and pure blue magic respectively. Bryn would want to talk to Mr. Canberra at some point about the vulprin, but not today.

Sometimes teachers went without any students at all, and they got the day off to do whatever they wanted. Such was often the case with Dr. Umbronn. The frail little man was the Academy's green kiema expert, and since students had to supply their own kiema at the Academy, few people could afford to work with him even if they wanted to. Having an expert in every type of kiema qualified the Academy for certain government subsidies, though, so Principal Saffra didn't mind keeping him on staff despite his lack of effort. Well, the principal *almost* didn't mind; the man was the most contrary human being he could possibly be. Bryn thought that his abrasive personality was deliberate, and she actually admired him for it in a strange way. The man knew who he was and what he wanted out of life, and he made it happen. Who wouldn't want a job where you don't have to work? *I wouldn't*, Bryn thought. *Gods, what a waste of talent. Too bad for him and his life of liesure, though. I'm going to put him to work.* That philosophy of making your will manifest to the exclusion of outside concerns; that was the heart of green magic. But that was also the practical extent of her knowledge; she had worked with Dr. Umbronn only one day over the course of her three years here, and that one day had been enough for her. She would be abandoning her pride today in the pursuit of the knowledge and power that she would need to achieve her goals in the near future.

Bryn considered the other teachers as they entered and as she waited for her friends to arrive. There were the dual magic experts: Ms. Yaleo, who combined red and blue kiema for magenta magic, and Mr. Plinn, who combined red and green kiema for yellow magic. Technically there was a third form of dual magic, cyan magic, combining blue and green kiema, but it was an esoteric art without many applications, mostly very specific medical procedures. The school did not have an expert in cyan magic, but Dr. Vionetta could handle questions if students were interested. She was the white magic expert, which combined all the forms of kiema. Dr. Vionetta and Mr. Plinn were the other two teachers who seldom had more than two students in a day, since green *kiema* was so scarce. It always seemed strange to Bryn that magenta

magic was widely regarded as the most difficult class of magic, more difficult than white even though logically it seemed like white should be harder. More *kiema* types should be more complex, Bryn thought, but that just wasn't how it worked.

Then there were the four teachers who taught non-magical subjects. Bryn imagined she would be studying with Mr. Bakeman later this week, since he was the school's biologist. He taught everything from human physiology to the classifications of animals, plants, and monstrous creatures. He also taught some basic ways to defend yourself from the more common monsters. Bryn had studied under him occasionally, but clearly she hadn't done so enough or she would have known about vulprin. Maybe he would have some insight into her problem. Into *that* problem, at least. She liked Mr. Bakeman well enough, but he was the kind of person who had memorized his job and gave the same lectures year after year, following a precise and predictable schedule. Students who liked his style of teaching could probably have repeated most of his lectures verbatim, since he reused them over and over.

The humanities teacher, on the complete other end of the spectrum, insisted that you call her by her first name, Carnella. Bryn often forgot that she was a *kiemara*, since the only outward signs were her magenta eyes and hair and some scaly skin that she usually covered with a turtleneck or a scarf. Bryn liked her. Communicating well was important for many reasons. Not only was it a worthwhile subject in its own right, but it also was a necessary skill for learning other subjects. Unless you could find a common platform on which to interact with your other teachers, you couldn't really learn from them. That was humanities in Bryn's mind, so she made sure to spend plenty of time studying with Carnella whenever she didn't feel like practicing her red magic with Mrs. Papriche.

The school's logician was a mousy old lady, Mrs. Valvatores. She taught a variety of topics, including math, physics, and chemistry. Many people underestimated the importance of these topics, since magics could so easily defy these principles that, according to the Discarded, were put in place by Whyat to allow life on Ortha to function and thrive. Bryn used to agree with that, but over the past few years she had been considering that these subjects might be complementary to magic rather than as an obstacle for magic to overcome. These topics could provide the solutions that humankind would need as the world's supply

of kiema dwindled. Now, Bryn supposed, she had the chance to consider those topics more thoroughly.

The final teacher was a jack-of-all-trades, meant to handle any other topic the students might be interested in. Music, art, vocational training, economics, business; you name it, Mr. Genapris knew something about it. Something, but not much. Bryn rarely found his lectures useful, but if she had been interested in any of those topics, she would have chosen a different school that was more specialized in that direction.

The teachers assembled on the stage like they did every weekday morning, quickly scribbling their topic for the day on a long phogram behind them. As students began filtering in and sitting down, Bryn noticed more than a few stares and a lot of whispering, no doubt because of yesterday's reminder of her father's infamy. Bryn concentrated on the topics to distract herself from the scrutiny. She wished that she could attend Mrs. Papriche's lecture today entitled "Magic Without Fingers." That sounded very interesting. Usually the kiema entered and mixed with a person's bloodstream, and you used your fingers to shape and manipulate it into what you wanted. To use something other than your fingers... Bryn guessed it would be like trying to thread a needle with your toes. Maybe if you tried hard enough and long enough you could do it, but why would you want to?

The other topics were mostly uninteresting, though Mr. Plinn's "Advanced Utility Vocabulary" sounded like it would be interesting under different circumstances. Mr. Bakeman's "Fighting Scrizzlers" was one that Bryn had actually taken before, and she was sure he would repeat it by rote. It was only Dr. Umbronn's that mattered, though, today. He quickly swiped his bony hand across the board, scratching something that was barely legible. Bryn had to look at it for a full minute before she could make sense of the words.

"Useless ephemera?" Bryn muttered to herself. "What kind of a lesson is that?"

"Who cares?" said an intense young woman as she sat down next to Bryn.

"Nighra! I am so glad to see you, you have no idea." Bryn nearly leaped out of her seat to hug her, but she managed to control herself. She was starting to get worried again that her friends would all be suspiciously absent now that the first audibells were about to ring.

Nighra's appearance put that fear to rest, though. Momentarily. Bryn suddenly thought of Lani.

"I had a question to ask you. What was that present that I got you for your eighth birthday that you hated?"

"Ugh, that ugly pink dress? Gods, Bryn, why would you remind me of that thing?" *Good, this is Nighra*, Bryn thought. *Either that or Lani has really done her research.*

Don't you think you're being a bit paranoid? came the voice in her head. *You've known Nighra your whole life.*

Better safe than sorry, Bryn thought back.

Oh, she deigns to respond to me for a change, the voice mocked before fluttering away.

"Sorry, I just couldn't remember what color it was."

"You couldn't remember? I wish I could forget! I think they invented a new color for that dress, 'radioactive pink'. I couldn't sleep at night if my closet door was open even a crack, but my mom insisted that your heart was in the right place and so I needed to keep it and wear it at least once."

"But you never did," Bryn laughed. "That's okay. I thought it was a pretty dress, but I guess I was a little oblivious when it came to fashion back then."

"Back then?" Nighra asked skeptically, rolling the fabric of Bryn's shirt in her fingers.

"This," Bryn said, looking down at the outfit she was wearing, "is a long story."

"I'm sure it is," she said, her mood souring. "I heard the news." The first audibells began ringing an odious high-pitched melody across the amphitheater, indicating that it was time for students to begin choosing their tutor for the day. Where were Emera and Safler? Bryn wasn't worried about them yet. They were often so wrapped up in each other that they didn't notice things like audibells or other people or rampaging monsters. She had wanted to have a chance to talk to her friends before school started, but that prospect was looking less and less likely.

Usually there was a rush to the stage when that first audibell rang, but today only three people stood and went to the stage immediately. Bryn suddenly became very aware that everyone was trying very hard to make it look like they weren't watching her. *What are they waiting for?* she wondered. *They want me to choose a class? Does that mean*

that they want to be in my class, or that they want to avoid it? She could understand it either way, and that probably meant that there was a mix. Half of the people probably thought it was dangerous to be around her, and the other half probably wanted to corner her and find out everything she knew about her father's escape. One downside of having self-motivated peers was that they were often nosy, selfish bastards. Either way, they all cared, and they were all waiting for her.

Nighra seemed to be a little uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of the rest of the school as well. "You should let me take you shopping tonight. We can get you something decent to wear. And seriously, Bryn, what's up with this?" she said, pointing at the sword.

"I told you, it's a long story," Bryn sighed. "Burgona's bottom, what do these people want from me? Look, Nighra, I'm going to probably do something crazy here just to get these people off my back."

"Like what? Attend Dr. Umbronn's class?" Nighra laughed. Bryn remained serious.

"Yes, actually, but that's not the crazy thing I was referring to." Nighra stopped laughing.

"Oh gods, you're serious."

"I know, I know. I'm in that much trouble," Bryn said. She looked at the layout of the amphitheater, and the clock, to try to decide how she would proceed. The stage had a canopy shaped like half a dome to protect it from rain. Bryn looked carefully at the steepness of the rows of seats, carving out a bowl in the ground. She thought it would be steep enough.

Bryn waited until there were four minutes left to go, then she stood up, and the rest of the student body followed suit. She walked out into the aisle, and down to the stage. She walked in front of each teacher, pausing momentarily in the clearly delineated rectangle that you had to be standing in when the second audibells rang, each time a bunch of students joining her and another bunch scurrying away. Thankfully, the rectangles were many feet apart; it would make Bryn's plan much easier. She pretended to consider the topics very carefully, as if the other students weren't even there. Mr. Canberra and Dr. Vionetta seemed annoyed with the show that Bryn was putting on, while Mrs. Pepriche and Carnella were enjoying the spectacle. Rarely was choosing a class this exciting or this dramatic. When she went in front of Dr. Umbronn, no fewer than ten students joined her. Ten! The man had never taught ten students at once in his life. He wasn't even paying at-

tention, his scraggle of white hair the only thing that could be seen behind the newspaper he was reading. She went on to the remaining teachers. One minute left.

Bryn finally returned to the center of the stage, where she stood for a moment outside of any of the rectangles. She really wanted to get Dr. Umbroon alone today, but realistically, she knew at least one or two students would figure out her game and predict her. Still, the fewer the better. She saw with relief that, during her promenade, Emera and Safler had indeed showed up. They had chosen Mrs. Papriche along with Nighra. Maybe they could teach her about fingerless magic tonight. In any case, Bryn figured, it was time to shake things up.

She suddenly pivoted, leaping off of the stage and bolting for the top of the auditorium. A handful of the students followed, but most realized that they were running out of time and began to make a choice. About twenty or so stood anxiously awaiting Bryn's next move, ready to dive into the rectangle that she would choose. Bryn swallowed a handful of green kiema in one gulp, eliciting a collective gasp from her audience that she would use so much green kiema at once. This further threw the crowd into confusion, sending most of them scrambling for Mr. Plinn. It was a good guess, Bryn thought. Everyone knew Bryn was best with red magic, and using so much green would make them think that she had brought some extra to practice some yellow magic today.

Bryn wiggled and wagged her fingers frantically, worried about getting the timing just right. Too soon, and she'd land on stage with enough time for the rest of the class to catch up to her. Too late, and she wouldn't get any instruction from anyone and she'd have to sit in Principal Saffra's office all day. While she shaped the magic to her will, she looked at the crowd. Soon most of them were teetering on the edge of one boundary or another, ready to dive into the neighboring rectangle if Bryn went that way. Bryn was grateful at the positions of the teachers that morning; it couldn't have been better for her plan. A host of twenty students were crammed into Mrs. Papriche's rectangle on the right, and twenty more were elbowing each other to be on the edge of Mr. Plinn's rectangle next to that on the left. Fifteen people nervously chose the other side of Mr. Plinn's rectangle, adjacent to Dr. Umbroon. Only one person actually stood in Dr. Umbroon's rectangle, dead center, staring at Bryn with his arms crossed. *Lousy Bannam, of course he'd somehow know what I was planning.*

For a moment, everything felt suspended on a razor's edge as Bryn's magic manifested, a thick hemp rope snapping into place at the apex of the canopy and filling Bryn's hands. She started to run, and that's when she saw Nighra's hands lighting up with a red glow.

"Don't worry, Bryn, we'll catch you!" she shouted. *Gods bless you, Nighra*, Bryn thought, shifting her weight as she committed to a direction. *I knew I could count on you*. Until that moment, Bryn wasn't sure which direction she would swing.

The student body scrambled twice, first in response to Nighra, then again as Bryn's trajectory became clear. She dove off the top row of seats, clutching high on the rope as she swung, barely clearing row after row on her descent, both legs stretched out and held up as high as she could as if she were going to kick people out of the way if necessary. She was aimed squarely at Mrs. Papriche's rectangle, and a mass of at least fifty students descended on the space, trying to fit themselves inside. Bryn marveled at how much they must want to get at her – if her plan fell apart now she would probably hurt a number of these people in their zeal. They were that eager to find out what she knew, that eager to learn the juicy gossip about her father's escape from prison.

Nighra was jostled by the flash mob, but maintained her concentration. Bryn's body rapidly approached the rectangle, exactly where she intended it to go, directly beside Nighra. She braced herself for the impact as she guessed at the words Nighra was signing. Force, moderate, repulsive.

Nighra extended her fingers wide, and Bryn was buffeted by a crimson force so powerful that it sent her hurtling twenty feet away. This was the same magic that the kiemara Slaterin had used to kill the vulpin the previous day, a most basic application of red magic that simply redirected force suddenly and violently. The ripples that followed knocked students in Mrs. Papriche's area to the ground, but they scrambled to stay inside the lines. Nighra did her best to angle the blast so that it would halt Bryn's forward momentum, but she also didn't want to kill her.

Bryn grunted as her body tumbled through the air like a rag doll discarded by a child. She thought of Ortha, and how it must have felt during the Upheaval and then the subsequent abandonment. She spun as much as she could to get a clear look at her final destination.

Nighra's aim was surprisingly good given the spontaneity of Bryn's plan – Bryn was cannonballing directly towards Dr. Umbronn's

rectangle. Bannam smirked and made no effort to help. *There was once a time when chivalry wasn't dead*, Bryn thought. With this much momentum, she was likely to just barely overshoot the rectangle's far corner.

Whether she could land in the boundary or not, she had to at least cushion her fall. She had saved some green magic in her fingertips that she now used very crudely to shoot out thousands of small black pillows. It would be fastest, cheapest, and probably most effective to just scatter the objects directly from her hand than to try to plant a landing pad somewhere unpredictable.

The second audibells rang, and the red barriers delineating the rectangles suddenly sprang into being. *I'm inside!* Bryn thought with amazement at the impeccable timing. Her spray of pillows rebounded off of the wall of force, landing in a pile in the far corner of the rectangle, with Bryn soon to follow, landing on her chest. The impact hurt, as had Nighra's little boost, but she managed to avoid breaking her neck and the pain was nothing compared to the wounds that she had from her rape and beating. More than a dozen students had tried to follow Bryn to Dr. Umbronn's rectangle after Nighra's blast, but they all found themselves locked out of any classes for the day. One student actually found himself straddling the barrier as it was erected, a pained look on his face. Mrs. Papriche didn't argue when he allowed himself to fall back over to the inside of the rectangle; he had already been punished enough for his indecision.

Shouldn't you be more careful? the voice returned. *You wouldn't want anything to happen to your little one.*

I've been pregnant for all of one day. My little one isn't developed enough yet to be in danger.

That's what you think, the voice said ominously. Bryn shivered. She hoped that the voice was just a part of her subconscious and not some sort of external influence. Could the person who removed her memories have inserted something as well?

Shut the fuck up. You're just a figment of my imagination, Bryn said. *You're just trying to make me doubt myself.*

Whatever you say, Bryn. Whatever you say. Bryn didn't let the voice or her sore breasts ruin the small victory she just claimed. She almost had Dr. Umbronn to herself today. If only Bannam weren't there, it would have been perfect.

Mrs. Papriche called out in her squeaky, high-pitched voice, "What an extraordinary display of control and concentration under extreme pressure. Excellent work, Nighra, truly excellent. I will be sure to keep it in mind for your grade today." She was fanning herself with her hand, clearly excited by the spectacle that Bryn had more-or-less arranged. There were a lot of unhappy faces in Mrs. Papriche's demesne, more than thirty, and a few very angry faces just outside of it because of the blowback from Nighra's magic. Nighra was beaming from ear to ear, and she gave Bryn a thumbs-up that Bryn happily returned from her contorted position on the heap of pillows.

"Let me guess, Aubryn," Dr. Umbroon said as he flipped through a page in his newspaper, never looking up from it. "You want me to help you replace that disheveled hovel you called home." *Gods, the man is infuriating!* "And were you trying to *impress* me with the rope and the pillows? I shit better creations than those, even without kiema."

Chapter 16: In Which Bryn Hears a Prediction

He's just trying to agitate you, Bryn thought. *Be humble and conciliatory. He knows how painful that is for you, so it will make him understand that you're actually serious about studying with him.* "No, sir. I have some very specific goals in mind that I cannot accomplish on my own. I require your tutelage, and submit to whatever curriculum you require." The word *submit* filled Bryn's stomach with bile, reminding her of her recent violation.

Her contrition seemed to get his attention. Dr. Umbron closed the newspaper, which Bryn now saw had a picture of the ruins of her home prominently displayed on the front page. His leathery, wrinkled face became taught and strained as his tiny, squinting eyes looked at Bryn seriously through a pair of glasses that must have strained his frail little nose.

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" he asked.

"I wanted to make sure that you understand that I'm serious about learning from you now," Bryn said, honestly.

Dr. Umbron studied Bryn but directed his next question at Bannam, "And you, Bannamus, why are you here?"

"I really don't feel like studying today," he said. "I figured you'd have your hands full dealing with Bryn, so I could just slack off." Bryn thought he was actually being sincere. Bannam was a savant, picking up magic and knowledge as easily as most people breathe. Bryn was not exactly surprised that he predicted her choice, though she really couldn't see how he arrived at his conclusion. She didn't exactly dislike Bannam, but his unusual personality left something to be desired when interacting with him. He was even cute in his own way, tall and skinny with short blond curls.

Also, he was the only person at the Academy who could outperform Bryn with red kiema. That bothered her. She didn't like being second-best at anything, but she especially didn't like being second-best at the thing that she considered to be her strongest asset. Even so, *she* had the conviction to use her talent to do important things, and that was something that seemed to elude Bannam. *What good is power if you don't use it? It's like the money and the kiema all over again*, Bryn thought. *Maybe I can use the money as bait to draw Lani out, and maybe I can put Bannam's talents to some use despite his apathy. See things not for what they are, but for what they can be.* It was becoming a mantra for Bryn. Maybe it could be her new strongest asset.

Dr. Umbroon snorted, "Burgona's bottom, boy, you can just go home if you want to. I'll be happy to just give you an A for the day." Bryn did wonder why Bannam attended this school, specifically. She felt like she was missing a piece of the puzzle on that one.

"Whatever, it doesn't really matter to me," Bannam answered. "If it's all the same to you, I'd be fine with just watching you teach Bryn." Bryn thought that was strange, but then again, Bannam just was strange, sometimes. Dr. Umbroon grunted his acquiescence. Was Bannam trying to learn to be a teacher? Or was he just trying to observe normal social interaction? *He's not likely to find much of that between me and Dr. Umbroon*, Bryn thought. Another insidious thought burrowed its way to the surface of Bryn's mind. *Or he could just be spying on you, too. For that matter, he could be Lani.*

"Bannam, may I ask you a question?" she said, thinking back. She had a few minutes to talk to him while they waited for the audibells to finish and the barriers to fall. She had only met Bannam at the Academy, which was well after when she first met Lani. The best that she could do would be to verify that this Bannam before her was the same Bannam that she met three years ago. If Lani were somehow so deeply undercover that she had been impersonating Bannam all this time, Bryn would have no way to know. Still, something was better than nothing. The voice in her head reminded her that she was being paranoid, but she ignored it. There was a fine line between prudence and paranoia. It cost her nothing to ask Bannam a question that only he should be able to answer.

"I guess so," Bannam responded. What could she ask, though? She didn't really know Bannam that well. There was one memory that came to mind eventually, though, that she knew they could agree on.

"When we competed in the 200-foot flame toss in our first year, how far did you and I each miss by?"

Bryn expected to take him off guard with the question, and for it to take him some time to answer. "I believe that you missed by 1.13 feet and I missed by 1.12 feet. Why do you ask? I would have thought you'd be more interested in how I knew where you'd land."

Bryn asked because she knew he would remember the details the way he remembered everything. Bryn remembered the details because it was the first time he beat her, and she'd never been able to keep up since. That rankled her, no matter how much she tried not to let it. That rankled her, too, that she couldn't just let it go.

"Oh, no real reason," Bryn said, and Bannam quirked his head to the side as if he didn't believe her. She moved in very close to him. His body tensed up; he seemed nervous that she would touch him. "Though, since you bring it up, how *did* you know where I had decided to study today?" she whispered.

"Oh, because I knew where you would land. And I guess because you like magic," he said, as if that explained everything.

"I like red magic," she clarified the latter point, still unsure of what he meant by the former.

"Yeah, but you're in no condition to use it." Bryn backed away like a doe that had been spooked. Bannam had said it as if it were obvious to everyone. At first she panicked that there was some rumor that had somehow already spread about her, and she started trying to figure out how someone knew. Looking around at the curious faces, though, she doubted that that was the case.

She doubted that she would be able to keep her pregnancy secret indefinitely, but it would make things easier for her if it weren't public knowledge. The school would be required by law to prohibit her from using blue or red kiema under their supervision, not that Bryn cared since she didn't intend to use any. The real problem was the stigma associated with teenage pregnancy. It would also only raise questions about the father, questions that Bryn did not want to have to answer. But how did Bannam know?

"Who told you?" Bryn asked him, an anger in her whisper that she felt bad about, since she didn't really mean to direct it at him.

"No one told me. I can see her, Bryn," he said, looking down at her belly.

"Her?" Bryn asked. One half of her was terribly confused and mystified by him. The other half was screaming in joy. *I'm going to have a baby girl!* Her excitement subsided and gave way to rationality. He can't possibly know that. Bryn wasn't an expert with blue kiema, but she did know that predicting the future was impossible. Everyone who had ever tried had gone hopelessly mad. Then again, Bryn thought, people once thought that you couldn't use red kiema to fly, but that ended up being false, too. Could Bannam have discovered a new branch of magic? Maybe it wasn't really so different from psychometry or somatic empathy.

"Oh, yes. She's quite beautiful. So blue! What an unusual shade. I would have expected some sort of red, of course, like Burgona.

Although I of course would have expected her to be human even more.” Bannam just continued talking, as if he was just saying the most obvious things in the world.

Bryn just looked at him, dumbfounded. She tried to process what he said, and arrived at two possible conclusions. The first, Bannam's mental state had deteriorated a lot since the last time she had interacted with him, and he was now just batshit crazy. Maybe he had tried his hand at prophesy, or maybe he was exposed to some wild kiema, or maybe this was just a natural progression of the condition that had afflicted him since birth. These explanations seemed likely. Far more likely than the alternative, that Bannam could see the future, and that... what? She was going to give birth to some kind of blue kiemara or monster, like a sluggothoth or a banaband? Unlikely, given Bryn's resolve to keep the taint away from her daughter. He specifically compared what he saw to Burgona. Could he be suggesting that her daughter would be a new god? That maybe Darblun had returned his godly attention to Ortha and had somehow been responsible for Bryn's rape and impregnation? It sounded far too ludicrous to be true.

It would explain why the vulprin followed me out of the city, Bryn thought, a chill running down her spine. The mere fact that she was even considering this as a possibility frightened her. Surely these were just mad ramblings of a troubled mind.

She wanted to ask him more, but the audibells finished and the barrier fell. “If you two are done lollygagging, I'll meet you in practice field D. I wasn't expecting to have to babysit you today, so I'll need to go get a few things before we begin.”

Bryn gave a last look to Nighra, mouthing the words, “Thank you,” in her direction. She led Bannam off to practice field D, the faces of most of the students following her with curiosity.

“Bannam, can I trust you not to tell anyone that I'm pregnant?”

Bannam laughed. “Why would I tell anyone?”

“Why wouldn't you?” Bryn said, understanding that Bannam meant that since it didn't matter to him, that he had no reason to tell anyone. But that also meant that he had no reason not to.

“I guess that's a good point.”

“I'm giving you a reason not to,” Bryn said. “It would make my life more difficult if people knew. It would hurt my feelings and make me

upset with you if I found out that you spilled my secret. Do you understand?"

"Sure, Bryn," he said. "I don't want to upset you." Bryn was thankful for that at least. "It can be our little secret," he said, as excited as a child. *Children are no good at keeping secrets*, Bryn thought, *but I guess I have to work with what I've got*. She idly ran her fingers through the fine crystals sitting in her green satchel.

"One more thing," Bryn said, as they made their way onto practice field D. "What you said earlier, was I understanding you correctly? What will my baby girl turn out to be?" She still didn't believe his words, but she wanted to know what he saw anyway.

"Huh? I'm sorry, I don't remember what I said, Bryn. I forget things sometimes, if they only might be true. Like a glimpse of a fish lost in a stream." Bryn sighed. The boy who remembered everything forgot the single most important thing to Bryn at that very moment.

"Are you ever completely wrong?" she asked, humoring his prediction.

"Yeah, sometimes. The further away from something I am, the harder it is to see clearly. Bryn, why did I choose to study with Dr. Umbroon today?"

"Don't worry about it," Bryn said, convinced that she'd gotten everything out of Bannam that she was going to. He was Bannam, after all... this was just how he acted sometimes. With any luck, he'd even forget about the pregnancy entirely, but Bryn wouldn't count on it. "Dr. Umbroon is going to be too busy dealing with me to give you a hard time."

Chapter 17: In Which Bryn Reconciles With Dr. Umbroon

“So, girl, what the hell do you want from me?” Dr. Umbroon said in his disgruntled voice, which was basically the same as his normal tone. “I hope you aren’t seriously thinking of rebuilding your house with those clumsy fingers.” Bryn let Dr. Umbroon grab her by the hands without a word, raising them up into the air, turning them over, inspecting them.

“Huh,” he said, after a long moment. “Nails neatly trimmed and not covered in goop. And callouses.” Bryn hadn’t really noticed it, but using the sword yesterday had toughened the skin on her hands just a bit. “I can work with this, I guess,” he said. “What do you want to know about?”

“Everything,” Bryn said, “but I’ll start somewhere specific. How can I hide something large? Ideally, how can I hide something large and keep it with me?”

Dr. Umbroon grabbed the sword from Bryn’s belt and she had to force herself not to stop him. “I’m guessing you’re talking about this piece of garbage,” he said. “Really, Bryn, a sword?”

“That sword saved my life, sir,” Bryn said.

“Then you must not have been in much danger to begin with,” the teacher said. Bryn was aware of Bannam’s gaze, as he sat off in the grass just watching the two of them.

“I’d appreciate any advice you have for a better weapon, as well.” Bryn thought about the life growing inside of her. “And some sort of armor might be a good idea, sir.”

“Sir, sir, sir,” he mocked. “You can stop that nonsense right now, Bryn.” His fierce eyes howled like lions, threatening to make Bryn’s cower in fear, but she held her gaze. “It’s clear that you’re mixed up in something dangerous. You were desperate enough to come to me, after all. I know I’m mean, rude, angry, and half a dozen other things, but I’m not heartless. You’re a student and you need help. I’m going to help you to the best of my ability, no matter the disagreements we’ve had in the past.”

Bryn visibly relaxed, only just then realizing that she had been standing as tall as she possibly could be, with her shoulders squared and chin up. “Thank you,” she said.

“So was it Bannam here?”

“Excuse me?” Bryn asked, confused.

"The pretty little thing who knocked you up?" Bryn got a wide-eyed look on her face and began to sputter protestations, but Dr. Umbroon shushed her with a finger. "Nevermind. I don't want to know the answer."

"Gods, is there anyone who doesn't know that I'm pregnant?" Bryn asked rhetorically.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the whole school knew by now," Dr. Umbroon said. "After all, you chose to study with me. Why the hell would you do that unless you were pregnant?"

"I didn't want the scrutiny of my classmates today, so I went for the class that I knew would be emptiest," Bryn explained.

Dr. Umbroon guffawed. "Well, you've definitely got the truth of that one. It might even convince a few people, but I think most people are going to arrive at the same conclusion as me eventually. I know you better than that, Bryn. After our last session, I thought for sure I'd never see you again." After a long pause, he muttered, "That was my greatest failure as a teacher." The words sounded strained as they came out of his mouth, as painful and protracted as childbirth.

Bryn couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was this the same man who had humiliated her on her first week of school at the Academy? *Maybe he's Lani*, came the voice, but Bryn was sure she had already seen enough of Dr. Umbroon to know he was himself. He was a stubborn old man who could never admit to doing anything wrong. Bryn wanted to say something, but she couldn't find any words.

"When you came here, you had a passion for green magic, and the talent to do it. I pushed you hard because I saw your potential and knew you could do better. But I ended up pushing you away instead, and you followed your father's path. I made a mistake, and we've lost a lot of time because of it."

Bryn was expecting a lot of things out of her training with Dr. Umbroon, but an apology was not one of them. It was true what he was saying. As a kid, Bryn did love green magic. There was something so satisfying about creating something where nothing once existed. In that space, there was infinite potential, and all that it took to make something real was conviction and imagination. Bryn wanted to create things, in no small part to make up for the destruction caused by her father. She intended to study green magic at the Academy, but Dr. Umbroon's harsh lessons in her first week ruined that ambition.

He had been pushing her all week, making her build things faster, and stronger, of all sorts of materials and even with moving parts. She burned through green kiema like it was nothing for the first four days of the week, driven only by her desire to learn. On the evening before that Fryday, Bryn's mother told her that she couldn't afford anywhere near as much kiema as Bryn was using. When she attended class on Fryday, she focused on extracting as much magic as she could with less kiema, and her work suffered because of it. When she tried to explain the situation to Dr. Umbroon, he made an off-hand comment about how she could have afforded some green kiema if her father weren't a terrorist. Bryn had been hoping that no one at her new school would make the connection, that that part of her life was behind her and that the future was hers. It was a sore subject for Bryn at the time, and by the end of the day, the whole school knew two things: that Bryn was the daughter of a terrorist, and that she had punched Dr. Umbroon square in the jaw.

Bryn thought back to her first year at the Academy. It was a four-year Academy, so there were three years of students ahead of her at the time. Had they been as averse to taking Dr. Umbroon's classes? In hindsight, his classes weren't always as empty as Bryn had convinced herself that they were, after her bitter grudge consumed her. It dawned on Bryn that she, or at least the altercation that they had, was responsible both for his reputation and for his sourness. She suddenly felt incredibly guilty.

"I... I don't know what to say, Dr. Umbroon," Bryn said. "I think I may have misjudged you. I'm sorry, for that and for everything. Especially the..." she mimed a punch in the air.

"Girl, the punch was nothing but an exclamation point. You have nothing to apologize for. I was out of line, and you deserved better. I've watched you, you know." He didn't mean it in a creepy way, though Bryn's experiences with Lani recently made her shiver at that thought. "On the days when I don't have students, sometimes I'll watch you. You are a gifted girl, Bryn. You didn't let me get in your way, and you adapted to find a new path forward for yourself. I regret that I was an obstacle to your dreams."

"That's all well and good, sir," Bryn brought back the respectful title. Dr. Umbroon didn't comment; Bryn hoped that he understood that she was hoping to let him know that he had genuinely earned her respect once again. "And while I appreciate this little talk that we've had,

I've noticed that you haven't actually taught me anything useful yet and it's been nearly fifteen minutes.”

Dr. Umbroon let out a wheezing laugh followed by a bit of coughing. Bannam's ears seemed to perk up, as if he hadn't really been paying attention. It was too bad that he hadn't – Bryn thought he probably could have learned more about the student-teacher dynamic in that one short conversation than he could in a year of dedicated study.

Chapter 18: In Which Bryn Forges Her Sword

"I'm glad that we have the opportunity to work together again, Bryn. Now, the first thing I will do is offer you access to my kiema supply so that we don't have the same problem we had last time. This job doesn't pay as well as you'd think, so it's not as much as you need, but I'll do what I can to support you. I know it's going to be hard on you, especially after yesterday. Tell me, have you found a place to stay?" Bryn sensed an offer there if she wanted to take it. It would be a good idea to stay with him, for a number of reasons. He'd be available as a resource for Bryn around the clock, and she could shield Edger from getting much more involved in her problems. But as much as he had done to repair the broken bridge between himself and Bryn, she wasn't sure that she wanted to risk driving a leviboard across that bridge just yet.

"I have a place," she said. "And kiema is not a problem. You can keep yours." Bryn opened the mouth of her blue satchel, where she currently kept her personal stash of green kiema. Dr. Umbroon's eyes lit up greedily as he peered inside.

"Gods, girl, what did you do, rob a bank?"

Bryn shrugged uncomfortably. "It's probably better if you don't know." *You stole it from an eleven year old girl*, the voice said.

No, I stole it from a shapeshifting master of disguise who probably stole it herself, Bryn replied, chewing on how ridiculous that sounded in her head.

"I'll leave that to your discretion," he said. "But I am here to help if you need it. If you're in contact with your father somehow, maybe I don't want to know about it."

Bryn's optimism for this entire conversation began to spoil as she thought about his words carefully. Her father was a criminal, so it was the most likely explanation for her windfall. Bryn hadn't considered that before. She would have to be careful about that if she dealt with that kiema store owner again. *What was his name, Sagus? Not important right now.* But the way in which Dr. Umbroon brought it up put Bryn on alert.

Which is more likely? Dr. Umbroon genuinely wanting to repair the gulf between the two of you, and wanting to help you in any way he can? Or Dr. Umbroon, with a known hate for your father, being enlisted as a spy in some conspiracy to track him down through you? Bryn honestly couldn't decide which of the two was more probable, but she

wanted to vomit either way. *It's too soon for morning sickness*, she thought.

She tried desperately to dismiss the latter theory as ridiculous. *That can't be it. How could someone have guessed that I would have come to Dr. Umbroon anyway?*

I would think that would be obvious by now, the voice answered. She didn't want to start listening to the voice, but she needed to vocalize her fears, even if it was just vocalizing it in the realm of thought.

You mean that someone knew I was pregnant? she said, a sinking feeling setting in.

You know I mean a lot more than that, came the reply, the voice taking on a serpentine hiss. Up until then, its voice had sounded like a dark reflection of Bryn's own, but it was beginning to take on a timbre that sounded like something new, a creature of its own right. *Ghovits are so far removed from their humanity that they've become incorporeal specters. Why couldn't there be a monster that had become a denizen purely of the land of thought?* She thought back to Bannam's words earlier. *Would a god growing inside me have a voice in my head? What makes a god a god, a human a human, and a monster a monster?* Bryn felt like everything she ever knew was at best a lie and at worst a deception, that the bedrock beliefs that she thought she had about how Whyat had made the world to function were crumbling away under the erosive power of new, contradictory information. She wondered if the stories of Whyat and his three children were just that – stories – and what that meant for her and her circumstances and the world in general if they were. But the voice was expecting a reply.

You think that someone deliberately impregnated me to get me to turn to Dr. Umbroon, Bryn voiced the unspoken theory on its behalf.

It's a possibility, isn't it? the voice asked.

Bryn wanted to lie and say that it wasn't. That it was factually outside of the realm of possibility. The thought that she might have been raped because someone wanted to find out more information about her father was too much to handle. She felt violated, in mind, body and soul, that her control over her entire being was being ripped away by the forces around her.

Bryn didn't want to be a part of any of this. She was naked in the alley again, with a rampaging behammon about to stomp her guts and smash her to bones to meal before swallowing the bloody pulp of

her corpse. And behind him she could see a dozen vulprin, Lani, the shadowy silhouette of her rapist, and her father, all eager for their turn.

"Is everything okay, Bryn?" came a different voice. "I didn't mean to upset you." Bryn felt like an iron grip on her had been released as she was drawn back to reality by Dr. Umbroon's words.

What in the hell was that? she thought., scrambling back from the precipice of despair. *The voice? Pull yourself together, Bryn. Nothing has changed. You are alive, and at least right now, you're safe. You can't control everything going on around you, but you do have choices. Snap out of it, and get back to being the tough-as-nails bitch you claim to be.*

"I'm fine, sir," Bryn lied. "You just reminded me of something important that I'm going to have to take care of sooner rather than later.

"The kiema is not from my father, though I can understand why you might think that," Bryn offered as bait, hoping to snare some glimmer of the thoughts hiding behind Dr. Umbroon's thick glasses. "I would appreciate it if you would just let me worry about the kiema and if you could just teach me." Even if he was a spy, that was all the more reason to keep an eye on him, and she *did* need his instruction.

"All right then, Bryn. You want a way to carry and conceal large things, a weapon powered by green kiema, and some protection. We can do those things," Dr. Umbroon said, rolling up his sleeves. "Let's start with the first one.

"As you know, there are many ways to carry things. Most use the force generated from red kiema to carry them, but that is not an option for you right now. I could certainly help you make something with yellow magic if you want me to, but I suspect that's not what you want."

"Correct, sir. There are some things I need to do myself."

"I understand. Determination and self-reliance are virtues, Bryn. I do admire you for them. They can also be a burden, and not all burdens are worth bearing. Case in point: why carry the sword at all?" Bryn didn't follow him immediately.

"Well, it's not something one would normally do," he continued, "but with so much green kiema there's no reason to keep the sword summoned. Why not create a template that can summon it on command?"

"And then what... just leave a trail of swords in my wake?"

"You could, or you could recycle them."

"Recycle them?" Bryn asked, and Dr. Umbroon sighed.

"I really wish I'd been teaching you for longer, because I think you'll be very good at it. It's possible to take something that you've created and recycle it, turning it back into kiema. You don't get as much as you put into it, but an experienced recycler can get up to a ninety-five percent return on their original expenditure."

Bryn had never heard of recycling. Why didn't everyone know this, and do this? They could be saving so much wasted kiema. She asked as much.

"Oh, Bryn. I wish I had your naivety. Well, for starters, recycling isn't easy. Most people can't ever do it, even with the guidance of someone who already can. And there are limitations. You need to understand exactly how the thing was constructed. The path it took from conception in the imagination, to the physical manipulation of magic through the body or a kietella, to the precise moment of incarnation. It's a difficult skill to master, so you will need to practice it." Out of the corner of her eye, Bryn saw a green glow coming from Bannam's fingers. He kept creating a tiny black sphere, then turning it back into kiema, over and over again, each time the sphere and the crystal shrinking, until finally it was just dust on the wind. "Bannam has the hang of it, though, apparently. I'm sure you can draw some motivation from that fact.

"Of course, there is the other reason that recycling isn't widely practiced. Why would Roseta Industries want people to have a renewable source of kiema?" It was an upsetting question in Bryn's mind. Roseta Industries' sheer economic capital gave them sway over politics and the media. In a perfect world, given the rapid depletion of Ortha's green kiema, the government should be encouraging people to recycle. That was the responsibility of government in Bryn's mind, to impose regulations to make sure that self-serving behavior and social welfare were aligned, rather than at odds. Unfortunately, once those selfish entities were able to insert their tendrils into the political system, the role of government became polluted and the system broke down. Waalort, and Ortha as a whole, was suffering from the interference of self-serving behavior in the political system, and Bryn didn't see a way to escape the vicious cycle that the corporations had created.

"I see what you mean," Bryn said, as she looked the sword over.

"Go ahead. Recycle it."

"How? Do I... I don't know... just pretend to do it in reverse?"

"You can try that."

Bryn held the sword the way she did when it first materialized. She thought about exactly how that happened. She was in the process of swinging when she conjured it, a strong upward slice through the neck of that first vulprin. She would have to start with it in the air, swing the sword down, and draw the matter out of it and back into her fingers. She didn't sense the magic in it, though. It was just a sword now. It wasn't magic; her will had made it real. Pulling magic back out of it felt like it would be like trying to grab a handful of air.

She tried a few times, nonetheless. After her third time, she stopped. "It's not like I'm going to spit the kiema out afterwards. That's not what Bannam's doing. This is not the right way," Bryn said, barely looking at Dr. Umbronn for confirmation. "So the process is something else entirely."

She thought long and hard about the composition of the sword. She had a dozen adjectives in her mind when she shaped it, buried under a sea of adrenaline during the battle, adjectives that she spelled out with her fingers in much the same way that she composed sentences with her mouth. Long, flat, hard, fast, sharp, steel, hand-held. Those were the core of the thing. But there was more, Bryn remembered. Her personal touches. Elegant, stylish, angry, violent, righteous. And then the last one she hadn't even realized that she had used. Penetrating. Bryn felt like that word had a particular power coming from Bryn when she used it. Everyone's finger-language was different, and it was the same concept no matter the kind of magic you used. Bryn's vocabulary was most extensive when it came to fire.

She tried to consider adjectives that would represent destruction or dissolution as she fingered the sword. Empty, insubstantial, vanishing, ephemeral, transient.

Dr. Umbronn seemed to be able to read the intent in her fingers, grabbing her arm before she could continue, "You're on the right track, and I think you can get rid of the sword with that. But that's just going to destroy it. You won't recover any kiema."

Bryn knew he was right. But the adjectives were the key. The right adjectives could unlock this puzzle. Bryn wasn't sure of much in this process, but she was getting the feeling that there needed to be a sense of balance. Short, wide, soft, slow, blunt. She stopped at steel. What was the opposite of steel? She couldn't think of one, so she substituted insubstantial, getting a brief nod from Dr. Umbronn. Remote, ostentatious, garish, calm, peaceful, wicked. Some of the antonyms

she chose weren't perfect, but they were close. She thought long and hard about the last one, thinking back to how she felt before she was raped, before *she* had been penetrated. Secure was the word that came to mind, and she knew it was right. With the last motion of her fingers, she willed the sword to become kiema once more, and to her surprise, it did. A green glow suffused the thing, and then it was just gone, four small crystals left in her hand.

"No less impressive than I would have expected from you, Bryn. What is that, eighty percent? On your first try?"

"A little less than that," Bryn said, trying not to be too pleased with her results. It was steel that held her back, she guessed.

"Do you know the opposite of steel?" she asked, hoping that the question made sense to Dr. Umbronn. Not everyone thought of their gestures as words or language, but it helped Bryn. He seemed to understand the question, though.

"I'm afraid not, and that is the rub, isn't it? Sometimes we make a thing without thinking about unmaking it. It's hard enough to make exactly what you want under pressure, so planning ahead to reverse it is tricky. But for what it's worth, something like wood or cotton would probably be better than a general destruction word even if it isn't exactly the opposite." Bryn had a lot of questions still, but one of them interested her the most of all.

"How did you read my fingers like that? I can't explain that at all."

Dr. Umbronn laughed. "Sorry, Bryn. I'd like to teach you that, but you're not ready for it yet. We'll get there, hopefully. And I hope you don't think I knew exactly what you were doing. There were some shape words, and some space and time words, most of which I can make a guess for just from the result, but there were plenty of words I couldn't identify at all." He harrumphed, as if he wished that he could do better. "Besides, as with any language, comprehending it is easier than composing it. I would have great difficulty replicating your words, even after seeing them. Does that all make sense?"

"It does," Bryn said. "So let's make sure I understand the implications. I could create a token that has the words for the sword embedded in it, and if I choose the words carefully I will be able to come up with truer antonyms that will allow me to also use the token to recycle it more efficiently."

“Exactly right. Excellent work, Bryn.” Bryn nodded appreciation, but then she frowned. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“That technique is great for transporting or concealing most things, like a sword or armor. But it’s useless for kiema.”

“Ah, of course,” Dr. Umbroon said, glancing at the blue satchel. “I understand now.” Everyone knew that you couldn’t use green kiema to create more green kiema. Some rules could be bent, and some could be broken, but some rules were so obviously fixed that it was clear that nothing could be done. This was one of those rules.

“Yeah,” Bryn said with disappointment.

“Well, there is one option, but it is very advanced, and dangerous. You’re not ready for it, and it would be irresponsible of me to show it to you.” Bryn frowned again. “But I could make it for you. I’ll need a lot of kiema. Most of that satchel.”

“Take it all. I have some more in my locker.” Bryn handed him the satchel, and he transferred the kiema to a small bag on his side.

“I’ll make it for you now, and we’ll reconvene here after lunch. In the meantime, I expect you to work on creating a sword template worthy of your talents.”

Bryn set to work immediately, taking a bag with her to get some more kiema from her locker. She looked around as carefully as she could to make sure no one was watching her as she filled the bag. She returned to Bannam on practice field D with the bag, a pad of paper, and a pencil.

She sat down and started making a list of desired qualities in a sword. She would then come up for the qualities of the summoning token, and layer the sword’s words on top of the token’s, forming finger symbols for every pair of adjectives between the token and the sword. Because this greatly increased the number of symbols she would have to form, and because she would have to simultaneously form one symbol with her right hand as she did a different one with her left, this process would take a lot longer and it would be much more prone to errors than a typical incantation. Bryn was beginning to see that it would be an incredible challenge to get it right, but she felt good to finally be doing something to work towards her goals. She decided that she would make the summoning token and the recycling token separately rather than making it all one thing, since there was no need to have them be the same object and it would allow her to split the effort into two sessions.

Sharp, Bryn wrote first, as if that word alone made it a sword. Straight, long, thin, flat, single-edged, pointy, hand-held. She liked the idea of the longsword she had created, but a lighter weapon like a rapier would probably be better for her. Keen. It kind of meant sharp, but there was no harm in doubling up on good qualities, as long as she thought she could come up with good antonyms. Rust-proof? Bryn thought that was more specific than she wanted, so she scribbled it out and wrote down ageless and durable instead.

Those words captured the essence of what she wanted to create, but she didn't want to stop there. Legendary, epic, magical, powerful, deadly. These were words that would increase the difficulty substantially, but they would be worth the risk if Bryn could pull it off. Explosive, she considered, because she was very good with that word. She then considered changing that one word to three – radiant, searing, and glorious – as she recalled the sheer devastating force of Edger's sunbeam. Without mixing red kiema into the shaping of the sword, though, she didn't think those words would do much, so she discarded them. Explosive, though. You could create mundane explosives with green kiema. Bryn decided that she would keep that in mind for later, but that this sword was not the right place to experiment with it.

She reconsidered and added radiant back to the list. If someone saw a glowing sword, they would know that it was infused with magic. Even it couldn't fire sunbeams at her foes, they might think that it could.

She concluded her list with a few words to add a personal touch to it. Stylish, slimming. Those words, like most words, would naturally take on the connotation that they had for Bryn; the sword would fit her sense of style and it would make her body look slimmer. She thought about going shopping with Nighra this evening, and wondered if she really needed to buy clothes. Now that her fingers weren't trembling and she had what felt like an unlimited supply of kiema, she could make an entire wardrobe for herself. *No*, she thought. *The point of shopping with Nighra isn't just to get new clothes. I need to connect with her and have a little bit of time to just relax and be a normal person for a few hours.*

As with a lot of magic, specificity was the key, so adding these personal touches was important to making the transition from concept to reality. The more details you left out, the more the magic had to work to fill in the blanks, and leaving out important details, or forming them

poorly with your fingers, could be the difference between success and failure.

You're forgetting two important ones, the voice said.

You know, if we're going to keep having these little conversations, Bryn thought back, *you should at least give me something to call you.*

I don't have a name, she responded. Bryn thought that the voice actually sounded sad.

Bryn paused to consider before continuing. *You're not my baby, are you? I'll be damned if I'm going to give my baby a terrible name without even knowing it.*

The voice laughed a long, throaty laugh. *No, Bryn, I am not your baby. Let me hear the terrible name you've picked out for me.*

Doubt, Bryn said.

Doubt? the voice responded, letting each phoneme slowly roll over her imaginary tongue. *That is not a terrible name at all. Doubt is a wonderful thing.*

So, Doubt, what words have I forgotten?

Penetrating, she replied quickly. *It worked well for you the last time, and I think you understand the concept behind the word pretty well at this point.* Bryn admitted that that was true, and she wrote it down. She saw Bannam looking over at her and wondered if he was just being Bannam or if he was somehow aware of the conversation going on in Bryn's head. She wouldn't be surprised either way.

And the other one? Bryn asked.

Badass, Doubt mocked as she faded away.

You make one silly comment, Bryn thought, *and no one ever lets you live it down. Well fuck you, Doubt. Maybe I will include badass.* Bryn had never used the word before, so she would have to figure out how to translate the concept to her fingers. She spent a few minutes with the word in her head, thinking about things that she would consider to be 'badass' and trying to imagine feeling them with her fingers. A pair of foot-long leviboards with just a pair of straps for skating down the highway at dangerously high speeds. A behammon-hide jacket with its collar flipped up. A full torso tattoo of a zyzoon battling a hybustrus on the peak of a snow-capped mountain.. Before long, her fingers had the texture of the word, and she added it to the list. She had to do the same for

some of the other words as well. Legendary and magical ended up being very complicated.

Bryn looked at the final list of words. Twenty-one words in total. That was a bit excessive, but the more words the better. She set to coming up with antonyms. Dull, curved, short, fat, wide, double-edged. She felt a bit unsure about the last one, but she thought it would work. She had trouble with pointy – the best she could come up with was blunted – and it seemed unnecessary if she would be including penetrating and its counterpart, secure.

She continued down the list. Remote seemed to work for her with hand-held before, so she stuck with it, aware that those words had specific connotations about the placement of the materialized object in her mind. When she made the rope, for instance, it was both remote and hand-held. Worn, decrepit, fragile.

Forgotten seemed a good fit for legendary, and it made her think of another word that had been very personal for her in the past two days: abandoned. She worked backward, appending the word beloved to her list of desired qualities. She never would have considered using such a word if she weren't thinking of dissolving the sword as well. This exercise was pushing Bryn's imagination further than ever, and imagination as important as specificity when it came to magic. She wasn't sure what effect beloved would have, but it felt right.

She crossed off epic, unsatisfied with all of her options and feeling that it was a little redundant with legendary anyway. Mundane, weak, innocuous, tenebrous, garish, unflattering. She already covered penetrating with secure. That just left badass.

She considered a few options, none of them quite right. Wimpy, pathetic, lame. Unfortunately and begrudgingly, she settled on a word that really bothered her but that she had to concede was the right one.

Pussy. She shook her head in shame at having to use that word. Words only had the power that Bryn gave them, but some social constructs even Bryn couldn't escape.

She looked at the list. Twenty adjectives with their corresponding antonyms. She hadn't specified the material that it would be made from, but she supposed that if it had the properties that she wanted that the material didn't actually matter.

She decided to try to make a brooch for the token. It would be something simple that she could pin onto anything, most likely the side of her belt as if it were a scabbard. She'd try to limit the number of adjectives on this one since she didn't care about the form much. If she could get by with just three or four, it would save her a lot of headache of repeating the sword adjectives over and over. Small, light, pinned. That was really enough, but she wanted to get it right. Concealed. She was starting to push her limits. Accessible. That was it. That would require one hundred combinations, she didn't dare push it further. She tried to imagine a non-layered magical effect with a hundred adjectives to describe it, the sheer precision you could achieve with such excess. There was something to be said for the fact that many of the gestures would be repeated, but operating her left and right hands independently was not something Bryn had much experience with.

She had spent about an hour designing the object, but now she needed to actually make it. She needed to practice the motions extensively before trying to make a prototype with actual kiema. It was incredibly frustrating at first. She found her fingers on one hand would mimic the fingers of the other hand, conflating the two words into something unrecognizable. If she wasn't careful, she would end up making a sword that could summon a brooch. This was yet another reason that she had never been one for making kietella and generally relied on red magic.

"You're thinking about it all wrong," Bannam suggested, seeing her fail another combination. "Or at least, it's not right for you. I can do it that way, but I'm special." He wagged his fingers with completely independent control on each side, one hand looking like the dainty motions of a goddess and the other somehow looking like the harsh flicks of a war mage. "It's a gift that I have and you don't."

Bryn, in her frustration, was tempted to snap at him, but he was right. She couldn't separate her hands in her mind. "What would you suggest?" she said instead, after taking a long, calming breath.

"Your hands are one. You move them as one. Stop thinking of your words as combinations. Think of the entirety of the compound word as a single thing, and just do that."

Bryn considered his advice, and looked again at the first combination. Small with the left hand, sharp with the right hand. Small-sharp. Smallsharp. She practiced it until it became a word of its own. She felt the motions being committed to muscle memory as a single unit. This meant that she would lose the advantage of repetition, but she

could master the motions if she could just memorize a hundred new words. Smallstraight, smalllong, smallthin. It was a grueling, exacting, and tedious process. Lightageless, lightdurable, lightlegendary. Whenever she got distracted, she thought back to why she needed this sword. She thought about waking up in that alley, broken, beaten, and bloody, and the feeling of her bare breasts scraping across the rough pavement as she crawled to her satchels. Never again. Pinneddeadly, pinnedradiant, pinnedstylish. She thought about being trapped, defenseless in a stone cocoon as a vulprin tried to devour her and her unborn child. Concealedthin, concealedflat, concealedsingle-edged. Fighting desperately to rescue Edger and Lani from forces far stronger than she was. Accessiblepenetrating, accessiblebadass, accessiblebeloved. When she finally mastered the last one, she wiped the sweat from her brow and imagined herself stabbing the sword of her mind into the gaping maw of a behammon.

She ran through the words one last time, all in a row, to ensure that she had mastered them. Bannam watched the whole time, and he clapped at the very end.

“You think I'm ready?” Bryn asked.

“There's only one way to find out,” he said.

“Should I wait for Dr. Umbroon?” she asked, looking across the practice fields. She saw some weak-looking fireballs sputtering across the field in Mrs. Pepriche's class. Bryn guessed that Nighra, Emera, and Saffer were having a good time trying to learn to shape magic without their fingers. They probably had their own new language that they were learning. There was no sign of Dr. Umbroon, though.

“That would be smart,” Bannam said.

“Smart and safe,” she agreed. “But that's not me.”

She gulped down several handfuls of green kiema. She didn't bother counting. She would need to draw all of the magic that she could handle. She knew her limits, though, and when she was saturated. Her fingers tingled with the promise of a new tomorrow.

After the hours of grueling work this morning, it was almost anti-climactic. She formed the compound words one after another in quick succession. Forming all one-hundred of them took nearly a minute, but after the time she spent in preparation it seemed like an instant. Each word took more willpower than the one before it, draining Bryn to the brink of exhaustion and beyond. Bannam watched her care-

fully during the whole process. She began to feel like she hadn't slept in days as she neared the conclusion. As her delicate fingers stroked out the last word with a flourish, she felt a brief sharp pain in the palm of her right hand and it glowed green momentarily. Had the sun been this hot all day long? It was sweltering.

She looked down with heavy-lidded eyes at her hand, expecting to find a brooch pinned in it. Instead, there seemed to be a dark discolored circle in her palm, as if a small green disc were embedded underneath. She poked at it, but nothing happened. It felt firm to the touch.

"I think you got your gestures right, based on what you'd been practicing," Bannam said. "Is that what you were trying to make?"

"I'm not sure, actually." Bryn said, her voice hoarse and weak. "Maybe. Let me try this." She pulled out a green kiema crystal and touched it to her palm, and again nothing happened. Usually kietella had an access point for fueling them with kiema; maybe Bryn made a mistake by not clarifying that. She swallowed the crystal instead, and let the magic flow to her hand as normal, but focused it in the palm. The palm began to glow very faintly. She continued to consume kiema, the glow growing in intensity but still hard to see in the ambient light of the midday sun. After the eighth gem, when she directed the magic to her palm, it slithered past and entered her fingers instead.

"I think it's charged," Bryn said to Bannam.

"What are you waiting for? I want to see it."

Bryn wasn't sure why she was hesitating. There was something about the uncertainty that lay in anticipation that she wanted to enjoy before continuing. Right now, at this moment, any number of things could happen when she triggered this kietella, a whole world of possibilities. But once she did it, that would be it. From then on, this kietella would produce the same sword every time. *Maybe I should have added random or chaotic*, she considered, but it was far too late for that, and it probably wasn't a good idea anyway.

She started to touch her hand when an alarum came from behind her, on practice field E. "Look out, Aubryn! There's a scizzler coming right for you!"

Chapter 19: In Which Bryn Stands Up To Mr. Bakeman

The warning came from Mr. Bakeman, but it came with plenty of time for Bryn to turn and see the trail of earth being upended in the scizzler's wake. They were burrowing fox-like monsters with fur made of metallic silver and the same angry magenta eyes that every monster seemed to have, but they weren't anything more than nuisances. Assuming her token worked, this would be a good test of her new sword.

Bryn leaped to the side as the earth broke open underneath her, maintaining her balance and activating the kietella in her hand in one smooth motion, thrusting her hand at the ground as if the sword had been stored inside her arm all along, just waiting to be dislodged and freed into the world. Bryn knew that she should watch the scizzler, but when the sword hilt materialized in her hand, she was overwhelmed with emotion and had to pause to adjust to it.

It was the rapier that she envisioned. It was exactly the right height, long but light enough for Bryn to wield effortlessly in one hand. The hilt had an oily leather-bound handle with a golden hand-guard, engraved with a naked woman subduing a lion with her bare hands. The pommel and cross-guard were likewise fashioned out of gold and encrusted with tiny rubies patterned to look like flames. The grip didn't feel like a grip at all; to Bryn, it felt like an extension of her own arm. *Beloved*, she thought tenderly at the feel of the sword in her palm. This was *Bryn's* sword.

As with most swords, though, the blade itself was the most important part. It was impossibly thin, thinner than paper. It was so thin that Bryn was at first worried that it might break off after the first thrust. Whatever material it was made of, it was completely translucent. It looked like crystal or glass, but feeling her *Beloved* in her hands, Bryn knew that this blade would not fail her, and that it would pierce the thickest of hides as easily as the supple skin of a newborn.

After seconds of familiarizing herself with her new sword, she finally moved to hold it in front of her, between herself and the scizzler. As she moved it, the sword left a trail of darkness in its wake, a faint memory of the motions it went through written in shadows. *Darkness?* she wondered. *That must have to do with it being radiant, but I don't see how.* Bryn wasn't sure how she should stand, yet – she would have to try to find the time for some fencing lessons, to get the most advantage out of her new rapier – but she knew that it didn't matter for this skirmish.

The scizzler, which had moments ago been ready to pounce on Bryn and devour her, was beginning to have second thoughts. Bryn thought at first that it was just being deterred by the threat of the sword. She felt waves of intimidation radiating from it, or maybe she was just projecting her own confidence onto it. In either case, the scizzler paced back and forth out of her reach, no longer the bloodthirsty monster that it first seemed to be. Bryn couldn't help but feel sorry for it instead of fear it, and her experience with the vulprin made her think that maybe there was something behind its monstrous exterior worth saving.

"I've got it, Bryn," Mr. Bakeman called out from a fifty feet away as he twiddled his fingers, red magic flowing through them. Bryn wasn't sure what effect his evocation would have – reading the magic of others was a skill that Bryn did not have at all, and was beginning to envy – but the concerted look on his face convinced Bryn that he was intending to kill the scizzler.

"No, Mr. Bakeman, don't!" Bryn tried to warn him, but she was too late for words. Mr. Bakeman pointed and a stream of brilliant red fireballs began shooting toward the scizzler, following a tight and predictable trajectory.

Bryn didn't even have time to think about what she was doing, she just reacted, instinctively interposing herself between the flames and the scizzler. She brought her arms up to defend herself, the thin blade of the sword the only thing standing between her and immolation.

What are you doing, trying to get us killed? Doubt asked.

I'm trying to save this thing, you jackass. The fireballs were closing in on her rapidly, but the conversation seemed to stretch out to eternity.

How's that working out for you?

I'm not dead, yet.

Yet.

What's the matter, are you nervous? Bryn asked. If she was going to die here, saving this pathetic creature, maybe she could at least get some answers finally. *What happens to you when I die?*

Oh, I'm not worried, Doubt said. *I'll just find someone else to go munch on. I'm just surprised that you would be willing to risk your baby for this thing.*

The words hit Bryn hard in the gut. She almost dove out of the path of the fire. Doubt was right about one thing, Bryn had to think for

two, now. She could just dodge the flames and let them devour the scizzler, and everyone would cheer that the day had been saved because no humans were hurt.

But Bryn had seen the vulprin. They were more human than most monsters, to be sure, certainly more human than behammon or scizzlers. *If Doubt is a monster, is she more or less human than the vulprin?* Bryn wasn't sure. But some part of the scizzlers was human. Somewhere along the line, a long time ago, some woman consumed tainted kiema while pregnant, giving birth to a baby with magenta eyes and a tuft of silver fur. And that baby survived and went on to breed with someone or something else that had two arms that were almost more like legs. And so on and so on, through the generations, until the scizzler was here. What made the scizzler different from a squirrel? Monsters are violent and predatory, to be sure, but if you starve a squirrel it will bite your face off just as quick. Maybe they could be tamed, if we just tried to care for them.

This thing could be my baby some day, or my baby's baby. Letting it die would be like letting little Charlie die. Charlie didn't sound like the right name for the baby either. *I can't just stand back and do nothing. This is not the world I want her to grow up in.*

Bryn had made her decision, and she stood her ground, sword raised in front of her. *I will save them both,* she thought, focusing on the sword. *And if I have to get Edger to heal me again, later, so be it.* The thought of him stroking the charred flesh of her breasts for a second time didn't overwhelm her with shame as she thought it should.

The fireballs rushed in, pushing hard against Bryn's firmly planted back foot. At first they seemed to stall in the air as they approached the blade of Bryn's sword, as if the force behind their assault were a rug that had been swept out from beneath them. Then one-by-one the flames winked out in a puff of smoke from the edge of the blade. Bryn barely even felt the heat.

What was more, her Beloved was now glowing a beautiful mixture of red and orange, swirling and blending the two colors as if it were filled with glowing liquids. *Orange?* Bryn wondered. It reminded her of Edger's scruffy beard for a moment. She wanted to consider the meaning of the colors carefully, but it would have to wait.

"Gods, Aubryn, what in the hell are you doing?" Mr. Bakeman shouted as he approached, about to unleash another attack on the scizzler. The scizzler gave a whimper and ran up behind Bryn for pro-

tection, but she hadn't forgotten that a few seconds ago he wanted to eat her. She dropped Beloved down to point it at the scizzler, leaving a bright red and orange trail of light, while simultaneously pointing a finger at Mr. Bakeman.

"Back off," she said in a commanding tone, and Mr. Bakeman wilted under her voice and the sureness of her stance. Bryn had always been careful to be polite and respectful when dealing with authority figures. She found it advantageous since they were the ones with the power and the resources. People responded well to courtesy, especially conceited people, and people in authority were often conceited. Bryn had to learn these lessons when she was very young, thanks to her father.

She saw no need to respect Mr. Bakeman's authority today, for many reasons. The past two days had changed her, for sure, making her wonder why she used to care about things that really aren't important, like her nails, or her makeup, or what she was wearing. Those things might be important if she were going to be a model or an actress or even a housewife, but Bryn had different dreams. And the sword wasn't helping. It filled her with a sense of control, a control that she had feared she had lost forever when she was raped.

But it was more than that. For the first time, Bryn realized that Mr. Bakeman was not the authority here. In his conceit, he thought he was, that he knew everything there was to know about monsters and that everyone should follow his advice. Bryn's anger was misdirected, she knew; she was angry at all of the Mr. Bakemans out there, but just had this one available to vilify. Bryn was beginning to think that she knew more about monsters than all of them put together, because she had stopped to study them rather than follow the conventional wisdom that had been passed down through the generations.

"This creature is not a threat to you or to me. You won't be killing it," Bryn said.

Mr. Bakeman was clearly taken aback by the authority that Bryn was demonstrating, but he was trying to fight back. "Listen here, Aubryn Dandaster. That is a dangerous creature. If I hadn't warned you that it was coming, it could have seriously hurt you. Now that you seem to have subdued it, somehow," his eyes glanced at her sword, clearly curious about exactly what had happened to his magic, "I'll happily take it back and go lock it up with the other monsters again." Mr. Bakeman kept some weak monsters in cages so that he could give students first-

hand experience in “dealing” with them. Clearly one of the students had failed to deal with this one, and whatever had been attracting monsters to Bryn recently must have drawn the thing across the Academy grounds to her.

Bryn sighed. She had a lot of things to deal with right now. She didn't like the monsters being caged and abused, but she didn't have the time or the resources to take care of this thing, much less the other monsters that had been caged by Mr. Bakeman. This was a problem she couldn't tackle right now, not this minute, but she could plant some seeds.

“Tell me, Mr. Bakeman, does your mistreatment of these creatures ever bother you?”

“Mistreatment!? How dare you! These monsters are vicious, evil creations that want only one thing: a giant chunk of your flesh to gnaw on.”

“If you stopped for two seconds to actually open your eyes and look at these things as something other than the monsters you were taught that they were, you'd know that wasn't true.” She used her free hand to unhook her green satchel, upending a pile of blue kiema on the ground in front of the scrizzler. She hoped that it wasn't just vulprin that were able to sense the taint. She had wanted to save her discovery until she could learn more about it, but the well-being of these creatures was more important than earning accolades.

As Bryn expected, when she withdrew her sword from the scrizzler with a flash of red, it buried its nose in the pile of kiema. Mr. Bakeman watched it curiously, until it found a piece that it wanted. It gobbled up the crystal in delight, throwing its head back in a glorious yelp, rising to its hind legs and standing upright, its cheshire smile pulling back to reveal human teeth rather than a row of fangs. Just as quickly, the transformation passed, and it was back on all fours, noticeably calmer than it had been. Bryn reached down and stroked its neck, the cold stiffness of the metallic fur bristling and parting to allow her hand access to its skin. She planted Beloved in the ground, feeling a sense of loss as she released its grip, and scooped the tainted kiema back into her satchel.

“Aubryn, what just happened?” Mr. Bakeman asked, with a group of students now watching in awe from behind him.

“I stopped treating him as a monster, and he stopped acting like one,” Bryn said. “He's just trying to survive the same way we all are,

but he needs more than food and water. Monsters need blue kiema, the kiema of life, to survive. That is why they attack people, not because they are evil or inherently violent. They are just desperate." She thought about Edger killing the behammon. "Desperation is the mother of violence.

"Take away their desperation, and they are as gentle as you or I. Gentler, probably, because I'm a tough bitch and we've all seen how you handle your problems," Bryn jabbed, even though she knew that Mr. Bakeman had acted in ignorance and that he had already learned his lesson.

"Gods, Aubryn, I'm sorry, I had no idea. How long have you known about this?"

"I just learned it myself. I've still had to kill some monsters to defend myself since, and you should kill them too if it comes to that, but we have to find a better way. I have a lot going on, Mr. Bakeman. I want to do something about this, but I can't do it on my own. Will you help?"

"Of course, Aubryn. The entire school will. This discovery is extraordinary. It could change Ortha as we know it!"

Bryn said darkly, "I wouldn't celebrate immediately. I can't be the first person in Ortha to have ever witnessed this. Someone in the government must know about this, even if they don't admit it publicly. I don't know that they will like it becoming public knowledge." Mr. Bakeman seemed to understand Bryn's meaning.

Am I stirring up something here? Just how much like my father am I? Bryn worried. *What if he had learned this too, and that had something to do with the fires he started?* It seemed unlikely, but there was something comforting about that theory, so Bryn would keep her eyes out for evidence to support it. *Maybe my father isn't a villain. But why would he kidnap my mother and burn down our home?*

"I can't imagine that Rosetta Industries knows about it, or they'd already have a product line of untainted kiema," Bryn said.

"Wait, you're saying that the scizzler was able to tell which kiema was tainted?" Mr. Bakeman asked. Bryn shook her head in exasperation. This was a man who was supposed to be teaching her, and she was having to teach him what was right in front of him.

"For blue kiema, at least. I don't know if you can convince them to do the same for red kiema, unfortunately. In any case, like I said, I need your help." Bryn felt emboldened by the sword, and by the appar-

ent reversal in her relationship with Mr. Bakeman. “I want you and your class to study this phenomenon, to see if you can get the monsters to sort out a pile of tainted and untainted kiema, and to see if and for how long we can prolong the humanizing effect on them. We may also be able to replicate the effect using cyan or white magic, so you should collaborate with Dr. Vionetta on this.”

Mr. Bakeman started to protest, but Bryn silenced him with a stare that expected him to fall in line. Slowly, grudgingly, he seemed to soften, consternation turning to admiration. “You’re right, of course, Aubryn. This is important, and it’s something that we should be working on here at the Saggiset Academy. But I don’t think the school has the resources to do what you’re asking.”

“You worry about supplying the manpower, and I’ll worry about supplying the kiema. Deal?” Bryn was beginning to worry that the money she stole from Lani was not really the infinite supply she thought it was. A venture like this would be expensive, and it would drain her purse eventually. If she kept thinking of it as a bottomless well that she could just dip her bucket into whenever she wanted, she might find herself awfully thirsty one day.

“Alright. Come here, boy,” Mr. Bakeman coaxed the scizzler.

“Also, I want you to give the monsters names,” Bryn demanded, since she was on a roll.

“Names?”

“People have names. They should have names, too. This isn’t just a scizzler. It’s Scratch. He’s an individual, he should be treated with dignity.”

“Okay,” Mr. Bakeman said, not really understanding. “Come here, Scratch.” Scratch perked his ears up and bounded over to Mr. Bakeman, sitting down obediently next to him.

“One last thing,” Bryn warned, because she was worried that Mr. Bakeman wouldn’t realize it on his own. “Be careful about the other monsters. Scratch here is one of the least aggressive that I’ve seen. Some monsters might not respond as favorably to you, the kiema, or to you not providing enough kiema. Lethal force should be a last resort, but don’t fall so far into complacency that you forget what these things are.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” Mr. Bakeman said. The students in his class – and Bannam – had watched the exchange in rapt silence,

Bryn was beginning to realize. When she looked out at them, they no longer looked like her peers. Bryn didn't feel like they were peers, and they certainly didn't look like they thought they could compare themselves to Bryn. Bryn wondered how much of it was the sword, and how much of it was simply the fact that she had grown up and moved beyond the petty preconceptions that had been holding her back.

Any one of those people could be Lani, Bryn thought.

After no one moved for a few minutes, Bryn said loudly, "You're all dismissed back to practice field E." The students didn't hesitate to start running, and Mr. Bakeman gave a pathetic look to Bryn before he joined them.

"Whyat's breath, Bryn, that was exciting," Bannam said after they had left. "And the sword! Did you know it could do that?" He pretended to hold up an imaginary sword of his own and made a lot of swooshing sounds before miming Bryn's absorption of a fireball.

"Well, I wanted the sword to be powerful, legendary, and magical," Bryn said, truthfully. "And you have to admit, it's pretty badass." She watched the colors swirling around in the crystalline blade. *If it were just red, I would assume that I had just absorbed the red magic into the blade. But it's orange too. What does the orange signify? There's no such thing as orange magic. If we went by the standards set forth in color mixing theory, it would be two parts red to one part green. But that's not how mixing magic works. No matter what proportion of red and green you put into a spell, it'll always come out yellow if both are present. Or white if you include any blue at all. Orange magic just isn't a thing. So what does this mean?* Bryn didn't have the answers.

"You really wanted to test it out on Scratch, didn't you?" Bannam said.

Bryn blushed a little and looked at him, surprised that he managed to read that from her, "I really did. But it wasn't the right thing to do."

"Well, how about a practice dummy instead?"

"How do you mean?"

"I could make you an homunculus to test the sword on."

"A homunculus?"

"A mimic, a doppelganger, a simulacrum. A thing that looks and feels and even sometimes acts like a real creature, but it lacks thought or feeling."

Oh come on, Bryn thought. I don't need to hear this right now.

What's the matter, Bryn? Doubt asked knowingly.

I'm still grappling with the ethics of killing monsters and the thought that anyone around me might be a shapeshifter. I don't need to add to that the possibility that there could be people walking around that aren't even real people.

What makes a person real?

That's exactly my point! What's the difference between a homunculus and a person!? If it looks like a scizzler, walks like a scizzler, and howls like a scizzler, why isn't it a scizzler?

Bannam told you the difference. It doesn't truly think or feel. It just mimics the template that its based on.

How can he know that?

Why are you asking me and not him? Bryn didn't answer. *Is your baby real?*

What kind of a question is that?

Does she look like a human, walk like a human, or cry like a human? Doubt asked, her voice tinted black with ichor as the word cry slid off her tongue.

She is a human, Bryn thought defiantly.

Not yet, she isn't.

Then what is she?

Potential? How should I know? asked Doubt in exasperation.

Potential. Bryn liked the sound of that word. *That wouldn't be a terrible name. We could call her Poe for short.*

We?

You're not going anywhere, are you? Bryn asked, actually a little worried that she might. She was starting to like having this voice around. It made her feel less alone.

I guess not. You do have a habit of befriending us, don't you?

Befriending you?

Aubryn Dandaster, monster tamer extraordinaire.

Is that what you are, then?

Isn't that what you think?

Do you have to answer all of my questions with more questions?

No, Doubt said, and just as abruptly as she arrived she was gone.

Bryn was working on maintaining her focus on the world around her during her little mental discussions with Doubt, so she didn't think Bannam noticed her distraction this time. She hadn't really made a decision though.

"How do you know that they don't think or feel?" Bryn asked.

"I'm the one making them, Bryn. Of course I know." Bannam said.

"I made this sword," Bryn said, swinging it through the air with a trail of red. "But there's a lot that I don't know about it. I wonder if Whyat knew what he had created when he made his children, or when he made Ortha."

Bannam looked at Bryn with a blank look on his face. Bryn was worried that, for all of his brilliance, Bannam would have a lot of trouble with this basic philosophical and moral dilemma.

It's not like I'm doing much better, Bryn admitted to herself.

"You've given me a lot to think about, Bryn," was all he said as he sat back down on the practice field with his chin resting on his fist.

Chapter 20: In Which Dr. Umbron Gives Bryn a Gift

While Bannam sat in thoughtful repose, Bryn set to learning the gestures she would need for the recycling token. She tweaked her list a little, replacing tenebrous with occluded, since the shadowy trail the sword cast before it was hit by Mr. Bakeman's spell had a kind of dark radiance to it. She asked Bannam to get her some lunch from the cafeteria while she worked on learning the new gestures, and he was more than happy to do so. Her stomach was beginning to feel like a bottomless pit by the time he returned with two plates heaped with protein. Bryn would have liked to have *something* green on her plate, but given how sore her entire body was beginning to feel, she thought Bannam made the right decision. She really needed to finish this token today, and she wasn't going to be getting the energy for it from anywhere but food.

Bryn was just starting to worry about how long Dr. Umbron was gone when he returned.

"My, my, aren't you just the talk of campus. I just got back from the faculty lounge. Mr. Bakeman was in a fit, questioning my credentials as a teacher for leaving you two unsupervised," Dr. Umbron said.

"I'm sorry, I hope I didn't cause you any trouble," Bryn said.

"Trouble? Whyat's breath, Bryn, the only trouble was for him! He lost control of one of his creatures, and you had to stop it. Everyone was on your side. If you ask me, Mr. Bakeman's the one who needs supervision." Bryn wasn't going to disagree with him. "There was quite a bit of talk about your sword, too."

"I'm not surprised," Bryn said, turning it over and inspecting it. "It turned out even better than I expected."

"It is a thing of beauty," Dr. Umbron said. "I had expected you to wait for me, but you seem to have done alright on your own. May I hold it?"

Bryn stood up and started to hand the sword to him, but she hesitated. She wasn't afraid that he would use it on her; even if his motives were suspect, he didn't seem to want her dead any more than Lani did. She hesitated because she didn't think the sword would want him to hold it.

Your sword has wants? Doubt asked her.

Can't you feel it? It wants to be in my hand.

Does your sword have thoughts and feelings?

Bryn glared thoughts of consternation at Doubt in the land of her mind, not bothering with specific words. *I don't have time for this right now.*

You just don't have the answers. Doubt was right. Bryn was beginning to wonder if there were answers.

"I'm... not sure that's a good idea, sir," Bryn said. Dr. Umbroon took his hand back and looked insulted. "I'm thinking of your safety, Dr. Umbroon. I don't think anyone other than me should touch the hilt of my sword."

"Is that something you built into it deliberately?" Dr. Umbroon asked.

"Not exactly. I thought I was being pretty specific, with twenty words, but I guess I was still pretty vague about a lot of it."

"Twenty words! Gods, Bryn, how many words did you use on the token!?"

"Just five," Bryn said innocently, sure that he would think that was too many.

"One hundred gestures!?! Maybe I should be fired. You're lucky you're still alive."

"I'm fine, sir. I had some lunch, and it seems to have helped." Now that Bryn thought about it, she had been exhausted, but she should have felt even weaker than she did. She had nearly recovered at this point.

What do you expect? You have three people inside of you, Doubt said.

Now you're a person? And Poe too?

It doesn't really matter. The important thing is that we're here.

Can you speak with Poe too?

I can speak to her, the same as you. It doesn't mean she can hear us. She's a day old, Bryn, what do you expect? Bryn wasn't sure what she expected. She hoped that if Poe were the spawn of a demigod that Doubt would have some insight into that.

I have to try to stop making expectations, Bryn answered. *They just keep getting shattered anyway. But are you saying that you're lending me some strength?*

I want you alive, Doubt responded in a sultry voice.

What are you taking from me in return? Doubt's only response was echoes of laughter.

"Well, I don't think that you should attempt to make the recycling token until you've had some time to rest," Dr. Umbroon interrupted Bryn's inner dialogue.

"Really, Dr. Umbroon, I'm fine. It would be better if I could rest first, but I can't afford to at the moment. I can't go walking around with this sword on my hip tonight."

"Got plans with a boy?" he asked, glancing at Bannam.

Between Senator Cimarron, Edger, and Safler, I've got plans with a lot of boys tonight, Bryn thought. *Maybe I'll see Slater too if I have the time to make it back to the Rat Hole. I really need to investigate the scene before the trail goes cold.* She felt strangely excited at the idea of seeing Slater again. She did need to apologize to him.

Instead she said, "No, sir. I don't think I'll be spending much time with boys in the near future. But I will be out in public, and most people don't carry swords around on the street."

"Well, you could try to fit it in here, but the cross-guard might not fit," he said, offering Bryn thin coral red marble box about the length of a small carrot and half as wide as it was long. Bryn took it and held it up; it was less than two inches thick.

"Um, sir," she said, trying her best not to look at him like he'd gone insane, "I'm more worried about the blade than I am the cross-guard."

"Open it up, you wise-ass," Dr. Umbroon said, sounding more like the instructor that Bryn was familiar with. Bryn flicked open the latch that held it closed, and looked inside. "It's bigger on the inside," he said, and Bryn saw what he meant. She waited for Dr. Umbroon's nod before reaching her arm into the box, watching in disbelief as it disappeared. She wagged her fingers to make sure that they still felt like they were there, then pulled them out.

"That's quite extraordinary," Bannam said, watching Bryn's examination. Bryn looked inside again. The inside looked very much like the outside, as if she were looking at it through a macrolens. With the distortion it was hard to really judge how much space there was in there, but she thought that it was somewhere between the size of a large backpack and the size of a bathtub.

"How does it work," Bryn asked, before she was willing to store her sword inside.

"It's a construction of green kiema. Tell me, Bryn, what is green magic?"

"It's the kind of magic, fueled by green kiema, that creates matter."

"That's what a first-year would say," Dr. Umbronn tsked. "You can do better than that."

"It's –" Bannam tried to answer.

"I want to hear Bryn's answer," Dr. Umbronn said, a judgmental eye peering out over the thick glasses.

Bryn thought about it carefully. *Green magic creates matter out of empty space. That's a little more accurate, but not much better. What about red and blue magic?*

Green is matter, red is energy, blue is life. They corresponded strongly to chemistry, physics, and biology respectively, but there was definitely overlap as well. She knew red magic the best, so she decided to start there. *What is red magic?*

Red magic could do a lot. It could create force from nothing, it could excite matter to the point of ignition. But it could also slow things, or freeze them, even if Bryn wasn't as good at those techniques. It could create energy from nothing, or it could return it to nothing. She had always kind of wondered what nothing was in the context of energy; it was a lack of inertia, but she didn't really have a feel for what that really meant.

With green magic, though, Bryn thought she might understand. Nothing was just empty space. That was essentially what recycling was, returning matter to empty space. When you create a wooden sphere with green magic, you make it out of the space between the air, or whatever material you're putting it in. It's harder of course to fit something in the space between water than between air, for instance. But creating that new space displaces and distorts the old space. You have to actually change the fabric of space to make the new object have a place to be.

So what if you wanted to make something, and you carved out the empty space for it, but then you just... didn't fill it in? Bryn looked at the box again. *What if I went through all of the motions to make a treasure chest, but stopped at the very last moment, on the cusp of turning*

that new space into new matter. I could make something a lot like this. That, or I would rip a hole a mile wide in the fabric of space. No wonder he said it was dangerous.

“Green magic allows us to create matter and space, and turn one into the other.”

“That,” Dr. Umbroon said, “is a much better answer. I believe you understand now. This is going even better than I could have hoped for. You are truly living up to your potential.” Bryn put a hand on her abdomen without even thinking about it.

It seemed like such a simple lesson, to Bryn. “I don’t understand why it has taken me this long to understand,” Bryn said. “Or put another way, I don’t understand why I’m now able to pick all of this up so readily.”

“You’ve matured, and you’ve learned how to learn. Your experience with red magic isn’t useless just because you don’t want to use red kiema. You can apply those lessons here, so we aren’t exactly starting from scratch.”

It made sense to Bryn. She looked the box over a few more times. She tried to think about what else one could do with this technique.

She bounced a few ideas off of Doubt before asking Dr. Umbroon, “Could you use these ideas to instantly transport yourself from one place to another?”

Dr. Umbroon frowned and scratched his chin. “I don’t really see how.”

“Well, maybe not instantly, but as fast as light?” Dr. Umbroon seemed skeptical. “Hear me out. Is it possible that the nothingness of green magic – that is, empty space – is in some way the same nothingness of red magic?”

“It’s possible, I guess. I’ve never considered that. Maybe Mr. Plinn would know more.”

“So we combine all three types of kiema. We turn the matter to nothingness, turn the nothingness to light, turn the light back to nothingness, and turn the nothingness back to the original matter, as one of Bannam’s homunculuses.”

“Homunculi,” Bannam corrected, riveted by the discussion.

“Right. Thank you. And the blue kiema can maintain the life and soul of the thing transported, if it’s a living being.”

Dr. Umbronn gave her a disapproving look. "What you're describing does not sound *impossible*. However, it sounds incredibly dangerous. I will sleep better tonight knowing that you don't want to use blue and red kiema. There's a fine line between ingenuity and hubris, Bryn."

"You're right of course, sir. Forget I mentioned it. Maybe some day I will continue to explore this, but I will take every precaution when I do."

"There's no need to try it on a person," Bannam said. He swallowed some red and green kiema.

"Bannam, boy, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to test Bryn's theory on something that isn't alive. That should be simpler, anyway."

"Hold on, boy. Let's take it slowly," Dr. Umbronn said, holding out a hand to stop him. But Bannam wasn't deterred, and he made a dozen motions with glowing yellow digits, culminating with a point.

"Bannam, no!" Bryn screamed, but too late. A beam of light flashed from Bryn to Bannam, almost faster than the eye could see, and Beloved was suddenly in Bannam's grasp. "Drop it right now!"

Bannam gave a wide smile at his success. Bryn and Dr. Umbronn looked on in horror, the grin sharply contrasted by the fountains of blood gushing from his torso. The sword seemed to be slicing and stabbing Bannam's torso of its own accord, pulling Bannam's arms roughly with it, slinging trails of red and orange all over. Everywhere it penetrated his flesh, no matter how small the wound was, torrents of blood seemed to be pulled out like soda through a straw. Bannam's smile covered over in red as he looked down at the carnage.

Bryn put a hand on Dr. Umbronn's shoulder to steady herself, but he nearly collapsed from sickness as well. She wanted to run, to hide from the scene in front of her, to get him medical help at least. But blood spurting from a hundred tiny scratches drained Bannam's body before Bryn could even recover.

"Gods, Bryn, what have you created!?" Dr. Umbronn said, as Bannam's body collapsed to its knees. She didn't answer, her eyes filling with tears.

"Don't cry, Bryn," came a weak whisper from Bannam. "It's my fault. Besides, I'm... not... really..." his voice trailed off as he fell forward on his face.

“Not really? Not really what!?” Bryn screamed at the corpse in futility. “Why would you do that, Bannam!? You knew about the sword!” Dr. Umbroon put his arms around her. She felt oddly comforted, knowing how hard it was for Dr. Umbroon to show such affection. *Not really what?* she kept asking herself.

Not really real, Doubt eventually answered.

Not real?

He seemed awfully interested in testing out your sword, with no regard to his own safety. Maybe this is just a homunculus of the real Bannam.

So, what, he just sends out a copy of himself to school each day? That's crazy.

From what you've been thinking, Bannam isn't entirely sane.

Bryn had to admit, as odd as it sounded, it did sound like the kind of thing that Bannam – the real Bannam – would do.

If he did that, then he'd have some way to see through its eyes and hear through its ears, right? What's the point in having it go to school for you if you're not going to learn anything?

Maybe he had better things to do? I don't know, Bryn, Doubt said.

Bryn composed herself. *Thanks, Doubt. I appreciate your help.*

For what it's worth, I hope he's okay. I did like him.

Me too, Bryn said. She steadied herself and walked over to the body, with Dr. Umbroon watching her. She gingerly plucked the sword from his hand, feeling the familiar and comforting feeling of belonging that it bestowed. At least now she knew what the sword would do in the wrong hands. Maybe Bannam wanted to show her that.

She rolled the body over and stood over it, looking into its still-open eyes, sickened by the bloody smile still on its face.

“Bannam, please, if you can hear or see me, give me some kind of sign.” She waited for a minute, and then off in the distance, she heard what sounded like a signal flare. She gave Dr. Umbroon a hopeful look before running off of practice field D. Her lungs heaved as she climbed the four flights of stairs in the circular building to get a view from the roof of the Academy. The sound was repeated two more times before Bryn managed to get a good look back to the horizon in the direction of the Waalorten suburbs, opposite the lake. After two more loud noises, Bryn saw a bright explosion in the shape of two fists butting

against each other, shimmering bright white even in the afternoon sky. They disappeared with a *pop*, their cinders floating away on the wind. Then another explosion appeared, this one in the shape of two hands that seemed to be growing out of one wrist.

Thank the gods, Bryn thought. He was recounting the advice he had given her about thinking of both of her hands as one unit. *Gods, Bannam, don't you ever do that to me again*. Most of the school had dropped what they were doing to follow Bryn's lead, watching the fireworks in puzzlement. Bryn hurried back to find Dr. Umbroon, but Bannam's homunculus was nowhere to be found.

"Where did he go?"

"I got rid of the body," was all Dr. Umbroon said, and Bryn didn't ask for more details.

"Good. It wasn't really Bannam."

"I assumed so, from your reaction. Kids these days. If my generation had half your talent, Ortha would be a very different place. Now if I can just get you to apply yourselves."

Bryn paced awkwardly. "Well, what do we do now?" she asked.

"I guess we can continue class."

"Do you think Bannam will send another homunculus to rejoin us today?"

"I never have any idea what's going on in that boy's head. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Bryn sighed, and pulled out the box again. She cleaned her sword and placed it inside, having to work to get the cross-guard through the opening. It wouldn't be very easy to get the sword out because of the awkwardness. That wouldn't be very helpful if she needed it in a hurry. Considering that, she decided to recharge the *kietella* in her hand. At least she could conjure a new sword at a moment's notice, though it wouldn't have the red and orange glow. *Maybe I can channel some red magic through the sword?* She wasn't sure if that would affect Poe, so she didn't want to experiment with it right now.

"Did you still want to try making the recycler?" Dr. Umbroon offered.

"No, I don't think I have the stomach for it today, after what we just saw."

"I agree. I'll give the boy credit: he actually did it." Bryn hadn't even noticed in the commotion, but Dr. Umbroon was right.

“Teleportation,” Bryn agreed. “That could change a lot.”

“If anyone asks, though, I’ll give you the credit,” Dr. Umbroon said with a wink.

“It was hardly an individual effort,” Bryn said, nervously. It was a group effort on behalf of Bryn, Dr. Umbroon, Bannam, and Doubt, for that matter. But she didn’t see any reason to mention Doubt to Dr. Umbroon, especially since he could still be fishing for information about her father. Bryn couldn’t be sure that Doubt, her father, and the rape were all related, but the timing made it probable. She was feeling less and less paranoid as the day went on, as she continued her discussions with Dr. Umbroon, but she wanted to keep reminding herself not to trust anyone.

You can trust me, Doubt said sweetly.

Hah! I trust you least of all. Less than my father even.

Ooooh, she let out a long syrupy moan. *This sounds like a fun game. Let’s rank the people in your life in order of how much you trust them.*

Bryn was appalled, but she didn’t stop Doubt from continuing.

Let’s see, your mother comes first, I’m sure. Bryn agreed. *Hah, so naive.*

Doubt continued. *I’m guessing Nighra, Emera, and Safler are next, in that order. Unless you think they might be Lani?*

They could be, but I can check that. I already asked Nighra about the pink dress this morning, and she remembered that. I knew them before my father became a terrorist. They stuck by my side, unlike everyone else.

Yes, I see, you should tell me more about that some time, you know. I don’t know the details of your father’s exploits, since you don’t like to think about it. Bryn didn’t think she had ever heard anyone else refer to her father as “father.” They always said “dad” or “Rudy.” It felt strange coming from Doubt, but then again, there was nothing about Doubt that wasn’t strange. *In any case, next would be Edger, I guess.*

I guess so, Bryn said, not really wanting to admit it.

Well, he did help you, and he was a perfect gentleman about it. Plus you know he isn’t Lani.

Do I? What if Lani can create and control a homunculus of herself. She could be any number of people! What if everyone but me is Lani?

Doubt let out a long laugh. *I love your imagination, Bryn. That would be fun. But I think we would both agree that that's a bit far-fetched.*

Okay, I can agree on that much, Edger is almost certainly not Lani, Bryn admitted. And if he is, I'm fucked no matter what I do, so let's just assume Edger is not Lani.

Mrs. Pepriche, followed by most of the other teachers next. Then Mr. Bakeman, then your other peers, then Dr. Umbronn.

I don't know, Bryn said, looking at the box in her hand. I think I trust Dr. Umbronn more than Mr. Bakeman and my peers.

Oho, interesting. How about Bannam and Mrs. Scarsbad?

She's in there somewhere, too, after Mr. Bakeman. As for Bannam... I don't know if I can trust him just because he's so unpredictable. But I also don't really find him suspicious, either. We'll just put him in with the rest of my peers.

Edger's parents?

Mrs. Barrington before even Mrs. Pepriche, right after Edger. Mr. Barrington is in last so far.

Really? Ouch.

Well, Mrs. Barrington has just been so nice to me, and you saw the way Mr. Barrington looked at me when I was putting my dress back on.

Did I?

I assume you can see the things I see.

Assume away. Still, I'm not sure you understand why trusting people is dangerous.

Huh?

If someone wants you to trust them, they're not going to be lecherous towards you like Mr. Barrington. They're going to be sweet and accommodating, like Mrs. Barrington. Like the way you act with authority figures.

Bryn wanted to argue, but she knew Doubt was right. *Kind of like you?* she asked. Doubt's laugh was warm and juicy.

You probably trust the vulprin and the scizzler more than everyone we have left.

Probably. I don't know, Slaterin is probably in front of them. Maybe in front of Mr. Barrington.

Oh my, someone has a crush?

What? No! But he saved my life, and he didn't have to. He's not that different from Edger.

All the more suspicious, Doubt said, giggling. Then what? Your father, then me?

My father, the police, Lani, and then you can be last.

Oh good, I like standing in the back. It's much harder to be backstabbed back there.

Unless my rapist isn't any of those people. I'd put that bastard behind you.

Oh my, Bryn. Kinky.

Not what I meant, and you know it. She was kind of sickened whenever she thought about her rapist, and didn't appreciate the innuendo in the least.

How about Senator Cimarron?

I don't even know Senator Cimarron. He might as well be Lani. Bryn paused. *He's probably Lani.*

Yeah, probably. Glad we're ready for that encounter. Anyway, if that's everyone, I guess Safler is your rapist.

What? Where did that come from?

Well, he's the man you trust the most. That means he did it.

That's ridiculous. I'm done talking to you for now. She hesitated. *Besides, he and Emera are attached at the hip. Why would he do it?*

I'm just basing my assessment on Chesnan's, Doubt said. Bryn thought it strange that Doubt called him Chesnan instead of Mr. Barrington for some reason. She guessed she still hoped that Doubt was a part of her rather than some invading entity. *You've really filled out, and Safler is a teenage boy who has watched you grow up.*

Yeah, I'm done talking to you now, Bryn said. *Oh, there is one other person. I trust Poe most of all.*

After a moment, Doubt's laughter bubbled up like newly discovered crude oil.

What? Bryn asked, unsure why it was so funny.

If Poe is the demigod you think she is, what if she conceived herself? Doubt continued in a fit of laughter. *She could be the baby and the rapist, in the front and in the back!*

Conceived herself? Bryn wondered. *Something out of nothing. Why not?*

I don't think you appreciate my humor, Bryn, Doubt said with mock umbrage, then she left with a trail of laughter.

The rest of Bryn's training with Dr. Umbronn was uneventful, mostly recapping and expanding on some details of the major discoveries of the day. Shortly before the evening audibells, Bannam simply walked on to practice field D as if nothing had happened.

"Welcome back," Bryn said, unsure how she should respond to his entrance after the spectacular exit he made.

"Thanks, Bryn. I'll be sure not to touch your sword again."

"That would be for the best. I take it we're talking to another homunculus?" Bryn said.

"Oh. No. I think that was the last homunculus I'm going to make. Of me, at the very least."

"Really?" Bryn asked. "Why?"

"Well, it's what you said earlier. What if that homunculus were a real person of his own right?" So Bannam really did understand what Bryn was saying, earlier.

"I see. But if so, why have your copy kill itself?"

"It made the decision for us. It knew it was wrong for there to be two of us. If only one of us was supposed to be here, it was me."

"Gods, Bannam, I'm really sorry," Bryn said, uncomfortable that she had put him or his homunculus in that situation.

"I know, it's really sad, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I wouldn't want something I created to die, much less to kill itself so horrifically." She thought of Poe.

"Yeah." He looked like he would be crying if he were able to do so, but Bryn didn't think he possessed that particular emotional register. "But he wanted to help you. He was able to verify your theory and explore the capabilities of your sword in one experiment. I think... I think he was happy with how he chose to die."

"That's good, Bannam. We can remember him as doing some good with his short life," Bryn said, hoping he believed the lie more than she did.

"Bryn, may I ask you for a favor?"

“Anything,” Bryn said, regretting her instinctive response. She had a lot to do.

“You’re going shopping with your friends after school, right? Can I come too?”

Bryn eyed him skeptically. How did he know that she was going shopping? Could he actually see the future? The homunculus seemed to think it could. Or did he just know what she had said to Nighra earlier? That would have been a much simpler explanation that could explain both this knowledge and how the homunculus knew where she wanted to land. She didn’t really care one way or the other – even if it felt like spying, she didn’t really think that he was being malicious since he was being so upfront about it. But the truth, whether it was the truth Bannam said, the truth he believed, or something else entirely, could mean something about Poe.

“Of course you can, Bannam.” The evening audibells rang. “Thank you for everything, sir,” she said to Dr. Umbroon. “I really do appreciate your help today.”

“I know, Bryn, and to be honest, I’m glad to finally be useful around here,” Dr. Umbroon replied. “I’ll be here for you whenever you need me. I don’t know what trouble you’re involved in, but I wish you the best.”

“Thanks.” She took Bannam with her to load the kiema in her locker into her magic box.

“That’s a lot of kiema, Bryn. You must be as rich as my parents!” Bryn didn’t know Bannam’s parents, but she believed him about their wealth. Bannam didn’t seem to care about how much kiema he used, unlike everyone else.

“Yeah, I guess it is a lot. But I’m not really rich, Bannam,” she said as she dumped most of it into the box, which seemed to have plenty of room for it. She wouldn’t be able to access it on the fly, since the blue and green kiema was now all mixed together, but she would be able to sort that out later. Ideally she’d make some new satchels using Mr. Umbroon’s technique, but she needed to think on it a while before she could be sure that she could do it safely.

“Could you do me a favor? Keep a lookout for people while I do something private?” Bannam nodded and went to the middle of the hall, confirming that it was empty. Bryn split the remaining wad of money evenly between her locker, the box, and her satchel, with a little bit left

for her bra. As long as she had at least one hiding place, she'd be okay for a while.

“If you need money, let me know,” Bannam said, without looking at her or what she was doing. “I can get some for you.” Bryn didn't really want to know what that meant. After what she'd seen of Bannam today, he would probably counterfeit it somehow, even though Bryn was well aware of how hard that was to do. Bryn didn't feel up to teaching Bannam another lesson, and she was no longer surprised by the fact that he just knew things he shouldn't be able to know. Right now, all she wanted to do was go shopping with her friends.

Chapter 21: In Which Bryn Goes Shopping

Bryn waved as she guided Bannam to the parking lot. Nighra, standing beside her leviboard and the pair of lovebirds, gave a nervous wave back as she saw Bannam by Bryn's side. Bryn gave her a furtive shrug to indicate that she didn't really have much of a choice but to invite him, and Nighra understood, rolling her eyes a bit. They had known each other long enough to communicate a lot without words, but they also weren't trying very hard to hide their opinion of Bannam. Bryn didn't think he would even notice.

"I've been looking forward to this all day," Nighra said as she climbed into the driver's seat at the front of the board. It looked a lot like Mr. Barrington's board, but it had seen a few more miles, the black matte finish wearing off to a dull gray, with white dings and scratches along the edges in a few places. The leather on one of the passenger seats was ripped and stitched back together in two places. It was definitely a hand-me-down, probably from Nighra's older brother, Landers. Bryn liked Landers. He was a few years older than she was, but she had always thought he was cute, and he was nice to her whenever she spent time with Nighra's family. Nighra was lucky; even though third-years were old enough to drive, most of the students at Bryn's school came from families that couldn't afford a second or third leviboard for their children.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to use magic without using your fingers?" Safler asked Bryn while Nighra tapped in the unlock sequence on her leviboard.

"Gods, after the day I had using magic *with* my fingers, I don't want to think about trying to do it without them."

"Good idea. Besides, I don't even know why anyone would bother. If you lose your fingers, you've got bigger problems on your hands than not being able to use magic." Emera was speaking to everyone, but she was looking at Safler. She gave him a kiss on the lips, turning to see Bryn after giving Safler a big smile. "Oh, Bannam, I didn't see you there. How are we going to do this?" She was referring to the seats. There was just the driver's seat in the front, and three passenger seats in a row behind it.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know there wasn't any room for me," Bannam said. "I don't have to come." He looked sad, sad and pathetic. Nighra and Emera gave her a look saying that this was the perfect way to ditch him, but Bryn couldn't do that.

“We’ll make room. Bryn can sit on Safler’s lap,” Nighra joked. She and Safler were the only ones to laugh, and it trailed off quickly. Nighra looked confused – Bryn didn’t know how to convey how uncomfortable the joke made her feel – and Safler looked like he was in trouble.

“The only woman that’s going to be on *this* lap,” Emera said, waving her open palm ostentatiously in front of it, “is me.”

“I guess I could sit on Safler’s lap,” Bannam said. This time all the girls laughed. “What? I’m thinner than you are.” Emera’s laughter stopped immediately, and Nighra’s became a howl.

The exchange continued a while longer, Safler trying to convince Emera that she was beautiful. And she was, even if she was a little plump. Emera’s curves were nearly as voluptuous as Bryn’s and Nighra’s, even though it was unusual for her ethnicity. Part of it was the extra pounds, but it was really just the shape of her body that was unusual. But she had a beautiful face with thin, devilish lips, and gorgeous silky black hair that rose at least four inches from her head before plunging loosely to her shoulders in wavy layers. Bryn would kill for her hair. It would be impossible to wear it wrong. You could wear it up, you could wear it down, you could braid it into dreadlocks, you could even wrap it up into two braids that fell on either side of your head; it would look amazing no matter what you did with it. Bryn’s hair wanted to just *expand* no matter what she did to hers.

Of course, she and Nighra had their own assets; Nighra was thin yet shapely, with the body and flawless dark brown skin of a model, even if her eyes looked a little off and her front teeth had a very small but noticeable gap between them. At least Bryn had her boobs, she guessed, even if she wished her skin were as dark as Nighra’s and that her hair were as smooth as Emera’s. She didn’t really know why people thought she was beautiful, but they said they did. Mr. Barrington certainly seemed to think so, and he was a sex worker.

“Well, no one’s sitting on anyone’s lap, not on my leviboard,” Nighra said. “We’re going through the heart of the city. There will be police everywhere. I’m not going to get a ticket just so the two of you can joust with your tongues.”

“Are you talking to Emera or Bannam?” Bryn joked.

“Either of them.”

“Oh I know,” Bannam said, pounding his fist into his palm suddenly. “I’ll just sit on the board itself, and hide myself.” He jumped onto

the board before Nighra had a chance to object, and with a flash of magenta he vanished from sight.

“Bannam?” Bryn asked, climbing up into one of the seats and reaching out to where he vanished.

“Yes, Bryn?” came a disembodied voice. It reminded her of Doubt, though it was clearly coming from outside of her head, from the direction of where she assumed Bannam was.

“That’s quite impressive, but I’m going to need you to be a little less impulsive if our little arrangement is going to work,” Bryn said.

“I’m sorry, Bryn. Sometimes I just don’t know how to stop myself.”

“It’s okay, Bannam. You don’t have to apologize. You are who you are. I understand that. Just do your best not to make too much trouble, okay?”

Nighra leaned over to whisper to Bryn when Bannam agreed, “Bryn, why on earth is this guy with us?”

“He’s not so bad, Nighra. He’s a little weird, I know, but he really helped me out a lot today. I’m not really sure what’s going on in that head of his, but he’s trying to figure something out, and he’s not asking for anything more than just to hang out with us.”

“Are you sure? I mean, what if he has a crush on you?”

“On me? Unlikely. Maybe he’s trying to get close to you,” Bryn suggested instead.

“Oh good, that’s just what I need. Fine,” she said, as she started the leviboard, Emera and Safler scrambling to buckle in. “Are you buckled up back there, Bannam? I wouldn’t want you falling off, especially since I can’t see you.”

“I believe that I have secured myself effectively,” he said. Bryn guessed he was using some red magic for that, but his invisibility seemed to be masking the magical signature as well. The number of tricks that Bannam seemed to have up his sleeve made Bryn feel inadequate. She had to remind herself that his remarkable abilities did not diminish her own abilities in any way. He was Bannam, and she was Bryn. Still, his talents could make him a valuable asset, if she could figure out how to direct them to her advantage.

“Good, hang on,” Nighra laughed as she took off, accelerating so fast that Bryn nearly fell out of her seat. Bannam let out a wail as the leviboard nearly left him behind, but his voice seemed to stay with

them. Emera and Safler even had to put a short hiatus on their canoodling to steady themselves.

“Okay, Bryn, we’ve waited long enough to ask,” Emera said when she finally came up for breath. “What really happened with your dad and your house?”

“Gods,” Bryn said, beating her head back against the headrest. “I wish I knew. I’m knee-deep in shit, you guys. My father and the house are just the beginning.”

“Well, I for one am just grateful that you finally got over yourself and hooked up with that drummer. If you’d been at home with your mom, Bryn...” Emera didn’t finish the thought, but it wasn’t her genuine concern that made Bryn’s ears perk up.

“The drummer?” she asked aloud, though she was speaking more to herself.

“Yeah. Honestly, Bryn, he was kind of cute, I guess, but for you to jump up on the stage like that... I just didn’t really expect that from you.”

“You mean Satyrday night?” Bryn asked, trying to piece together what Emera was saying. This was the first clue that she had about her missing memories, other than the dress she was wearing. *We were at a concert, of course. That explains the dress, the hair, the nails, and the makeup. I wanted to look my best.*

“What? No! Fryday. Did you hook up with another drummer on Satyrday, you little slut?” Emera asked with a giggle.

Bryn sighed. “I’ll be honest with you guys, I don’t remember a damn thing that happened between Thirdsday morning and when I woke up yesterday.”

“What!?” Emera gasped, as a stunned and distracted Nighra swerved to avoid a pedestrian she nearly plowed over. Emera knew a lot about mental magic, so things that affected memory were in her area of expertise. Yet another reason that Bryn knew she needed to confide in her friends.

“I know, I know. I don’t even remember going to a concert with you guys.”

“Gods, Bryn, where did you wake up?” Safler asked.

“Huh?” Bryn thought it was an odd question.

“Well, I mean, you weren’t at home, right? If you were you would have been caught in the fire. We had tried to call you on Satyr-

day, and your mom said you didn't come home and that she was worried sick about you. We just assumed you were having a good time with the drummer."

"Oh, gods," Bryn thought she was going to be sick. Her friends thought she was having a good time and ignoring her mother for this drummer when, in all likelihood, he was raping and beating her for an entire day. "Oh, my mother must have been freaking out. And now my father has kidnapped her, and she still doesn't know that I'm safe. I have to find her. I have to find my father. I don't have the time to go shopping with you all."

"Calm down, Bryn," Emera said, reaching over to hug her. "Your mom has been kidnapped? Are you sure?"

Bryn *wasn't* sure. She had been told that by Lani. *Fucking Lani*. Bryn didn't know what to believe.

"I don't know. Maybe. I couldn't find her in the ruins, so I don't think she was killed in the fire. As for the rest of it, it's secondhand information from a very unreliable source."

"Well at least she isn't dead. I don't think your dad would want her dead anyway, right? I mean, he still loves you and your mom, right?"

"I don't know," Bryn said. "We haven't seen him since his arrest. He looked awfully angry at my mom as the police took him away."

"Okay, well, we can help you figure this out," Safler said. "Let's start with my question. Where did you wake up?"

The boy is persistent with that question, Doubt said to Bryn.

I don't have any reason to think it was Safler, Bryn replied to Doubt. *That doesn't even make any sense.*

Suit yourself, Doubt said.

"That's the worst part, guys. I—" she felt a lump rise in her throat and couldn't continue. Somehow telling Edger and his father seemed okay, since she didn't really know them very well. There was some sort of emotional distance that acted as a buffer to protect Bryn from the reality of her rape, and it was only through that buffer that she was able to reconnect with Edger despite his knowledge of what happened to her.

But these people were her closest friends. They knew she was a virgin, that she had never really expressed much interest in sex, and that her behavior with the drummer was out of character for her. They knew her, and they loved her, unconditionally. This news would tear

them apart. They would console her, and they would pity her, and she would fall apart. She didn't know that she could handle that right now. But she owed it to her friends to be honest with them, and she needed them. Not just their help in tracking down her mother, and her father, and her rapist. She needed their friendship.

"I woke up in an alley. My dress was torn almost completely off of me and I'd been raped and beaten to within an inch of my life." The words sounded cold and hollow as she said them, as if putting any emotion into them would unleash a levee that she couldn't close. Nighra flicked her hands wildly as the leviboard came to an abrupt and dangerous stop on the sidewalk, eliciting shouts and screams from everyone on the street.

"Burgona's bottom, Bryn," Nighra said eventually to break the silence. "I'm going to fucking kill that drummer." Emera was torn between trying to give Bryn support and trying to seek some from Safler for herself. Safler just looked stunned.

"Oh, Bryn, that's just awful," Bannam said. Bryn had almost forgotten that he was there.

Bryn swallowed and continued, seeing no reason to drag this out any longer, "And there's one more thing. I'm pregnant with my rapist's baby." She added as an afterthought, "And I'm keeping it."

Nighra looked back at Bryn, her hand covering her mouth and her eyes filling with tears. She unbuckled her safety belt and gave Bryn an awkward hug, sobbing into her shoulder as Emera joined in. Bryn cried too, of course, and she spent a few minutes just happy that her friends were there and that she wasn't alone.

As her sobs faded, Bryn said, "There's more, really, but that's the most important stuff that happened to me yesterday. I am so glad you all are here. I was a mess without you. I've been trying to stay strong, and to keep moving forward, but I need help."

"Of course, Bryn, anything," Nighra said.

"Where do we even start?" Safler asked.

"I have no idea," Bryn admitted.

"We should start with that lousy drummer," Nighra suggested.

"Yeah, probably. He's number one on my list," Bryn said. Then she sighed. "I should probably get some information from you all about that night, first. And we are close to the strip. We might as well do what we came here for."

“What? Go shopping at a time like this?” Emera asked.

“Sure, why not? It might take my mind off of things. And honestly, I need the clothes, and the break.”

“A little shopping and strategizing? That’s very Bryn,” Saffler said, testing the mood of his companions to see if they could handle something normal after Bryn’s revelation. Bryn shrugged, let her head rest, and closed her eyes. Nighra fired up the leviboard again and drove to the strip, searching three garages before she finally found a place with space. The valet seemed new, so he had a line of seven people ahead of Nighra. Bryn felt like it took forever for him to cycle through the leviboards, stacked one on top of the other in a chamber that sank into or rose from the ground to allow access to whichever leviboard compartment corresponded to the ticket you picked up when you dropped it off. It was safe enough to leave your leviboard locked at one of these places, but this kid kept missing the right compartment so it was going to be a while. Bryn didn’t like waiting, but it gave them time to talk.

“Okay, so, I guess we made plans to go see a concert Fryday night?” Fryday was the last day of school, the first evening of the weekend. It was the perfect time to go out and have a good time.”

“That’s right,” Saffler said. “I managed to get four pit tickets for the Burgona’s Brigade concert, so I thought we’d go that night.”

“Burgona’s Brigade? Really? I agreed to go see them?” Bryn didn’t really like their music very much. And the drummer? She thought she could picture him. He was so scuzzy! Bryn didn’t remember his name.

Oh, you like them dirty, don’t you, Doubt said. Bryn hadn’t really noticed it, but she had been humming in the back of Bryn’s head, and only stopped to tease Bryn. The humming sounded like Edger’s leviboard, now that she thought about it. Bryn rolled her eyes, in her mind.

“That’s not what you said at the time. You were way more excited about it than the rest of us,” Emera said. The line was down to two people.

“That doesn’t sound like me. Who did I study with those days?”

“You and I were with Mrs. Pepriche on Thirdsday,” Nighra said, “And you were with Mr. Bakeman on Fryday, I think. None of us were with you.”

"No, I was with you that day," Bannam said. Bryn kept forgetting he was there, even though he was no longer invisible. He was a ghost, haunting their conversation.

Like me, Doubt said.

Bryn disagreed. *Ghosts are victims of their condition. You're enjoying yours, whatever it is.* Not that Bryn believed in ghosts of the dead. Disembodied monsters, sure, but they were new life, not a shadow of something that once was.

"Really, Mr. Bakeman?" Bryn wondered why she might have taken an interest in the biology teacher before learning about the vulprin. There could be any number of reasons, really. She might have just been bored. Or maybe she was attacked by something she'd never heard of. "What was the topic?"

"Preparation for Fighting Scrizzlers," Bannam said, which was unsurprising given today's lesson.

"That doesn't really make a lot of sense," Bryn said. "I had taken that class before, and you know Mr. Bakeman wouldn't change a single word of his lecture." Everyone agreed that it was unusual.

They finally got the leviboard parked and started walking down the street, their analysis put on hold while they decided where to begin shopping. Clothes were the first order of business.

Oh, I think I'm going to enjoy this, Doubt said in an unusually cheerful tone. Bryn was taking in the bright lights of the photads advertising all of the latest styles and the best deals, and she guessed that Doubt was excited by the sensory overload. It would have been even more jarring if they had come a few hours later after the sun went down, but even in the clear daylight was it was still a sight to behold.

Or maybe she's feeling inspired by how manipulative these advertisements are, Bryn thought to herself as she saw an impossibly thin model in a slim yellow dress. *That sounds more like her.* Doubt just went back to humming, a bit more loudly now, but it was drowned out by the noise of hundreds of shoppers bustling along the large sidewalks of the district, most of whom had probably just gotten off of work and were looking for some fun or food. Bryn was hungry, but she figured she and her friends would eat after they finished shopping.

Safler wanted to go to Hellman's first, a fashionable store that sold both men and women's clothing, but he was outvoted by the girls. Bannam didn't seem to care at all, his wide eyes and blank expression

content to watch the images flashing all around him no matter where they went, beckoning him to buy everything from panty hose to perfume.

"How about Isabella's Closet?" Nighra said, intending it as a joke even though Bryn knew Nighra did actually want to go there. Nighra liked looking at expensive things, even if she couldn't buy them. Bryn could never really justify spending that much money on clothes, except in really special cases. Her favorite dress had been a birthday gift from her mother a few months ago, and it actually came from Isabella's Closet. It was one of the cheapest dresses they had, but Bryn loved it. Bryn tried to put her mother out of her mind.

"Yeah, let's go there," Bryn said. Nighra missed a step and nearly tripped over a small boy holding his mother's hand.

"I was kidding, Bryn. We can't afford that. We'd be better off going to somewhere like Eastern Winds or Cacascopy, since you need a lot of clothes," Nighra said.

"We're going to help you out, don't get us wrong," Emera added, "but we were only able to scrape together a few hundred marks, and you need at least ten completely new outfits, not to mention shoes, socks, and undergarments." Bryn stopped as the rest of the group kept going.

"You guys pooled your money for me?" She was struck by the gesture. She hadn't even considered that people would just give her money after she lost her house. That just wasn't the way Bryn thought about things. It was her problem, and her responsibility. She didn't consider herself to be a charity case, but it was still so thoughtful that she couldn't help but feel warm and fuzzy feelings for her friends right then.

"Not just us," Safler said. "We got a bunch from the other kids at school."

"After it was clear you weren't going to show up for lunch – which was a good idea by the way, since everyone was asking about you," Emera began. Bryn hadn't even considered that. She was glad she was too busy for it. "After you didn't show, I convinced everyone that you couldn't afford it because of what happened and passed around a collection for you."

"You what!?" Bryn shouted angrily over the din of the evening shoppers. People were giving the group a wide berth. Bryn was thankful. Was it more crowded here than it should have been? Maybe it was just her imagination. Bryn used to think that crowds were fun, but now they were just another place for danger to lurk.

"I thought you would need it, and let's be honest. You do," Emera said.

"Bannam, did you see this when you picked up my lunch? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was important, Bryn. I'm sorry."

"No, it's not your fault. Nor yours, Emera. You've both been nothing but good to me. I'm sorry I snapped." Bryn bit her lip. "This just puts me in a bind."

"How so?" Emera asked.

"The thing is, I have the money. It's a long story, but let's just say that money is not an issue. In fact, I want to go to a leviboard dealership tonight, too."

"Really?" Safler said. "How on earth did that happen?"

I stole it from an eleven year old girl, Bryn thought guiltily. How would her friends feel about that?

"I'll tell you once we get somewhere a bit less public. But my point is that it would look really bad for me to show up in a three hundred dollar dress tomorrow after what you did, so now I have to dress down whether I like it or not."

"I'm sorry, Bryn, I didn't know," Emera said.

"And you couldn't have. What you did was really awesome, Emera. I don't want you to feel bad about it. I just," Bryn said pensively, aware of how vain it sounded, "I just was hoping to have something nice for a change."

"Then come on, Bryn, let's go to Isabella's Closet," Nighra said.

"Didn't you just hear me?"

"If you have as much money as you're claiming, then why not just buy one wardrobe for school, and one for everything else? You should have something nice." Bryn couldn't really argue with that logic, and Nighra already had them at the entrance of the store. The models posing in the photads just looked so happy. It was shallow, and vain, but Bryn knew that putting on one of these dresses would make her happy. The lie that she projected on the outside, that she was just another girl in a pretty dress, could be reflected within. By wearing one of these dresses, she could transform herself.

Just like magic, Doubt said. Her humming was loud now, Bryn realized, as she left the muggy street for the refreshing quiet of the boutique, encouraging the others to follow. At first Bryn thought Doubt was

being poetic, but she realized that Doubt was actually being literal. This whole process, the art of making the world see you a certain way, actually did have a lot in common with manifesting your will with green magic. And the adjectives in fashion were all colors, and shapes, and fabrics, and designs.

Do you have to keep doing that? Bryn asked, referring to the humming.

You don't like my song? Doubt asked. Bryn hadn't really been listening to it. Even though it was louder than before, it was still very quiet, only annoying her now because the store was so empty. Not many people could afford to shop here. They only sold twenty dresses at a time, each prominently displayed on its own mannequin on a slightly raised platform. There was an attendant for every row of five dresses, ready to tell Bryn exactly who the designer was, what collection it was from, and what alterations could be done. Price was never discussed at a place like this, not even during checkout.

It's just that it's a little distracting, that's all. Gods, who can afford to shop at a place like this under normal circumstances? She walked up to one outfit with a slightly asymmetric lemon yellow top and a skirt that started with leopard-print at the waist and bled into solid blue at the knee. It looked light and comfortable, exactly the sort of thing that Bryn wanted in the summer heat. She found herself pulling on the skirt to see how it would flex under pressure. She wanted to be beautiful, but she also had to be practical. If she was going to be swinging a sword around, she would need to have some freedom to move. This outfit was promising.

Well I thought you would appreciate the warning, Doubt said after she finished humming another stanza.

Warning?

They've been stalking you for a while. Now. You should probably turn towards the door. Bryn turned suddenly, noticing Bannam do the same out of the corner of her eye. The rest of the store's occupants joined them ten seconds later when a police officer came crashing through the store window, falling in a bloody, contorted mess on the floor. Bryn heard a loud roar from outside from something big, and three garmin were suddenly darting into the store. *What was that sound?*

Burgona's bottom, Bryn, it's a zygallon! Doubt sounded different, suddenly. Bryn thought she sounded scared.

A zygallon!? Garmin and a zygallon working together? How did Doubt and Bannam know?

Bryn didn't waste time pondering questions she couldn't answer. Instead she activated the kietella in her right hand and was already bounding up and over a mannequin platform while the rest of the people were fumbling in their pockets for red kiema. Bryn would have reached for red kiema before, too.

It's a good thing you didn't, Doubt warned. These are no ordinary garmin. The zygallon is controlling them. Everyone is going to use fire on them, just like you would have, but they're going to be immune to it. Even worse, their skin is coated with a flammable oil that's going to make a mess of everything. They'll probably burn this place down, and it's all your fault.

Thanks, more guilt is exactly what I wanted right now, Bryn said. How do you know so much about them, anyway?

I know a lot about monsters, Bryn. Definitely more than Mr. Bakeman. Remember when I suggested giving blue kiema to the vulprin?

I guess that was you, wasn't it? And here I thought I was just clever and a good listener.

Well, I never said you weren't clever. You're smart enough to use me as a resource, after all. And you've been a great listener. That's one of my favorite things about you. Though right now, you should probably pay attention to the problem at hand instead.

Bryn didn't need the advice as she closed the distance to the first garmin. They were spherical things with one giant magenta eye and four flat, sharp appendages that functioned as either arms or legs. Those flaps could cling to their body as they rolled and bounced at high speeds, their preferred method of attack. With the constant peeling of the orange arms and legs from its green body, it almost looked like a piece of fruit that had gone rotten, leaving a trail of flammable brown goo wherever it rolled. Usually that flammable goo was their greatest weakness, but with the zygallon's reinforcement it threatened to make the store-goers' default reaction to a garmin attack a dangerous conflagration.

Even though the garmin's appendages were flat, they were very strong. Bryn assumed that the police officer was thrown through the window by one of them. Now that she was closer to the front doors, she could see that there were at least a dozen more garmin outside,

taking delight in terrorizing the crowd but clearly advancing towards Bryn's location. Half of them were on fire and leaping through the air. The three police still alive outside and retreating from the mob would have benefited from Doubt's warning.

Under normal circumstances, garmin weren't much of a threat by themselves, or even in a pack of five or six. Bryn was starting to wonder if there really existed such a thing as "normal circumstances." The zygallon was the real trouble, Bryn knew. They were among the most imposing of monsters, fifteen feet tall and layered with muscles, like gorillas on steroids with a pair of demonic magenta horns, if gorillas had replaced their skin and soft fur with chitinous black and crimson scales. Bryn knew what to expect when she saw the zygallon, but beyond basic details of their physical description and a general understanding of the extreme threat they presented, not much was known about the creatures. The zygallon was outside on the strip, quite far away, but that was where Bryn would be headed once she dispatched the garmin in the store. No reason to burn down the store if she could avoid it, and Bryn was sure it was she these monsters wanted.

Not going to try to tame them? Doubt asked as Beloved – the second Beloved – slashed an abyssal swipe clean through the center of one of them. Any other sword would have just severed the two halves, leaving a bloody mess where it fell, but Beloved was not content to be just like any other sword. As Bryn drew the sword through the creature, it simply exploded, in every direction, the blood erupting out of its body like the air from a balloon that had just been popped.

Bryn's outfit, the one she got from Lani's mother, was hopelessly ruined, as were the outfits on more than one row of mannequins. *Oops*, she thought as she ducked and stabbed upwards at the garmin that had bounced towards her head. This time, because the creature was in the air, the sanguine explosion had more exposure, enough to ruin every outfit in sight, whether they were worn by living people or by the lifeless models.

I can't afford to let them live this time, whether they're human or not, Bryn said to Doubt. *There's one thing I'm certain of, though.*

Oh phooey, certainty is no fun. Bryn expected Doubt to be laughing, but the gravity of her slimy voice just made Bryn want to take a shower instead. Not that anyone in the room would turn down a shower at this very moment, as long as it wasn't made of blood again. *What are you so certain of?*

Those mannequins aren't human. I may not know about homunculi or monsters or kiemara, but at least I know that.

Oh excellent, Doubt drawled. I'm glad we've established a baseline.

By the time Bryn got to the third garmin seconds later, Nighra had finally cast a quick and dirty fireball towards the thing. It was a weak spell by any measure, but it was fast and it was strong enough to take out a garmin. Bryn couldn't risk taking her eyes off the garmin long enough to track the projectile, but she heard the high pitched whine and felt the heat in time to swing the sword around her back, switching it to her left hand and swiping it through the path she thought the burning orb would take. She was grateful to see a trail of shadows on her right side and a trail of red-and-orange light following it on the left. *I can absorb it even without seeing it, thank the gods.*

"What in the hell did you do that for!?" Nighra shouted, but her words took far longer than the inner dialogues with Doubt. By the time she finished the question, a lot had happened; Bryn had dispatched the third garmin in another gruesome display, and she successfully absorbed two more flaming attacks from Bannam and one of the store's employees. The rest of the people in the store were either bad enough with red magic or slow enough on the draw that they had enough time to stop themselves from finishing the finger-work needed to complete their spells, instead letting the magic rest in their fingers. Emera seemed to be doing a few other things with blue magic instead, but they didn't look like healing, one of the only things Bryn could do with blue kiema, so Bryn had no guesses as to what they were.

Everyone but Bannam was staring at Bryn with their mouths open after the carnage she had brought down upon the creatures. *Let them stare. I just saved their lives, and I didn't even need red magic to do it.*

You needed me, Doubt said. You might want to tell them that the zygallon is psychic.

That giant brute is psychic? The idea that something with so much physical presence would be so intelligent, let alone supernaturally so, was ludicrous. Still, not much was known about them, since it was rare for someone to face one and live to tell the tale. Doubt had to be lying. But had she ever lied to Bryn? Bryn didn't think so. Cryptic, maladjusted, and deceptive: Doubt was plenty of things, but Bryn didn't think she was a liar. She preferred to deal in uncomfortable truths instead.

It's why you humans never see them coming, despite their size. Zygallon are feared and respected, even among monsters, for very good reason. Their psychic powers are how they immunize the garmin. The fire will eventually burn the garmin to death, but they won't care about its effects until they've already burnt down most of the buildings on the strip. And the zygallon has many other more direct psychic talents as well that I'm sure he's going to use on you, and you don't know how to defend yourself yet without Emera's help. Humans know so little about them because they've only ever survived encounters with babies or adolescents who don't yet know how to use their powers.

Forget how you know this, why are you telling me this?

Because I want you to live, Bryn, and you need all of the help you can get. You figured out the vulprin's weakness on your own, but you don't have the opportunity to experiment with the zygallon. It's too dangerous. Plus, Doubt said with hesitation. Once you get near it I will have a lot of trouble helping you. There was a lot of meaning in that admission about Doubt's nature, Bryn was sure. She would have to wait to dissect it, though.

"Sorry, Nighra, but these garmin are immune to fire thanks to the zygallon outside. You would have set this whole place ablaze. Not that I haven't made a mess of things, but getting blood everywhere is not as bad burning to death."

Oh, one more thing, Bryn.

Not now, Bryn growled, becoming more and more annoyed with Doubt's recent loquaciousness.

It's really, really important.

Spit it out already then!

The zygallon's blood is made of acid, Doubt said quickly before shutting up. Bryn cringed as she looked down at Beloved, and glanced at the blood covering the rest of the shop.

Really? For fuck's sake. It would be, wouldn't it. An explosion of that much acid would destroy the entire strip.

"Don't release your magic just yet," Bryn said, raising her sword to rally her friends and the people in the shop. "There are a dozen garmin outside, and a zygallon reinforcing them and making them work together. If we join forces, we can defeat them! We must defeat them before more innocent people die! Now come on, who's with me!?" She hoped it was inspiring and that she would have an army following her,

but she couldn't afford to look behind her to see who would be joining the fray.

Chapter 22: In Which Bryn Deals With Some Garmin

Bryn felt a palpable wave of fear wash over her as she dashed onto the street, washing over her skin like stepping into a pool of terrifying water, stopping her in her tracks. *That's just another trick from the zygallon*, she said. *Right?* She got no response from Doubt, though. *Right. So I'm on my own.* She tried to will herself to ignore the fear, and held up her sword.

"To battle!" she tried to cry out, but her sword barely rose above her shoulder and her voice was much weaker than she expected, not even drawing the attention of the people cowering on the sidewalk. Many of them were bloody and beaten as the garmin bounced between them like a demonic pinball machine stuck on multiball. Bryn hoped that Beloved would somehow banish the effect, both on her and on the victims on the street, but there was no such luck. She found herself unable to move forward, trapped at the edge of that aura of terror the creature was exuding. All that her battle cry managed to do was draw the attention of the zygallon and the garmin, giving them a clear view of the path to their target.

"Everyone stop," Bryn called back into the store, noticing that only her friends had been approaching the door to assist her. "Don't enter the street. You'll be paralyzed with fear. Can you do something, Emera?" Emera was already consuming more blue kiema.

"I can make myself immune. I could make a bubble of immunity if I had some green kiema, but I don't have any on me." The others had some that they would give her, but Bryn was becoming too terrified for rational thought. Instead her left hand trembled uncontrollably as she reached for her satchels. They seemed impossibly cumbersome all of a sudden, as four of the garmin were rolling towards her at speeds that defied reality. Bryn shrieked as, in her fear, she forgot that she had switched the bags that she was using, upending her green satchel filled with blue kiema all over the ground in front of her. Panicking, she sliced her belt off in a quick swipe and threw the entire thing back at Emera.

"Open the blue bag!" she screamed as her face began to cover with tears and her lips began to gibber uncontrollably.

"And don't look in the box," Bannam said. Bryn would have been thankful that he was keeping a level head and guarding her other sword, if she could feel anything at that moment other than an overwhelming and all-encompassing sense of terror. She didn't think she

would have the will to swing her sword if the garmin reached her before Emera could help.

Safler and Nighra looked on in horror, genuine horror at the events that were unfolding, not the manufactured horror exuded by the zygallon. Nighra frantically began darting her fingers crudely into some pattern when Safler, watching Emera carefully, said, "She'll never finish it before those things get to Bryn." Bryn's nethers burned as she involuntarily lost control of her continence, bringing up the memories of waking up in the alley, adding layers of fear over the ones that were already there.

Bryn fell to her knees. She would have lost her grip on Beloved, but somehow, thankfully, the sword did not let her. That was something. All that she could do was fall to her stomach and point the sword in front of her, hoping that the creatures might accidentally glance against it and that that would be enough to shred them the way it had obliterated the others.

The first garmin closed within ten feet, and Nighra finished her spell, the fastest and most basic thing she could have done: a simple battering ram of force that stopped the advance of the creature. She got lucky enough to connect with its eye, so the creature seemed to be stunned and blinded by the move in addition to being halted. The garmin following immediately behind bowled into it, propelling the first garmin to the side of the street and getting knocked off its own course like a pair of colliding billiard balls.

Bryn was sure she was dead, absolutely sure, as nothing was left between her and the third and fourth garmin. As the third garmin approached Bryn's prone body like a boulder traveling fifty miles an hour, she had to look away. She braced for the impact, crying uncontrollably and filling the street with screams that sounded inhuman.

The impact didn't come. Suddenly Bryn felt another wave wash over her, the same sensation as being submerged under the surface of a liquid. Where the last wave brought fear, this one brought comfort and safety. *Emera's spell*, Bryn thought. *She did it.*

Suddenly Doubt was back, screaming in her head at the top of her lungs, telling Bryn to not be afraid and to stand up and fight. Bryn didn't think that Doubt could tell that she could hear her, so she wasn't going to say anything. Maybe Doubt would slip up and say something revealing about herself. Bryn didn't want to miss this opportunity to trick

her, even if she was still having trouble recovering from the zygallon's fearsome aura.

Bryn quickly stopped her sobs and sprang to her feet, sword firmly in hand, and looked at the two garmin not ten feet in front of her. They had come to a full stop at the edge of the pile of blue kiema that Bryn had spilled in terror, and they were staring intently at it.

"Oh, thank the gods, she did it," Safler said, his fingers glowing red and flexing. "So we're not supposed to use fire, but force is okay?" he asked Bryn.

"Yes, force, or ice if you can manage it. I don't know which will be harder. Take out the two stunned on the sides first. I have these two." Safler nodded and looked at Nighra. Emera was busy holding her hands high above her, yellow light spilling out of them. Safler sprayed some kind of mist at one of them – Bryn thought it was remarkable that he did that with only red magic – and it seemed to harden and freeze. Nighra followed that up with a strong force from above, shattering the garmin to pieces. Bryn didn't see exactly what Bannam was doing to the other one, but he was actually using cyan magic of all things. The creature seemed to disappear. *I hope he didn't just make it invisible. That would have made the spell's signature white, right? He had to include red kiema to do it to himself. What in the hell did he do instead?* Bannam continued to mystify Bryn when he ran over to the spot where the creature had been and squatted, doing something that Bryn couldn't see.

Bryn didn't have the attention to spare, as she looked back at the two garmin in front of her. She was going to have to time this right. "I know you suck at white magic, Nighra, but if one of the boys could enhance my reflexes right now, I would really, really appreciate it."

"Sorry, Bryn, I only know how to do my own," Safler said. *Such a slacker. Maybe if you spent more time studying and less time snogging your girlfriend you would be more useful.*

That's not fair, Bryn, Doubt said. He's trying his best, here. Bryn knew that Doubt could hear her surface thoughts, but she tried not to let it show that she could hear her back. *If I can hear your thoughts, Bryn, what makes you think you can fool me?* What she said made sense, and Bryn nearly responded in frustration. But what if she was bluffing that she could hear her thoughts? It was a possibility. Bryn continued to not respond.

Please answer me, Bryn, Doubt said, her voice becoming raspy and weak instead of its usual dark and sultry. *Please. This is important.* Doubt was beginning to sound like she was genuinely in pain. *I will die if you don't respond to me.*

Doubt began to spit and sputter, letting out protracted wails of pain. After a lot of hesitation, Bryn decided that she couldn't risk losing her. It was probably a bluff, but Doubt was too valuable of an asset at the moment to allow her to die, as much as Bryn wanted some time alone in her own head.

Fine, you win. I can hear you, Bryn admitted. Doubt let out a long and deep gasp, as if she had been drowning and managed to get her head just above the surface.

Please don't do that to me again, Bryn, Doubt said seriously.

So what, if I don't talk to you, you'll die? Is that how you work?

Yes, Bryn, Doubt admitted. *Also if you stop listening to me.*

Why should I believe you?

I don't have a good reason for you. You'll just have to trust me on this one, if you want me to live. Bryn didn't like that answer one bit, but she felt that it was important to keep Doubt around. She was too valuable, even if her information was suspect. She hoped she wasn't making a mistake.

"How about you, Bannam? Can you boost my reflexes?" Bryn called over to him.

He stood up from his squat and called back, his voice quivering. "I understand what you're planning, Bryn, but... I think I'm too far away from Emera." *Great, wonderful, way to fail, Bannam.*

Not his fault, Doubt reiterated.

I know, but it doesn't mean I have to take his failure graciously.

Bryn gestured with her left hand for Emera to move the protective bubble to try to bring Bannam back into it, keeping Beloved at the ready in her right hand. She started to add words to the command, but the moment came that she had been waiting for. Both of the creatures' eyes lit up, and all eight of the appendages between them darted toward a specific crystal on the ground. Bryn locked her eyes on that crystal.

Doubt, if you really want me to live, you will memorize that crystal.

I'll try, Bryn. If you can keep watching it, it will help.

Bryn wasn't sure she would be able to. Fortunately the two creatures collided and began fighting each other over the crystal, neither one claiming it for its own, sending it careening through the pile. Bryn kept the chaotic bounce of the crystal in her vision, but she lost track of it as she brought her sword to bear on the creatures. She would have to hope that Doubt had better concentration.

"I'm sorry," Bryn whispered as the glowing red-and-orange blade ripped through the two spheres in front of her in one smooth stroke, spraying blood everywhere on the street outside of Isabella's Closet. If any part of the creatures was human, it wasn't anymore. Now they were dust in the wind.

The rampaging zygallon was still far down the street, with a force of nine garmin bouncing around it. Bryn couldn't be sure, but she thought that the zygallon might be using them as a shield. She estimated that she had a minute or more to get everyone to regroup before the last assault.

Bryn went over to the kiema pile while Emera retrieved Ban-nam. *Which one is it?*

That one, Doubt said. Bryn was undisturbed by her ability to point without a finger. Bryn somehow just knew which crystal she was indicating. She bent and picked it up. One crystal, and she had to trust Doubt that it was untainted.

Are you sure?

I'm confident, but I can't be sure, Bryn. I really wish that I were. If I were sure, I would tell you to eat it.

Well, you know that's not going to happen. Whether you're sure or not. I'm not using any blue kiema until I am sure.

I know.

Why would you want me to eat it, though?

You know the reason.

I think I do, but I want you to say it.

Doubt sighed. *You win, Bryn. I'm a monster. I slithered into the cracks of your mind that your attacker left when he erased your memories.*

How many more times and in how many more ways could Bryn be violated? *Why in the hell would you do that?*

I'm a parasite. I don't want to be, but I am. And I'm hungry. I need your attention almost as much as I need blue kiema. Untainted blue

kiema. It's everything I can do not to scream at you to put that kiema in your mouth. But I need you. You're the best chance that we have.

We?

The monsters. We're suffering. I'm more intelligent than most. I've held on to most of my sanity, relinquishing my body instead, barely surviving off the hushed whispers of children afraid of unseen things in the dark. I was overjoyed to find a space in your mind, and you actually listened to me. You have no idea what it means to me, Bryn. My life has become tolerable, though I still hunger for what you hold.

So you're what? An ambassador from the monster nation?

I guess you could put it that way.

Bryn suddenly put the pieces together. *It wasn't Poe at all. She's not the reason the monsters have been after me. It's you. That humming you've been doing has been drawing them to me. There's nothing wrong with Mr. Barrington's leviboard.* Doubt didn't object, which was enough of an answer to Bryn. *You wanted me to encounter the monsters so I could, what, come to understand them?*

For what it's worth, I'm sorry for the deception. I think that my plan worked, though. I know you want to help us. I'm just sorry that I tried to force an encounter this time. I had no idea the zygallon was there. I would never have provoked him if I had. I still don't see how you plan to get us out of this alive.

Bryn paused to consider her plan. *I haven't forgiven you. Frankly I'm appalled at everything you've done. Why weren't you just honest with me?*

If you had woken up, freshly raped, and I started babbling about the plight of monsters that were suffering, would you have listened to me at all? She had a point. *I really want to work with you, Bryn, not against you.*

Then you'll help me do this.

Anything you want.

Bryn paused for a moment as she looked at the crystal in her hand. *Wait. One more thing. If you're a monster, why can't you tell the difference between tainted and untainted kiema like the others?*

Sorry, Bryn, I wish I could. But I'm piggybacking on your senses. I'm just as in the dark as you are.

Okay, fair enough. Follow my directions. But this conversation is not over. We will talk about it more, later.

I'll tell you anything you want to know.

Bryn still wasn't sure that she could believe a word Doubt had said, but she wanted to. It would be so easy to. If what Doubt said was true, this would help Bryn by both removing one of her problems and by giving her a vital source of information for the coming days. She decided to believe Doubt's words until she was given a reason not to, solely because the alternatives all led to a single conclusion: Bryn's demise. It was the worst kind of gambit, the kind where only one of your options could lead to victory, but that was the situation Bryn was in. For a brief moment, she wished that Edger were there; one of his sunbeams might be able to take out a zygallon. A zygallon that was gradually advancing towards Bryn and her friends' position, and whose aura was pressing more heavily against Emera's barrier.

"Okay, Bannam, have you recovered?" Bryn asked.

"Yes, Bryn. I'm back."

"I don't suppose you managed to track the crystal?" She thought he understand what she was doing, so she hoped that he was watching too, but she wasn't counting on it since he was terrified at the time. But if he did have a photographic memory like Bryn suspected, he still might be able to tell.

"I did, actually. That is the correct crystal." *Oh, bless you, Bannam. Confirmation! I'm not going into this completely blind.*

Doubt let out a whimper, and Bryn felt the need to respond.
What's wrong?

I really, really want you to swallow it. This was too important for Bryn to put off until after things calmed down.

I'm definitely not going to, but what would happen if I did?

I think... I can't be sure, you realize. We don't really understand it ourselves. But I think I could make a body for myself. I could leave your head and exist as a real person, free of the shackles that have bound me to you.

Won't you also need some green kiema for that?

Why?

You're creating something from nothing. And it's matter, even. How would you make it without green kiema?

I'm... not sure, actually. I feel like I can, but maybe you're right. I wonder if that's why the vulprin haven't been able to sustain the effect.

Maybe we need all three kinds. Maybe only Whyat can truly create humanity.

Whyat? Bryn asked, confused.

Well, he's the sum of his children, right? White magic is his domain.

What does that mean about yellow, magenta, and cyan magic? Are there gods for those, too?

I don't have these answers any more than you do, Bryn.

I'm asking what it is you believe.

What it is I believe? Doubt asked. She seemed surprised that Bryn would care what she believed if she didn't know that it was truth, though to be fair, Bryn was also surprised that she cared. *I guess, I believe that yellow magic, for instance, is the domain of both Burgona and Verdán. That's why magenta magic is generally the hardest magic to work; Darblun and Burgona have the worst relationship of all of them.* Bryn thought that actually did make some sense.

Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, we've got more urgent matters to deal with.

What exactly is your plan, here, Bryn?

I'm going to do what I do best, Bryn said. I'm going to reason with it.

You're going to what!?

I'm going to talk to it. And you're going to help me.

Bryn, I know that you want to help the monsters, but this one is too dangerous to tame. Even if you can stop his rampage, what makes you think that he won't just run off and start killing people somewhere else?

Why wasn't he attacking before you provoked him? Bryn asked. *I mean, he must have been in the city. He could have been killing people left and right. And if he's anything close to being intelligent, with his powers, he shouldn't have any trouble finding untainted blue kiema. If we just knew what he wanted, we might be able to end this without violence. And if we could get him on our side... Just look at how easily he controls the garmin. He would be a huge asset.*

Doubt sounded skeptical. *You're taking a huge risk here, Bryn.*

Well, that's the situation you've left me in. Besides, it's time to come up with a plan B.

“Safler, can you gather my kiema?” Bryn requested, hoping he would be of some use. “Bannam or Nighra, have you ever heard of sunbeams?”

“Sunbeams?” Nighra asked. Bannam shook his head.

“It was an evocation that my friend Edger used, since he's bad with fire. It was able to take out a behammon in one shot.” Nighra's eyes widened at that, but Bannam continued to look detached. “I didn't exactly understand what he did, but I think he basically fired a compressed cylinder of light at the creature, completely disintegrating it where the beam hit.”

“That sounds very effective,” Bannam said. “And that would help with the acid problem.”

“The acid problem?” Nighra asked. Bryn gave Bannam a frustrated look. *How does he know these things? Is this future-sight again, or is he privy to my conversations with Doubt?*

“Unfortunately,” Bryn said to Nighra, “fire, lightning, force – even ice – aren't going to do much to the zygallon's thick scales. I'd use my sword, but I think I might have made it a little too badass. The thing's blood is made of acid, so my sword will probably kill us all if I penetrate its hide.”

“So that leaves sunbeams,” Nighra said, and Bryn nodded.

“No, Bryn, there are other ways of dealing with it,” Bannam said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small orange ball that he gripped tightly between his thumb and forefinger. It took Bryn a minute to understand what he was holding.

“Bannam, that's the garmin! You shrank it?”

“I didn't think you would want me to kill it. I can always return it to its original size later.” Bryn recovered from her shock pretty quickly, much faster than her friends did.

“Oh,” she said, realization dawning on her, “it's just like the box.” Bannam gave a wide grin. Bryn kept a careful eye on the zygallon's advance as her mind raced.

By the backhand of Burgona, she cursed in her head as she finally had the eureka moment she'd been seeking for years.

What is it, Bryn?

I just thought of a way to save Ortha from the impending kiema shortage. Maybe. I'm not sure. I need time to think about this.

You don't have the time right now.

I know! Shut up and let me work.

"I can't tell you how excellent that is, Bannam. Please keep him safe. Actually, can you put him in my box?" Bryn asked.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Bryn. The two effects are related, so I'm not sure what would happen. We should ask Dr. Umbroon first."

"Yeah, you're right. Just do your best to keep him safe. Unfortunately, the zygallon is psychic, so I'm not sure that shrinking it will eliminate the threat that it poses." The zygallon's advance continued, barely stalled by the crowd in the street. It did not seem to be in a hurry, but its attention was affixed to Bryn the whole time.

"It could limit the range of its abilities," Bannam suggested.

"I don't think we should take the risk," Bryn said, and Bannam deferred to her command.

"In that case, I should be able to conjure one of Edger's sunbeams," he offered. "It sounds easy enough."

"No it doesn't," Nighra said. "It sounds impossibly hard!" Bryn agreed with Nighra, and she knew red magic. "It's light. It's just going to fly off in all directions and you'll lose most of the energy you put into it."

"Not if you put most of your words into shaping it. Add some adjectives like contained, focused, pinpoint, directed, et cetera. As many as you can: each will focus the intensity. And when you do the motions, just be sure to visualize the shape that you want the final beam to take, and let your instincts guide your fingers." Bryn found herself envying Bannam even more. *He's not just brilliant, she thought. He's on a completely different level than the rest of us. Thank Whyat he came with us today. Now if only I knew why he really wanted to, or anything else going on in that enigmatic thing he calls his mind.*

Bryn continued, directing her next thought at Doubt. *Isn't this where you normally chime in with some snarky comment about how I shouldn't trust anyone, and then run away giggling?*

I think we're past that at this point, Doubt replied seriously. *I have to admit, I did have some fun with it, but I only care about having your attention. Fear and paranoia are great ways to get attention. That's how I survived for as long as I did without a host. But now that you're willing to help me, I don't need to make you second-guess everything.*

Does that mean you want a new name? Bryn was beginning to get a little worried that she might be missing out on the things going on

around her. Their mental conversations seemed to take virtually no time, but that didn't mean she wasn't at least a little distracted by them. She was feeding Doubt her attention, after all.

Oh, no. I like the name Doubt. You gave it to me. Doubt said it lovingly, and Bryn was a little concerned about the tone of her voice. Did Doubt think that Bryn was her mother? She thought of Poe, suckling at her breast the way Doubt was suckling at her mind. Maybe Doubt wasn't entirely wrong to think of Bryn as a mother.

"Is everything okay, Bryn?" Safler asked, handing over a freshly repaired belt with her satchels and the box attached. Bryn checked quickly to make sure that he had put the blue kiema in the green bag and the green kiema in the blue bag. He had.

"It's fine, I'm just a little distracted. Do you have anything to add, Emera?"

"I'm going to have to keep my concentration on this aura, Bryn. I do also have the strength and durability of ten men right now. Fat lot of good that does us." So that's what she was doing in the store. She continued the dance of light and flesh that was saving all of them from the fear effect.

"Safler, you're in charge of making sure Emera has a steady supply of kiema. If she goes down, we've lost." He nodded. "I will distract the zygallon and handle the garmin. Bannam and Nighra, if you can, tear him apart with a sunbeam." They also nodded.

"That's our plan B," Bryn said. "We're only going to do that if I fail, but I want you all to be ready."

"If you fail?" Nighra asked. "Fail what?"

Bryn tossed the piece of kiema into the air and caught it. "I'm going to tame this beast."

Chapter 23: In Which Bryn Matches Wits With The zygallon

Bryn walked slowly forward, the bubble of sanity advancing behind her. She stepped over a number of corpses, some of them burning, some merely brutalized. She ignored the cries of the ones that still lived, hoping they could at least take some small comfort in the protection of the bubble as it passed them by. She hooked her sword into her belt as she advanced, putting the untainted kiema crystal in her hand and holding it out on her palm as she approached.

The zygallon stared at her with an intense look in his magenta eyes. *Always magenta. As if they're missing the spark of life that makes people human.* Mercifully, he only had the two. In fact, if you could look past the scales, the horns, and the sheer size of the thing, the zygallon looked more or less human.

His horns are the source of his psychic powers, Doubt said. There were two of them on the top of its head, pitch black and tapered toward the ends, a pair of dark antenna that it was using to control the garmin around it and to terrify the crowd into submission.

Thanks for the tip, but if it comes to the point that I need to use that advice, I think I've already lost, Bryn replied as she advanced, eyes locked on the creature's. The garmin stopped their rolling to rest in a circle around the zygallon, but they were clearly ready to return to action should the zygallon will it.

Aubryn Dandaster, came a booming voice in her mind, a deep baritone filled with a resonance that made her skull ache. *I must say, I did not expect us to meet like this. I see you have brought me an offering. Come, let us parley.*

Bryn felt an indescribable sensation as she was ripped from her body, her mind floating in the ether momentarily before coalescing once more at a long wooden table in what looked like an old castle. Crimson and scarlet tapestries adorned the onyx walls of the castle, reminding Bryn of the creature's scales. She suspected that the zygallon had pulled her into its mindscape. She was hopelessly outclassed in this battle of wills, but she had things the zygallon wanted. She hoped.

To her surprise, Doubt was there as well, in the flesh. Bryn expected Doubt to look like a twin copy of herself based on her voice, but she actually looked quite different. There was a bit of Bryn at the core of her, but the differences were striking. Most notably, she looked like a kiemara, her eyes glowing magenta and her brown skin covered in patches of golden serpent scales. She wore her hair as an afro, some-

thing Bryn had always tried to avoid. Seeing the look on Doubt made Bryn wonder why she avoided it. Doubt was actually quite beautiful. As if to mock Bryn, she was wearing the outfit with the yellow top and leopard-print-and-blue patterned skirt that Bryn had been considering at Isabella's Closet. Bryn herself was wearing her favorite dress, the orange-with-cream-leaves one that her rapist had destroyed. She felt clean, and she was grateful for it. Her body, back in the physical world, was a mess of blood and bodily fluids.

As surprising as Doubt was, the zygallon's avatar was even more so. He was a man of average build and slick black hair with wings of gray on the sides, dressed in firmly-pressed black fabric highlighted with vertical lines of embroidery in shades of bright red. He had the look of someone who was very much in control, someone who had power and knew it. Bryn couldn't disagree with him. She found herself poking the palm of her hand to see if her kietella was there, but it was not.

"I fear you have me at a disadvantage," Bryn said, diplomatically. "You know my name, but I do not know yours. Do you have one that I could use for you?"

"I do," he answered. "It was given to me long ago, by a man who earned my respect. He called me Abyss when he first met me, and I decided to keep the name. Much like you and Doubt here," he admitted. Bryn couldn't be sure, but she had a strong suspicion of the man that Abyss was referring to.

"Doubt, Doubt, Doubt," Abyss continued. "Look at the mess you've made."

"The mess *I've* made?" she asked indignantly.

"I hope you're not going to blame *me* for this," Abyss said. "You know the influence your song has on our people. The sweet high notes and the sultry low ones, fluttering through the skies like a swarm of butterflies that you can't help but swat at." Abyss pantomimed plucking a butterfly out of the air. "Well, you got my attention, and drew me out into the open. I hope you're happy." His tone indicated that he was anything but.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Doubt said. "You could have ignored me."

"I did, for a long time, but you just kept getting louder and louder. And now look at me. My body is completely out of control. Even most of my powers are being used against my will in my body's quest to

crush you. You're lucky this girl here has something my body wants even more, or she wouldn't have stood a chance."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Doubt said. "Luck played very little part in it. She is resourceful. Bryn has an excellent plan for dealing with you, if this parley should fail."

"Thank you very much for speaking as though I'm not here, and for revealing things that were meant to be private," Bryn said, finally able to get a sentence in edgewise.

"Nothing is private where I am concerned, Bryn," Abyss said.

"I'm getting that. You seem to want me to think that you already know everything I'm thinking. But I've been getting by on bluffs myself for the past few days as well. You have weaknesses, and I know some of them," Bryn gambled.

Abyss grunted. "Oh, really? Name one."

"Bannam. You can't pierce his mind, and he has the power and the will to destroy your body." She didn't know for sure that Abyss wouldn't be able to penetrate Bannam's unique mind, but she had seen so many strange things from her willowy friend – her willowy ally, at least – that she was willing to believe it. As long as she actually believed it, that should be enough to convince Abyss that she was being truthful.

Abyss gave a cold look to Bryn. "I should have known that you'd be formidable, but like I said, I never expected to meet you like this."

"You expected my father to introduce us instead?" Abyss laughed long and hard, as if he couldn't contain it.

"That's funny, Bryn. Ruddicus didn't want you anywhere near me. It's understandable. I am prone to violence when things do not go my way."

Bryn knew that she should feel terrified, given that both her mind and body were in mortal peril unlike any she had ever faced, under the scrutiny of this creature. Instead, she felt relieved. Relieved and excited. She could finally get some answers from something that actually knew something about her father.

"Do you know where my father is? Have you seen him?"

"Why do you think I'm going to answer your questions?" Abyss asked, a stern look on his face.

"Sorry," Bryn said. "I'm getting ahead of myself. As I'm sure you know, I have a lot of questions. I think you know the answers to many of

them, especially about my father, so I'm eager to ask them. But I know nothing is free. I want to deal with you."

"I'm sure you think that kiema has you in a good bargaining position, Bryn, but I could just kill you and take it. Besides, I don't have trouble finding untainted kiema. I can sense it like any other monster." He looked at Doubt. "Well, almost any other monster. And I don't need to reveal myself to humans to take it. I admit," he flexed his fingers, hidden behind a pair of leather gloves, "the hands on my body aren't always ideal for handling such small things, but I do manage. And that is why I am usually above violence, unlike my fellows."

"And I am grateful for that. But the kiema I'm offering you is really just meant to open the negotiation. Think of it as a sign of good faith."

"You think you have something else to offer, then?"

"I have a number of things to offer you. With the aid of my companions, I'm sure that I can eliminate the rage that Doubt has instilled in you, allowing you to go back into hiding."

Abyss laughed, "Oh, why, thank you Bryn. What a lovely and self-serving gift you have offered me. It is very much like a husband giving his wife a new set of pots so she can cook dinner for him."

Jack-ass, Bryn thought.

"I heard that," he responded.

I meant for you to, she said in her mind, honestly, and he laughed.

"I can act as an emissary between monsters and humans. I believe that we have a lot more in common than most people seem to think, and that with time we can reconcile our differences and create a new society where humans and monsters coexist and in which monsters are not killed, not mistreated, and given access to all of the untainted kiema they need." She didn't mind doing this at all. In some sense, she already felt like she was doing it for Doubt.

"Oh, Bryn, your idealism is quaint. Your human government is so fundamentally based on the concept that monsters are evil, violent things that it would be impossible to change it without drastic action. Humans already can't get enough kiema for themselves; there's no way they will be willing to compete with monsters for it. Your father was prepared to take the action necessary to change the system, but you are not."

"Is that why he burned down Karmin Garden and those other installations?"

"What else do you have to offer me?" he said without answering her question.

"I have Doubt," Bryn said, and Doubt looked like she'd been caught in Abyss's aura earlier. "She knows quite a bit, and I'm guessing you can't just take that knowledge from her."

"That's an intriguing offer, but I'm afraid I already have Doubt. You didn't think I was going to let her out of here after all the trouble she's caused?" Bryn was beginning to think that he wasn't going to let *her* out of here either, and that her body would just eventually fall to the ground, completely uninhabited by either of them. She started coming up with a backup plan. The one thing that she couldn't plan for was how much time was passing in the real world while this exchange took place. If it was like talking to Doubt, then not even a tenth of a second had passed. If too much time passed, the others might begin the attack prematurely, or if Abyss was able to split his attention between the physical and mental world, he might have already started killing her and her friends.

"Oh, I like that plan you just thought of, Bryn." He turned to address Doubt. "She was going to offer me one of her 'badass swords', which she would plant in the ground, that I might pick it up once they've left." He turned back to Bryn. "I'm afraid I know all about what happened to Bannam's homunculus."

"You can't blame a girl for trying. It's in my nature to solve problems." *But how in the hell do you fight something that knows every move you're going to make?*

Abyss just laughed. "I thought you didn't want to fight."

"I don't, but you've made it pretty clear that you don't want anything I have to offer." Doubt gave Bryn a look of panic.

"Oh," Abyss said with a slow, twisted smile, "I never said that." His eyes traveled from Bryn's, down her face and neck, running over her ample bosom and down, slowly making their journey across the rolling hills of Bryn's body to settle squarely on her abdomen. He looked there greedily for a full second, before laughing and looking at Bryn in the eye.

"You sick bastard. We're done here. Come on, Doubt." Bryn grabbed Doubt by the wrist. "I'm not going to leave you with this thing. If

there's anything human about him, then not all of humanity deserves a chance at life."

Doubt stood up shakily. "What do you think you're going to do? He knows every move you're going to make."

"He can read my fucking mind all day long, but if I don't know what in the hell I'm going to do, then he won't know either." Bryn wished that she could make an obscene gesture towards him, but she needed one hand on Doubt and the other free. The smile on Abyss's face turned into an angry snarl.

Bryn reached out to Beloved. She knew in her heart that if she called to the sword, it would return to her hand, no matter where it was. But it was already in her hand, attached to her physical body. She just needed to do the opposite, draw her self to the sword. *We belong together*, she thought, as she closed her eyes. She experienced the sensation of being ripped apart and dragged through the ether once more, before finding herself in her body once more, eyes still closed. It reminded her of the sharp pain of her raw nipples scraping across the alley pavement.

When she opened her eyes, the scene before her was horrifying. Nighra's lifeless body was face-first on the ground not ten feet from Bryn, with three garmin feasting on its flesh. Abyss's fifteen-foot tall black-and-red body was towering directly over Bryn, heaving warm, sticky breath down all around her. One set of long, pointy claws had impaled Bannam in the stomach and were now slinging him around as if he weighed nothing. The piece of blue kiema was gone from her hand; she could only guess that Abyss had taken it while her mind was trapped. *Doubt, were you actually there, or was that a construct he made to fool me?*

I have no idea what you're talking about, Bryn.

That bastard. He never had any intention of dealing with me. Did he even really know my father, or was that just to distract me? What else was a lie? Bryn had been too careless in believing the things this creature told her, actually believing a number of its lies. Abyss didn't know anything about Doubt or her father other than the things that Bryn had offered him in her mind. He just fed her lie after lie, falsely confirming Bryn's fear and paranoia. It was a waste of time and it was a brilliant distraction on Abyss's part. She worried that she had made some assumptions based on his lies, and that unless she was careful she

wouldn't be able to disentangle the assumptions from the things she knew to be true.

Emera and Safler thankfully had stayed back out of danger, Emera continuing her spell while Safler defended them. They must have all been wondering why Bryn froze suddenly, what she was doing, and why Abyss hadn't attacked her. It was time to change that. Nighra and Bannam didn't look good, but she could save the others.

I believe in you, Bryn, Doubt said.

Bryn didn't need the vote of confidence. This would either work or it wouldn't, but it was the one option she had other than mutually assured destruction.

She shifted the weight on her feet, backing up towards Emera to put a little bit of space between herself and Abyss. She needed the space to make forms with her sword, carving out words in the air with the glowing trails of red-and-orange that traced out a history of Beloved's path. This sword had absorbed one fairly weak flame from Nighra, a medium-strength spell from one of the store clerks, and a pretty powerful fireball from Bannam. If Bryn was right, that was about as much red magic as Edger had used.

It didn't absorb Emera's spell, Doubt pointed out, since Bryn hadn't indicated that she noticed that fact.

I know. I wonder if it's because it doesn't absorb blue and green magic, or if it's because I didn't want it to?

You should test that out later. Knowing the answer could be the difference between life and death.

Thanks, Bryn said. Maybe she and Doubt could work together, if Bryn could let herself trust her.

Time seemed to drag as she invented a new language with the sword. Focused, she started with, two horizontal slashes with a diagonal line through them that felt like the clean cut of an axe through a block of wood. Abyss's eyes turned to watch what Bryn was doing, ever so slowly. Searing came next, three long squiggles that reminded Bryn of her mother's bacon on a Sunday morning. Abyss began to rotate his body. Bright, a single slash over an oval, like the light that spilled over Bryn's freshly raped body, waking her up by penetrating a single eyelid. Abyss's shoulders lunged up and backward as he began to raise his massive biceps above him. Precise, she added, drawing two hands in the process of forming a spell. Her arm was beginning to strain and

sway from the speed of the gestures and the weight of the sword, but Abyss continued, bringing down both hands, one balled up in a tight, clawed fist and the other wielding Bannam's body like a hammer. *One last form*, she thought, as she rushed. She didn't have time to really assign a word to it. She thought she would have called it brilliant, but she was thinking *Edger* the whole time she did it. It was a circle with lines radiating from it in every direction. She made the last motion, screaming with every fiber of her being into the universe.

I am Aubryn Dandaster, and this is my will manifest!

Abyss was about to tenderize Bryn with his arms, and that gorilla-like face was following close behind his appendages. Bryn shuddered as the sword, pointed directly at the thing's face, suddenly flashed a light brighter than any she'd ever known, even brighter than the sunbeam Edger had conjured. It tore through the entirety of Abyss's forehead, a perfect cylinder just above his eyes, wiping out everything from the brow up. A few inches from the two tips of his horns were all that were spared. The ray of light left a cauterized semi-circle behind with no acid to speak of.

His arms still had their momentum, slamming into Bryn and forcing her hard to the ground. She held on tight to Beloved, though, which had lost the redness of its glow. Trapped under Bannam's weak, but still breathing, body, Bryn managed to see the sword. It was now completely brown. *Brown? Great. A new color.* She still didn't know what orange meant. Unless... She thought maybe that what she thought was orange before was really this shade of brown, under the influence of the red glow.

Could the brown be the taint? Did I just use pure red magic? It didn't matter for Poe's sake, she didn't think, since she didn't channel the magic through her body, but it might explain why the effect was so much stronger than it probably should have been.

"The fucking bastard is dead. I can't believe I let him get to me." She scrambled to her feet and started towards the garmin on Nighra's body. "Emera, Saffler, see what you can do for Nighra and Bannam." Now that Abyss was dead, the rest of the garmin were coming to their senses and running away. Bryn had no trouble dispatching the ones that had their fangs on Nighra, but she looked like she was already in terrible shape.

"Oh gods, Nighra, hang on. I'm so sorry. I should have known he was tricking me. Why did I think he would know my father!? What's

wrong with me?" Emera knelt over Nighra, a white glow on her fingertips, but she recoiled and fell backward a moment later. Nighra's skin was repairing itself completely on its own, scratches knitting themselves back together, missing organs being filled in with meat, burned flesh softening and smoothing over. But it was not repairing itself to the tall, dark brown form that Bryn expected. Instead an unconscious thirty-something year-old white man took her place, and Bryn collapsed to her knees.

Lani.

Chapter 24: In Which Bryn Learns About Bannam's Condition

Bryn wasted no time. She did not know when this... this thing would awaken. This thing that was once her friend Nighra. This thing that she now thought was the same thing that was her neighbor Lani.

There's no reason it has to be Lani, Doubt said. *There could be more than one shapeshifter out there.*

Fantastic, Bryn said. *I just don't understand.* She was certain it was Nighra. She even did the paranoid thing and asked her about the pink dress that morning, and she answered exactly the way Nighra would have. And she wielded pretty powerful red magic during class selection, something that Bryn didn't think a shapeshifter could do.

But... Class selection was more than eight hours ago, and Bryn didn't even see Nighra again until after the evening audibells. There was plenty of time and opportunity for Lani to swap herself with the real Nighra without Bryn finding out about it. And tonight, Nighra's spells were all quick, and weak, more like the kind of stuff she thought Lani could do.

Oh gods, I hope she's okay, Bryn thought. She shivered as she thought about the fact that she let this person, whoever he was, cry on her shoulder.

"Fuck. I'll deal with this," she told Emera. "Please help Bannam. He's very hurt." At least she knew Bannam wasn't a shapeshifter. Probably. She began gobbling green kiema.

Tight, constraining, binding, full-bodied, inescapable, inevitable, final, Bryn thought. She added another adjective for completion, adaptable, and one final word for spite: punishing. After the trouble Lani had put her through already, Bryn wanted to get even.

Bryn thought it would be something like head-to-toe ropes with knots everywhere, but instead it looked more like a suit of heavy, plate mail armor. The arms and legs were all bound tightly together behind the man's back, forcing his pelvis to arch forward involuntarily and, from Bryn's perspective, quite painfully. The joints of the armor were fused together to prevent motion. The inside and outside were covered in tiny spikes that would dig into the skin whenever the person contained within moved. At first the suit seemed too big for the man, but in a matter of moments it warped and constricted to conform to his body. *I'll have to remember this when I make my armor,* Bryn thought.

She didn't know if the bonds she made would hold this man, but she thought it was worth trying. What had he done to the real Nighra? How did he know the gestures to lock and unlock her leviboard? That was a real problem at the moment. They would need to know those gestures before they could leave the shopping strip. Bryn didn't want to interrogate this man in the middle of the strip, with dead bodies surrounding them. Police and media were bound to descend on this place any second, if they weren't there already. Surely the fleeing officers called it in. Unlike Bryn's house, this place was in the middle of the city.

"Owww," came a weak groan from Bannam as Emera took her hands off his naked abdomen. You could clearly see his abdominal muscles, not because they were thoroughly developed but because he didn't have any fat on his body to hide them. "That hurt a lot."

"Oh, Bannam, I'm so glad you're alright. I really... I really thought the worst," Bryn said sadly, adding Bannam to the list of people she really needed to repay somehow once all of this was over. Bannam, Edger, Mr. and Mrs. Barrington, Nighra, Emera, Safler, Dr. Umbronn. They had all helped her so much, and they hadn't asked for much in return beyond friendship.

"It's going to take more than that to kill me, Bryn. Though, I'm starting to reconsider whether I'm going to use homunculi. At least, for when I'm around you."

"That's not a bad idea," Bryn admitted. She walked over to Bannam, putting a hand on his shoulder as he rested on the ground. "It's an unfortunate truth that sometimes practical concerns can invalidate the things that we want to be morally good."

"Like suddenly switching to vegetarianism?" Bannam asked. Bryn was reminded of the plate of meat he got her for lunch.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, no one likes killing animals. They're innocent. If we could stop doing that, we would. But so much of our food comes from them. If everyone stopped eating meat all at once, there would be huge food shortages, and we'd have nothing to do with all of the animal product already in the production pipeline. It's just not reasonable. Even if the change were gradual, it's not guaranteed that vegetables alone could sustain the number of people on Ortha, so even though idealistically

vegetarianism is desirable morally, there are a lot of things about it that are impractical.”

Bryn was getting frustrated. This argument was neither here nor there, but Bannam really looked like he cared about it. “You’re probably right,” she said, hoping to change the subject. “In any case, the police will be here soon. We need to disappear.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, like, actually disappear. How are you feeling? Can you do it?”

“Sure, Bryn. I’m starting to run out of green kiema though. I’ve used an awful lot today. Can I borrow some?” He took some kiema from Bryn and swallowed it, his fingers glowing white. The group was surrounded by a transparent white dome.

“I take it the people outside can’t see us?” Bryn said, afterwards. The sword didn’t absorb the spell, even the red part of the spell, so Bryn was now convinced that it either only absorbed the spells she wanted to absorb, or maybe it only absorbed hostile spells. Either way, it was good to understand the sword some more. She thought she was beginning to understand Beloved, but she couldn’t be sure that it didn’t have new tricks up its sleeve. It was certainly impressive.

“Well, they will see what they expect to see in this dome. I can’t just make the dome invisible the way I do an individual, because then what would they see on the ground? Instead it’s more of a mental effect. They don’t see us because they have no reason to think we’re there.”

“It’ll have to do. Safler, can you help me drag this bastard to some place that’s out of the way?”

“Of course, Bryn. Who is he? Where’d Nighra go? I hope you know what’s going on, because I’m clueless.” Bryn’s shopping spree ended before it started. She had plenty of green kiema, so she could make some clothes for herself, but it still was depressing. They talked as she and Safler carried the body by the legs and shoulders, respectively. “Are you hiding our voices too,” Bryn asked Bannam, and he indicated that he was. When they got a few blocks away in a quiet alley, Bryn dropped him hard on the ground.

“This,” Bryn said, nodding her head at the man who had taken Nighra’s place, “is a shapeshifter. If I’m not mistaken, he’s also been impersonating my neighbor, Lani, for seven years now, ever since my fa-

ther was jailed. I can only assume that he's been waiting all of this time to keep an eye on me and my family in case my father ever returned to us. He knew I was going to visit Senator Cimarron on his behalf after we shopped, so I'm guessing that 'Nighra' was going to offer to come with me for that, and that she... he... it was going to try to get some information there. As for where the real Nighra is... I'm pretty sure she was herself at school this morning. Maybe Lani took her place when she went to the bathroom or something."

"Or when she went to the cafeteria during the second lunch period to collect donations for Bryn," Emera suggested, wide-eyed. "She went alone. And when she came back, she really hadn't made much money."

"That sounds pretty likely. Gods, I'm worried about her. Emera, I know you're good with mental magic. I was going to ask you to help me regain my memories. This might be more important at the moment though. Can you read Lani's thoughts, or try to pull out some information that will help us find Nighra? *One way or the other*, Bryn thought darkly, but her friends were already going through quite a bit and she didn't want to add to their despair.

"Well, I know how to recall my own memories, and how to allow others to recall theirs, so I might be able to help you, Bryn. But I can't read other people's minds. I know it's possible, but I've never really understood how to do it. I can hear their thoughts, but it's like they're speaking a different language, you know? Everybody thinks a little differently, and they have to turn their thoughts into words that anyone can understand: that's what speaking is. I might be able to pick out some names or other proper nouns, but most of his thoughts will just be gibberish."

"How about you, Bannam?"

"I don't know how to read thoughts, Bryn. I can't even understand why people say and do the things they do. What good would understanding their thoughts be?" Bryn looked at him in disbelief.

"I think that might be your fundamental problem, Bannam. The things that people say and do are driven by their thoughts. You can use the things they say and do to understand what they're thinking, and use that to predict what they will say, do, and think next."

"But why do I need do that when I can just see what they'll say and do next?" Bannam asked, genuinely confused.

"You don't honestly expect me to believe that you can see the future. Why would you let yourself get impaled by Aby—" Bryn caught herself using the creature's name, "— by the zygallon?"

"I knew that you would save me. If I didn't distract him, he would have killed you, Bryn. You were next, then Emera, then Safler last. I knew it was going to take you a minute to return to your body, but I also knew that only your sunbeam would be strong enough to slay him. You're stronger than I am." He wasn't being humble or complimentary. He was just being factual, and somehow, it sounded like obnoxious bragging. Like he was the one with the plan, not Bryn.

"Just how far into the future can you see?" Bryn asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

"Oh, it varies based on my mood and on how thick time is. Sometimes I can't see much at all, just a second or so. But sometimes I see years." *How thick time is?* Bryn didn't think of time as having thickness or viscosity, but she also couldn't see through it as if it were the same thing as space. She was pretty sure that that was what was going on, here, based on her new understanding of space that Dr. Umbron had taught her.

"How are you doing this, though. I don't see you consuming kiema constantly. Do you smoke it when we're not around?"

"No, I don't use kiema to do it. I just do it. I was born with this ability."

Bryn gasped. "Are you a kiemara?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"What? How? Why don't you have magenta eyes?"

"I do, I just don't show the rest of the world. People don't like kiemara, and I prefer to be liked." Bryn just looked back at Emera and Safler with a look of disbelief.

"I'm going to apologize," Bryn said. "I thought you fundamentally didn't understand people, Bannam, but I was wrong. There's nothing wrong or broken about you at all. You just have a different perspective than the rest of us."

"Thanks, Bryn, I think. I think you're right, probably, but my perspective sometimes makes me seem strange to everyone else. I just don't know how else to be."

"Oh, hang on... You can see the past, too, can't you?" Bryn asked.

"Of course."

"That's how you knew which crystal was untainted. You could just rewind things and view it again. In slow motion even?"

"I could dissect the entire scene moment by moment, and step through each of them one at a time. Usually I'm more limited by the awkward gangliness of my body and the time it takes to use my muscles to move from one position to another. But exercise is so incredibly boring that I've never been able to make myself do it, so my muscles are probably going to be clumsy like this forever."

"Wow. I appreciate your forthrightness, Bannam."

"I can help you more if you understand me better. Do you understand me better now, Bryn?"

"I think I really do. And I think you can help me a lot. Though, I don't understand why you're helping me." She kept thinking. "You knew I would need the magic from your spell in the store for the sunbeam, didn't you? You fueled most of it." He nodded. "Can you change the future that you see?"

"I never have," he said, and for the first time he sounded uncertain of what he was saying.

"Have you ever wanted to, or tried to?" Bryn asked.

"It doesn't work that way, Bryn. I see the future. Not possible futures."

"You still didn't answer my question about why you're helping me."

"I thought I did."

"Huh?"

"I'm helping you because that's what happens." In a weird way, it made sense to Bryn. Or at least, it made sense that Bannam would see it that way.

"But why did your future self do it?"

"How should I know?" Bannam asked, throwing up his hands.

How could you not!? "Don't you feel like your free will is taken away? Like your choices don't matter?"

"Knowing that I know the future, is that how *you* feel, Bryn? Like you don't get to decide your fate?" Bryn began to get tears in her eyes. What if he was right? What if Bryn was just following some script written by the gods? Maybe Verdan or Darblun was still playing with Ortha, and no one was the wiser. "I'm sorry, I don't want to upset you, but that's what I'm supposed to say."

"I don't want to talk about this right now," Bryn said. "I need to think about it. You're wrong, I know that much, but I'm too frustrated to articulate why."

"I know, Bryn."

"Could you –" Bryn started to ask Bannam if he would heal the shapeshifter on the ground in front of them, but he was already doing it. Emera gave a look of confusion as the invisibility bubble seemed to remain even though Bannam wasn't powering it anymore.

"How is he doing that?" she whispered to Safler.

"How is he doing anything he's doing? I always knew he was... gifted, but this is kind of ridiculous," Safler responded. They actually seemed a little scared of him.

Bryn became a little scared of him too when he slapped the shapeshifter in the face with a glowing white hand.

Chapter 25: In Which Bryn Questions

Lani

As far as Bryn knew, healing could be done in three ways. The first, the easiest, was to heal yourself. All it took was blue kiema, and your body usually was able to guide the spell itself without much effort on your part. There were exceptions, of course, like allergies and other disorders of the body's immune system, or cancers.

Because of those unusual cases, the second type of healing generally involved a doctor who combined all three types of kiema and relied on flesh-to-flesh contact for rapid changes to the body's makeup. This was much more difficult, because every person was a little bit different. Bryn imagined it was like recycling a construct that you didn't create yourself. Each body has a certain language that describes it, and unless you know that language, you risk composing sentences that don't make any sense, or even worse, that insult the person you're talking to. Unlike with magical constructs, though, there's a lot of overlap in the languages describing bodies, so it's more like learning a new dialect instead of learning a new language. A small cut is a small cut no matter who has it, and the same techniques could be used for anyone.

The last type was rarely used. It was a bubble effect, like Bannam's invisibility or Emera's mental defenses. It required all three types of kiema too, and a lot of it, and all it did was make everyone inside regenerate more quickly. The only real reason to do that was to stabilize a lot of people and keep them from dying until they could get individual attention. Given the carnage of Abyss's attack, the paramedics who arrive on the scene would be likely to use such an effect to try to save as many of the victims as possible. There was no guarantee that the recipient of the effect would have enough energy left to survive, even with the regenerative bubble, but it definitely improved their chances.

What Bannam just did resembled the second type of healing more than the other two, but Bryn had never seen healing combined with physical force. It was always a delicate process. Her shock didn't last long though, as it became apparent why Bannam did what he did.

The shapeshifter let out a howl as he sat bolt upright, wide awake. Bannam hadn't healed him at all; he just brought him back to consciousness. *That's pretty cruel. I hope he doesn't go into shock*, Bryn thought. *Well, maybe I hope he doesn't.*

"Doesn't feel very good, waking up to a body that's been torn apart, does it?" Bryn said, not wasting the torture that Bannam had

opted to use. Bryn imagined the spikes on the inside of the bonds were driving the shapeshifter crazy.

"What are you doing, Bryn?" came the strained voice of the shapeshifter. Bryn didn't recognize it. The man struggled with the constraints, his body almost moving like a fluid in the tight, ruthless bindings. He howled in pain as he expanded into the body of a three hundred pound woman, then rapidly shrank down to take the form of Lani.

"So you are Lani," Bryn said, angrily, as the shapeshifter's shackles stretched and shrank, conforming tightly to the body no matter what it did. He, or she, finally settled in Lani's form before answering.

"Yes, I am, but I'm on your side!"

"Why were you spying on my father!?" Bryn screamed in anger. Lani's eyes were gushing with tears, and Bryn didn't think it was only because of the physical pain that the suit was putting her in.

"I wasn't spying *on* your father, I was spying *for* your father. On you. He wanted me to keep an eye on you, to keep you safe."

Bryn just stared at Lani in disbelief.

"I wanted to just tell you yesterday after everything went to shit," Lani continued. The curse sounded so weird coming out of that mouth, but she already looked weird enough with the frightening armor on. "I wanted to get you alone, though. Edger had all of his senses boosted the whole time he was in my house. I don't know that we can trust him." She craned her neck to give very deliberate looks at Ban-nam, Emera, and Safler.

"*You* don't know that *we* can trust *him*? You've been smoking too much wild kiema, Lani."

"Listen, Bryn," she said, grunting and changing back into the form of the man who she was when she was unconscious. A man with deeply tanned skin and dark hair shaved close to the scalp, a scar running down the side of his face, so straight that it looked like it was made with a ruler. One of his eyes, the one that the scar passed through, had the magenta glow of a kiemara, though the other was plainly hazel. Bryn had never seen that before. His facial hair was a little longer than the hair on his head and neatly trimmed, the scar slicing through it like a memory of the blade that must have made it. The scar did not make him look any more trustworthy, if that was what he was going for. He was handsome in his own way, but old enough to be Bryn's father. "I'm an associate of your father's. You have to believe me."

"You're saying I should trust you because you're a terrorist?" Bryn asked with half a laugh, stifled because she thought he was serious.

"I'm not a terrorist, and neither was your father," he growled. "You don't know a damn thing about your father. He threw away his life for you. He was a great man, the best man I've ever known."

I think he's in love, Bryn, Doubt said.

What? Oh gods, as if things aren't bad enough.

I know. Love always complicates things. Doubt sighed.

"I've never wanted to know my father. He killed hundreds of innocent people."

The man bent over backwards on the ground let out an angry laugh. "Innocent!? They did this to me!" he screamed.

"What?" Emera said. Bryn's friends had been quiet until that point, trying to let her be the one to lead the questioning, but Emera couldn't hold it in any longer. She looked embarrassed that she had spoken, but she continued. "What did 'they' do, and who are 'they'?"

"The fucking military. They were experimenting on us, their own fucking soldiers! They... they turned me into a kiemara. They *made* me into a shapeshifter. I was a failed experiment though, and they locked me up rather than releasing me. It would have been more merciful to kill me, but they kept me around to test all kinds of things on me. My body is... not my body anymore. I can make it look the way it used to, but it's not me." The man's voice cracked with raw emotion. Bryn almost expected him to just scream at her with all the breath he could muster. "Do you know how it feels to be a stranger in your own body?"

"I do," Bryn said, uncomfortably, glancing at her friends. The man glared at her, but his angry countenance softened as he understood her meaning.

"Your father saved me. He didn't just burn Karmin Garden to the ground. He freed the people trapped inside, the people like me who had been abused and damaged, before he burned the motherfuckers who did the damaging. Your father is a bona fide hero. He deserves better than what your mom did to him."

Bryn was miles away from processing this information, let alone deciding if it was at all credible. It could definitely make sense that shapeshifting would be a consequence of heavy experimentation. Bryn imagined that it was like making a magically infused kietella, only in-

stead of creating it out of nothingness or inert matter, you would make it out of living, human flesh. But why? What would possess them to do something like that? Monsters were mostly under control, so she didn't think that would be the reason. Waalort was the capital city of the Waalorten Union, and the Union didn't really have enemies. As far as Bryn knew, there was peace between the Union and the neighboring countries of Groasland and Shabreleth. Why abuse your own citizens unnecessarily?

"Why did they do it?" Bryn asked, assuming that this man at least believed what he was saying.

"For the life of me, I don't know. If Rudy knew more, he never told me. I only spent a few short months helping helping him before your mom found him out and turned him in, but they were the best two months of my life. We liberated so many people together. During one of our raids, when we were on the brink of death, he gave me one last mission. I remember it like it was yesterday.

"'Jaid,' he said, 'if I don't make it, I want you to make sure Aubryn is safe. I never wanted things to end like this, and I was too stupid to let it go. I don't think I'm going to get out of this one.'

"'Don't say that,' I told him.

"'I mean it, Jaid. What we're doing is important, but Aubryn is everything to me. If I can't be there for her, you have to be. And you can be. They can't catch you if you don't let them. I know that what they've done to you is terrible, but you have to take what they've done to you and turn it into something good. If I'm caught, Aubryn and her mother are going to be in a lot of trouble. I need you to be there for them.'

"'If you get caught, I'll break you out of jail, sir. Rudy, I mean.' I always tried to call him 'sir', because of my time as a soldier, you know. But he insisted I call him Rudy.

"'No. It's no good. That will just put Aubryn in more danger. I can't have that. As of tonight, we've freed all of the victims of this project. I'm not sure there's much more I can do.'

"'But if we don't go after the people in charge, they're just going to do it again!' I objected.

"'Promise me,' he grunted. I started to object again, and he repeated it. 'Promise me.' He grabbed my face with both of his hands, looking me squarely in the eyes.

"Staring into his eyes, I couldn't deny him the request. 'I promise, sir. Rudy. If anything happens to you, I'll take care of your daughter.'"

Bryn didn't know what to think. It was a trick, right? It had to be a trick. It was such an elaborate lie, but it definitely wasn't any more elaborate than the manufactured neighbors that this man was claiming to create to watch over Bryn.

Find a contradiction, Doubt suggested. You're right, it's an elaborate lie. The more elaborate you make something, the more likely it will contradict itself or other information you have.

You would know, Bryn jabbed.

I'm just trying to help.

I know you are, but that worries me. I'd like to figure this one out for myself. What if you're working with her?

Someday, Bryn, you might need to trust me.

I hope I never get that desperate, but there are worse things that could happen.

Bryn hoped that would tide Doubt over while she set to finding a hole in Lani's story. Jaid's story. She wasn't sure what to call him or her, or what to think of his or her love for her father. She did think that Doubt was right about that, or at least that that was what he wanted Bryn to think. Did her father return the feelings? Was he faithful to her mother? Bryn had never even questioned that, since it didn't seem important given that he was gone. Her mother never looked for anyone else after he left. How much did her mother know about what her father had done, either in terms of his motivations for committing terrorism or in terms of infidelity? Would *she* be able to verify or contradict Lani's story?

I'm going to call her Lani, Bryn said. That's how I know her, and that's probably who she's going to go back to being once we aren't behind Bannam's screen. She certainly can't walk around as Jaid.

I agree, Doubt said. Bryn didn't need the reply, but she appreciated it anyway. In the distance, Bryn heard the muffled wail of police sirens, no doubt trying to clean up the terrible mess that had been made of the strip. She wondered if anyone would be able to identify her or make the connection to her father; it might make for some trouble at

school tomorrow. Assuming she could even make it in; she would have to prepare for the possibility that she would need to evade the cops.

So far all that Bryn had decided was that she needed to find her mother to get the story directly from her. She needed to find her mother anyway. The only way Bryn could be sure that her mother was safe was if Bryn was protecting her, herself.

Was the military, the government, capable of a plot like the one Lani had described? Bryn thought that was plausible. They had the ability, certainly. The only real question was what would drive them to such lengths. It would have to be something incredibly important to risk the kind of backlash that they would expect, the kind of backlash that they got from her father.

Doubt offered some theories. *They expected an attack from a foreign nation? Or maybe they were preparing to attack someone else?*

I really don't think that's it. Neither Groasland nor Shabreleth can compete with our military strength as it is, and they don't have anything we want. At least, I think that's the case. Bryn didn't follow international politics very closely, but she thought she would know if the country were on the brink of war.

I think you're right, but I would be careful about believing everything you hear in the media. If you don't trust me...

I'll keep that in mind. Okay, so it's plausible that they had some unknown motive to experiment on soldiers, too.

I could come up with other theories, too, if you like. Maybe there's a monster that's so terrifying and dangerous that they don't know how to fight it. Like a zygallon on steroids.

Wouldn't you know about it, if that were the case?

Probably, but not necessarily. What if it could wipe memories, even mine?

That was a thought that Bryn just didn't want to entertain. *Thanks for those nightmares,* Bryn thought.

Sorry, Doubt apologized. *I'm just trying to be thorough. It's hard to rule anything out when magic makes so many possibilities.*

So many possibilities, Bryn repeated. *So why did they make a shapeshifter? If I were making a super-soldier, I'd make him fire sunbeams out of his eyes.*

Lani did say she was a failed experiment.

What were they trying to make, then? A shapeshifter would be an excellent spy, but she was a failure, so they weren't making a spy.

I don't know, Bryn. I think you're onto something, but I don't know what the answer could be. Maybe Lani would know more, if you decide you believe her story, but I wouldn't count on it.

This is getting me nowhere. If Lani were actually protecting me, why'd she let me get raped? What does she know about what happened to me for those three missing days? And what did she do with Nighra?

You'll have to ask her.

"Say I'm willing to believe your story," Bryn said after a long time. There were a lot of questions to ask, but she knew which one she should start with. "What did you do with the real Nighra?"

"She's safe. I didn't hurt her, if that's what you're worried about. She's probably still asleep, in a closet at the Academy."

"So you knew you would be revealing yourself to me tonight?" Bryn asked. "Otherwise I would have found her tomorrow."

"Well, no. I thought I might. But if I didn't, I could always have gone back to the Academy tonight and hidden her."

"Kidnapped her, I think you mean," Safler said, angrily. Safler's understanding of the situation was far less than Bryn's, and Nighra was his friend too. Bryn wasn't surprised that he would take the attack on Nighra so personally. No doubt Emera felt the same way.

"You wanted me to find you out, though. You left things for me in your... in Lani's parents' room." Bryn trusted her friends, but she didn't feel the need to say that that was where her money came from. She had to admit, it would be a small relief to not feel like a thief, if the money were actually meant for her. But just because the circumstances worked out favorably, it didn't mean that Bryn didn't still feel guilty about what she did, given what she knew at the time.

"That's right. I needed to help you, and I wanted to let you know what I was, and I didn't trust Edger."

"You certainly seemed to trust him," Bryn said. "What was with the show you put on for him?"

"Show?"

Bryn felt a little awkward saying this part in front of her friends, but she felt even more awkward saying it to a middle-aged man. "Can you please turn back into Lani, first?" After some hesitation, Jaid transformed back into the little girl Bryn had watched grow up, groaning as

her bindings cut into her flesh. *She must have been really dense as a four year-old*, Bryn thought absentmindedly.

Is talking about an eleven year old's breasts much easier for you than a middle-aged man's? Doubt said before Bryn was able to ask the question.

I think it is, actually. At least I know Lani. Or I know who Lani is supposed to be. I don't know Jaid at all. And there's a possibility that he was... involved... with my father. Nothing about this situation is easy, Doubt, for anyone.

"Edger figured out that you were a shapeshifter on his own. He said your breasts kept swelling up whenever you were alone in the room with him."

"What!? No they didn't," Lani seemed to blush, despite the pain she was in. "I mean, sure, Edger reminds me a little of your father, but he's not in the same league." Edger didn't remind Bryn of her father at all. They weren't even the same race, for goodness sakes.

Maybe a shapeshifter sees things differently. Maybe the appearance of his body isn't important at all, and it's more what he has in his mind and heart. Doubt's advice did seem to make a kind of sense, except her father and Edger were still as different as night and day, respectively.

"I have complete control over my form, Bryn," Lani continued. "He was just putting you on. He must have known some other way."

"How, though!? I thought I was paranoid for thinking you were a shapeshifter, and that was with a lot of evidence that he didn't have! What do you think, he just plucked that theory out of the ether!?"

"Or maybe out of your mind," Lani said. Emera cringed.

"What are you suggesting? Edger was reading my mind?"

She's suggesting a lot more than that, Bryn, Doubt said, darkly. Bryn felt like a rabbit about to be caught by a snare.

"You think he raped me," Bryn said, angrily. "The person who took me in and helped me when I needed it most. *I went to him*, you bitch." Any reservations that Bryn once had about being rough with Lani had melted.

"And why did you go to him for help?" Bryn didn't answer. *He was the only person who I could think of nearby.*

She's a master of manipulation, Bryn. You know this. I'm not saying I trust Edger the way you do, but you shouldn't let her taint your

opinion of him. Bryn wasn't sure that she liked Doubt trying to tell her what she should and shouldn't think.

But she has a good point, Bryn thought back. *Think about it. What if Edger did rape me? If he left me in the alley near his apartment, knowing I would come to him for help, knowing that he would help me and earn my trust. What better way to find my father?*

What would Edger want with your father, Bryn?

I don't know! I don't know why, but everyone seems to want to find my father. Maybe I'm just projecting that onto them, though! There are other reasons why someone might rape me. Edger had a crush on me when we were younger, and now he has the power to take someone by force. Maybe he's not as different from his leech of a father as I thought. With his mastery of blue kiema, he has the ability to violate someone sexually unlike anyone else, and to wipe the memory of the assault.

He's not the only one, Bryn. Lani and Emera are both experts with blue kiema, and Mr. Canberra, and who knows who else? Bannam probably could do it, too.

Why are you defending him?

Because you sound like you're willing to give up on him, even though he made you happy! Doubt shouted at Bryn angrily. Bryn hadn't heard her use that tone of voice before. It shocked her, and brought the spinning gears in her head to a halt.

You're right. I mean, this doesn't really change anything. I should have been considering Edger as a suspect before, and I still should be. But it's still not likely. He's a good man. I know he is.

"If you were supposed to be protecting me, then why didn't you stop him?"

Lani bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Bryn. I took my eyes off you for a little while, and I lost you." Bryn wondered if maybe Lani was too busy breaking her father out of prison to keep an eye on her.

"People don't get raped every day, Lani. Why would someone be waiting for you to let your guard down just to rape me?"

"Because, Bryn," Lani said with a dangerous look in her eyes. "You had something they wanted. Your father *worked* at Karmin Garden." So even if Lani's story was true, maybe especially if it was, her father still had questionable scruples. "He was a part of the system before he met me. He sympathized with me, but it was the last project he was working on that pushed him over the edge. When he liberated me and

the other soldiers, he stole the final product and destroyed the records for it. Everyone else thought he just destroyed the serum, but I don't believe that. He worked too hard on it. I think he put it into you."

Bryn really didn't like where this was going. "Wouldn't I know if that were the case?"

"I don't think so. He told me, once, why the previous experiments had all failed. Human beings grow, and change, but once they become adults, they're pretty much who they are going to be. It's hard to change them, and when you do so you usually end up messing up what's already there." Lani whimpered a little as the constraints grated her skin. "The process of creating the thing the government wanted... it was a slow process. It had to start with a child – in this case you – because children are strong enough to survive the process, but malleable enough to be changed. But that wasn't enough. They needed to fundamentally rewrite the words that made up a human being, from the ground up. They needed to shape completely new life."

Poe, Bryn thought. "Let me see if I'm understanding you correctly. You're telling me that someone raped me to ensure that I would produce a super-human baby that they could use for some sick government agenda?"

"Not just any government agenda," Lani said. "The biggest one yet.

"They want to bleed the gods."

Chapter 26: In Which Bryn Learns About Her Baby's Purpose

"Bleed the gods!?" Bryn asked with incredulity.

"Why the surprise? You've known it for a long time, Bryn. Ortha is in danger because they're running out of kiema. But it's happening all over. The Waalort Union already takes nearly all of the kiema from Groasland, Shabreleth, and even Aesri, and even that's starting to run out. They need to get more kiema from somewhere, so why not go to the source?"

"The gods' blood?"

"Exactly. They want to create someone who can leave Ortha, cut the gods, and bleed them dry."

Bryn peered out of the alleyway at the failing light on the horizon. Darblun's Fingers stood to the east, a reminder of the difficulty the people of Ortha faced in the Upheaval. *How would he react to being stabbed by one of his toys?* Bryn shuddered at the thought.

"You are mad," she said, not even looking at Lani.

"I might be. A lot of things have happened to me in my life, and being so many different people for so long can really strain your sanity," Lani said. "But as mad as I may be, the people who hatched that plan are madder."

"Why would they tell you any of this?"

"They didn't. I've had to piece it together from the things your father knew when he was arrested, and the things I've learned over the years. I've gathered agents, spies, who have helped me track this information down. I've been trying to pin Senator Cimmaron to it for years, because I know in my gut that he's responsible for the program. I finally worked my way into a position under him, and was able to fill in some of the last gaps."

"So you were directing me to him, hoping I would learn about this project somehow?"

"That was the basic plan." Lani said. "Afterwards I would have found a way to introduce you to my real self, to Jaid, and let you know that he had been one of the victims of the military's experiments. Then I hoped to enlist you in finding and helping your father. I guess," Lani said, with a grin on her face despite the pain, "this works too."

"So you don't know where my father is yet."

"No. I don't know how to find him, either. I think you'll have more luck."

"Why do you think that? I barely know the man."

"He'll be searching for you, though."

Bryn thought Lani was probably right about that last point if nothing else. Her head was swimming with questions. She didn't know how to even begin answering them. She had opened up too many possibilities about her father and her rapist, but since she didn't trust Lani she couldn't know which possibilities were most likely. She needed solid evidence, not hearsay.

"What do we do now, Bryn?" Emera said. Bryn considered her options. She might be able to verify Lani's story at Senator Cimarron's office, but if her story were true, he'd be trying to cover it up anyway, so that might be difficult. Returning to the scene of her rape with Emera would probably be the best use of her time. But she wanted Edger to be there too, in case he had some advice. She was supposed to be on her way to her house to meet him right now, and to bring the blue kiema to the vulprin. But even more important was checking up on Nighra, especially since she might be able to corroborate Lani's story.

But first there was the problem of Lani herself. Bryn couldn't just remove her shackles and let her go. She wanted to keep Lani close to keep an eye on her at the very least. Keeping a leash on a shapeshifter would be difficult, though. Bryn looked between her friends carefully before swallowing a few green kiema. *Let's see.* Tight, adaptable, durable, beaded, obvious. She added fashionable so she wouldn't have to explain it to strangers. Remote, unique. She shaped the words and snapped a finger, and a rainbow-colored choker appeared on Lani's neck, binding itself tightly against her skin. *At least this way I should know that it's her if she changes again.*

"I'm pretty sure she'll have trouble getting that off. I'm going to let you go, Lani, but I expect you to stay near me at all times. I don't believe your story, not yet, but I'm willing to let you accompany me as I track down more leads."

"Okay, Bryn. I'm fine with that. To be honest, it's kind of a relief, for you to finally know who I am. I've been lonely for... a very long time," she said. She really didn't sound like a little girl anymore.

"Emera, I'd like to revisit the alley where I was raped." She said the sentence before listening to it in her head. "Part of me doesn't want to, but I need to. You know what I mean. I need to find some hard evi-

dence, and I think you'll be very helpful for that. If nothing else, it should be easier for you to try to bring back some of the memories that I lost if we're there."

"Of course, Bryn. Though, I do have one question first."

"What's that?"

"Are you expecting us to fight more monsters like the zygallon? Because that scared the fuck out of me. I've barely been following what's happening since I'm still shaking from that. How are you still going like nothing happened?" Safler pulled her close to his chest and stroked her hair, and she closed her eyes and let him comfort her.

Is that the last of them? Bryn asked Doubt. *You aren't going to keep drawing monsters to me, are you?*

Of course not, Doubt said. *Unless I bring them to help you.*

To help me? Bryn asked.

You never know when a crash of behammon will be a convenient distraction.

Bryn sighed, both in her head and in her body. *Can I trust you?*

You ask me so many questions that I can't know the answers to, Bryn. It's really not up to me whether you'll be able to trust me or not.

"I think that's the last of the monsters. That doesn't mean there might not be more fighting, and we'd be fighting something even more dangerous than the zygallon." Emera's eyes bulged. "I'm talking about people, sweetie," Bryn clarified, relief washing over Emera's face. "But don't let your guard down. People have the potential to be more brutal than monsters. Believe me, I know." Bryn hadn't really thought about the soreness in her vagina for a while, but it was still there, and the memory of waking up in the alley made her very aware of the pain down there.

"I'm in, then," Emera said. "I want to help."

"Me too," Safler added. "Someone has to keep you two safe."

Bryn was pretty sure that Safler was the least useful of everyone here in a fight. Unlike most people, he didn't really specialize in anything. He probably would have liked Mr. Genapris's classes, but ever since he and Emera began dating two years ago he just always took whatever class Emera was interested in on a given day.

"Thanks for the support, guys. How about you, Bannam? You wanted to come shopping with me, but do you want to stick around some more?"

"I probably should. I don't want to miss the exciting conclusion."

"Conclusion?"

"When you find your rapist."

"It's happening tonight?"

Lani's neck craned to look up at Bannam expectantly as he nodded. It strained against the choker, but her eyes looked excited rather than pained.

"Where will I find him?"

"I don't tell you. You don't want to know, anyway." Bryn was frustrated once she understood what he meant, but she was starting to get used to being frustrated with Bannam. She couldn't help but feel that if he just told her where she would find her rapist, it would be like they had cheated, like reading the last page of a book to see how it ends, before you go through all of the work of understanding how and why the ending was the way it was. A story was told in a certain order for a reason.

"Well then, I guess we have a plan." Bryn thought about how she would remove the armor on Lani, and realized that this was the perfect opportunity to try recycling. Loose, free, flowing, scant, escapable, avoidable, open-ended, rigid, rewarding. Her fingers practically formed the antonyms on their own. It was even easier than Bryn thought it would be, and she soon had nearly all of the kiema she used to create the binding suit right back in her hand.

"Wow, that's a neat trick, Bryn. When did you learn that one?" Safler asked.

"Today, actually. It turns out Dr. Umbroon actually knows his stuff." She spoke casually but her muscles were in a tense state of readiness as she watched Lani stand up. They stood there looking at each other for a long time. Lani was no longer pretending to be the girl that Bryn knew growing up.

"Okay, we've all got garmin blood all over us. Can anyone do anything about that?" Before she finished the sentence, Bannam had swallowed some red and blue kiema, and made some motion with his fingers before spreading them wide. Bryn felt a wave of heat as the blood on everyone's clothes rapidly evaporated in a fine red mist. She was caught off guard, but she managed to hold her breath, unlike Emera who soon found herself coughing and gagging. But after the un-

comfortable heat and steam passed, everyone looked like their clothes had been freshly washed.

“Great, we’re ready to reenter society. Let’s go pick up Nighra’s leviboard from the garage.” Bannam released the invisibility field and the group made their way back down the strip, the bright lights of the photads covered in blood in a number of places, casting a dark and scary glow over the carnage and mayhem that had taken place. As they passed, a corpse board driver was trying to cut the zygallon in half with a chainsaw to fit him on his leviboard. Bryn wanted to try to stop him, but she knew it would draw attention to them and she was too late in any case. The man let out a dozen curses as he caught a spray of acid, half of which Bryn had never even heard before. He managed the surprise fairly well, though, and was able to adapt to the challenge.

The garage was crowded. Everyone was trying to leave even if they weren’t involved directly in the carnage, and business was closed for the night all the way up and down the strip. Bryn sighed with frustration as she waited, the sun creeping further down until it fell completely out of sight. She wondered what the night would bring as she looked at Bannam, wondering what he already knew about their next steps. When they finally got the valet to bring up Nighra’s leviboard, Bryn stopped Lani from getting in the driver’s seat.

“I’ll drive, thank you,” Bryn said.

Lani simply unlocked the board and said, “Be my guest,” before buckling herself into the passenger seat that Bryn rode on the way over. Bryn paused ever so briefly before starting the leviboard. How did Lani know Nighra’s unlock code?

Maybe she forced Nighra to tell her the combination before stealing it. Bryn didn’t want to believe Doubt’s suggestion, because of what it might mean for Nighra’s current safety. *Or maybe this just looks like Nighra’s board, an elaborate fabrication meant to be a perfect copy of it.* Bryn appreciated that they were more.

Bryn drove the leviboard more than twenty miles per hour over the speed limit through the crowded city streets without much difficulty. She felt like a leader, and more importantly, she felt like she understood the motives and the capabilities of the rag-tag crew she had assembled for the first time. The group, even Lani, seemed to have been brought closer together by the experience of fighting the zygallon, and Lani

didn't seem to be holding a grudge about her rough interrogation afterwards. All Bryn needed now was for Nighra and Edger to round out her little army, and they'd be ready to return to the alley where she was raped. She couldn't help but feel that she would find the answers she was looking for in the very place where her ordeal began.

Chapter 27: In Which Bryn Feeds Her Pets

Bryn relaxed as the trip back to her school was pleasantly uneventful. After the past two days, Bryn was beginning to believe that peace and normalcy had no place in her life anymore, but she managed to just enjoy the simple pleasure of the wind on her face as they traveled, blunted as it was by the leviboard's force field.

Lani led the group to a closet in the Academy building, where, as she promised, Nighra's body rested. Bryn reached down and shook her shoulder, but got no response.

"It's no good. With the hex I cast on her, she's going to be out for at least the night," Lani said apologetically. "I couldn't risk her waking up and spoiling my disguise."

"It's no problem," Bannam said. Once again his palm glowed white and he slapped Nighra on the face, hard. Bryn gasped and nearly responded with force, except Nighra immediately sat upright, wide awake, clutching a hand to the side of her head.

"Oh gods, what in the hell happened?" she asked groggily as her shoulders sagged and she rubbed her temples.

"Just relax, honey," Emera said. "You've been through a lot. What's the last thing you remember?" Lani started to speak up, but Bryn shushed her with a finger. *I want to hear Nighra's story the way she remembers it, not with Lani's influence.*

"Well," Nighra began, "I was in the lunch room collecting money for Bryn... And I saw someone outside the window. At first I thought I was seeing my own reflection, until she winked at me. This woman looked *exactly* like me! I was curious, so I went outside and... and... that's pretty much the last thing I remember." She shook her head as if she was still trying to shake off the sleep that lingered within.

So she didn't give up her leviboard code, Bryn said to Doubt.

There are still plenty of other explanations than memory manipulation. Maybe you should just ask her.

Bryn agreed. "One thing about your story still doesn't add up, Lani."

"Jaid," Lani said.

"I'm confused enough right now," Bryn responded with exasperation. "Can't I just call you Lani?"

"Sure, Bryn."

"How did you know how to unlock Nighra's leviboard?"

"I didn't. I don't. The board we took wasn't Nighra's, it was one of mine. I didn't like tearing up the seat or dinging the paint job, but it was necessary."

"One of yours? Where did all of your money come from?" Bryn asked, sitting beside Nighra and stroking her shoulder for comfort. *Lani replaced her before I told my friends anything. This must be extremely confusing for her.*

"The government. It's not hard at all to steal from them when you have my talents, and getting away with it is even easier. Plus they deserve it." Bryn wasn't so sure about that last point. After all, the government was funded by the people's taxes, so Lani was just stealing from everyone in the Waalort Union, apparently. Bryn had not been overwhelmed by Lani's rationality, though. "That stash you found was just one of my many hiding places. You should see how much I keep in the kitchen."

"Whatever. You probably shouldn't do that in the future, but I just can't bring myself to care at this point."

"I'll take that under advisement," Lani said, rolling her eyes and fingering the collar that Bryn put on her.

Bryn considered everything that Lani had told her. It could all be true, she thought. The best lies were based on truth, though. It was more likely that most of her story was true, except for one little lie that would end up biting Bryn in the ass later. Until she could figure out what that lie was, though, she was stuck.

"Bryn, what's going on?" Nighra asked, still trying to get over her headache.

"A lot, Nighra. I'll explain it to you on the way. I'll ride with Nighra on her leviboard, and I expect you all to keep an eye on Lani on her board." Maybe she couldn't really trust any of these people, but as long as one of them was honest she didn't think there would be a problem. "Did you hide Nighra's leviboard too, Lani?" She nodded. "Well, take us to it. We'll meet back at my house."

By the time Bryn finished recounting her story to Nighra, the pair of them were a mess of tears. "Gods, Nighra. I'm so glad you're okay." Bryn finally said when she managed to regain her composure. Recounting the rape was the hardest of all, but telling Nighra all about Lani and how she had been attacked was almost as hard. Bryn felt guilty for pulling Nighra into her troubles, but she could see on Nighra's face that Nighra would have been upset if Bryn hadn't gotten her in-

volved. They had always been close like that, but Bryn felt like she was truly appreciating their friendship for the first time in her life.

"It sounds like I got off easy compared to you lot. I didn't have to fight a zygallon."

"It's too bad you didn't. I bet you would have kicked its ass."

"You know it. That Lani is a real bitch, though, taking me out with a sneak attack. I can get revenge on her soon, right?"

"Sure, but let's wait until she's outlived her usefulness." Bryn sighed. "I'm so glad to have some time alone with you, Nighra. I just can't trust anyone else right now."

"What about Emera and Safler? You've known them for years."

"I know, I know... Let's just say that some bad information has had me questioning Safler."

"Safler!? That boy wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone you, Bryn. He's head over heels for Emera, and you know it."

"I know!" Bryn said. "At least, my head knows that. But there's this lingering... doubt... I guess, in my heart. How can I really know what's going on inside someone else's head, even the head of a close friend? What if he's had a crush on me for years, and he finally decided to act on it? I'd never suggest such a thing to Emera, and I don't even really think it's true myself, but I have to consider the possibility."

"Yeah, but even if he did it, it's Safler. He's a slacker. He wouldn't know the first thing about wiping your memories."

"Well, he *has* taken all of the same classes as Emera. But I'm more worried about the case where you're right. If Safler couldn't erase my memories, then who did? It would have to be Emera, right?"

"Oh, Bryn, that's sick. So what, Emera caught Safler raping you, but she still loves him so much that she's willing to cover it up for him?"

"Maybe?"

"I don't believe it for a second," Nighra said.

"Yeah, me neither," Bryn lied. She didn't think it was likely, but she wasn't willing to rule it out. "It's probably the drummer from Burgona's Brigade, anyway."

"I hope so. I never liked them much anyway," Nighra laughed. "I only went because you guys were going."

"Wait, I don't like them either! Why in the hell were we going there?" Bryn asked.

"I guess we all just thought everyone else liked them," she answered with a shrug. It felt good to laugh. As Bryn pulled up in front of the blackened ruins of her home, she thought it might be the last time she would have the opportunity for a while.

Lani's leviboard wasn't far behind, but Bryn was already off and moving towards the ruins. They looked so cold and empty now, nothing like the warm memories she had of the building that once stood in their place. She didn't see Edger's leviboard anywhere, but she wasn't surprised since he would be trying to hide from anyone else who might take an interest in Bryn's former home, like the police or the media. She already had the one copy of her sword thrust through her belt, glowing brown, and the other copy in the box Dr. Umbronn had given her, but she didn't think it would hurt to swallow more green kiema so that she could have her kietella charged.

"Edger!" she called out. "Are you here?"

"I am," he said, as he stepped out from behind some of the debris. Bryn thought it unlikely that he had been hiding magically the way Bannam could, but it sure seemed that way.

"Thank goodness. It's been a long day, Edge." she said as the other group was beginning to catch up.

"You're telling me. Here I was worried sick all day that you'd have trouble getting along without my help, and come to find out you've recruited half of your class. And you even picked up my favorite little neighbor!" he said, flashing a big smile at Lani.

Bryn watched Lani carefully when he did that. Edger was right; her breasts did swell up to twice or maybe even three times their size. She was only supposed to be eleven years old, but she looked like she had the firm, perky tits of a twenty year old. How had Bryn not noticed this happening before?

Or is she just putting on a show now for you since it's expected of her? Doubt asked.

"See what I was saying, Lani?" Bryn said with a pointed glance. The breasts immediately returned to normal and Lani looked horribly embarrassed. "I'm just thankful you were in the form you're in. For gods sakes, you're old enough to be his —" Bryn was about to say "father", but it conjured unpleasant thoughts of her rape, "— his mother."

"Am I?" Lani asked. "It's hard to even know at this point."

"Well, when the zygallon incapacitated you –"

Edger interjected, "You guys fought a zygallon? And lived!?"

"Not now, Edge, I'm on to something," Bryn said. "When the zygallon incapacitated you, your body repaired itself, back to its true form, or so I assume. And that man was over forty at least."

"If you say so. I've kind of lost track of the years at this point," she sighed.

"Why didn't you change back when I knocked you out, just over there." Bryn pointed to an fuzzy outline of Lani's body in the soot outside, barely visible through a window that was hanging off of one sad-looking hinge.

"I was just unconscious, then," Lani explained. "My body didn't think it was in danger. If it had, I probably would have reverted."

A convenient explanation, Doubt said.

Yes, but one that could be true.

I know. I thought you had her with that one, Bryn. Bryn didn't see any more holes in Lani's story, at least not at the moment, but she wasn't sure she believed the explanation of how she reverted to her "real" form either.

"So we all know Lani's a shapeshifter, then?" Edger said to the group, trying to catch up. "And we all know that we all know?" Everyone just nodded half-heartedly, as if they didn't really believe most of the events unfolding around them. "What else do we all know?"

Bannam began babbling off a list, "Bryn was raped, you healed her, she's pregnant with her rapist's child, her dad kidnapped her mom and burned down her house – or so we *think*," he was careful to clarify. Bryn wondered if he knew, but she knew he would say something if he were going to, whether he knew or not. "Monsters are people too, and Ortha is on the brink of disaster because we're going to run out of kiema."

"That's enough, Bannam. Edger already knows this stuff, and it's enough to tell him that you all know everything he does. In any case, I believe introductions are in order. Everyone, this is Edger Barrington. Edger, I believe you already know Lani and I'm not sure how I'd even begin to introduce her anyway. I think you might know Nighra Jones, Emera Chiang, and Safler Ngoyen from when we were kids."

"I remember Nighra, at least," Edger said with a smile. "You two spent all of your time together, if I recall."

"Gods damn right," Nighra said. "Bryn is my best friend. Always has been, always will be. If you hurt her in any way," Nighra said with a poke to Edger's burly chest, "you'll have to answer to me."

"I'd be careful," Bryn said to Edger. "She's got a nasty mean streak, and she's pretty good with red magic now." Nighra feigned objection, and Emera and Safer just laughed.

"Anyway, last but not least is Bannamus Asina, Bannam for short. He's one of my classmates, and he's quite talented. He claims to know the future, and he's been following us around for some reason," Bryn said dismissively.

"Really? What a rare and unique gift," Edger said. "Is it part of your kiemara heritage?"

"It is," Bannam said. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I see lots of things," Edger said, pointing at his eyes. Bryn didn't really know what to make of his posturing. She almost thought he might be jealous, that he might think that Bannam was a competitor for Bryn's affections. But that would require Edger to have feelings for her, romantic feelings, and she didn't think that would be possible after their too-intimate-too-fast moment yesterday.

"Well, now that we're all up to speed, how are the vulprin doing?" she asked Edger. "Did you get some blue kiema from school?"

"I did manage to get some, actually. I probably matched what you already picked up from the kiema store. It's hidden with my board."

"Did the vulprin stick around?"

"They did. They seem to be getting a bit anxious though. I think they're hungry."

"Get your kiema and lead me to them," Bryn said. When he did so, she gave him a grin as she held up the box. "Check this out." She upended it, spilling out an enormous pile of green and blue kiema. It took minutes for the entire contents of the box to be emptied through the small mouth of the box. Edger just watched the entire time, speechless. The sword that was inside seemed to be lodged there, like the last piece in a box of candy. Bryn considered removing it too, but decided against it. Even though it had some red magic stored in it, it might be more useful if it were something an opponent didn't know she had in reserve. She

added the kiema from her green satchel, and the kiema that Edger had brought.

Bryn started to separate the green and blue kiema from each other, but the vulprin quickly shooed her away and went about to doing it for her. She restocked her blue bag with some more green kiema, since she had used much more than she ever would have thought she might use in a day. She liked using magic without care for the resources it took. When she had to think about how much kiema she was using, she couldn't really concentrate on what she was doing. With seemingly limitless kiema, she could focus on the magic and *how* it worked, and that seemed to be very good for her today. She really understood green magic for the first time in her life.

More importantly, she was free to experiment however she saw fit. This was why joining the Order of Whyat was so important. They had the resources to let her flourish. There were other resources than money and kiema, though. *People, and talent, and talented people*, she thought as she looked at her friends. *Those are the most important resource of all, and that's what the Order really offers.*

The vulprin eventually made their way through the pile, gobbling up the first ten untainted blue kiema they found and leaving the rest in a neat little pile between them. Bryn had hoped that maybe their humanizing transformation would last longer and longer and be more complete with each piece they ate, but there was no such luck. There were about seventy-five crystals in the pile once it was sorted. Not even half a pound. Bryn started to reach for it.

"Oooooouursssss," the vulprin drawled in their crooked, nearly human speech. They leaned over the pile as Bryn's hand advanced toward it, and she hesitated.

"I understand that you want this kiema," Bryn said as if she were talking to a child. "I even want you to be able to have it. But if this arrangement is going to work, I need to get something out of it, too. Do you understand?"

One of the vulprin twitched its neck a few times. At first Bryn thought they didn't understand, but then slowly, meticulously, the vulprin pushed a feathered wing down into the middle of the pile, carving out a third of it. He pushed the third a few inches toward Bryn before covering the remaining two thirds with his wing again. "Taaaaaake."

Oh well, Bryn thought. *Something is better than nothing. This will be enough to heal myself once or twice at least, if I get hurt and am*

willing to take the chance. It is relying an awful lot on the vulprin's ability to identify the taint. She loaded the handful of kiema into her now-empty satchel, and the rest of the green and tainted blue kiema back into her box.

Are you sure you don't want to give Edger a piece? Doubt asked. *Why would I do that?*

I don't know, Doubt said. *I just thought maybe you'd want him to study it. He knows a lot about kiema. Or maybe he could use it to calm a monster later.*

I think it's better for me to hang on to it, she said. *But thanks for the suggestion.* Bryn thought the suggestion was strange, but she had known Doubt to be strange at times. *What happened to your overwhelming desire for me to consume some blue kiema?*

Maybe I've decided that I'm better off inside your head? Bryn was unconvinced. *Or, more likely,* Doubt confessed, *I'm not sure yet how to build a body for myself.*

Bryn hesitated after the exchange, eventually convincing herself that Doubt was being completely dishonest about Bryn's consumption of untainted kiema. What that meant Doubt actually thought, Bryn couldn't guess, but she doubted she could get the truth out of her.

She only had a little bit of red kiema, but she thought that having some untainted red kiema would be better than nothing. She poured it out for the vulprin, who sniffed it.

"Groooooossss," one of them grunted. He was the talkative one.

"I know it's gross, Beaky," she said, giving him a name. He seemed happy to be named. "I don't expect either you or Birdo to eat them. I'm just hoping you can sort them."

Beaky and Birdo sniffed the pile again. They looked at each other, and separated the pile in two. One crystal in one pile, the other hundred in another.

"Just one? I guess it's to be expected. I'll have to bring you more next time."

"Hang on, Bryn," Nighra said. "We have red kiema too. Use ours."

"Are you sure?" Bryn asked.

"Of course! It's way more important that you have the untainted kiema than us. Unless Safler and Emera have some important news for us."

"What?" shouted Emera. "Nighra! What are you suggesting!?" She pouted. "I'm saving myself for marriage."

"You are joking," Bryn said, spending an inordinate amount of time on each word. Emera was practically having sex with Safler right now with how much they were fondling each other.

"She's really not," Safler said with a groan that had years of yearning behind it.

"I mean, we're not totally innocent. We've done... stuff. I just don't want to go all the way until we're married."

Uh oh. The boy has blue balls, Doubt said.

Oh please, that doesn't make him a rapist.

It doesn't not make him one either.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Bannam said, but Bryn was skeptical. Bannam didn't forget anything, he just chose when to say things very carefully. He fished around in his pocket and pulled out the tiny, hand-held garmin that they had obtained from their last battle. "Maybe we should leave him here too?"

"That sounds like a good idea, Bannam. Can you make him big again?"

"Of course." Bannam started to swallow some kiema.

"Wait, before you do that... Set him down by the pile." Bannam did as Bryn requested, though the rest of the group just gave her confused looks. Bryn watched the garmin carefully. It was barely big enough to fit a piece of kiema in its mouth. "Go ahead, Tiny. You can have one." Beak let one of the crystals in the pile leave the protection of his winged arms.

Tiny, or so he was now called, sniffed the crystal briefly before trying to devour it whole. Once again, Tiny seemed to regain some human characteristics, but not for any longer than the garmin on the strip did. Bryn hoped that the size of the kiema relative to Tiny's body would be enough to allow him to make the effect permanent, but she guessed that that was just wishful thinking. He did, however, seem to be able to direct the blue magic from the kiema the way people did, and he actually dispelled Bannam's effect on his own, returning to his normal size. One kiema crystal should not have given him that much power.

"Oh, that is just excellent. I think it will work." Bannam gave her a quizzical look "Oh, don't worry about it. It's not important right now. Some day it might be, but I've got to get through tonight first."

The three monsters seemed to get along now that they weren't hungry anymore, and they were more than willing to sort everyone's red kiema. Bryn ended up with eight red kiema crystals. *At least the creatures have no desire to keep any of these. This is barely enough for one spell. I'll have to make it count.*

"Okay," Bryn said as the group redistributed the tainted red kiema amongst themselves. "Now that everyone's here, it's time to go back to the alley."

"Almost everyone," Bannam corrected.

"What?"

"Almost everyone's here. We're still missing two people."

"Two people? Who?"

"You'll find out," he said. "Let's just go to the Rat Hole. We'll pick them up along the way."

Who could they be? Her parents? She joined Edger in the backseat of Nighra's leviboard. Somehow, just knowing that the red kiema was finally available to her again, it made her feel much more confident and much more optimistic about her chances. And that innocent look in Edger's eyes when he looked into hers... She could trust him, and Nighra, and even Emera and Safler. She knew she could trust them when she looked into those eyes.

Be careful, girl. You're falling for him.

What? No.

I know what I'm seeing. You're falling in love.

I am not. I'm just admiring him. There's a lot to admire.

I remember you admiring his penis through the window back at his apartment.

What!? I did no such thing!

You almost did.

But I didn't. That has to count for something!

Just be careful, Bryn. I don't know what's going to happen tonight, but after everything you've been through I don't want to see you get your heart crushed, too.

Great. I'm getting close to tracking down and taking revenge on my rapist, but I have to stop to deal with love advice from an incorporeal monster.

You made your bed, Bryn. Now it's time to lie in it. With Edger.
Doubt ran off laughing as Bryn scowled in her head.

Chapter 28: In Which The Story Unfolds

The three leviboards, piloted by Edger, Nighra, and Lani, entered the main street of the Rat Hole, the same street that Bryn had made the agonizing journey across the previous morning to reach Edger's apartment. They could just barely see his apartment building from the street, as it towered over the neighboring, older buildings. Bryn's stomach twisted and turned as the anticipation of her return grew inside. The sun had set a long time ago, and the photorbs, most of which had expired, barely shone bright enough to light the street. Despite the late hour, the streets were pretty crowded with unsavory people, any of whom looked like they could be Bryn's rapist. Seeing the squalor made Bryn wonder why she was doubting her friends when there were so many better suspects right here.

Then it hit her. A waft of air washed over Bryn, and she got a powerful whiff of whiskey. "Stop the board," she told Nighra, looking back over her shoulder to where the smell came from. It was a bar, the barely legible sign reading *The Iron Monkey*. The entrance to the bar had a pair of swinging saloon doors, and the open space above and below the swinging doors made it easy for the sound and smells inside to creep out onto the street. Bryn was certain that that was where the smell came from. When Nighra parked in front of it, the rest of her entourage followed. They were all very careful to lock their boards as they got a few skeevey looks from men sitting on stoops nearby.

"Is this the alley?" Emera asked, peering into the alley next to the bar, not straying too far from Safler's side.

"No. Do you all smell that?" Bryn asked.

"It smells like whiskey," Edger said.

"Okay, this is going to seem like a strange detail, but why is it that the only thing that I remember from my attack, literally the only thing, is that my attacker smelled like whiskey?" Bryn asked.

"Well, ordinarily, memories of smells are some of the strongest and most persistent memories we have. It would be the hardest memory to remove, especially for such a traumatic event," Emera said. Bryn thought that that explanation was reasonable. "However," Emera continued, "I don't think that really explains this. You would have other weak memories trying to resurface if that was what your attacker did. It sounds like his magic was very crude, that it just tore out everything from about three days of your life. I can't imagine that kind of magic leaving anything behind, not even a memory of a smell."

"Then why would I have this memory?" Bryn asked, incredibly grateful that Emera was there with her expertise.

“If I had to make a guess? Whoever gutted your memories also left something behind. He wanted you to remember that smell for some reason.”

“So you’re saying that he wanted me to come here?”

“It looks that way to me, Bryn,” Emera said.

“That is quite insightful, Emera,” Bannam said. “I am very impressed. Even I couldn’t figure that one out.” Bryn wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or a backward sort of boast, but she didn’t think that Bannam intended it as either. He was just stating some facts in that typical absentminded tone he had.

“Thanks, Bannam,” Emera said. “I think.”

“Well, no sense in disappointing my rapist,” Bryn said, as she started to enter the bar.

“Wait, Bryn,” Edger said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She felt her heart racing, and Doubt started teasing her again. “Are you just going to go in there, knowing that it’s a trap?”

“Why not? Disarming a mousetrap is easy if you know it’s there. You just poke it with stick or something.”

“Try telling that to a mouse,” Edger said. Bryn understood his point, but this was the best lead she’d gotten so far.

“Wait out here for me.” Edger and Nighra started to object, but Bryn silenced them with a look. “Keep an eye on Lani, and look out for anything else unusual,” she said before pushing the swinging doors roughly aside, making a loud entrance.

The bar was filled with tough-looking men, most downing shots or slurping from mugs at the bar proper on the left side of the room. A few groups of three or four people – the only groups containing any women – were having conversations in booths along the right side, and there were two leviball tables in the back that were currently in use by a group of about ten men, two of whom were at least seven feet tall and over four hundred pounds. Most of these people meant nothing to Bryn, but they all looked at her when she entered. She not-so-idly played with the hilt of her sword as their lecherous eyes stared at her, and most of them went back to their drinks, conversations, or entertainment. She took a few steps towards the bar, the sticky floor threatening to pull off the pair of loose-fitting shoes Bryn had taken from Lani’s house.

Two men stood out, and their gazes lingered on Bryn a lot longer than the rest of the bar’s patrons and were no less penetrating.

She recognized both of them. The first, one of the men in the back playing pool, was the drummer for Burgona's Brigade. She recognized him strictly as a devotee of popular culture. Burgona's Brigade was arguably the most popular band in Ortha; if you didn't recognize every band member on sight, there was something wrong with you. Or at least that's what Bryn's peers would say, even if Bryn and her friends didn't agree that they were that great.

What's a guy like that doing in a seedy dive like this? Bryn thought.

That's what you're here to find out, isn't it? Doubt asked.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I'm going to have to see some ID if you're going to be coming in here," came the voice of the bartender, surprising Bryn. She hadn't even thought about that complication.

"Oh, no, Limbit, she's with me," came another voice. This voice came from the second man that drew Bryn's eye.

Oh, this is not going to go well, Bryn thought.

I thought you wanted to see Slaterin again, to apologize and to ask for his help with the area, Doubt said.

I did, but that was before I already had plenty of backup. Now he's more of a liability than anything else.

You can't trust what's behind those glowing eyes of his?

Something like that.

I'm not sure you have much of a choice at the moment.

"Oh, sorry, Slater. I had no idea. Of course you're welcome here, miss, if you're with our hero." Several of the men at the bar raised their glasses and clinked them together after Limbit's declaration.

"Their hero?" Bryn asked, sitting down at the booth that Slater occupied alone. Her seat faced away from the entrance and towards the back of the bar, so she kept an eye on the drummer. She tried to remember his name, but had no success.

"I've saved the lives of pretty much everyone here at some point or another. I guess that's what they're referring to." Slater took a sip from a glass of whiskey, and the smell filled Bryn's stomach with bile. If he were her rapist, and he had planted a memory of whiskey in her mind, would he be so obvious about it now? Bryn found that unlikely. "Drunk people don't have much defense against monsters, and there are plenty of monsters in the Rat Hole at night," he said.

"You're not wrong," Bryn said, one eye on Slater and one on the drummer. "What about you?" Bryn asked, gesturing at his glass. "Who protects you when you get drunk?"

Slater gave a dark and cynical laugh. "I wouldn't know, I've never been." Bryn raised an eyebrow, glancing at the three empty glasses that suggested otherwise. "Every kiemara's got a little quirk about them, right? That just happens to be mine. Try as I might, I can't get drunk. I can't hardly even get hurt, to be honest. I don't remember the last time I saw my own blood, and I've been fighting monsters since I was a kid."

Bryn wondered how Beloved would fare against his claimed powers. "That's a lucky gift."

"Yeah, you'd probably think that, given how you looked when we met yesterday. You know, you still haven't told me your name."

Bryn hesitated. Did she really have a reason to lie to him? He did save her life. Somehow this decision, whether to trust him or not with something as simple as her name, seemed like the most important decision she could make.

What if he recognizes my name and my association with my father? Bryn asked Doubt.

So what if he does? He doesn't seem like the type to hold it against you. He's pretty sullen. A little angsty, even. I'd bet he's seen his own share of prejudice.

Sometimes people who have experienced prejudice first-hand are those who are the best at being prejudiced. They've learned from the best, and they have a lot of reasons to be concerned for their own safety.

But if we believe Lani's story, your father is probably a friend of kiemara. And if we don't, he's just a terrorist, and the kiemara aren't exactly friends of the establishment. Why would he have a problem with your father anyway?

That's a fair point. I guess I'm just seeing shadows.

Don't be dismissive of shadows, Bryn. Something has to cast them, after all.

"Bryn," she said, finally. She wasn't going to give him her last name, but she didn't think there was a reason to lie about her first name.

"Bryn? Aubryn Dandaster?" he asked, suddenly much more alert. He looked around the bar to see if anyone had heard him. "Gods, I should have known. I should have seen the resemblance."

"You knew my father, I take it?" Bryn said, trying to sound disinterested but panicking on the inside. This man just happened to be one of her dad's associates. He could probably confirm Lani's story, assuming that he was willing to talk about it and that his information was credible.

"I did. That was a long time ago. Gods, I was what... fourteen years old then? It feels like no time has passed at all, but I'm sure your father would disagree." He looked around the bar at the people one more time. "If I'm a hero, then your dad's a legend, plain and simple."

Bryn's eyes teared up. She hadn't been willing to believe Lani's story before. If she believed it, and it turned out to be a fabrication, then she would be devastated when she learned the truth. But the idea that Slater could independently confirm that her father had noble reasons for committing the crimes he committed... Bryn was elated by an overwhelming love for her father, with a certainty for once in her life that he was not the cruel, evil monster that everyone thought he was. Her mother was wrong to turn him in, though Bryn was sure she had her reasons, too.

Everyone has reasons for everything they do, she thought optimistically.

Maybe, Doubt replied. But those reasons don't always make sense to others, even if they're known. I wouldn't rely too heavily on the rationality of humanity, Bryn.

Are you speaking from experience?

Maybe, she said, her voice trailing off into darkness.

Bryn decided to try a gamble. "Were you one of the prisoners? If you were fourteen, you were too young to be a soldier."

Slater stared into his drink for a long moment, before shaking his head and looking up at Bryn. He said in a low, nearly inaudible baritone, "How did you find out about that? I know Rudy didn't tell you. He never wanted you to be a part of any of it. He spoke of you, all the time, you know. You were in every speech he gave. There was a picture of you on every wall of his at the base. He claimed to be fighting for what you represented, the children of the future who would suffer from the work the government was doing, but it was obvious to everyone that he was fighting for *you*, specifically. You must be something special."

Bryn and Slater had very different reactions to those final words. Bryn was falling apart inside, full of warm, comforting thoughts

that made up for years of feelings of abandonment and inadequacy. Bryn could only guess that Slater said the words without considering their meaning too carefully, because once he did, he got a look of shock on his face that rivaled the one he had when Bryn revealed her name.

“Special,” he said again. “And you’re...? I mean, I wasn’t wrong yesterday about your condition, was I?”

“You weren’t,” Bryn said, cautiously.

“Did your dad...? I mean, I don’t know how to ask this. Did he ever give you anything unusual? Like some medication that you didn’t need, or maybe some food that didn’t taste quite right?” Bryn knew immediately what the questions meant.

Gods, she thought. Every word Lani said was true. Poe is the result of some kind of government experiment that my father was involved in.

It does seem that way. Does it matter?

No, it doesn’t matter one bit. She’s my baby, and I’m going to protect her. I’m going to raise her to be the best damn super-baby she can be. And if the government comes and tries to take her, or tries to make her stab at the gods, they’re going to have to go through me first. I’ll show them stabbing.

I’m glad, Bryn. Doubt was quiet for a little while.

You really aren’t her, are you? Bryn asked for confirmation. I mean, you’ve said you’re a monster, but I don’t really believe that story. If I’ve learned anything over the past two days, it’s that nearly anything is possible. Something tells me your story is even more complicated than I’m imagining.

No, Bryn, I’m not Poe. Even super-babies need time to develop, she chuckled. I’d be the first to let you know when she starts making her first thoughts, though.

You think you’ll be able to hear them?

I would, if I were still around then. She’ll be a part of you for a while, at least. You can already see that, I think. When you created Beloved, you drew some strength from her. She’s already very strong, I suspect, at least in terms of her ability to wield magic, even if she doesn’t have a physical presence to speak of yet. I guess we do have something in common there, at least. Maybe I should think of her as a little sister. It’s going to be a very interesting pregnancy. I wish I were going to be around to help you through it.

Are you going to be leaving me soon? Bryn wondered. Doubt nodded. *I'm sorry to hear that. It's going to be lonely in my head without you.*

You won't feel alone for long, especially not once Poe grows up a little. I'm worried you're going to forget me once she arrives, or once you fall in love with one of these hunks you're surrounding yourself with.

You mean Edger?

Edger, maybe. Though Slater's not too bad looking either.

Slater? Yuck. He's way too old for me.

He's awfully handsome, though, and pretty tough. I know I wouldn't mind having a go at him. I think he's more my kind of guy, and Edger's more yours. Maybe we could work something out? Doubt had a hint of jest in her voice, but she also sounded like she might be serious if Bryn agreed to it.

Just what in the hell do you think you're suggesting? Bryn asked, completely flabbergasted. *Forget it, I was wrong. You're not comforting. You're creepy and disturbing. I'll talk to you later.*

Slater interpreted Bryn's long, distracted silence as confirmation of his suspicions. Bryn realized it too late, but she didn't think there was any harm in letting him draw that conclusion. "Wow, Bryn. When I met you yesterday, I just thought you were a girl in trouble. I had no idea just how much trouble you were in. Who else knows about this?"

Bryn sighed, "Way too many people. I'm no good at keeping secrets. Probably dozens of people know I'm pregnant already. My friends outside know that there's something special about my baby, too. Well, my friends and Lani. Speaking of which, do you know a man named Jaid?"

"Jaid? Gods, that psycho? He was obsessed with your dad. I mean, I respect the man, and I admire him. I wouldn't be sitting here with you today if he hadn't saved me. But I never sat around worshiping him. He's an honorable man who, when confronted with the truth, he chose to make the right decision and obey his conscience. But Jaid... he took his love for Rudy way too far. It didn't help that, well..." Slater trailed off.

"It didn't help that what?" Bryn asked. "You can tell me. Trust me, nothing will surprise me at this point."

Slater looked extremely uncomfortable. "It didn't help that Rudy returned the affection, at least a little. There was something between

them, but I never knew more than that. I don't see how it really matters, though. Jaid was kicked out of the movement, and then once your dad was captured the rest of us scattered."

That's not really what it sounded like when Lani told the story, Bryn said to Doubt for confirmation.

I agree, she made it sound like they made their last stand together.

So why would she lie about that, but nothing else? What's she hiding there? Does it involve my mother?

What are you thinking? Doubt asked.

Well, what if Lani was rejected by my father because of his love for my mother and me? Could that drive her to impersonate my mother, turn him in, and stalk us for years?

I could definitely see that. Lani is definitely crazy enough for something like that. But what's her end game? Why reveal herself to you now?

Maybe she's getting her revenge? Maybe she killed my mother and burned down the house? Maybe she's the one who raped me? Oh gods, what if she broke my father out of prison to make him watch as she violated me!?

That's sick, Bryn. That's beyond sick. Why did she wait this long to do it?

She had to be sure I was old enough to bear a child, Bryn thought with horror. It all made sense. She hoped to the gods that she was wrong, but she finally had a complete possible explanation of why she was raped that, as far as she could tell, was completely self-consistent.

Gods, Bryn, I'm sorry. This is even more twisted than I thought it would be. She paused to let Bryn process the new theory. *Are you okay?*

I'll be fine. I'm glad, actually. I know where to direct my anger now.

Doubt took a moment to respond. *It's okay to let yourself be vulnerable once in a while, Bryn.*

I can be vulnerable after I take my revenge, she said coldly, and Doubt didn't want to question her any more.

"I'm sorry if that information is upsetting," Slater said. "I really didn't mean for any of this. I didn't have a clue who you were until you told me. I just thought you were a girl in over your head, and I can't

stand to see people struggle." Bryn thought his words were sincere. She could doubt him the same way she doubted everyone else in Ortha, but she didn't see the point anymore. Everything was stacking up against Lani, from multiple independent sources, but she still needed to know for sure. At this point, Bryn didn't think that anything could convince her further other than getting her own memories back, and that would require Emera's help.

"No, don't apologize," Bryn said, "None of this is your fault. You've been nothing but good to me, Slater. If anyone should be sorry, it should be me, for how I treated you earlier."

"No, Bryn, really, I—"

"You understand?" Bryn asked, and she let out a frustrated laugh. She had to stop herself from punching the wall next to the booth. "You have no idea how sick I am of pity right now. Everyone thinks they understand, but you know what? Even if they do, it's not understanding that I'm looking for." Bryn reached in to her blue satchel and pulled out a few pieces of green kiema. "I want justice. I want retribution." She swallowed the kiema quickly and manifested a pencil and paper in a few quick gestures. "I want vengeance! You can save your sympathy for some other waif."

"I can see that," Slater said, watching her curiously as she began to write something on the paper. "You do seem to have a handle on things. Still, I'm not sure that your attitude is healthy."

"Excuse me?" Bryn said with umbrage, pausing her writing to glare at him.

"What, you don't want to be treated like a weak victim, but you can't take a little constructive criticism? You can't have it both ways," Slater said. He was right, Bryn had to admit, though she found herself grinding her teeth. She went back to writing her message.

"All I'm saying is that you aren't likely to find satisfaction in revenge. I should know," Slater began.

"Be careful. You're treading dangerously close to empathy," Bryn warned, her pencil scribbling furiously. She was suddenly glad that she had been practicing carrying on two conversations at once, and was grateful that Doubt wasn't interrupting with a third.

"Empathy and pity are very different things, Bryn. Look, I wanted revenge on my captors after I was freed. That's why I joined your dad's crusade, not to help free other people. But you know what?"

That revenge didn't get me anything. I killed a bunch of them, and I'm sure the world is better off without them, but it didn't fill up the hole they had carved out of me. My flesh was intact – nothing they ever tried made a dent in that – but my soul was empty.”

“Your soul?” Bryn snorted. Some people believed that humans had a soul, and that that was what made them different from animals and monsters. And possibly kiemara, depending on who you asked.

“Or my heart, or my mind, or whatever you want to call it if you don't believe in spiritual essence. The thing that makes us who we are, that separates us from each other and makes us individuals. The core of my being. They ripped a large part of it away when they captured me and killed my parents. And then they chipped away at it, one piece at a time, as they held me in chains and ropes and a dozen other forms of bondage over the next few years. So much time, so much of my life, just wasted by evil. I thought that killing them would fill the emptiness they had created, but it didn't.”

Bryn realized she had stopped writing to listen to the pain in Slater's voice. It was easy to forget that she wasn't the only person who had seen hardship in her life. She quickly went back to writing, focused on the paper as she said, “So what did you do about it? If revenge didn't satisfy you, what did?”

“Did I say that something had?” he said darkly, looking at his drink again. “Helping people gives some relief. I like being constructive. It makes me feel like I have purpose, like the horrible things that have led me to this point in time have had meaning.”

“Is it so bad if they don't have meaning? If those tragedies aren't some part of a master plan?” Bryn asked, thinking about her own hardships. What if there wasn't some grand conspiracy about the rape or her father? How would she feel if there wasn't some sort of intelligence guiding those events, if they were just random happenstance? Did that make the pain of the events better or worse? Try as she might, she couldn't answer that question with any confidence. Still, she was glad to debate Slater about philosophy; it gave her time to finish her note.

“Isn't it worse if there's no meaning? That means that we have no hope at all that we or our children will be able to avoid the same tragedies we've experienced.”

Bryn stopped writing to consider his words. There was something fundamentally wrong about them, but she had trouble identifying it.

Eventually she said, "I'm not so sure about that. Things don't need to have meaning in order for us to be able to predict them. All that we need to predict things is to understand the factors that cause them to happen. Often the only hurdle to doing this is that the causes are too complex for us to identify, but that doesn't mean that there is some intelligence guiding them."

Slater scratched his head. "I'm not sure. Even if events were being guided by some kind of intelligence that we can't see, who says it has to have a meaningful plan?"

"I'm not sure I follow you," Bryn said, as she read over what she had written. She wasn't surprised that she was distracted; high philosophy and covert messages each required too much of her concentration.

"Well, say you were writing a book. Most people would plan the entire thing out, starting with an outline of the plot and identifying all of the characters, before they start writing."

"Sure."

"What if, instead, you just started writing? When you needed a new character, you made one up. When the plot wasn't going anywhere, you threw in a new twist? What would a story like that look like?"

"Well, it probably wouldn't make any sense, for starters."

"Exactly. It would be riddled with contradictions and mistakes. Tangents that go nowhere and don't contribute to the overall story in any meaningful way. Maybe that's what our world is. Maybe Whyat is writing something, and he hasn't gotten around to editing it yet. Maybe even he doesn't know how it's going to end yet? Maybe he doesn't have a plan, and the plan that he eventually chooses for it will only become apparent when he has the entire thing in his hands to tweak it?"

Bryn had stopped reading her note a long time ago as she listened to Slater's words. After their first encounter, she had just assumed that he was kind of a brute. She didn't expect him to be so sophisticated, or so religious.

Maybe I was wrong, Doubt said, and Bryn groaned that she would speak up now. *Maybe Slater is more your type of guy than mine.*

Oh please. Not now. What do you think of this note?

It's a good idea, I think. I don't know if it will do anything against Bannam, but it might help against Edger or Lani if they're the rapist. I assume you're lying when you write that you trust him.

Fibbing, Bryn admitted. I don't trust him completely, but I trust him more than most of the people standing outside right now.

I'm a little concerned that you might be trusting Nighra a bit too much.

Oh come on, Nighra did not rape me! I'm willing to entertain a lot of crazy theories, but I'd like to see you explain that one. At least there's a plausible explanation about how Lani would impregnate me. What did Nighra do, bring along a turkey baster filled with the drummer's sperm?

Okay, fine, I admit, that one is a bit of a stretch. I'm willing to trust Nighra if you are. It's good to have someone you can trust.

Bryn grudgingly admitted, I think I trust you now, too.

What? Really?

You could have done a lot to lead me astray, but you haven't. I still don't appreciate how sinisterly you acted initially, but now that we've come to understand each other, you do feel like family. I like the idea of Poe having a big sister. Somehow, in Bryn's head, it seemed like Doubt was on the verge of tears. Oh please, that's not the Doubt I know. Don't get all blubbery on me.

Sorry, Bryn. It just means a lot to me.

I know. I think I know what you've really been looking for now, after talking with Slater. You just want somewhere to belong, like the rest of us. Somewhere where you'll be appreciated. I just wanted you to know that you are.

I am what?

Appreciated.

Bryn smiled as she imagined Doubt stewing over those thoughts. They were probably a feast for her. She wrote one more line on the note and handed it to Slater. She did all of this while seamlessly continuing their discussion about meaning, a higher intelligence, and whether they were both just actors in a grand play that was written in stone, or whether they were more like pawns in an evolving game of chess where the victor was yet to be determined. Meanwhile, Slater read the note.

Slaterin,

Please try to maintain the conversation we've been having as you read the contents of this note.

I've gathered a number of companions over the course of the past two days, some of whom are my friends and others of whom have insinuated themselves into my life in one way or another. Among them is Jaid, who has taken the form of an eleven year old girl. You can recognize him by the rainbow choker I placed on his neck that will adapt to any form he tries to take.

As much as it pains me to admit it, I have reasons to suspect nearly everyone who has accompanied me. Not only might one of them be my rapist – and I believe that also means they erased my memory of the three days leading up to my rape – but they could also be searching for my father for whatever personal reasons they each have. Through information I got from Jaid, I have reason to believe that my father may have kidnapped my mother, but as far as I'm concerned it's more likely that she's been killed. Really, the only one of my friends that I think I can trust completely is Nighra. She's the black one with the nice body and the skill with red magic. She's my best friend, and she's going to be protective of me.

We are about to go to the alley where I woke up, where I believe the rape occurred. My other friend, Emera, is going to try to restore my memories. I suspect that if the rapist is among this group, he will be ready for this, and he will attack me and my friends once I have that knowledge. At the moment, I think it's most likely that it will be Jaid. I don't know exactly what it is that Emera is going to do, but I suspect the two of us will be indisposed momentarily and that's when he will strike. I need you to help us, to be there to protect us when this happens.

I've written you this note because my companions all seem to be very good at ferreting out information. Edger, the muscular, red-headed man, often uses blue kiema to enhance his senses, so I'm sure he's been listening in on me this entire time. Lani and Emera are good with blue magic, too, so for all I know they might be listening as well. And Bannam, the skinny blond guy... Well, he claims to see the future. I still don't know what to do about that, so I'm just hoping that he's on my side. I'm sure that he already knows you're going to be there; in fact, he practically already said as much. And Safler, the Aesrian guy, he and Emera are so into each other that I'd be willing to believe that they'd kill for one another. Emera's got a good handle on mental magic, so you can bet they've got a

telepathic connection going. If Emera can hear our conversation, I'm sure Safler can, too.

I know that I barely know you and I've been fairly cold to you, but I still hope you'll help me. If not, I'll find a way to get by on my own. Please nod if you will have my back in the upcoming confrontation.

-Aubryn Dandaster

PS: I have to admit, I think I misjudged you at our first meeting. I'm going to put my trust in you, even though I have no reason to. There's a lot more to you than I ever expected, and when this is all over I think I'd like to get to know you a little bit better. Please nod a second time if you'd like that, too. This isn't your fight, though, so I will understand if you do not nod at all.

Bryn and Slater continued their conversation, Slater's eyes locked to the page for a long time. Eventually, he swallowed a piece of red kiema and ignited the page, letting it burn away. Bryn wasn't sure what he would do next, but she was glad that she had put him in a situation where he couldn't back out of the fight and yet still express interest in her. As for whether her interest in him was genuine... She didn't really think it was, but she wasn't as opposed to the idea as she once was, and she thought that including that incentive might make him more likely to assist her.

You're a very shrewd woman, Bryn, Doubt said.

If you ask me, shrewdness is a virtue.

After a few agonizing moments, Slater gave one slow nod. He then paused, and smiled a warm smile as he nodded a second time, complete with a wink. The happy look on his face made Bryn worried that she had just entered into a deal that she might regret later, but at least he would be there for the confrontation.

Bryn started to try to bring the confrontation to a close so that she could return to her friends, but she was interrupted. She had been so distracted by carrying on three simultaneous conversations that she had forgotten all about the drummer, but now here he was at her booth since his game of leviball was over.

"We need to talk," he said, and he grabbed Bryn by the arm.

Chapter 29: In Which Bryn Meets Someone Famous

“What in the hell do you think you're doing?” Slater asked, standing up and pushing the drummer with all his strength, staggering him and making him fall on the floor. He lost his grip on Bryn's arm, and she stood up to give the two men some space.

“Relax, Slater. I just want to talk,” he said, wiping away a bit of spittle that had dripped into the scraggly mess he called a goatee. He ran a hand through his shoulder-length, greasy brown hair as he used the other hand to help himself stand up. His magenta eyes that marked him as a kiemara were glassy and distant; Bryn hoped it was from too much booze but wouldn't be surprised if he was on something stronger. He held both hands out in front of him when Slater started walking towards him. “Chill out, man!”

“You leave her the fuck alone, Lugo. She doesn't need to be any part of your shit.” Bryn was getting the impression that Slater did not care much for Lugo. She wasn't surprised, and couldn't fathom what business she had with him.

“It's okay, Slater. As long as he just wants to talk, it's fine. I want to hear what he has to say.” Slater visibly relaxed his stance, but Lugo seemed even more skittish. The other patrons in the bar, who all looked like they were itching for a brawl to break out, were disappointed that the scuffle had ended without a single punch being thrown.

“I'm not going to talk with him here,” Lugo said.

“Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of him,” Bryn replied.

Lugo gave her a puzzled look. “Are you sure about that, Bryn?” He knew her name, which lent credence to Emera's claim that she had been involved with him somehow during the time that she lost.

“I'm sure,” Bryn said, even though she wasn't. She had no idea what was going to come out of his mouth.

“Well... Okay, if you say so.” He shook his head. “I guess I'll just start by asking how you are.”

“How I am?”

“Yeah, I saw the news. Your dad burned down your house. He didn't hurt you, did he?”

“No, of course not. I wasn't there at the time,” Bryn said cautiously. Slater looked at her with some curiosity, but he never took his eyes off of Lugo.

“Thank the gods. I had been trying to track you down all day Satyrday, but I didn’t have any luck. I was pretty fucking worried about you, Bryn. You seemed so into me, but then you just split without warning.”

“Yeah, well,” Bryn said, trying to think of an excuse. “Maybe you should check on your ego. I was just having a good time. I left when we stopped having fun.”

“Oh, don’t treat me like that, Bryn. I know you’re not really that kind of girl. I expect that from the other groupies, but I thought you were different. I mean, I thought we were going to do it together.”

“It?” Bryn said, her eyes widening.

“Yeah,” Lugo said, with a wary glance at Slater. “You know. *It*.”

“We were absolutely not going to do *it* together,” Bryn said. “I wouldn’t do *it* with you under any circumstances I can imagine.”

“Then why the fuck did you come to me in the first place?” he asked. Bryn started to respond, but she had absolutely no idea why she did.

Any insight, here, Doubt?

If I had to take a guess, I'd guess it has something to do with his profession.

You mean because he's famous? Maybe I used him as a distraction somehow?

That's not what I meant, but you might be on to something there. No, I meant that he's very precise. His kiemara nature has given him a very precise sense of rhythm. He has faster reflexes even than someone whose reflexes have been enhanced by kiema. Maybe you needed that skill for something.

For what, though? She recalled the mantra that she’d been repeating over and over for the past two days. Don’t think of things as they are, think about them as they could be. When she stopped thinking of his talent as being useful for music, she knew immediately what else it could be used for. *A lock?*

Exactly, Bryn. Locks were locks, whether they were for a levi-board, a house, or a safe. They all operated the same basic way. The lock’s creator could assign a specific sequence of timed taps at precise locations on the lock’s surface, and then as long as they remembered that sequence they could disarm it. If something needed to be very se-

cure, multiple people could cooperate to create a single lock that only unlocked if all of their sequences were entered simultaneously.

I needed him to get past a particularly hard lock. All of Burgona's Brigade's songs have a really fast beat. He could probably take on the role of eight or nine people on a single lock. That's why I wanted him, specifically. Bryn paused to look around. *And that explains what he's doing here. He moonlights as a cat burglar.*

You're one to talk, Doubt said.

Fine, whatever, I deserve that. There's only one lock I can think of that I'd be interested in that would have that kind of security.

Your father's prison cell?

You guessed it, Bryn thought. *Was I the one who freed him instead of Lani?*

Maybe, though it sounds like things didn't go as planned. It sounds like you skipped out on him before you all went through with it.

Good point.

Lugo and Slater were both staring at Bryn, expecting her to say something. "I thought I could use you," she said eventually. "But then I found another way to do what I needed." She wished that she hadn't looked at Slater as she said that, but she did, and Lugo took that to mean that Slater had replaced him.

"Him? Oh please. He might be fast, but he's a brute. He doesn't have the finesse to do what you wanted."

"Burgona's bottom, Lugo, you're just asking for me to beat you down," Slater said.

"Bring it on, motherfucker!" he yelled, and the bar's patrons started to stand up from their chairs.

"Stop!" Bryn screamed at the top of her lungs, drawing every eye in the room towards her. She pulled Beloved from her belt and held it between the two men who glared icy death at each other. All because of Bryn! What did she do to incite this kind of macho behavior over her? If she let them start fighting, they'd make a mess of things, and Lugo would probably get hurt badly if they engaged in hand-to-hand combat at hyper speeds. Whoever or whatever Lugo was, no matter what crimes he may or may not have committed, Bryn thought she might have already screwed him over somehow. She didn't want to be responsible for his medical bills as well. Besides, Bannam said that she had

two more people who would be joining them in the alley. These had to be them.

"I won't be responsible for this. You," she pointed at Lugo and spoke with the same voice she used to command Dr. Bakeman that day. Was it really that same day? It seemed so long ago. She was getting tired, so it was hard to judge the time very well. "You're coming with me. And you," she said with another point at Slater. "You're going to fucking stay here. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, sorry Bryn," Lugo said. Slater didn't say anything. He just slowly nodded his head. Bryn returned the nod. Slater glared at Lugo before nodding again. Bryn, despite her better judgment, also nodded a second time, as she grabbed Lugo by the wrist and rushed out the saloon doors with him in tow.

The rest of her group was apparently across the street, surrounding the charred corpse of a vulprin.

"I leave you guys alone for ten minutes and you kill a vulprin? What the heck, guys?"

"Sorry, Bryn," Edger said. "It attacked someone on the street. I told you they're really common around here. And you took all of the untainted blue kiema."

Edger was right of course. They had to defend someone if they were being attacked. Why hadn't she listened to Doubt's suggestion earlier to leave an untainted piece of kiema with Edger?

Don't worry about it, Bryn. It's not your fault. You have more important things going on, and I didn't give you a very good reason for leaving it with him. She thought about Slater's words, about how revenge left him empty while helping people did something to make up for it. She thought about Slater while watching Edger. She honestly didn't know which man she appreciated more at that moment, but she didn't think either one was her rapist. But Lani was starting to make less sense; what would be the point of her detour into the bar? To meet with Slater and learn that she was emotionally unstable? How did that help her?

"Of course, that was dumb of me. Thanks for being here, and for stopping the vulprin. Everyone, this is Lugo, the drummer for Burgona's Bottom. Lugo, this is everyone."

"Hi, everyone," Lugo said nervously as he got sharp glares from Nighra, Emera, and Safler. It was clear who they thought Bryn's rapist was.

"Hello, Lugo. It's nice to meet you," Bannam said, and he extended a hand for a handshake. Lugo did not oblige, and Bannam looked at everyone else before taking his hand back. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Bryn said, "Nothing's wrong."

"I don't know," Lani said, still fiddling with the collar on her neck. "Something doesn't seem quite right to me. I thought you said we were expecting *two* more, Bannam."

"Did I?" Bannam asked. "I must have misspoken."

"It's not important," Bryn said, trying to draw attention away from the question. "It's time to finally get some answers. Leave the levi-boards. The alley is right over there."

Chapter 30: In Which Emera Casts Her Spell

Bryn felt queasy and lightheaded as she entered the alley, the memory of waking up there coming back in pinpoint focus. The reminder of the wounds, of the unsettling realizations that occurred to her one after the other, of the rape and her pregnancy and her sudden vulnerability to even mundane dangers in the world. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Bryn was strong again. She reminded herself of that as she smelled the whiskey on Lugo's breath. She was not the same girl who she was before her rape, but she would be better and stronger for it.

"So," Edger said, when no one else was willing to say anything, standing like statues at the scene of Bryn's rape. "This is where it happened."

"It is. Or at least it's where I woke up. So what's the plan, Emera? What are you going to do?"

Emera hemmed and hawed, "Okay, Bryn, I want you to understand something up front. I don't know if this will work. Your case is really special, you know? Once memories have been destroyed, you can't just get them back."

"What? You mean it can't be done? After all of this!?" Bryn asked.

"I didn't say that. I have a theory, though. I've been thinking about this for a while now, a form of memory restoration based on the concepts of psychometry. Something Bannam said earlier actually made me think that it will work."

"Right," Bannam said. "I told you that I could see the future. But that time was thicker in some places than others, so it really depends on when I am in the timeline as to what I can see at any given time."

"And the past is much easier to see than the future, right?"

"Oh yes. I can see back to when I was born, even."

"That's... disturbing," Emera said, "but good for you. Anyway, I think he's right. Time is like a river, and we're swimming against the current, trying to make our way into the future as it tries to drag us back into our memories of the past. If someone can figure out how they're swimming, they might end up like Bannam here, a bit upstream from the rest of us."

"Okay," Bryn said, considering Emera's theory but not quite grasping it yet. Emera wasn't usually one for experimental thought, but Bryn thought she had it in her. Bryn had a tendency to surround herself

with talented people. Looking around at the group, today was no exception.

"Well, in that case, all you have to do to regain your memories is to stop swimming for a little while, and let the current take you back to when the memories were first made. I can't bring the memories back. The best thing I can do is to send you back so that you can make them all over again." Emera got a pained look on her face, and Bryn and everyone else – other than Bannam, of course – realized what this meant at about the same time.

"You can do that?" Bryn asked, avoiding the topic of how awful of an idea it was.

"I think I can. I have some ideas. It's incredibly dangerous, not just for you, but also for the fabric of space and time. It's going to take all three kinds of kiema. Blue for obvious reasons. Red to generate the force needed to halt your mind from swimming in the timestream. And green to access and manipulate the timeline itself, assuming that, as Dr. Vionetta once taught me, time and space are related. I don't know how it's going to make you feel or what other side effects we can expect from it. I'm really going in blind here, Bryn, but I think it can be done."

"Well, I haven't let danger slow me down so far," Bryn said. "If I have to relive my rape, then so be it. Wait," she said, "If you're sending me back, what stops me from changing things?"

"I don't think it works that way, Bryn," Bannam said. "I told you. Events are already written. We are merely observers of the events that have been created." Bryn thought back to her discussion with Slater. Were the events of the past five days set in stone, or were they a work in progress? Some grand story being told by Whyat to his offspring, written all at once and revised into edition after edition until Bryn's actions in the past – and those of Bannam, Lani, and her friends – created a consistent timeline with the events of the present. Did it matter? Could it be both of those things, or neither for that matter, if the timeline were constructed by something that wasn't within it? A work in progress, and a complete thing? A thing that could be, under the rules of existence as defined by Whyat. Bryn thought she was beginning to wrap her mind around it. A causal loop, where the past determines the future and the future determines the past. Such a thing could only come into existence through the efforts of something that exists beyond the laws of causality, outside of time and possibly outside of space as well. Suddenly the nature of Whyat became even more inexplicable to Bryn; does it even

make sense to ask if he has intelligence or remotely human motivations if he exists outside of the timeline that humanity perceives?

Bryn didn't know the answers to her questions, but she thought she had a weak grasp on Emera's theory. "I think I understand, Emera. I'm certain it will work." She took a deep breath. "I'm ready whenever you are. Just tell me what to do."

"You should probably get into the same position that you were in when you awoke. Like I said, time and space are connected. By being at the same place where you woke up, I'll know when you cross the threshold between what you remember and what you've forgotten."

"One more question," Bryn said. "If I'm going to be there when my rapist makes me forget my memories, what will stop me from losing them again?"

"That's where I come in," Safler said. "Emera's going to be busy with sending you back. While she's doing that, I'll guard your mind from the attacker's spell."

Can I really trust Safler to do this? Bryn asked Doubt for advice again.

You know you can, Doubt replied as if the answer were obvious.

How do I know that? Bryn asked.

You've got all of the evidence you need to verify that Emera's spell will work and that he's going to shield you from your rapist's spell, right here inside your head.

I do? Bryn asked. She had to think for a long time before she realized what Doubt meant.

Oh, Bryn finally replied, stunned that it took her this long to put the pieces together.

Yeah, Doubt replied. *Sorry about the deception.*

What the hell, Doubt? Are you seriously telling me that you, the mysterious ethereal voice in my head all of this time, are just me at a different point in the timeline?

Yes, Bryn. I'm your future self, who has already relived your past for you, thanks to Emera's spell.

Of course you are, Bryn said, struggling to wrap her head around what was happening. *Why all of the lies about being a monster, and about needing my attention to live, and about drawing monsters to me?*

Doubt paused for a long time before responding. *I didn't have a choice, Bryn. All of those things I did, they were already decided for me. Right? I already lived through myself lying to me about these things just as you have; if I wanted to keep the timeline intact, I had to keep up the lies.* She hesitated again. *As much as I hate to admit it, the experience has given me some insight into how Bannam lives his life.*

I could see that, Bryn replied, not looking forward to having to commit to the things Doubt had done in her future.

Don't worry, Bryn. You'll have plenty of opportunity to decide your fate once Emera sends you back. By lying to you about most of myself, I've left you free to act of your own will since you don't know all of the events that will be coming at you. The lies were meant to protect you.

Emera was getting things in order for the spell. *Thank goodness I'm leaving. If this conversation goes on for much longer, I'm going to have a headache.*

Imagine how I feel!

I don't have to, do I?

No, I guess not, Doubt sighed. *I'm just going to shut up now and wait for you to go. Oh, but one last thing.*

What?

Can you load me up with kiema before you go? I'm going to need all three kinds.

So we have a plan, then?

Of course. Did you expect anything less?

I guess not.

"Okay," Bryn said, as she gave Emera and Safler large handfuls of blue and green kiema from her box.

"One last thing before we start. I'm going to be ready for anything when I get back," she said, looking everyone assembled around her in the eyes. She retrieved the second copy of Beloved from the box, and held it in her right hand. With her left hand, she swallowed all of the untainted blue and red kiema she had, and then she swallowed as much green kiema as she could handle. "Let's do this." She returned to the ground, back in the spot where she woke up. She tried to assume the same pose, even, but it was hard to remember exactly how she had awakened because of how disoriented she was.

I guess this explains why I was so disoriented when I woke up, she thought. *My mind had to make sense of you being there?*

As far as I can tell. I'm glad we've finally made it to this point. It's been a long couple of days. But you still have one more thing to do, Bryn.

I need to shield you from Emera's spell, don't I?

Of course.

What happens if I don't?

Doubt sighed. *For once, I really don't know the answer. My best guess, though, is that Whyat would get frustrated trying to reconcile the inconsistencies in his story. He'd probably rip it up and throw the entire thing in the trash. Let's not find out what happens if I were to get sent back into the past again. It's your turn now, Bryn.*

I know we don't have much time, Bryn said, and I know you probably don't want to tell me any details, but can you at least give me a little bit of reassurance that things are going to work out?

Absolutely, Bryn. Yes, we find out who our rapist is. And yes, over the past two days of reflection I've figured out how to stop him. But you should know by now that it's never quite that simple. Sometimes we win, and sometimes we lose, but sometimes we do both. I'm afraid this is going to be one of those times.

Of course. It wouldn't be my life if it were simple, she thought wryly. *What about mother?*

I wish I knew, Bryn, but I'm afraid that's my problem, not yours. You'll understand soon enough.

I guess this is goodbye, Bryn said.

Not really, Bryn. We'll always be together. As much as the word "always" makes any sense here.

Bryn furtively made the symbols she thought she'd need to protect Doubt from being sent back into the past with her. She barely even put any effort into coming up with the words. Temporal, protective, cognitive, other. After all, she already knew it was going to work, so did it really matter how much effort she put into it? That was the danger of knowing the future: assuming that things would work out just because you knew they would made it too easy to drop your guard. Bryn's protective effect took hold as Safler and Emera both were finishing their own spells. No wonder Bannam was so screwed up, and no wonder Doubt made up a persona instead of revealing that she had lived

through all of this already as Bryn's present self. Knowing the future was a terrible thing, and Bryn just got her first taste of it.

Chapter 31: In Which Bryn Thinks About Cover Stories

When Bryn awoke, she was in her bed at home. The warm, soft covers were a much kinder reception than the rough pavement of the alley, and Bryn had braced herself for the disorientation this time, so she recovered almost immediately. She wondered if she should call herself Doubt, to go ahead and get used to the idea. When the time came, could she remember everything that Doubt had said? Would she have to? Would the words just come on their own?

And what about right now? She immediately tried to wall her thoughts off from Bryn's. *Past Bryn, that is, she thought to herself. That name's no good. How about I call her Aubryn? That's what I used to go by, so it's kind of fitting in a way. If I can prevent her from hearing me think, that should make things easier. It's a skill I'll need to have by the time I become Doubt, and it might help Aubryn with her disorientation when she wakes up.*

She recalled the feeling of Abyss pulling her consciousness out of her body, and based her mental defenses off of that. She remembered it feeling like something was grabbing her and removing her from where she was supposed to be, like a giant lifting her off the ground. She had to surround her consciousness with a wall of mental thorns, completely opaque and painful to the touch. Through her experiences with the zygallon and with speaking with Doubt in the realm of her mind, she thought she understood what was necessary. It was just a matter of manifesting her will in this mental landscape. It was surprisingly not very different from green magic, except that it didn't require green kiema to do it. The rules were simply different here. Existence was even more malleable. It required surprisingly little concentration, but she couldn't be sure that her defenses had worked until she tested them with Aubryn.

Aubryn was still asleep but Bryn knew the feel of her own bed. Even with Aubryn's eyes closed, and even if Bryn hadn't been able to sleep in it last night. *Or is it four nights from now?* She hoped the vulprin were able to salvage some comfort from the ruins of her home.

The vulprin. Doubt had been lying about being a monster, and that meant that her humming was not what had attracted danger to Bryn. But they had definitely been there. Bryn would have to arrange for them to show up at the appropriate times, somehow, to preserve the consistency of the timeline. Why did she have to put herself in danger like that? Could the whole point of this entire ordeal be to learn the truth about the nature of the monsters on Ortha? She supposed that she had

also learned about the ability to shrink and grow things, which she thought might some day be instrumental in solving the kiema shortage. Bryn had learned a lot from the monsters, she realized. It was actually very good that they had been drawn to her.

The vulprin should be fairly easy to command at least since they seemed intelligent and responded well to blue kiema. The other monsters would be a bit more difficult. How was she going to get a lot of blue kiema? She'd have to get used to not having access to Lani's stash, now. Lamenting the loss of such an incredible resource, she realized that this body that she was in wasn't pregnant yet. She could use blue and red kiema herself. Or at least she could get Aubryn to do it. She hoped. She would have to get her to trust her first.

Actually, she thought to herself, maybe that's where I should go first. Lani will know the entire stash is gone eventually anyway, and that I will be the one who will have taken it. Why would I not just go take a little bit of it now? Everything I don't take will still be available for me in the future.

In fact, it's almost like I'll be adding more to the stash, except that it had really always been there all along. Is fate really that malleable and uncertain? If I choose now to go there and dip into that resource, then there was always more there than when I first discovered it. And if I instead choose now not to go there, then there was never more than what I discovered. Is it really my decision, still, or is that just an illusion brought on by the linearity of my perception? Which comes first? The decision or the outcome, the chicken or the egg?

Even though she couldn't answer those questions, Bryn was still satisfied with her decision about her initial course of action. She made a mental list of the other problems she'd have to solve over the next three days: getting Aubryn to trust her, luring the monsters to attack her, meeting with Lugo to set up plans, figuring out why she would decide to involve Lugo just to abandon him, finding out the sequence she would need for her father's prison cell, and finally getting into the prison to break her father out without being seen. All of this without letting Aubryn know what was waiting for her on Satyrday night.

Feeling the familiarity of her body, pure and intact, Bryn couldn't help but feel a little resentful about what she was about to do. She was busy planning how to preserve the consistency of her personal timeline when, if there were any justice in the world, she would be planning how to preserve the innocence that would be ripped away from

Aubryn in three days time. But the consequences of deviating from the established series of events seemed too risky. If she had to sacrifice her body to ensure that Ortha would continue to exist... No, that wasn't it. She had to sacrifice her body to ensure that Ortha existed at all, ever. If Aubryn does not get raped, there would be no Ortha, ever. Bryn couldn't be certain of this, but she wasn't willing to risk Ortha unnecessarily, just as she wasn't willing to needlessly corrupt Poe with tainted kiema. Bryn had survived the rape, and she had even used it to grow and become a stronger person; Aubryn would get through it as well, even if it would take her just as long to cope with it. Even if neither of them would ever truly get over it completely.

So what strategy would Bryn use to win Aubryn's trust? Doubt had started by being a familiar presence, as if she were Bryn's subconscious, eventually evolving into something sinister and cryptic as a way to set up her final false persona, that of a monster who slipped into the space where Bryn's memories were missing. It was a confusing dance, an excessively complicated one, but it was also a dance to which Doubt had already been taught all of the steps. Taught by herself, when she lived through it as Bryn.

Why did it need to be so complicated? When Bryn first awoke in the alley, she was in no condition for hard or complicated truths, unlike Aubryn. Far better to hide for a while, to give Bryn time to adjust to her new situation, before confronting her with too much. The monster persona was a creative and convincing lie, one that was so convincing that Bryn eventually accepted it as truth. That was why Doubt used it. She needed Bryn's trust eventually just as Bryn now needed Aubryn's trust, and that story certainly earned it. But the Doubt persona was one that needed to be created gradually, and was only possible after Bryn's fear and prejudice of monsters had been dispelled by the encounter with the vulprin. Besides, neither Bryn nor Doubt had to create that excessively complicated plan from scratch. Not really. That was all Whyat's doing, if he truly was the author of the events Bryn was living through; Doubt's cover story was provided to her by something beyond Bryn's perceptions.

But Doubt had revealed far less about the past than she knew, clearly. She could have told Bryn what her cover story would be in the past when dealing with Aubryn, but for whatever reason, she didn't. *For whatever reason*, she thought cynically. That phrase was used a lot to describe Whyat's creations. Maybe he and his children didn't care about

humanity as individuals – he was certainly more than willing to do terrible things to Bryn – but maybe he did care about his story. Bryn tried to imagine herself in Whyat's place, creating the world of Ortha with white magic. How many words would it take, and, even with so many words, how much would be left up to magic to fill in the details?

Bryn did have one advantage that Doubt did not have. Anything Aubryn learned over the next three days would be completely destroyed anyway. In some sense, Aubryn will disappear after she gets raped, since her memories, the things that make her *her*, will be erased. Bryn could tell her anything she wanted without concern that her foreknowledge of events would create inconsistencies in the timeline.

The best lies are based on the truth, Bryn thought. Bryn's main goal, and the one that would be most understandable to Aubryn, was to free her father from prison. So she could start there. Should she just tell her that she was from the future? Would she believe her? If Bryn were in her place – and she supposed she once was – she would ask about some minor future event that Bryn should know. But Bryn's memory wipe made that option impossible, and attempting to explain it would just make Aubryn question why her memories were gone. If Bryn could, she wanted to avoid telling Aubryn about her rape for as long as possible.

Bryn considered a few options. She could pretend to be a monster the way Doubt did, but she didn't think that story would work again without the explanation of how she came to slip into Bryn's mind. She could pretend to be an agent sent by her father, but she didn't think that that was likely to earn Aubryn's trust.

She was trying to come up with a third option, wondering what Emera would suggest, when Aubryn's eyelids fluttered open.

Chapter 32: In Which Bryn Is Too Honest By Accident

It's time to wake up, Bryn, Bryn said to her past self, almost without thinking about it. It was similar to how Doubt had greeted her.

Emera? Is that you? Aubryn asked, the groggy weight of a bad night's sleep in her voice. *Gods, my head is swimming. What did you do to me?*

Of course, Bryn thought to herself. *She's disoriented and hears someone speaking in her mind, so of course she would think Emera was doing something. Like testing out a new long-range telepathy spell. Well, I can work with this.* Bryn imagined herself as Emera, hoping that doing so would let her pattern her voice after her friend.

Yes and no, Bryn said, grateful that her voice sounded like Emera's, even to her. *I am Emera, but it's a little bit more complicated than that. I'm sending you my thoughts from the future.*

The future? What? Aubryn asked, as she sat up and pushed off the heavy comforter that would be ashes in three days time. It was an odd feeling for Bryn, the feeling of involuntary motion. She could feel everything that Aubryn was feeling, but she had absolutely no control over her body whatsoever. It was like watching a photube show with a first person perspective, where the viewer was just a participant along for the ride.

Believe me, I know it's complicated, Bryn said sincerely. *Very complicated. I'm sure you're having trouble thinking clearly right now. Just take a minute to orient yourself. Focus on my voice, and try to steady yourself.* Bryn began singing a song for Aubryn, since it was a song that helped her get through her own confusion.

Bryn hoped that her past self wouldn't be as paranoid as her future self. She thought that should be the case; it was really the combination of the rape, the arson, and Lani's deception that had made Bryn as paranoid as she had been. In any case, she should be able to answer any sort of personal question that Aubryn could ask Emera to verify her identity. But she might at some point be clever enough to test Bryn's knowledge of blue magic, which was something that Bryn did not know much about and that Aubryn could verify independently. Also, she would have to keep Aubryn away from the real Emera at all costs, since Emera would be both interested in what was going on and able to discover quickly that Bryn was not who she claimed to be.

After Bryn finished the song, Aubryn said, *That's a lot better, thanks. When did you learn how to do this?*

Desperate times call for desperate measures, Bryn said to avoid answering the question. *I had been thinking about how to do this for a long time, but I always worried about how dangerous it was. But Bryn – the Bryn from my time – needs your help.* Bryn knew that Aubryn would believe Emera, if she believed that the voice in her head was Emera.

What does she want me to do? Aubryn asked.

Bryn held her mental breath as she said, *She wants you to break her father out of prison.* Aubryn's reaction here would mean a lot as to whether the lie was going to work.

Bryn was silent for a long time. *You're not Emera*, she said. *You're me.*

What? Bryn asked. How could Aubryn possibly know that? It took Bryn two whole days to realize Doubt's true identity.

Well, for starters, we both know I'm a terrible actress. You don't sound like Emera at all. I've only ever heard two people refer to our father as "father," and that's me and my mother. Or three, if we want to include you as a separate person.

Second, and perhaps this was a bit more obvious of a clue, I've heard every godsdamn thing you've been thinking this morning! Clearly your mental wall is not as good as you thought it was.

Bryn cringed. *So she knows about the rape, then*, she thought involuntarily.

Yes, Aubryn continued. *I know that you've been raped, and that you were going to do your best to make sure that I get raped, too.* Bryn began to panic. The situation was wildly out of her control at this point. She expected Aubryn to go straight to Emera to exorcise Bryn's consciousness.

Calm down, Bryn, Aubryn said. *Ugh, that won't do at all. I'm going to call you Doubt, since you seem to be so fond of that name for voices in your head.*

Right, because that won't be confusing! Bryn said with exasperation.

You're going to have to get used to being called Doubt at some point, right? If I'm understanding the situation.

You seem to understand it better than I do, Bryn said grumpily.

Don't sulk, Doubt. You shouldn't have tried to hide the truth from me. You know I'm smarter than that. But as much as I hate to say it, you got what you wanted anyway, for the most part. I do believe that you are me from the future, even if I also know that it sounds like a pretty terrible future.

You have no idea, Bryn said, thinking of the rape. But you're going to find out in a few days.

Yeah, well, I don't see why I would just sit back and let that happen, so I'm not too worried about it yet. Tell you what. How about you tell me everything, from the beginning, and then I'll decide whether I'm going to help you.

Bryn figured there was no use in trying to keep up any sort of deception, so she conveyed as much of what happened since the rape as she was able. It was helpful for Bryn to summarize the events, since she knew she was going to have to play the role of Doubt when she got back to them and that would take some preparation. It would be similar to the preparation she put into forging Beloved.

She recounted waking up in the alley after the rape, and re-meeting Edger and rekindling that friendship. She described how her house burned down and how Lani had been spying on them. She talked about going to school and the things she had learned from Bannam and Dr. Umbronn, with emphasis on Beloved. She recalled every encounter with monsters – the frequency of which still struck her as mysterious – especially her encounter with Abyss and the lies that he told her. She was thorough in her summary, and felt like her description of the past two days from her perspective likely rivaled any story that Whyat might be telling about Bryn's bizarre life.

So, Aubryn said after Bryn finished. In three days time, I'm going to have my memory wiped, get raped and impregnated, my father is going to kidnap my mother, my house is going to burn down, I'll reunite with Edger Barrington and Dr. Umbronn, I'll learn that the eleven-year-old girl down the street is actually a shapeshifter, I'll discover that monsters are mostly human on the inside and that they can identify untainted kiema, and I'll basically question the trustworthiness of everyone I know before being sent back in time by Emera to learn about my rape while maintaining the consistency of the timeline. Does that about sum it up? Bryn nodded. *That's definitely a complicated story. I'm not sure you've given me an incentive to follow through with what you're expect-*

ing from me, though, since, you know, apparently my reward for listening to you and preserving the timeline is to get raped.

That's because you haven't lived it the way I have. You've just heard it told to you. You haven't felt the joy of having Poe inside of you. Bryn was realizing for the first time that joy really was what she felt at the thought, and part of her couldn't wait to get back to the point in time when she would be impregnated again.

I also haven't felt the pain of having a rapist inside me either, Aubryn replied. *And I really don't wish to.*

Maybe you don't have to, Bryn said. *Maybe if I can figure out these mental defenses, with your help, we can make it so that neither of us actually experience the rape. We'll just have to experience the after-effects.*

That's great, Doubt. But I also seem to remember you thinking that I would effectively disappear after the rape, and that's not exactly something I want to happen either. This is my body. I'm not going to let you take it from me.

Bryn thought about it for a long time. *Yes, you will. I know you're tough, and I know you want to stop me, but I also know you, Aubryn. You'll do what needs to be done.*

Damnit, Aubryn thought. We're both too stubborn to work together like this, Doubt.

If you'd just do as I say then we wouldn't have a problem, Bryn offered. Aubryn just gave her a look that made it clear that that wasn't going to happen, not that Bryn had expected it to.

Fine, Doubt. I'll play along for now. We'll see what happens, but I make no promises that I won't go rogue at some point. Bryn had to assume that Aubryn thought there was plenty of time still to change her destiny. Bryn wasn't sure, but her gut told her that the rape was something that couldn't be avoided. Aubryn would be there for it, whether she wanted it or not.

I wouldn't expect you to. I just hope you understand the consequences of spoiling the timeline.

The alleged consequences. I'll decide for myself, thank you.

Bryn was more worried than ever about this plan. She had a tendency of ruining the plans of others, so she didn't see any reason why Aubryn would be any different.

Chapter 33: In Which Bryn Eats a Nostalgic Meal

Aubryn got out of bed, showered, and dressed in a knee-length forest green dress with a divided skirt. She smoothed her hair back and down with coconut oil, and put on just enough makeup to hide the uneven spots in her complexion. The bronze lipstick she chose matched her skin and her dress while emphasizing the fullness of her lips. Bryn waited patiently for her past self to get ready, even though she knew they had a lot to do. She might not really care much about her appearance anymore, but she knew Aubryn did.

Thanks for humoring me, Aubryn said dryly.

Right. First order of business is to help me shut up. Do you feel any difficulty at all in reading my thoughts? Bryn thought while hiding in the thorny cocoon she thought she had constructed.

Not really. In fact, your thoughts are pretty clear. I'd have trouble ignoring them.

Do you feel anything... thorny? Bryn asked.

No, Aubryn responded. *Though I can tell that that's what you're going for. I just don't see it or feel it.*

Bryn didn't understand it. It was plain as day to her. She guessed that creating things in the mind must be more complicated than green magic after all. She wished that she had asked Emera about it before leaving her.

I could give her a call and ask her, Aubryn offered.

No, it's still pretty early, and besides. I'd like to interact with as few people as possible while I'm here. I can figure this out.

Well, as long as you do it quickly. I can't hear myself think.

Try closing your eyes. Visualize the space in your mind. What do you see? Bryn asked.

I see... I see the Academy. That's where I was going to be going today, after all, but I think you're going to insist I do something else.

Maybe not. The Academy is as good a place as any for what we need to do. Where at the Academy?

My locker, actually. I guess it's kind of like a home away from home. Nighra's there, smiling and talking to Emera and Safler. That wasn't remotely like what Bryn's mindscape looked like. She felt like she was alone in an open field. It might be one of the practice fields, but it didn't seem like any real place she was familiar with. And Aubryn's voice sounded like it was coming from all around her. Bryn thought she

understood the problem now, at least. Her defenses, which snugly held the avatar in her mindscape, existed only within her. They didn't exist in Aubryn's mind.

But her thoughts did. Why? What was the difference between Bryn's thoughts and her mental defenses? How did Abyss reach into Bryn's mindscape?

Can you do me a favor? Bryn asked.

You want me to send you a steady stream of thoughts so you can try to pinpoint where they're coming from, Aubryn replied. She began singing the same song Bryn sang earlier, one of the songs by Burgona's Brigade. Bryn guessed she picked that one because they were on her mind, not because she liked it. She had just been informing Aubryn of her meeting with Lugo last night.

As the rapid staccato repeated over and over again in her mindscape, it seemed to be coming from every direction. Bryn rubbed her eyes, imagining herself enhancing her vision with blue magic the way Edger always did, just trying to reveal things that might otherwise be hidden. It seemed to work. She began to notice glowing blue cracks in the space of her mind, in the fabric of the empty space itself, she thought.

Okay, here goes nothing, Bryn said. One-way, conductive, mental, protective, harnessed. She made the motions with the fingers in her mind, and found glowing veins of red wrapping themselves around the cracks in the space of her mind. She suspected that the cracks were what was letting her thoughts seep out, but they would also be what was letting Aubryn's thoughts seep in. She couldn't close them entirely without severing her connection to Aubryn. But she could seal them up, and she wasn't surprised that her sealant took the form of fiery red stitches. She found herself suddenly in possession of an audibar, the smooth black rod kietella used to record sound for photube programs or at concerts.

She heard Aubryn's voice through the audibar. *Bryn? Are you still there? I can't hear you anymore.*

Good, Bryn said into the audibar. *Do you hear me now?*

I do. Sounds like you've figured it out. What was it? One-way, conductive, mental, protective, harnessed? That's what you thought, right?

Yeah, Bryn said. She knew what was going to happen next.

There, now I've got my own defenses, Aubryn said. Her voice sounded slightly muffled, but it was still clearly audible, like talking to her on a windy day. Bryn tried to reach out to read Aubryn's thoughts on her own, but she felt a searing pain in her head, like she was being burned. She guessed that Aubryn also thought of fire when she made her ward. She was disappointed that she had given away the secret to making it, but it was only fair that if Aubryn couldn't snoop on her thoughts, she couldn't snoop on Aubryn's.

Once they resolved the issue of sharing the space inside Aubryn's brain, Aubryn opened her bedroom door and started for the stairs. Bryn smelled it first, the mouth-watering aroma of bacon and home fries that told her that her mother was awake and cooking. She wanted to run down the stairs and grab her mother, wrap her up in her arms and apologize for all of the trouble she had given her over the years regarding her father. But as much as she wanted to, she was just a passenger on this journey, and Aubryn wasn't nearly as excited to see her own mother. She had seen her every day for her entire life. She may have been told that her mother would be kidnapped, but she didn't know how it would feel to actually lose the single most constant thing in her life and to be completely on her own as a result. As self-reliant as Bryn was, she still wanted to have her mother there when she woke up in the morning.

Can you do me another favor? Bryn said into the audibar. Can you give our mother a hug when you get downstairs?

Sure, I guess, Aubryn replied hesitantly. *It's going to be weird, though.*

I know. But it's important to me. And I think she'll appreciate it.

Aubryn's eyes finally spotted her mother, and Bryn wanted to run. She willed Aubryn to run. But nothing happened, other than Aubryn taking her precious time to cross the room before wrapping her arms around her mother from behind.

Her mother barely flinched as she worked on breakfast. "What's up with you this morning, Bryn? Hurry up and eat, the potatoes are already ready. I'm just finishing up the bacon now. I need to drop you off a little early today. I have an interview in less than an hour in the city."

"Oh really? That's great," Aubryn said between bites of the potatoes. She dumped salt and ketchup on them, not that they really needed more flavor, but it was just how she ate her mother's home fries

since she was a kid. Bryn savored the taste through Aubryn's mouth. What if this were the last time she ever got to eat them? "What's the interview for?"

"It's for a secretarial position with Senator Cimarron." Aubryn stopped mid-bite, nearly losing her grip on her fork. "Apparently his old secretary just gave him her two-weeks notice, and someone at the temp agency put in a good word for me." Bryn's mother smiled her beautiful, motherly smile at Aubryn as she plucked several strips of bacon from the pan, dried the grease off, and placed them on Aubryn's plate. She looked a lot like Bryn, just older, with an indomitable cheer in her step despite the difficult times she had seen. Her hands were worn and calloused from some of the jobs she had been forced to take over the years to provide for Bryn, but she still looked happy whenever their eyes met. Her dress was plain and cheap, off-white with embroidered black-eyed susans on it. It was also stained blue very noticeably around the hem in the back, which Bryn suspected had given it a huge markdown. Bryn was sure that she got it from a thrift store so that she could save her money for more important things, like Bryn's education.

Bryn wouldn't even have noticed if she weren't focusing on the sight of her mother so intently. *You might want to warn her that Senator Cimarron bears a grudge against our father. And tell her to change her dress. This one has a stain on it.*

"Mom," Aubryn said. She called her "mom" when she was speaking to her directly, but she tried to give her more respect around others. This woman was tough, and she raised Bryn all on her own. She deserved respect.

"What is it, Bryn?" her mother replied after Bryn spent a moment too long in biting her lip.

"Your dress has a stain. You might want to change in to something else for your interview."

"Oh gods, I forgot about the stain. You're right. Can you clean up in here while I change?"

"Of course, mom."

Bryn's mother ran off to her bedroom, leaving Bryn to ask, *Why didn't you tell her about the Senator's involvement in our father's incarceration?*

There's no reason to shatter her hopes, is there?

They're going to get shattered anyway, right? I'm sure that the Senator will realize who she is. If he doesn't know already.

Yeah, well, fuck you. I don't want to be the one to do it.

Bryn didn't argue. She wouldn't want to hurt her mom's optimism either, especially since she was doing it entirely for Bryn's sake. Bryn was also worried about the fact that it sounded like her mother was applying for Lani's job, but she didn't know how to bring that up. Maybe this was just what was supposed to happen to start events in motion.

Aubryn hurried and finished her food, and cleaned the kitchen. She stocked her satchels from the supply in the kiema cabinet; not that she had used much, but she liked to keep her red satchel full at least.

You should tell our mother that you'll fly yourself to school today, to make sure she isn't late.

I know, Doubt. I can handle some stuff on my own, you know.

I'm sorry, I'll stop crowding you.

Thanks. Bryn was getting more and more frustrated by being a backseat driver in her own body.

Bryn's mom returned wearing a dress that Bryn didn't think she had ever seen on her before. This one actually looked like it might have been tailored to fit her, when she was a little younger. It still fit. It had an elegant gold fabric that drooped in folds deliberately meant to draw attention to her bosom. The dress matched the hoop earrings and the ruby necklace that she wore as well. Bryn had never seen any of it before.

"Gods, mom, where did you pull that out of?" Aubryn asked. "I've never seen you wear anything like that. It must have cost you a fortune."

Her mother looked a little embarrassed. "It's the dress I wore to my wedding," she admitted. "I wouldn't wear it, normally, but I looked at my wardrobe and there wasn't anything else. It's not too much, is it?"

"I'm sure that Mrs. Maunbraut would have something appropriate in her wardrobe for an interview with Senator Cimarron," Aubryn said, as much to Bryn as to her mother. Bryn was thinking the same thing. Now they had a cover story for getting access to Lani's stash.

"That's a nice thought, honey, but I'm already late as it is."

"That's okay, mom. Go ahead to your interview. I'll fly to school today."

“Oh, Bryn, that’s such an expensive waste of kiema, and it’s so dangerous.”

“You’ll never get the job if you show up late to the interview. Go, now! I’ll not have you missing the interview on my account.”

Bryn’s mother took Aubryn by the sides of her face and pulled their foreheads together so they touched. “You’re an angel, Bryn. I love you.” She gave her a kiss on the cheek before grabbing her ratty leather purse and starting for the door. Bryn was ecstatic to hear those words.

I love you, too, she thought. When Aubryn didn’t say anything, Bryn repeated the words insistently.

“I love you, too, mom,” Aubryn said. Her mother paused to smile back to her before closing the door. *Happy?* Aubryn thought through her audibar.

Indescribably so, Bryn replied. *You have no idea how much it means to hear those words, and to have our mom know that we love her. We don’t say it often enough.* Aubryn shrugged in her mind, and Bryn could see clearly that she hadn’t taken her mother’s abduction personally yet. She knew the story, but it wasn’t real to her yet.

Give it time, Bryn thought to herself.

Chapter 34: In Which Bryn Flies

Aubryn locked the door of their house and walked down Gransen Circle towards Lani's house. The weather was overcast, and if Bryn didn't literally know better she thought it might rain over the next few days. Aubryn's knock on the door was answered almost immediately by a middle-aged woman in a gray business suit.

"Good morning, Mrs. Maunbraut," Aubryn said, a hint of nervousness to her voice.

"Oh, good morning, Aubryn," Mrs. Maunbraut said. "What is it? I'm in a hurry." She was trying to put on her heels while she talked.

"It's just Bryn, now," Aubryn said. "My mother is going to a job interview today, and she needs a dress to wear. Do you think I could borrow something from your closet?"

Mrs. Maunbraut missed a beat while putting on her second heel, but Lani seemed to recover pretty quickly. "Of course, Bryn. My room is just upstairs. I'm really in a hurry, so can you just lock up after you go?"

"Yes, Mrs. Maunbraut," Aubryn said respectfully. "Thank you." It was hard for Bryn to watch their conversation without her anger towards Lani's deception taking over, but she managed. Soon Lani was out the door, and Aubryn and Bryn had the house to themselves.

Aubryn took them up to Mrs. Maunbraut's bedroom, where Bryn guided her to the secret compartment in Mr. Maunbraut's armoire. As Bryn expected, the compartment was now stuffed to the brim.

Just take about half of it, Bryn said.

I don't know about this, Doubt. This feels really wrong to me. I've known Lani my whole life.

I'm telling you, the person you know as Lani is actually a middle-aged crazy man, a terrorist obsessed with your father, and a devious shapeshifter to boot. If you need proof, look in the closet. Bryn thought for a moment. Actually, look in the closet anyway. We need to take an outfit with us, or Lani will be suspicious when she gets back.

Aubryn looked at the motley assortment of clothes in the closets of the Maunbraut's room, and she couldn't deny that it was bizarre. *Even so, Doubt, we aren't thieves.*

Bryn knew that she wasn't going to win this argument. Before her rape, she had much stronger moral convictions than she did now. The rape and subsequent crises had changed Bryn. She became more practical, and realized that she didn't have the luxury for perfect morality all the time. She remembered that it was Poe who eventually pushed

her over the edge into taking the money, but Poe wasn't *real* to Aubryn yet.

Bryn was still thinking of Aubryn as being a copy of herself, but in this case it simply wasn't true. *What would have motivated me to take this much money five days ago?* she thought to herself.

Okay, Aubryn. Here's the deal. There are a number of new spells that I want to teach you today. Kietella creation, subspace manipulation, teleportation, and, the one I think you'll be most interested in, sunbeams.

Sunbeams? Aubryn asked. Aubryn's attention was piqued again, just as it was when Bryn described the behammon attack during her recap of the next few days.

The attack spell that I reverse engineered from Edger. I know you like fire, and it's generally good for hurting monsters, but I've never seen anything remotely as deadly as sunbeams.

Aubryn looked like a duck that wanted the food in someone's hand but was too nervous to approach them. *How do they work?*

I'll tell you, once you take some of Lani's money and go get us some bags of kiema to work with.

Aubryn looked torn between her morality and her desire for knowledge, but as Bryn expected the desire for knowledge eventually won out. It helped that stealing stolen money was much less amoral in their minds. Aubryn stuffed the money into a bag, and started to leave the room.

Wait a second, Bryn said. Take another look at the room? I think I'm forgetting something.

Aubryn turned around and scanned the room. *I don't see anything, Doubt.*

Right, the ceiling fan! Bryn said excitedly. *Check on top of it.* Aubryn climbed onto the bed and reached up to the ceiling fan. Bryn's heart jumped when she felt the sheets of paper that had been taped to it. She read it through Aubryn's eyes.

Dear Jaid,

When did things get so complicated? I know how strongly you feel for me. In a different world, where I hadn't met Taupeka and had little Aubryn, maybe there could have been something real be-

tween us. But I have a family. You understand that, right? What you want from me is not something I can give you.

I'm sorry if this is hard on you, and I know you want to break me out of prison. I meant what I said – I really do care more about you protecting Aubryn while I'm stuck in here than I care about my own escape. If, however, the opportunity ever arises, I've been trying to prepare for my eventual liberation.

I believe I've finally mastered all of the unlock codes for my cell. They change the codes every year, but I think these codes should be good for a few more months. They rarely open my cell, and when they do I generally don't have access to paper or anything so it has required a lot of memorization. It's not like I have anything else to do in here, other than to worry about Aubryn and to long for the sight of Taupeka. I finally ferreted away a few sheets of paper, so I've sketched the complete unlock codes on the next few pages. My lock requires eight people to unlock it: the President, four senators, the head guard, the guard on duty, and for some reason, a representative from Roseta Industries. It's one thing for you to sneak in here disguised as someone else to meet with me each week, but you're not going to be able to sneak seven other people in. Please don't risk yourself on my account. Like I said, you're doing more than enough for me by protecting Aubryn from the consequences of our actions.

I just want you to know that I do appreciate your weekly visits, and I do care about you. I'm sorry that I was ever a part of the organization that tortured you, and I hope you can forgive me for not being the man you want me to be. Hopefully one day we can be reunited, but I fear it will be a long time from now.

With love,
Ruddicus Dandaster

Bryn was unsurprised by the contents of the letter, though she was somewhat relieved. Half of her information about Lani was sketchy at best, and only Slater had given her information she thought she could rely on. This letter just served to confirm Bryn's understanding of the relationship between Lani and her father.

Aubryn, on the other hand, was caught off guard. *Gods*, Aubryn said. *This isn't just some dream. This is really happening. You haven't*

been lying to me or anything. Everything you said about the next few days is true.

Yes, Bryn said. *I'm sorry, but it's all true.* She was glad that Aubryn was starting to take things seriously. If nothing else, it would make her more cooperative.

I'm really going to get raped on Satyrday?

Yes.

Aubryn collapsed on Lani's bed and stared at the ceiling. *You'll have to give me a few minutes. This is a lot to take in.*

Believe me, I know. Take your time. When you're ready, we can get to work.

A few minutes later, Aubryn had regained her composure. *Okay, I'm ready to get going. Do we have time to stop by a kiema shop and still get to school?*

We do, but we'll have to fly, and pretty fast. Flying was dangerous, and not just because it was difficult for most people to control red magic that carefully. The clouds of Ortha were home to many dangerous monsters, and you were almost guaranteed to get attacked by something if you flew more than a thousand feet off the ground. It felt backwards to Bryn after the past few days, to go seeking out monsters like this instead of having them come to you.

Not to worry, Aubryn said. *I can take them out.*

Bryn sighed. *I wish we had more time. I bet if I thought about it, I could come up with a way to repel them without hurting them.*

I know you like monsters, Doubt, and that you think they're not very far removed from humanity. But they're also dangerous. We take down dangerous humans, too.

But if it isn't their fault that they're dangerous, we usually try to help them.

Well, then you should probably start working on a way to repel monsters without hurting them. I'm going to get us to school on time. The words triggered ideas in Bryn's mind; she needed to be thinking of ways to *attract* monsters, not repel them, in order to ensure her future as a monster magnet.

Aubryn locked the door of the Maunbraut residence behind her, and swallowed several handfuls of red kiema. Bryn savored the feeling of red magic coursing through her body, another familiar comfort that had been ripped away from her in the rape. Aubryn would need most of

that magic for the sheer effort involved in flying, but some of it she'd keep at hand for the inevitable monster attack.

Bryn felt Aubryn form the words, skyward, aerodynamic, buoyant, fast, powerful, controlled. It took people a long time to come up with the words for flying, for some reason. Each of those words was necessary for Bryn to fly, and in that order. Deviate from any of it at all and she risked serious harm to herself. Several weeks of school were devoted to ensuring that students knew how to fly, since it was a mandatory requirement for graduation.

Aubryn shot off the ground, straight up into the air at nearly a hundred miles an hour before reaching her flying altitude of five hundred feet. The higher you went, the faster you could go, but the more likely you were to attract monsters. Five hundred feet was higher than most people would risk, but Aubryn knew how to handle aerial battles. With a kick of her heels, her body began moving towards the Academy at about half the speed of her rapid ascent.

Don't go to the kiema store near the Academy, Bryn said. Choose a different one. I don't care if it's more expensive.

Why? Aubryn asked.

Because I went there to buy my kiema, and it didn't seem like the owner remembered me buying a lot of kiema from him before.

Is this one of those preserve-the-timeline things?

I'm afraid so.

That's fine. It doesn't matter much to me anyway.

Aubryn was concentrating on flying, but Bryn found that she could be a much better scout because of it. She couldn't control where Aubryn was looking, but she could focus all of her attention on scouring the skies for monsters whereas Aubryn had to split her attention between flight and watching. Unsurprisingly, Bryn saw the shadow of the hybustrus in the cloud cover first.

There's a hybustrus up here, Aubryn. Get ready, Bryn said.

You should really call me Bryn, you know? Besides, I'm always ready, replied Aubryn, confidently.

As Aubryn zipped by, leaving a trail of disturbed cloud cover in her wake, the shadow of the hybustrus materialized into the actual creature as it dropped out of the clouds that were its home, looking for a meal. As Bryn expected, it dropped behind Aubryn, hoping to sneak up behind her and take her down like they often did with their prey.

Hybustrus were much more common than zygallon, but they were among the most deadly of monsters. Their thirty foot wingspan spoke to the size of them, which granted them proportional strength and flying speed. The biggest threat that a hybustrus posed, however, was the horns that covered its torso. It looked like someone had crossed a very large bird with a sea urchin, but these horns weren't meant for gouging. They devoured red magic, probably in much the same way that Beloved did, Bryn realized. That would explain why hybustrus could breathe fire from the round snout on their face. The snout just had a single nostril for breathing, and it took the place of the beak that you would expect such a birdlike creature to have. Of course, the hybustrus only looked birdlike – its wings were adorned with hearty scales that only looked like feathers, and its flight was more magical than mechanical. This particular hybustrus had a dozen appendages, arms and legs and tails all over the bottom of its body, seemingly placed there at random rather than with the typical symmetry of natural creatures.

Watch out for its horns, Bryn said.

Yes, thanks Doubt, I know how to fight a hybustrus, Aubryn replied. She was already spinning in midair, twisting her body so that she continued flying forward while looking and aiming behind her. She seemed ready as the creature approached her from behind.

Bryn knew the words Aubryn would use, but Aubryn formed them with her fingers so impossibly fast that Bryn lost track of them. *Is that what my red magic looks like to other people? Gods, no wonder they respect me. I'm a scary bitch.*

A torrent of fire burst forth from Bryn's fingers as she maintained her course while flying backwards. The flames split into two streams that slithered like snakes through the air current, aiming for the creature's wings. The wings didn't have horns on them, but the wings were also resistant to fire. This attack was meant to distract the creature and slow it down. If it had the opportunity to get close to Aubryn, its horns would short out her flight and she'd find herself plummeting helplessly to the ground, where her mangled corpse would make a fine meal for the hybustrus.

The flames connected and the wings caught fire briefly, making the creature howl in pain as it stopped its forward motion and beat its wings furiously to shake the flames out. This action left the tender underbelly of the creature exposed for a moment, which gave Aubryn the opening she wanted. Several words formed in the air and a pointed fin-

ger later, Bryn watched as the creature's stomach erupted like a volcano, complete with a discharge of magma made up of the hybustrus's innards. The mixture spilled out for a stretch over the countryside, followed shortly by the main bulk of the creature.

See? Piece of cake, Aubryn said as she wiped some sweat off her brow and righted herself.

Don't get cocky. There could be another one. Before Bryn even had the chance to finish the thought, it was right there in front of her. Aubryn was headed straight for it. *Down!* she screamed.

Aubryn reacted quickly, dropping as fast as she could, but it wasn't fast enough. One of the hybustrus's horns came within ten feet of her, and suddenly the glow that had been surrounding her and powering her flight vanished. Then she began to drop much more quickly, and she started to panic.

Blue and green kiema, now, Bryn ordered, calmly but firmly. She felt detached from the danger from her vantage point as a passenger in Aubryn's body, as if it wasn't really happening to her. Aubryn seemed to respect the calmness in her voice, and she obeyed quickly and immediately.

Use these words, she continued. Bouncy, solid, steel, epidermal.

Steel? Aubryn asked.

Just do it! Bryn shouted, the ground rapidly approaching. Aubryn didn't stop to ask any more questions, and she completed the spell just before impact. Even with the layer of steel that temporarily replaced her skin, the impact hurt both Bryn and Aubryn a lot. Her body and, more importantly, her internal organs remained intact and secure, though. Moreover, her body rebounded off of the ground with nearly as much force as it had when it connected. A small crater was left in her wake as she soared back into the sky.

To its dismay, the hybustrus had been diving after Aubryn to follow her as she fell. It didn't have time to react as Aubryn's body came rocketing back towards it, nearly as fast as it originally fell.

Tuck into a ball, Bryn ordered, and Aubryn complied. The hybustrus tried to breathe flames at her as she approached, but it didn't have nearly enough time and the steel was protecting Aubryn anyway. She collided with the creature's mouth with a sickening amount of force, separating its head from the rest of its body despite its thick neck.

Aubryn once again rebounded, this time to the side, bouncing to the ground several times before she finally settled on her backside. Her clothes were a bit singed but mostly intact.

That really hurt, Doubt. Why did you want me to do that instead of trying to fly again?

You never would have gotten the flight back up in time. Besides, Bryn said, his horns would have absorbed any more red magic you tried to use. You needed to rely on blue and green. It's not often you use cyan magic, is it?

No, it really isn't. Steel skin? What gave you that idea?

It was the garmin I fought, actually. The way they bounced around seemed pretty effective. I thought we could do the same, but I didn't want us to die in the process. Looks like the steel did the trick.

I'll say. Thanks for looking out for me.

What can I say? My sense of self-preservation is strong.

It would be several minutes before the effect wore off, and Aubryn thought it best not to try to fly again until it had. Bryn agreed, and they were near a kiema store anyway. Aubryn's purchase of large bags of red, blue, and green kiema went roughly the same way it had the previous time. Without Edger there as backup, Bryn actually felt a little bit more confident rather than less, and the shop owner and his thug-gish guards seemed to perceive that strength through Aubryn. Edger was more of a liability in a fight than an asset, as long as Bryn was willing to consume red kiema. There was still a considerable amount of money left over, but Bryn found it unlikely that Aubryn would find a way to use all of the kiema she bought anyway, so they would have to stash this hoard somewhere else before the rape. That was a problem for later, though.

The second leg of their flight was less eventful. She had to fly lower since she was also transporting the heavy sacks of kiema. By the time she stashed the kiema in her locker, the first audibells had already rung. Students packed into their rectangles for the day as Aubryn first caught a glimpse of the amphitheater. Dr. Umbroon's rectangle was naturally empty, and she would have liked to have taken advantage of that, but she knew that she spent the day with Nighra in Mrs. Pepriche's class. Then again, it was Lani who told her that. But Emera and Safler would have said something if that were a lie, and why would Lani lie about something like that? She instructed Aubryn to land in Mrs.

Pepriche's crowded rectangle, and she did so with remarkable control that earned an impressed nod from Mrs. Pepriche.

“Good morning, Bryn. Flying to school again?” Nighra asked.

“Yeah, my mother had an interview this morning and we were late, so we didn't really have a choice.”

“Any trouble on the way?” The second audibells rang, locking the students into their classes for the day. Bryn looked around. Bannam had chosen Ms. Yaleo – he was more than capable of wielding magenta magic, unlike most other students – and Emera and Safler were with Mr. Canberra, unsurprisingly.

“Just a couple of hybustrus. No big deal,” Aubryn said casually. Nighra smiled and gave her a friendly punch on the shoulder. A few of the other students in Mrs. Pepriche's class gave Aubryn an uncomfortable look. Most of them would be lucky to survive an encounter with one hybustrus; they would never fly higher than a hundred feet or so to be safe.

“Anyway, what's today's topic?” Aubryn asked. She glanced at Mrs. Pepriche's program and saw a hastily scribbled word: *burnout*.

Chapter 35: In Which Bryn Acts Funny

Bryn had been through Mrs. Papriche's burnout lesson a dozen times since she had enlisted at the Saggiset Academy. The first day that she studied with Mrs. Papriche was during the week of orientation. Mrs. Papriche went through, student by student, encouraging them to channel more and more red magic until they reached the limit that their body could handle.

The limit was different for everyone, and it varied by the color of the magic. Some people, like Bryn, could handle hundreds of kiema crystals at a time, of any combination of colors. Some unlucky people could barely take five crystals of one color before they began to sweat. That was the case with Masin, the freshman whose turn came just before Bryn's. After he consumed his seventh crystal, his face began to flush and his eyes became bloodshot. Mrs. Pepriche told him he was done, and she moved on to Bryn.

Bryn fed herself red kiema one crystal after another, very quickly at first. Mrs. Pepriche insisted that she slow down, since she might pass her threshold without realizing it if she went to fast. After ten crystals, one after another, gasps erupted from all around her. Masin, apparently, was not satisfied with his performance and tried to push himself past his limit. The gasps came when his body collapsed to the ground, thrashing about in painful seizures. Red sparks erupted from his skin all over his body, leaving bloody gashes everywhere they did, shredding his clothes. Mrs. Pepriche reached out instinctively, but she stopped when she realized there was nothing she could do.

Everyone knew that nothing could be done for Masin, that he had passed too far over the brink and the magic would ravage his body until there was nothing left of it. Every moment of it would be agony. This was why identifying the signs of burnout and knowing your own limits were considered a mandatory lesson at the Academy. The consequence of ignoring the signs was certain, excruciating death.

Standing there with her fingers tingling with red magic, watching Masin howl in pain, Bryn knew what she had to do. She didn't look to Mrs. Pepriche for approval before forming a few words with her fingers and incinerating Masin's body.

Mrs. Pepriche jumped back from the burning corpse, now and forever silenced by the flames. Bryn's classmates screamed and ran in terror. Bryn solidified her reputation as a cold-hearted bitch that morning, confirming the suspicions that people had based on the punch she had given Dr. Umbronn the previous day. Still, Bryn would have done the same thing again in a heartbeat if she had the choice. She thought

she was compassionate. Sometimes atrocity and compassion could be the same thing, depending on your perspective.

There are so many things, Bryn thought, leaving that memory behind as she returned to the present. So many new things that I never would have believed before I was forced to start thinking about magic from a new perspective. I wonder if someone could have saved Masin. Maybe Bannam or Edger will have some ideas about that, once I get back to them.

Her thoughts were also troubled as Aubryn went through the standard lesson in the morning, the periodic test that everyone had to do to assess their limits. A human who used shapeshifting magic had difficulty using any other kind of magic at the same time. It puts great strain on her body to keep the magical flows separate, so a shapeshifting human would probably not want to use powerful red magic. If the red and blue streams were to merge, they would become magenta, the most erratic and wild form of magic. Few people had a high threshold for magenta magic. She suspected that Bannam, Nighra, and herself were probably the only students at the Academy that could handle more than twenty crystals of blue and red at once.

Why did Lani nearly burn out? Bryn asked Aubryn. At the time, she had assumed that Lani was just an inexperienced child, but she was really a middle-aged man, so that explanation didn't make sense anymore.

Maybe she just didn't know her limits, Aubryn suggested as she waited for her chance to stress test her body.

That doesn't seem likely, though I don't know how long she was held in captivity and how long she was cut off from red kiema. Still, she would have had time to reacquire herself with her limits once my father helped her escape seven years ago. And most importantly, she isn't really human anymore. She's more like an artificial kiemara, and kiemara powers rarely interfere with the use of magic, so why would she have difficulty wielding red magic?

Aubryn just shrugged since she didn't have anything useful to add. Bryn wondered why she had bothered to ask her former self, since she shouldn't expect her to have the answers any more than she herself had. But it was still a mystery to Bryn that was unanswered.

Bryn thought about the problem while Aubryn went through her test. Nearly three hundred crystals! The class oohed in admiration as sweat dripped from Bryn's face onto the inch or so of exposed skin of

her breasts. All over her body, her muscles felt like they were vibrating like a guitar string and her skin felt bloated like a sausage link stuffed with too much meat. Aubryn had found her limit, and Mrs. Pepriche smiled proudly as she stopped her. Aubryn closed her eyes and released the magic through her pores and into the air, a gentle red haze spreading out in lazy tendrils that were pulled away by the midsummer breeze.

The only thing I can think of is that her body is deteriorating. It would explain why she sounded so bitter about how the experiments have affected her. Maybe she thought that her capabilities weren't nearly that limited, and when she saw me in danger she really did want to protect me.

Not because she's obsessed with your father, Aubryn asked, but because she's... he's secretly the father of your baby?

That's my concern, yes. I keep running over Lani's behavior in my mind, wondering if she could be my rapist. And I just can't decide one way or the other. She could just be trying to protect me for my father's sake like she claims. I was hoping that her near-burnout would have given me some clues one way or the other, but it hasn't. I hope that our mom is okay at her interview.

Sorry, Doubt. I guess we're just going to have to figure this out the old-fashioned way. We're going to have to wait.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. Bryn wanted to find the chance to get Aubryn away from prying eyes, but there were no opportunities until lunch. The cafeteria was large enough to support the entire student body at once, so usually everyone was there. Like most days, she sat down next to Nighra, Emera, and Safler. Aubryn had chosen a turkey sandwich and a pear for lunch, but she didn't feel very hungry. Bryn could feel the lack of hunger from within Aubryn's head, but she couldn't do anything about it. Her appetite was spoiled by the anticipation of her upcoming rape, no doubt.

"You seem... different, today," Nighra said.

"Do I?" Aubryn asked.

"Yeah. You seem distracted," Safler added. "Is something wrong?"

Bryn hadn't really been worried about how Aubryn was adjusting to the information she had given her. She knew that she herself had been able to come to terms with all of it, so she expected Aubryn to do

the same, but the circumstances in which she was introduced to it, the amount of time she had to cope with each new piece of information, and the total amount of time that she had to square herself with the reality of her situation all varied from Aubryn quite a bit. Bryn would have to stop thinking that she knew what Aubryn was thinking. At this point, they were as much the same person as Bryn and Doubt would be in a few days time.

"I guess I am, a little. I just have a lot to think about." She looked around the cafeteria, finally finding Bannam sitting by himself in a corner. He was staring at her.

Do you think he knows what I know? Aubryn asked. *I mean, what you know? You said he thought he could see the future. Does he already know what's going to happen?*

I wouldn't put it past him, Bryn replied. *Every time I've tried to figure him out, he does something new to surprise me.*

"Like what?" Nighra said cheerfully. "Oh, poor me," she said with a high pitch to her voice, mocking Aubryn. "I'm better with red magic than anyone else in school. I'm on the fast track to get into the Order of Whyat. All the boys in school are too afraid of me to ask me to prom."

"Hey," Aubryn said. "That's a real problem! And it's not true," she said half-heartedly. Bryn knew that she believed it, a little bit, deep down inside. That didn't matter much to Bryn anymore, though. She wondered why at first, but she didn't need Doubt's creepy insight to answer that question. Edger wasn't afraid of her, even though he knew her reputation, and that was enough for Bryn.

"Oh, right, I'm sure you have a date," Nighra teased. The prom wasn't for four months, but people had already started planning for it. Bryn doubted she would go. How big would Poe be by then?

"I do have a date," Aubryn lied. Bryn didn't like where this was going.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure. Who?"

"His name's Lugo. He's the drummer for Burgona's Brigade," Aubryn said, casually. Bryn was ready to strangle her with the ethereal fingers of her mind.

"The drummer?" Emera asked with a disgusted look on her face. She tried not to laugh as she looked at the grin on Safler's face.

"Speaking of Burgona's Brigade, my dad said he could get me some tickets tonight if you lot want to go to their concert tomorrow."

"That's the best he can get?" Nighra asked. "I thought he was pretty high up in the spire."

"He is, but he can only get tickets to the bands his company sponsors. And you may not like Burgona's Brigade, but they're really hot right now."

"Bands his company owns, you mean," Nighra said with a sigh. "I don't know. I think I'd rather just go shopping or something instead if that's the best band that's playing."

"No," Aubryn said, after some prodding from Bryn. "Let's go to the concert. It'll be fun." Eventually, and against Bryn's advice, Aubryn added, "And I'll be able to prove to you that Lugo and I are dating."

Emera laughed nervously. "I guess everyone wants to date someone famous."

"I don't know if it's worth it in the drummer's case," Nighra voiced in disagreement. "You can do better, Bryn."

A photorb lit up in Bryn's head as her gaze caught for a moment on Bannam. Nighra was right. She could do better than Lugo. He was one way to get through the lock, but if she knew how to cast some of Bannam's spells, she could do the entire thing without Lugo's help. The answer had been right in front of her all along.

We have to go, Bryn, she said.

What, now? In the middle of lunch? I haven't even touched my pear.

Yeah. We've got work to do.

What, should I just get up and leave?

Just make something up! Bryn said with exasperation.

"Sorry guys," Aubryn said as she hastily wiped the crumbs from her mouth and cleaned up her area. "I just remembered that I need to be somewhere."

"What's the rush, Bryn? It's not like you to skip class," Safler said.

"I already had my test. I don't need a review of the symptoms of burnout. Some things are more important than class," she said as she got up and walked away.

“Are you sure you're still Bryn? You haven't been replaced by a pod person, have you?” Nighra asked with a laugh. Aubryn returned the laugh half-heartedly and started walking briskly towards the door. No one stopped her, and she gave one last wave to her friends before she left the cafeteria.

What was that about? Aubryn asked Bryn once they were outside. *What was the rush, and where am I supposed to go?*

We needed to give him the chance to meet with us, Bryn said. *Though where we go shouldn't really matter. Let's go down to the lake-side. We should be able to find some place private there.*

He? He who?

Bannam, of course, Bryn said. *He's going to teach us a few things, and he's going to help us break our father out of jail.*

Chapter 36: In Which Bryn Cheats

Aubryn didn't have to wait long on the rocky beach. Lake Fush was calm today, its gentle waves lapping quietly against the muddy sands on the shore. Aubryn sat in the driest part of the sand, watching for her tutor's approach.

"I know you're there," she said finally.

"Impressive, Bryn!" Bannam said as he became visible with a flash of magenta light. "How did you know?"

"You're leaving footprints in the sand," she said.

"Yes, you are correct."

"Isn't that a little sloppy for you?"

"It was quite deliberate, I assure you. Surely you understand that by now."

Bryn wasn't surprised that Aubryn didn't understand what he meant, so she told her. Aubryn then replied, "If you hadn't, then we wouldn't be having this conversation, and you knew we'd be having it."

"I'm glad you understand now. It makes talking to you much easier."

"Is it? Isn't talking with me always as easy as possible for you? You're just speaking the words that were already prepared for you."

Bannam looked off at the horizon. "I didn't say it was easier for me." Bryn had trouble imagining how his mind worked, but she was trying.

"In any case," he said, shaking some thoughts from his head, "there's a lot to do, so we'd better get started. First, you need to know how to create a homunculus."

"I do?" Aubryn asked.

"You'll need them on Saturday to help you with the lock. You will also need to know how to turn invisible to get past the guards. I doubt you've got enough capacity with cyan magic to make a perception distortion bubble, so you will make the homunculi within the prison."

"Oh I will, will I?" Aubryn asked. "I'm getting tired of everyone telling me what I'm going to do."

"Whatever," Bannam said dismissively. "I know you'll protest but it doesn't change anything."

"But —" Aubryn started to say.

"Doesn't. Change. Anything." Bannam said with an authoritative tone that sounded strange coming from his mouth. He usually sounded so innocent and childlike, but he suddenly seemed serious. Where Bryn

was just curious about his changed disposition, Aubryn seemed to be quelled by it. It reminded Bryn of Lani speaking with the voice of Jaid.

"Anything else I should know?" Aubryn asked. "Like who's going to rape me?"

Bannam seemed mildly shocked, but his expression also seemed feigned, as Bryn would expect from someone who couldn't really be shocked by anything. "I would have thought you would know that by now."

"So you don't know everything, then?" Aubryn asked.

"I know the things we'll say in the future, but I don't know what's going on in your mind, Bryn. I don't know when you'll realize who your rapist is."

"But if you knew we were going to have this conversation, why would you say you thought we would know that?"

"If I hadn't said that, would we be having this conversation?"

Bryn's head was beginning to hurt, so she could only imagine what Aubryn was going through. "So you didn't really think that I would know who my rapist was?" Aubryn asked, trying to make sense of it.

"Of course not. Now that that's out of the way," he said, as if he were checking each of his sentences off of a checklist. "Let's begin."

Bryn wondered if she would be like Bannam in a few days when she truly became Doubt, a puppet dancing on the strings of fate. And, if so, did it change anything? Would she be any less Bryn? She also noticed that he had diverted Aubryn from her question with ease. Bryn considered reminding Aubryn of that fact, but decided not to. At first, she thought would have to learn to do that for when she became Doubt, but then she realized that she already knew everything she needed to say anyway.

Bannam's tutelage was supernaturally fast-paced, yet somehow completely understandable, as if he were teaching Bryn something she already knew. It was as if he knew exactly how to speak to Bryn to make her understand his words, his explanations filled with the clarity of foresight of the mistakes she might make or the misunderstandings she might have. There was very little time and a lot of material, so the accelerated lessons were simply necessary. Magic of this complexity was the subject of years of research that only old, experienced magi were able to learn, and only through substantial experimentation. This method of learning, of borrowing from the necessity of consistency that eschewed

the need for trial and error... Bryn didn't have a word for it other than "cheating." But after everything she had been through, Bryn was ready to take any advantage she could get. No wonder she had been able to learn to make Beloved so quickly when she studied under Dr. Umbronn; she and Bannam had been cheating all along and Bryn didn't even know it.

By sunset, Aubryn was sweating profusely and her breasts were heaving with long, drawn-out gasps. The sharp pain in her lungs was an indication of her physical exhaustion, not of burnout. But she understood a number of things, now. She knew how to reshape light to her will, bending it around her body to make herself invisible. She knew how this could be used to transform herself into light, to travel long distances in a moment as long as she had a straight path to them. Most importantly, she now knew how to create life from nothing in the form of a homunculus. The implications of this last spell made Bryn feel *godly*. What was being a god other than being in charge of life and death?

"Thank you, Bannam," she said, when she finally had her breath back. Over the course of the afternoon, Aubryn had used most of the kiema that she had bought in preparation. There was just enough left to stuff her satchels to their full capacity. Bryn estimated that this was a little bit more than twice what she had on her when she awoke from the rape. "I don't know how I would have gotten through this without you."

"No, Bryn, thank you. Besides," Bannam said seriously, "you couldn't have gotten through it without me, and I couldn't have gotten through it without you." He smiled at her, "I guess I'll see you at the conclusion."

"Does that word even have meaning to you?" Aubryn repeated the question that Bryn put into her head.

"More than you know, Bryn," he said. He swallowed some kiema and began to glow red, preparing to fly away. "More than it means to most. You'll see." He launched himself into the air, leaving Bryn to rest her mind and Aubryn to rest her body on the muddy sands of Lake Fush.

Chapter 37: In Which Bryn Sets Up A Meeting

Aubryn didn't want to move from that spot, and Bryn didn't want to make her. It was comfortable. The air was cool and refreshing now that the sun was going down, and the smell of the water reminded her of her childhood, when she was really young, before everything that happened with her father. When her family was together, and whole. She missed those days. Things were much simpler then. Even if she could free her father and find her mother after this was all over, things could never go back to being that simple for her. She had seen too much.

The rumble in Aubryn's stomach reminded her that she had overexerted herself, and she needed food desperately.

I know exactly where to get something, Bryn said. Her lessons with Bannam had given her a lot of ideas for breaking her father out of prison, but there was still one piece missing.

Where's that?

There's a dive bar in Waalort city called The Iron Monkey. I'm not going to lie, I'm sure the food is going to be greasy, but that's where our next order of business is anyway.

What's my next job? Aubryn asked with resignation.

We need to meet with Lugo.

Why? We can unlock the door ourselves, now. Bryn wished that Aubryn were showing a little bit more backbone and that she was thinking for herself a bit more. She worried that she was doing Aubryn a disservice by ordering her around without giving her the chance to make the plans, but she guessed that it wouldn't matter much in a few days time anyway.

There are a few reasons. The most important one, even if it makes the least sense, is that I know that you are to meet with him, and that according to him you will ditch him afterwards. That means that it needs to happen, anyway. But more importantly, I think we need to learn something.

We do? Aubryn asked.

There's something to his ability to move so fast. I can't help but think that we're going to come up with something that will make it so we don't need to create seven homunculi. Wouldn't it be better if we could do it with just two homunculi? Just one for you and one for me, both moving at Lugo-level speeds?

So you're saying we need to meet with Lugo to come up with some way to copy his kiemara ability?

Exactly.

Okay, fine. I guess that makes sense, especially if you think you could move our separate consciousnesses into the bodies of two homunculi. I'm starving, anyway. She swallowed some red kiema and took to the sky again, this time at a much lower altitude since she was so tired.

Don't forget to disguise yourself, Bryn said along the way. *We can't have the bartender recognizing us, and he'll definitely question us if we look underage.*

Of course, Aubryn said as she scanned the cloud cover for threats. The trip was peaceful, thankfully, all the way up until Aubryn landed on a roof near *The Iron Monkey*.

Are those the vulprin you were talking about? Aubryn asked. She had landed right next to a clutch of them, and they seemed both asleep and undisturbed by Aubryn's landing. She was trying to be somewhat stealthy, after all. Bryn realized that this must be their home. They had made their home on the roofs of the buildings in the Rat Hole, and the police didn't dare enter this district to purge them. No wonder they had moved in here.

After moving far away from the creatures, Aubryn quietly made most of the same motions with her fingers that she had learned for Bannam's invisibility spell. Personal, photonic, dynamic, bent, shapely, tight-fitting, reflective, distorted, slippery. Some of the words seemed like an odd choice, to Bryn, but she knew they worked. Unlike the homunculus, which Aubryn hadn't actually tested yet for ethical reasons, she had worked on her adjectives for invisibility extensively and tested them thoroughly. This time, however, Aubryn omitted the word invisible from the beginning of the spell, and replaced it with deceptive.

Oh, that's an excellent idea, Bryn, Bryn said to her former self, ignoring the placid vulprin. She wondered why Aubryn thought of it when she hadn't. Making oneself invisible and making oneself look like someone else were essentially the same thing, based on how Bannam's spell worked. Suddenly Bryn felt a disturbing similarity with Lani as Aubryn looked down and saw the skin and clothes of a middle-aged man.

I was just doing what you asked. Why, how did you think I would disguise myself?

I expected you to make a cloak or something to just hide your face. Your idea is much more clever.

Thanks, Aubryn said. She took a long moment to inspect her new appearance, thinking that her new persona looked like he could be her uncle. *We've diverged, haven't we?* Aubryn asked.

Bryn understood her meaning. Aubryn and Bryn had become different people. They shared a common history, much more than most people ever could, but they had experienced a number of events differently as well. At some point, Aubryn was no longer the Aubryn that Bryn once knew.

I'm afraid so, Bryn admitted. *That's why this is even more important. I really don't want you to have to die, Bryn. My solution – to make a homunculus for you – isn't perfect, but I think it's as close as we can get. Anyway, how about your voice?*

My voice?

Well, you're only shaping the light. You're still going to sound like a high-pitched teenage girl.

Good point, she replied. *But I'm not meeting with him tonight, right? You wanted to meet with him tomorrow.*

Yes, Bryn said slowly, expecting more explanation.

Well, I was just going to slip him a note with a wad of money, to tell him to meet with the girl who dances with him on stage tomorrow night for a business transaction, if he wants to see the other half of the payment.

That's a good plan, Bryn admitted. *Just be careful.*

Because you're the model of caution, Aubryn said sarcastically as she descended the fire escape. Bryn was reminded of her agonizing climb up the ladder to meet with Edger, her body still ravaged by the attack. There was a certain symmetry to her descent that struck her as odd, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Aubryn's plan worked flawlessly for the most part. Bryn watched from her seat in Aubryn's head as she scribbled the note and attached the money. She walked nonchalantly through the saloon doors and took a seat, grabbing a menu from the table on the booth. She pointed at one of the dishes when Limbit came to take her order, a juicy burger that was heavy on protein to make up for the effort involved in Bannam's instruction. While she waited for her meal to arrive, she went to the bathroom in the back of the bar, stopping briefly to put the note in

Lugo's pocket as he took a shot on the leviball table. As Bryn expected, he was a professional; he didn't even flinch or try to look at the note as far as Bryn could tell. He would save it for later.

Aubryn finished her meal in silence, an angry look warding off anyone who might be tempted to approach her. She paid for her meal and started out of the doors before taking one last look back at Lugo, not paying attention as she barreled through the saloon doors in a hurry.

Bryn felt like she had run into a wall, her senses reeling as she fell back, hard on her bottom. It took Aubryn a moment to right herself and to look up at the door. Slaterin was standing there, concerned.

"I'm so sorry, sir," he said with his deep, stalwart voice. "I didn't see you there."

"It's my fault," Aubryn said without thinking, immediately ringing alarm bells of panic in both herself and Bryn. Slater was about to reach down to help her stand, but her mismatched voice made him withdraw his assistance. He gave her another penetrating look with his magenta eyes.

Run! Bryn shouted, but Aubryn took her time.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Slater asked.

How could he? Bryn wondered, since she hadn't met him yet, but Aubryn apparently had a different impression of his meaning.

"Maybe you've heard of my brother, Rudy," she said with the deepest mumble she could muster. "Excuse me," she said as she ran out the door.

"Wait, what's your name?" he called down the street. Aubryn just kept running.

Well, that was a mitigated disaster, Bryn said finally, when Aubryn stopped running and dismissed the spell.

What are you talking about? I delivered the note just fine.

Yeah, and you met Slater before you were supposed to.

Says who? He still doesn't know who I am. Has anything really changed with your first meeting with him? The only difference is that he might actually know a little bit more about you than he lets on in the future.

Bryn sighed. She couldn't change what happened, so she'd just have to plan around it. She did wonder if it would have an impact on the final confrontation, or if it had inspired Slater's philosophy about the time stream that had led to Bryn's own... understanding wasn't the right

word. Acceptance of events? She felt like things were finally beginning to come full circle.

Can I go to sleep now? Aubryn asked. *I'm seriously exhausted, Doubt.*

Yes, Bryn, Bryn said. *Get some sleep. We have another big day tomorrow. It's nothing but big days from here on out.*

Chapter 38: In Which Bryn Suffers Through Class

Bryn enjoyed the feeling of being back in her own bed that night. When Aubryn went to sleep, Bryn found herself still awake. She wasn't tired at all. She guessed that without the physical demands of interfacing her mind with a body, she didn't need to rest her consciousness the way Aubryn did.

It was a painfully dull night with Bryn's senses completely cut off from the world outside. All she had were her thoughts. She reviewed Bannam's instructions, both from the previous day and from her future lesson with Dr. Umbronn. She still lacked a concrete plan to fight her companions in the future, should they turn out to be her rapist. She suspected was going to need a surprise to stop him. She was going to need to innovate.

She had another problem to solve as well, and eventually she decided that that was the best way to spend her night. She needed to solve the problem of attracting monsters to her. Bryn concluded that there was no realistic way that she would be able to find all of the monsters that were destined to attack her and give them the proper motivations in the time she had left. Abyss, in particular, was going to be impossible to find and deal with. She decided that it was much more likely that she would be generically attracting them somehow.

Bryn eventually memorized a series of adjectives that she thought would work for a new spell. Internal, central, concealed, attractive, vital, auric, beckoning. Based on Beloved's token kietella, Bryn thought that these words would create a kietella that was concealed within her body.

Thinking about the words carefully, she thought they were correct. More correct than she even realized at first. She included vital for a specific reason, since monsters craved blue kiema. She thought that by making herself seem more lively, somehow, that it would specifically attract monsters. But, Bryn realized, even though she had attracted her fair share of monsters, she had been attracting people as well, both sexually and not. Slaterin's timely rescue. Edger and his father, Chesnan. Lani too, maybe, though she was always hard to predict. Bannam and the rest of her classmates. Especially Bannam, whose sudden interest in her seemed all-consuming. Maybe kiemara were even more attracted than humans? The excessive crowds in the shopping district. Even her friends somehow seemed more focused on what was going on in her life than they usually did.

Was that it? Would this spell create a kietella that attracted all life to Bryn? It made perfect sense to Bryn. She would need to get Aubryn to cast this spell, but it would have to wait until just before the rape. Then she had a horrible realization: the aura of attractive energy that would be created when she will instantiate the kietella could very well be what will attract her attacker at the appointed time. She knew that it was going to happen, and that was bad enough, but the fact that she was going to have to initiate it? If she was actively making the incident happen, was it really rape anymore? It wasn't consent, exactly. She certainly wasn't looking forward to it, neither the rape itself nor the excessive and brutal harm that would be done to her body. But she thought she had the choice, still, to just say no and to completely ruin the time stream. She just didn't know what the consequences would be.

She considered whether it might not be better to risk the consequences for a very long time, keeping her mind preoccupied while Aubryn slept. Eventually, she decided that it wasn't worth the risk. But it wasn't the fate of Ortha that made Bryn's decision for her, rather, it was the fate of Poe. If she didn't get raped, Poe wouldn't exist. She had a lot of responsibilities as a mother, and the first and foremost in her mind was to ensure the existence of her daughter.

She still didn't have the solution for her other problem, that of taking revenge on her rapist, when Aubryn began to stir. She had a lot of options for how to attack when she regained control of her body, but it really was going to depend greatly on who it was. Besides, she would have two nights after the rape to plan once she had that knowledge, while she was truly taking over the role of Doubt.

Bryn didn't try to influence Aubryn's decisions that morning, but predictably, she put on the cream and orange dress that Bryn loved so much. She put on the makeup Bryn had been wearing as well, and she had painted her nails the previous night. She was now dressed as she would be for her rapist. If nothing else, it meant she wasn't going to be coming home tonight.

Be sure to tell our mother that we love her, Bryn said.

Of course, Doubt. I understand how important it is for you to see her again.

No, Bryn, Bryn said. You don't understand. This is the last time we're going to see her.

You mean it's going to happen tonight?

I don't know, exactly. I didn't wake up until after tomorrow night, but I was wearing what you're wearing now. So I don't think we're going to be coming home tonight.

Aubryn looked at herself in the mirror and bit her lip. *Maybe I should change.*

No, don't do that.

But if I change, then it won't happen tonight.

Then you'll just have to put that dress on again tomorrow. Will it be any easier, then?

It might be.

I didn't know I was a procrastinator, Bryn said, trying to sound angry and unsympathetic even though she knew all-too-well how Aubryn was feeling, and how right she was to feel that way.

I'm not procrastinating, I just... I just don't want to die.

With my help, you won't. Just follow my advice and we'll get through this. We'll both get through this.

Okay. Aubryn left her room and had breakfast again. Her attention and focus were on the food, but whenever her mother was in Aubryn's line of sight, Bryn's attention was all on her. She wanted to take in every ounce of time with her mother. She couldn't be sure that she would ever see her again. This was an opportunity that most people didn't get when they lose the people they love, and Bryn was not going to let it pass her by.

"How did your interview go?" Aubryn asked between mouthfuls of scrambled eggs.

"It didn't go very well. Guess who Senator Cimmaron's secretary is. It's Mrs. Maunbraut, of all people. You know, little Lani's mother? Well, she apparently didn't know that she was going to be getting replaced. Even worse, Senator Cimarron made her do my interview! My goodness she was angry. I guess I'd be angry too if I were being replaced by someone better." Taupeka laughed happily as she cleaned the dishes.

Bryn wasn't laughing, nor was Aubryn. Lani's jealousy of Bryn's mother was likely to send her over the edge after this incident. Maybe she attacked Bryn's mother and burned down the house. It would explain why she was first on the scene. But Bryn wasn't able to find her mother's body, so what happened to her? Did Lani kill her and dispose

of her, or did she kidnap her somehow? If it really was Lani. She certainly had the strongest motive.

Maybe, if she freed her father in time, he could stop Lani from taking revenge. She didn't know yet whether her father or Lani got to her mother first, and Bannam hadn't said anything to that effect. It was like the size of Lani's stash all over again; it could really go either way depending on Bryn's actions. On Aubryn's actions.

I had been wondering why we would free our father from prison, Aubryn said. I mean, I understand why he did what he did, and I want him back as much as you, but freeing him from prison is just going to make him a fugitive again. It's not going to bring him back to us, at least not for long, and definitely not forever. But he could save your mother from Lani, even though we can't.

I'm not so sure about that, but if that convinces you to be there tonight, let's go with it, Bryn said.

"Do you think you got the job, at least?" Aubryn asked, not sure what else she could say at this point without letting on the things she knew.

"Probably. Mrs. Maunbraut seemed pretty upset."

"You should celebrate, then," Aubryn said, repeating instructions from Bryn. "Once you've dropped me off at school, you should go shopping or something. Maybe get a manicure, or a massage."

"You think so?" Taupeka said. "I guess I've kind of earned it."

"Sure. I'm going to a concert tonight anyway. Maybe meet up with a friend, even. Spend a girls' night out."

"Oh, you're a sweet girl. I haven't had any girlfriends since... Well, maybe Mossita would want to get drinks or something. Are you sure you'll be okay if I stay out late, tonight?"

Don't do it, Bryn said, as Aubryn was about to make the promise. *Don't lie to her and tell her you'll be fine.*

"I'm seventeen years old. I don't need a babysitter," Aubryn said instead, rolling her eyes dramatically.

"Go ahead and get the leviboard started. I'll give Mossita a call and be right out."

Aubryn drove the pair of them to the Academy before giving her mother a kiss goodbye. She stood watching as her mother drove off, and Bryn didn't want her to look away, even after their leviboard passed into the forest and out of sight. But the first audibells were ringing.

Aubryn turned and walked away. She met with her friends briefly before class to make plans for the concert, then earned puzzled stares from them when she entered Mr. Bakeman's rectangle.

Preparation to Fight Scrizzlers? Aubryn asked Bryn. *I've taken this before.*

I'm afraid so. Today we need to deal with a certain monster. Besides, you need to take it easy. We need your body at full strength tonight.

Aubryn took Bryn's advice. She tried not to look too bored during the morning lesson. "A scrizzler isn't much to worry about," she mouthed in time to Mr. Bakeman's predictable words. Some of the students near her watched her instead and laughed. "They're very good burrowers, and they like to attack from below. If you have any talent for geomancy, you can try that to stop them in their tracks, if you've got the kiema for it. Geomancy uses green kiema, for those of you who are first years." Aubryn wagged a finger condescendingly, a perfect mockery of her teacher.

"I'm sorry, Bryn, am I boring you?"

"Oh, no, sir," Aubryn said sarcastically.

"Really? It's just that I have trouble understanding why you want to take this class again."

"I just thought I could benefit from your wisdom again," she said dryly, and her classmates tried not to laugh. Some of them tried, at least. "I had forgotten that scrizzlers could burrow."

"I suppose you know all about scrizzlers, is that it?" he asked.

"I know as much as you do," Aubryn said. Bryn guessed that she was probably right. No wonder Mr. Bakeman would be an asshole in the future. It turned out that Bryn had started it.

"Oh really? How many pounds does a scrizzler weigh on average?"

"Three hundred eighteen. Ask me something these first years don't know."

Mr. Bakeman got a frustrated look on his face. "What's the best weapon to use against a scrizzler?"

Aubryn looked around the classroom with disdain. "Seriously? You're going to ask me that? Knowing who I am?"

"Sounds like you don't know," Mr. Bakeman said smugly, and Bryn almost felt sorry for him.

"I know you *think* it's fire," Aubryn said, wiping the smile from his face. "Maybe someday I'll be able to convince you otherwise." Some of Aubryn's classmates laughed, and others just watched with a look of disbelief at how she was behaving.

This continued for most of the morning, Mr. Bakeman asking predictable questions and Aubryn answering them with ease. There was a brief pause for lunch, which was blissfully normal for a change. Just Aubryn and her friends relaxing and enjoying a meal together, like old times. It helped Bryn forget about the challenges she would face tonight.

When class resumed, Aubryn was content to stay quiet and in the back while Mr. Bakeman continued his lesson. Bryn took the opportunity to fill Aubryn in on more of the details about the two days after her rape. Bryn thought it would be a useful exercise to try to recall exactly what happened and exactly what people said, so that she could perfectly play the role of Doubt when the time came. She still worried about the things that she might have forgotten, but if the natural state of the timeline was to be consistent, she shouldn't have any problems.

The morning session had been in a classroom, so she had nothing better to do at the time than taunt Mr. Bakeman, but during the afternoon session they were on Practice Field A with the monster cages. There were a number of cages, but Bryn only cared about one of them. The very one Mr. Bakeman led them to.

"This is the scizzler you will be fighting on Moonday," Mr. Bakeman said as he gestured at one of the creatures.

More or less, Bryn said to Aubryn. That's the lock you need to break.

How can I do it? Everyone's watching.

Well, you can wait until people stop watching, or you can use your new magic to find a way to do it without being seen.

Or, Aubryn said, I can just let Mr. Bakeman be his typical, incompetent self. Look closer.

Bryn followed Aubryn's gaze. During his lesson at some point, Mr. Bakeman had unlocked the cage and handled the scizzler, but when he put it back in he must have forgotten to lock it again.

Unbelievable, Bryn said with an incredulous guffaw at Mr. Bakeman's incompetence.

I can't believe we've spent the entire day in his class for no reason, Aubryn said. Promise me you'll be extra bitchy with him on Tuesday.

Don't worry. It will be pretty emasculating.

Well, that's something, I guess. Aubryn gave one last look at the lock to make sure it was still open when the evening audibell rang, then hurried to Nighra's leviboard.

Chapter 39: In Which Bryn Dances

"Where in the hell is this place?" Bryn asked as the evening air passed by, the refreshing breeze slightly penetrating the force field of Nighra's leviboard. She and her friends had been driving for over an hour, getting farther and farther from the city. They had seen a number of sights along the way, including a few aggressive monsters as Bryn expected in the countryside, but there was nothing that the four of them couldn't handle with ease.

"It's just a little bit farther, I promise. See those lights?" Safler said. "They're coming from the pavillion." Bryn could see them now that Safler had pointed them out. Two enormous, moving spotlights were pouring cones of light into the night sky, lighting up wisps of clouds here and there. As they approached the origin of the lights, the dirt road that had been empty for such a long time was suddenly stuffed with the traffic of thousands of eager fans. People started to park on the grass and walk the rest of the way. It was clearly what the theater management expected them to do anyway. Before long, the ushers had taken Safler's tickets and given the four of them paper bracelets to wear that indicated that they were allowed to sit in the closest seats, by the mosh pit.

You know, this might actually be fun, Bryn said. I mean, I don't like Burgona's Brigade that much, but we can do some serious damage in the pit. It might be cathartic.

Says the girl who doesn't have to feel the bruises, Aubryn said.

Oh, I feel them, Bryn. I'm just not afraid of them anymore.

Well, I'm sorry that I still care about my body. I agree, it would be fun if it weren't so dangerous. As she scanned the crowd, she eventually added, Hey, is that who I think it is?

Bryn followed Aubryn's gaze, not that she had a choice in the matter, and she saw Slater standing stoically at the edge of the pit. Some no-name band was playing on stage at the moment while people still arrived, and the moshing had already started even if it was still a little thin. The swirling mass of humans eddied around Slater's sturdy frame, like a breaker holding back the crashing waves. *Yeah, that's Slater, alright.*

He's cuter than you said, even if he is a kiemara, Aubryn said. Bryn remembered when she thought that him being a kiemara was a problem, but she no longer felt that way. She wasn't sure what had changed exactly. She thought that maybe Aubryn was having the same sort of evolution towards respect for humanity, no matter the shape it took.

If you say so. I trust you'll be sensible and avoid him tonight.

Actually, this is a perfect opportunity. You said that his kiemara quirk is that he's really hard to hurt?

Yes, Bryn said nervously. *What are you planning, Bryn?*

Well, you wanted to come up with a spell to copy Lugo's kiemara power, didn't you? Why don't we try copying Slater's as a practice run? Besides, it might come in handy to copy Slater's power in the confrontation with your rapist.

Okay, if you think you can do it without being noticed, Bryn said.

No problem, Aubryn replied, and she stood up. Everyone else around her started standing up too, since Burgona's Brigade had just taken the stage. There were cheers and whistles all around her, and the activity in the mosh pit really picked up as they started with their opening song. The lead vocalist screamed angry murder into the audibar, streams of guttural language that made Bryn wonder when he found the time for breath. To his right, the guitarist was running and jumping around the stage excitedly as he strummed furiously on the strings of his guitar. Their instruments had been magically infused with the same technique used on the audibars, their crystal-clear tones resonating throughout the entire pavillion. The bassist, the only girl in the group, was more subdued despite her shaved head and a collection of piercings on her face. The notes she summoned from her instrument shook the ground beneath Aubryn's feet. And of course Lugo was on a raised platform behind the other three, glowing blue and beating out an impossibly fast rhythm on an enormous set of drums with the band's name painted ostentatiously on the front.

Aubryn turned to Nighra and shouted over the angry music filling the theater, "I'm heading down to the pit. If we get separated tonight, don't worry about me. I'll find my own way back."

"What? Bryn, no, don't be stupid!" Nighra called back, but Aubryn was already pushing her way through the crowded aisles to get closer to the pit.

She got close to Slater, first, but she stayed far enough away from him not to draw attention to herself. Most of the people in the pit were consuming kiema, especially blue kiema, so no one blinked twice when Aubryn swallowed blue and green. Half of the people in the pit were fortifying their own bodies against the avalanche of people that kept barreling into them, and the other half were using their considerable collective magical talent to ensure that the avalanche would bury

them all. Moshing was an incredibly dangerous activity when magic was mixed in, but Bryn could feel the exhilaration even from the edge of the pit and understood why people did it. A number of the people were generating bubbles of sexual energy that probably emulated a lot of the elements of Chesnan's profession.

Even at the edge of the pit, Bryn felt the allure of the magic coursing through the crowd. It had become a living thing, almost, a spell that transcended the control of the individual and became a complex, interwoven magic of an unseen hive mind. The language of their dance wasn't one that could be sculpted with fingers; it required the emotion and the energy of hundreds of hormonal moving bodies to bring it forth. These people were the fingers of humanity.

Bryn watched Aubryn's hands as she formed the words for the spell she was inventing. Bryn was shocked to realize that she couldn't read the words that Aubryn was using anymore. Had they really become so different? Or was Aubryn inventing new words to make this spell work? In either case, Bryn thought she could replicate the spell later with her own personal touch. She was getting better at understanding the spells of others, after her time with Bannam and Dr. Umbronn. It was mostly about replication and duplication, and looked to be inspired by the homunculus spell.

After Aubryn finished the spell, she tightened her fist and looked at it, then turned her attention to the pit. *Here we go*, she said.

She charged forward and leaped into the air. The pit was in a three-foot recess in the ground; low enough to easily get the injured out if necessary, but high enough to keep the pit from spilling out onto the people who didn't want to be caught in it. Aubryn found herself surfing across the surface of the crowd, grabbed and pushed by hundreds of unfamiliar hands, half of them tugging at the loose fabric of her dress and more than a few of them taking the opportunity to molest her body before passing her along to the next reveler.

Bryn thought that this treatment should bother her, but for some reason it didn't. It was all because of the intent. The men with the greedy hands didn't mean any disrespect, and their invasiveness wasn't personal. They were lost in the ecstasy of the music and the pressing sexual energy of the crowd. In this particular venue there was an understanding that this was acceptable behavior.

Bryn became acutely aware that there were at least ten men for every girl in the pit. With how reckless she was being, she wasn't

surprised that she was destined to be raped soon. Surely Aubryn felt the same way? The intoxication of the ambient energy could only explain her lack of inhibition so much.

Aubryn seemed to be enjoying herself, and Bryn realized why when she was finally dropped from the surface of the crowd and into the mix. The mass of writhing flesh buffeted her from every side, threatening to squeeze the life from her lean body. But Aubryn wasn't budged as they crashed in on her. Instead, men plowed into her and found themselves bouncing off and falling to the ground, getting trampled by the ongoing rush of a seemingly endless supply of people. She simply stood there, dancing, as stable and as resolute as...

Slater! You've replicated his talent? Bryn asked.

Yes! Aubryn replied excitedly. She was clearly enjoying herself in the crowd. *I thought this might be handy. You think Slater's going to be at your final confrontation, so this might be a trick you'd want to try. It doesn't even take much kiema. Most of the work is already done for you, I guess by the kiemara's parents or genetics or whatever.*

This is fantastic, Bryn. Thanks. Can you make your way to the stage? I think it's time to go dance with Lugo.

Aubryn followed the advice, using her elbows to gracefully force her way through the crowd to the front of the stage. When no one could budge you, it was easy to just slide right through the press of violence flowing around you. Even the bodyguards at the foot of the stage were stymied when their blasts of force had no effect on Aubryn's ascent to the stage. When they realized that she was getting through their perimeter, they scrambled from their seats to try to stop her, but by then she was vaulting onto the stage.

She turned and pumped a fist into the air in victory, and the crowd cheered. When Aubryn turned to look back at the band, they hadn't missed a beat, though their eyes were all on her. They were definitely enjoying her enthusiasm.

I guess we need to put on a show, Bryn said. Aubryn danced with each of the band members for a few moments as she made her way to the back of the stage, finally settling on Lugo. He seemed genuinely surprised that she stopped with him, but he just smiled a filthy smile on that sweaty face of his, flicking salty excretion everywhere as he tossed the wet hair out of his eyes.

Just suck it up, Bryn. I know he's gross, but we need his help.

He's not that bad, Aubryn said as she hiked up her dress to her thighs and did a number of unseemly things on Lugo's lap, earning even more cheers from the crowd. Lugo was clearly enjoying the experience, but his beat remained rapid and constant. Bryn couldn't be sure, but she thought that Aubryn was actually trying to tease him to the point of making him make a mistake, as if she were just testing his skill. It didn't take long for Bryn to feel the lump of excitement pressing against Aubryn's thigh as her gyrations urged him to speed up.

Bryn couldn't believe what Aubryn was doing. She must be under the sway of the sexual energy from the mosh pit. Most of the crowd wouldn't recognize her, but her friends would. She would never live this down. Aubryn moved her hips faster and faster, and Lugo's drumming sped up in response. Soon the song that was impossibly fast to begin with took on a feverish pace that boiled the blood in the crowd.

Like most excitement, though, it couldn't last forever, and Aubryn was soon lifted from Lugo's lap by one of the bouncers. She must have released the spell that was copying Slater's powers, because the bouncer moved her with ease. She couldn't hear his words, but she saw Lugo tell the bouncer to take her backstage. The band put on a good show of being upset that she was being hauled off, and the crowd booed and howled at the loss. When Aubryn looked back at the stage one last time, Lugo gave her a slimy look that revealed his intentions for later.

Good job, Bryn, Bryn said. *He's not going to be able to keep his hands to himself long enough for us to copy his power.*

What do you want from me? You told me we needed to dance on stage with him.

I didn't mean that we needed to be an exotic dancer.

Lighten up, Aubryn said. *It was fun. He's not my first choice, and I'm not going to do anything more than tease him, but we could have chosen someone worse to grind.*

If you say so, Bryn. Just don't blame me if he ends up raping us.

Oh? Are you going to try to tell me that it's my fault we're here, and not yours? Aubryn asked. *What part of, "I don't want to die," did you not understand?*

Bryn had some time to consider the situation while she waited for the band's set to finish. *You're right, Bryn. You did a good job. And thanks for working with me.*

Aubryn shrugged in her mind. *It's as much for my sake as it is for yours. I've got a stake in this now. I'm going to take it seriously.*

When the set ended, Lugo rushed off the stage and grabbed Aubryn by the arm, pulling her into his changing room and slamming the door behind him. Suddenly his hands were all over her and his lips had found hers, his tongue forcing them apart and slithering into her mouth before she could react. Bryn was disgusted, but she could feel that Aubryn was a little aroused by the forcefulness of Lugo's presumption.

"Damn, girl," Lugo said when he came up for breath, hot sticky breath that clung to Bryn's neck along with the sweat from Lugo's body. "That was fucking hot. Who sent you, and what do you want from me other than my dick inside you?" He quickly and roughly started to pull her dress up and away from her thighs, making his intentions clear.

Okay, this has gone on long enough, Bryn insisted, and Aubryn agreed. She grabbed his arm by the wrist and twisted it around to his back, shoving him to the ground and kneeling on him all in one smooth motion.

"What the fuck?" Lugo said through lips that were being ground into the carpet of his changing room.

"Sorry, Lugo," Aubryn said. "I'm not here for your entertainment. I'm here to do business."

"Oh, come on, girl, you can't just tease me like that and not deliver. That's just fucking cruel."

"You're disgusting," Aubryn said, letting Lugo stand up and keeping her distance. "I can't believe I have to work with you."

Lugo brushed himself off and seemed to be back to being a professional again. "Let me see the other half of the cash," he said.

Aubryn held up the rest of the stash that she had gotten from Lani's house. "This is it. I need you to prove to me that you can do what I need, first, though."

"Oh, I can do what you need, girl. You got a name?"

"Bryn. Bryn Dandaster."

Lugo laughed uproariously. "Oh, I see, the poor little girl wants to break her daddy out of jail, is that it? Are you sure you don't just want a new daddy?" Bryn wanted to punch him, so she wasn't surprised when Aubryn actually did, right in the nose.

"You will show me and my father some respect if you expect to get a single mark of this," Aubryn said, waving the money at him.

Lugo rubbed his nose – Bryn thought Aubryn had broken it – before replying, “Burgona’s bottom, you can’t even take a fucking joke. Of course I can do the job. Do you know the lock codes?”

Aubryn pulled the codes she had gotten from Lani’s room out of one of her satchels, and handed them to Lugo.

“Wow. They really don’t like your dad,” Lugo said as he looked at the codes. He went over to a chest in the corner of the room and pulled out a large slate that looked like it could be a lock pad, except it wasn’t attached to anything. Aubryn and Bryn followed his hands as he pounded the board in rapid succession. He covered most, but not all, of the points that needed to be hit, the slate leaving a record of what he had done so that Aubryn could easily compare to the sheet.

More importantly, Aubryn took the opportunity to cast the duplication spell again.

“That’s good enough,” Aubryn said, looking at the practice slate that was the tool of Lugo’s secret trade. He covered about ninety percent of the points that would need to be hit, just by himself. If Bryn could get three quarters of the speed that Lugo had, her plan for tonight should work.

Aubryn walked seductively up next to Lugo, his eyes locked on to hers and his heart racing as she approached. She whispered into his ear, “Thanks for the help,” and plunged the fistful of money into the front of his underwear, making him flinch as she wriggled her hand around inside. She removed her hand suddenly, turned around, and grabbed the door handle.

“What the hell, girl? Don’t you want me to come with you?”

“I need you like I need a hole in my head,” Aubryn said with disdain. He shouted a few choice slurs about Aubryn’s character as she darted out the door.

It’s time to get out of here and go free our father, Aubryn said, and Bryn couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 40: In Which Bryn Makes Copies

Aubryn left the backstage area swiftly, making her way out into the dark of the night. The concert had lasted until just past midnight, and a brilliant full moon hanged luminously above the dispersing concert-goers. Aubryn and Bryn debated finding the others, but based on Bryn's understanding of the night's events, they decided not to.

So you think we're ready to break our father out of jail, Aubryn said. But how are we going to get there?

The way I see it, we have two options. We could fly, but that will take most of the rest of the evening, it's going to wear you out, and flying so far at night alone through the countryside can't possibly be safe.

I agree, Aubryn said. So my other option is to try that teleportation spell on myself, then?

I'm afraid so. Aubryn had practiced teleporting rocks on the beach with Bannam, and she had gotten the hang of it. That was one of the spells that wore her out the most, just because it took so many tries to get it right. The first time she tried, she left half of the rock behind, cleanly shorn into two equal pieces. The second time, she managed to grab the entire rock, but instead of coming to her hands, it appeared fifty feet above her, and she barely dodged out of the way in time. The third time, it came to her hands, but she had to throw it away immediately since it felt like it had just been plucked from a furnace.

Over and over again, she tried slight variations on her forms and intentions, and each time there was just something not quite right about it. It took her an hour to get a perfect teleport, and even after that she still made mistakes with it consistently. Even by the end of the day, she only had about a ninety percent success rate.

Ninety percent didn't seem so bad, except she could only teleport within line of sight. It would be pretty useless for traveling within the city, unless she did it from the Spire or from one of the other larger buildings. Bryn realized that Edger's apartment would also work. But the point was that there was enough of a risk involved in using that spell, at least right now, she should reserve it for situations where the benefit to using it was exceptional. Now was such a time, if she could find a high vantage point.

The pavilion's stage had a catwalk fairly high in the air that had some scaffolding in place to hold some photorbs that shined on the band during the performance. Most had been turned off at this point, though the two biggest ones, the spotlights shining into the sky, were still glowing brightly. Aubryn climbed up onto the catwalk and peered out

towards the city. Even with the full moon and the height she had, there was no way that she would be able to see it at this distance. That didn't mean that she didn't have a straight line to it, though, only that she didn't know where it was exactly.

How lucky do you feel? Aubryn asked.

After the past four days? Honestly, I'm not sure if I feel lucky or unlucky.

I can understand that. I'm not going to risk this if you don't want me to, Aubryn said. *I'd hate to die because of someone else's mistake.*

I wish you'd stop acting like we're different people, Bryn said. *I mean, I know that we are different. We've each got our own perspective on the things that are happening, but we're mostly the same. I like to think that we're more like sisters.*

Sisters?

Yeah, sisters. And if I had ever had a sister, I'm pretty sure I would trust her with my life. Just like I trust my mother, and like how I have faith in my father. You can do this, Bryn.

Do you really think so?

I know so, Bryn said. *But I'm also cheating a little bit. After all, I know we're going to get through this.*

So I'm going for it?

We're going for it, Bryn confirmed.

Aubryn took a deep breath, then swallowed the kiema she needed for the spell. It was one of the most expensive spells she ever cast, but she verified that she still had plenty of kiema as the white magic coursed through her veins. She closed her eyes for a moment to focus, then formed thirty words, one after another with intense precision before finally putting one hand on her chest and pointing the other one off into the horizon towards where she thought the city was.

Here goes nothing, Bryn thought. *If she aims poorly, we could smash our body into the ground, or blast ourselves off into the emptiness of space clear on the other side of the Orthan bowl. But I believe in her. There's nothing to fear.*

Bryn felt Aubryn's body transform, from its current state of flesh and bone into pure, opalescent light. Bryn's perception expanded, and she felt Aubryn's presence there with her even though they could no longer communicate. There was just an inexplicable sense of the envi-

ronment around her that only seemed to come into sharper focus as she began to move forward. She moved as if she were a train following a track straight through the night sky. The journey was a brief one, even within the context of Bryn's distorted perception that bent the fabric of time, stretching it to the point of tearing but never exceeding that point. Or maybe it was more like a river, the way Emera had described, and Bryn had just climbed out of the water to run along the shore for a while. From her current vantage point, Bryn could plainly see that time and space were not the fixture that everyone believed them to be.

Suddenly Bryn's senses returned to their myopic perspective as she began to once again see through her primitive eyes and hear through her primitive ears. Wind rushed against her skin, she realized, because she was hurtling forward at nearly a hundred miles an hour. She saw ahead of her that she was hurtling towards the Roseta Industries building in Waalort City, hundreds of feet off the ground, maybe even a thousand.

You need to fly, Bryn, now! Bryn shouted.

I'm trying to, but I can't! Aubryn's voice was filled with fear. I can't move my arms! I can't move my head!

Bryn realized that she was moving their head. Without even thinking about it, she was in control of their body. She dipped into her red satchel and downed some crystals hastily, forming the symbols for flight and flipping in midair, putting her feet forward and facing away from the building. Her momentum was strong and the building was close. By the time she completed her spell, she was nearly there. She had just enough time to slow herself and direct her trajectory towards the frame of the building rather than its windows. She wanted to avoid crashing into the building through the windows if she could, since that would draw a lot of unwanted attention on a night when she needed to be sneaky. Before she knew it, she was absorbing the impact against the black cube with her knees, and she managed to spring off the building and into the sky, in complete control of her motion again.

Gods, Doubt, that was close. What happened? Aubryn asked.

I think I'm in control of our body, now.

What!?! Really?

I guess you screwed up the teleport a little. Or maybe I just wanted it more, once I had the opportunity to take it, she teased.

I'm glad one of us is enjoying this, Aubryn growled. Bryn really was. It felt good to stretch her muscles on her own. She hadn't realized just how much she missed the autonomy.

Weren't you just complaining about how it was your body that was in danger of getting squished in the mosh pit? Maybe you should have cared about being in control of it more.

Very funny. Give it back! Aubryn shouted.

I will, I will. Let me go land near the prison first.

The prison was in the city, a few blocks from the Waalort Pagoda. Bryn landed on a nearby roof and made her way gently to the ground with the last of the red magic that she had channeled for flight. She was in a clean alley, a reasonable place for working on their current predicament.

Okay, so, there's got to be a way to swap our consciousnesses, Bryn suggested.

You think so?

I'm pretty sure. I mean, we know it can be done with magic at least. But I suspect that at this point, if we work together, we can do it through willpower.

Okay, what do we do?

Well, let's see. We each have our own mindscape, right?

Yeah, I think I've figured that out based on what you've said.

Our body has some set of senses, which we both seem connected to, but it also has a set of motor functions, which only one of our minds seems to be able to hook into at a given time. Maybe if we can swap our mindscapes, somehow, we can trade it off?

You mean by bending the space of our minds?

Right. Maybe... Bryn thought about her idea silently before continuing. *Maybe one of us – me, probably, since I'm in control right now – maybe one of us should create a hole in her mindscape, and the other should force her way in through the hole. We'll both need to push. It's probably going to hurt quite a bit. It might even feel like giving birth.*

That's gross, Doubt. Let's just get this over with.

Bryn returned to her mindscape, the red-stitched holes still there and protecting the boundary of their minds. She focused on one of those cracks in the space of her mind, and ripped it apart with an open hand. She thrust her fist in that hole and moved it around, cajoling the

boundary and trying to make it relax, as if it were a frightened animal with its muscles tensed. She felt her fingers wrap around something on the other side of the hole. It was Aubryn's hand. She pulled with all her might, and Aubryn pulled back. The world of Bryn's mind began to ripple and peel away around her, swirling along with her avatar around this nexus between their minds. She felt herself be pulled into it as she pulled Aubryn at the same time, and her entire world swirled and mixed as it exited through the hole like the drain of a bathtub. In moments, she felt herself spilling out the other side, her world billowing out around her like a clean silk sheet thrown over a mattress. She smoothed it out with her mind and dove onto the middle of it, feeling once again at home in her right mind. She sealed up the cracks in her mindscape walls, and tested their connection once again.

Did it work? she asked.

I think so, came Aubryn's reply. Bryn watched through Aubryn's eyes as she waved her arm around. *Yeah, I've got control again. Thanks, Doubt.*

Do you trust me now? You know I didn't have to give our body back to you, but I thought I could entrust you with it.

Fine, Doubt. Sister.

Good. Because you're going to need to trust me for what we're about to do. First thing's first, though. Get us to our father's cell.

Aubryn didn't waste any more time, casting the invisibility spell that she had learned for just this purpose. She walked quickly down several streets to the edge of the dome of Waalort Prison.

She hadn't really made any plans for getting in beyond being stealthy, but she didn't need them in the end. She was able to shadow guards through the gates and halls of the prison. Aubryn just relied on them using their access to the secure areas of the prison, following just one step behind them and slipping through doors before they closed. The process took hours, each subsequent secure area taking longer and longer for Aubryn to find the right guard to follow through. Twice she brushed against a guard, and they turned and tried to spot her, but Ban-nam's spell was remarkably effective at keeping her hidden.

She had to pass through four security checkpoints before she got to the hall that Bryn estimated to be at the center of the complex, just one story underground. The last guard room had a window in it that Bryn expected to be their point of egress. There were only a few dozen cells down here, for the worst of the worst of the criminals, many of

whom would be executed after they got their fair trial. Her father had been sentenced to life in prison rather than death, but he would certainly be found among the prisoners in this block of the prison.

After looking through small rectangular windows on each cell, Aubryn finally found the right one. Bryn's breath caught in her metaphorical throat as she peered into the dank cell through Aubryn's eyes. Her father, Rudy Dandaster, lay inside, his arms behind his head on a flat pillow that rested on the stone bench that was his bed. There was a bucket in the corner of the room, but it was otherwise completely empty except for the grime and crud that lined the walls and floor.

Rudy stared at the ceiling, his eyes wide awake and alert. This far in the complex, he probably had no idea what time it was outside. Or maybe he just found it impossible to sleep, his boredom driving him to the brink of madness. Bryn couldn't begin to imagine what the years of incarceration had done to his mental fortitude, but if she believed anything with certainty at this point, it was that he was the strongest man she knew. He would recover from this, however long it took. She wanted to climb through the hole in his cell door the way she climbed through the hole in her mindscape, to find her way through to the other side and into her father's arms. Aubryn was clearly affected the same way, and she nearly put her hand to the surface of the door.

Careful, Bryn, Bryn said. Aubryn caught herself before touching it. That will trigger the door, and we're not quite ready for that yet.

We're so close, Doubt.

I know. And we're going to do it. But we're going to do it right.

Okay. So you've been saying that you have a plan, now, right?

Of course. Like I said, we're going to kill two birds with one stone. Haven't you been wondering why our father doesn't go with us to protect us from being raped?

It hadn't really occurred to me, Aubryn admitted. Once you indicated that you had this problem solved, I stopped working on it. She paused for a moment. I guess maybe I trusted you more than I realized, Doubt.

Good, I'm glad you did. The reason our father won't be protecting me is that he'll be too busy going with you to protect our mother from Lani.

Aubryn thought for a minute. *I'm not sure I follow, she eventually said.*

We need two spells to unlock our father's door. First, you will create a homunculus. In all the ways that matter, this homunculus will be you. Aubryn Dandaster. It will have your memories, your personality, your body, and your talent. Immediately after you create your new body, you and I will shut down your consciousness in this body, and I will take over. Your consciousness will lie dormant here until after the attack, when our rapist wipes her memory and she becomes the seed that will grow into, well... Me. I will remain in this body through the attack, taking on the role of Doubt until this body's occupant, the seed, gets sent back by Emera. Meanwhile, all this time, you will live on in the body of the homunculus, and you will go with our father and protect our mother. You can avoid the rape entirely, and you can even cheat death, and the timeline can go on exactly as it needs to.

Aubryn seemed on the verge of tears. *But that means that you're going to be the one getting raped, Doubt. Or should I say Bryn?*

I've already come to terms with it, Aubryn, Bryn said. I've experienced the pain before, and I can live through it again. You don't have to. But that doesn't mean you have to die, either. And who knows, maybe you'll find a way to be there to help me in the end.

Count on it, Bryn. We'll get through this together, even if we have to split ourselves apart to do it.

Aubryn very deliberately and very somberly went through the motions necessary to cast the homunculus spell she had learned from Bannam. Even though she hadn't actually completed it before, it worked flawlessly, and at the exact moment of completion of the spell, a second body appeared in front of Aubryn, complete with clothes and everything. The only thing missing was the kiema in her satchels. In that split second of creation, Bryn and Aubryn both felt the pull of the spell on their minds as it sought to duplicate them, to create a consciousness for the new body. As Bryn predicted, though, she was able to resist the pull. Whether it was through her own mental defenses or the spell that Safler had cast before sending her back to protect her from the memory wipe, Bryn's singular consciousness remained intact and within the trappings of Aubryn's former body.

Not wasting a second, Bryn ripped through one of the cracks in her mindscape and forcibly took over control of the body she remained in, flushing Aubryn's mind out of the driver's seat once more. Aubryn cried out, but Bryn brought to bear her full willpower over her mindscape, wrapping Aubryn's consciousness up in a prison of unaware-

ness, cutting her off from the body's sense of the world, even to the point of making her unaware of the passage of time. This duplicate consciousness would rest here, trapped in stasis, until she was ready to be born into the world again after the rape, at which point Bryn would relinquish the body to her and become Doubt. This way, no one had to die. Everyone's personal timeline, their sequence of experiences, could be preserved in one place or another. And all it would take to make it happen was that Bryn would soon have to endure her rapist's attack.

After her mind stabilized, Bryn stood there looking at Aubryn, a perfect copy of herself. She almost couldn't believe how innocent she looked, standing there in that gorgeous dress.

"Where are you, Bryn?" Aubryn whispered, her voice sounding unfamiliar as it echoed softly off of the walls of the cell block. Both of the girls were still invisible. The corridor was empty, though, so she thought it was safe. Bryn dismissed the invisibility spell first, and soon they were standing there together, a pair of jailbreaking twins.

"Okay, Aubryn. Still feeling fast?" She assumed the homunculus would copy the ongoing copycat spell as well, but she wasn't sure.

"Yeah, I can still feel Lugo's power working."

"Right. We'll each take half of the lock, then." They probably could have managed it if only one of them had kept Lugo's power, but this would make things easier.

Aubryn smiled. "This was a good plan. I should never have doubted you."

"No, you were probably right to doubt me," Bryn whispered as she divided their supply of kiema between them. They each had their own copy of the lock code. Bryn smiled to herself as they went through the motions for the lock, her perception and control enhanced to the point that it was when she was transformed into light during the teleport. *Tap tap tap tap*. More than a hundred taps per second with perfect precision. Bryn's smile widened at the memory of creating the token that would come to be embedded in her hand. Working in unison with Aubryn, two independent halves making up a whole, it was exactly what Bannam had taught her to do when she made Beloved. Bryn was the right hand, and Aubryn the left, and together they were unlocking the door that held the mysteries of the universe behind it.

The click of the mechanism on the door was so quiet that Bryn wouldn't have heard it if the hall weren't silent and she hadn't been listening for it. The pair of girls pushed the door open gently, and their fa-

ther turned his head to see what was coming for him. As his eyes found the silhouettes standing in the doorway, lit from behind by the photorbs in the hallway, he rose and turned towards them.

“This must be a dream. I've finally gone mad.”

“You're not dreaming,” Bryn said, her eyes filling with tears. Aubryn was a perfect mirror of her. The pair of them ran forward and wrapped their arms around their father, knocking him back onto his bed. They stayed like that for minutes, happy just to be reunited finally for the first time in years.

“I thought for sure that I'd lost you forever,” Rudy said. “And not that I'm complaining, honey, but... why are there two of you?”

“There's no time to explain, father,” Aubryn said. “You need to come with me, right away. We need to get you out of here, and I need your help. Mother needs your help.”

“Taupeka...” Rudy said with fear at the look on Aubryn's face.

“Go,” Bryn said, before giving her father one last hug. “The two of you need to get out of here. I'll give you a distraction and then I'll slip out on my own.”

“No way, Doubt. It's too dangerous.”

“You know as well as I do that I'll be fine. Hell, I'm even going to make it out without being seen, if the future is any indication. Just go out to the guard room, find the window, and teleport out of here. It doesn't matter where. You can make it home from there.”

“But —”

“No buts. Save our mother.” Bryn gave them both a hug before shoving them out the door. *Godsspeed*, she thought. *With any luck I'll see you in three days. And if not, then I'll just have to track you down and find you.*

After giving them a minute to make their escape, she cast the variant of the invisibility spell to make herself look like her father, complete with the plain white prisoner garb. This part of her plan wasn't strictly necessary, but she thought it would be best if she made it look like her father was responsible for his own escape, to draw suspicion away from herself. And that meant that he needed to be seen escaping.

That meant that she needed to bust some guards' heads. They had been holding her father here for all of these years, though, so in Bryn's opinion they had it coming.

She banged on the lock on the cell door until alarms began to sound. She swallowed as much red kiema as she could handle, carefully keeping Lugo's celerity going as a separate effect. The guards came pouring into the hallway, but Bryn was far too fast for them, darting through them, taking most of them out with her bare fists alone thanks to her speed. She only resorted to fire when she was overwhelmed by an entire squad of police at the first checkpoint. Getting through the secure doors on the way out wasn't difficult – there were plenty of badges to choose from on the guards and she had memorized all of the lock codes on the way in.

Bryn made her way out of the prison complex far more quickly than she had infiltrated it. She was sure that Aubryn had gotten their father out as well. She wished she could have been there when he took his first breath of clean air, but she had other responsibilities to deal with.

She had a date with her rapist. It was time to learn the truth, once and for all.

Chapter 41: In Which Bryn Is Raped

Bryn walked through the city for a while until she could be sure that she had lost any guards who might have been following her. She dismissed the spell that was masking her appearance. After walking a while longer, the sky began to lighten to herald the coming of dawn. Bryn considered whether she should try to go find a place to sleep for a few hours, but eventually decided that her prison break had left her too wired to sleep. Instead she searched the streets until she found a coffee shop that had already opened so that she could get a little privacy.

Bryn ordered a small coffee. She wasn't much of a coffee drinker, but the warmth and the aroma from the cup was comforting anyway. She wondered if her mother had returned home to find a jealous Lani waiting for her, or if Aubryn and her father had been able to do something about it.

No sense in worrying about something you can't change, she thought to herself. It's time to focus on finding my rapist.

Bryn recalled the words that she had chosen for the attraction kietella, swallowed the necessary blue and green kiema, and cast the spell. She felt a tiny pop in her chest, not to the point of discomfort, just to the point where she could tell that something was different. She didn't feel anything else unusual, but she was willing to assume the spell had worked. She was now a choice piece of meat for monsters, and a choice piece of tail for men if the spell worked the way it should. She had no doubt that her rapist would find her soon.

But who would it be? She considered the possibilities. Assuming it was someone who knew her, whoever did it would need to have four things, Bryn decided. He would need motive, a reason to commit the rape; knowledge, of where Bryn would be and how to wipe her memory; opportunity, the ability to do the rape without being missed; and capability, the physical ability to subdue Bryn. Motive was something that Bryn could never be sure of, but considering the other things in the list Bryn narrowed the possibilities down to six people: Slater, Edger, Chesnan, Lani, Bannam, and Lugo. Most of them could be found in the Rat Hole. If it were Lani or Bannam, the odds were good that they could find Bryn wherever she went anyway.

I guess it's decided, then. I might as well go to the alley and wait for him to show up. Bryn sighed, took one last ominous sip of her coffee, and continued her journey across the city.

As much as she had been waiting for this moment for the past few days, now that it was finally about to happen Bryn found herself trembling in anticipation. How would she feel when it happened? Would

she feel betrayed? Would it hurt? Would the pain be worth all of the good things that would result from it, like Poe and all the knowledge and experience that Bryn gained? Would it have been possible to have earned those things in some other way instead?

Bryn asked a dozen more questions, but when she couldn't answer any of them she eventually gave up. She passed Edger's apartment building and recalled the circumstances of their reunion with a smile. She hoped that he wasn't responsible for what was about to happen.

Bryn began to slow as she passed *The Iron Monkey*, wondering if either Lugo or Slater were inside this early in the day. Bryn had taken her time walking across the city, but it was still well before noon, so she doubted anyone would be in a bar yet. Unless they were still in the bar from last night. She could see the alley, its entrance just barely visible several blocks away. Her stride seemed to get smaller and smaller, her steps less and less frequent as she neared the site of her rape. She tried to put it off as much as possible, but eventually she had nothing left to do but peek her head around the corner.

There was no one there. The alley was just an alley. The only things there were a few trash cans, some cardboard boxes, and an up-ended crate. She blinked, and cautiously made her way into the alley, looking in every direction, even above her.

Maybe I'm early? she thought. *I guess I need to wait for him to show up.* She sat down on the crate and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. With no warning she found herself face-first on the ground, her arms behind her back. Her attacker wasted no time in binding her with rope. Whoever was on top of her was strong and heavy, and he was skilled with the rope. He made sure that he bound her hands and fingers both.

"I'm sorry, Bryn," he said. "I know you're ready for what's about to happen, but I also know you'll struggle if I don't hold you down."

Bryn's body was roughly manhandled as she was flipped over, and she saw the face that matched the voice she had just heard.

"Bannam!? How could you?"

"How could I, Bryn?" he asked. "How couldn't I? I don't really want this any more than you do, but it's what happens. You and I, Bryn, we're the same. We're just marionettes dancing on the strings of fate. If the gods demand the sacrifice of two virgins, then that's what they get."

Bryn struggled with her restraints in horror. *No, Bannam, you can't do this. I refuse to believe that we are victims of a cruel fate decided by the Gods.*

"Come on, Bannam. Fight it. It doesn't have to be this way. Neither of us really want this to happen. We don't have to do this."

"If we don't," Bannam said, "The future timeline that I've seen, the future timeline that you've lived through, they will cease to be. Then you will cease to be. We'll be replaced by a different world. This is the only way that we can exist Bryn. You and I are part of something wonderful, a journey orchestrated by the Gods."

Bryn considered his words while processing her helpless rage. His bindings were far too strong to break out of, and she wouldn't have access to any sort of magic without access to kiema or her fingers. *I can't believe that I was this stupid. I should have never listened to Bannam, should never have abdicated my autonomy to the hands of destiny. I do not want this!*

But try as she might, Bryn didn't know how to escape. She screamed at the top of her lungs. Maybe Edger would be walking nearby and he would hear her. Or maybe Slater, even. She would even settle for Lugo or Lani. She felt terrible for suspecting all of her friends at one point or another when they'd been nothing but good to her. All the while, Bannam was teaching her and helping her just because he knew what had happened to her and he knew what would happen to her in the future.

"Don't scream, Bryn. No one can see or hear you in this bubble, anyway. Besides, this is a good deal. We're both going to get something out of this."

"You are sick, Bannam. I was wrong. You're not even human. I don't know what you are, but it isn't human. Not even remotely."

"What's more human than wanting a child?" Bannam asked as he stroked Bryn's cheek, his thin, pale fingers contrasting sharply against her creamy brown skin. His curly blond hair now looked like it was a product of insanity rather than a lack of hygiene. He had abandoned his pretense of humanity, revealing a pair of magenta eyes that looked far more evil than they could ever look on any other kiemara.

"Is that what you're getting out of this, then?" Bryn asked, hoping she could buy some time. She struggled with the ropes, but Bannam had tied her hands to her feet with almost no slack. "You're going to be the father of a god?" It was all Bryn could do to ignore the pain of her

back being bent impossibly far. The ease with which Bannam was binding her was alarming. He had clearly enhanced his strength if nothing else.

"I admit that I find the idea appealing, but that's not why I'm doing it, Bryn. There's something else I want far more. And I'm sorry that it's come to this, but once your anger subsides, and once you've had the chance to understand what happened here, you'll understand. You're the only one who can understand."

Bryn didn't know what he was talking about. She was too frustrated with herself and with her bindings to think straight. As she lay there on her side on the pavement, she saw that Bannam was beginning to undress. He folded his baggy pants and t-shirt neatly before putting them on the ground. He bent over and pulled a knife out of his pants before removing his underwear and socks. He stood in front of Bryn, his naked, scrawny body only threatening because of Bryn's compromised position and because of the knife in his hand. He bent down and roughly cut through the front of Bryn's dress from the bottom to the top.

"I'm sorry about the dress, too. I know how much you liked it." He threw the knife back to his clothes as he delicately pulled the dress away from Bryn's flesh, exposing her supple breasts to the muggy noon air. Bryn believed Bannam when he said that he took no joy in this. Even after having Bryn there exposed for him, he still wasn't aroused.

He sat there for minutes, looking at Bryn's body and then looking at his own. Bryn realized that it was more than just a lack of arousal. He didn't have the first clue about what he was doing. Was this what it was like to have had every decision in your life made for you in advance? Had he ever had an independent thought? She didn't want to feel pity for him, but she did.

Eventually, Bannam figured out what to do, though he never quite seemed interested in Bryn's body. He was able to pleasure himself, though, to the point of arousal, and then he knew what to do. Bryn struggled, trying to move away, tightening her muscles as much as she could, but it didn't stop him. He was too strong, and too forceful. When he met her resistance, he smacked her hard in the face, with so much strength that she thought for a second that her neck was broken. She continued to struggle and resist, which only prompted Bannam to beat her more, on her chest, her arms, her legs. He lost his erection at one point, prompting him to pause to bring it back, and then he tried to force

his way in again. Bryn continued the struggle until finally Bannam began biting her breasts like an animal. He seemed to grow even more aroused by the violence. Bryn was howling in pain and she let her tension slip for just a moment, but that moment was all it took for Bannam's penis to find purchase in Bryn's hostile vagina.

Once he was inside, he growled with a feral snarl that would have made Bryn worry that he had lost complete control of himself. She would have worried, but as it was she had no room for thought beyond the pain that wracked her body. The torture seemed to go on forever, and Bannam's ferocity and violence only seemed to grow the closer he got to climax. Bryn closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pain. She tried to pretend that this was all happening to Aubryn, and that Aubryn was someone else. None of this was happening to her. No matter how much of her blood was being spilled from the raw and burned orifice that Bannam was forcing himself into and out of repeatedly.

Hours later – days, it felt like – Bannam finally began to pant and thrust with a terrible urgency, lifting and slamming Bryn's body back to the pavement, sending her head spinning as her skull collided with the ground. Bannam bleated an unearthly groan as he stabbed Bryn with a final, painful thrust, holding himself there and moaning loudly into the sky for what seemed like forever. He thrust himself in and out two more times before he finally pushed Bryn's limp and weak body away and stood up, looking down at her.

Bryn was almost too afraid and too broken to open her eyes, but she eventually did. She saw Bannam standing there, his torso covered in a thick sheen of sweat, his long, unbelievably thick member covered in blood. His chest heaved and his eyes had a wild look to them. After his breath seemed to calm, he went back to his clothes and reached for some green kiema.

As he cleaned himself with splashes of water that he generated with his fingers, he said, "I'm sorry, Bryn. I know how hard that was for you. I've known that it would happen for a long time, and I've known that it would be a violent process. I guess part of me just always coupled the sex and the violence with each other because of it. If I could have done it any other way, believe me, I would have. I didn't want to have to hurt the mother of my child."

"Get the fuck away from me, you freak of nature," Bryn growled angrily. "The first chance I have, you're going to die."

Bannam bent down and pulled an errant strand of sweaty hair from Bryn's face. "I look forward to our final meeting." He gave her a kiss, then swallowed some more blue and green kiema.

Despite the disorienting screams of pain radiating through her mind, Bryn realized that Bannam was about to wipe her memory. She focused herself and reached through the cracks in her mindscape to perform the swap with Aubryn's dormant mind. She freed it from stasis just in time for Bannam's memory loss spell to take effect. Bryn felt the spell wash over her, slamming against a barrier at the border of her mind, the barrier that Saffler had prepared in the future. Aubryn had no such protections, and Bryn was sure that she couldn't even process what was happening. Even if she knew it, she wouldn't remember it. Bryn was sure of it, because this poor girl would become Bryn one day. And now, Bryn was ready to take on the role of Doubt.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. He reached into another pocket and pulled out a small bottle of whiskey. "Still more destiny to prepare for." He took a swig and spit it on Bryn, burning the wounds on her breasts. He leaned in close and breathed heavily on her face, nauseating her.

Before Bryn even had a chance to make sense of what the temporary Aubryn was seeing and hearing, Bannam had knocked her unconscious with a fist. Bryn was still there, wide awake while her host body was dormant. Her eyes were closed and her ears were deafened, but even in her slumber Bryn could feel the pain that Bannam had inflicted on her.

Two days, she thought. *I have two days to plan my revenge.* She had wanted to take revenge before, but now that she had lived through the rape with complete fidelity, she needed more than revenge. She needed to make Bannam *suffer*.

Chapter 42: In Which Bryn Relives Two Days

Bryn grew accustomed to the pain again over the course of Saturday night and Sunday morning, before her past self awoke after the rape. *Wake up*, she whispered as her past self's eye fluttered. *You need to wake up now. You have a long day ahead of you, and it won't be easy.* Those were the words Doubt said to her then, back when she didn't know that there was a second consciousness in her head. Back when she didn't know that Doubt was she herself. The words slid off of Bryn's tongue with ease. She didn't remember the wording that Doubt had used exactly, but something filled in the blanks for her. It was exactly like magic: the words that Bryn remembered and used formed the skeleton, and something unseen and unknowable filled in the details. Despite the pain, she had no concern that she could claim the role of Doubt.

Bryn lived through that first day again, thinking about the events that were unfolding given the context of the information she had learned in the past. She convinced her past self that she needed to avoid using tainted kiema for the sake of Poe, then watched as she fended off a vulprin, met Slater and reunited with Edger. She guiltily enjoyed the awkward sexuality of her initial encounter with Edger especially, feeling no qualms about watching his firm, muscled body as he changed. She had come to know him a bit more, and he had come to know her as well. She didn't think that he would really mind that she took the liberty when she had the opportunity.

Then she and Edger went to her former home, which had been burned down. Bryn wondered what exactly happened here. Lani claimed that a man had run off with her mother, and that she thought it was her father. But who burned down the house? Her father? Aubryn? Lani? Hell, it could have been her mother, for all she knew. She didn't learn anything more here this time around than she had the last time. She smiled at the revelation that the vulprin were more human than she'd been told, and that they could identify untainted kiema. They were definitely a positive outcome of the events that had happened to Bryn, and her attraction kietella was working flawlessly. She made sure to hum and sing at the appropriate times to provide the misdirection needed to keep her past self questioning the events going on around her and seeking the answers that would be provided for her at the proper times.

She and Edger got cleaned up and Bryn learned far more about Lani than she ever wanted to know. Bryn still couldn't understand why Lani revealed herself, especially since she had some role in her mother's disappearance. Something still didn't make sense there, but Bryn still didn't have the pieces she needed to solve that puzzle. Or if she did, she didn't see how they fit together.

After enduring the events of the day again, Bryn was happy to have dinner with the Barringtons and spend the night with Edger. She wished that she could take over control of the body and dive on top of him while they sat there watching the photube together. Not so much in a sexual way, though she was starting to get over the awkwardness that once separated them. Rather, she wanted to hug him and apologize to him for ever doubting him. Maybe there was some sexual energy there, still, lingering from the concert perhaps. And maybe it helped that the cause of her rape was almost entirely bizarre and supernatural and had nothing to do with the basic instincts of the male half of the race. If things like money and blue kiema could turn out to be very different from the things they were meant to be, why couldn't a rape? It was time to stop thinking about it as a violation of her body and start thinking of it as a cry for help from a very troubled individual. Bannam needed help. He was a rabid dog, and he needed to be put down.

While her former self slept, Bryn worked on her plan. She knew she would come up with one – Doubt had told her so before she drifted back into the past – so she didn't feel much pressure, but it still took some thought. Bannam had demonstrated that he knew everything that had happened and everything that was going to happen. But there had to be limits. Even with magic, there were always limits. You couldn't create kiema out of nothing, after all. What were Bannam's limits? She decided to listen extra closely to his words the following day, and she would come up with the plan then.

Edger drove her to school, killing the behammon and teaching her the spell she would need to face the zygallon later. With Nighra's help she avoided the crush of classmates who were attracted to her through a combination of juicy gossip and a non-specific attraction ki-etella. There she ran into Bannam for the first time after the rape. Part of her wanted to take over her body by force and exact her revenge right then and there, but she knew that she wasn't supposed to do that. He stood there with that stupid look on his face, pretending that he

hadn't just raped her two days ago. She didn't understand how he could live with himself.

But that wasn't really how it was for him, was it? Bryn thought about everything he said. It was almost as if he were living entire chunks of his life all at once. There was no past and no future for him. This moment was no more after the rape than it was before it in Bannam's own personal timeline, if such a concept even made any sense. He didn't have to live with himself because he didn't have to live, at least not in any sense of the word that most humans would agree on.

Then Bannam said something about the nature of his gift that gave Bryn hope. He told her what his limitations were, and this time, with her own personal journey through the timestream, she understood what he meant. Time wasn't any different from space. In most places it was wide-open and empty, easy to penetrate and easy for Bannam to see through. But in some places, it was cluttered, filled with matter. Just as those places were hard to see through and move through in space, there were places in time where it was almost impossible to avoid the natural flow of things.

And the answer was right there in front of her. Dr. Umbroon was indirectly teaching her all about the nature of space, but he was also teaching her about the nature of time. Suddenly she knew what Bannam wanted all along, and then she marveled at how stupid he was. He was brilliant with magic, and he knew just about anything that Bryn knew. He should have been able to cast this spell just as much as she could, but he had never had to think for himself. He saw a wall coming, a point in time that he couldn't penetrate, and he welcomed it. He wanted to reach a time when his actions weren't already decided for him. He must have thought it was his death, that Bryn was going to kill him somehow. But she couldn't kill him without first stripping him of his defenses. She was going to take away that precognition so that she could fight him fairly, and that was exactly what Bannam wanted. He would still have all of that brilliant knowledge, and she suspected he would adapt quickly to his sudden blindness, but he had never had to think or fight for himself for a minute in his life. Bryn knew she could win this fight.

She watched herself forge Beloved, and felt the overwhelming sense of relief as it was in her hands again. Then Bannam taught her how to teleport, and killed his homunculus in the process. As much as she enjoyed the sight and wanted to spit on his bloody corpse, Bryn

also felt overwhelmed by frustration. It wasn't enough to take her revenge on Bannam when she met back up with the present. He had surely sent a homunculus instead of his real self. Had he raped her with his real self or with a homunculus? Did it matter? Did it matter for Poe's sake? And what of Aubryn? Was she now another fertile womb for another godling, since she had been created before the impregnation? Bryn suddenly realized that her trip through time had provided her with an entire new set of questions that she didn't have answers for, but one thing was certain: she would need to subdue Bannam and trace him with Emera's assistance, rather than just take her revenge.

This ordeal would not end tonight, as much as Bryn desperately wanted it to, but it was going to be hard enough just getting through the events that she expected. Bannam was going to be ready for her, and if Bryn understood any lesson from her rape, it was this. It is one thing to know that something bad is coming and to prepare yourself. It is another thing entirely to be confronted with it and to face it in real time. When the time came, Bannam would struggle, and he would try to survive, just as Bryn had tried in vain to stop Bannam on Satyrday.

The rest of the evening was a blur. Shopping and the encounter with Abyss. No wonder Doubt had abandoned her temporarily. She spent that time with fortified psychic defenses in the mindscape that she had now become proficient with, feeling bitter about how hollow and incomplete her revenge would be this evening.

When she returned to help her former self with guidance about Abyss, safely under Emera's protection, she witnessed two more spells that were important to her for very different reasons. First was Bannam's shrinking spell. She paid more attention to it this time, trying to memorize it. It was the key to saving Ortha, and she would need it after this was all over. She doubted that Bannam would be a very good teacher when she was through with him.

The second spell was Safler's ice spell that he used on the garmin. The spell he used seemed unusual to Bryn, but she understood it after watching it again, and it helped her think of the words she would need to condense the timestream. He didn't create water out of nothing, which explained why he didn't need any green kiema to create the frigid mist. Instead he pulled the moisture from the air itself and froze it around the garmin.

When the time came, Bryn would think of the timestream like a river again, and bring it to the brink of freezing, somewhere between a

liquid and a solid, a flow of temporal magma that allowed passage through it, but only at the single, natural speed of the universe. There would be no swimming against the current, no peering around the bend in the stream. The timestream would have the strength and the density to be in control once again, and only someone with Bryn's skill and talents would understand how to modify it in the future. If nothing else good came of this nightmare, Bryn was happy that she could be a part of repairing a glaring miscalculation in Whyat's creation.

Bryn finished reliving Abyss's attack, then they captured and questioned Lani, learning that she had replaced Nighra during lunch. Something about her story was still off, but Bryn couldn't figure it out. She hoped that Bannam didn't have another trick up his sleeve when it came to Lani. What if she were one of his homunculi, somehow, just made to look like her through his modified invisibility spell? It didn't seem likely, since too much evidence pointed to the fact that Lani's shapeshifting was true modification of her body's underlying structure. Did he have the skill to truly shapeshift with magic? She had to assume that he did, if it suited Whyat's whims. She would have to be wary of Lani in the final confrontation.

Finally she took the group to *The Iron Monkey* where she met with Slater and Lugo. Poor Lugo. Everyone else had a reason to be there for the end and had something approximating an understanding of what was happening, but Lugo had been dragged into a very complex situation that he had no way of comprehending. He was gross, and preposterous, and for that matter a thief, but he didn't deserve to be killed in the crossfire between Bannam and Bryn. She would try to look out for him, but not at the expense of any of her friends. Slater should be able to take care of himself, though. She wondered if he could survive the destructive force of a sunbeam, then decided that she should just hope he didn't have to find out.

And then it was time for the journey through time. She said her goodbyes to herself. She had been swimming through the timestream, swimming with the current, catching up to the present. Safler and Emera cast their spells, and her former self was gone, leaving Bryn in charge once again, on the ground, a copy of Beloved in each hand, her body humming with as much white magic as she could handle.

All eyes were on her as she stood to her feet, and Bannam smiled a wicked smile that etched a memory in Bryn's mind that no spell

could ever erase. She only had to growl one word, and all hell broke loose.

“Bannam.”

Chapter 43: In Which No One Is Safe

So many things happened at once that Bryn couldn't follow them all. Out of one corner of her eye, she saw Nighra complete a spell that spewed a cascade of golf-ball sized fireballs at Bannam. Lani followed soon after with a blast of force, but Bannam dodged both of the attacks with ease. Anyone focusing on defense would have been able to dodge such hasty and straightforward attacks, but Bannam didn't even seem to pay them any mind as he cast his spells and moved between the attacks.

Lugo, Emera, and Safler all were buffing themselves with speed, strength, and defense respectively. Bryn almost predicted Bannam's next move in time to stop it, but instead she found herself hopelessly swinging Beloved in slow motion as Bannam finished his spell. A sunbeam fired from his hand, blinding everyone in the alley.

"Safler!" Bryn cried, but her call of desperation was overwhelmed by Emera's screams. Emera abandoned her buff to try to heal him, but there was nothing she could do. The sunbeam drilled a precise hole through Safler's forehead before he could finish the spell that would protect him. Bryn knew he would go for Safler before he defended himself. Bannam did not plan to leave any survivors, and it would have been harder to kill Safler if he had completed his spell.

He wants me to know that he's serious, Bryn thought. I'm the only one he really cares about, and he's willing to kill anyone here. He has to be sure that I'll do what he wants, that I'll end his torment by solidifying the timestream. Bryn didn't waste time in mourning. Emera could mourn for the both of them. Bryn had to focus on averting this massacre. She planted both the orange and brown Beloveds into the pavement, sliding them easily into the stone as if it were a pool of water. Only she would be able to remove them from their new home. Simple spells could sometimes be done with one hand, but the spell Bryn was about to attempt would certainly require both hands free. She had to count on her friends to protect her.

Edger, meanwhile, had finished his spell. Bryn caught a flash of yellow out of the corner of her eyes. That surprised her, that Edger of all people would use red and green kiema rather than blue. But when she saw the completed spell, she understood. Suddenly the alley was filled with sparkling gold dust that propelled outward from Edger's hands in every direction, sticking to everything in sight, just like the blood from the garmin that had covered the clothes in Isabella's Closet. The motes of twinkling dust clung to the bodies of the occupants of the alley, cover-

ing half of their exterior in a conspicuous sheen. The spell revealed the outlines of two invisible people who were flanking the group.

Homunculi, Bryn thought. She was almost sad that she didn't get a response. Her head was much more lonely now than it had been for the past five days.

Two more sunbeams fired from Bannam's doppelgangers when they were revealed. One took Nighra in the shoulder as she twisted to avoid it, and the other was meant for Bryn. Bryn was so focused on her spell that she couldn't possibly have dodged. She closed her eyes, fingers still working on the forms for the spell that she wanted. Dense, viscous, frozen, flowing. She saw the flash of light through her eyelids, but when she opened them again, Slater stood there between her and one of the Bannam clones. His chest was smoking, a three inch circle seared out of the dark green shirt. His skin looked red and irritated but he still seemed unhurt. Bryn would have to find the time to repay him later. Obstructive, synchronized, natural, regular. Right now, she needed to finish the spell. Though Slater looked mostly unharmed in the sense that he didn't have a gaping hole where his heart should be, he also seemed weakened and blinded by the attack. Temporal, fixed, continual, measured. Between Safler, Emera, Nighra, and Slater, half of her group had already been eliminated from the fight. Of the people left, she didn't know if Lugo or Lani were really on her side and Edger would hopefully be busy trying to save Nighra's life.

Liberating, she added as the final word. It would be liberating, both for her and for Bannam, if it did what she wanted. She wanted it desperately. She took that want, that desire, that will to make it happen, and she funneled it through herself into the spell. She felt the white magic course through her, pumping through her veins, drawing strength from the eager beats of her heart. And then, as her fingers formed that last symbol of freedom from the bonds of destiny, Bryn felt an inexplicable sense of purpose. A sense of power, of control over her own destiny. It felt like a gift, like it had been given to her, but at the same time it felt like she earned every ounce of it.

"Thank you, Bryn," Bannam said, awkwardly, as he released the magic he had been holding. Bryn couldn't be sure that the homunculi had done the same: like Bannam, when they were invisible they were also masking their magical signatures, even if they were covered in Edger's glitter.

"I can't believe you, you fucking monster. You raped me, you threatened my mother, and you killed my friend. And now," Bryn said with fury. "Now you have no fucking idea what I'm going to do next!"

Bryn brought the orange copy of Beloved up out of the ground and in front of her just in time to intercept Bannam's next sunbeam. His face contorted in frustration with the first genuine emotion that Bryn thought she had ever seen him emote.

"Is living like the rest of us everything you dreamed it would be?" Bryn screamed, rushing forward with a thrust towards Bannam's stomach. Bannam evaded her, just barely, losing his footing as he stumbled back into the street. Bryn wished she could have taken the opportunity to copy Slater or Lugo's kiemara powers, but she had used all of her magic for the spell to solidify time. She didn't have any untainted red or blue kiema left. If she was going to be able to cast anything else, it would either have to be green or she would need to call out the exceptionally brilliant red magic that was making Beloved vibrate in her hands. Bannam's sunbeam had an absurd amount of magic fueling it. Bryn didn't understand how it was possible for someone to channel that much magic in their body.

She continued her advance, small steps and swift strokes of Beloved keeping Bannam on the defensive. She finally landed a solid blow, Beloved slicing a half-inch gash near his spleen. Bannam tried to cover the wound, his guts spilling out over his fingers through that tiny hole as if his body was no longer a welcome place for them. He sputtered and moaned in pain as he collapsed to the floor.

Bryn brushed past a fleeing Lugo as she returned to the alley. He had stuck around longer than Bryn expected him to. Even if he hadn't really done much to help, he also didn't interfere even though Bryn hadn't exactly been kind to him. Edger was hunched over Nighra, who was crying in pain. Bryn thought she heard her say something about not being able to feel her arm, but she couldn't take the time to follow up on it.

The two outlined copies of Bannam seemed to have their hands full. Slater had recovered and was engaging one of them, grappling with his arms and trying to keep him from forming words. Lani, surprisingly, was breathing an intense and wide stream of flame that resembled something that Bryn might have done if she could use red kiema. The flames engulfed both Bannam and Slater, but Slater didn't seem to mind at all. Their clothes burned away and Bannam howled.

But Bannam managed to finish the last symbol for his spell, and Slater blinked away in a flash of light, somewhere off into the distance. Bryn couldn't follow the light's path, but it was clearly a teleport that was meant to take him out of the battle. Bryn had to hope that he was okay and that she'd be able to help him later.

Meanwhile the other Bannam had his hands full with Emera, who had turned her shock over the loss of Safler into a raging assault. She finally had the chance to enhance her strength, and it was an impressive sight. Bannam's slender form was able to evade her, and whenever she missed him near the walls of the alley, her fist went clean through the brick, turning it to a reddish-orange dust that fell to the pavement below. She connected once with an elbow, knocking the outlined body several feet away, completely off balance and sprawling onto the ground.

At that point, either Edger's spell wore off or the Bannam who was now burning to death had done something to it with his last breath. In either case, the final Bannam disappeared again. Emera quickly brought a fist down where he had been, leaving a crater in the ground that clearly demonstrated that she had missed. She got a fireball in retaliation to her face, burning off her hair and sending her screaming to the ground as she tried to put it out. It seemed to cling to her, but Edger was leaving Nighra to deal with it.

"Make sure you heal her, Edger. I still need her help," Bryn said. She needed Emera to trace the remote sensing spell that Bannam placed on his homunculi back to its source.

That just left Bryn and Lani to deal with the final, invisible Bannam. Unsure of where he was, they regrouped in the middle of the alley, Bryn holding Beloved carefully in front of her, Lani with her fingers glowing an intense shade of red.

"Can I trust you?" Bryn asked.

"With your life," Lani replied. "I'm sick of the lies. We should have trusted each other a long time ago."

Bryn turned to give a glance at Lani. There was something familiar in the look on her face. Suddenly she realized who Lani was, who Lani had been all this time. Aubryn had taken Lani's place shortly after they liberated Rudy from jail, to save their mother. She had copied Lani's shapeshifting ability with the kiemara copying spell. She must have been holding on to the spell for days.

The realization that Lani was Aubryn distracted Bryn just long enough for a heavyweight punch to blindside her in the jaw. Bryn fell to the ground, with Beloved still in hand, but the invisible Bannam was now on top of her, holding her down with a strength that was clearly enhanced.

"I don't want to kill you, Bryn."

"But my friends are fair game?" she snarled.

"They aren't carrying my baby."

"I'm not either," Bryn said. "You're just a homunculus."

"I may be, but I'm still the one who raped you," he laughed madly. "And it doesn't make me any less of a man. You of all people know how much of a man I am." Bryn smelled the whiskey on his breath as he leaned over her.

"You're right. A homunculus is just as human as you or I," Bryn said with a smile, thinking of Aubryn. "Sometimes more so. Especially in your case. Goodbye, you god damn motherfucker."

Bryn could feel his invisible head turn, but it wasn't in time to avoid the sword that came heavily down upon him, tearing a two-foot gash in his back. His organs erupted from his body with so much force that it sent Lani, the wielder of the sword, sprawling back against the alley wall. By the time she fell to her knees, she abruptly took on Aubryn's shape, despite the choker on her neck. She dropped the brown sword and began gripping the choker with her hands as it strangled her.

Bryn threw the invisible shell of a human being off of her as she came to Lani's aid. To Aubryn's aid. Loose, ornery, fragile, smooth, inconspicuous, garish, local, non-descript. She recycled the necklace with ease, recovering most of the kiema she'd used to make it. Aubryn coughed and wheezed as she looked at Bryn.

"Thank you, Bryn," she said.

"No, Aubryn. I'm pretty sure *I owe you*. Though, I have to admit, I wanted to be the one to kill him. I guess in a way I kind of was."

"So you're sure, then? That he was the one who raped you?"

"Yes. That doesn't mean that the real Bannam is off the hook, though. He may still have been the one who planned all of this." Edger had finished healing Emera, and Bryn waved her over there to inspect the spells cast on Bannam.

"Were you able to save mother and father?" Bryn asked Aubryn.

"I did. Lani attacked not long after our father and I got home. I'm afraid that I was the one who burned the house down, taking her out. She was a tough little bitch. I've been holding on to her power for two damn days now, Bryn! Through unconsciousness and near death, even. I don't recommend it. I'm just glad that I can be myself again."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad that you were Lani," Bryn said. "I couldn't have done this without you. But I'm even more glad that you're Aubryn."

"How long have you known?" Aubryn asked.

"Honestly? I barely saw it coming before Bannam did."

"I figured. I'm just glad that my gamble paid off."

Bryn looked at the injuries of her friends, and the dead body of Safler. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I'm sorry that you all had to be a part of this," she announced. "And I'm sorry for the things that we've lost along the way."

Emera wiped some tears for her eyes. "I have a fix on the real Bannam, Bryn. But if it's all the same to you, I don't want any part of this anymore."

"I'm so sorry, Emera," Bryn said as she gave her friend a hug. "Really, I am. I shouldn't have been so reckless, but there's even more going on here than any of us could have known. And I wouldn't want you to come with me anyway. You have things to do here, and I need to see Bannam alone."

"Not alone," Edger said as he stopped tending to Nighra. "I'm coming with you." Bryn wanted to protest, but she decided not to. Honestly, she wanted Edger to be there.

"Fine, but no one else," Bryn insisted. Aubryn started to object. "No, Aubryn, you need to go take care of mother and father. I assume you've been hiding them in order to avoid the cops and preserve the timeline? See if you can find Slater while you're at it, and thank him for me."

"I will," she said.

Bryn gave Nighra a hug, and Nighra just smiled a weak smile back. "Come on, Edger. Let's get going before he moves. I can't stand to be here a minute longer."

"I'm with you, Bryn. Always." Bryn felt her heart jump into her throat at his words and at the bold look in his eyes. When this was fi-

nally over, she was going to have to repay him most of all. And she knew just how she would do it, once he finally healed her.

Chapter 44: In Which Bryn Sees The Future

"Care to explain any of what just happened?" Edger asked as he drove Bryn out of the city. Bryn was grateful to have him manning the leviboard. Her hands were still shaking from the adrenaline, but it didn't stop her from recycling the attraction kietella.

"I don't even have the words," Bryn said.

"You've got the words, Bryn. You've got more words than anyone I've ever met."

"Oh, shut up. That doesn't even mean anything."

"No, I mean it. That last spell you cast... I don't even know what it was, but clearly it did something."

"If you don't know what it was, then why are you impressed?"

"Anyone can describe something that I can understand, Bryn. A ball of fire, invisibility, sunbeams, even the creation of your sword. Those things I understand. But describing something abstract and esoteric, something that you can't even perceive with your senses, that takes serious skill."

Bryn didn't have the energy to be humble. "Thank you, Edger. Thanks for healing me, thanks for accompanying me when I needed it, and thank you for being there in the end. I hate to think how badly that fight could have gone, if you hadn't been there to reveal Bannam's homunculi and to help Nighra and Emera."

"I'm glad I was there too," Edger said. "Speaking of homunculi, has Lani been a copy of you this entire time?"

"Ever since you and I met her together, yes."

"She's your homunculus? When did you make her? And why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie! I made her several days after we reunited. Oh, Edger, it's a long story involving time travel and it's just going to give you a headache. Can't you just take my word on it? Lani was replaced by Aubryn, that is, me before the rape. We both have the memories of the days before the rape, now, though from slightly different perspectives."

"Interesting," Edger said as he made the turn out of the city limits. "So what you're telling me is that it was actually you who grew her boobs and clearly wanted to sleep with me." He gave her a crooked smirk.

Bryn laughed, not in embarrassment, but at how wrong Edger was. "No, Edger. She and I are very different people now. I was raped,

and she wasn't. I thought I lost my mom, but she was with her the whole time. I've grown up and grown hard, but she still has innocence and openness on her side."

After a long span of awkward silence, Edger continued. "I see. I think I understand what you mean." After a heavy pause, he said, "You know, I never told you how my sister died."

"I know. I figured you would tell me when you were ready."

"I think I'm ready now," he said, but the tears in his eyes told Bryn that he wasn't. She tried not to watch him, to let him pace himself. This was clearly difficult for him.

"Take your time, Edge."

"It was just a few years ago. I had just entered medical school, and I was starting to learn to drive. Dad tried his best to get me to be careful about what I was doing, but I was young and stupid. One careless mistake later, and the three of us had been thrown from the levi-board. I tried to heal her. I cried out to the gods to give me the skill to heal her, but they didn't listen. Her wounds were just too much for her frail little body. I shook her and shook her, and poured everything I had into her."

"But in the end it wasn't enough?"

"Not exactly," he said darkly. "My father tried to stop me, but in my grief and guilt I lost myself to the magic. I let it do what it wanted. And in the end, she lived again. Her body was able to move."

"But...?" Bryn asked.

"But she was dead on the inside. She was a mockery of a human being, some kind of mindless zombie. I *did* that to her. We eventually had to kill her again to put her out of her misery. And for a long time, I never forgave myself for it."

Bryn put a hand on his shoulder. "I know how you must have felt. Even if no one else does."

"I know you do, Bryn. I just don't want you to go blaming yourself for Safler or for any of the other people who were victims in the crossfire of your life."

"I don't," Bryn said. "I blame Bannam."

"That's the other thing. I know how you feel, but I don't want you to lose yourself in your revenge. You've killed the homunculus that raped you, or at least we think you have. Even if you kill the original Bannam, how will you know that he doesn't have more copies of himself

out there? For that matter, between you and Aubryn, which one gets to be the original? Aren't you both just people now? And if she were to kill someone, should I blame you for it?"

Bryn didn't like Edger's logic, but he wasn't wrong. She sat in silence for a few more miles, and then she finally said, "Turn around, Edger. Let's just go home."

Edger didn't say anything. He knew how Bryn felt, and they both needed some time to themselves to process everything that had happened to them.

It wasn't until they got back to the city that he spoke up. "I just want you to know, Bryn... It took me a long time to open up to people again. Honestly, it only finally happened when I healed you. Saving you saved me, Bryn. I'm ready to love again."

"I'm not, Edger," Bryn said. She couldn't look at him, shame filling her cheeks with heat.

"I know you aren't, Bryn. I know things are still too raw, and I know how strong you are. It is going to take you a long time to recover from the things that have happened to you. But I just want you to know," he said as he took his eyes off the road to smile at her, "I'm going to be here when you're ready."

Bryn let the tears drop off her cheeks. He understood her better than he knew, and she never wanted that to change.

And that was the fundamental difference between Bryn and Bannam, why she had to cast the spell that he never could. Bannam was so blinded by the things he knew, the things he could see, that he could never imagine a future beyond the horizon.

But Bryn, she could imagine a whole world in front of her even now. A world with the potential for romance with Edger when she was ready for it. A world in which monsters could become human. A world in which she could raise Poe to use her powers and talents responsibly and for the betterment of Ortha. A world in which she was reunited with her family, in which she successfully joined the Order of Whyat, in which she used the knowledge that she had earned through her hardship to make Ortha a better place. The future could be a beautiful place, if Bryn had the courage to shape it to her will.