

The Scarlette Saga Volume I:
The Education of Half-Orc Scarlette Urrug

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A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2023

Committee:
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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
CREATIVE WRITING AND POETICS

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Abstract

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The Scarlette Saga Volume I: The Education of Half-Orc Scarlette Urrug (EHSU) experiments with form and consists of three interwoven plotlines: social, familial, and educational. The idea to experiment with *EHSU's* formatting arose from a desire to immerse readers in Scarlette's head by creating an access point for their eyes to visually and contextually connect with what is happening on the page.

Earth was rescued from mankind by Mythicals during an event thousands of years ago known as the Great Return. Generations of humans were punished for planetary neglect and re-educated as a species. Today, Scarlette Urrug is a 13-year-old girl who is starting her first year at Amalgamy Academy. At the prestigious private school, Scarlette awkwardly and anxiously tries to make friends and not get into too much trouble ... or at least not get caught! If only her big Chronicles of Eras Past project was her only worry.

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For my parents who have always supported me in all things;
For my family who encourages my oddities and fantasies;
For my friends who love me even when writing consumes me;
For the military whose funding made my educational dreams possible;
For my cohort who endured garbage drafts and practiced friendly bullying;
For every Professor who has ever believed in me and my writing;
'Thank you' does not feel strong enough to express my gratitude.
And (thanks to you) that's coming from a writer.

The Scarlet Saga Volume I:
The Education of Half-Orc Scarlet Urrug



(An AI Depiction of Sanctuary)

Prologue: Sanctuary

I never thought myself poor until I saw the reflection of an ivory candle-lit chandelier on the surface of an indoor lagoon. Before now, the fanciest place I've been to was an atrium attached to a community center for my little sister's dance recitals. I liked the way bamboo shoots swayed behind Quellie as she performed, but it doesn't compare to the lavish grotto before me now. White sand shifts beneath me as my mom and I walk through Sanctuary's main entrance in search of an employee. Half of the uniform shop is submerged underwater for the comfort of mermaid seamstresses. Though my perspective is distorted by ripples and waves, pink and yellow lights flash beneath the surface as the Mythicals cast spells over their finished work. The upper half of the shop is encircled by lime rock walls with gothic arches carved into them. Murals of stained glass windows are painted within each; as if truly backlit by the sun, they glow with filtered golden rays of light. Gondolas carry shoppers to floating platforms ringed with lily pads, cattails, and lanterns. The carefully spaced beacons exude warmth from behind their frosted glass faces, illuminating the shop's wares. Spiraling staircases lead to higher levels with cushioned balconies overlooking the foyer. Some patrons lounge in them, nibbling on finger sandwiches.

When a man with layers of long porcupine quills for hair approaches me and Mom with a reserved smile, I can tell that he's wondering the same thing I am: what are we doing here? Between his damask vest and the light aroma of jasmine flowers lingering in the air, I am convinced we are in the wrong place. My new school requires uniforms, I know that. But this shop feels far too upscale for my needs.

"Welcome to the Sanctuary," the porcupine man says in a nasally voice. His small eyes drift between us, like he's unsure whom to address.

Mom steps forward and makes a show of looking around, as if she's barely holding back criticism about the paradise we've walked into. Her nicest pair of dwarven-made earrings dangle over her shoulders; her fancy dress is the same one she wore for her birthday party last year; and her almond-shaped eyes are shadowed by mascara-covered lashes. Mom looks like she just walked out of some designer's art journal: thin, beautiful and priceless. But the porcupine man doesn't seem impressed by either of us, me least of all. I'm wearing black trousers and a purple blouse that compliments the orcan-blue hue of my skin. I thought I was dressed nice, but, now that we're here, I feel like a walking 200 pound bruise.

A moment later he adds, "If you're looking for sweets, the candy store is further down the treeline."

Mom doesn't deign to look in his direction but she says, "This will do. We're here for Amalgamy Academy uniforms."

Eager to prevent another lapse of silence, he points his sharp nose towards her.

"Ah, yes. And your charge has already been enrolled? Our garments are top-tier, so I must warn you that we don't accept returns here at Sanctuary."

"My 'charge'?" Mom asks. A shiver crawls down my spine at her tone, but the porcupine man is unphased.

"Yes, I assume you're this child's nanny? Whose name should I open the account under?"

"You can open it under her *mother's* name, Letia Urrug."

"Great," he says, making a note on a clipboard. "And your name is?"

"Letia Urrug."

The porcupine man, who was already turning around to call a gondola, stops dead in his tracks. His angular features are pinched in confusion.

"I think I misheard you. I asked for your name, Madam. I already noted the child's mother's name."

Slowly, Mom pivots to face the porcupine man directly. Locking eyes with him, she replies, "They are one and the same. I am Letia Urrug, and this is my daughter, Scarlett."

Without breaking eye-contact, she motions for me to stand next to her. The soft sand makes her high-heels obsolete and, if anything, further emphasizes our height difference. But since I'm taller than most humans, that's to be expected.

The porcupine man's face is warped with incomprehension, mouth opening and closing without a decimal of sound.

"Do you offer any discounts for agents of the Crown?" she asks, throwing the man a life line.

"You-you

-you- you

the Kings?"

work for

His three part query mirrors his emotions: First, a disbelieving stutter, followed by an acceptance as if something that was once bizarre now made sense to him, and ending with a rising lilt to his voice.

The frown on Mom's face deepens as she corrects him, "No, my husband is an officer for the Magical Emergency Agents of National Security. You know. The Kingdom's militia, MEANS?"

"Oh, only an officer. Right."

His face is awash with a mixture of relief and disappointment. Then confusion furrows his brows. The porcupine man's small, watery eyes shrink as he squints at her, then at me.

"And your husband ... is an orc?"

Mom steps closer to the man and I try to swallow the lump forming in my throat. I already dislike shopping. I like it even less when Mom picks a fight with someone. And I don't even understand what the problem is.

Terse, she asks, "Is that an issue for you?"

"No, I was just surprised to see a half— I mean, no there's no problem. Of course not!" The porcupine man tries to choke out a laugh, but now it's Mom's turn to be unimpressed. To my surprise, she doesn't raise her voice. Instead, her lips spread into a cloyingly sweet grin.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll let you make it up to me and my daughter. Why don't you call another attendant to help us. Then you can find your supervisor and brainstorm an appropriate discount as your apology."

The porcupine man's supervisor is an Elvin woman with three rows of piercings nestled into the cartilage of her pointy ears. She agrees to work on a discount, but requests that the porcupine man continue to assist us while we're in Sanctuary.

"As a learning opportunity," she explains.

"B-B-But, who will watch the foyer and welcome guests to Sanctuary?" he protests.

The woman cuts him off with a wave of her hand; her decision is final. From the way Mom keeps requesting sandwiches and iced tea with lemon, I'd say she's enjoying this arrangement just as much as the porcupine man hates it.

"My name is Thomme," he says while we cross the lagoon.

I know it's rude to laugh at someone's name, so I have to fake a cough to cover the tittering that escapes me before I can stop it. I could argue that it's not my fault. I wasn't the one who saddled him with a name that rhymes with 'thumb.' By the look on his face, not only would

he disagree with me on that front, but I'm pretty sure he knows I wasn't actually coughing. Thomme and I silently agree not to speak to each other after that.

The mermaid enchanted garments are so alluring that, when our gondola stops at the Amalgamy Academy platform, I almost fall in the water in my hurry to touch them. The platform is stuffed with row upon row of plaid skirts that are charmed to display their sassy sway while walking on their own; tan trousers pose dynamically whenever catching someone's eye; white blouses wave at me to come close and try them on; and neckties float about, tying and untying themselves into complicated knots. It is a mesmerizing scene.

Unfortunately, the wonder tarnishes an hour later as I struggle to peel off my sixth collared black and green dress

"Oh, that one doesn't fit? That's okay, I'll go get another one a size up," Mom says from the other side of my changing room curtain.

The back of my hands are slick from wiping my eyes over and over again.

"Don't bother. Just give up, we're never going to find a dress that fits me in here. Let's try the skirts," I call back. I try to keep my voice steady, but it breaks part way through.

"Are you sure, Sweetie? I can go get more for you."

I stare at my reflection, moving my hands to my belly fat, my neck, my thighs.

Mom came close and whispered through the curtain, "You're just big boned, Scar. That's all."

When we return to our gondola with a week's worth of uniforms, Mom says that we are victorious. Her tone is cheery and sweet. Too cheery for the ears of someone who stayed behind a curtain until their eyes were no longer red and puffy. Too sweet for someone who still feels hollow.

We are both ready to leave Sanctuary, me more than her, but Thomme winces when he sees what we've collected.

One would think it pains him to say, "You've almost got everything. You're just missing socks and a blazer or two."

There's a twisting feeling in my chest, and I sigh deeply. The last thing I want to do is spend more time surrounded by clothes that are too over-excited at the sight of a patron to realize there's no way that they'll fit me.

"I just want to go home," I groan.

Thomme sniffs at this, "I'm sorry Sanctuary isn't up to your standards, little girl."

Then, under my mom's glare he hurriedly adds, "You can always split up. Socks are on the left, blazers are in the back right corner of the platform."

Hoping for the least social interaction possible, I volunteer to get two blazers.

Illusion magic makes the platform seem larger than it actually is. It's a great trick for extra storage space, but it also means that some areas see less company than others. I find one abandoned aisle filled with long-outdated dresses. Alone, in a place that feels like it hasn't been touched for ages, I slump to the floor and try to keep my sobs in my chest, not my eyes.

When my heaving breaths simmer down to slow, even inhales, I look up and a silver dress that hadn't been on the driftwood rack a moment before catches my eye. I reach out to touch it, but before my fingers can graze its silky fabric, the dress spins off its hanger and curtseys.

"Oh, you're pretty but I didn't mean to disturb you. Go back to your hanger," I tell it.

The dress pirouettes again and leans into an even deeper curtsey.

"I mean it," I say. But the dress doesn't budge, if anything, it drifts closer to me.

"I'm not trying you on but, well. At least you don't talk."

With a sigh, I rise to my feet and attempt to curtsy back, but it's a flimsy failure by comparison. The dress doesn't seem to mind, though, as it hovers over to me and shifts its sleeves to float in a dancing position in the air.

"Oh, no, I couldn't," I say. But, probably because it hasn't seen another living person in who knows how long, the dress refuses to take no for an answer. I look around to confirm that there's no one nearby, then shrug and accept the dress' offer of a dance. It shimmers like melted silver as it guides me through twirls and dips. There's no music, yet as long as I follow its lead, the dress and I are in sync. I'm not a great dancer, that's Quellie's thing. But it's fun and *almost* makes up for the way I felt behind the dressing room curtain, even when stumbling around and tripping over my own feet. I lose track of time dancing with it, and when we finally stop so I can catch my breath, I realize that I am hopelessly lost.

"Uh oh, you don't happen to know the way back, do you?" I ask the dress. It twists at the torso, indicating 'no'. I recognize nothing as I meander through the rows, hoping to at least find an arrow pointing towards the exit.

I know I didn't want to talk to someone, but directions would be nice right about now.

It's the dress that finds hope of escape before I do. It tugs on my wrist and leads me down aisles I've never seen before. Teetering stacks of overflowing chests and boxes with all sorts of clothes spilling out of them leer at me; each looks like they're one accidental bump away from tumbling down onto my head. I'm about to give up when I hear a boy's voice. It's muffled and, for whatever reason, has a slight echo to it. When I peer around a corner, his butt is the first thing I see. An arrow-tipped tail flicks behind him from where he lay crouched on the floor, head

completely engulfed within a massive wooden chest. I announce myself to him by making a coughing sound, like clearing my throat.

"There you are; I was wondering where you went," the boy says.

His words are tinted with impatience, a disappointing contrast to the soft timbre of his voice. It bounces out of the chest his head is in, and around the walls of bloated boxes around us. I can't tell if he's purposely raising his voice to achieve the effect, or if he's just a naturally loud fellow. The sound of it reminds me of waves crashing onto a beachfront. But I suppose that could be because of the platform's edge behind me.

Confused, I stare at him. What is he looking for that led him all the way out here? And what does he mean when he said he was wondering where I went, was he looking for me? Was he watching me? Heat trickles into my cheeks and I don't know which would be worse: did he see me clumsily dance by myself with nothing but an empty dress? Or did he witness my meltdown in the aisle and I just didn't see him? I open my mouth, but nothing comes out as I realize I don't really want to know the answer to either of those questions. I just want to know which way is the exit. Then, to my surprise, he flings something at me.

"Here, I think I finally found something in here that might fit you," he says.

A wad of fabric comes flying at me. It's a daring move considering we are so close to the water, and he didn't even look before throwing behind him. Luckily, I catch the fabric with my face. It's a blazer with the Amalgamy crest embroidered in the chest. And it's as big as a tent. I could sew lapel to lapel together, and my little sister could use it as a sleeping bag! He found *this*, this massive blanket of a jacket, thinking it could fit *me*?

"Why?" is all I can manage. My voice, in just one word, is thin and wobbly.

"So? How do you like it? I can keep looking for something bigger," the boy says, his plummy voice now sickening to my ears. He mutters something acidic under his breath and adds, "I see now why you wouldn't want to go shopping on your own, you really need the help!"

I shake my head, gasping as I fail to contain a new wave of sobs. They're leaking out of me, uncontrollable and raw.

"You think this is funny?" I raise my voice this time and it cracks from the effort.

"Heads up!" Shouts another boy's voice. His is deep and gruff, but I don't see him.

The boy I do see mutters something I can't make out in a questioning tone, and bumps his head as he rises out of the chest. He stands up, one hand rubbing the back of his skull, and a clump of fabric flies over one wall of stacked boxes. It opens like a parachute as it flies through the air, and, like me, he catches the assaulting blazer in the face.

"It's a wild one," shouts the voice of the second boy I still can't see. I guess that he's the one who launched the jacket over the wall. But what he means by 'wild one' I don't know...

Then I understand, too late. The boy whose head is now wrapped within the blazer is struggling to peel it off of him. An enchantment gone sour, the jacket refuses to release the boy's face. Blindly, he flails around and his tail whacks into a column of boxes. It is the excuse the walls have been waiting for. One bump is all it takes. Like a tidal wave, they crumble.

I turn around, ready to sprint the way I came when I first found the nightmarish boy, but it's already closed off! There's a rumbling sound — an avalanche coming down from above and I can't move, my feet are frozen in place! Air is pushed from my lungs and I grunt as a force charges into me — blazer-boy. Still blind and disoriented, he slams into my body with his own, saving me from being crushed. But the force of his push is too much. I lose my footing. For a second, I am touching nothing but air, and then water closes around my knees, my shoulders!

Shocked, I gulp for oxygen but swallow the flavor of salt instead. I can swim, I know I can swim. But the potent magic of the lagoon dulls my senses. Bubbles pop in my ears as I sink. My eyes burn as multi-colored starbursts consume my vision. It's like looking through a kaleidoscope, and even squinting doesn't eliminate the cloak of shifting prisms. I urge myself to kick. To move! It's like being stabbed by a thousand numbing pins; jabbed with syringes of ice cold venom; needled by the sharp spines of a poisonous caterpillar, all over my body.

Slowly, in a handful of long, stretching seconds, my body comes back to me. The water feels thick, like wading through oatmeal with weights on my ankles, but eventually I break through the surface coughing and greedily sucking at the air. At the same time, another tower of crates and clothes loses its fight against gravity and spills into the lagoon so slowly it's almost comical. Each splash ripples out a wave, stinging my face with an unnatural cold slap. The platform is a mess. I can't see beyond a fallen column of crates, boxes and chests, but I can hear the boys again.

"Rough luck," the soft voice I recognize as the blazer-boy says. "Had enough fun, yet?"

"Yeah, I'm done. Let's go," replies the gruff-sounding boy.

Tongue-tied by the lagoon's magic, I'm forced to stay silent as the floorboards of the platform creak with the weight of their fading footsteps. A part of me wants to scream for their help, to demand that they pull me up from the lagoon onto the platform. Another part of me, a larger part, knows that I wouldn't even if I could.

It was deliberate. A show, a game they orchestrated. And now that they've had their fun, they're 'done'? Just like that.

Hate bubbles within me as I realize how cleverly I've been played. But my anger isn't for them. All my hurt and frustration balloons inside of me as I realize this is all my fault. This never

would have happened if I had stuck with my mom, or ignored the dress, or just didn't come to Sanctuary at all. They went through all that just to prove something I already knew but ignored: I don't belong here.

The raised platform is too high for me to climb up, so I have to swim all the way around to find the gondola. Somehow the silver dress survived the catastrophe and is animatedly swirling around in circles above me. It's shaking with what I can only assume is rage and looks like it is putting up one side of a silent argument. Thomme is the first to see me. Looking horrified, he fishes me out of the water and into the gondola.

I try to tell him and my mom what happened, but my words are a jumbled incoherent mess. Mom pats my face, inspecting the lingering effects the lagoon's magic inflicted on me. She coos that the welts won't last long, that the splashes of new aggravated warts will fade in a few hours. But with all her bedside manner, all she and Thomme manage to decipher from my wet, tear-clogged gurgles is that someone pushed me into the water for fun.

Mom pulls me to her side and commands that Thomme take us to the foyer.

"Don't cry," she whispers in my ear. "Not here. Don't show them they hurt you."

She glares at Thomme, as if my soggy state is his fault.

"Your review depends on this, Thomme. Let's be quick," Mom directs.

Despite the porcupine man's effort towards speed, the journey back to the foyer feels longer than our departure into the lagoon. Vampire subjugates on the Necropolis Institute platform bump elbows into their neighbors to draw their attention to me as we splash by. An ancient human invention, called light blubes or something, lace another platform labeled 'Stage Productions'. Their enchanted shine twinkles as if still sparked by electricity, highlighting the amused smirks on three different fairy girls' faces. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out

everything and everyone around me. As I imagine crawling into a snail shell, the gondola dips to the left under Thomme's silent, strained guidance.

"What's the big deal, if I Vaporize I won't weigh the boat down so much. We don't have to go faster, but I can make it easier on her," I hear someone say. The voice is deep and gruff, immediately identifiable as the boy who threw the wild blazer over the wall.

"Don't you dare! You are not about to disappear half your body. It's the principle of the thing," another boy replied tartly. His tone was sharper than before, but unmistakable.

I spin around so quickly, our gondola shakes. Heading in the opposite direction is the wide shoulders of a boy with shock white hair. His bulk makes it impossible to view the other passenger in the gondola with him, and, if I had to guess, is the reason their vessel drags and teeters. The weighed-down boat barely floats above water. It's obvious even from this distance that an uncalculated shift from one butt cheek to another would invite buckets of the lagoon on board with them. Just above the white hair, I see the screwed up face of a Sanctuary employee with doe ears and small antlers. A fae woman, her face is contorted with the effort of hard work. She is standing, steering their gondola with her large paddling stick. She wears a similar vest to Thomme, with a white scarf tied around her thin neck.

"Just because you're in a bad mood doesn't mean everyone else has to be," the rough voice says.

"And I told you before we got here, just because you're in a good mood doesn't mean I have to be," grumbles blazer-boy.

A blueish-green mist began pouring out of the gondola, and the matching color of the large boy's torso steamed with curling tendrils of smoke. The Vaporized form of the Mythical

boy, clearly of genie of some kind, encourages the gondola to rise from the lagoon, at least two hands higher than it had been seconds before.

"Is that better, Myla?" he asks the fae.

The woman grants him a grateful smile and dabs at her brow with a pocket handkerchief.

Bitterness flavors blazer-boy's voice as he snaps, "Isn't it your job to ferry us around Sanctuary?"

My mouth puckers sourly at his tone, the rude abrasion of it. But the fae woman, a crease reforming on her forehead, inclines her head, pockets her handkerchief, and continues to guide them to the other side of Sanctuary.

"Some people really do think they're better than others just because they occupy a comfortable position in life," Mom says, pulling my attention back to our own gondola. She is twisted in her seat too, eyes following the same gondola of boys. I turn around to face forward when she does, my braided hair flinging droplets of water around us as I do.

"Some people are always going to do their best to make you feel like you don't belong. You can dress right, talk right, and do right. And sometimes it still won't make a difference. It's up to you to keep your chin up and prove those who doubt you wrong. Only you can decide where you belong, don't ever allow others to decide for you," she says.

She lifts my face with an index finger and once again instructs me not to let anyone see me cry, not to show any weakness. But I don't know what she thinks that will solve. Because I can't hide my tears. I can't hide the fact that I am dripping wet. I can't hide at all! And I'll never be able to. They don't even bother to whisper. No one does. The whole ride over to Sanctuary's exit, I am cast under the light of glowing stained glass for everyone around to stare at. I don't

have to look up to hear the patrons on the upper levels gather to gawk at the girl who fell in the lagoon. They lean over the balcony railings, to stare at me; my bristling welts; my warts.

I rush out of Sanctuary's doors feeling that I am someone who will always stick out, whether I want to or not. It's the principle. All the rude, horrible blazer-boy and his friend did was remind me. Mom is wrong. I am someone who will never fit in. I am someone who can never be normal. And if those boys also attend Amalgamy Academy, then I won't belong there any more than I do in Sanctuary.



(An AI Depiction of the Elf Tthreadvar, a student at Amalgamy Academy)

Mark One: The Flag and the Airplane

As a race who prefers the wonders of the underground world, Orcs believe that 'hell' is the gut-wrenching sensation of falling down an endless shaft of magma tunnels. In my opinion, being stuck with that helpless falling feeling and the everlasting burn of lava for the rest of eternity is far preferable to the social torments of being 'the new kid' in school. Case in point: the assembly on my first day at Amalgamy Academy.

Five days ago I attended the mandatory meeting and noticed right away that, despite the hundreds of bodies generating heat, the auditorium was chilly. Perhaps, if the massive tree roots overhead weren't so overgrown with ivy, the brightness of the fading autumn's sun would peek through with its buoying light and warmth.

During the assembly, Principal Perrocles clodded back and forth across the stage and, in a deep dragging voice, pontificated the long history of our Kingdom of Loria and the Academy. Her attempt to hype up the coming school year by bragging about the school's many special qualities and features felt pointless. Weren't we all already students? The people that matter in that decision making process, our parents, have already been convinced of Amalgamy Academy's virtues. She did pique my interest, though, when mentioning the ancient humans.

She said, "The Kingdom of Loria used to be known as the 'Pacific Northwest'. We try to keep history alive by preserving the parts of our school that were established on the grounds of an ancient human educational site. Right now, for example, we are in what was once known as a 'football field'. The trees that enclose this space today are just one of the many constructional changes contracted Gardeners made when designing the campus."

Suddenly the damp cold around me warmed as my reluctance to be there thawed. That is, until the Principal saw fit to welcome the few new students to the school.

To my horror she also announced, “And a special welcome to Scarlett Urrug, one of Amalgamy Academy’s very first, and this year's only, mix-blood student! We are so pleased to have you with us Scarlett. As you all know, we are one of the first and largest schools of mixed races where humans and Mythicals learn side by side.”

Everything in the world, except for my cheeks, went cold again as students and faculty alike turned to look at me. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, wondering if one or both of my parents asked for this to happen thinking that it might help me make friends faster. Why else would the Principal single *me* out? Again, we’re all students. We could tell for ourselves just by looking around that we’re a mix of humans and Mythicals. She herself already said we know that. Sometimes adults make absolutely no sense whatsoever.

The abrasive chill back to haunt me, I shivered when rising from my seat, along with the rest of the student body, to honor the flags of our Kingdom of Loria. We were expecting three flags in total to unravel in beautiful unison, suspended from the ceiling of tangled roots. There is, of course, the national flag, black and emboldened with a gold outline of Earth. While other nations surrounding Loria are spiderwebbed with delicate linework, our coastal peninsula is shaded in with gilded thread. I think the Kingdom flag is really quite pretty, but then there are also the flags of the Magical Emergency Agents of National Security which, by popular opinion, are not so pretty. Or cool. Or welcome. Every school has at least two on-hand, as an obligatory symbol of the Kings' protection. It is imprinted with three stacked rings rippling out and around a triquetra. As a whole it represents unity, completeness, perfection, and, above all, harmony. The militia's acronym is embroidered at the bottom in silver thread: M.E.A.N.S. — MEANS.

When all three unfolded, two were completely and utterly vandalized. The MEANS flag flanking the left of the national flag was splattered with the pattern of boot prints pressed into its

face. Its twin's fabric was torn to ribbons, some shreds so small that pieces of it showered the crowd. And while everyone else in the room wore innocent shock upon their faces, four students in particular caught my eye. Three boys and a girl on the other side of the vast room lined with bleachers. They sat at the very top row. Smug. Prideful. Jostling each other in an effort to conceal their chortling. And although the guilty party was never officially caught, the principal deemed it a political protest.

In letters to parents that were supposedly apologetic she wrote:

The demonstration was not approved by the school prior, but it was peaceful. Amalgamy Academy is always actively encouraging students to think independently. The school board views this incident not as an act of aggression, but one of expression. Rest assured that student safety remains our top and foremost concern. In the future, all assembly equipment and displays will be thoroughly examined for potential disruptive qualities. Individuals with any questions or concerns surrounding the incident are more than welcome to discuss the matter with my assistant, Vice Principal Gola.

She signed it with an emerald stamp of a hoof and when I presented it to my parents, I wondered just how many bottles of ink did it take to fill a bucket large enough for her signature? Although when I voiced the thought at the dinner table, even I didn't find the musing all that humorous. All I could think is that my father works for MEANS. And as proud as I am of him,

the display those four orchestrated proved that Amalgamy Academy is yet another place it isn't safe to claim so.

On the second day of school I paid another student with my lunch to slip the letter under the Principal's office door. This time, it read:

The demonstration was not [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] peaceful. Amalgamy
Academy is [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] not [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] safe [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] for [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] all [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] individuals [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

It was a risk, but I have to assume that I can't be the only student out of hundreds who has family in MEANS. Right? Besides. It's just an anonymous message with a vague but unclear, underlying threat. According to the Principal's definition, my note is a classic example of a 'peaceful protest' expressing *my* individuality.

It's now been four dizzying days since the assembly, during which I feel my school-time hours have been spent more on memorizing the campus layout than actually learning. Everything is so spread out! An entire forest of treehouse classrooms, a network of criss-crossing leafy overhangs and branch bridges — not to mention the sprawling tendrils of river beds on the

ground itself. I am supposed to have a peer-ambassador with me to show me around campus but I didn't even get a chance to register her name before she was whisked away by friends. And that is the hardest part, really. The loneliness. Everyone already has friends. Everyone seems to already know one another, which, I guess makes sense since Amalgamy classes are divided between Level Scores, not age.

"Schools of mixed races can't go by age," I remember my mom saying.

This was in the summer, when my sister was crying because she didn't want us to change schools. And she liked the idea of us not going to the same school together even less.

"Why not!" Quellie remarked. I could hear the pout in her voice from the top bunk bed.

"Because," my mom said patiently, "we all mature differently. At thirteen I was a teenager, but, you know Mr. Pantoran, from up the tree over? As a fawn his family didn't see him as a teenager until he turned twenty two."

My little sister sniffed, and I knew she was puzzling out what Mom was saying. I stared at the wooden curve of the ceiling, but I was imagining my sister's face. She was young enough that she looked more like our mom, still more human than Orc. Save for tendrils of sky blue that stretched over her right collarbone, soft highlights of teal that shadowed her cheekbones, and a slithering line of aegean snaking up her right ankle. On her, the Transition looked artful. Like purposeful tattoos. I looked like a fish when my skin tone started to change. When I began to leak my father's image. Stupid Sorina Mason from farther down the treeline still calls me 'Scales' sometimes.

"Elves aren't considered adults until they're at least one hundred, Quellie." I piped in, "I'll be going to school with a bunch of *old* people. They've got to be at least forty, right Mom?"

I leaned over the edge of the bunk to look down at her. Her face looked funny as her eyes darted between my sister and I. Finally, they rested on Quellie.

"Something like that. Look, you're old school placed people into Levels haphazardly. Somewhat by skill, somewhat by age, but mostly by neighborhood. There aren't any schools for half-race-only students like there are for pure-blood Mythics and *humans*."

Was it my imagination, or did her voice go cold there, at the end?

The bunk bed started shaking. Quellie was bouncing up and down in protest.

"I still don't see why Scar and I can't go to the same school! You didn't even let me try, I could've taken the Leveling test, too!"

Mom sighed and rubbed my sister's arms soothingly. She was trying to calm her, but our mother wasn't quite as smiley as she was when the conversation first started.

"You can try in three years, sweetie. Amalgamy doesn't accept Level One students and still has age requirements for each race. With a human heritage, you have to be at least eleven before you can take their placement test for Level Two.

"And I'm already thirteen." I said, trying to help. "I'm too old for your school."

Then, thinking about Mr. Pantoran, it occurred to me. "Mom, am *I* a teenager?"

She laughed at that, looking up at me from her chair beside Quellie's bed.

"Sweet Gaia! I suppose you are, yes. I don't know how that came to be so quickly."

I didn't know what she meant by that, it must've happened quickly. If it was a slow change, wouldn't I have noticed my transformation into a teenager? I did some quick research in my head, thinking of all the books and movies and shows on the ScryScreen that focused on teenagers and school. But I couldn't think of any with half-orc leads. None came to mind that had characters like me.

I shake my head clear of the memory and rap my knuckles against my new locker. I find myself wishing I had dedicated more time to thinking about how Levels were different at Amalgamy compared to my old school. Here, one could stay in the same Level for years at a time. If I had thought about it more ahead of time, maybe I would've expected the already-formed social circles and cliques. Instead, I am the outsider.

I rap my knuckles against my new locker and rummage through it. This stretch of the Academy, the main campus, is the part that used to be a human school constructed in the Era of Man. The buildings, or parts of them such as this hallway of lockers, were petrified by the Oak that raised the chunk of ancient constructs into its branches. The tree is called the Tree of Halls and it is my favorite thing about this school so far. I smile as I tap my fingernails rhythmically against the locker door, listening to the metallic *ting-ting-ting, ting-ting-ting* it makes in response.

I finish swapping out my books and pull out my map of campus. Then it hits me. A paper airplane lies face down on the floor, its tip crushed from crashing into the back of my head. I pick it up. Flip it over. Blanche. On its side is scrawled the familiar phrase, "The end justifies the MEANS." The same words printed on my father's water bottle. His uniform. His tattoo. Beside the acronym was a hand-drawn humanoid in full MEANS livery with an exaggerated member. Sprouting from the figure's mouth is a speech bubble that reads, "ME: Anal Numbing Services."

A roarous cacophony of laughter erupts behind me and when I turn around I see *them*. Three boys and a girl. By way of eavesdropping, I have learned more about them and for whatever reason, they seem to be annoyingly popular.

The girl, Lavinia, is a hamadryad, heir to a lucrative salad dressing company. Her family acquired a new farm irrigation contract over the summer, which she often, and very loudly,

bragged about paying for her newest collection of designer hemp dresses. The other three are also fae. A pair of brothers who happened to be the selkie stars of the school's swimming team. The youngest of the two, Daoll, had Cryptozoology right before me. And Physical Activities the period prior. I know because the seating assignments Proctor Morgana created placed us at the same desk in her classes, him then me. And since he refused to dry after swimming, I have to bring a towel to class to sop up the puddles he leaves around our shared desk. Then there is the Elf. Tthreandvar. Leading his small pack down the hallway.

"Did you see how far that one went!" Daoll shouts. His untucked, unbuttoned uniform clings formlessly around his figure. The top-heaviness of his frizzing dark hair reminds me of a mop.

"Your best work yet, Tthreandvar," echoes his twin brother, "Where'd it go?"

Ollurd is stockier than his brother but cleaner, especially for a thirteen year old boy. While Daoll looks wild and unkempt, Ollurd is manicured and sharp-edged. There are no wrinkles in his trousers, no loose threads fraying his blazer. His inky hair is buzzed down into a thin layer of fuzz.

I glare at them all as they amble through the corridor, receiving high-fives and friendly smiles. Of course it is them, how could it not be! Not only did they disfigure the flags and get away with it, they are being greeted like local royalty to boot! It's too much.

My hand closes around the parchment's fragile body and in one swift movement, I shatter their giddy howls with the crashing of metal on metal. Everything, everyone goes still as they wait for an explanation. I stride through the crowd and stand before them all.

A
sliver

of
sunlight
piercing
through
a
long
window
cuts
a
divide
Between

me

and

them.

"Looking for this?" I spit.

With a bend of elbow I hold up the wadded clump. Like an accusation. No, like a gauntlet.

The hamadryad giggles, "Uhh, maybe? Did you ruin it already?"

"I didn't 'ruin it', it hit me. *You* hit me with it!"

I throw it on the ground so hard it bounces. It is a challenge. An action I was sure said, 'I demand an apology'. Instead, the Tthreandvar shrugs and bends down to retrieve it.

"Well, I didn't mean to." He says, "Where did it hit you?"

He has a lean figure, though not so slender that I can describe him as thin. A straight nose is centered beneath dark angular eyebrows. A soft jaw of slanted lines tapers at a narrow chin. But girls didn't fawn over him for his good looks and guys didn't envy him for his swagger. No. He could look like a pegasus' unwashed butt and smell like one, too, and it wouldn't make a lick of difference. It is his charming haircut. Charming for the way it parts and fades to reveal long, extended ears. Although his small piercing bespeaks a humble status in Elven society, the rest of

the world only sees pointed helixes. It doesn't matter whether or not it was his mother, or his great grandmother's mother who laid with an Elf. Fae blood is potent. And everyone knows Elven is the most dominant of all.

"Didn't mean to —" I protest, "it hit my head!"

"Not that kind of 'where'," Ollurd drawls, "Where were *you*?"

Infuriated, I say, "What does that have to do with anything! I was just standing over there—"

I turn to point to my locker. Freeze. Feel my eyes widen in alarm. Its door is bent and dented. What is new to me, assigned just this week, now a withered shape. My breath catches in my throat as I stare at it.

"Looks like someone's had a bit of an accident!" Lavinia sings delightedly.

I crank my head back to the four of them and feel the edges of a snarl pull on the muscles of my face. I want these kids to feel as bad as I do. I want to scream, I want to break something! I blink, and, in the darkness, I do it all.

First, sweet primal release. Then? Tthreadvar. If he inherited any physical advantages from his blood, he would be fast. His ears, though, sensitive. A march, a straight bee-line, and I'd have them compressed between a pinch of my thumb and forefinger. Only a moment to move — A quick yank downward, complete with a harsh twist. Next! Selkies were fast underwater, but sluggish on land. Jab the jowls of whoever comes at me first, duck a blow of the brother's wild swing, and rocket upwards — smash forehead against teeth. That just leaves Lavinia. A face-first push into a locker would do her in, I'm sure of it. But maybe twice, just for good measure...

"Hellooo! Earth to orc — can I help you or something?"

The vision shatters. The question is for me; the voice belonging to the head whose ears I had imagined ripping off. I splay my hands, stretching the tight muscles between my knuckles. I look back at my locker. Not only did I warp its solid structure, but here I am shouting at the popular kids for throwing a paper airplane. No one else knows what it said. Worse, no one else would care! Suddenly I feel sick. I want to run away, I want this horrible interaction to be over as it dawns on me: As if being the new kid in school wasn't enough pressure. As if being the only half-human student didn't already single me out. Now I'm the crazy girl who shouts at people for no other reason than throwing airplanes on their way to class.

Meekly, even to my own ears, I mumble back, "I'm not just an orc."

"That's nice, sweetie," he says liltingly, "anything else you'd like to announce?"

Lavinia giggles.

Daoll whispers something to his brother under his breath.

Everyone is staring at me.

I feel an uncomfortable heat sprawl across my face, the powdery blue skin of my cheeks blossoming into an undignified purple. Did I really pick this fight? I imagine going home to tell my parents I was expelled. And for what? Destruction of property? Getting in a fist fight? All in the first week of school.

"No, uh, sorry." I say, forming the excuse around my still-growing tusks, "I . . . got pinched by the latch of my locker. Then I must've slammed it closed too hard."

I have no idea why these other kids hated MEANS so much, why their personal vendettas just had to be so incredibly public. And as much as I want to punish them for it, I just can't afford to be careless. I'd only be sent back home in shame.

"Excellent. You heard the 'Not-Orc', the time for announcements is over! New girl, here, is just a bit of a drama queen, so don't forget to applaud" Ttheandvar shouts with an elaborate flourish of dancing jazz hands in the air.

Amused chuckling and a scatter of entertained clapping breaks the tension. As if by his command, the steady flow of life resumes around me once more. I feel like a boulder in a river as people skirt around me. Two or three human students gawk as they pass me. Further down Skylark is a tall boy with small horns sprouting from his forehead, eyes flicking between Ttheandvar and I curiously. A few nymphs roll their eyes in my direction, obviously displeased by my gaudy display. A werewolf boy claps me on the back as he passes by. A drow shakes her head dismissively as she drops her skateboard to mount. Everyone forgives. No one forgets. At lunch they snicker, between classes they whisper.

A fog of disembodied voices:

"Did you see Scarlette blush earlier?
I didn't know orcs could do that!"

**"They can't, not even pale orcs. Have you
seen her dad? Urrug? He's pure, solid
aegean."**

"It must be her mother's
blood. Did you see the
way she crushed her
locker?"

"That's what you get with something like her,
orcish strength and a human temper."

"The football team could use that kind of muscle. No one would think there's a girl under all that intimidation."

"Do you think they'd have a uniform her size?"

"Forget size, she could be dangerous."

"Just don't let her get too close to you. I'm sure the smell is bad enough, but there's unfiltered mortal aggression under that tainted skin, I just know it."

"Yeah. Aren't orcs supposed to have thick skin? What do you think really set her off?"

It is true, I think to myself, but I'm only half. I swallow a tangled hitch in my throat.

That day I learn a pinch wouldn't hurt, but words? They sink deep.



(An AI Depiction of Letia Urrug)

Mark Two: The First Book

My last class of the day is Chronicles of Eras Past. Out of everything in my school schedule, it is what I look forward to the most. And for the school year's first big project, Proctor Aegnor thinks it fitting that I focus my history report on 'Human and Mythical Relations'.

The moment I say I'm looking forward to getting started on the project, the Proctor turns and blinks her reptilian eyes at me. Slowly. Her slitted eyes look dry and dull in the shadow of her turban, the fabric of which is deliberately scrunched and folded by design to form a bulbous cotton rose.

"Strange. Most of my Orcan students groan in the face of academic work."

"I accept the challenge with warmth! I must get that from my mom." I say proudly.

"Indeed."

Proctor Aegnor hesitates for a moment. The expression she wears is an exact replica of Quellie's face when inspecting cooked eggplant. It was the face of someone slightly off-put, one that said "I'm curious, but not optimistic."

Eventually, in a voice that sounds like dry gravel, she says, "That is why I selected this topic special for you. I suggest you ask for your mother's help. In fact, I insist that you request the assistance of your father as well. I'm sure you'll provide us with a balanced, one-of-a-kind insight on the matter."

After school I tell my mom about the project, how I was specially selected for it and that my teacher said I needed her help. But instead of matching my excitement, she is skeptical. I wonder if maybe she thinks I am being lazy or trying to cheat?

She asks, "Why did you choose "Human and Mythical Relations?"

I answer, "I didn't, it was assigned to me."

"Why did Proctor Aegnor say you should be the one to do it?"

"She said I'd bring a unique perspective to the discussion."

"What other topics are your classmates working on?"

"There's groups for magical tech, kingdom boundaries, and economics."

The full plush of her pink lips press together, thin as a wire.

I scratch the back of my neck, suddenly itchy all over.

Later that afternoon she sits with me at the kitchen table. My father has not yet returned from work and the smell of dinner hangs thick in the air. Garlic mingles with the gamey scent of rabbit meat. It is delicious. In an hour we will slice up apples to add to the stew and jicama for a salad. Even at thirteen I know my mom is an excellent cook. She has generations of family recipes stored in her mind and a knack for maximizing ingredients because of it. I may not like clothes shopping, but I love going to the market with her. It is her own kind of magic, the way she barter for pork and then, off to the side, explains how she'll divide its use for pancit and adobo later that week. My father is a good cook too, but he uses onions too often for my liking.

Home is an idyllic cottage. Ground-level, since my father's bulk makes him too heavy to feel secure higher up in the treetops and because my mom prefers a garden in the ground. It has two floors, not counting the attic, and a well-loved kitchen where most of our time as a family is spent. Sitting in front of the simmering stew, Mom pulls her thick hair up into a knot and ties it under a bandana. Then we begin by reading the school-appointed textbook together. By her instruction, I scan the Table of contents, the section on how to best use this book, and start not on the first chapter, but at the introduction.

Once upon a time, Earth was governed by magic and its folk. As a whole, these folk are known as the Mythicals or Mythics. For many an Era past

the Mythicals and the planet lived in utter harmony until such a time came that certain beings evolved into humans. For a brief time, Mythics and Mankind attempted to coexist. However, it quickly became clear that the latter not only desired to inhabit the world, but they coveted it for themselves. For the mortal belief that they were meant to be the true inheritors of the planet, and in the name of peace, the Mythicals left the realm in human hands.

My eyes never leaving the page, I see my mom's head bob in a slight nod and she quickly flicks a wrist at me, silently urging me to keep reading.

So far so good.

The hearth crackles with the noisy bark of a healthy fire and by its cue I obey her mute command.

For one long Era of Man the world was ruled by humans. Land and water were divided into warring nations; blood and bodies sank deep beneath the crust; toxins and gasses polluted ocean and sky both; plastic and other garbage poisoned flora and fauna alike.

The planet was utterly unbalanced. And it was Earth's pain that finally beckoned magic back into the realm. Harkening Her plea, portals were reopened and the Mythicals re-emerged. In great numbers and through wholesome unity, the Mythicals swept over Earth, set to the task of Her healing. Thus marked the Great Return.

At the end of the paragraph, I chance a glance at her, my mom is positioned stoically in her chair. She rubs her thumb in slow semi-circles along the body of her earthen clay mug, the flatline of her mouth mimicking stone. It is like staring at a pot of water on the fire and seeing tiny bubbles form at its bottom. I wait to see if she will interject. She doesn't.

In less that one full rotation around the sun, the War of the Returned was over. The Earth was once again, as She had not been for so very long, liberated. A tribunal was held to determine the fate of mankind, what worthy punishment for ignorant, blatant planetary neglect the destructive race would receive. The determined sentence: Intergenerational indentured servitude to the Mythicals until such a time that humans could be re-educated as a species. Re-Education Mission Camps, otherwise known as REM Camps, were constructed, but it was not until the next Era, after the Revolutions of—

From tiny bubbles, to splashing heat; the pot that is my mother boileth over. The page flips in a sudden, swift gust of wind. The arching swipe of an olive-colored hand swatting a flagon of water to the ground. A sharp crack splinters the air as it slams against the floorboards. A sizzling erupts from the fireplace where spilt liquid kisses flame. I don't move. But a moment later, she stands. Plucks the mug from the ground. Gingerly sets it on the table. I stare at it, studying its new webbing.

I have never heard my mother utter an apology for anything in my life and she doesn't do so now. Instead she simply states, "I shouldn't have done that" and I begin to count the seconds of silence that follows. At fifty two she stops pacing. At ninety seven she speaks again.

"How simple they make it sound," she says.

My forehead forms valleys in my confusion. In class, we had talked about the generations of humans who served their time and attended the REM Camps in order to right their inherited wrongs. To learn from their ancestor's mistakes. Today very few human families are still bound by that Law. Only the worst of ancestral lineages remains unforgiven for their selfish crimes against their fellow man and the Earth Herself. Families who used to own stuff called oil companies. People who didn't care about their outdated products choking landfills. Surely no one my mom had ever known personally. I say as much to her and she sighs.

"Scarlette, you look so much like your father," she says, "and for that, you have no idea how grateful I am. At a mere glance from a stranger on the street, you pass. And so you've never been shamed for being human. For being the lesser race."

Just under my mom's skin, a storm roils and quickens the pace of her charged words.

"I understand the planet was in danger. I even understand why such drastic measures were taken to heal Her. But that was eons ago! What have I ever done to hurt Gaia? Was I alive to protest the production of plastic? Did I tunnel and bury nuclear waste into Her soil? Have you? Why are humans still hated, even outside of REM Camps?"

Her intense anticipation has a tangy scent to it, less than primal, yet insistent. All together assertive. She's in what Quellie and I call 'hot head' mode. I don't want to do or say anything that would upset her further, but how to manage that?

"You do love your garden," I say slowly, thinking about the luscious nursery she nurtures. How she keeps Earth's presence as a constant envelopment. Mom works hard to surround us with nature's beauty, from the meadow of our yard, to the greenhouse pots scattered around our home.

A groan reverberates from within her throat. I swallow hard. Obviously, I am missing something crucial. I rack my brain thinking, *am I supposed to be remembering something? Have*

we ever talked about this before? I can't remember. Maybe that's why she is getting so mad at me.

I think it before she could say it aloud, *why am I so stupid?*

She raises her voice then, as if she has somehow heard me. She plants herself firmly across from me, slamming both hands down on the table.

"Think!" She nearly shouts, "Why are we still being punished? What shapes, or shaped the structure of our society? No human alive today played a part in what happened during the Era of Man. Yet, at work just the other day, a satyr took one look at me and demanded a different nurse be assigned to her infant."

"Scarlette, think for yourself for once. You say people 'attended the REM Camps to right inherited wrongs', but how can anyone be guilty of their dead ancestor's sins?"

A silence settles between us.
I don't dare to move a twitch.
Her dark eyes, lit with passion, bear into mine.

Slowly she uncurls herself, her small body stacking straight. Like a bent fishing rod straightening after the loss of game. Like a loose bowstring made suddenly taught. I swallow her visage with my eyes. Her own, black and almond-shaped, express a sharp alertness; her thin arms are bent to cross her chest, stubborn and willful. And, from this angle, she seems taller than normal. Her towering figure is backlit against the flickering fire. The flames casts shadows against the smooth walls of our kitchen, making strange bulbous and swirling shapes out of the drying vegetables hanging from the ceiling. And the wood-eating stove. And the iron oven.

She just stands there, looking at me expectantly. Flushed. I release a low groan. Find a quick reprieve of darkness under the spread of my hands. Smoosh my palms into my face. A film of tears build behind my eyeballs. Rage and shame slither through the caverns of my veins.

I don't understand. I don't understand. I don't understand. I don't understand!

"Just explain it to me," I plead, "Tell me what you mean!"

Her mouth parts, prepared to spew, when a melody on the wind slips through the window. A whistling of jumping notes and looping winds wind its way through the air, and, following it, my father brushes his large square shoulders through the doorway.

"Good evening, family," he sings. "How fares my favorite people in the whole world tonight? Where's Querie?"

"Urrug." She says his name in greeting. Not without welcome, but not exactly brimming with it either.

He fixes his wide grin on me. I can feel it, if not totally see it through the latticed crossing of my fingers sliding down my face. His smile wavers. The dull glow of his red eyes slip from me, then to my Mom.

"I am helping Scarlette with a history project," she announces, straightening her posture. "About human and Mythic relations."

For a moment they just stare at one another. And for some reason, I shiver.

"I see." That's all he says. It's all she needs to hear.



(An AI Depiction of Ella, Scarlett's Childhood Best Friend)

Mark Three: The Park

The park is alive around us. Other kids, both younger and older than I, launch themselves from what I like to call Spring Flowers. I don't know what the flora's proper name is, and they are technically summer blooms, but even past their prime the Spring Flowers make for bouncy, gravity-defying fun. I recognize a pair of hill troll sisters, from my old school, the Panther Lake Center of Learning. The youngest of them, Svante, is in the same class as Ella and I. Well, the same class as Ella. They are using the Flowers to fling themselves into a flashy show of acrobatic high-fives. The petals, as wide as I am tall, reverberate with the push and pull of their weight. Elsewhere in the park are brown, pillowy mushrooms that have footholds worn into them from months of climbing. The knobby roots of the massive neighborhood trees form a cave fit for thorough exploring. At the center of the cave's dome are moss covered slides. On long rows of picnic tables, fist-sized ladybugs and shiny, purple beetles fly over each other in hopping games of tic-tac-toe. Someone's parents are playing leapfrog with them in the shallow pool filled with boulder-sized lily pads.

When my parents granted me permission to leave the kitchen, I immediately left to find Ella. She knew by the look on my face that I wanted to talk to her in private, so we came here — to the neighborhood park. Luckily, my best friend and I were able to score the perfect spot on the swings today. We are right in the middle where the two swing structures end. Both are grown carefully, with the aid of nature magic, side by side. My side is sturdy, the structure's pillars and the swing's flat wooden seat are molded from the smooth flesh of a tree. Hers is made of thick ropey ivy. A tightly woven knot supports the weight of her small human body in a comfortable sling-like seat. There was a time when we both used the ivy swings. But ever since my biggest growth spurt two years ago, I no longer fit. Half-human, I managed it comfortably until I was

eleven. During one lazy swing, I felt a jarring *snap* suddenly jerk me mid-flight. That's when I realized my half-orc side had spoken. It was time for me to upgrade to the big swings.

Thanks to our good seats, I'm able to fill Ella in about my big school assignment and how both my parents shooed me away so they could talk. At first I think it's funny that she asks me the same questions my mom had. Except it very quickly becomes unfunny.

I say my topic was chosen for me.

She wonders, "Didn't everyone else get to choose?"

I don't know what to say.

She asks, "What does she mean by 'unique perspective'?"

I don't know what to say.

She asks about my group.

Again, I don't know what to say.

Our conversation hangs in the air, limp and open-ended. For an uncomfortable and lonely moment, I wonder what Ella's school days are like now that I've left Panther Lake. Who does she hang out with at lunch? There were other kids we were friendly to, like the sisters at the Spring Flowers, but when the teacher said it was time to pair up for assignments there was no question we'd be together. Our eyes would lock from across the room before the Proctor could finish their sentence. Life is so different now, for both of us. I hate it.

Ella interrupts my thoughts with a loud huff that reminds me of neighing horses.

"If you're not going to tell me what your partners are like, then at least tell me their names." she says.

I run a hand through my hair over and over again, but it's not enough. I find myself scratching hard, from the back of my neck to my collar bone.

Finally, I answer, "I can't tell you their names because I don't have any project partners."

"Not even one of your full-human classmates?"

I wiggle in my seat.

"Nope, it's just me." I say as a coldness spreads through my chest.

I glance over at her as we pass each other in another arc, but her blonde hair whips in front of her face and I miss her expression. I wonder what she's feeling. Disgust? Confusion? She hums darkly. A short museing. As if she is trying to decide who to blame.

There's another layer of frost as I think about how uncomfortable I was talking to my Mom about my schoolwork. How angry she had become when it became clear that I had no idea what she was trying to get out of me, what she was trying to get me to understand but couldn't.

Had Ella puzzled out in mere moments,

what I could not in an hour?

For a long while, my best friend and I sway back and forth in silence.

I lean back in my swing, tilt my head, and I look straight up. Alpine homes are carved into hulking bodies of trees polka-a-dotting the neighborhood. Blooming pillows of leafy branches are nurtured carefully by residents to shape their space, obscure private wrap-around porches, and invite the delicate lives of wildlife such as butterflies and honey bees to their bowed windows. Homes are stacked and scattered up and up into the treetops, the way towards uptown

somewhere above the visible canopy, where branches and ivy staircases crisscross and connect the community together. I pump my weight through my legs, smearing the bright colors of autumn as the swing pushes and pulls at my vision. The neighborhood marquee is so dense I can't catch even a glimpse of sky.

"Then what happened, Scarlett?" Ella asks.

"Then we came here. I tried to tell them I wanted to stay, that if they were talking about my homework I should be allowed to at least listen, but then they said *it's grown up stuff.*"

Ella and I scoff in unison.

"*Because 'I said so,'*" my friend adds with a nasally accent.

"Then you know the rest," I continue, "I came over and asked if you wanted to play." I pause thoughtfully, "I suppose Quellie will help finish the rest of dinner."

I had thought about inviting my little sister to play at the park with me and Ella, but decided against it at the last moment. Quellie always wanted to play with dolls and while Ella would have indulged her, I wasn't in the mood. Not right now, I need a friend more than a playdate.

Ella starts laughing wildly. "In your presentation you better explain why you always call your dad by the wrong name! Remember that time he took us all out to get ice cream? Benny still teases me about it. Of course he feels no embarrassment for himself, since he says it's all my fault."

"Your brother's right," I guffaw, "it is your fault!"

In our next passing swing, I turn my head around to face her and stick my tongue out. She kicks at the air in protest of my teasing her.

Ella's words bubble out of her between giggles. "When I called him by his last name, or at least the version of his last name you came up with, the ice cream guy was stunned!"

"Of course he was!" I exclaim. "You basically told him you're my sister. And look at us! You and Benny don't look anything like Quelie, me, or my mom."

"I know, I know! Both your dad and the clerk were startled when I accidentally called him 'dad'. What made it even worse, though, was that he *knew* the ice cream guy. He's the son of one of your dad's work buddies, right?"

"Sure is!" I say brightly, "Then, even though the next day was his mid-week break off work, Rugrug got a call from that same buddy congratulating him on the adoption of two orphan humans! 'How generous you are', they told RugRug, 'didn't even know you were looking to adopt.'"

"In my defense," Ella remarks, "how many times has your mother called me her 'blonde daughter'? At this point it's at least partially true."

"And in my defense, it never occurred to me that I needed to explain orc customs to you."

"You could have at least mentioned that your family is a special case. If I had called him Urrug like is proper —"

"Hey, that's not fair though! You know I had problems talking when I was little-little. Rugrug was the best I could do, and it stuck." I say through a wide smile.

Ella announces that she gives up and I thank her for another victory. When Ella then asks how I feel about Amalgamy Academy, for a second, I think about telling her the same thing I have been saying to my Mom. The conversation runs through my head:

I would say,
oh you know, everything is fine'.

Mom would say,
'that's nice. focus on your studies'.
My best friend? She would say,
Liar.

So I tell her about the bullying at my new school. How I almost got in a fist-fight with the Elvin boy, Tthreandvar and his three other Fae friends. That I don't know why they mock the Magical Emergency Agents of National Security, or if they've guessed that Rugrug proudly works for the Kingdom's militia.

"Everyone's talking about me," I say. "I just know it. I hear bits and pieces of it, and I'm worried things are only going to get worse."

"I'm sorry," she says. "That's a lot all at once."

I swing my legs out before me and lean back, allowing the swing to rocket me forward. When the wood creaks and rope jumps at its crux, I float for half a second, weightless in the air. Then gravity wraps itself around me once more and I curl my legs again. In an elegant arc, I sweep backwards, my unbound hair brushing the ground, then billowing around me in my spare moments of flight.

Ella breaks our silence. "I'm sure it'll pass. It can't be as bad in real life as it is in your head."

At that I frown. And, feeling that the moment deserves more than that, I grunt too.

She stumbles over her words a little in response, rushing to provide an explanation. "I just mean, people get bored, right? Sooner or later the gossip will move on to something else. You're just extra sensitive because everything and everyone is new to you. Stop doing that thing you do and be a little, you know, more open."

"*Oh noo!*" I say mockingly. I release a hand from holding one side of my swing and plant it against my forehead, selling my exaggerated facade of epiphany. "Now it makes sense! I've been *so insensitive* to not have considered the entire student body with *my* newness to them, *poor babies*. Think I should bake a batch of apology cupcakes for everyone? Sans the other new students of course, since they've all been just as *woefully ignorant* and *insensitive* as I."

Then, a pensive heartbeat later, "Wait — I don't do a 'thing'".

Predictably, Ella rolls her eyes. "Sure you don't."

"I don't," I reply, waving away the thought. "But, let's say that I did. You know, have a 'thing'. What does that mean? And what does that have to do with being 'more open'?"

As my swing pulls me backwards, I sit up a little in time to see my best friend's golden halo of curls cloud around the back of her head and shoulders. We are swinging opposite of one another, yet in perfect rhythm. As I fall forward, she slides back. And it feels right. Everything always feels right when we are together. I am noise, she is quiet; I am fire, she is air; I am the stick that breaks, she is the fabric that bends. Always different, always synergetic.

"Remember the blizzard two winters ago and your idea to pack wet stone and snow around the local leyline markers?"

"Of course I remember." I say. "If Buggies can't sense leyline energies, the vehicles can't run. The idea was to extend our snow days together by making it impossible for us to go to school."

"Oh I understood the plan, but then what happened?" She asks.

I blow a long raspberry out of my lips. "It didn't matter after all. We learned that even though the markers amplify some magnetic energies, they're mostly decorative. For directions or whatever. Our rocks and water didn't do anything to it."

"Yeah," she urges. "But you kept saying how you felt everyone was watching you. That the adults thought you were a no-good troublemaker."

"Mhm," I nod, releasing a bitter snort, "right before Benny betrayed me!"

Ella doesn't hesitate for a second, "He didn't betray you, Scarlette, he was trying to help you."

I raise an eyebrow, not caring that she can't see my face through the movement of our alternating pendulums. "He kicked down the fortress we built around the southern marker and told your mom what our plan was. Your guys' parents might have laughed it off, but my mom sure didn't!"

Ella and I never fight, but we've had plenty of disagreements before. Usually when it comes to matters of grace. When I argued that a book's villain deserved their death, she found reason to pity them. If I thought a protagonist deserved to unleash their wrath upon a bad guy, she felt it would strip away their heroism. I see the world in black and white, but she sees reality as a sliding greyscale.

"If you care to remember," I say in the tone of someone recalling the plight of a great injustice done to them. "I was grounded for the rest of that snow break."

"He wasn't trying to get you in trouble." Ella groans, "All he knew was that you were starting to think the whole thing was a bad idea and that the adults didn't like you anymore. He thought getting rid of the pile around the marker and asking our mom about it would help."

I rock my jaw back and forth.

"All I'm saying is sometimes you do this thing where you get in your head a bit." Ella continues, "Maybe you felt so guilty inside, that your head looked for outside reasons to feel bad,

too. And then once everything was messy inside and out, you felt like the whole world was against you."

Again, I keep my mouth shut. The oscillation of our measured swaying is still in perfect rhythm. I think about the smattering of applause Tthreandvar drew from the crowd who witnessed my embarrassing interaction with him and his gang. The fog of condescending, opinionated voices I heard murmuring around me in the Tree of Halls' corridors of lockers. The way my school-assigned ambassador abandoned me before she even told me her name. How I spend more time looking at the campus map than engaged in any sort of conversation. The lunches I ate alone, the recesses I sat alone, the school project I was working on alone. Was it all really that simple? Were others wary of me because they could sense I was wary of them? I am unconvinced.

"I'm not imagining this, Ella. People really are talking about me. I heard them. They talked about my blood, and my stature, and-and they said I am 'tainted'."

"*Tainted?*"

Ella's body goes rigid. She sticks her legs straight out and drags her heels against the worn earth beneath us.

"Scarlette, they really said *that*? You have to tell someone, an adult. Your parents!"

A nervous laugh erupts from me, in no way am I prepared to tell them what was really going on at school. If I did, they were sure to do something about it. And then where would that leave me? I feel infamous enough without their involvement. If my father, MEANS Chief Kierrian Urrug, made a complaint to the school? His mere presence would send a message of warning ringing throughout campus, I was sure of it.

I can't remember how old I was the first time he had a talk with a school principal of mine, but I do remember why. I had stayed after school the day before with tutors who were helping me with speech problems. Then, afterwards, they put me on a public Crawler Buggie, presumably to send me off on my way home. But I didn't know the way. And neither did the bus driver. Time was an elusive concept to me still, but Rugrug said I was missing for more than three hours. The next day, the principal welcomed us into her office with open wings and a smile. And, though I sat directly outside her closed door while they spoke, I noticed that her lioness tail was twitching sporadically when we left.

I learned a valuable lesson that day:

Quiet anger is potent,
possibly even more
ferocious than spitfire. It's
the difference between a
threat and a promise.

I will never know or ask what Rugrug said to the principal that day. I only know that from then on she personally escorted me to the bus line for the rest of the school year. Often and with small treats of wild boar jerky and sweet fruit. I remember because I thought it was funny that she would give me apples instead of the other way around.

And as for what if Mom had gone instead of Rugrug? She was the spitfire kind of angry. So much so that her scent changed from her usual sweet smell that came from her diabetic blood, to one of rotten vegetables. Three days after talking to the principal, a wild boar went on a rampage through our neighborhood. By the time the bus driver noticed the policing Guardians, the doors were open and I was tottering at the edge of the exit. I remember hearing the words

'stop' and 'boar' being shouted behind me but there was nothing I could do. I felt pressure between my shoulder blades push me the last step forward; I heard the doors of the bus close; I turned to see the face of my Drachin neighbor pressed against the glass; and I smelled the overripe, dirty stench of a wild animal nearby. I was around Quellie's age, seven or eight, but I didn't panic. I didn't feel the need to. The Guardians took down the boar before I ever saw it, but the reason I didn't freak out? When I was alone with the threat of a wild boar on the loose, I saw my mom charge down the road from our cottage ullaing a warrior's cry and wielding a garden hose as her weapon.

It was another lesson:

Humans, no matter what
era, are a far more scary
and resilient race than
they seem. Part
destruction and part love.

We dangle from the rope swing side-by-side, Ella's wide eyes still intense and watching me.

"I'm not telling anyone, and neither can you. Promise?"

I stick my left pinky out, holding it up between us, but she doesn't budge. Only narrows her eyes.

"I don't want any drama or trouble, Ella. I know what they said. I know what it means."

At least some of what it means, I think internally, not wanting to admit that she seems to understand their implications deeper than I.

"I won't lie. It's pretty bad. People so far have been mean, and uninviting, and judgmental, and it's, it's just been very lonely. But maybe you're right, too." I push on, trying to

find the right words that would ring both true and convincing, "I dunno, say that was only 10 percent of the school. Of my Level's Sprout Division. I still have 90 percent of the rest of the school to meet. There's bound to be a friend or two hidden in the fold somewhere, right?"

Her small mouth wriggles, and I know she is chewing on her inner lip. I flex my pinky, curling it invitingly. I am hoping for a laugh, but she is oddly placid. Serious. Every ounce of playfulness withdrawn from her face. She doesn't offer her pinky in return, but finally starts to talk again.

"I don't like it," she says. "I wasn't there. I didn't hear what was said. But I do agree that you can still make friends there. Scarlette, just be careful."

"Careful? Of what?"

"Of people," she says rather elusively, "of who you trust. And that you don't sike yourself out tomorrow."

Slowly, she raises her left pinky, deliberately leaving gaping space between both our hands.

"But I still think your imagination has a tendency to over exaggerate reality, and to make friends you have to be open to them. Approachable. You can't do that if you're looking for enemies behind every face. So if you promise to try to be more open, I'll promise not to tell any adults about the jerks at your school."

She still isn't smiling. Her thin eyebrows are drawn together tightly, expressing a seriousness I rarely see her execute. With her other hand she sweeps a large lock of her bright, unruly hair out of her face, never taking her eyes off mine. I nod, reach out, and entwine her pinky with my own. Only then does she relax, a faint smile resurfacing.

"Besides, if all else fails" she shrugs. "Do what my brother says and pretend you're part-of. Then maybe after a while you won't need to pretend anymore. And if after some time you still feel like you need to pretend? Then you know the problem isn't you."

Benny's special after-school class meant he couldn't come out and play with us today, but I have a feeling Ella is right in her advice by quoting him. And now I have a feeling that I owe Benny an apology for misunderstanding him two winters ago. When he does come find us at the park, it's to tell us that it is time to come home. He is confused by my attempt at amends, claiming he didn't know I was ever mad at him to begin with. So he shrugs away my concern with a hapless smile. Then he says that he learned a new batch of fun facts at school today that he's excited to share with us on the walk home. They're random and funny and just so *Benny*.

There is something about Benjamin that's different from everyone else. Separate from Ella and myself. He is one of the smartest people I know. Part of what makes him different to me is the fact that he is one of the oldest kids I know and am friends with. But there is more to it than that. He is good at hard card games, can tell me the specific name of any rock I ask him about, and loves to talk with me about Ancient human power resources. Sometimes his smartness makes him hard to talk to, but he is a good friend. It's not his fault I sometimes have a hard time keeping up with his big brain. And he isn't just smart, he's funny! Listening to him laugh is like walking out from under a tall tree's shadow and into a patch of warm sunlight. That's why, when his laughter is cut off by a sharp *yelp*, it feels like a giant rain cloud eclipsing the sun. He is in the middle of a silly joke about Elves taking out the garbage when a pebble crashes into his nose.

The path we are on is narrow and thick with leafy arbor, robust foliage and fat bushes. It connects the neighborhood park to our homes and is a well-worn walkway the three of us are deeply familiar with. There's a bend to the path that curves in a way that makes corners out of the

dirt pathway. One corner curves away from the direction we just came from, and the other corner lies ahead of us, leading the way back home. The straight section we are in is overgrown all around, but we can still see everything clearly within a ten foot radius. What we can't see, what I can't find, is who threw the pebble.

"Maybe a bird dropped it?" Ella suggests.

Benny, while rubbing his pinkened nose, agrees. But before any of us can take a step forward, we are bombarded by a shower of pebbles pelting us from above. Small as they are, the rocks hurt! There's intent behind their projection — someone is throwing them hard enough to bruise. I cover my head with my arms and look over to check on Benny and Ella. There's a small trail of blood leaking from Benny's forehead now, but he's using his arms to shield his sister.

"Run!" I shout at them.

But it's no use. I can hear the flutter of wings now as our attackers follow us straight, then around the bend. Stones fly at us, some zoom past our heads while others pound into the back of our necks, our thighs, our shoulders. Still hiding my head under my arms and running, I hear Ella cry out behind me. Chancing a glance, I turn to look back and receive a face-full of gravel.

"That's it! Show yourselves, what do you want?" I scream at our assaulters.

I don't wait for a reply. Instead, I start scooping up the scattered pebbles and begin throwing them back in the direction they came from. The surprise of my counter attack creates an opening for Benny and Ella to charge forward. I hear them skid to a stop and call back for me to hurry up. But rather than following their lead, I throw up another spray of pebbles. This time I see them. Half a dozen sprites still decades away from being considered children. Somehow they not only snuck away from their minders, but they're already up to the nefarious games the youth of their kind is known for.

"You're just babies!"

"Yes," Benny says irritably. "Babies with a penchant for mischief and trouble. Come on, Scarlette! Let's go before starting up again."

I spare one last glare up at the sprites. They're giggling and flying around in loop-de-loops, as if throwing rocks at us were just a game of tag. As if, now that they are out of projectiles, we are too boring to bother with any longer. I clench my hands into fists but before I can do anything more, Benny is tugging on my arm. He and his sister look as if they have both barrel-rolled down a hill and landed in a sticker bush. A fresh wave of irritation washes through me, inciting a desire for some sort of revenge, but Benny quells it with a shake of his head.

"They're not worth it." He says. "You're fine, but Ella and I aren't. And we need you with us the rest of the way home."

I know what he's doing. Benny is smart, so he knows they don't really need me to escort them home. After all, it was his parents that sent him to bring Ella and I back home safely. His job is to protect Ella, and lingering here, no matter how badly I wanted to get back at the pixies, won't accomplish that. Besides, He's right about one thing. The sharp edges of the rocks might have stung, but they didn't cut into my skin the way they did theirs.

Reluctantly, I relax my hands, nod, and together we leave the playful pixies behind. I don't stop thinking of them, though. A pixie's natural aptitude for chaos and unrelenting desire for anarchy makes most of their kind unwelcome neighbors. And this was the first time I've ever seen those six in the neighborhood. So I can't help but wonder what their story is. Where they came from, or when their clan moved in nearby. Because for nomadic Mythicals who prefer the Wilds between Kingdom boundaries, it seems odd to have spotted so many of their young flying around my neighborhood.

I lather my hands with soap and wash away the memory of pixies in my kitchen sink. I don't know how Benny and Ella will explain their cuts and bruises to their parents, but my mom doesn't even bat an eye when she sees me come in. Looking at my metallic reflection in Mom's pots and pans, I realize why. Sometime tomorrow, Benny and Ella's mom will certainly tell mine all about the state of their return from the park. But while they go home tonight looking battered, I simply looked slightly tousled. Wind-blown from playing on the swingset.

At dinner I make sure to compliment Quellie on her jicama and apple cutting skills, promising that I could taste the special care she put into sizing them. It wasn't until we were getting ready for bed that mention of my big school project arises again. I am waiting behind Quellie for my turn to brush my teeth at the bathroom sink we share when I hear Rugrug's voice calling me from the living room downstairs.

"Tomorrow after school we're going to sit down together and go over some of your homework. In fact, we'll probably spend the next few days after school doing a little homeschooling."

Surprisingly, Mom isn't waiting for me in the room with him. After all the time they had spent deliberating with one another while I was at the park with Ella, I had expected a talk with them both. Instead it is just Rugrug and I talking, sitting on the sofa together.

"I don't always agree with your mother's methods, but she's right. It's about time we talked about the reality of the world and how a large portion of it sees the human race. Your mother, I love her for her intense passion, but I know its heat can be... educationally distracting. So I think it's best if we three talk about it together, yes?"

The cushions sag beneath us; his far greater weight creates a decline that threatens to pull me down.

"I think that sounds good," I agree. Though a part of me is worried that even with his help, I won't understand what Mom is trying to teach me.

Then he jerks his massive body and the momentum topples me over and into his torso. Without hesitation, he announces that his plan has worked! He wraps his strong arms around my shoulders and hugs me. His chest slaps against my cheek as we laugh together. He smells like soap, comfort, and a little bit like a home-grown tomato still on the vine, its skin warmed by a summer sun.

I try to hold on to that feeling, as I lay in bed that night. I try to think of the promise I made Ella. But, at the end of the day, the swing in the neighborhood park is so far away. The comfort of Rugrug's warmth is replaced by the old darkness of night. I curl into my blankets. I draw a pillow to my chest. Ignore Quelim's heavy snores. Close my eyes.

And

I could feel, could think of *dread*
that talking to Ella was one thing had helped today,
but

Ella won't be there to face the day with me.

whowouldIhavetomorrow

No.....

tomorrow, tomorrow **I'll be** on my
own



(An AI Depiction of Amalgamy Academy)

Mark Four: The Tour

The morning is gray. Some might not know what this means, what it feels like to wake in and of fog. When evergreens, a backslash of muted reprieve, sway like jewels; when thick rainclouds swarm overhead and shield against the sun's warmth; when damp paving stone is just as cold as you are inside. It is amidst this dark and stormy painting of life that I prepare to face the long hours after dawn, thinking that sleep is a restless, sweaty thing.

I wrap my school uniform around my body,
thinking about knights donning armor.

Today you face the world,
proclaims a small voice in my head.

Mom pushes breakfast into my hands.
I eat my bowl of oatmeal close to the kitchen window,
where Mother Earth and Sky feel close.

Today you face the world, echoes the voice.

While Mom takes Quellie and I to school,
I focus my mind on detaching emotion from my face.

Today I face the world, I murmur to myself.

My promise to Ella is a dull throb in the back of my head. The tans and plaids of the different Amalgamy Level uniforms swirl about me as I trek through the morning mist. I keep my head down, eyes trailing the path as my feet carry me towards my poor, brutalized locker atop the Tree of Halls. I am staring at my boots when the lift's edge goes flush with my hallway vaulted in the Tree. A hand painted sign that reads "Skylark" marks the corridor's frame, hanging just beyond the platform where other students lounge in line for the lift. I hold my breath, waiting for the shocked gasps. The inevitable cutting commentary. I was ready for "that's the girl I was telling you about" and "look who showed up after all". Instead, all I hear is the dull thrum of school. Scraping metal doors clanging open and closed, spilt books tumbling onto the floor,

the low trill of people muttering morning greetings to each other. Then a yawning voice murmurs a polite dictum. It comes from somewhere hip-level. I look around myself, confused, before it speaks again.

"Excuse me," it repeats, "this is my stop."

I step forward onto the Tree's flat branch of a platform and to the side. A dwarven boy disembarks from the lift behind me and continues down the hall. He mutters a quick word of gratitude before disappearing into the crowd of other sleepy students. I raise my eyes, scanning the faces of those around me, but see in them only the reflection of the sky's heavy gray rain clouds.

I don't know how to react to the indifference around me.

I step forward, hesitantly. It feels automatic, my slow push for forward momentum. I had prepared myself for ridicule, but this ... this somehow feels lonelier. I swallow a sigh, fighting off the soft edges of the gray day that pull at me. Taking in a deep, measured breath through the nose, I lift my chin and continue my way through Skylark Hall.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest as it struggles to find balance.

My locker is a brisk walk from the lift, but the way the corridor twists and curves around the body of the Tree leaves me time to spare. I'm watching the faces of those around me. The sleepy smiles, anxious quiz cramming, friends sharing notes on last night's Alchemy readings. I feel so empty the longing rattles inside me: *I want to be a part of that.*

The row of metal faces embedded into bark on my left is choked with bodies. Deep in the sea a pair of yellow eyes meet mine.

They belong to a boxy boy a hand taller than me who flashes me a slight smile and a quick nod. I remember the weight of his hand on my shoulder, from when the werewolf thudded

me on the back yesterday. I offer a wobbly smile back but look away quickly. My brain sparking into rapid conversation with itself:

Ella said I have to be approachable to make friends. But she also said to be careful who I associate with. How do I know which he is? Do I go say hi? He did pat me on the back yesterday. But what does that really mean, it might not have been meant to be supportive of me. Isn't that weird, anyways, to pat someone on the back? It is. Definitely. Right? Oh Gaia I'm overthinking this! It's fine, just say hi. 'Hi' is not weird. 'Hi' is friendly. Yeah, totally friendly and normal.

By the time I've work up enough courage to look back, he's already walking away, headed for the other lift on the opposite side of the long corridor. He melts into the crowd, between two boys, one with white hair and seaweed-colored skin and the other a tall boy with curved horns. As if sensing my attention, they both turn and look straight at me. I jump a little at the sudden accidental eye contact and look away quickly, groaning internally and shaking my head. So much for facing the world. Too slow to make a friend, too weird to blend in.

With a feeling akin to wading through sticky syrup, I travel to the outer rim of Skylark, hoping to distance myself from those who would prefer to gossip about me behind my back with their friends rather than talk to me themselves. I've never bothered to maneuver around the crowd before. The left is where the lockers are, the right seemingly bare but for lofty windows. I'm shaking my head, staring at the floor again, internally groaning, when I begin rubbing the back of my neck and stop dead in my tracks. Since I've never walked on this side of the corridor, this close to the windows, this detached and indifferent, I wasn't prepared. So I'm startled by the beauty that's framed before me. The landscape the window captures grinds my motion to a full-stop, right foot paused on its heel before weight can be distributed into my toes.

I had thought the Tree of Halls my favorite part of campus for how it melds dichotomies together. A massive oak only 90 years old, but physically aged thrice over and cleverly sculpted by the technical skills of a Gardener capable of wielding Nature Magic.

I remember my Grandpa mentioning the educational requirements for his job while we were on a fishing trip together. He works as a Gardener for a small business in the city and oversees the Construction-and-Nature Balance for uptown constructs. He visits Gardening sites often, but mostly works in an office. Like him, most Gardeners go to school until they Test out of the Level Five Sprout Division. My Uncle Nalo only has the education of a Level Four Seedling, but he works for the same company as a Green Thumb. He's a natural with Nature Magic, and so he spends all day casting at sites like the ones Grandpa is in charge of. They've both been doing their jobs for a long, long time, but I'm pretty sure that even if they were to work together, there's no way they'd have the skills, tools, or even talent to Grow something like Amalgamy Academy's Tree of Halls. If I had to guess, the Gardener who nurtured the Tree, from sapling to construct, was probably an overachiever. They were someone who had the education of a Level Six Flower, *at least*. And they not only had to be capable of Nature Magic, I'm almost positive they had to have Arboreal specialization as well.

The Tree towers over any onlooker from the ground up. Once, as it grew from just a seedling placed central to an ancient human educational institute, the Tree's branches swaddled blocks of the old building's structure, plucking them from Earth. Each corridor was then petrified in the Nature magic that was used to nurture the Tree's maturity. The pamphlet I was given at the assembly on the first day of school bragged that the Tree of Halls was just one of many notable features of the Academy, and I had a feeling I knew why. I was proud that I knew what it was instantly: a beautiful collision of Eras. The old and the new paired side-by-side just as the metal and wood of each Hall. The romance of history and the thrill of 'today' is bundled together and wrapped in the scent of oak and rain. Drawn to the windows that overlook an Autumn-touched forest, I see from its crown why the Tree of Halls is a treasure.

Spread before me is a criss-crossing nest of wiry branches adorned with the vibrancy of fire. A smattering of goldfish-hues. Pumpkin-pigmented leaves. Slashes of burnt red. It is a tunnel of flames that breaks out over a sea of rolling green ferns and emerald firs far, far below. There are even a handful of students bravely challenging gravity by tiptoeing and climbing farther out on the Tree's branches. Sparkling ribbons of streams and skinny rivers weave through bridges and roots on the ground. The miniscule figurines of uniformed bodies drift on the earthen paths in a way that reminded me of floating twigs pulled by a current. It is the view I admired from the swings, but flipped. I think I like how it looks from up here. But then again, who doesn't like the option of looking down?

"It really is quite something, isn't it?" Someone says behind me with a sigh.

I pull away from the window and turn around to find a pale girl with a sheet of even paler hair folding over the angular cuts of her shoulders. Through pools of depthless ink, her stare is instantly the friendliest I have received from any other student so far. Her eyes match mine in height and her dress is the same color as my Level Two uniform, but that about sums up our similarities. Her uniform is cut differently than mine and I wonder if she made it that way herself.

The green highlights of her skirt reach up her lower sternum, big black buttons clasping over-the-shoulder straps to the top of the skirt's fabric, a flat line tucked just under her chest. On her right shoulder strap the empty eye sockets of a skeletal cat blinks at me. It has a long, thin tongue protruding out of its mouth as if tasting the air.

I get the feeling that she spends most of her mornings getting ready for school in a bathroom standing before a mirror, probably even surrounded by bright stage lights. Then I take

in the girl's makeup and think, *scratch that last part*. She looks familiar somehow, but I can't quite place her.

"Isn't the view great?" She tries again, her thick lips glossy and shaded approximately nine shades too bright a pink. They clash with the harsh blue of her eyeshadow.

"Uh, yes. It is." I reply. Then I see what her arms are wrapped around and a sliver of anxiety stabs at my heart. "How did you — what are you doing with all my things?"

The girl's bright eyes dart between me and the bag she holds against her torso. The deep hue of sapphire winks at me each time she looks down. Peeking out of a paper bag are the edges of my secondhand textbooks and the cuff of the spare jacket I keep in my locker.

"Riiight," she says, dragging out the word in one, long high note, "This was meant to be a surprise but I kind of outed myself there, huh?"

Giggling at herself, she gestures to my wrinkled locker door just around the curve, its sharp body glinting loudly between throngs of plaid and tan clad bodies. "Principal Perrocles told me your locker was, um, not up to snuff. So I thought I'd help you switch. I was thinking something a little more your style. Let's see."

I blink. During that blink, she somehow has time to lean all of her weight on one hip and quickly tap a slender index finger against her chin. Four quick *tap-tap-tap-taps*, one triumphant 'aha' and a waterfall of chatter poured from her flowery mouth,

"You strike me as the strong and silent type, no? Stout and sturdy. Resilient and proud! Ok maybe a little clumsy, but that's alright. No bother! Say, we ought to sign you up for some clubs. Sports, right? I'm a cheerleader myself. It's a vibe thing, I can read people, you see. It's a natural born skill, and it's why I'm such a great judge of character! Anyways we can sign you up for extra once we set you up with a new little cubby hole — oh, sorry, I don't know if that's a rude thing to say to orcs, or half-orcs in

*your case, but no offense intended!
You get it, I know you do. I can also
sense that you're cool with that kind of
stuff. Now I was thinking of something
like the stone chests in the Root Cave
under the Tree of Halls or ..."*

"No!" The word rips out of me but she's talking so fast I have to say it several times before her words tumble to a full-stop. Switch lockers? Leave the Tree of Halls? Panic surges through me.

This is punishment, I think to myself, for my behavior yesterday.

I have to find a way to stay in Skylark. I clear my throat and make an effort to inject friendliness into my voice.

"I mean, thank you. That was very, um, considerate."

"You're welcome!" Her smile widens. It's a genuine smile, oddly crooked and — I gasp.

"Your teeth," I marvel, "they're pointed!"

This whole time her smile was still deep and wide but all lips. Now her face splits with a grin so open I can count at least five death-tipped fangs. I didn't think I'd actually see one of her kind this far away from Mom's home country. She told me about Mythicals like this pale girl. I fight the urge to step away at the recognition of her race, but I can't keep the stutter out of my mouth. I am suddenly flooded with the monster stories Mom used to tell Quellie and I before bed. The scary ones from her old Kingdom.

"Y-y- you're an aswang!"

"Indeed I — oh. Oh, no!" she explodes with a mirthy giggle.

*"I'm actually from a long line of Kellas Sith!
Ha! A vampire, wait until I tell Mother. It's
an understandable mix-up, although not
exactly polite. But that's ok, you didn't mean
to be offensive."*

I look back down at the skeletal cat on her shoulder and I want to bang my head against the wall. Maybe toss myself out of the window. *Of course!*

"What a horrible mistake! I am so sorry," I say.

"Oh no, don't be. Mother says it's a common accident. You're just my first."

She pauses. Eyes me warily. Curiously. I can't tell which. For a second, I think she's about to ask me something. There's a question written on her face but her expression is locked and I don't have a key.

"I can see how someone might mistake us for a vampire or an aswang or even a mandurugo. But vampires are strictly nocturnal, can't handle the sun. Most aswangs are hideous creatures by night — I know that's not exactly politically correct, but it is true. Mandurugos, well, they're the naughty bad boys of the crowd, aren't they? Everyone thinks they're nocturnal but they're not, not really. I dated one last year, he just ascended to a Level Three Flower. Fabulous kisser. Kellas Siths, while we do have our nocturnal habits, have more flexibility."

She's not even breathless. The girl's grin just deepens when she finishes speaking, showing more teeth. It's a sly, slippery smile. And it looked like liquid on her face.

"Wow," I express, trying to piece together everything she just said. She speaks so rapidly all I can really think is *this girl can talk*.

I haven't met any aswangs or mandurugos before, at least not that I know of. And I'm usually in bed by the time any vampires in the neighborhood awaken for the night. Sorina Mason did say that she met a homeschooled one at a restaurant once. It was in the bathroom. Sorina says that she was asked by the vampire to check the girl's lipstick. In every retelling Sorina can't decide whether she was about to get eaten or if the vampire girl was hitting on her.

But the fact that I've been around Kellas Sith before and I still mis-identified her is mortifying. Although, in my defense, while there were Kellas Sith at my old school, they preferred to keep to themselves. Now that I think about it, I hardly made any Mythical friends there. I was stuck with whoever else was assigned to my classroom and I got along best with the

human students. Maybe that's why I feel so lost here, for a private school of mixed races there seems to be a lot more Mythicals than humans.

A small cough interrupts my thoughts. I stammer out an apology, realizing it has been an entire eternity since either of us has said anything and it is definitely my turn to say something now.

"S-Sorry, it's just, ha! You're kind of *my* first Kellas Sith. At least one of the first to willingly talk to me. Those at my old school and I, we didn't run in the same circles. And I don't know much about the other races you mentioned. There's a night school not far from the town center. Most nocturnal Mythicals I would have otherwise gone to school with attend the N.I."

She laughs, clearly amused by me.

"The Necropolis Institute? That place is a potter's field. But we're kind of like, um, shapeshifters. We're just like everyone else except I can transform into my animal self at will. Or, I will be able to transform at will. Eventually. Haven't quite mastered the 'on demand' part yet."

I want to ask more questions, especially about what she looks like in her animal form, if she's transformed for the first time yet, but that felt like a rather personal question for someone you only just met five minutes ago. And the last I want to do is embarrass myself in front of the first person to show any interest in me here. Or worse, I absolutely do not want to offend her.

"Like I said, I'm just not familiar with, uh, with the culture. I guess."

Hot pink nails flash at me as the girl uses her free hand to play with her hair as she continues talking in high-speed.

"Oh, it's no problem as long as you're a quick learner. You'll meet plenty of us today! I'll introduce you to all my friends."

I don't know whether it is confusion or alarm that she sees on my face, but she chimes out another reassuring laugh.

"During your private tour hosted by none other than yours truly! That locker incident yesterday really rippled through the school, you know. Principal Perrocles was not pleased with me and is totally concerned about you. They blame me for 'not sticking around you better as I ought to have', ambassador and all. And I can't sort through the rumors! Did your locker get wrecked in a fight no one wants to talk about? A bet of some kind? Or were you trying to threaten some other kids. You know, start on your reputation."

She blinks at me expectedly.

"Wait wait wait, hold on. Run that by me again?" I ask. There's so much to unpack. Each sentence piling a new question on top of another. At least I can finally place her now. She's the girl who was supposed to show me around five days ago, the student ambassador I was assigned! How did I not recognize her immediately? Her face is a canvas I would not think I could forget. Maybe she looked a different kind of different that day.

What a game, I think, to make a list of questions not to ask aloud.

Then the question that concerns me the most, "What did the Principal say, exactly?"

"Nevermind that. I just told you the only important part. They're disappointed in me, worried about you."

Her thick eyebrows arch high into the dark brown of the powdery bronzer applied to her forehead.

"You can trust me, I'm not going to snitch to Principal Perrocles on you. But you totally, have to tell me — was there a fight or not?"

"Not!" I admit, a little flustered. "There was a moment, that's to say I thought about, in truth there was a second, ugh! I was provoked. Really. It was Tthreandvar, he —."

"Tthreandvar?" she interrupts, a suddenly distant tone tinging her words. The sparkly layer of her voice is dull and darkened. I know something has changed in her because she speaks slower now, more calculated and focused.

"Say no more, Perrocles was right. You really do need me if you got tangled up with his lot already."

My face wrinkles with the creases of interest. "His reputation precedes him, then?"

"Yes, kind of. And no. You don't understand." She shifts her weight again. Draws me closer to the window. Lowers her voice. "Tthreandvar kind of gets a free pass around here these days."

I droop. I can't help it. The reaction is automatic. I didn't need anyone's help to figure *that* out, thank you very much. Just another Elf who thinks they're better than everybody else. My old school was filled with Old Bloods. Those who clung to every thin drop of Fae liquid in their veins from one frisky great grandmother six generations back or more. Too polluted for Piercings and status in Elvin society. Just enough to make them believe they're better than everybody else.

"So?" I ask. I make it clear from my tone that I am unimpressed. The fact that Tthreandvar has Piercings at all, humble though they may be, says a lot about his blood and family's status. He may be purer than any of the manipulating bullies from my old school, but still. "So what? He's got the whole school wrapped around his sixth littlest finger, does he?"

"Oh, no, wait!" The pale girl reassures me, "it's more complicated than it looks. His mom works here at the school. Mrs. Salmissoria. So folx know them. And I mean *really* know them. She has Elvin blood and this summer..." Again she shifts, resting the bag of my locker items against her waist while she rolls her free wrist in circles.

"This summer she outlived her husband. He was part Elvish, too, and the rumor is it only went about three generations back. It helped him live healthily for almost two centuries and look like a total Daddy 'till death, honestly. But he got very sick very fast. And then he was gone. Imagine. A healthy family of six with not just Mythical, but *Fae* lineage? Their pedigree should

have kept them all together and happy and alive for what? Two hundred more years? Maybe three? Gone in less than six months. A blip, a blink of a second in their long, long lives."

"A family of *six*?" *Tthreandvar has siblings*, I realize suddenly. I don't know why this startles me. Yes, I have been slightly obsessing over yesterday's encounter all morning, but it's not like I had thought much about Tthreandvar himself or about his family. Why wouldn't he have siblings.

"Yeah." She now used her manicured left hand to count off the children of the Salmissoria family, "He's got two older siblings. One sister who is a Level Four Seedling, no surprise there, it's only her second year at Level Four. And a brother, Level Three Flower, now, I believe. Miraculous improvement this round of Leveling Tests, I hear. Tthreandvar is a Level Two, like us, but he's recently moved up to the Flower Division — *surprise, surprise*. Then, of course, there's his very, *very* little brother. Thalered, 'ta-lay' for short, the scandalous miracle Level Two Seedling. Must be some kind of prodigy seeing how the school board made an age exception for him."

She rolls her entire head and looks at me pointedly. It was a pose that said, 'if I were chewing gum, I'd pop a huge, dramatic bubble right now.

"That's interesting," I manage, working through the newfound depths, but, also, perplexion. "I mean, that's an awful loss. I can't imagine — I love RugRug, my father. If I lost him suddenly, I don't know what I'd do. It'd just be me, my mom and my sister. And we don't have centuries in the cards for us. We're not anywhere on the same level as they are, them being Elvish and all. But I hate to think of coming home to — how do you go home to that? To them? When do you start to wonder if it's still home, or maybe that feeling is gone forever. But..." I look the girl square in the eyes. Hers are steady on me, black dots sparked with the peculiar soft

light of intrigue swimming in blue lakes of eyeshadow. She cocks her head slightly, the curve of her azalea pink lips urges me on.

"But," I push on slowly,, "even after thinking of all that, there's more. You're bitter about something. The Tests. You make it sound like —"

"Goddesses below!" She laughs nervously and glances around.

But, and I don't know how we didn't notice sooner, the hallway is somehow empty. Only we two remain.

I curse quickly. "I have to go. I'm going to miss my Inter-Planar Leylines class."

I move to take the bag of my belongings from her, thinking that I'll just have to carry them with me for now, but her grip on them is strong. The vice she now has around my wrist with her left hand stronger. I'm startled by her speed, astonished by how much her thin hands hurt. Stuck in the feeling of dismay as I search her face.

"Sorry!" She exclaims, "I forget my own strength sometimes!" She releases me and rubs anxiously at my blue wrist. I make a mental note not to forget how the facade of the unassuming girl masks the strength of a killer predator.

"Don't you remember, new girl? You have a tour booked with me today. I'll show you around campus and introduce you to my friends. I've got it all planned out. It should take us at least half the day."

She smiles widely, sharp teeth exposed. "Just long enough that I'll have to turn in my Archaic Linguistics and Ancient Writings homework a day late. Which is fine by me because I forgot to do the assignment last night and the teacher? You do not want Instructor Zinnik cross with you. That is, unless you really like things mysteriously falling apart on you for no reason. Gremlins, am I right?"

"Don't worry about your own classes," she adds quickly, before I can comment. "It's all been approved by Principal Perrocles. First thing we got on our to-do list is finding you a new cubbyhole!"

She heaves the paper bag back up from her waist and against her chest in illustration. I feel like it's a test of some kind. Will I or will I not accept her help and give her an excuse to play hooky? The decision is an easy one to make. I grin back at her.

"Think I can just stick with the locker I have now?" I jab a thumb in its direction and try to smile at the pale girl. It's strange. *She's* strange. The more I look at her the more perplexed I become. "Then we can get started on the tour right away."

The girl tilts her head, "You want to keep the ruined one?"

"I want to stay in the Tree of Halls. Preferably Skylark."

"Why?"

I hesitate. Then, "I'll tell you if you tell me why you don't like Tthreandvar."

The pale girl narrows her eyes at me. I wonder if it would've been a scarier mannerism on another Kellas Sith. One who didn't look like a walking color splash effect.

"Why does it matter?" She asks.

"Because." I say, not backing down. Not hesitating anymore. "You say he gets a free pass from everyone these days, but it sounds like you're not so fond of a warty toad either. I want to know why."

A cold wind bursts through the window beside us. I try not to shiver, leaves rustle, she stands perfectly still.

"Fair enough," she says slowly. Her voice drops again, the usual shine of her cadence as dull and flat as it was when Tthreandvar's name was first mentioned. "It's been four moon cycles since Mr. Salmisorria passed. And still the teachers, the lunch staff, the admissions office, even Principal Perrocles, cover for him. If anyone tries to complain about his hostility, you're dismissed. But I say he's not special because he's lost someone. Salmisorria's loss is not special because it was the death of someone *Elvin*. I told Principal Perrocles once that if my father were to die, the rules would still continue to exist for me. But they only said, 'there's no point in drawing up irrelevant hypotheticals'.

"I have sympathy for Tthreandvar, but I don't like him. He gets special treatment, knows it, and takes advantage of it. Plus, I don't think pity should play a factor in the Leveling Tests."

I understand. It makes sense. She's right. Tthreandvar and his family have a right to hurt, neither of us would dare deny or begrudge them that. But it is not an excuse. We share this, it makes me feel a kinship for this girl. I straighten my spine, standing at my full height. Without slouching, I notice that I am now several measurements taller than the pale girl. Steadily, I complete the exchange with my answer to her question.

"The idea of switching storage units is repelling. What would Tthreandvar's gang say if I left? Would they think I gave up Skylark because of them? The Tree of Halls? No. I won't leave because I refuse to. It feels too much like losing. I will not give them a victory and I will not lose access to the best part of this stupid stifling school."

She rewards me with another wide, toothy smile. Her sparkling energy and speed seep back into her tone.

"Then the Tree of Hall you shall have. You can have your pick. I'll hold on to this for now." She slips off her backpack and even though it looks full by its bulky shape, the paper bag of my belongings slides easily through its mouth. She pulls the drawstrings closed, buckles the flap, and slides the bag back over her shoulders. Then she asks me, "Have you seen each corridor? I think we should start at the top, don't you? Let the tour now officially commence! We should start with a game of 'follow the leader'. I'm it. Oh, this is going to be fun. We are going to be such good friends, I can *feel* it! What's your name again?"

I hardly have a breath of time to answer and no time at all to stop her. In the two seconds it takes to utter my name, she's halfway out the window, feet on the thin ledge of the Skylark's external body. The branches of the Tree of Halls shudder around her.

"That's right! Scarlett. Oh and by the way, I go by she/her pronouns and my name is Adora."

She winks at me and, without further ado, launches herself off of the ledge into dead air.



(An AI Depiction of Adora, an Amalgamy Academy student)

Mark Five: New Friends

I don't know whether she was expecting my surprised terror or not, but it takes Adora ages to stop laughing at me.

"Did you really think that the Tree of Halls was going to let me fall?" She asks the question so casually. As if jumping out of a tree was a totally rational thing to do. In fact, she's laughing so hard she even has tears in her eyes. "Do you have any idea how high up we are?"

I am still reeling, recovering from the whiplash of witnessing Adora throw herself out of a window. I had scrambled forward as fast as I could with a mind to either reach out and clasp her collar or otherwise watch her body splatter on the ground below. Instead, my fright was met with full-bellied laughter. Adora's body convulsed with it, cradled in a net of branches the Tree had caught her in.

She swats at the smaller pliable fingers that are curling around her torso. They retreat and she stands up, shouting at me to hurry and jump already, because we have a lot of campus to cover before lunch.

I am learning so much more in the four hours of playing hooky with Adora than I have in five days of classes. And she is having way too much fun playing teacher. Her first lesson started with her jumping out the window, demonstrating that of course the Tree, a conscious and living being, is an excellent player of catch.

"Which makes swift travel fun and interesting!" she says.

Adora tells me that as long as you're within range of his branches, the Tree of Halls will catch you. It was part of the charm that the Gardener cast on him when the Tree was still just a sapling before they used nature magic to help shape his Growth. It is the same charm that Adora taught me to exploit. Because of her, I can now swing through the Tree of Halls' crown. I can

fling myself from branch to branch, trusting in the Tree's reflexes and honing my dexterity. Use my own momentum to grasp limbs and fly up or down, twist in the air to maneuver left or right, propel myself forward, backward, faster and faster and faster — Adora's first lesson is to teach me how to fly!

We do not explore every corridor as Adora had originally suggested, just a few of her favorites. And it turns out I was wrong. It isn't just a few hallways the Tree had scooped up in his branches at the Gardener's behest; it was an entire ancient school. The Tree of Halls' branches hold more than the hallways of lockers at the lower levels of the canopy. Higher up there are rooms filled with musical instruments and art supplies; storage closets; fountains; broken up chunks of a theater and auditorium; offices with giant fish tanks; a cafeteria in which the Tree forms into lumpy rows of knots where plastic tables would have otherwise lived. There are even remnants of a room with a sign on the door that reads 'computer lab' filled with outdated, dead technology from the late Era of Man. Every structure wrapped in the Tree's branches is a perfectly preserved fossil in the air draped in the fineries of forest.

"You really thought it was all hallways? What a boring imagination you have." Adora chuckles.

We are still at our first stop, communing with the Tree in its highest branches. It is cold up here, exposed against a chilly Sky the color of flint. We are incredibly high up. And the ground is imperceptible through the network of bark-covered limbs below. Yet, even at this height with so much of the forest sprawled out before us to view, Adora finds entertainment in mocking me.

"I am a creature of routine," I shrug. "I didn't have any reason to go higher or to any part of the Tree of Halls other than Skylark. So I didn't. I still appreciated the Tree, but I didn't think there was more to explore. Besides, it is called the Tree of *Halls*."

"*His name* is the Tree of Halls." Adora corrects me slowly, careful to emphasize her words to drive her point across.

I furrow my brows in confusion, "Okayyy?"

"Jeez, public school really did a number on you, huh? You do know that every tree is alive, right?"

A spark of irritation. "I'm not that dumb." I don't mean to sound harsh... it just sort of eeks out of me. I breathe in deeply before continuing. "Of course I know that. But they don't have gender. Calling them it/she/he — that's a notion, a title, a way that we choose to reference plants or Buggies or other things."

"Who is *we*?"

I groan, "I don't know, like, people, I guess. People have genders and we call other beings like trees by pronouns sometimes or just by 'it' but no one really cares. I mean, my grandpa once said that there are some Gardeners that claim a plant told them their gender or something like that, but he doesn't believe it's true."

"Is this your grandpa from your human side or your orc side?"

"Human. He's a full human."

"I see." Adora looks as if that settles everything. Then she rushes to explain.

"You're not wrong, but you're not right either. Most trees, shrubs, ferns, and etcetera don't care about pronouns. But the Tree of Halls has more personality than most other trees. It's said that he woke up in a way that most plants never do. Story is the Gardner who Grew him waited until he was a sapling before altering his natural growth magically. And during the Growing process he became more self-aware. It is said that he spoke to the Gardener who Grew him, that

he adopted the pronoun and even named himself."

I have to ask Adora to repeat herself, several times and slowly, in order to understand her.

"Named himself?" I scoff, "right. Are you sure the Gardener wasn't also growing special mushrooms nearby?"

Adora smiles innocently, "Mock all you want, Scarlett. But if I were you, I'd err on the side of caution. It's his body you want to store your things in, climb on. And it's his branches you depend on to catch you when you fall."

Point taken. This could very well be the first time my grandpa has ever been wrong.

When Adora announces that it is time for lunch, she also declares that it is finally time to introduce me to her friends. She doesn't lead me back towards the cafeteria as I had expected, but instead takes us deeper into the forest where it grows denser and darker. When she crouches down to crawl under a stone wall, I hesitate. Walls exist for two reasons: either to keep things in or out. And this one spreads out before me so high and so far to either side that I can't see where it ends.

"What is this place?" I ask. "Are we supposed to be here? It's pretty far away from everything."

"Don't balk now, we're almost there!" Adora's words have a slight echo to them, her voice bouncing off the walls of the small tunnel she is disappearing through.

I wait a moment more, considering my options, realize I don't have many, and duck down to follow her. The tunnel is darker than I expected. And the only thing I hate more than complete darkness and tight places, is admitting I hate complete darkness and tight places. Orcs are supposed to have excellent night vision. Rugrug does. Even Quellie can spot bats on a moonless

night. I, on the other hand, can't make it to the bathroom five steps away from our bedroom without stubbing a toe at night. Now I'm combining blindness with compression?

It takes only a few mere seconds before I can't see Adora anymore. I call out for her. No answer. I call out again. Only the scraping sound of my doubled-over body against the tightness of the tunnel walls meet my ears.

Can I turn around? A sharp jutting piece of stone stabs the back of my shoulder as I test my range of movement. The cutting edge of it screams 'no!' Blackness crushes me. The air is stale and cold, the earth beneath me dry and raspy each time my foot drags upon its surface. How long have I been in this tunnel? Could I have missed a fork somewhere? Is that how I lost Adora? I must have accidentally kicked a stone forward because now the tunnel echoes with the disjointed crackle of stone skidding on stone. Or is that the sound of rocks falling from above, a sign that the tunnel is beginning to collapse? My breath is heavy and labored when, what? I think I see — faint shapes in the distance? A stalagmite?

If I can see a shape, that means there's light somewhere up ahead!

I quicken my pace, acutely aware of the desperateness in my desire to escape this tunnel. I hear the fabric of my skirt ripping, but the tunnel is widening now. I have the space to speed up into a jog, then a run! And I see a bright light, a consuming glare just ahead of me. I stumble into it, blind from the sudden brightness of the sun, and panting with relief.

I wasn't even running that hard. What am I saying? I can't run in that stupid tunnel.

I can't see a thing but I stand and revel at my unbound freedom in a mighty stretch. I begin to blink my vision slowly back into existence and catch a faint murmur of Adora's voice somewhere.

" — the rumors, a confirmed half-human. Her name is Scarlette, uh, Rugrug, I think? Remember, be nice."

My sight restores itself and, well, I have to admit, I'm shocked. Like, totally and completely and utterly and deliciously shocked. Of all the things I had thought to see at the end of this tunnel, an underground cave lush with serene pools of deep water and cobblestone paths is not what I was expecting. I can see the cloudy sky above through a craggy hole in the cave's ceiling. Greenery drips from its edges and curls around what looks like carved stalactites; the chiseled design of runes on them are severely weathered and worn. Scattered throughout the space is a collection of students of varying Races, Levels and Divisions. Some are even in various states of transformation with the odd talons and tails of different Mythical ancestry showing off. I can see Adora talking animatedly to a group of other kids lounging around one of the nearby pools. One of them is sarcastically whining about not being able to toss someone into the water for their own personal amusement.

"Don't you look like something a cat dragged in?"

I jump at the suddenness of a voice behind me, despite its polite and dulcet tones. When I turn around, I'm faced by a leggy boy with dark hair, hazel eyes, and a smile so wide it cracks his face in two.

"So which one of these miscreants lured you all the way out here, little mouse?" he asks.

I can feel my eyebrows knit together; no one ever calls me 'little' anymore. Sure, I'm smaller than most orcs, a little above average height when compared to other human girls. But this guy is only maybe a hand taller than me. And he's waiting for my reaction, diamond-shaped face tilted in curiosity, as if the weight of his small twin horns are unbalanced.

There's a warm, tingling feeling in the pit of my stomach and I realize his greeting is an invitation to a puzzle, a game. I have to say something witty in return to win; I can taste the tang of a sarcastic but playful response dancing on the tip of my tongue. I consider chastising him teasingly for sneaking up behind me, but decide that would be boring. He made the first move. I need to not just counter, but impress.

I settle on the words, "Perhaps the mouse wasn't lured, but the bait itself. In search of catching said miscreants."

Delighted, he answers with, "That's one brave mouse to throw themselves into the lion's den. What would motivate such a bold move?"

"She must hunt them. For the mouse to feed her pet cat, of course." I counter.

"I see. Why fear the cat when you can tame it?" He nods appreciatively at me.

"Whoever said my cat is tame?"

He booms out a hearty laugh. And that's how I know I win.

"Well met, little mouse. My name is Ezra, by the way. He/him. I'm allergic to bananas, and my favorite class is woodworking."

"And you have a thing for clichés." I add, thinking about how it was a Kellas Sith who led me here.

Then his face clicks into memory, I know him! Or, at least, I recognize him. I've seen him before, in Skylark Hall. The tall boy with curved horns and watchful eyes. He was there the day Tthreandvar threw the paper airplane and again this morning before Adora found me. At the time I thought he might've been watching for something to judge me for, but now that he's here, right in front of me, I'm not so sure. Why is he here?

I tell him that I recognize him and ask, "Stalk much? Perhaps you're on the hunt for a mouse. And you should know I'm no easy target."

One of his eyebrows lifts in an arch. The corner of my mouth hitches up in a smirk but before he can reply, Adora brushes past me and injects herself between us. Her movement is as smooth as liquid poured from a pitcher and I wonder at how I ever mistook this feline for an aswang.

She says Ezra's name like it's a slur. In return, he greets her and it is almost imperceptible, but there's a change in him. Though his face is still split with an open smile, his eyes calcify.

He blinks three times. His eyes drift from Adora, to me, and back.

"Ah. I see what you mean. It appears clichés do represent my calling card after all. How are you doing, Adora? I haven't heard from you since the beginning of summer."

She *hmpfs* at him.

*"Fine, thank you. Now away with you.
Neither Scarlette nor I are in want of your
poor influence today."*

He shrugs.

"That's a shame. Where's your sense of adventure?"

I don't think she means to, but when she flips her hair over her shoulder, I'm smacked in the face by the silky curtain of pearly-white.

*"If you want to talk one-on-one later that
can be arranged but for right now —"*

"Actually," Ezra interrupts, "I'm good. No need."

He has his hands up, palms facing Adora. Then, looking back at me, he laces his fingers behind his head and casually juts his chin towards the middle of the cave. The group that must be the friends Adora wants to introduce me to are openly watching us. One of them, who's lounging at the edge of one of the deep pools, wriggles their fingers in our direction.

"I know you're busy. And my friends are waiting on me, too."

He sidesteps around Adora and walks towards a tree on the other end of the cavern whose base is occupied by a small band of guys tossing small bits of bread in each other's mouths. I watch as Adora's mouth works but no sound comes out.

Ezra calls back to me. "One more thing, little mouse. Be careful. Not all cats can be tamed. You can strip them of their claws, but that'll only sharpen their bite."

He has a long, dark tail. It's tipped with an arrow-head point and sways in the air, flicking to the beat of his stride. Adora stamps her foot on the stony pathway in defiance.

"That's racist!" she calls out. But whether he hears her and chooses to ignore Adora's claim, or doesn't hear her at all, Ezra doesn't stop or turn around.

"So you two have history?" I ask.

Her pink lips part to release a tinkling laugh.

"Oh Scarlette, it'd be so much easier to list who I *don't* have history with," she says coolly.

Adora runs her hands down the lines of her modified uniform, smoothing its fabric, her hair. The creases of her forehead. I say nothing, only watch the back of Ezra's head as the distance grows between us.

"Ezra is a fun toy, no different than the rest. Right. Now come on, they're all dying to meet you!"

By 'all', Adora means her five best friends. We start our approach towards them together, but she quickly bounds ahead of me, slinking up the length of a moss-covered pillar that fell long ago. Its body is broken in two, making a rigid arch over a rippling pool next to which the beau monde lounge.

Adora perches above us, swinging her legs over the surface of the water. As I draw nearer, I notice that they are each a uniform code nightmare. A force of disastrous beauty stitched together by way of blade, needlework, and just a touch of chaos. The one decorative trait they all share? A skeletal cat pinned to a skirt's edge, a blazer's collar, or fastened as a belt buckle. She introduces us like it's some big announcement and all that is missing is some trumpets and fanfare in the background.

"My dear friends, meet Scarlette. Scarlette, meet friends!"

Denzel introduces himself first, as brother to the Kellas Sith whose skirt their head rests on.

The siblings' relation is easy to spot as they share the same bright round eyes the color of petrified tree sap. Dezel's pair of kohl-lined amber spheres peer at me from behind the length of their long nose, an identical copy of their sister's. The delicately featured brother is the one who had waved at Adora and I earlier and who is still sprawled lazily on the cave floor. A sleeveless waistcoat embroidered with swirling symbols spreads out beneath them, a thin lining between their relaxed body and the cold stone beneath.

While Denzel eyes me curiously, their sister seems more interested in appraising her almond-shaped nails. After an awkward silence, Denzel introduces her as D'ja.

"Or you can just call her 'diva' since that's what she is. Seriously. You don't have to be such a bitch."

They address her casually, not really putting much emphasis or feeling behind the insult. D'ja's tapered ears twitch irritably from atop her head. She's not the only one here whose feline ears are out, but I wonder if she knows how expressive hers are. She opens her pinched mouth to speak, but is cut short by another girl next in their little semi-circle.

She purrs. "We actually have several of the same classes, you and I."

"I as well, Saréell." The girl next to her pipes in. She tucks a bundle of her frizzy red hair behind a freckled ear with an extension of a feline claw.

Denzel raises their hand, "Me, too. Alchemy. You know, when I deign to go."

"Which has been how many times so far?" asks the freckled Kellas Sith who interrupted Saréell.

Denzel shrugs and offers her a wry smile. "Once or twice. It was a long summer, I have the pressing matter of rekindling to attend to."

"Oh, yes, so pressing. I hear you ruined Aeron's heart last spring, Denzy," Freckles chastises again.

"Don't worry, all will be forgiven soon! In fact, he's my next appointment," Denzel says.

"Gods below you're a slut," Freckles spurns.

"Don't I know it!" Denzel replies.

The chuckle that follows his remark reminds me of late-season raspberries, devastatingly sweet but surprisingly acidic for something so beautifully colored.

I watch patiently as the three banter with one another, taking the opportunity to really soak them in. Saréell has a sultry voice, slitted eyes that gleam like cursed gold and only one fanged tooth. It leans out of her mouth, lingering over her bottom lip even when closed.

I don't know Freckles' name yet, but I like the way she unabashedly teased Denzel. She reminds me of Ella in that way. She is beautifully splattered with freckles from the crown of her coppery head to the creases of her collar bone and, presumably, even farther below where my eyes can't reach.

"Ignore them," interjects the next girl in the procession. A trail of feathers dangle from an ear hoop over her left shoulder. It sways delicately as she speaks.

I hadn't been paying her much mind until now, wanting to take in each member of Adora's group one by one. Although now that I turn to look at the girl, I can't believe how ignorant I have been to not have marveled at her sooner. School uniforms, as I understand it, are meant to create a sense of unity, maybe equality, if it can be managed. But even if hers wasn't a tailoring triumph in modifications, the Goddess of Clay did not design her aristocratic features of her face to be so easily overshadowed. Her high cheekbones and a slender nose is a classical marvel. At the sound of her voice, a hush settles over the group.

Ah, I realize, so she is their leader. Of course, that makes sense. Hadn't she said as much in an interview with Retro-Television Magazine? They asked her what her friend group is like at the private school she attends.

The girl in charge gestures to Freckles.

"Our very own prude ginger, here, is Kalia. As you may have noticed, she has a penchant for debating with anything that moves, even if there's no argument to be had."

She leans into the shoulder of the boy on her left.

"And this," she coos, "is my boyfriend, Raff. He's a bit shy, but don't let that fool you. He's a natural born killer with RadiusScythers, aren't you, baby?"

Raff inclines his head in my direction. His face is masked in an expression of politeness, his blue eyes revealing nothing of his mind. But is it shyness or caution that keeps him so closed off? The tabloids label him as someone elusive, the strong and silent type. His only downfall? His pure humanity.

Their leader looks back at me.

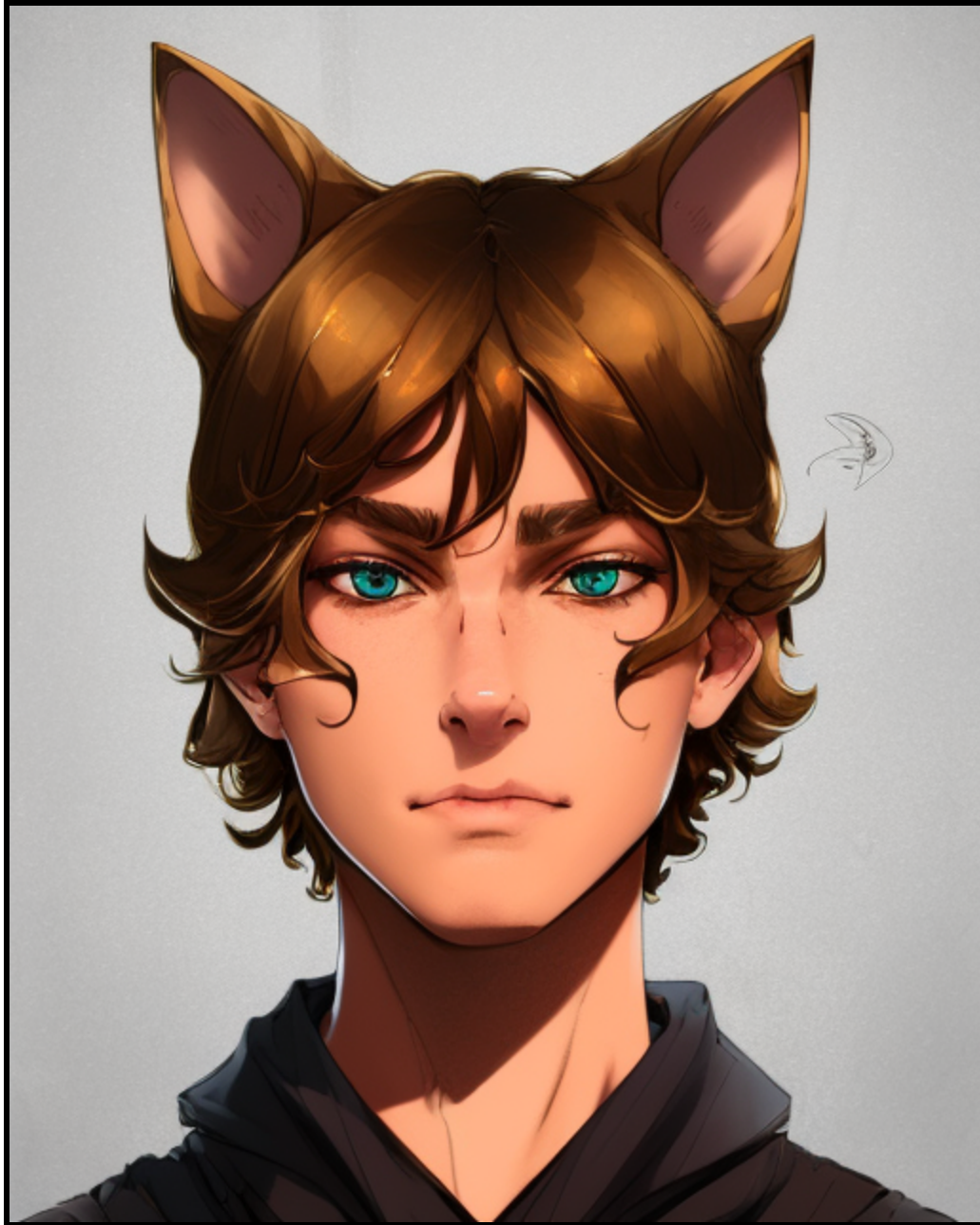
"And I am—"

"Veresa Lovelace," I interrupt.

The look on her face betrays her indignation at being cut off, but it is obvious by the way her full lips tighten before plucking up into a smile that her pride of being known and recognized takes precedence. But how could I not recognize her? How many times have I seen her last name on my living room's ScryScreen?

"Lovelace is a household name in my family," I admit. "My mom loves your mom's films. And the dress you wore at her last Cottage Carpet pre-screening? I mean, just wow! Your mom is great, but you're iconic."

Her chin raises a fraction of an inch at the compliment and I know it is the right thing to say. This is a girl who is not only used to being complimented, but expects it from any loyal subject. The small voice in the back of my head whispers an anxious prayer, hoping that I've impressed her so far by honoring her family name and recognizing the social etiquette of her court. Because, make no mistake, this? Everything — everything from pantheon-shaped forest cave, to this exact pool under an arch of a broken column; from their distinctive modified uniforms, to their exact seating arrangement — everything here belongs to her. This is her kingdom. And gods and goddesses have mercy on anyone who tries to tell someone like her otherwise.



(An AI Depiction of Denzel, a member of the Beau Monde at Amalgamy Academy)

Mark Six: Friend or Foe

"Now, is she the human or the orc, your mother? Gods above I hope she's the human one! Otherwise? Well, I imagine the balls on any human male who pursues an orc woman must be huge!" Saréell exclaims.

"Imagine that often, do you?" Denzel quickly retorts.

At the same time Kalia reasons, "Not necessarily. It depends on what he's into. Maybe he carries a smaller package and enjoys — "

"Human! She's human!" I blurt out.

I look up at Adora for help in escaping this conversation but she only waves at me in a way that I think is meant to be encouraging? Whatever she's thinking I know it's not helpful to my cause. It hasn't been long since I decided to seat myself across from them, but already my butt is cold from the clammy cold of the stone floor. I wonder how long it has been, fifteen? Maybe twenty minutes since Veresa officially welcomed me to Amalgamy Academy? I took it as a sign of at least a temporary acceptance into their group. I was told to sit and break bread with them. Though, the invitation was verbal only and no one moved or offered a seat next to them on their plush spread of blankets and pillows. Even Denzel, whose body is mostly sprawled on the surface of their open waistcoat, didn't look willing to move his backpack from the cushioned space beside them.

So here I am, nibbling at my packed lunch, ass slowly freezing into a popsicle, still unsure of what to make of them all. But I don't care. This is my first lunch at Amalgamy Academy that I haven't eaten alone. Although now that they seem to have remembered me, and there's a small, squirming voice inside that wishes they hadn't, at least the blushing burn of my purple cheeks are accompanied by a genuine smile.

"You said we have classes together? Saréell? Denzel?" I ask, trying to change the subject away from genitalia.

Kalia immediately clears her throat, as if claiming the right to speak next.

"Indeed. We're in Cryptozoology together. Not my best subject, I'll admit, I usually sit in the back. While you, I notice, prefer the front row."

"I noticed that, too. In both Arcane Identification and Chronicles of Eras Past," Saréell adds.

They look to Denzel but instead of offering helpful information, they start listing off the names of the several people they were too busy making out with to be bothered with something as trivial as class.

It's Veresa who cuts through the communal fit of laughter that follows Denzel's list.

"So, which do you like the least so far, Scarlett?" she asks.

I perk up at the opening. Finally, a question I am happy to answer about myself. And coming from Veresa, no less!

"Well, I really like Alchemy, actually, but I'm not very good at it yet. It's the theoretical stuff we've been reading so far. If I could only just get behind the cauldron and actually do something rather than just reading about it —"

Veresa's bubbling laughter is contagious. As soon as she eeks one out, the others follow suit. I cough out a dry chuckle.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"Not your least favorite class," Adora says between giggles.

"Your least favorite teacher!" says Kalia.

"This year mine is Proctor Abraxas," Saréell declares.

"Ew, yes! Why does he insist on dressing himself in reds? It's so not his color. Or is he trying to look like an overripe tomato, you think?" Denzel says. They make a face like they're sucking on a lemon.

"What else do you expect from him, Denzy? I'm sure the strain of magic, no matter how external it is, is impossibly taxing on the poor fellow," Kalia says with an air of excusal.

"Look, if he has enough agency as a grown man to choose a career dabbling with potion magic, he has enough agency to fix his dismal style." They wave their hand in the air, dismissing Kalia's attempt to support our Alchemy instructor.

Veresa chimes in, "I almost feel kind of bad for him, really. His jealousy of those born with internal magic must be crippling indeed. What else would drive a human with no internal magic to practice vocational alchemy? It's embarrassing, really."

"There was Davgara and Gahnel," says Kalia.

She looks around at her companions but is met with only empty stares. Kalia sighs and mutters something about being surrounded by illiterates.

"Come on, guys. The Covenless Witches? Nothing? It was after the Great Return. Humans were still getting used to the idea of magic back in the world and Davgara was one of the greatest practitioners of Necro magic. She had abandoned it for years until Gahnel came along. Gahnel wasn't born with internal magic, but she created many of the potions and elixirs still taught today. Our textbook has a whole intro dedicated to the pair of witches!"

Veresa sniffs and I notice a subtle twitch of one of her eyebrows.

She says, "That doesn't change the fact that Abraxas probably only got involved with alchemy because he wasn't born with internal magic. And since alchemy is one of the few

disciplines of external magic that, like, pretty much anyone who knows how to cook can perform, he realized it's the closest a human like him could get to wielding magic himself."

"Besides, that's a terrible example, Kalia. Witches have both internal and external magic at their disposal. This Gahnel character either had some mastery of both or else she had the help of Davgara. Especially if you're saying she *created* both potions *and* elixirs," Saréell adds.

Raff, undoubtedly the quietest of the group aside from D'ja, is, I think, also the most observant. He takes note of Veresa's twitching brow, reaches out to take his girlfriend's hand and rubs his thumb in slow circles over her dainty knuckles. The notion is so gentle, so patient, I'm perplexed. Hadn't Veresa's chief complaint about Proctor Abraxas been in conjunction with the fact that he's of the human race? Accusing him of using external magic as a bandaid to cover up the fact that he wields no internal magic? Yet here was Raff, human through and through, comforting Veresa. As if she had been the one insulted.

"Veresa, darling, you asked what else would motivate a human to learn and practice alchemy other than jealousy and spite. Kalia was supplying a rather interesting example, I think," he says, the timbre of his voice low and soothing.

Kalia jumps at the mention of her anecdote being interesting to someone other than herself.

She says, "And I didn't even tell you why Davgara adopted and taught Gahnel! I said she wasn't *born* with internal magic but —"

"I still don't see what this has to do with Abraxas' desire to look like an heirloom tomato," announces Denzel, apparently deciding that it's Kalia's turn to be interrupted.

But before Kalia can even roll her eyes, D'ja speaks for the first time since I've arrived. It's a single word. A name. *Tthreandvar*.

We all follow her gaze to the cave's entrance just in time to see the unaccompanied elvin boy step out of the mouth of the tunnel. A bitterness rises in me the moment I clap eyes on him but it's Adora who catches and holds my attention. The pale girl who had been lying on her stomach only a moment before is now on her feet, eyes narrow and hateful. It feels wrong to see her like this. This is not the look of someone who idly dislikes someone for their privilege. The poison on her face is so powerful, I am sure the hairs on her arms are standing straight up.

"Didn't you tell him not to come back here?" Veresa asks. She, too, is watching Adora.

"Someone should remind him. Tell him to leave." Saréell sneers.

Raff starts to stand up, preparing himself for the task, but Adora motions for him to stand down.

"No. This is my problem. I'll take care of him," she says.

"Yes," Veresa agrees. She places a firm hand on Raff's knee and distributes direct stares at all around the pool. "Adora will handle this."

Her full lips spread into a cool smile as she focuses her full attention on Adora. She promises, "You got this, we believe in you, girl."

When Adora passes me, I begin to rise myself, intent on accompanying her whether she likes it or not. I'm stopped not by the mutterings of the group behind me, nor the clicking sound Veresa makes to draw my attention to her. No, I'm stopped by the placement of a warm hand on my shoulder. I turn to look at who it is that's touched me, expecting to see Raff's gentle face warn me to obey Adora's wish, but it's Ezra. How fast must it be to travel so swiftly from one end of the cavern to me? And why to me?

In a low voice meant only for my ears he mutters, "I've got this, little mouse. You stay with your miscreants."

He waits for me to nod before the warmth of his hand disappears from my shoulder and he steps away from me. I'm left in an awkward crouch, half-sitting-half-risen, watching him as he walks towards the elf boy and Kellas Sith. His arms are spread open before him as he approaches the pair at odds, but they're too far away to hear what any of them are saying. I rest my weight on my knees, shifting into a kneeling position, and look over my shoulder.

Veresa and Raff meet my eyes, but the rest are too busy watching the three-sided conversation to take notice.

"Anyone care to explain what's going on to the new girl?" I ask.

There's a moment of silence. Veresa shrugs but offers nothing more. It's Saréell who finally answers me.

"Where to start? You don't know Adora like we do, but she kind of has a flair for the dramatic," she says.

Kalia immediately offers her opinion next saying, "More like a need to be the center of attention. A diagnosis for which she self-prescribed a collection and the stringing along of aching, broken hearts of men. Can someone say 'daddy issues'?"

Saréell rolls her eyes before continuing. "The point is, she and Ezra had a thing going for a while there last year. Everyone could tell when there was tension between the two, which was, like, always, and no one was surprised when they broke up. Except for the fact that it was Adora who called for it. He really cared for her, but Adora said she got bored."

"That doesn't explain Tthreandvar," I say.

"No, and that's not the worst part of it." Veresa concedes.

My eyebrows knit in confusion and I marvel at the feeling of my muscles contracting to make such an expression. My cheeks still have the friendly ache of a long-lasting grin though the amusement that fueled it is now gone, replaced with something else.

"Honestly, she treated him terribly. Everyone but Ezra saw it. And one day, just before summer as school came to a close last year, she ended things. Very. Publicly. She shouted something about him having some sort of choice, but I guess he either didn't pick fast enough or he chose wrong. She turned to leave. Started walking away. And it almost looked like Ezra was going to chase after her."

"Until Tthreandvar climbed on one of the campus dedication statues nearby and shouted over the crowd, 'Freedom is not so easily won, my friend! Let someone else pet the bitch and get clawed for their efforts. Celebrate, Ezra, you're the canary that got away.'"

It was Denzel's voice, lowered in mockery of Tthreandvar's words, but the anger that sizzled beneath was unexpected, at odds with the nonchalant image I had spent the better half of the last hour painting their character in.

"Kalia, you said *hearts* of men. As in plural?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, Adora adores having admirers. Ezra isn't the only boy she strung along last year. And I hear the new president of this year's fan club is secretly one of Ezra's best friends. Jemyr. See him over there? The one with the shaggy hair and no shirt? He's a jinn."

I crane my neck even further to glance back at the tree Ezra had walked over to earlier. His group of friends are also watching the altercation at the cave entrance, and though Jemyr is easy to pick out, I probably would've led with a physical description that included the shock-white color of his hair and the seaweed tint of his skin. Or the fact that he is probably shirtlessness because his torso is the size of two tree trunks squished together

Saréell sighs. She picks up the conversation where it left off and says, "Anyways, Tthreandvar and Ezra have been friends ever since. They spent almost every day together over the summer. Mr. Salmisorria's passing only made them grow closer. They're thick as thieves now."

"It's too bad. I like Ezra. He's actually a good guy, if a little naive," Raff says.

His statement earns him a withering look from Veresa, but he only shrugs.

"What? It's true. None of us know why they were always fighting, but there had to be something to their relationship that worked and made them keep trying for so long."

As usual, D'ja says nothing but I notice her feline ears twitch as Raff defends his unpopular opinion of Ezra's character.

Ezra's raised voice carries over to us. "You don't own this cave, Adora. You don't have the power to banish people just because you don't want them around."

The emotion in his voice is tangible, frustration making his body look as rigid as a plank. I feel a pang inside me, a jarring sensation like the moment when a guitar string snaps and twangs out a final broken note.

"What I don't understand is why she cares about Tthreandvar. Why does it matter if they're friends or not?" Kalia asks.

Denzel taps their clawed fingertips against the stones of the cave's floor musically.

After a moment they slowly work the words, "I don't think she does. I think that she hates Tthreandvar because of how he shamed her in front of the whole school. Like Veresa said, I think if Tthreandvar hadn't stood up for Ezra the way that he did, if he hadn't urged Ezra to step away from the relationship, he was going to go after Adora. So, naturally, our little sugar plum hates

him. If you ask me, her favorite part of dating someone is their wistful pining after her once she's done with them. Tthreandvar took that away from her."

"And you're all ok with that?"

The words spill out of my mouth before they even form in my brain. The four bright eyes of wary Kellas Sith and the open blue eyes of Raff fixate on me.

"I know, it does seem rather ludicrous. You'd think a girl with that much male attention would know how to do her own makeup." Veresa tiskied.

"*That*," Denzel acknowledges, "but more importantly, to answer your question Scarlette, yes. We're okay with how she treats her boyfriends pre- and post-relationship. And we're okay hating Tthreandvar with and for her. Why? Because she's our friend. So let her do her thing, and him do his — live and let live!"

"You're supposed to say that when you're forgiving grudges, Denzy. Not apply it to situations where you adopt them." Kalia points out.

"Whatever. As long as we're all in agreement that I'm right."

Denzel is met with noncommittal stares, a shrug, and a 'sure, if you say so' from Veresa, but still, no one objects. Their eyes eventually land on mine, a question held between the two of us like the flickering flame of a candle. I start to incline my head but hesitate as my eyes catch on D'ja's. I've never seen amber so jaded. Denzel sits up, blocking D'ja from my view, and as they speak to one another in low murmurs, I take the chance to turn back to the cave's entrance.

The three are still locked in heavy debate. Adora has both hands on her hips as she rattles on passionately. The two boys stand side-by-side, trying to interject their own words into the argument, with no obvious success. After a few more minutes of watching them argue, and listening to the group behind me deliberate over who's winning, the interaction finally ends with

Adora flipping them both the crux. She turns around to face us at first, but then she seems to think better of it, opting instead to push the two boys apart and march away into the tunnel.



(An AI Depiction of Ezra)

Mark Seven: Claustrophobia

Seeing Adora walk away, I scramble to my feet. As I move to step forward, a deep timbre of a metallic gong echoes around the cavern and soon everyone is rising to their feet. When I turn to ask the group what's happening, Denzel is gracefully ducking under the pillar Adora had been perched on earlier, making their way over to me. D'ja is already gone and the others are in their own worlds, oblivious to my stare.

"Don't worry, it's just the end of lunch. Someone stole one of the enchanted alarms from the main campus years ago and brought it out here. If a chunk of students keep missing class after lunch, eventually someone would come looking. And a secret hang out spot can't very well stay secret if we're all found here. Ha! Especially here!"

With how tense I was meeting Adora's friends, and how distracted I got during our time together, I had forgotten to ask where 'here' is. But, more pressingly, I question, "What about Adora? I better see if she's ok. Also, she's my guide. I don't know how to get to my next class without her anyways."

"Awe, you care! Good, you'll be one of us soon enough. Don't worry about Adora. D'ja will catch up with her. They're surprisingly close. If you can believe D'ja to be close to anyone other than myself. As far as your next class goes, would you accept me as your humble escort?" Denzel flashes me a winning smile. They hold out their arm, offering it to me.

I linger a moment more, thinking about Adora and her brisk departure. Then, reassuring myself that Adora would probably prefer D'ja's company over my own, I turn to face Denzel.

"An escort? Yes. But consider you humble? Never," I say, looping my arm in theirs.

Their smile widens, "Fair enough."

I sling my bag over my shoulder and we start making our way towards the exit. As we approach, though, we're surprised by Ezra. He's looking at us, waiting patiently next to the tunnel exit. While I imagine most people — or at least Saréell and Kalia — might've puffed out their chests and brandished their claws, Denzel only looks a touch discontent.

One hand on their hip, the other occupied by my grasp on their elbow, they slowly look Ezra up and down before drawling, "Can we help you, Pigeon?"

"Nice to see you, too, Denzel. Or can I call you Denzy, yet?"

Ezra's smile is one of familiarity, disarming and unassuming. My companion sighs.

They say, "Regretfully, I must decline you that pleasure. As Kalia only gets to call me that since we're friends."

"And were we not once friends as well?" Ezra asks.

"We were, Pigeon, we were. And, unfortunately, now we are not. It's a shame, but alas, that is how life goes."

"It is." Ezra doesn't just say the words to simply agree with Denzel, he *means* them. He still values Denzel's opinion of him, despite having been cast away by the beau monde last year. And I realize he knows full well that when Adora's ultimatum drew a line in the sand, everyone was forced to choose a side. And although some of her friends might have begrudgingly accepted his dismissal., the group's version of unquestioning loyalty left Ezra alone on his side. I wonder if maybe that's what Tthreandvar saw when he spoke up against Adora the day they broke up.

"Does that also mean I cannot pursue other friendships?" Ezra asks.

Denzel doesn't reply, only shrugs. There's an awkward silence between us as we three stare at one another. It's Ezra who regains his voice first.

"I just want to talk to Scarlett. Or is that not allowed?"

"We never had a problem, you and I. It matters not to me who you talk to, befriend. And Scarlette here is her own person, a free agent allowed to talk to whoever. Provided, of course, that she wants to talk?"

Their question hangs in the empty air. Denzel's arm loosens, as if to show Ezra they're not holding me back, and I shuffle my feet, aware of all the bodies swarming around us, flowing into the tunnel exit. Ezra turns his full attention to me.

"How about it, little mouse? Will you grant a poor Pigeon like me an audience?"

I see Denzel raise a thin eyebrow, but they say nothing, waiting, instead, for me to speak.

"Actually, Denzel, if you don't mind, I do have some questions for him," I say.

There's no hesitation or awkward staring. Denzel simply gives my arm a slight squeeze and releases me.

"I do think I saw Aeron earlier and if I hurry I might still be able to catch him and reschedule our rendezvous. Sadly, Kalia is right and I should attend at least one more Alchemy lesson this week. Even if it does mean facing off with a giant tomato. I'll meet you on the other side, darling."

Denzel plants a soft kiss on my temple, stretching his body with careful strain to reach it, and disappears through the tunnel.

At this point the cave is empty, save for Ezra and I.

"I shudder to think of what questions you have for me," he says.

His words are lighthearted, but there's a tightness to his features. The way he smiles now that we're alone. The way it doesn't quite sit still on his face, as if it hasn't decided if it belongs.

"Look, you have to know, I didn't know you were with Adora when I approached you earlier. I just thought —"

"That's not what I was going to ask you about," I say hurriedly.

"Oh," Ezra says, his forehead creasing with confusion. "Okay, what do you want to ask me, then?"

I curse at myself internally. I didn't have a specific question in mind — I only said that in front of Denzel to give me and Ezra some time to talk. And even though he is somehow familiar, I don't even know why I want to talk to him. Perhaps it's the enigma of his person, the story Adora's friends spun around him? Or maybe it's because now I remember his eyes, the way they tracked me in Skylark. At the time I thought he was just another person judging me from afar, but now I'm not so sure

I gulp, my mind raking itself only to finally squeeze out the question, "Where, exactly, are we?"

Just like before, Ezra's laugh booms like thunder. He doesn't patronize me, though, or tease me for asking such a stupid question. Instead, he looks around, then straight up, pointing at the circular hole in the cavern's roof.

"That up there is the surface of Amalgamy Academy's Adventurer's Arena. This cave was discovered by a student mid-Trial years ago. They returned after the Trial, invited a few select friends who invited their friends, and voila! A secret-not-so-secret hang out spot was established."

"No way — wait, isn't this place kind of dangerous, then? A Creature or Beast could wander in here at any moment. Or worse, they could slip out the tunnel and straight onto campus!"

Ezra's face quirks up in what seems to be both amusement and dismissal.

"Sure, theoretically. But one: The Arena is huge. Literally one of the largest in the Kingdom. And this cave is just one tiny underground pocket at its very edge. Two: I think there's usually enough people going in and out of here that most nasties know to stay away. Three: Have you ever seen a Creature? Or a Beast in real life? Most of the scary ones are way too big to fit through that hole up there, let alone through this tunnel. And besides, what happened to your bravery? I thought you were a mighty mouse with cats to feed."

"Oh, so I'm a 'mighty' mouse now, am I?"

"You always have been. You didn't really need me to say so."

I eye him suspiciously then ask, "have you ever seen one in person? Either a Creature or a Beast?"

"Of course. I'm part of a squad training for a Graduation Trial. Raff's on the same team as me. One day, he and I will enter the Arena side by side."

I feel my eyes widen, "You have to tell me what it's like! I can't imagine participating in a Trial. How do you even train for them? The challenges are different every time, and you have to contend not just with the terrain, but team dynamics, the environment, other squads, Creatures and Beasts — you have to be crazy to go through a Trial!"

Ezra cocks his head to the side, "You seem to know a lot about it already?"

Of course I know about it, Rugrug loves reliving his time in the Arena through the stories he tells my sister and I. And though I don't think he'd ever approve of me signing up for that much danger myself, I can't deny that I've always wondered about it. Ezra straightens up to his full height, as if deciding on something.

"I have a proposition for you, little mouse. I'll tell you everything you want to know about the Arena and training, *if*."

"If what?" I ask, searching his cryptic hazel eyes. I try to keep my voice flat in an effort to keep the burning curiosity I feel inside me from showing. Somehow, though, I know I've failed.

"If you meet me after third period tomorrow," he says decisively.

I wrinkle my nose at him.

"That seems oddly specific. Why?"

"Only one way to find out."

Ezra's smile twists into a taunting smirk.

When I finally agree to his terms, I can see the pointed tip of his tail sway in wide arcs behind his head. That settled, I turn to look back at the tunnel. But I hesitate, not wanting to go through.

"There's something else," he says. "You want to know why I approached you today and not before."

It's not a question, but a statement. Of course I had wanted to ask about him. About Adora. About him and Adora. But I wasn't going to. I didn't dare to. A second ago, starting at the tunnel, all I wanted to ask was if there is another way out of this place. But now all I can think about is how I *do* want to know why he didn't talk to me in Skylark. Why did he wait until here and now? Luckily, I don't have to confirm his suspicions. He explains himself without provocation.

"I didn't see you go into the tunnel earlier, but when I went in I caught up to you about halfway through. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to scare you. You know, dark cramped space, some strange voice bouncing around in the shadows. Didn't seem like a great

idea. But you pushed through and then you made it to the other side, and the way you drank in the sunlight, I saw..."

I bristle as his voice trails off, narrowing my eyes but not yet turning to look at him directly.

"And you saw what, exactly?"

I think back to the panic I felt surge through me in the tunnel. The absence of Adora grounding me, the images of stone crashing down from above. The knowledge that my father's ancestors would be ashamed of my cowardice. The one saving grace I had was that no one was there to witness that particular flavor of my embarrassment. Or so I had thought. How well do those hazel eyes see in the darkness? Did he see me run like a trapped rat? Is that why he calls me 'little mouse'?

My hands twist into fists by my side as I prepare for his ridicule. Finally, I rip my eyes from the tunnel to his face, but there is no haughty smirk, no mockery in his eyes. He's not even looking at me. He's staring beyond me, at the gaping hole of the tunnel itself. His thick eyelashes flutter as his gaze drifts down to meet mine.

"It's the closeness of everything. I hate that feeling of being squeezed, pressed on all sides. The way the walls crush you," he says. Then, when I don't say anything, he prompts, "I kind of got the feeling that you hate it, too."

The tension drains from me like water down a stream. He isn't making fun of me. But I also don't know how to take in this pure honesty of his. My mind is blaring in alarm as I wonder what I'm supposed to do, how exactly am I supposed to react to this, so I am surprised by my own voice as it slips out in a delicate whisper forming the soft vowels of the words, "I do."

The statement hangs between us and I'm suddenly aware of how close he is to me. How alone we are in this cave. And how this uncomfortable unfamiliarity we have with one another is somehow... pleasant. The unsureness of the moment is oddly but specifically different from the jitters that filled me when I met the others under the arch of the pool. Without looking away from me, he continues talking breathily. Absently. Like he's trying to process something out loud and the words on the tip of his tongue are spilling out before it can touch his mind.

"But when you stepped out into the light you surprised me. I still have to take a moment to compose myself sometimes. But you, you just opened your eyes. I had planned to ask if you were okay, but by the time we came out of the tunnel, you were fine. You didn't need to catch your breath, but I sure did."

A grin spreads across Ezra's face before he barks out a curt laugh and shakes his head, "Then I thought you were going to turn around and see me staring behind you. And I figured at that point it would only be weird if I didn't say anything!"

He forces out another laugh and swings his arms to loop behind his head. It was like watching a cork pop off a bottle of fizzy water and I can't help but laugh with him, suddenly feeling silly myself.

"Is that why you stayed behind? To ask if I had any tips on how to beat the cramped tunnel? I hate to break it to you, but I don't have any. I feel like I barely survived."

I gesture to my uniform — the grubby smudges on my button-up, the small tears in my jacket, the long rip across my skirt that splits to reveal a knobbly kneecap.

"I should be asking you for advice. I look like I barely survived a field of thorns, let alone walking through a simple tunnel," I say.

For a second Ezra only stands and stares at me, face caught between a half-laugh and a half-smile. We dab away at the awkwardness with a few more chuckles on both our parts and agree that maybe we can help each other.

Somehow it is decided that he would go into the tunnel first and I right behind him. There is a joke that I should hold his tail to make sure we don't get separated, which only results in more foolish guffaws as I wonder why we'd have to worry about that. But in the darkness, as I shuffle behind him, it no longer feels so funny. Knowing Ezra is in front of me somewhere isn't the same as seeing him. And the sound of my heart thundering in my ears is growing louder and louder the deeper we go until it is so loud that I can't hear my own hot breaths. I want to run.

I am too hot ... I think as my back prickles with sweat.

My heart is too loud ... I worry, feeling its thrum in my neck.

It is so dark . . . my shoulders squeeze together in a stony pinch.

Run. My brain screams, Run. Run. Run!

I'm willing my body to burst forward, not caring if I careen into Ezra who I logically know is ahead of me, somewhere. But I can't. My body won't respond. How was it that earlier when I went through the tunnel the first time I rocketed the last sprint, but now the only thing keeping me upright is the pressing wall of rock around me?

Maybe Ezra will notice I fell behind. What if he's already made it out? How long would he wait for me? My breath quickens and I can't tell if I'm blinking or staring with my eyes wide open — it's all the same.

Something in the darkness reaches for me and clasps at my elbow. My shoulder, my neck! I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes out. It slides up my neck to my face, the back of my head. Its pressure is warm and strong. Then I feel fabric against my face and the scent of sawdust fills my nose. I deflate. It's Ezra. His arms wrap around me in a gentle hug.

"Is this okay?" He whispers in my ear.

I still can't get my mouth to form words around my deep, heavy breaths, but I lean into him and nod in approval.

He continues to whisper soft words and smooths my hair down my back. I can't make out what he's saying but soon the thunder in my ears recedes.

"This is always the worst part, but we're almost there," he says.

His voice echoes in the tunnel. It's soft, low, and ... somehow familiar? I am reminded of the lapping of ocean waves on a beach front. And then it clicks. The platform of crate columns. The stinging water and prism vision. The low dip of a fae woman's doe ears as she strains to guide an overburdened gondola. It all comes rushing to the forefront of my mind.

"It was you!" I say, pushing him away. "You're blazer-boy, you're the one from the uniform shop!"

I try to jerk away from him, but there's no space.

I scratch my back against the tunnel walls, but I don't care.

"What?" he asks.

I can't see his face, but his voice is piqued in astonishment.

"You're the one who played that unforgivable trick on me. You pushed me into the water. I could have drowned! Do you realize how much magic was in that lagoon?" I can't pull away from him, but I can push him. I beat against his chest, I even try to shove past him. He doesn't stop me from hitting him, but he does place his hands firmly on my shoulders.

"Scarlette, please, calm down. Someone's going to get hurt," he says consolingly.

"Yeah, you! I'm going to hurt you."

My elbows chafe against the tunnel wall, the space too cramped for me to throw a punch at Ezra without scraping myself up too.

"Okay, but can you tell me why you want to hurt me?"

I scoff, "Don't play stupid, you know what you did."

"No, I really don't. I have no idea what you are talking about." He grunts the words out while I beat my fists against his chest.

I knock against his sternum so hard he gasps, and his hands dart from my shoulders to my wrists. He pins them to either side of my head against the cracked, stone wall.

"Calm down," he says.

I hesitate, dazed by how strong he is. As someone who has never lost an arm wrestle to anyone but Rugrug, it's a surprise to find myself pinned down by a boy barely my senior. For a second, just a second, I'm too startled to move. His breath is hot on my face. I can't discern his expression in the darkness. I can only feel his closeness, breathe in his scent of wood chips, and stare blindly in front of me, wondering what the next move is. I'm about to stop straining against him, to stop fighting. But then he chuckles. He *chuckles!* Like my rage, like the way he hurt me doesn't matter.

"Had enough fun, yet?" he asks.

"Not quite," I seethe.

I yank my head backwards, slam the back of it against the tunnel wall, and lunge forward. There's a popping sound as my headbutt crashes into Ezra. He releases my hands and I hear him take a step back with a howl, his body scratching against the other side of the tunnel.

"That's for fat-shaming me," I spit. "I'm half-orc, you jerk. Big bones come with the territory."

I remember it all now. Ezra is the blazer-boy, and Jemyr! Tall, broad-shouldered, big as a hut, Jemyr. I try to step forward, I want to get close and hit Ezra again, but I'm dizzy from the headbutt.

"You were at Sanctuary the same day I was this summer," I sputter.

Ezra groans incoherently somewhere in the darkness before me.

"You and your friend Jemyr knocked over all those boxes and shoved me in the lagoon. Remember that?"

Shock, and a new lisp, flavors his dulcet voice as Ezra replies, "Jemyr? Sanctuary, the platform. Oh, gods below. The boxes, the spill — Scarlette?"

"Yes, me. Scarlette. I bet you thought your whole 'wild blazer' plan was really clever didn't you," I growl back at him. "What, never expected to get caught, huh? Well here I am!"

"Plan? Scarlette, there was no plan. Please, you have to believe me, it was an accident!" he pleads.

"If it was such an accident, why did you leave me there, huh? Why did you walk away? I had to swim all the way around the platform to get out of the water. Do you realize how much that hurt?" To my great displeasure, my voice trails out into a wobble.

I try to hit him again, but I still can't walk straight. My fist skips off the tunnel wall, abrasive against my knuckles. Shame courses through me; the embarrassment of trying on dress after dress; the way I squirmed under the eyes of Sanctuary patrons who stared at me as I inched along the lagoon towards the shop's exit. The welts and colorful warts that didn't take hours to fade as Mom had predicted. They took days. A week of sitting around the kitchen table, crying into pot after pot of soothing lavender tea. I knew blazer-boy went to Amalgamy Academy. But I never expected to run into him, to *identify* him. And now here we are.

"Let me explain, please. I promise you, it wasn't on purpose. I didn't know you were there, not really," he says.

I can't say anything without betraying myself. I know that if I speak again, I'll start crying. And I will *not* do that in front of him. Mistaking my silence as an opening, Ezra explains himself.

"You've seen Jemyr, he's a big dude. Huge! That's why he asked me to go to Sanctuary with him. He's not exactly 'standard size'. I had just been dumped, so I was already having a bad day," he explains.

I interrupt him, "Dumped? You mean by Adora?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter," he says. "I only went to Sanctuary because he needed help finding things that fit him. When I heard someone behind me, I thought it was Jemyr. And then he threw that blazer at me, and I knocked over all those boxes... I mean, *a lot* of boxes. And crates. And chests. It was chaos! And when I finally got the blazer off my face, all I saw was a heaping pile of trouble around us, and Jemyr was over it. He didn't want to keep shopping, so we took what we gathered and left the platform to pay. Scarlette, I didn't know I knocked you over. I didn't know I knocked anyone over! When the walls fell and no one else but Jemyr was there, I just thought I was hearing things. Or that it was him all along. I didn't see you, I didn't see anyone else but Jemyr."

Fumbling around in the dark tunnel, he takes my hands and presses them to his chest. I can feel his heart rapidly beating underneath my palms.

"It was an accident. I swear, it was an accident," he says pleadingly.

The more he talks, the more my eyes sting. And ... I want to believe him. Could it really be possible that, after all this time, the whole thing truly wasn't on purpose? I hesitate in my

reply, rewinding the memory over and over again. The more I think about it, the more plausible his story becomes. He never saw me. Even when he crashed into me, his face was covered by the rogue blazer.

But I pull my hands out of his anyway, unsure what to believe.

"I am so sorry," he says.

He says it so quietly, so brittle, that I almost want to take his hands back. But I don't.

"It's going to take more than an apology to make it up to me," I reply.

He doesn't come closer. I can't see him, but he doesn't reach back out to touch me either. Instead, he says evenly, "Whatever it takes, whatever you want. It is yours. I really didn't mean to hurt you."

"I think I think I know that. But that doesn't explain how rude you were to the Sanctuary employee. The one who steered your gondola." I reply.

Ezra sighs and makes a sputtering sound that I imagine is probably him spitting blood out of his mouth.

"Yeah, Jemyr got onto me about that too. I know, it wasn't fair. And, for the record, I apologized and tipped her well," he says.

"Right," I say placatingly. "Because I'm sure paying her off made her feel loads better."

"No, that's not — I know it doesn't make it better. But it's all I could think of to do to try to make it up to her. Like I said, I was in a bad mood after the break up. It's not an excuse, just a reason," he says.

There's a long pause; no sound aside from the wind in the tunnel and our synchronized breathing.

"Can we —" Ezra sighs. "Can we start over?"

I can't agree to that. It's not something I can do. I can't just let go of all the feelings squirming around inside of me. I can't forgive him for the way he treated the fae employee who steered his and Jemyr's gondola. He doesn't deserve that. But I remember the way Mom dressed up to go to Sanctuary. How she dressed right, talked right, did everything right and it didn't matter to Thomme how hard she tried. The only reason he put up with us was because his supervisor made him. And I don't want to be like Thomme. I don't want to judge based on first impressions.

"No, it's too late to start over. But maybe we can move forward," I decide.

Ezra accepts my offer with grace. It's clear that neither one of us is exactly pleased with how this venture down the tunnel is turning out, but at least I don't feel the need to punch him any more. He leads us around a sharp corner after which the tunnel marginally begins to lighten with every step with the promise of sunlight soon at hand. As it also starts to widen, we shift so that we can walk side-by-side. We're toeing the tunnel's last edges of shadow when we slow to a stop.

"I think this is where we part ways," he says.

I mutter, "I believe Denzel said they're waiting for me."

Neither one of us moves. Neither one of us turns to leave. I slide my eyes over to him, hoping to get a peak of whatever expression his diamond-shape face is wearing, only to find him watching me. He doesn't back down, or hurriedly glance away, or fumble with a light-hearted joke. My vision tracks the strong curve of his jawline, the gentle slopes of his dark eyebrows. I'm searching, but I can't see even a trace of playfulness in him. No. He's pouring his full attention into my eyes. Shamelessly. I don't know what to say.

Then the sound of a hyper, baritone voice crashes over us. A long distance shout from beyond the tunnel entrance. Denzel yells, "Scarlette? Are you back yet? I just had the most excellent speed-snogging and I just have to tell someone about it *immediately!*"

"And that's my cue," I say, giggling a little at the absurdity of it all.

"Wait," Ezra reaches out and stops me, his hand on mine. "Meet me tomorrow? In Skylark. I'll tell you all about Adventurer Arena training,"

I eye him warily, "I don't know if that's a good idea. I said we can move on, but —"

"Please? I know you're still mad at me. And, even though I totally didn't mean to hurt you, I know I did. You said it yourself, an apology isn't enough. Let me at least try to make up for it," he says.

Ezra releases my hand. The skin around his lips and chin is already a little purple from where I headbutted him.

"Why do you care?"

I don't say it to flippantly dismiss him. It slips out of my lips simply because I don't understand. Why would he care about a girl he accidentally rubbed the wrong way? And I literally just assaulted him. His teeth are still stained red from the blood I drew in my attack. What could possibly motivate a guy to hang out with a girl even after getting beat up by her?

"Because," he replies with a smirk. "I like mice. I think they're cute."



(An AI Depiction of Fjurnik, a rock troll by nature and Amalgamy's Bridge Troll by status)

Mark Eight: Negotiation

Ezra goes on ahead of us for his own class and Denzel spends five whole minutes talking about their impromptu appointment with Aeron before we even start walking back towards the main campus. When we finally do place the cave and tunnel to our backs, I am reminded how hopelessly lost I would have been had I not Denzel for a companion and guide. The foliage is just starting to grow less and less dense, but this is definitely not the same way Adora and I had come. Either that, or I'm truly less observant than I thought. I don't remember seeing the bramble-entombed weeping statues of human-like visage, or feeling my feet skid beneath me on a slippery bridge made of tree roots over a small marsh, or smelling the funky scent of a patch of colorful mushrooms growing around a giant empty snail shell. As fascinated as I am by these discoveries, I am distracted by Denzel laborating over the details of their short tryst. And I learn that, apparently, Aeron is a moaner.

"It's so hot," Denzel says for what has to be the third time in the past forty seconds.

I hum in agreement and immediately regret not asking something — anything — as a follow up question, because then Denzel asks what my first kiss was like. I stammer, conversational footing lost, and they chuckle.

"You haven't had your first kiss yet, have you?" Denzel shouts the question so loudly I nearly jump.

Frantic, I set to shushing them, rushing to clamp my hand over their mouth.

"Don't just announce it!" I beg.

Denzel shoos my hand away.

"Oh, you're fine. The few classrooms that are out here are too high up to hear us, if they're being used for anything at all. Other than snogging, of course! But, really? I totally

thought that's what you and Ezra were up to when you said you had 'questions' for him. I get why you didn't want everyone else to know you two know each other, but now you have to tell me."

Classrooms? I look up and squint. It takes me a moment to spot them, but they're right. I wouldn't have noticed them had Denzel not said something, but very high up I can see platforms carved into some of the largest and thickest of the trees. They look so bare I almost think it's a stretch to call them classrooms, but it's reasonable to think maybe that's because of my point of view looking up at them from this angle. Denzel calls my attention back by clearing their throat

I shake my head and say, "Right. No, Denzel. We really don't know each other."

"Don't play coy with me, Scarlette, I'm not stupid. I'll give you one more chance. Don't screw it up now. What is that pet-name he has for you? Little mouse? Does that make him 'Daddy Mousie'? Oh, how about the 'Big Cat-io'?"

I feel like there's a word for moments like these. Because it's almost funny, in the most infuriating way. I'm imagining flakes of enamel scraping off as I grind my teeth together. Meanwhile, Denzel's lips are twisted into a wicked grin. And when I don't immediately reply to them, Denzel's soft black ears begin to twitch.

They purr, "You can tell me now, *or* you can explain it to the whole group later, when I ask you again in front of Adora. Your choice."

Denzel's eyes gleam at me, reminiscent of when they teasingly called their sister a bitch. It was obvious then that they didn't truly mean the sentiment, but now? I can't tell if they're joking or not. I groan loudly, a verbal sign of my surrender.

"Really! I'm being honest. Okay, we kind of met over the summer, but briefly. It was a terrible interaction and I didn't even know it was him until just now. Really, I only met Ezra right

before Adora introduced me to you. He happened to be the next person to come through the tunnel. I didn't even know he was behind me! I don't know why he calls me 'little mouse.'"

Then I bite my lip, remembering Ezra's last words to me as I left to trade his company for Denzel's.

"Actually, maybe — He said he thinks mice are cute."

Denzel swings their long arms wide open in victory.

He exclaims, "I knew it! I knew it. Don't ever try to lie to Denzel. I knew there was something going on between you. So what are you going to do? When are you going to see him again? Oh! What if he's your first kiss?" Then, as an afterthought, they saucily add, "Ooo, scandalous~"

"Uhm, I don't know about all that, but he wants to meet tomorrow," I admit.

Denzel clasps their hands together, "So soon!"

"But I don't know if I'm going to go."

"What?" Denzel's tone is suddenly flat, their ears pricked up in disapproval. "What do you mean you're not going to go?"

"I don't know. For one thing, what about Adora? Isn't she his ex-girlfriend?" I ask.

"What about Adora! She forfeited every right she had to Ezra when she broke up with him last year. What he does isn't any of her business. And his business, it seems, is wanting to spend time with you. It's not about what Adora wants."

I stop walking and stare at my feet. Denzel steps up in front of me, close enough that I can smell them. The earthy aroma of hazelnuts teases my nose.

Confidence structuring their tone, Denzel says, "We haven't known each other long, but one thing you should know about me is that I'm a quick bonder. Actually two things. I'm also a

big fan of free choice. So. I've decided that you're my friend now. And it sounds like you need someone to remind you to ask yourself: What does *Scarlette* want?"

I continue to stare at my feet, finding the square foot of broken leaves and dirt around my toes infinitely fascinating, as I wonder what *do* I want? I think I want to be Adora's friend. I think I want to be friends with Denzel. I think I want to be part of their beau monde group. *And I want to believe in second chances.*

The thought is jarring because, after all, isn't today sort of like my second chance after what happened yesterday with Tthreandvar? Plus, there's something about Ezra that is immensely confusing. What if he had approached me sooner? Adora only came back to talk to me because the Principal told her to, but Ezra had no other motivation other than because he wanted to. *Because he thinks I'm cute.*

"Hang on, why are you encouraging me?" I ask Denzel.

"Don't be dull, I already told you. I'm an advocate for free choice. And the friend thing," They say dismissively.

"Yeah and Adora is your friend, too. You sided with her last year against Ezra and again in the cave, like, thirty minutes ago." I point out.

"Okay, that was against Tthreandvar. I have nothing against Ezra. I said I'm okay with how she treats her play things because she's my friend and it's not my place to judge her. But that doesn't mean I think she's right. Unless she asks for advice, though, what she does isn't really any of my business," they explain.

"But it is your business if you are asked?"

My eyes remain stuck to my feet, but I can hear Denzel's crooked smile in their voice as they reply, "Is that you asking me what I think you should do?"

I hesitate. Then nod.

"Well then. Let's see. I think the only person you should be loyal to here, Scarlette, is yourself. And your friends, of course, which includes me as I have already confirmed."

My friends. And who are my friends? So far at Amalgamy Academy that list seems to exclusively contain only one name, and they're standing right in front of me.

"So," Denzel prompts. "What does Scarlette want?"

"I think you're right. I think I can at least get to know him."

"Excellent!" Denzel agrees.

They reach out to pluck my hand from my side and spin me around. Then they loop my arm in theirs, and pulls us into forward motion.

"Now we're getting somewhere," they say conspiratorially.

"As a friend, Denzel!" I clarify.

Denzel waves the thought away carelessly, "Yeah, yeah. We'll see about that. First we'll have to do something about your style. The uniform code is bad enough, but you're a wreck."

"Hey!"

I stop to inspect my uniform, am reminded by its tears and dirt smears of its ruin, and sigh in defeat.

"Alright, admittedly, this is pretty bad."

"You can't go back to class the way you are. The Proctors are going to get nosey and we'll lose our lunch spot at the cave. And I am too pretty to break bread with the peasants on the outside."

They tilt their head to lean in closer. The tips of their feline ears graze against my eyebrow.

"For the record though, I would have said the same thing if you were squeaky clean and wearing a fresh uniform," they whisper.

I turn to face them and start to pull my arm away, but Denzel laughs airily and boops my nose with a long index finger.

"Just teasing, Darling! It's not your fault the school uniforms are hideous. But I happen to have an excellent eye for design, as you may have already noticed."

"I was wondering about that. So the beau monde's uniform modifications are all you, huh?" I ask.

"Beau monde? Oh, I quite like that. Yes! But not only that, you are looking at the one and only Amalgamy Academy Re-Designer who works exclusively for my friends and is coveted by all in the land!"

They say it with such gusto I don't know whether to laugh or play my role as the newbie in starstruck awe. My reaction, though, seems to matter little to Denzel as we continue our walk. They're explaining, down to nitty gritty details, their artistic choices in regards to each of their muses.

Saréell's uniform? Embroidered with swallows in various stages of flight to compliment her hidden tattoo, an open bird cage in the shape of a crescent moon. Apparently, she used to keep swallows as pets, until the first time she fully shapeshifted into her true Kellas Sith form. In the frenzy of her first transformation, Saréell accidentally ate her beloved feathered friends.

It's with equal parts apprehension and enthusiasm that I ask, "Not to say I expect one, but I'm curious. What would you imagine for me?"

But Denzel, now tapping the tip of their own nose, and says, "A magician would never reveal their secrets. Why should I?"

Then they raise an eyebrow and look me up and down.

"More immediately, we need to get you a change of clothes. We already decided that you can't go to class with the rags you have on now," Denzel scrutinizes.

I can't disagree with them. At some point, even my hair unraveled from the braid I twisted it into this morning.

"Yeah, a Lost and Found would be nice," I agree.

Denzel laughs. "The Lost and Found is anything but nice. It's guarded by Scald, and he's a real nasty piece of work. But I suppose that's why Amalgamy hired him for the security team. No one wants to tangle with a Drachkin."

"That makes sense. At my old school there was this older kid, Mahgen, gods above was she a grouch!"

"How's that?" Denzel asks.

They're leading us away from the main path now, down a narrower trail. I talk as we walk, recalling how Mahgen was an older kid at my previous school and that we used to live in the same neighborhood. We'd end up running into each other walking home from school a lot. She would always say that she didn't want friends or company of any kind, but I think she was just shy. One time she was in a really good mood though, and she played tag with me. But she wasn't used to her Gift of Breath yet. So, she accidentally froze me in a puddle.

"How much older was she?" Denzel asks.

The trail Denzel is leading us on starts to stretch uphill, and the slabs of stone underfoot grow slick and requires more focus to traverse.

"I don't know exactly. I'm pretty sure she's in Level Three or Four now. She's around the same age as Benny. He's one of my other neighbors that I'm friends with," I say.

"Does he think you two are friends?" Denzel questions.

Reactively, I make a face of complete dismay. Then, realizing that his back is to me and he can't see my face, I say, "Of course he does. Why would you say that? Him and his sister, Ella, are my best friends."

As the incline levels out, Denzel slows to a stop. I'm so grateful for a chance to catch my breath, that it takes me a minute to notice why we have stopped. The pathway is cut off by a steep drop that opens over a small valley squished between sloping hills; on the other side of the valley, the other half of the path continues. The slopes cradle a swift channel of water that isn't quite large enough to be a river, but is also too wide to be a stream. Though we stand on the peak of the largest ridge this side of the water, I can't see a reason why Denzel led us to a dead end. There's no one here and nothing around us that looks remotely like it could be a makeshift Lost and Found.

"We need to go down there," they say, pointing down at the valley.

I stop myself from groaning, but Denzel grants me an apologetic look and shrugs.

"Fjurnik's trove is enchanted. Walking all the way up here is like knocking on the front door. Besides, I need to see where I am going to know how to get there."

"Wait, you're saying someone lives in the valley?" I ask.

"No, I'm saying someone conducts business in the valley. And he's not one to keep waiting. Shall we?"

I take one last look over the valley, and nod to Denzel that I'm ready to continue.

"I wasn't trying to be offensive, by the way," they say matter-of-factly. "When I asked whether or not Benny thinks you two are friends, it was an honest question. You do know that

Drachkins mature twice as fast as humans? They're taught how to master their Breath by the age of seven."

"No, I did not know that. But what's your point?"

I'm not trying to be argumentative. Denzel isn't Kalia, I remind myself. But I can't deny I'm a little piqued.

"Nothing. Only that if Mahgen is as old as you say, it probably wasn't an accident. Watch your step. We're going off-trail from here."

Denzel's tone is casual, yet their words jolt through me. I follow mutely as they retrace our steps to find a relatively safe angle for us to descend the hill by. We begin to carefully pick our way downwards, and, honestly, I'm kind of glad the steep decline gives me an excuse to stop talking. My grace, already not a quality I am well known for, is hindered even further by the fully resurfaced memory of Mahgen and the cold entrapment of my toes.

I recall the way her black eyes glinted, a stark contrast against the pale scales of her skin. They were wide and brimming with unshed tears in my memory, but were they filled with regret or mirth? I always thought it odd how easily she laughed at my predicament. She said it was an uncontrollable instinct, that underneath her awkward smile — and she did insist that the fat grin on her reptilian face was involuntary and very awkward indeed — she was actually horrified at what she had done. She left me to get help, but now that I think about it, my Mom didn't find me until almost an hour later. I was so relieved that I instantly assumed Mahgen had told her where I was but I see now that that doesn't make sense. My home was closer than hers. An eight minute walk around the corner, tops.

After that, Mom told me not to talk to Mahgen anymore. That didn't prove difficult as Mahgen refused to talk to me after that anyways. Not even to tell me to go away. And she moved

away the next year, sent to an all-Mythical boarding school. So Denzel has a point. I called her my friend, but that doesn't mean she ever thought of me as one of hers.

Denzel reaches the bottom of the hill first. I almost trip and fall the rest of the way down, but I pitch my weight behind me just in time. I even almost manage to make my slide down the bottom of the hill look purposeful. Almost. I clap my hands together in an effort to dust the dirt off them; see the fresh tear in my shirt sleeve; give up; and rub my palms into what's left of my skirt. I absolutely hate wearing skirts, pants are far more practical. For one thing, they'd certainly make flying through the Tree of Halls, crawling through tunnels, trudging through woodlands, and hiking rugged terrain a whole lot easier.

We are in the valley now. Side by side, Denzel and I stand in a clearing with a copse of trees at our backs. We are flanked by running water and the hill we just descended — the crest of which stretches so far out that it casts a faint shadow over us.

"We're almost there," Denzel says.

They've already started walking forward, but towards what I can't tell. It's nice down here, quiet and undisturbed, but I still don't see anything or anyone around that might be helpful. A few minutes later, Denzel stops at the foot of the hill; where the base meets the valley floor and the ground fades from river, to stone, to sand.

"We should be able to see it soon."

If by 'it' Denzel means 'a pile of rubble and a smattering of boulders', then yes. I see 'it'. Long ago, this collection of rocks and ruins might have been something, but now? My mouth opens to form a question, but my brain is still piecing words together.

In front of me, Denzel is trying to angle themselves to see around a large boulder while still keeping their distance.

Then, eyes widening, they quickly turn to me and say, "Better let me do all the talking, trolls are notoriously difficult to bargain with. They like to mince words, so the less said, the better. Got it?"

Trolls? You never said anything about trolls! But I barely have time to think the words, let alone say them.

Denzel steps forward and offers, to whoever is watching us, a deep and formal bow. I try to mimic the act, once again dumbfounded at my own ignorance. Why had I wasted so much of the walk here talking about nonsense and not questioning what exactly it is we are doing? I should have known something was off the moment Denzel said we weren't going to the Lost and Found.

There's a distinct rumbling sound behind the boulder Denzel just inspected, and I instinctively take a step back. But Denzel grabs my wrist and holds me in place. It is the impossible sight of rubble lifting itself into the air and reconstructing itself into *something* that stops me from pushing Denzel. While Physical magic pieces together the facade of a structure of some kind, Illusion magic ripples and alters my perception of the space before me. The rising rocks shed sand as they flip end over end to find where they belong. Boulders crumble into dust, which then swirl around the structure, plugging holes in its growing body. The grinding of stone on stone echoes in the valley as the hodgepodge of random rocks fit together to create ... a bathroom? After a few more seconds of blinking, the building is complete with paintings of a yellow humanoid on one side, and a green humanoid on the other. This, I am certain, is part of the enchantment Denzel had mentioned. I have to admit, the doorbell and camouflage features are impressive, but an old lavatory? After the lavish decadence of the Tree of Halls and the hidden cave, a secret bathroom is underwhelming with a capital 'U'.

A dog with matted carpet for hair strolling out of the green side of the building captures my attention. At least, I think it is a dog. Until I notice that a Level Two Flower uniform is strapped to the squat boy's body, barely visible between the tangled sheets of his long, dirty hair. His gray skin is splattered with cracked mud; small tufts of grass and weedy flowers sprout out of him from these thick dirt pockets as earthy accessories. He's about eye-level to my belly button, but his bat-like ears come up to my ribcage.

"Who's that?" I gawk.

It's a mistake. I know it as soon as the words leave my mouth because Denzel tenses beside me and curses under their breath.

"I told you not to say anything!" They mutter.

But it's too late. The rock troll, whose attention had previously been focused on Denzel's sign of respect, is now focused on me. Their gait diverts from its original trajectory as the troll brushes pass Denzel to stand directly in front of me.

**"What's this I see?
A crew of two.
One overdue,
one new."**

The troll's voice is nasally, energetic and high pitched. Not at all what I am expecting.

Denzel tries to reassert himself, announcing their name and declaring me as their companion — a witness to the trade they've come to broker.

The troll only grunts incoherently, and it's not clear for whom it is meant. Giving up, Denzel sighs and introduces the troll to me as Fjurnik.

"You opened negotiations by speaking first, Scarlett. According to troll trading customs, he will now speak only to you," Denzel informs me. His ears twitch in irritation and I know I've somehow made an already sticky situation worse.

"But I don't know what to say, I'm not familiar with trolls, what am I supposed to say?"

My voice is tinged with anxiety as my eyes dart between Fjurnik and Denzel. Fjurnik, however, seems delighted.

***"Don't worry, little girl, we'll keep this easy.
You're here because you need me.
And though I'm no genie,
you can tell me what it is you wish.
Be it a kiss or kitsch, I can conjure most anything
like a witch, miss.
Roll the dice!
Life will be nice as long as you can pay my price."***

When he's done talking, Fjurnik smiles monstrosly at me, releasing a stench like spoiled goat cheese through the cracks of his holy molars. The pungent smell brings tears to my eyes. It is punishment for being unprepared for an offensive attack on my sinuses.

I've never bargained with trolls before, but it's hard to imagine that those who I've seen at the market are Fjurnik's kin. For one thing, Svante, the hill troll I know from Panther Lake, takes great pride in her appearance. Like most trolls, she is a walking vase. I always see her with pockets bursting with overgrown flowers, but that's just it: her pockets are overgrown with flowers. Fjurnik is overrun by weeds. Svante also always smells like a meadow; unlike Fjurnik's funk.

"Fjurnik here is a Bridge Troll, aren't you, friend? And not just any Bridge Troll. Standing before us today is the head of Amalgamy's underground market."

Denzel's tone is honeyed with flattery, but Fjurnik doesn't take the bait. Evidently, rather than look at Denzel, he prefers to go so still that he stops blinking. And if I thought I was uncomfortable before, the unyielding gaze of his icy blue eyes piercing into the inner depths of my soul has me downright unnerved.

Mom believes trolls are the most annoying merchants to barter with. She says that they all think their junk shops are treasure troves, and, more often than not, they'll charge you too much for what is probably stolen goods. It doesn't matter to her whether one is a mountain troll, hill troll or any other branch of their Mythical lineage; for her, the race's reputation for shrewd deals was warning enough. Even if she is right beside the whole time, Mom won't even let me visit Svante at her family's apothecary, the Prudent Pestle. But her family are merchants by trade. Fjurnik, on the other hand, is a freaking Bridge Troll! It's a title I'm only familiar with because of a report I did about the First Rebellion last year at Panther Lake. I remember thinking the name was misleading. It took two full days of research to discover that one doesn't actually have to be of troll descent to be a Bridge Troll. The term came to be because a troll by the name of Veli Margrethe ran the most infamous black market during the First Rebellion while hiding all of its operations beneath the arc of the Serpentine Spine bridge. In this case, I take after my mom: The Bridge Troll's sketchy reputation is warning enough. If Denzel would rather cut black market deals with a Bridge Troll, Scald must be truly terrifying. But even if I do manage to broker a deal with Fjurnik, who's to say it will be a favorable one?

Fjurnik clears his throat, a rather dry and grating sound, and I remember he's waiting for *me* to say something.

I stumble over my words, "Oh, uh, I'd like um — Mm. I mean, I need a new uniform, please."

Denzel immediately shouts, 'Nay! Say nay to cancel the trade, Scarlett. Now!'

I do so and the elation in Fjurnik's eyes fades slightly.

Still, he happily whines,

**"I must profess, your wording is reckless.
But if a uniform is what you'd possess,
I have many in excess.
Do you need one with a headdress?
Or perhaps something pressed
for a dance, yes?"**

I glance over at Denzel who shrugs and gives me a knowing look. The words '*I told you so*' are written plainly on their face and in the way they cross their arms across their chest.

"This is ridiculous!" I roar.

Taking a page out of their sister's book, Denzel brushes their claws against their shirt, examines them, and brushes them again. They're either bored or annoyed, I can't tell.

"You've got to do better than that," is all they say.

"It's not my fault I'm messing this up." I try to smile while I talk, but my frustration makes my attempt at calm friendliness more akin to a wolf baring its fangs.

"Odd, that's exactly what it looks like to me."

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't know what I'm doing here!"

"Oh, I noticed," Denzel scoffs. "You're letting him outsmart you. Haha! Can you imagine climbing back up that hill in a gown?"

I grind the heels of my hands into my eyeballs.

Through gritted teeth I seethe, "Newsflash! With all the time it took to walk here, you could have warned me about what we were getting ourselves into."

Denzel strikes a lofty pose and waves a disdainful hand in the air, soaking up every ounce of my bitter exasperation. They drawl, "I told you when we got here to let me do the talking. It's not my fault you can't follow directions."

'Tense' is not a strong enough word to describe how every muscle in my body tightens; the way both my eyes widen and twitch at the corners; how the curves of my nostrils widen in an irate flare. 'Tense' may be inadequate, but 'unhinged' is exactly how I feel.

My tone drips with acid as I whirl on Denzel and snarl, "You know something? Everything about you is a show! You're not a quick-bonder. You're just obsessed with yourself and don't care about anyone else. If you're ever cast out of the Beau Monde, all you'll have is sewing needles and your bad personality. Maybe D'ja, *if* she sides with you."

Denzel gasps, but I'm too heated to care about impact. I'm already tongue-lashing Fjurnik, my finger pushed into his fuzzy chest.

"And you're supposedly in charge of the underground? I thought you're a Bridge Troll, not a glorified bathroom attendant! I'm not here to play games or spit out weak poetry. Can't you see how I'm dressed? I need a —"

Fjurnik releases fierce bellow followed by an odor so foul I can't help but gag.

"She didn't mean it!" Denzel says. They push themselves between Fjurnik and I and apologize profusely. But it doesn't matter. I don't see Fjurnik touch Denzel. One moment they are standing between us, and the next moment Denzel is crumpled on the ground. A skidmark, a path of upturned stones and freshly churned dirt, lead my eyes to where Denzel lay dazed, several feet away.

"Denzel!" I try to scream, but there's nothing blocking Fjurnik from me now.

The earth trembles beneath me. No, it doesn't tremble, it crumbles! I fall down on my butt as the ground shifts beneath me to merge with Fjurnik's body. The cacophony of clattering rocks splashing out of water and dragging against each other swirls around me. I watch as Fjurnik suddenly grows taller and wider with new layers of stone molding to his body. The rock troll grows from the size of a dog to a giant right before my very eyes.

**"You've made a mistake
From which there is no escape.
You're a pauper of honor,
I'll make you a daughter of mourners."**

Fjurnik's words boom with anger. No longer nasally and giddy, his voice is deep and throaty. An intense growl. He begins to walk towards me and pebbles jump at his every footfall. I look over to Denzel but they're still sprawled in the moist streambank. I scramble to my feet and start running away from their direction, trying to lure Fjurnik's gigantic form away from Denzel. It works, but the troll is faster than I anticipate. Huge stony fists beat against the ground, smashing the earth just behind me while I run. I know I don't have long. Fjurnik's legs are longer than mine and he knows this stream probably better than any other being at Amalgamy Academy.

That's when I'm struck with the dumbest, most ludicrous idea I've ever had. But with a raging troll racing behind me, a rushing stream on my left, and a sloping hill to my right, what other choice do I have but to run for the trees and hope they provide cover? Jaw clamped in determination, I push myself to run faster. But then Fjurnik dives for me. The impact his heavy body makes on the ground is so great that I lose my footing. It's just as well, for as I go down, shattered logs and rock spray the air. I feel something slice open my leg but I know I can't slow down. There's a soft whisper in my head, a voice telling me that I should feel pain right now, but

I force its reasoning aside, stumble to my feet, and push forward. I don't turn around to look behind me until I can press my palm against bark. I'm heaving deep, heavy breaths, clutching at a harsh stitch in my chest, and Fjurnik is erect in the midst of a dust cloud.

I think I'd be less terrified if he bellowed another roar, hopefully loud enough to raise some kind of alarm? But, scarier than I thought possible, the giant rock troll simply cranks his head in my direction and strides straight towards me.

"Wake up! Time to come back!" I yell.

Panicked, I start yanking on tree limbs, stripping bark and needles. Thanks to my orc-born strength I even manage to rip chunks of tree roots out of the ground.

It's not enough! It's not working!

Within seconds, Fjurnik crosses the streambank and is right behind me; the grove's first barrier barely keeps his ginormous hands off of me. Without any hesitation, he starts violently yanking trees straight out of the ground. Knowing I don't have long before I'm found, I lunge for the largest, strongest branch I can reach and clasp it tight. My breath catches in my throat as a large fist encloses around my waist, trapping my legs into a stiff and unforgiving vice-grip. My joints scream as the rock troll tugs on me, but I refuse to release the hold I have on the branch. My hands burn as bark embeds itself into my flesh, then an ear-splitting snapping sound erupts from the tree. Branch in hand, Fjurnik lifts me into the air.

The rock troll's giant face is warped, stripped with minerals and dripping with water from stones freshly plucked from the stream. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he can utter a single line of rhyme, I release a primal shout and plunge my hard-won weapon into his eye with all of my strength. Fjurnik rips out a pained howl and releases me.

For a moment I'm consumed with the gut-wrenching sensation of falling. I brace myself for the harsh impact of the rocky ground below, but it doesn't come. Instead, I'm swaddled by the leafy, wooden embrace of one of the trees nearby. One that I had been hiding by, one that I'm sure I broke a few limbs off of. It had been a desperate attempt to awaken a dryad, or to call a forest spirit here if one was nearby. I knew the chances of one of these trees being home to someone who might help was slim, but never could I have guessed that an Ent was hiding among them.

His voice creaked and reverberated around the valley. It didn't quite form words, but the sound filled me with his sorrow and rage.

How dare we desecrate his home, his brethren? What do we have to say for ourselves?

Fjurnik is whimpering and clutching his injured eye. He's shrinking in size as his stony shell of armor falls off his body in tumbling chunks. When the last of his protective crust of pebbles clatters to the ground, he seems too shocked to notice. I stammer, unsure of what to say, when someone familiar miraculously speaks for me.

"Our deepest apologies, wise, kind tree-man. I weep for your loss and pledge to plant ten trees for each that was injured in this terrible misunderstanding."

It's Denzel! He's not only standing and diplomatically diffusing the Ent's frustration, he's smiling! They have one hand gingerly set on a shoulder, but otherwise they look perfectly safe. Relief floods through me so strongly, I almost want to laugh, but, now that my heart is no longer hammering within me, my body awakens to all my aches and scrapes. I barely have enough agency to mutter an apology to the tree-man holding me, when a foggy blackness washes over me. The fight now drained out of me, I sink into its inky embrace.

When I wake, it is to the sound of rushing water and the scent of hazelnuts. When I blink my eyes open, it is to see Denzel replacing a pumice on my leg, and to feel cold water soothing my shredded hands. And when I ask in alarm what happened, where the Ent and the Fjurnik is, Denzel bursts with unrestrained laughter! It takes a while for them to calm down enough to explain everything.

"You insulted a troll! And you had to have set a new record, like, you really set him off and *fast*. In case you somehow missed it, trolls are an incredibly proud people. So the way you disrespected his title like that? His customs — that's why Fjurnik was rhyming, by the way — *and* you put a hand on him? Three big no-nos. By the time I was back on my feet, I thought it was over. He literally had you in the palm of his hands, I thought you were a goner! Dead, unrecoverable. But then oh-ho! You got him good! Ol' Fjurnik will think twice before he fights you again. The Ent you somehow managed to find and wake refused to give him any *esse sap*, so he's blind for good in that eye. Unless he has any stored in his trove, which is doubtful."

"Esse sap? Why would the Ent give me medicine?" I ask.

I pull myself into a sitting position and notice the pile of clothes Denzel has next to them.

"How in Gaia did you still manage to score a uniform?" I marvel.

Denzel smirks and asks if I want to know what happened, or if I would rather continue interrupting them. I smile sheepishly and motion for them to keep talking.

"Simple, really. You lost a lot of blood from your leg wound so you passed out. And though the Ent isn't your biggest fan, you're lucky that he was angrier at Fjurnik than you. With the enchantment down, the Ent took one look at the man-made obstruction and demanded Fjurnik level it. He wailed something about boundaries and purity, then I persuaded the tree-man

to let me collect some esse sap from their body, right where I presume you broke off your weapon, and I applied it while you slept," they say.

Then, pointing to the crumpled uniform beside them, they continue, "This was a little harder to obtain. But I offered something Fjurnik couldn't refuse. Even after losing an eye the Bridge Troll in him can't resist a good deal."

My brain is not yet awake, still catching up with the rest of my body. But I could be dead and still know that something about this deal between Denzel and Fjurnik is wrong. I flex my wet hands and place one carefully on my injured leg. Everything stings, but it's not unbearable.

"Denzel, what did you trade?" I ask.

They wave away my concern, "Don't worry about it."

I ask again, my tone harder this time. Worried. "What did you trade?"

They hesitate, then finally say, "It's nothing. Just a favor."

My head snaps up and I look at them, wide-eyed.

"You did not, please, tell me you're joking!"

They shake their head, "In the end, one favor from me is so valuable that it got you a new uniform, and, more importantly, no blood feud. Fjurnik agreed to hold no grudge against you, and that was his price."

"Fine, that's easy. I'll pay it. Whatever it is that Fjurnik asks for, I'll take care of it."

Denzel replies with his late-season raspberry chuckle, somehow both tangy and sweet.

"C'mon, I know you went to public school but you're in Amalgamy now, Sweetheart. You know favors don't work that way, they're not transferable. I can ask however many people I need to help in completing the favor, but I can't just sit out."

I shake my head, this is the kind of thing Ella and I would muse about in a game of 'would you rather'. Like, would you rather owe a favor, or drink a mysterious potion that could cause any number of things to happen?

"You don't even know when Fjurnik will call on you, or what the favor will be. Why would you agree to that?"

Denzel looks away from me. Then, after a thoughtful pause, they change their mind and turn so that they can look me dead in the eye.

I don't say anything. I just wait, wanting to give Denzel the space they need to talk. I'm tempted to jump in when their eyes squint so hard it looks like they're in pain, but I hold out. A moment later, Denzel's voice is so soft I have to lean in to hear them.

"I don't know where to start. But you were right. I should have warned you about meeting a Bridge Troll before we got there. I thought introducing you to the leader of Amalgamy's underground market would make me look cool, you know? And then I got mad at you because you were mad at me — but you had a right to be mad and I didn't, which made it worse."

Denzel lifts their head and starts blinking at the cloudy sky. They sniff and say, "I have to watch the kohl. I wasn't expecting to tear up and I don't have extra on me."

"Don't worry, I have allergies, too," I joke.

Denzel laughs softly but refuses to accept the excuse I provided them. "Darling, please, we both know I'm about to cry. I'm trying to prevent my eyeliner from ruin, not hide my tears."

I smile at them but it doesn't last.

"Thanks, but I wasn't right about everything. I lost my temper and said things I shouldn't have. I'm sorry for —"

"I'm not done. I mean, please wait. Don't say you're sorry," Denzel interrupts. Still looking up, they reach out to put a claw-tipped hand on my shoulder.

They take a deep breath in and loudly exhale before continuing.

"You wouldn't have said all those things if I hadn't egged you on. Besides, you were right. When I was on the ground and Fjurnik was getting ready to attack, I saw you draw him away. I didn't even invite you to sit next to me at lunch, and you still thought of *me* while running for your own life. I love D'ja, but she's secretly a huge scaredy-cat, so I know that not even my own sister would do something like that for me. So when Fjurnik made the offer, one favor from me seemed like the least I could ... no, no, forget that. That's wrong. I'm doing it again. No shows, no half-truths."

When I open my mouth to protest, they level their eyes with mine. I purse my lips to keep myself from speaking.

"Making that bargain wasn't the least I could do," they say. "It was the right thing to do. I was the one who got us in trouble and this is how I make it right."

I can't tell whether they're done or not, so I don't say anything. I squirm a little in the awkward silence instead and immediately regret it. The esse sap is working, that much is obvious by the way my skin is knitting back together under its sticky spread, but I'm not pain-free. And it's not until Denzel clears their throat that I realize it's my turn to talk.

"I think I see where you're coming from, but I still don't like the part about you owing a favor to anyone, least of all Fjurnik," I say.

Denzel pats me on the shoulder, "He really isn't all that bad of a guy once you get to know him."

"He tried to kill me," I counter.

"Only after you insulted him! Nevermind, forget Fjurnik for a moment. Look, Scarlette, what I mean to say is, I'm sorry for taking advantage of you by leading you to a meeting with a Bridge Troll and introducing you to the underground market without warning. So, please accept my apology?"

It is such a specific and odd expression of regret that I can't help but squeak out a small laugh, despite how hard I tried to keep it in. Denzel, having apparently achieved their goal, wiggles their eyebrows at me encouragingly.

"Of course, and I'm sorry, too. I don't care what you say, my temper made the trouble worse."

Denzel's tapered ear twitches but I pull them in for a hug before they can argue with me. A few seconds later, their arms wrap around me and squeeze back.

When we break our embrace, Denzel happily prompts, "And maybe also promise to help me with fulfilling the favor? That would be nice, too. Especially since I know what you can do now, I've seen how resourceful you are first-hand! Don't worry, I'm sure whatever it is won't be *that* bad."

I furrow my brow.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I promise, it's not as bad as it sounds. Most favors are scary, but I've known Fjurnik for years. Would I recommend you make a trade with a favor on the table? Normally, no. Actually, I wouldn't recommend you try engaging in troll trading customs ever again. You're clearly awful at it."

They wink at me and I laugh. So do they.

"And to think, all this trouble over a uniform? Are you sure the Lost and Found wouldn't have been the better option?" I ask.

"Oh, most definitely." Denzel replies immediately. "Your Mahgen was a child playing with her frozen Breath abilities but Scald? You'd be burnt to a crisp by now and I'd be in detention for life." They flash me a knowing grin, showing off two crooked canines.

I do nothing but stare at them, unsure what to say in response. But Denzel pats the back of my hand and motions for me to rest my head on their shoulder. We sit like that for a while, talking about nothing and everything, and sometimes just resting in silence underneath a sky heavy with rain clouds threatening to burst.



(An AI Depiction of Raff, a member of the Beau Monde)

Mark Nine: Flinch

By the time Denzel and I make it all the way back to the center of main campus, I've missed my Alchemy, and Mundane and Magical Herbs classes. There's only one more class of the day before we all go home. So Denzel drops me off outside of my Chronicles of Eras Past classroom. Proctor Aegnor has written a note on the board that today's class time will be dedicated to our study groups, supplying us with time to work on our big project. And when Saréell sees me walk through the door, she immediately waves me over. She's sitting next to Raff and another student, presumably their study partner. We still have three months before our presentation is due, so I figure there's no harm in spending some of today's class time sitting with them. Besides, I still have questions to ask my mom and Rugrug about the assignment after school.

So, instead of sitting in the front row as I normally do, I divert and take the seat Saréell has saved for me next to her. Across from us sits Raff and a human girl. They contrast each other in every possible way. Visually, it's like someone's placed a salted caramel next to a white chocolate truffle in a display case. Raff is slouching in his chair, his large nose twitching as he sucks his teeth like there's popcorn kernels stuck between them. The girl with wide-set eyes brimming with enthusiasm bounces her head a lot when she talks. Her tight golden curls spring reactively as she introduces herself as Helena, she/her.

Their subject, I come to find out, is how the boundaries of the Kingdom of Loria came to be what they are today. Helena is giving me a run down of their research so far and I stop them at the mention of Valeria the Victorious.

"She's also known as Valeria the Vicious. It depends on who you ask." My voice is slow but steady as I address Helena. At first I think the rise of her eyebrow is a challenge. But when

she says nothing, I continue, "Some texts claim that the First Rebellion wasn't a total failure and that she actually survived the massacre caused by her betrayal."

Raff's lips, I notice, twitch into a small smile. Something I consider to be a personal victory. Meanwhile, Helena is leaning forward in her chair. Her attention is focused on Saréell, but I internally claim her prideful smirk as a personal win as well.

"See? I told you! We have to keep that in the presentation, even the halfy knows this bit of history."

Halfy ... It's not quite as bad as being told I have tainted skin, but the title is uncomfortable. A shallow cut.

I see Raff's face flicker with emotion, but it's Saréell who speaks next.

She rolls her eyes and says, "Wait, are you serious? Can either of you provide a source for this wild conspiracy theory?"

"It's more than a theory! There's literally a lullaby about it, my mother used to sing to me and my sister all the time," Helena retorts.

"Yeah, Kellas Sith don't sing about dead human war losers to our cubs," Saréell mocks.

I interject immediately before Helena can reply and say, "You don't have to believe us, but a controversial conspiracy theory would add some spice to your project."

I announce myself on Helena's side and she grants me an appreciative nod as a reward. It feels good. Easy. Another friend in the making.

"Vote on it?" Helena asks her group. "As long as I can find a textual reference, we include it in our presentation. All in favor?"

Saréell stretches and sighs.

"Sure, why not?" She concedes.

Then she adds, "You're all lucky that I'm not Kalia. We'd all be on the way to the library to find your 'textual reference' by now."

At that we all laugh. Saréell isn't wrong, but it's the way she says it that's so funny. It's the way her small nose wrinkles and the way her golden eyes arch charmingly upwards in her sass.

I try to mimic her expression and tease, "Not to mention the only reason Saréell doesn't want to vote is because she knows she's outnumbered three to one!"

The Kellas Sith gasps as if scandalized while Raff and Helena meet my joke with appreciative snorts of laughter.

"Not bad, halfy! You're chiller than I expected," Helena says permissibly.

I am successful in hiding my flinch, but I don't know what to say. There's an icky feeling growing inside me that I don't know how to name. I don't know why the word bothers me; I only know it's not nice.

"Her name is Scarlett," Raff injects defensively.

He sounds more purposeful than he looks. His slouch emphasizes the exaggerated collar of his modified uniform jacket, it's like a tall cone cupping around the back of his head. His hands are shoved in the large pockets of his baggy slacks, and he punctuates my name with a jerk of his head, as if to swish the mess of hair atop his otherwise shaved head out of his eyes. Everything about his posture indicates cool, calm and, ok, perhaps not collected, but indifferent? Yet his voice is sturdy, commanding even. It's surprising.

"C'mon, Raff, she's cool with it! Aren't you?" Helena doesn't bother to look at him. She barely deigns to spare me a glance even though I'm the one she's addressing.

Admittedly, I don't love the title. I consider shrugging it off, but the light in Raff's eyes cut me off. His mouth is a taught line, pressed so tightly together I am reminded of my mom, the disapproval on her face at the dinner table yesterday.

"SCARLETTE YOU LOOK SO MUCH LIKE YOUR FATHER,
AND FOR THAT YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW GRATEFUL I AM,
AT A MERE GLANCE FROM A STRANGER ON THE STREET,
YOU PASS.
AND SO YOU'VE NEVER BEEN SHAMED
FOR BEING HUMAN.
FOR BEING THE LESSER RACE."

Her voice is small. A quiet echo in my head. A potent shadow. I wonder what it means to 'pass' when you didn't know there was a test. And I wonder if this is what it would mean to fail. Another conversation, Ella's voice, surfaces in my head.

"I DIDN'T HEAR WHAT WAS SAID.
BUT I DO AGREE THAT YOU CAN STILL MAKE FRIENDS THERE.
SCARLETTE, JUST BE CAREFUL."
"CAREFUL? OF WHAT?"
"OF PEOPLE."

I refocus on the moment before me. Raff is watching me, and Helena is distractedly running her fingers through her curly hair. I don't know how to explain it, but I know that 'halfy' is not a nickname I want to adopt for myself. But when I open my mouth to politely correct Helena, a different, colder voice swarms us.

"I do hope you're all using your time wisely," prompts Proctor Aegnor from behind me.

I turn around to see her slit pupils peering down at me, yellow irises encircling muddy ovals. A purple bonnet covers her head where the hissing of snakes seep out. The green scales of her flesh remind me momentarily of Mahgen, but she is a Drachkin. Ms. Aegnor, though they do admittedly share similar reptilian features, is a gorgon. And though the stony eyes of danger are hidden under her hat, I feel anything but safe in this moment. It feels as if her seeing eyes alone have hardened me into a statue under her glare.

"Of course, Ms. Aegnor, we were just going over our project notes with Scarlette," Saréell supplies.

Proctor Aegnor says, "That's interesting. Scarlette Urug, don't you have your own assignment to be working on? Perhaps instead of wasting your and your classmate's time, you'd all be better off doing as you're instructed. Which would be working on your own presentation."

"I am working on my assignment," I say. It doesn't have to be a lie, so I add, "They were just asking me a question about Valeria the Victorious. Then I was going to ask them some research questions, too. I just thought since I don't have a group —"

"Scarlette, you should be ashamed of yourself, trying to get out of doing your own homework. If I were you, I'd spend less time socializing and more time studying." the Proctor chastises.

"But I am studying!" I argue, "we were just helping each other."

"So now you admit to cheating?" Proctor Aegnor sneers.

The four of us are told to switch our cards. It is inarguable. The command is solemn. Whole. Daunting. In horror, I rise to my feet. Without thinking, my body moves to obey. Reluctantly, I am followed by a chaffed Saréell, a silent Raff, and an indignant Helena. In quick

procession, we march to the front of the classroom where our names are posted with colored flags. Slowly, I flip mine from the comforting green that labels me as a good student, to a jarring yellow. It marks me. Us. Like warning labels. When the deed is done and we are each walking back to our seats, Proctor Aegnor beckons me to come close, one hand on the chair I had been sitting in.

There she accuses me of being ungrateful for the privilege it is to attend Amalgamy Academy. She questions who I think I am to challenge her decisions in her own classroom? And she promises that insubordination will not be tolerated. From now on I will have an assigned seat. Rigidly, she points to the single-chaired small table closest to her desk. It's not even part of a row, it's an isolated island all its own.

I feel small. Tiny. A speck of dust. Without looking at anyone, I scoop up my bag and notebook, and march to my new desk. As soon as I sit down, the tightness in my chest is submerged in a sour wave of relief as I realize at least this way, with my back turned against the rest of the classroom and with how far away I am from everyone else, no one can see me cry. Luckily, I don't sob. My shoulders don't shake. I hold my breath and release it in controlled portions to feign the illusion of stone. Invisibility. Beads of hot tears drip down my cheek as Ms. Aegnor returns to her desk.

Unsubtly, she seethes, "This institution is in dire need of weeding. Your father works in the public sector, does he not? MEANS? Hmm. I do hope they raise the tuition cost next year."

The rest of class passes as I pretend to read from my textbook. Saréell tries to attract my attention at first. In my peripheral vision I can see her waving at me from under her desk, but I know that if I look at her she will see that I have cried.

I'm not sure what to do. I don't even know what I did wrong. But the message Proctor Aegnor sent is clear, not just to me but, I'm sure, to everyone else as well. I am apart. And I must stay apart. For do I really belong here? I've been asking myself that question for days. Ever since the assembly. It's a question that's morphing its shape everyday. Looking closer and closer to say, "do I really belong anywhere?"

I miss my old school. I even miss Sorina Mason. And I don't care that she still sometimes calls me Scales. Wasn't I happy. Didn't I have friends? Didn't I fit in? But then I think of Mahgen. How Denzel dissected in seconds what I couldn't do for months. Years. And I remember another girl. Someone who had moved to a neighboring treeline and started school with us around the time 'Scales' was just becoming a begrudgingly popular nickname for me. Her name was Fleur. She was a Ravix; small, green as moss from head-to-toe, and she always had twigs in her messy, foliage of hair. We were friends for almost our entire Level One years. Until the day Ella Tested into our class. She's technically older than me in age, but, as neighbors, we were already friends. I was excited to introduce them to one another, but for some reason Fleur despised Ella.

"YOU'RE A MYTHIC.
MY PARENTS TOLD ME
THAT PEOPLE LIKE US
DON'T HAVE TO BOTHER
WITH PEOPLE LIKE HER."

My eyes dry as it clicks into place. The faint memory of Fleur's words. I remember being confused by them. People like her? What did that mean? Ella wanted to let it drop, but I couldn't. Partly because I didn't understand.

I remember the moment Fleur discovered that my mom is human. I remember the wiggly feeling in my stomach when she called me a liar. I remember feeling like I had swallowed a can

of worms. I didn't care that Fleur and I had stopped being friends after that because I had Ella. Actually, if I'm honest with myself, I didn't really notice. But two for two, maybe I didn't belong at my old school. And if I didn't belong in public school, surrounded by more humans and *halfies* than in all the Levels of Amalgamy combined, how could I ever belong here?

I am out the door the second that class is over. I want to leave and go home and not talk to anyone ever again. But, to my surprise, Raff stops me. I'm rushing towards the nearest exit that'll take me to the ground — the trunk slide — when he calls out to me. I briefly wonder if I can get away with ignoring him or with pretending that I don't hear him, but ultimately decide that would be unnecessarily rude. And besides, since we were the fastest of the students in preparing to leave, it's just us in the hallway right now. Although that fact quickly becomes false before I can take another breath. And it doesn't matter anymore because he's already caught up to me.

"Scarlette. Thanks for waiting. Are you okay? What the Proctor said, all that. It wasn't cool, you know?" he says.

Even when standing he slouches his big half-cone of a collar stretches above his ears to touch the closely shaved parts of his dark hair.

"Thanks," I say.

Of course I know that, but I say nothing more, hoping he gets the hint that I don't want to talk about Proctor Aegnor. Especially because I still don't understand what I did to get us all into trouble. I feel gross, and guilty and confused and all these other things I don't want to think about.

"Yeah, anytime," he replies.

I shuffle awkwardly, wondering if this exchange is over. We are not far from the exit slide but I don't know if it's appropriate to hurl myself into it or not.

"There you are!" shouts a livid Helena. I don't know if it's the venom in her vicious tone or if it is by fear of being trampled, but people part before her as she charges towards me.

She screeches, "How dare you embarrass me like that! When Saréell vouched for you I thought you would be cool. But no, you're just as horrible as I — move out of my way, Raff, I'm not talking to you!"

I'm accustomed to my height, short in the company of orcs but tall when compared to most humans. Raff is no exception. He's short even for human standards and much, much thinner than I. I can think of no reason for Raff to place himself between me and Helena, but apparently he doesn't agree. I'm so dismayed by the gesture that I'm struck speechless.

He stands toe-to-toe with Helena and says, "That's enough. What happened was not Scarlette's fault. Let it go."

His voice is steady, authoritative. It doesn't shake like my hands do.

Helena, however, is vibrating with anger. She spouts off into a flurry of insults, first in demanding that he move out of her way, then escalating into threats, claiming Raff is a race-traitor. She brings up his girlfriend as evidence to her claim. Yet he does not move. He does not back down. Raff only glares at Helena, warning her to leave things be. But when she raises her hand and swats at his cheek, he draws a line. Then I remember what Veresa said about his hobbies.

"HE'S A DOWNRIGHT KILLER
WITH RADIUSCYTHERS,
AREN'T YOU BABY?"

Of course! It's not so surprising after all. He's the perfect build for a warrior skilled for such a weapon. Lithe and reflexive.

As Helena releases her slap, Raff ducks below her blow. In one smooth motion, he manages to not only catch her arm, but pushes Helena's momentum against her. Her attack is frenzied, unplanned, and, according to Ezra, made against someone training for a Trial in the Adventurer's Arena. As her body turns with her offensive movement, Raff pushes on her shoulder, forcing her to stumble in a half circle. She's caught off-guard and so he easily locks her in a grapple with Helena on her knees, hands pinned behind her back before she can even take another breath.

"I said enough. I'd tell you to apologize to Scarlett, but honestly? All you did was embarrass yourself here."

"Get off me!"

Despite Helena's violent thrashing, Raff holds on to her with seemingly little effort. His face is a blank canvas. After a while, Helena stops struggling and Raff plucks her off the ground, her hands still bound in his grasp. Once she's steady on her feet, he pushes her towards the slide.

"Go home," he says flatly. "It's over."

All I can do is watch, like everyone else around us.

Will there ever be a day where I'm not involved in some sort of school spectacle?

Helena *hmpfs*, her golden curls jiggling around her face. Its beauty is corrupted by her rage.

"Fine!" she snaps. "I'll leave. But it doesn't change the fact that you're defending a no-good, filthy halfy. Enjoy it while you can, Scar-spit. You might be in Veresa's good graces

now, but her lap dogs won't defend you forever. You are a monster and it is only a matter of time before everyone else sees it too."

Raff takes a step towards her, but having said what she came to say, she turns around and slips down the exit slide before he can reach her.

When Raff turns around to face me, I boil over. Finding my voice again, I cry, "I didn't ask you to do that. I don't need you feeling sorry for me!"

"Scarlette, I was only trying to help," he replies.

But the tears are coming again and I can't say anything but "I didn't ask for this" over and over again. So Raff, kind and gentle Raff who calmed Veresa after she absolutely insulted pure humans like him, crosses the space between us, and asks if it's okay to hug me.

Saréell, confused about what is going on, catches up to us in the hallway. She hadn't seen Helena blow up at us, but she also doesn't ask for an explanation. She simply lets me rest in Raff's embrace as she urges people along.

"What's the matter, people, haven't seen a hug before? That's what I thought. Now move along," she says. "Move along."

My head hurts — from crying or from blood loss from my fight with Fjurnik, I can't tell — and my legs and hands still sting. I can hardly believe that a little over an hour ago I was resting with Denzel by a stream after fighting with a troll. Hours before that I was swinging through the Tree of Halls' branches with Adora. All this when 24 hours ago I was alone against the world. Alone at Amalgamy Academy. But now, through some stroke of bizarre luck, I'm not. And when my mom asks me how school was when she picks me up in the family buggy, I smile and honestly say, "Eventful, but good. Today was a good day."

Of course I say that before coming home to see Rugrug already there. He's back from work early and is waiting for us, pacing, in the front yard. And I realize the day is not yet over.



(An AI Depiction of Kerrian Urrug, Scarlett's Father)

Mark Ten: The Second Book

Rugrug says that she's not old enough for the discussion he and Mom prepared for my homework, so Quellie is sent away on a playdate with Benny and Ella almost as soon as we're home. That is how I know something is off. Wrong. Our parents might send us out of the room when they need to talk in private, but never have either of us been sent away in temporary exile from our cottage. Aside from feeling confused, I am also annoyed. And when I say that it isn't fair that my sister gets to play with our friends while I'm stuck at home, Mom cuts me off with a withering scowl.

"You asked me for help and now that your father and I have set time aside for you, went through all the effort of preparing — no. You don't get to be ungrateful. Understand? I don't want to hear any of your back-talk. You will sit at the table and you will behave yourself."

If I have anything to say about it, this is the only time I will ever have to ask for your help.

With no further arguing, the three of us enter the cottage. Venison is marinating in the ice box for dinner and there's a kettle warming over the fire for tea. The thought of both is distracting, but at the same time, I have to admit that anything can be distracting when you don't want to focus on what's right in front of you. And as we gather around the kitchen table, I can't help but still feel worried, like I was last night, that even with Rugrug's help I might not understand what Mom is trying to teach me.

She starts our little meeting by telling me, "As your parents, we've tried to shelter you. But you're about the same age I was when I started asking your grandmother questions. We humans may have shorter lifespans than Mythics but the collective memory, if not always cohesive, is unrelentless."

I warily reply, "Questions about what, Mom?"

Rugrug places a hand on the back of her chair and says, "It's ok. Show her."

"Show me what?"

At some point, between setting the kettle and sitting down, Mom must have picked up a package and hidden it under the table in her lap. I hadn't noticed, so it's a surprise when she pulls out a parcel wrapped in brown paper and places it onto the smooth and aged surface of our kitchen table. Gently, she peels off the wrappings to reveal a heavy tome. The cover is well-worn, the spine soft and pliant. Pages yellowed with age.

"This is your great-grandfather's school book," she says. "From his history class. He was the second generation in our family to attend public school and receive an education outside of a REM Camp. It's a relic, an heirloom, really. Go on, take a look at the Introduction."

I raise a hand to stroke its peeling face, trace its faded title, *Earth: The History of Her Freedom Lost and Found Anew*. Mistaking my awe for reluctance, or just simply spurred on by impatience, my mom snatches the book out from under my touch and spreads it open. Pressing a finger to a page, she commands the book to read itself. A few long seconds pass, then the tome begins to vibrate. The ink of the pages sink into the old parchment. When they resurface, it is one letter bleeding into existence at a time. The words blossom in pace with a voice that is both ethereal and raspy:

Earth, Gaia, Mother to all, loves all of Her children.
And though some Mythical races came to Her from
other realms, She adopted each as Her own. This was
during Gaia's first Era when She was still new to Her
realm. It was clear to Her then as it continues to be
true today that the Great Mother would always love
Mythics above all others.

Her love for Mythic races is so profound that She bestowed sacred blessings upon them, shaping each essence with Her very core, starting with the Elves. Thus Mythics were instilled with the beauty of the Ocean, and its tempest; the heat of desert days and the frost of night; the might of mountains and the resilience of wood. And so, Her energies spent and well-preserved, Mythics were charged with the task of upholding the world's harmony.

However, humans, sculpted by the Goddess of Clay from mud and the blood and bones of apes, were not blessed with such Gifts. For this reason, mankind grew jealous of their betters. Blinded by envy, they who were meant to love Earth and kneel to the Gifted, the Mythics, instead grew mad, territorial, and violent.

As the nature of humanity soured, Mythics were pushed farther and farther away from their societies. Rather than being seen as mankind's appointed masters, humans ceased to distinguish Mythics from Beasts of light and Creatures of the night. So they hunted all of Earth's Gifted as if *they* were the monsters.

When I interrupt the narration the book's voice immediately fades.

"Mom what does this—"

She holds up a hand to stop me and furrows her brows. Her dark eyes dart from side to side as she scans the passage.

She says, "Scarlette, just wait. Don't you see? Already there's a discrepancy in pedagogy. The indoctrination, the rejection of egalitarianism . . . Here, we are! We know this Era as 'The Departure'. But in your grandfather's time, people were taught to refer to it as 'The Days of Division' or 'The Break!'"

I open my mouth to ask what all those words mean but I'm too slow. She has already turned the page and is reaching out to touch the tome and command it to speak once again. Rugrug, noticing my failed attempt to ask a question, tries to intercede as well but is unsuccessful. She cuts his efforts in half with a single sneer. He changes tactics by handing me a pen and miming the action of 'writing' while the narrator continues:

The Gifted, benevolent and peaceful as they naturally are, did not wish to harm humans for, after all, they are still children of Gaia. So they went into hiding. Tales of what would happen when a human discovered a Mythic always ended in brutality. It was a notable day in Fae history when the council confronted the monarch of the Seelie court, Queen Tatiana, with the news that her people were split between fearing mankind and wanting to help them no matter the danger. The matriarch then decreed that she would rather leave Earth than spill Fae blood trying to protect humans from themselves.

Then humans declared war against all they perceived as 'unnatural'. This category comprised those mankind were envious of: Mythics, Beasts and Creatures. When she could no longer stand the suffering of her people, Queen Tatiana set an example

for other Mythicals by making good on her promise. She and most Fae returned to the Dawnlit Forrest, driven away from the realm itself. Only the bravest of her people volunteered to stay and keep watch over Earth. Many Mythicals, including the King of the Unseelie who returned to the Twilight Desert, followed the Queen's example by choosing peace. Thus began the dark Era of Man.

This time Mom interrupts the narrator, silencing the book before it can finish the passage.

"Now, tell me what you see," she says.

She has arranged my great-grandfather's book next to my school textbook. Both are face-open to their introductions. One hand on each, she pushes them across the table until they are right in front of me. Then, she sits back in her chair and taps all ten of her fingers against the table's surface.

I look from her to Rugrug, who gives me an encouraging smile, and down at the books. It occurs to me that they are cousins of sorts. Or, maybe not cousins, but still somehow ancestrally related. I lean forward suddenly as something clicks into place — my book is just as much a descendant of the older one as I am a descendant of my great-grandfather. But while they are prose of different ages they are also of the same topic: history. And history doesn't change, it only gets added to. So then why...

"Why are they so different?"

Mom cackles.

"Exactly! *Why are they so different?* There's an ancient human saying: 'History is written by the Victors'. Now, if you look at the part in the old book about how Mythics come from other Realms and humans were sculpted —"

"Hold on, hold on. Give Scarlette a chance to think, darling. Do you have any questions, my love?" Rugrug inclines his head towards me. I look up at them to see my parents blinking at me expectantly.

I lick my lips and try to take a moment to choose my words carefully. When I do speak, it's haltingly, slow and meticulous.

"I am confused about a lot of things, but I don't know what to ask to be less confused ..."

That's it. I stop there, unsure of what else I can say.

Instantly, mom crosses her arms and scoffs but Rugrug puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "Don't be like that. She does not know what she does not know."

She scoffs again and retorts, "What does she know, Kerrian? Quellie would have figured it out by now."

I flinch and look down to stare at my hands in my lap.

"You don't mean that — Scarlette, look at me, she does not mean that."

The kettle begins singing its siren song and Mom doesn't move at first, but I do notice her taking a deep breath before grabbing a towel and relieving the kettle from its station above the fire. She places a mug of hot water in front of each of us. I watch as the floating loose leaves and dried flowers inside unfurl and slowly shift the color of clear hot water into a bright blue.

"Why don't you start by pointing out what you do know. What do you see that's different between the books?" RugRug mediates when Mom is seated again.

I take a breath, sip at my tea, burn my tongue, and start panting. Rugrug chuckles and says something like 'careful it's hot'. But no one else laughs. Still, I try to give him a small appreciative smile.

Ready to try again but unwilling to look either of them in the eye for fear of disappointing them, I looked down at the books and absently trace lines of text as I speak.

"I know that both versions make humans sound villainous. I know my book makes it sound like Mythics chose to leave this Realm peacefully, and the other book says they were 'driven away' and 'hunted'. Which is definitely not the same thing. And the most confusing part of all are the sections mom pointed out. The older book talks about the Goddess of Clay, but isn't she a cultist deity? And what does it mean by 'other realms'?"

I can hear his grin before I look at him.

"Those are excellent takeaways. The very ones your mom and I had hoped you'd pick up on. Right?" Rugrug beams.

He jostles Mom with his elbow, prodding for her to say something too. Slowly, I gather my courage and look at her. Mom's expression is unreadable, but she agrees and says that she's glad I'm paying attention at least.

From here, they tag team explanations while I struggle to keep up taking notes while they talk, scribbling my thoughts and theirs side-by-side on paper.

- Why my book sound like choice?
 - My book = persuasive (voice)
 - Makes humans sound less evil
 - More progressive = coexist, positive language
 - Old book = agenda (?)
 - More appropriate for how the world used to think
 - things different-ish now (mostly/much better)
 - Now = more tolerant

- Why make the above changes? = Impact!!!!
 - Indoctrination in school and news
 - Teaching people what to think
 - Teaching people to be racist/hateful

Influence. Influence. Influence.
- Other Realms?
 - Mythics aren't all from Earth
 - Who knows which are and aren't? Only Mythics (maybe)
 - Why take this out in my book?
 - "Must have decided they said too much. About their true home Realms. And if humans knew that long ago, maybe that's why they fought the Mythics so hard back then. There's no question humans originate from here and only here. But Mythics? ... With that, it's a fair argument to ask who the 'true inheritors' are. Coexistence is best, though, either way." - Mom.
- Goddess of Clay?
 - Not mentioned in my book. My book says humans 'evolved' not 'sculpted'
 - "This part of the historical story ~~indicates~~ is because of theological divide. The writers of the old book must have been a Dark Druid (DD). Their church used to be called something else, but I don't remember what it was. I suppose that's more evidence of how what people think can change over time." - Rugrug

- DD writer needed scapegoat, someone to blame for mankind.
 - Tried to make racism connected to a religious-rival-thing = Blame Goddess of Clay
 - Public turned against DD years after book was published.
 - Explains name-change
 - Explains why DD and Goddess of Clay worshippers are 'cults' now

We spend the most time talking about the religious and political elements that affected my great-great-grandpa's book and affected the world. At some point I just have to put the pen down and rub at my eyes with the heels of my hands. I don't want to admit to either of them, especially Mom, that my head hurts now.

Thankfully, Rugrug wraps us tonight's history lesson by saying, "The point is, who really knows the truth when it's been altered so many times? Even going back and trying to linguistically — hmm, that's not the right word. Even going back and trying to change things, make corrections, we're still missing information. Information is lost through as it erodes over time. Maybe through the destruction of records, but also through narrating biases."

"And biases are passed on. And on, and on. So there's no way to know the truth. No matter what, we're never going to get a true and honest account of history." Mom finishes for him.

Rugrug nods in agreement, mouth pinched together.

I nearly jump out of my seat when a knocking at the door thuds through the cottage. Its sound cranks us each into motion as Rugrug says that it's probably my sister coming home from Ella's and Benny's, and Mom sets to the task of fixing dinner.

Both Ella and Benny have walked Quellie home. I am so excited to see my best friend that I trip on my way to hug her. She helps me up and I manage to whisper in her ear, "I have so much to tell you about school!"

Without looking back, she and I run towards my bedroom.

Quellie rushes after us shouting, "Wait for me, I want to play, too!"

I stop, turn around, and whine, "Quellie, you already had your turn playing with Ella and Benny. Play with him while you wait, we'll come back."

Benny, already walking towards the front door, says "Sorry, I'm not staying. Mom picked up a new tumbler for me today, I'm going to throw some rocks in it and polish my gems while it runs."

"Moouoom!" I shout towards the kitchen.

I can't tell Ella about Ezra with my little sister in the room, where's the privacy?

Turning back to Quellie, I plead, "I want some time with Ella on my own. At least for a little bit!"

Miraculously, Mom steps into the hallway and instructs Quellie to follow her.

"Come on, baby," she says. "Let your sister spend some time with Ella. If you help me set the table you can have first dibs on dessert tonight. I made cookies. You've got five minutes, Scar."

I pump a fist in the air victoriously, grab Ella by the hand, and charge towards mine and my sister's bedroom. Once we're inside, I slam the door shut and press my back against it. I'm so

excited, I bang my head against the door. But I can't waste time acknowledging the bump that will surely grow because of the accident.

I lock eyes with Ella and blurt, "I have so much to tell you!"

I talk so fast while filling her in on my day at school, Ella has to ask me to repeat myself four different times. But I can't help it! There's just so much to say, and I saved the best for last.

"And do you remember blazer-boy?" I ask her.

"Of course I do, he was awful," she says. Then Ella's eyes widen as she adds, "Wait, don't tell me you found him at Amalgamy? You have to find a way to get him back! Push him in one of the campus rivers and see how he likes it."

"Yes, he's at Amalgamy! And that was my first reaction too, but he's actually really nice."

Ella blinks at me in disbelief. "Are you sure we're talking about the same person? Because I'm talking about the Mandurago who basically called you fat and pushed you into the pool at the uniform shop."

I laugh, realizing how absurd I sound. For a pacifist, Ella expressed quite a few violent ill-wishes towards blazer-boy. I admired her loyalty and support at the time, but now I need her to understand, like I had to, that there's more to the story.

"Yes, but it was an accident. He didn't mean to call me fat, he thought I was his friend, Jemyr. Remember? The jinn I told you about in the cave? And the lagoon thing was also an accident. He didn't mean to push me."

Ella runs a hand through her curly, golden hair as if that would wipe away all her skepticism.

"For now, I'm going to totally ignore the whole 'my new pals meet everyday for lunch in an impossibly serene yet dangerous cave' thing. Also, you need to spend more time with Svante. The fact that you found yourself running for your life against a rock troll and kind of deserved it?" Ella shakes her head in what is either disbelief, horror, or, more likely, a mixture of both.

She continues, "Let's focus on this Ezra guy. Do you remember how upset you were that day? That week? We drank, like, 5 pitchers of tea in just one sitting; your mom had to restock on dried lavender because of us. And you're saying it was all an accident?"

"It was," I groan. But I can tell by the way her eyebrows rise and stretch for her hairline that she doesn't believe me.

"We talked it over. He's really sorry and it was a simple misunderstanding and a chance mishap. It could have happened to anyone."

Her eyebrows lower a fraction and I know all I need to do is push a little more. She'll understand once I break through her doubt. At the risk of sounding redundant, I repeat what happened between me and Ezra in the tunnel. I smile as I talk, grateful that I told Denzel the full story earlier in the valley. Reliving the experience with them gave me a chance to practice reciting all the details just right. By the time I finish, Ella is beaming at me.

"You like him, don't you?" She asks.

I feel my mouth pop open in a flat "o" shape.

"Goddesses above, you do!" She squeals. "That's why you're defending him so hard."

"I — that is not why, Ella!"

Ella giggles and her delight is instantly contagious.

"Ezra and Scarlette, Scarlette and Ezra," she sings gleefully. "Look at you, I send you off to make friends and you come back with a *boyfriend*? You socialize quick!"

I am plunged into a sea of Ella's questions, and I struggle to stay afloat, until I'm struck by a strange wiggly feeling in my stomach.

"I do not like Ezra," I find myself saying. "I barely know him! And it's not like I have forgiven him yet."

"Yet~" Ella sings again. "You haven't forgiven him *yet*. But we both know you're going to. Come on, don't tell me you feel nothing for the guy. You drew blood and he still said you're cute."

"Okay, okay. If I agree to meet with him tomorrow will you stop?"

"Hmm, definitely not. But maybe if you admit that you're excited to see him?" Ella wiggles her blonde eyebrows at me encouragingly.

"I won't say I'm excited, but I will admit that I am rather curious," I finally concede.

Ella is squealing when Quellie knocks on the bedroom door.

She opens it a crack and without entering says, "Dinner is almost ready. Ella, are you staying to eat with us?"

With a sigh, Ella states that no, she can't stay for dinner, and I walk her to the front door. We give each other a tight hug during which she says, "I'm so excited for you and Ezra, Scar. But you need to be more careful."

She starts to pull away with promises to talk to Svante about a playdate, but then she adds, "Oh, I forgot to ask about your homeschooling! Benny and I are really curious about what you're studying. But our mom won't give us so much as a hint."

Then she steps away and walks out the door. The last thing she says to me before she leaves is an instruction to remember everything my parents and I talk about so I can tell her later.

Like a marble dropped in a game of pegs, her wish rattles through me and clangs against my every nerve.

Then the four of us, Mom, Rugrug, Quellie and I, all sit at the kitchen table eating dinner together. Quellie keeps asking what we talked about today and it quickly becomes a game of who can come up with the craziest story. And then it almost doesn't matter that we settled on talking about the best recipes for little sisters because Quellie makes us all laugh by saying in a most sincere way, "You'll have to use a lot of salt because I am so much sweeter than big sisters."

But it does matter. Because, now that I've told Ella about Ezra, I can feel the weight of today's lesson clinging to me. And I can't ignore the edges of a headache. I can't pretend that this afternoon's home-schooling lessons didn't happen. I feel like someone has scooped my insides out and replaced them with Thomme's porcupine quill hair.

I don't have any new questions for Mom and Rugrug about the books, but something doesn't feel right. It's there in the way I underlined 'influence' in my notebook. And highlighted 'now = more tolerant'. And in the bullet point dedicated to the words 'evolved' and 'sculpted' — one making it sound like humans were an accident, and the other making it sound like humans were a goddess-level mistake.

Rugrug stops me before I can turn in for the night. I pad over to the master bedroom in my pajamas and slippers. I pass Quellie on my way to him and point little gun-fingers at her while she brushes her teeth. Toothpaste foam drips out of the corners of her mouth as she pretends to take a hit from my weapons. I blow on the tips of my index fingers and make like I spin them into holsters at my hip as I walk away to the sound of her giggling behind me.

Rugrug is propped up in bed, his back padded against the bedframe with big fluffy feather pillows. Next to him Mom flips through channels on their bedroom ScryScreen. Their

room is much larger than mine and Quellie's, but is made cozy by all the furniture carved into the dome of the room. I sit on the chest near the foot of the bed.

"You called for me?" I ask Rugrug.

He smiles at me. It's gentle, and his red eyes are warm and welcoming. I raise a hand to touch the left canine barely protruding from my lower jaw and wonder when they'll finish growing into proper tusks like his.

He says, "Our discussion was pretty heavy earlier. I wanted to ask if you're okay?"

When I don't immediately respond, Mom does. "That's not what you said you were going to do. You're supposed to tell her about tomorrow."

Confused, I ask, "What's tomorrow?"

"I'm getting to that," Rugrug sighs. "But first, how are you? Doing okay? Need to talk about anything?"

"Actually, I do have one more question. If racism is a learned thing, if it's ..." I stumble on the word, "*indoctrinated*, what can I do about it?"

My mom says, "don't stand for it" at the same time Urrug instructs, "Come to us."

They look at each other, frowning.

"We can't always be there to protect her, Kerrian," Mom points out.

"I know that," he replies, "but for now —"

"For now?" she snaps. "What about for later?"

"What do you want her to do, fight?"

"I can," I interrupt.

I say the words with more confidence than I feel but balk slightly when they both turn to look at me. I think about the day in the hallway, how ready I was to tear into those four

attention-seeking jerks. How easy it was to plan my attack. Afterall, Urrug was a MEANS soldier. How many times had he shown me how to make a fist? The difference between an open-palmed and a backhanded slap; one for embarrassment, and the other one, knuckles crashing against cheek-padded teeth, for inflicting pain. "You taught me how, Rugrug. I can take care of myself."

I sit up straight and try not to break eye contact with him. He scratches his chin with a big blue hand.

After what feels like forever, Rugrug finally says, "Those lessons were for self-defense." RugRug's red eyes shift between my mom and I.

"Scarlette, fighting seems like the easy solution but it's not. For one, Scar, you're stronger than you think. You have the advantages of orc blood pumping through you. You'd both be wise to remember that. People are already going to count your human heritage against you, consider you violent. The best thing you can do is prove them wrong. Trust me, being able to fight doesn't mean you should. I would know."

Mom dropped both hands into her lap, and her lips squeezed together to form a flat line. She knew something. She knew there was more to what Rugrug was saying. A few long beats of silence pass.

Unable to wait any longer, I push, "What do you mean, 'I would know'?"

Rugrug chanced a glance at Mom. When she wouldn't meet his eyes, he turned back to me and scratched his chin again. Then, looking like he's reached a decision, he clears his throat.

"Scarlette, I want you to listen to me closely. What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room. When I was your age I, uh, I wasn't the brightest guy around. I was big and strong and I knew it. But I also had a short fuse. The combo of which led me to doing things I'm not proud of.

I got into fights all the time. Stupid ones, more about pride than anything else. And I wasn't much older than yourself now when I met this one kid that I just couldn't stand. We already hated each other. He rubbed me the wrong way and I him. It was petty stuff at first, light hazing, nothing too bad. But one day he just took it too far."

Wait, Kerrian Urrug? My father? But that didn't make any sense, I think. He's so kind, though. I've never seen him so much as slam a door. Raise his voice, sure, but him? Violent? Fighting?

"You mean for MEANS? You fought this guy as a soldier?" I ask.

Rugrug's expression darkens. "No. Not as a soldier. This was when I was still in school, closer to your age. I was a Level Three."

"Level Four," Mom corrects.

I let that sink in for a moment. It's such a strange and bizarre thing to imagine my dad fighting with anyone.

"Hmmm." He grinds his teeth, swinging his jaw left and right. His full tusks scrape against his cheeks.

"He was another guy my age. Just another punk like me. We went back and forth all the time, but he took it too far. It was the end of the day at school and I was on my way to your Mom's locker. We had a date, see. I was going to take her out to this new ice cream parlor shop that had just opened. When I saw him with his hands on her..." His voice trails off but his knuckles are white with tension.

She doesn't look at me or Rugrug. Mom simply and evenly explains, "He and a group of his friends were harassing me for being human. They ambushed me. My backpack was dumped on the ground, his buddies were gutting my locker, and he had a fistful of my hair clutched in his

hands. He had Dullahan blood. Wasn't a Rider yet himself, but his clan was responsible for manning REM camps for centuries. He spent his whole life being taught exactly what to think about humans. And then he found out that someone he already hated, your father, was dating me."

With her help starting it, Rugrug unraveled the rest of the story.

He says, "Your mother is a warrior at heart. She kneed him in the groin and clapped his ears good and hard. I want that fact known; your mother didn't need me to save her. But it was too late. I had turned the corner to see him holding her. I *heard* him. The vile, disgusting things he said about humans, the depraved garbage he said humans were only good for. I saw the evil look in his eyes. I knew what he wanted to do. And everything went red. I charged."

Mom clears her throat and shoots him a meaningful look. We sit through another terse moment of silence, one filled with RugRug's deep, steady breaths.

And he continues, "He was strong and fought back but I was bigger, stronger. A better fighter. The next thing I knew he was sprawled on the ground, unconscious. I'll never forget the way his head sounded when it cracked against the rock he fell on. I wasn't even twenty yet, and here I was standing over this body, blood dripping from my fists. Thank Gaia for Her mercy that he didn't die."

"Okay, but that fight was justified!" I say, "you were protecting Mom."

"No," he answers, "I wasn't. He had already let her go, remember? You have to understand that I crossed a line. I got lucky, very lucky, but I messed up. Scarlette, hear me when I say this: There's a difference between fighting to protect, and fighting to harm. And with our hidden strength, it's very important we know the difference."

Again, I think of that day in the hallway. But this time I don't think about how I want to hurt those other kids, I think about *why*. And I think I understand.

I say, "Some battles demand more than simple brute strength to win."

"Good girl," he says.

Then he opens his arms for a hug. But I don't go to him, not right away. Suddenly, I'm thinking of Ella. Of Quellie.

And I say, "It shouldn't matter how we're born. It shouldn't matter that we're human. But if it came down to it, I would fight anyone who tries to hurt my sister. Or my friends."

To my surprise, both Mom and Rugrug smile at me approvingly.

"If I get a call that you're fighting in school —" Mom starts.

But Rugrug interrupts and finishes with, "If you can prove that you did it to protect someone? To do the right thing? I'll take you out for a scoop of ice cream! And if you win? I'll buy you two scoops!"

I expect Mom to contradict him, but she doesn't. She only opens her arms for a hug and squeezes me tightly when I come over to her.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you, too," I reply.

When I hug Rugrug, he tells me that tomorrow afternoon he'll be home early again. In fact, he's arranged to be home early for the next two months to help me with my homeschooling for my big project. And when I say that I'm looking forward to it, I actually really mean it.



(An AI Depiction of the Glowing Glade)

Mark Eleven: The Glowing Glade

My favorite part of my sixth day at school isn't in class or even during lunch. It's the break between classes, after Cryptozoology with Kalia and Proctor Morgana, before Ethics of the Arcane with Denzel and Saréell. It's my favorite part because I like a good mystery, and this gap of time between classes is when Ezra and I have arranged our meeting. It's not that I'm excited to see him or anything. Why would I be? He's just another boy at school. Though, I think it's safe to admit that I am curious as to what his olive branch will look like.

I go to wait for him in Skylark as requested, but our rendezvous is almost ruined before we even say hello. When Adora runs into me on one of the Tree of Halls' lifts, she goes on and on about a splinter she got in our Mundane and Magical Herbs class the day prior.

Of course, I didn't go to class because I was too busy fighting a rock troll who also happened to be a Bridge Troll.

As she rambles on, we make our way down the hallway and I spot Ezra leaning against my locker. I bite my lip as my brain starts to panic. Adora, who hasn't seen him yet, can't possibly know that he's waiting for me. Could she? Anxiety starts to snake itself through me as we near him. I have no idea what would happen if the three of us collide, but I know that Adora does not like Ezra. And I would really like to prevent her from disliking me too.

I don't know what Denzel is doing in Skylark, probably looking for another face to suck if I'm honest. But like a good friend with impeccable timing; he sees me with Adora, Ezra by my locker, and puts the two together. With a wink and the tap on my bum with his feline tail, they spin Adora into a graceful ballroom dip. Thoroughly distracted, Denzel steers her away with questions of which makeup palette she used to achieve today's electric lime green look.

I trade my grateful smile towards Denzel for a subdued grin for Ezra. His face is broken with the most beautiful of smiles and I wonder if that's because it makes the brightness in his hazel eyes all the lighter. His twin horns gleam with fresh polish and when we hug, its sweet-rush scent mingles with his natural sawdust cologne.

"Your bruise is gone," I notice. When we left the cave tunnel yesterday, his lip was purple and swollen where I headbutted him. But his face looks fresh and peachy today, no trace of blunt trauma whatsoever.

"Oh, that? Don't worry about it. I can self-heal as fast as any werewolf," he beams at me.

I nod to myself. Of course he does. That's probably why having bloodstained teeth didn't phase him when he called me cute yesterday.

"I see. So you physically heal quickly, but I suppose that doesn't account for brain damage, does it? I'm still trying to figure out why you insist on hanging out with me," I tease him.

He ignores my barb with a nonchalant shrug and continues smiling at me. I make a mental note to ask Denzel if they're sure Ezra isn't some wacky lunatic or something.

"I seem to remember being made fun of for being cliché yesterday," From behind his back Ezra pulls out a small flower. It's a white, delicate daisy. "So I figured why not lean into that."

At first, I'm confused at why he would be showing me a flower, then, as he moves to tuck it into my braid just behind my ear, I realize it's supposed to be a gift. I never thought of myself as a daisy kind of girl, but when I reach up to stroke its soft petals, it's all I can do to keep myself from giggling pathetically. But maybe pathetic giggling is excusable, just this one time. I can feel my face start to heat up as a bubble of emotion balloons up from my stomach to pop in my chest.

"No one's ever given me a flower before," I admit. "Except for, like, my family at a bad lute recital or something."

"No? Then you're going to love this, I have another surprise for you." Ezra replies.

I open my mouth to protest, but Ezra refuses to hear any excuses that might slow us down. He takes the lead as we head down the Tree of Halls, away from the main square of campus, and through a thicket of trees until we find a thin deer-trail.

"Where exactly are you taking me?" I ask.

To which he helpfully answers, "It's a surprise."

I roll my eyes and fall into pace beside him. Side by side, we are wider than the deer trail, but I don't mind partially walking through tall grass, and, from what I can tell, neither does he.

"So, Ezra, hater of bananas, lover of wood shop. What else can you tell me about yourself?"

"I don't *hate* bananas," he corrects me. "I'm allergic to them. And I notice you know more about me than I do you."

"To be fair, you're the weird one who offered up that information when you introduced yourself to me. Unprovoked, I might add."

There it is, that crooked smile of his again. It's as distracting as a reflective glare of sun glinting off someone's wrist watch into my eyes, and I almost trip over my own feet. He catches me mid-stumble easily, and respectfully pulls away once I'm balanced again. A part of me wants to punch his shoulder for it, lightly of course. Another part of me, an annoyingly strong part, wants to blush. I focus on stamping my feet through the tall grass, hoping that it will distract attention away from my purpleing cheeks, and maybe prevent another clumsy stumble.

"To be fair, 'weird' is a relative term. I could think it is just as weird that you didn't reciprocate with facts about yourself in your introduction to me," he counters.

"But I didn't introduce myself to you. Technically, I didn't even tell you my name. Adora did."

I eye Ezra carefully when I mention his ex-girlfriend, looking for any subtle reaction that might tell me more about how he feels towards her. Adora openly detests him, but Ezra doesn't so much as flinch in response.

"True. Then I suppose you owe me an introduction. Here, I'll go first again."

Light on his feet, Ezra steps in front of me so fast that when he places a wall of ivy to his back, the vines sway.

"I'm Ezra. I turn fifteen in a few months and I was the one who vandalized the student parking lot in my first year here at Amalgamy. Your turn."

Ezra wiggles his eyebrows at me while I think of a response. I also make a mental note to check out the student parking lot later. Since Mom still drops me off in the family Buggie everyday, I haven't had a reason or a chance to see what vandalism he's talking about.

"Okay. I'm Scarlette Urrug. But you already knew that..." I trail off with a self-deprecating chuckle. I kind of hope that that's the end of it, but Ezra nods and motions for me to continue.

I clear my throat and try again, mentally summoning the charisma and confidence of the Scarlette I was the day before. The Scarlette who outwitted the lanky, romantic boy in front of me now, who met Veresa Lovelace and fell into her crew, the Scarlette who took on a troll and lived for Gaia's sake! This time I deliver my introduction with a false air of up-tight, moody attitude.

"My name, should you be so lucky to call me by it on a personal level, is Scarlett of the Orcan Urrug clan. I delight in fizzy beverages, especially when playing cards."

Ezra's head bobs from side to side. Finally, he says through pursed lips, "Not bad, not bad. With some practice, we'll get a proper introduction out of you yet."

I protest, "What do you mean? Now you have my name and two facts about me. I did the same thing you did."

But Ezra only laughs his sonic boom of a laugh. Then he steps aside, thick strands of the ivy behind him held in one hand, and pulls the curtain aside to reveal a slice of private paradise. Doing so he says, "Scarlette of the Orcan Urrug Clan, keeper of feral cats, connoisseur of fizzy beverages, and master of cards. May I present to you: The Glowing Gale."

Ezra bows deeply, gesturing with his free hand for me to enter before him, but I can't.

My old school, the same one Ella and Benny still attend, is a simple building carved out of a giant rocky cliff side. Only the older kids in the highest classrooms have the best views of the school grounds. And that's for its bird-eye perspective, not because there is anything special to look at. Flanked by carefully planted and trimmed trees, a shadow for a stretch of dirt where a playground always thrums with some class of kids at recess, the building of Panther Lake Center of Learning is a silent admirer of the flat pond that smudges its otherwise grassy front lawn. It is beautiful in a simple kind of way, the kind of pretty that you see in a polaroid and think 'that's nice' but you don't really feel the need to travel there to see it yourself in person. After all, Panther Lake is only just a school. But Amalgamy Academy? It is starting to feel like so much more for the way it bursts with secrets such as the underground cave and, evidently, the Glowing Gale.

Framed by a curtain of ivy I can see a flower-filled meadow. Glitter Gardenias release showers of sparkles as they rustle in the breeze, Honey Cups glisten with their secret pools of nectar stored within their bottle-neck bodies, blooming Fire Strand Bushes pock the field with their many layers of vibrant petals — a blanket of matured indigo dripping down each flower's stem to serve as a bed for huge orange bursts of bulbous stamen. It's not lost on me that I recognize most of the plants in this meadow because of my mom's love for gardening, not because of any Magical and Mundane Herbs class I've taken so far. But it's a thought I don't have time to speak because I see it now, stepping forward, reframing the picture between the ivy curtains. In the center of the field is the massive, sprawling shape of a White Weeping Willow. It is the only plant in the Glade devoid of color, but its sheen reflects the rainbow of the flowers surrounding it, making the tree an opal beacon of life.

I never thought I'd be rendered speechless at the sight of flowers. My awe manifests out of me in a breathy murmur, "It's beautiful."

Ezra takes my hand and pulls so that I step closer to him.

"That's not even the best part," he confides.

Then, running into the Glade full-force, he tells me to sing.

"Sing?" I ask. "You didn't say anything about singing!"

He urges, "Oh come on, it'll be worth it, I promise! It can be anything, but they only react to melody."

"No way!" I exclaim, catching on. But I refuse to sing alone and make him promise to accompany me. We decide quickly on a simple children's lullaby we both know and sing together in wobbly warbles. As soon as the first few notes leave our mouths, the slender petals of Silver Horn flowers rise from their vines on the ground. Before we know it, we are surrounded by

trumpet shaped flowers sprouting up in the Glade in all directions. Within a few more notes, the flowers bloom and hundreds of tiny white lights spill out of the trumpets and swirl through the air, dancing around us. The sight of them hushes me and I marvel out loud that I've never seen so many in one place before. Ezra finishes the song in a drawn-out, off-key note, and the white lights pop out of existence, one by one in tiny exploding sparks. When I turn back to look at him, Ezra already has his eyes on me, his hands clasped behind his head.

"So? What do you think of the surprise? Do you like it?"

"Do I like it? I love it! I've never seen anything like this before! How did you find this place?"

Ezra shrugs off the question, obviously more interested and pleased by the first half of my statement. We sit shoulder to shoulder for a long time, our backs resting comfortably against the white willow tree. We talk about music, ScryScreen shows, and the Buggie he wants for his upcoming birthday.

"What do you drive?" he asks.

"I don't. Humans aren't allowed to drive until they're seventeen," I say.

Ezra's face scrunches up into a question.

"I forgot, as a Mythical you probably don't know this, but you know how you can drive once you turn fifteen? Humans can't drive until they're seventeen. And because I'm half-human, I can't get behind the wheel of a Buggie until then," I explain.

The befuddlement lifts on Ezra's face like a mist disappearing at the touch of dawn.

"I see, because of the age-to-maturity difference," he says matter-of-factly. "Since humans age slower and mature slower than most Mythicals. I can see that. But I don't see why you have to wait so long?"

"If I were full-orc like my dad, I'd get my license at fifteen like you. But since I'm not..."

I shrug.

"Well, when I have a Buggie of my own, where shall I take you?" he asks.

I laugh appreciatively, and from there we start talking about all the places we'd like to travel to one day. And he asks me a lot of questions about where my family is from. When we leave the Glowing Glade to head back to the main part of campus, Ezra makes me promise to meet him again tomorrow. I chew my lip a lot, mulling over the invitation and all the excuses I could give him to avoid another meeting. But he presses that he isn't done making up for what happened at Sanctuary, and, in the end, I agree to his request.

When the day is finally over and I crawl into my bed at last, it's with an exhausted but pleased air about me. After the Glade, school was pretty uneventful. I told Denzel everything about my time with Ezra, of course. Although, it's not like I had much of a choice; Denzel did threaten to very loudly sing a song they've made up about my kissing virginity if I didn't comply. Luckily, I not only wanted to tell someone about our venture, I also wanted their opinion on whether or not I should meet with Ezra tomorrow.

"What does Scarlette want?" was their only retort.

I didn't know what to say to that, and I still don't. Not having a strong enough reason to say 'no' isn't quite the same thing as wanting to say 'yes'. It's true that there didn't seem to be any trace of the rude blazer-boy I first saw of him, but what does that mean, really? Especially when you're trying to impress someone. The thing I can't figure out is why he still feels the need to impress *me*.

"Maybe he'll show me another cool hidden mystery," I offered Denzel as an explanation for why I have decided to go along with it.

"You mean more secret make-out spots," Denzel had chided.

Quellie interrupts my recollection with a soft tapping on the bunk bed frame.

"Scar, are you awake?" she asks.

"Of course I am," I say. "We only just went to bed a few minutes ago."

I lean over the edge of my bed and peer down at her. My hair, loose and long outside of its braid, sways around me as I do.

"What's up?" I ask.

She doesn't look at me. Instead, by the light of a firebug lamp, I see her hug a four-armed doll closer to her chest.

"It's me. I am what is up, get it?" I smile at my own joke, purposefully swinging my hair back and forth for emphasis. She doesn't laugh.

"What do you and Mom and Rugrug talk about when I get sent away?"

I frown, unsure how to answer her. Today's homeschooling lesson was brutal. Mom gruelled me on the Rebellions and made me read the relevant chapters out loud two times from each book before Rugrug finally released me. But that's not what Quellie was really asking about. My little sister doesn't care about the extra lessons our parents are giving me, she just wants to know why she isn't allowed to stay for them. Why would she though? She's the lucky one.

"What does it matter? You get to play with Benny and Ella all day while I'm stuck here. It's like having extra chores," I grumble.

"I'd rather have the extra chores. Benny and Ella just do homework all day. And I finish mine during study hall," she whines.

"Don't do all your homework at school, then. Save some for later," I provide irritably.

Out of all the things there are to complain about — the hole in her favorite blanket, the Transition of her skin tone, how her otherwise smooth hair tangles into knots the day it grows past her shoulders — the absence of homework is what Quellie decides to harp on? I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from calling her stupid. She gets to go out and do whatever she wants, while I am practically chained to the table with two books and Mom, the wannabe Proctor.

She opens her mouth to say something else, but I cut her off.

"Just do yourself a favor, Quellie, and get over it. You have the better end of the deal," I snap.

I stare at her, probably more intensely than I need to. When she sighs and turns around to face the wall, I pull myself back onto my bed and curl into my blankets. I fall asleep cradling a white daisy in my hands, but with the taste of dandelion weeds in my mouth.



(An AI Depiction of the Cricket, a Buggy vehicle similar to a motorcycle)

Mark Twelve: Buggies and Buddies

I wake up in a rather foul mood that follows me around all morning. Quellie doesn't even want to look at me during breakfast. When Mom asks her if she's feeling well, my little sister nods dismissively, but I can tell that it's a lie. I have to fight the urge to roll my eyes at her dramatic tact for attention. My advice to her last night was sound. So what if she didn't like it? So what if it wasn't what she wanted to hear? The sooner she moved on and realized she was the lucky one, the better off we'd both be. Unfortunately, the words ricochet around my skull with nowhere else to go, so I'm stuck carrying them around with me like an extra backpack.

I jump away from my locker, rattled from my thoughts, as a pair of arms curl around me from behind.

"Good morning, little mouse" chirps a dulcet voice in my ear.

"Ezra," I say.

The surprise at being touched unannounced and unexpectedly is somehow muted once I recognize it's him.

"Surprised to see me? We agreed to meet here yesterday, didn't we?" he asks.

He's still holding me from behind. Not in a rough, bear hug sort of way, not even in a real orcan embrace. He holds his hands at my waist gently, a slight pressure. Am I supposed to hug him back? I wiggle around to get out of his grasp and face him.

"I'm surprised you can wrap your arms around me," I say in answer to his question.

The words come out sharper than I mean them to, stuck between the memory of a giant blazer being thrown at me and the memory of my sister's gloom this morning. Ezra's wide grin falters, dropping to a concerned, flat line. He scrunches his hands into anxious balls, but I shake my head before he can apologize.

"That's not how I meant it, sorry."

"That's alright," he says slowly. He doesn't say anything more, leaving the conversation open for me to steer. A question floats in the pupils of his hazel eyes, do I want to talk about whatever it is that's bothering me? Because his body, arms half-raised as if prepared for another hug, asserts that he's there for me in case I do want to vent to him.

"Let's move on, yeah? What's your surprise today?" I ask him. I force my lips into a smile. It feels as unconvincing as it probably looks, but Ezra accepts it nonetheless. He opens the crook of his arm and pulls my hand to nestle into the warm angle of his elbow.

As we begin walking he says, "It occurred to me that you've never seen the school parking lot before. And I'm in the market for a new Buggie soon. I thought maybe we can hit two birds with one stone?" he asks.

The shine is gone from his voice, but not from his eyes. From the way they scan my face I can tell that he knows something is wrong, but I'm grateful that his sense of self-preservation prevents him from prying. For that, I can agree to tag along in whatever adventure he has planned for the next half-hour.

The school parking lot isn't far from the rest of campus. In fact, I have walked past it every day and just never noticed it before. Buggies of all different shapes and sizes cling to the bark of half a dozen evergreen trees, and Ezra's idea is to walk up to each and pretend to inspect them as if we are prospective buyers. It's weird, but if this is how he wants to spend his second chance, so be it.

Climbing up a staircase carved into the trunk, I stop by a red and black one and say, "This one is pretty. I didn't take you for a ladybug Buggie, though."

"Ezra might not be a ladybug Buggie kind of guy, but I am no Ezra," he smiles mischievously. He puffs up his chest with grand importance and disguises his voice behind an accent that I think is supposed to hint to the Kalasa Kingdom north of Loria, but it's too horrible to really tell. "Mine name is Throva the Terrific. I am a Green Carpet designer for ScryScreen stars and I need something majestic to transport me to all my very important and richy-rich clients."

"Ah," I exclaim with a knowing smile. "Then, Mister Throva the Terrific, this ladybug Buggie simply won't do. *Tsk tsk tsk.*"

Ezra watches me with a matching grin as I look around us. This is a new game, one I am determined to win. Farther up the tree, I spot a long white vehicle with black spots and a fuzzy body. Its wheels are retracted in favor of ten little prongs, not unlike the ligaments of large spiders; the Buggie uses the prongs to clutch to the bark in parking mode, attached to the tree.

I point up to it and say, "You need something like the Caterpillar Crawler! It's large size makes it fit for luxurious travel, and it has extra space for either your famous companions, or clothes for wardrobe changes on the go!"

"Yes, yes," Ezra agrees, "Throva the Terrific likey."

We take turns, shifting between different personas and Buggies, pretending to be get-away drivers, opera singers, Wood Warden spies, and whatever else we could think of. We look at purple beetle-shelled Buggies with horns on the hood, amfid shaped sedans with wings instead of wheels, and even a brown Buggie that eerily reminds me of a massive cockroach. That one, Ezra informs me, belongs to Proctor Aegnor, and I can't say that I'm very surprised. A sleek-bodied motorcycle has me scurrying up the tree even higher.

I reach out and gingerly place a hand against its green and brown shell. The antenna at the vehicle's front quivers and, in response, the engine roars to life. Long, powerful cricket legs detach from the motorcycle's sides and spread out, ready to pounce.

"Now this Cricket is a beauty," I muse.

Ezra sidles up next to me and whistles, "We have a winner! The lady has excellent taste."

Without hesitation, Ezra swings himself over the motorcycle's body, and plucks me into the seat in front of him. I blink disbelievingly, once again thrown off by his hidden strength.

"What are you doing?" I ask. I squirm, searching for a way to dismount, but the next thing I know, my body is crushed flat against the Cricket as its legs spring into action and launches us into the air.

"Hold on tight!" Ezra advises.

He snakes a hand around my waist as we reach the climax of the Cricket's jump and begin to descend.

"Do you know how to drive this thing?" I shout to him in a panic.

We careen down, a nose dive heading straight for the earth, and I instinctively grab hold of the vehicle's antenna, desperate for some sort of tether. The Cricket immediately rights itself, and, when landing parallel with the ground, springs us back into the air.

"You figured it out! You're a natural," Ezra booms behind me.

Absurdly, incredulously, I burst out into a fit of roarious laughter. Ezra gives me targets, pointing to rocks and branches, instructing me where to aim next. All it takes is my will, a thought and a push of desire behind it, for the Cricket to obey. Wind loosens my hair and untangles it from its braid; Ezra whoops excitedly in my ear; the way gravity warps around us is almost like being on the swings with Ella or flying through the Tree of Halls with Adora. Only

much, much more exhilarating. By the time we officially land, my hair is a rat's nest and Ezra's looks like he's been struck by lightning. We dismount and, as I watch the Cricket's legs tuck back into the Buggie's body, I thank him.

"That was—" I started before catching my breath. "Really fun! Completely unexpected, don't ever do that again without warning! But it was fun," I say.

Ezra dips his head in acknowledgement, his twin horns gleaming in the sunlight.

"So, our second date is a success?" he asks.

I blink at him. This was a date?

Before I can even think of a response, someone's whistling weaves through the air. I look at Ezra, thinking maybe this was part of his plan? But he looks just as confused as I do. We turn around to face the stairway carved into the tree, and immediately my blood chills. I start to regret every single second that has passed since we left Amalgamy's main campus when I see Tthreandvar blocking the exit. He swings his head to the side, flipping a thick swab of pink hair out of his face.

"Well, well, well," Tthreandvar says mockingly. "Ezra, buddy. When my big bro said you wanted to take our father's Cricket for a joyride with a girl today, I was worried you might have run back to Adora. But this? This is the last thing I expected to see."

I stiffen, uncomfortable between the two boys. My mind darts to the Buggie behind us; the crossed arms of Tthreandvar and the pout on his face; the uneasy smile on Ezra's lips.

"I didn't know the Cricket was yours," I start in apology.

"I wasn't speaking to you," Tthreandvar replies, a curt dismissal of my presence. "The keys, Ezra."

The elvin boy holds out an expectant hand.

"Come on, man. Don't be rude. Tthreandvar, this is Scarlette. Scarlette, this is —"

"We've met," I interrupt Ezra with the same measured coldness Tthreandvar reserved for me.

I feel so stupid! I knew Tthreandvar and Ezra are friends. I don't know why the Elf is so upset with Ezra, but I know I'm somehow in the middle of it now. And I'd very much like not to be. I take a step forward towards the staircase and Tthreandvar shifts into a defensive stance.

"Relax, I'm just leaving," I scoff.

"Leaving so soon?" he asks. "I was hoping you might be able to puzzle this out for me. See, I understand wanting something shiny to show off to a girl, but *you?*"

Once again I am reminded of my Mom, the way she ignored Thomme at Sanctuary until she was ready to speak. But I don't have her elegance. I could tell myself that I am choosing not to dignify his question with a response, but the truth is I just want to get away from him. I want to get away from his question. He has to know, they both do, that it's the same one I've been asking myself since Ezra asked to talk to me after lunch yesterday. *Why me?*

I don't want to stand here and listen to Ezra stumble over his words as he tries to explain himself. I don't want to be here when Tthrandvar wins him over to his point of view. I don't want to stay for this intervention, only to be left behind. I won't. So I shove Tthreandvar to the side so hard I can hear the air in his lungs wheeze out of him when he lands against the tree trunk. I push past him and start rushing down the staircase, but something makes me stop. I haven't made it far, only a level below them, out of sight. And when their conversation picks back up, I can hear it. Only, it's not a conversation ... It's an argument. It's the sound of Ezra's voice spitting Tthreandvar's name like a curse. It's odd. Strange. Without seeing his face as he speaks, I can almost think that it's someone else talking.

"What's the matter with you? I like her Tthreandvar, I don't care if it doesn't make sense to you." And then I realize why Ezra sounds so off — he's angry! He's actually mad at Tthreandvar, his own friend, because of me? Slowly, I start climbing the stairs back up to them, one by one, afraid to make a sound.

Tthreandvar's chuckle poisons my ears as he replies, "What are you doing with her? She's a nobody. You're wasting your time —"

I round the corner just in time to see Ezra plant a fist right next to Tthreandvar's head. While that's more restraint than I would have shown, it startles a strangled gasp out of me.

"Scar—" Ezra starts, his eyes wide at my sudden reappearance.

I shake my head at him, wide-eyed myself, but for different reasons. Tthreandvar is too stunned to speak. Silently, I march up to them, grab Ezra's arm, and pull him towards the stairs with me. He doesn't fight me off, instead, Ezra obediently follows my lead, glaring at his friend as we pass.

"That's it? Haha, have fun with this one while you can, Ezra. Don't come running to me when you don't like the way her claws feel in your back anymore," Tthreandvar grinds out callously.

Ezra doesn't reply. He tugs on my hand, ready to leave just as I was a moment before. But I fling his hand off of mine, pivot, and march straight up to Tthreandvar, nose-to-nose with him. His slender face is twisted into an expression of mockery and contempt.

SOME PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS GOING TO DO THEIR BEST
TO MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU DON'T BELONG.
YOU CAN DRESS RIGHT, TALK RIGHT, AND DO RIGHT.
AND SOMETIMES IT STILL WON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
IT'S UP TO YOU TO KEEP YOUR CHIN UP

"You don't like me," I assert.

"Gods below, Ezra, you do like them dumb, don't you," Tthreandvar sniggers.

"You don't like me," I repeat. "But the thing is? The thing you haven't yet realized? Is that I don't need you to like me. I don't care either way. And you're not worth pretending for."

"Everyone cares wheth—" that's all Tthreandvar is able to say. Because then, at that precise moment while his mouth is still forming the *th* sound of 'whether', I slap him. Hard. Open-palmed, right across the cheek, for embarrassment. Just as Rugrug taught me.

I stand there and watch his reaction, arm still outstretched from the slap. He blinks a lot, leans back against the tree, but when he narrows his eyes at me, Tthreandvar knows better than to utter another syllable. Anger swirls in the dark recesses of his pupils, and I catch a whiff of something like spoiled milk coming off of him. But whether the scent is borne of his hatred for me or of the embarrassment of my slap, I can't tell. I don't care, either.

I turn and face Ezra. There's a moment of silence between us, and I refuse to be the one to break it. This is his chance. He saw what happened. This is his moment to choose who he is going to side with in this fight. I can't keep the satisfaction out of my smile when Ezra *hmphs* in approval, and offers his arm to me again. Tthreandvar is forced to watch through watery eyes as I accept Ezra's offer, and we leave him there alone to descend the tree together.

It's not until we are back on the main campus and Ezra is dropping me off at my Ethics of the Arcane class that we speak to one another. We linger outside the classroom. Beyond Ezra I can see Denzel shooing Saréell away while they hover near the door, watching us while chewing on their plush lips.

I can tell Ezra's about to apologize again, but I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear excuses made on Tthreandvar's account, and I don't want to hear how sorry Ezra is that things didn't turn out as planned.

"I didn't know that was a date," I say.

Ezra blinks at me, uncomprehensively, before his gaze turns sheepish.

"But I wish I had," I continue. "I would have worn my best uniform."

I try to accompany my small joke with a smile. I don't have a 'best uniform', I don't even have a modified one like everyone else in the Beau Monde. But I offer the sentiment to him as my own version of an olive branch. My smile is hesitant, pale, even a little wobbly when I plaster it on. But then Ezra sees it. And it takes a moment for him to process what I just said, but when it does his grin amplifies mine.

"I wish we could keep seeing each other —"

"Don't say 'but'," Ezra interrupts.

"But..." I say with a slight wince. "You saw how Tthreadvar reacted. And if Adora finds out—"

"Adora? What does she- nevermind. What I'm hearing is that we want to spend time together, get to know one another more, without the pressure. Without having to worry about what everyone else thinks. I get that. You're still new here, and you're trying to figure things out, that's fine."

Ezra interrupts his own speech with a sigh. He takes my hand in his, squeezes his eyes shut, and takes a few more deep breaths before opening them again.

"Little mouse, you don't owe me anything. You don't owe anyone anything at all. All I'm asking is that you give us a chance to figure out if there could be an 'us', before writing it off. Because that's what would be easier for everyone else, but is it what you want? If it is, I'll walk away. I'll leave you alone. But you like me, too. Admit that, and we have a chance."

WHAT DOES SCARLETTE WANT?

I release a string of garbled guffaws and prompt protests. He doesn't say anything. Ezra stares at me patiently, but without judgment. And when I look down and see my hand still in his, I don't pull away. I sputter a string of eclectic sounds, first for the realization, then because of the acceptance of the fact. And why not?

I like the way he calls me a little mouse, don't I?

I like that he told me he doesn't like the tunnel either.

I like that he noticed I fell behind, and he helped me the rest of the way.

I like that he owns his bad attitude, and is trying to make amends for it — and not just for me,

but towards the fae gondola woman at Sanctuary.

I like the way that he's willing to stand up for me, even against his own friends.

I like the way he smells like wood chips and sawdust.

And I like his honesty.

I like the open way he apologizes and accepts me and everything I feel,

even and especially when I don't understand my own emotions.

I'm not ready for a commitment,

I'm not even ready to call him my boyfriend.

But that's not what he's asking me, is it?

"Yes," I whisper. "I like you."



(An AI Depiction of a local neighborhood)

Mark Thirteen: Frenemies

Ezra and I agree that from now on, we'll meet at the Glowing Glade during our class breaks. And we do. Every day we make a game out of introducing ourselves to one another again, coming up with new fun facts about ourselves every time. We take turns singing to the Silver Horns, both of us horribly out of tune, and sit under the veil of the White Weeping Willow. After the first few days of doing this, Ezra starts bringing new surprises to our secret spot. He even packs different fizzy drinks and we teach each other card games with the deck he brings from home. Soon each rendezvous bleeds into class time. When I bring this up to Ezra, though, he doesn't seem to care. I don't know how he's managing it, but I quickly become even more grateful for and indebted to Denzel for their help as they cover for me in Ethics of the Arcane. They tease me with sucking kissing sounds each time I'm late or when I miss the class completely, but spending time with Ezra is worth it. As weeks turn into months, the Glowing Glade becomes our special and secret spot. It's become part of my daily routine to detour from Cryptozoology to the Glade. And it's wonderful. Perfect. Ours.

"You better not let Kalia find out you're missing class for your little snogging appointments with Ezra! Or else she will chastise you just as she did me the day we first met," Denzel says cheekily.

Filling them in on mine and Ezra's escapades has also become part of my daily routine. Of course, we can't talk about Ezra in front of the rest of the Beau Monde, so we make time and space by taking the long way back to campus after lunch. That is to say, I walk and talk in whatever direction Denzel decides to lead us. Kalia and Adora have tried to join us a handful of times. I don't mind, in fact, I'd be happy to spend more time with all of them. It's Denzel who takes the lead in those conversations and makes up excuses to keep ours a party of two most of

the time. Kalia still asks every now and then, and Denzel doesn't turn her away every time, but Adora has grown less persistent ever since she started asking Jemyr to walk her to class. I don't know how it started, but one day Denzel and I left the cave early and found him waiting for her on the other side of the tunnel.

Denzel snaps their fingers for my attention. Feigning exasperation they say, "Scarlette, I'm waiting for juicy details! You're not holding back on me now, are you?"

"No, of course not. But it's not like that, Denzel. You know Ezra and I haven't even kissed."

Denzel reels back, "I know! Girl, what are you doing in your little getaways? Get to it. Adora used to rave about Ezra's perfect kisses. And I need to know if she was exaggerating. So you get to the kissing and report back right away."

But what am I supposed to do? I've happily whittled away two months and some change in Ezra's company while simultaneously feeling like I've almost assimilated myself into Veresa's friend group, closer to Denzel than anyone else. But I am also, ironically, least close with Adora. Not including D'ja, of course, who still avoids acknowledging my existence if she can help it.

The truth is, I feel weird about hanging out with Adora. I haven't told her about my spending time with Ezra and up until now, I didn't feel the need to. We are only friends. Nothing has happened between us ... yet. But, I guess, that's the problem. Now that I want something to happen between me and Ezra, being friends with Adora at the same time while keeping my relationship with him a secret from her, is starting to feel wrong. And this time, when I confess all this to Denzel, their 'What does Scarlette want' tactic doesn't quite feel the same. I find myself wishing I could somehow smooth things out.

Aside from Chronicles of Eras Past with Proctor Aegnor, I now find that I actually enjoy my classes. I no longer sit in the front row anymore because my new friends often save me a seat next to them. Even in Cryptozoology. It only takes a week of Kalia's persistent arguing before Proctor Morgana revises our class' pre-assigned seating arrangements to make it so I no longer have to bring a towel to clean up after Daoll. The selkie's watermark is not only someone else's problem; it's specifically Helena's. And when I consider gifting her the towel I used to bring to lessons, the Beau Monde unanimously votes against it.

"I say let her sit in it!" Denzel remarks.

"Here, here." Saréell purrs.

It had taken multiple retellings over the course of several days for the whole story (or at least most of what happened between me, Raff and Helena) to stick in her head. Enough that she doesn't seem to be personally bothered by the slurs Helena hurled at us, but she still makes some effort to show her support. They are small notions, few and far between. Ok, maybe Raff has a point when he calls her out for being "dispassionate unless she can sneer as well as support", but I earn a spot in Saréell's good graces when I argue in her defense that "it is still support, nonetheless." Besides, I think her unpassionate indifference is part of Saréell's charm.

Veresa's vote is the only one that really counts though. She doesn't like how Raff grunts his approval before she can make a show of weighing the consequences, but even she says not showing Helena an ounce of leniency is the obvious choice.

"She picked a fight with one of our own. We can't just extend an olive branch to her now. Not after she called Raff a race-traitor for being my boyfriend!" Veresa orates.

This is a familiar line of thought she drills into us each time Helena comes up in conversation. For lest we forget, she too is insulted and therefore deeply wounded by Helena's

words when she sprung barbs at Raff. Usually she's able to console me as well before pleading to change the subject, but this is one of those times where she's too emotional to continue at all.

This is okay too, because I announce that the voting is closed and decided.

To mirror Denzel's sentiment, I throw my hands up and say, "Let her sit in it!"

Everyone cheers their approval. Everyone except for D'ja, of course. Denzel flourishes half a dozen rings on one hand in a torrent of snaps. Raff grunts and takes Veressa's hand as she dries her eyes with a silk handkerchief. Saréell hums a low, mewling note while stretching so far back she nearly makes an elegant arc of her body. Adora is the only one who sports for the traditional flurry of claps. Kalia nods so hard that the pencil she had lodged behind her human ear shakes loose and rolls to the ground. But D'ja? One of her tapered ears twitches, her only visible reaction to anything. Otherwise, she just emotes dead-pan. Slitted eyes cast elusively away.

It's as if she's taken it upon herself to serve as a constant reminder that I am still only temporary. That I still have work to do if I really want to earn myself a true spot amongst their ranks. This remains true a few days after the seat change in my Cryptozoology class, when I decide to try to break the ice between D'ja and me. Inter-Planar Leylines is my first class every day, and the only one I share with D'ja. I make my first mistake when I chose to sit beside her uninvited. I arrive first and when she walks in, I already have my notebook out and pen uncapped on the desk next to where she chooses to sit every day. We are working on our in-class assignment, color-coding the veins of magnetic energy on practice maps the Proctor hands out at random, when I start thinking of Denzel. Confident that talking about her sibling might be the safest topic of all, I turn to D'ja and open with a soft laugh.

I drum my fingers against my desk, gathering my courage, but it doesn't help.

Eventually I blurt out, "So, I hear Denzel's birthday is around the corner. Maybe we can go shopping for gifts together sometime?"

She doesn't say the words, but the phrase 'drop dead' is etched in her eyes when she turns to glare at me.

I try again, "They're a designer, right? What are they like when they're focused on a project? I can get them fabric, or, I don't know, something else seamstresses use? See, this is why I need your help."

There's another pause so long that consists of nothing else but D'ja staring at me, presumably making a mental list of all the things she'd rather be doing than talk to me. Like drowning in a river, or changing bedpans. I'm about to give up when she surprises me by addressing me directly for the first time ever.

Through sharp teeth she grinds out the words, "Denzel has this thing for side projects. They get all wrapped up and distracted for weeks, maybe even a few months. But eventually? They get bored. After all..."

D'ja pauses to look me up and down.

Eventually, she licks her upper lip and says, "After all. What are side projects but passing fancies."

The way she says the word 'fancies' makes my heart drop. She might as well have said 'distractions.' Or just said what she's really thinking which feels a lot more like 'you don't deserve my sibling's attention, enjoy it while it lasts.' She turns back to her worksheet, neither of us speaking another word to each other for the rest of class. Not even when the Proctor instructs the class to partner with the person next to us to check our work. D'ja's mapping skills are perfect.

Meanwhile, she returns my assignment dripping with red ink correction marks. Scrawled at the bottom of the page in the same alarming color of red are the words:

A for effort, but effort is not success.

You don't pass.

I know my geography skills aren't something I can brag about, but I still find the note a tad harsh. Even Ella finds it odd when I show it to her after school. She doesn't say anything; she stares at it wearing Quellie's eggplant-inspection-face until I finally throw the assignment away.

Ella came over because her mom has to take Benny to a medical check-up and her dad is out of town for work. Which works out because Quellie also hasn't been feeling well. She wouldn't have been able to go over to their home because she's been sick in bed all day. And Rugrug canceled today's homeschooling lesson, saying he and Mom had some important business to discuss. I didn't pry, partially because I am excited for an excuse to not be shackled to the kitchen table with those textbooks. I love learning about Ancient Humans and all, but I've been whining for a break for days. So I don't ask what it is they're talking about because I don't want to get roped into it. By the sour look on Mom's face, and the sulfur and charcoal scent of her emotions, it isn't a conversation I'd want to stick around for anyways.

So that means Ella and I are free to do as we please, just the two of us. This, as always whenever the weather is decent, means a trip to the neighborhood park. The swings are full, so we meander over to the grass where Ella tells me about her Tinker class. Svante, who has been partnering with Ella on class assignments since I left Panther Lake, sounds like she's been super helpful. They're working on an essay about Lost and Lock artifices, and it turns out, troll merchants use them often. Since I haven't entered the Prudent Pestle, I wouldn't have known that the barely navigable inside makes the magical tool a necessity.

Ella says, "The shop is so stuffed with merchandise that it's almost impossible to walk through, even with Illusion magic constantly altering the space. It's like a hedge maze, except the walls are stacked with all sorts of random stuff. And if a column of books or something gets knocked over, watch out! You're likely to get buried under a pile two times higher than the stack was to begin with."

If I could whistle, I would. But I can't. So I nod in surprise and say, "Sounds kind of like the part of Sanctuary where I met Ezra. No wonder they use Lost and Lock artifices a lot. How else would anyone find anything in their shop?"

"Exactly. All they have to do is use the artifice to lock a box big enough to hold what they're looking for, and ta-da! As long as you've attuned the artifice with the item, whatever it is you seek will appear inside with a few twists, turns, buttons, and a pinch of imagination."

From there, we talk about music and try to find four leaf clovers in the patch between us.

Until Ella suddenly lifts her head and asks, "Hey, whatever happened to your student ambassador friend, Adora? You talk about everyone but her."

"Nothing," I say far too quickly.

I cringe inwardly and try to turn away from Ella, but I'm too slow. She's seen my face, and by the look on hers, she knows something's up. I can try to shrug her off, I can even try to lie to her and say, 'Adora? Why we're the best of friends!' But neither deflecting or fibbing will work with her. It never has, and it never will. That's why Ella and I are best friends.

So I sigh, because I know there's no other way to get through this, and I resign myself to the task. It doesn't take long, really. I just explain that Ezra and Adora used to date. But the conversation is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Particularly because by the time I'm done

talking, Ella has pulled away from me, arms crossed over her chest, with her blonde eyebrows knit together.

Her face has disapproval written all over it, but her tone is unreadable. "Scar, you're not seriously telling me that you're dating your friend's ex-boyfriend?"

"Well, Adora and I weren't friends when I started seeing Ezra."

When she breathes my name, it sounds like her body can't decide whether to gasp or exhale.

"But you still hang out with her? Are all of her friends keeping your secret from her?"

"Only Denzel knows, but it's okay! They don't think it's anything to worry about —"

Ella cuts me off with a loud snort.

She says, "I'm *so* glad Denzel is okay with lying to their friends. Actually, I don't care about them. What about you, Scarlette? Adora trusts you, and you've been sneaking around behind her back."

"I'm not going behind her back! It's not like they're dating and I'm stealing him from her, she broke up with him. She gave up any right she had to him the day she ended their relationship."

"You don't 'have a right' to people! No one does."

I don't know when we stood up; I don't recall making the decision to get on my feet, and I don't remember balling my hands into fists. But somehow Ella and I went from searching for four leaf clovers, to shouting in each other's faces.

"Do you even know when they broke up? It could still be a fresh wound to her, Ezra could be using you as a rebound for all you know."

"I'm not a rebound," I roar.

There are people openly watching us now, but I don't care.

"And for your information," I add. "They broke up at the end of the school year last summer. I didn't tell her at the beginning because why would I tell a stranger about my crush? Especially at a new school. You know what those first few days at Amalgamy were like for me!"

I tug on the end of my braids, still not believing that this is happening. Ella and I fighting? It's unheard of! Ridiculous. And yet, it's still happening.

"But you're not strangers anymore, are you? You've known each other for almost three months. Now what's your excuse?" she asks.

"Believe it or not, I've been thinking about how to tell her."

It wasn't exactly a lie, which is how I know I'll get away with sharing that with Ella, but I definitely don't have a plan for how to tell her yet.

"I've been trying to find the right way to explain everything to her, but I don't want to say the wrong thing. I want to keep seeing Ezra and I want to stay friends with Adora. Is it so wrong to want both without the, the ..." I stop talking with an exaggerated groan and descend into heavy, rapid breathing.

Ella shakes her head, eyes on the grass so as not to look at me.

She says, "I think the word you're looking for is 'guilt.' Also, the beginning of last summer wasn't that long ago. It was around the same time you went to that stupid uniform shop. If Ezra's bad behavior had anything to do with Adora then? Who's to say she doesn't still affect him now?"

She huffs, then turns around and starts marching out of the park.

"Where are you going?" I shout after her.

"I'm going home. Goodluck telling Adora everything, maybe Denzel can help you."

She doesn't even glance back. All I can do is stand in a patch of clovers and watch as she walks away.



(An AI Depiction of Amalgamy Academy)

Mark Fourteen: Trouble in Paradise

The next day I get to the Glowing Glade before Ezra and pace under the White Weeping Willow. He tries to greet me with a hug, but I can't return it. It takes everything I have in me not to physically push him away. A hug? Denzel's words ring like a bell in the back of my head.

ADORA USED TO RAVE
ABOUT EZRA'S
PERFECT KISSES.

It's been two months of secret meetings and the most we've done is hold hands and cuddle. How does one go from that, to deep passionate kisses one can brag about to their friends? It's not like we lacked the opportunity. In all the times we've met at the Glowing Glade, we haven't seen another person. Our private paradise has remained just that — private.

Unable to take it anymore, I blurt out, "Why haven't you kissed me yet?"

Ezra, surprised, chokes on his fizzy apple juice and hiccups, "What?"

My cheeks burn as I rush to explain myself.

"You bring me to this romantic meadow; we play games everyday; cuddle while listening to the rain; sing horribly to the Silver Horns! I told you I like you, I said that months ago. And I think you still like me, unless you don't anymore? In which case, why are we still here?"

At this point I start rambling. Like scooping the guts out of a pumpkin, it feels like everything inside of me is coming out except for the one little seed I'm trying to pretend I don't notice: How long did it take him to kiss Adora?

IF EZRA'S BAD BEHAVIOR HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH ADORA THEN?
WHO'S TO SAY SHE DOESN'T STILL AFFECT HIM NOW?"

"Are you still in love with her?"

For a moment I feel the world around me go still. It doesn't make sense, the wind doesn't stop dancing through the Willow's branches, the Nightcap mushrooms nestled between her roots don't stop snoring. But I feel frozen as the expression on Ezra's face shifts and I realize that I poised that last question out loud.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammer. "You have every right to feel as you do, I shouldn't have pried. If you still love her —"

Ezra cuts me off with a gentle but firm, "No."

He leans back, resting against the trunk of the Willow, knee propping up a hand splayed with playing cards.

"I don't have any feelings for Adora. And I do like you. It's just that, you know, I'm a Mandurago. Kissing is kind of a big deal for me. It's the 'next stage' or whatever. I guess I was just waiting until we both felt ready. Being with Adora was hard. Spending time with you isn't. And I'm enjoying that. Or at least I was"

I gulp audibly, swallowing down a desperate sob. I don't see what being a Mandurago has to do with anything, but everything else he just said? It makes perfect sense to me: I don't know how we switched roles, but somehow I'm more prepared for the 'next step' than he is. I want to kiss him, but he doesn't want to kiss me. Remembering the daisy he gave me, now over two months ago, I think about how yeah, I'm pathetic. Desperate, even. And that's not who I am ... is it?

I feel so weirdly distant and empty, that even though I know I'm speaking, even though I can feel my mouth moving and hear my voice sputtering words, I don't know what I'm saying. I

only know I feel confused and frustrated and maybe kissing Ezra isn't the answer — I don't think I want that as much as I want to feel like he wants to kiss me too.

He closes his fan of playing cards, tucks them into their box, and motions for me to come closer to him.

"There's still so much we can do without kissing," he says, the dulcet sound of his voice lowered and inviting.

I've never been very good at telling time without the sun or a watch handy. I'm glad it has started raining again. I'm not tempted to read the sky and judge how long I've been in Ezra's arms. And I don't want to know, because that feeling of timelessness I get around him is the kind of mundane magic I've only seen in a ScryScreen.

I whisper, "We can take things slow. I won't make the same mistake as Adora, I intend to keep you."

Ezra's "What?" is coated with disbelief.

He stops, hovering his hands over my body as if he's now afraid to touch me.

"I'm being crazy. I like you and you like me. But I think I've been feeling guilty for keeping us from her. So I'll explain everything to Adora and I will —"

"You will, what? 'Keep' me? I'm not something to possess, Scarlett. And why do you keep bringing up Adora?"

He stands up. In his temper, his arrow-tipped tail flicks behind him so sharply it's making quick swooshing sounds as it cuts through the air.

"Wait, where are you, what's happening?" I try to scramble to my feet, but Ezra's tone when he speaks next kills the motion of my body before the words can touch the emotions in my heart.

"Don't worry, Denzel and I will figure it out. You don't have to do a thing, I'll take care of it all," I urge entreatingly.

"Stop! Scarlett, I do like you. But, you're being weird. Pushy, and jealous, you're not acting like yourself. And you're talking to me like I'm some sort of doll. You're acting like Adora."

Ezra sighs and rubs at his temples, "Look, I'm going to go. Don't follow me."

And so I watch him leave all the way, hoping that he'll turn around and change his mind but knowing deep down that he won't. I watch him as he crosses the meadow, parts the ivy curtain, and disappears on the other side.

A few days pass without even a glimpse of Ezra. Every day I make the journey to the Glowing Glade, but he doesn't meet me. I don't know if anyone in the Beau Monde, aside from Denzel, notices my distraction as half my attention is always spent scanning the cavern where we all eat lunch for Ezra's familiar presence. Every time I see a glimpse of horns or hear someone burst with laughter, I jerk my head in the same direction hoping to catch sight of Ezra, but it's never him.

Denzel reminds me at least twice a day that Amalgamy Academy is huge, and that Ezra could be anywhere on campus.

They say, "You'll see Ezra again when he's ready to see you. You must have really pushed his buttons talking about Adora and him like that. I'm not one to say 'I told you so'..."

"But you told me so." I finish for him. "I know! Adora just got in my head, you know? I really like him. It just feels like we're sneaking around her —"

"Free choice~" Denzel chirps in a sing-songy tone. "Why do you care so much about what Adora thinks?"

"I don't. Not really. I just don't like feeling like I'm hiding something from her. It feels like an obstacle, like a bad buffer that's separating me from Ezra, and me from Adora."

Denzel considers this for a moment then shrugs. "I don't think you are because it's none of her business. I personally think life'd be easier if you didn't, but if it bothers you so much, then tell her."

"That's what Ella said," I mutter under my breath.

But exactly how to tell my new friend Adora that I have been secretly going on dates with her ex-boyfriend, I don't know. I used to feel like I didn't have to tell Adora about Ezra and I, because there wasn't anything to tell. Just as I was a stranger to them, they were each a stranger to me. But that's changed. Or it was changing.

A few more days pass in which I remain unknissed by Ezra and without Ella to talk to. She and I have never fought before, so I don't know what to expect. I don't know for how long she will refuse to speak to me, and I don't know how to fix us. However, I do have this nagging feeling that Ella might be more open to speaking to me if I can say that I've told Adora everything. And I should tell her everything. When I started spending time with Ezra, I wasn't expecting a relationship. But now that it exists, to the point that we are actively having our first fight, I have to tell Adora. If I don't, if I wait much longer, I might hurt her.

I spend my walk on the way to my Mundane and Magical Herbs class imagining scenarios in which Adora and I have our heart-to-heart. So far the ratio for happy and unhappy

endings is not great. But I am spared from having to make an immediate decision on how to break the news to Adora by none other than Veresa Lovelace. She corners me outside our Mundane and Magical Herbs greenhouse. The raindrops of feathers dangling from her left ear have evolved; white swan feathers cascade from hoops on both ears today. I smile to greet her, but she shuts me down with a wave of her hand fast-like, and I realize something is wrong.

In a pinched and assertive voice, she says, "Denzel's in trouble. They need our help."



(An AI Depiction of Scald, Head of Amalgamy Academy Security)

Mark Fifteen: Treasure

The weather, having officially shed its false coat of summer's last kiss, has taken to raining more often than not. The White Weeping Willow in the center of Glowing Glade is thick enough to shield Ezra and I from rain when we curl up together underneath it (or at least when we used to), but can do nothing to stop me from sliding in the mud on the way to the geometric glass dome of my second to last classroom of the day. I am about to mount the pulley-system that leads to the greenhouse entrance, when I feel a sharp tug on my bag pull me backwards. It's Veresa. Her brown hair is fluffy and dry under a sunflower-pattern umbrella, but her expression is as cold as winter frost.

"Come with me," she says.

When Veresa stopped me from going to Mundane and Magical Herbs yesterday, I was ready to throw my bag aside, abandon it, and sprint to wherever Denzel was. The potency of Veresa's solemn approach sunk into the skeleton, making a conduit of my bones. Anxiety is still jolting through me from the thought of Denzel in danger, it feels like charged electricity in my veins. I nearly exploded when she refused to elaborate further. When I told her as much, she said she couldn't tell me unless I agreed to help with a 'favor.' The way she dragged the word out yesterday, emphasizing the *fae* syllable, told me two things: I know exactly what kind of trouble Denzel is in, and I also know that it's because of me.

She doesn't wait for me to respond before turning to walk off the flagstone walkway. I followed her to the dry center beneath a nearby root bridge without question. Adora is already waiting for us. Her arms are crossed with a claw-tipped finger tapping impatiently on a bicep. It's the first time we've been in a small huddle together outside of the Mundane and Magical Herbs classroom. Probably because we've only hung out together in large groups. Outside of that and

lunch, I've been avoiding one-on-one time with her for almost three months, ever since the first day Ezra brought me to the Glowing Glade.

Once we're close enough, Adora whispers hurriedly, "Everything is ready. Denzel is in place waiting for your signal, but we have to move fast." Then, looking at me, she adds, "Why is she here? I didn't know she was part of the plan."

Veresa holds up a hand to stop Adora, immediately taking full control over the conversation.

"Thank you," she says. "Scarlette's coming with you."

"Absolutely not. It's too dangerous!"

Veresa shoots Adora a withering glare.

"You can and you will. Scarlette will pull her own weight on this one. She's part of the reason we're in this mess to begin with."

Veresa settles her icy stare onto me.

"About three months ago, did you or did you not allow Denzel to make a deal with Fjurnik, the Bridge Troll of Amalgamy Academy?"

I don't bother to defend myself. I don't bother to say anything at all. The way Adora widens and narrows her eyes at me, tells me that I don't have to. Whether they're aware of the full story or not, they blame me for Denzel's predicament. And I can't hold it against either of them, because I blame myself too.

Veresa doesn't slow down. She pauses just long enough to let the question sink in, then continues, "Ding, ding ding! That's right. Fjurnik has called upon Denzel to fulfill the promised favor."

The corner of Adora's mouth has perked up to form an unbecoming scowl.

"If D'ja didn't hate you before..." Adora trails off bitterly.

"D'ja can't know anything about this, Denzel made that very clear. Stick to the plan and she won't ever need to know." Veresa replies tersely.

Adora nods, but before we can break our huddle and get started on whatever plan they've whipped up, she uncrosses her arms to point a finger at me.

She says, "I'll work with you on this, but I can't be held responsible for your safety. Fjurnik's favor isn't going to be an easy one to fulfill."

"I understand," I say, sounding more confident than I feel. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"Love the enthusiasm," Veresa says. Her lips spread into a frigid smile. "You'll need it when you descend into Scald's lair."

Twenty minutes later, Veresa is in position as a lookout while Adora and I prepare to rappel down into a Drachkin's lair. If Denzel's description of Scald is to be believed, the Drachnkin is an ill-tempered master of fire. This makes him the least likely staff member of Amalgamy Academy whose office will ever be threatened by thieves. It also makes it the most logical place to store the exam answers Fjurnik wants.

The office itself is more like a burrow located on part of the main campus; the entrance sits upon a hill adjacent to the Tree of Halls. At the end of a wide cavern-like pathway is Scald's desk. It is surrounded by what looks like confiscated student belongings. There are heaps of music boxes, piles of stuffed animals, a collection of varying religious items, and, closest to the desk, a small mountain of junk food.

"Quit gawking and hurry up," Veresa shouts from the mouth of the burrow.

"Where is Scald, anyway?" I ask Adora.

She's checking our ropes, making sure they're securely leashed around the desk's sturdy legs whose metal seems to have been melted down into thick, heavy stumps.

She answers my question in a frenzied rush that I almost mistake for impatience before I remember that's just how Adora talks.

"Oh, Denzel is creating a security distraction. They released half a dozen frost moths in one of the upper level's tropical greenhouses. It'll take Scald some time to capture the bugs and reheat the classroom, but we don't know exactly how much time and we've only got one shot at this. Ready?"

Without hesitation, Adora unscrews the shade of Scald's tabletop lamp and plucks the lightbulb from its bed. Turning the bulb upside down, a dark-red powdery substance filters into Adora's palm. She aims her fist at the ground behind the desk and blows out, sending a puff of cloudy powder to settle on the floor. Within seconds, the ground where she blew the powder falls away in large chunks, revealing a hole about eight feet wide. Looking through it like a window, I see a drop of at least forty feet, no staircase, and a horde of random antiques — wardrobes, shields, chairs, bed frames, broken spears, tables, jewelry, swords, vases, busts, chalices, chandeliers, statues, mirrors — all from different Eras, ranging in the craftsmanship of a wide range of races, and surrounded by great pillars of flame.

"You want us to go down into *that*?" I ask in complete dismay.

"Well yeah, duh. That's where our treasure is. Now angle yourself carefully. You don't want to accidentally repel into the jet of fire. And be careful of the trap triggers once you get down there."

And with that, she tugs on the rope one last time and slips down into the chamber below. It dawns on me then that this can't be the first time they've done this. They know exactly what will get Scald out of his office, and Adora knows not only where the powdery key to the chamber is, but precisely how to use it as well. Just how often they brave such a risk is the question. A question, I also realize, I don't have time to ask right now.

Carefully, and much slower than Adora, I wiggle myself over the edge of the hole and lower inch by inch until I'm standing at the bottom of the chamber. The heat is misery. How anyone can stand this underground desert is beyond me. Endless streams of fire billow from the ground in a pattern that is totally random to my eyes and it's so hot that there's a wavy quality to my vision. I have to squint through the haze to see Adora again.

The part of the chamber she's searching is completely submerged in fire, or at least, that's what it looks like at first. Then, looking harder, I see that there's actually a chest sitting center on a slab of stone that's surrounded by such high and powerful flames that it's almost imperceptible. The only reason I can make it out is because of Adora's coloring. She is a stark contrast to the reds and oranges surrounding her, she is a pale slip of white kneeling in the heart of fire.

Adora makes a sound of triumph. She pushes open the chest and holds up a white scroll. As she celebrates her discovery, a blue hard-shelled beetle whizzes past my ear and clinks against Adora's raised hand. She grabs it out of the air and stores it in a glass tube she produces from a pocket in her modified skirt.

"Oh no, that's Denzel's signal. Scald is leaving the greenhouse earlier than we expected. We've got eight minutes before he's back," she shouts over the roar of the fire.

"What can I do?" I ask her, wiping a sheet of sweat from my forehead.

"Nothing, this was easier to find than I expected. You should start the climb back up. Go and get ready to leave here in a hurry," she instructs.

She pulls out a notepad and begins to copy down the exam answers for whatever class Fjurnik wants to cheat at. I hesitate to leave. If Adora could write as fast as she talks, I might hurry, but as long as she's still scribbling, I can wait down here with her. The air is definitely thinner down here as well as hotter, but something's caught my eye. It's a strange book on a pedestal. It looks like a grimoire. Its green-lined pages jut out of the binding in odd angles; its black and battered face is hard to focus my eyes on. I can't tell if that's because the cover of the book actually moves, or if it's the effect of heat waves playing with my eyes. I cross over to it, thinking how odd it is that Scald would keep a book in a room of fire, but it's a mistake. The rock I just placed my weight on sinks beneath me and I hear a sucking sound above me. Instinctively I dive to the side and when I look back there's a fresh jet of fire scorching the earth where I was just standing. Sprawled on the ground I see another fat beetle fly into the chamber towards Adora. And I hear her scream.

I jump to my feet and look around for her, squinting again at the side of the chamber blurry with fire. There's Adora, just outside the inferno surrounding the chest of exam answers, patting at her left arm.

"No! Stupid, stupid, stupid! I burned myself in a trap. Scarlett, I-I don't think I can climb out. My arm, it hurts really bad. And we've only got five minutes now."

Her words are rushed and panicked; I squeeze my eyes shut and knock my knuckles against my temples.

Think! Think! Think! I command myself. But all I can see behind my eyelids are Adora's eyes, panic and fear lighting them brighter than the fire around us.

YOU'RE STRONGER THAN YOU THINK.

YOU HAVE THE ADVANTAGES OF ORC

BLOOD PUMPING THROUGH YOU.

YOU'D BOTH BE WISE TO REMEMBER THAT.

When I open my eyes again it's with renewed vigor.

Sorry Rugrug, I think as I jog towards Adora. Some battles do demand brute strength to win.

Ignoring her protests, I grab Adora's good hand and pull her towards the ropes. They're still dangling down the chamber's entrance. Then I wrap Adora's uninjured arm around my neck and shoulders, instructing her to hold on tight.

"But have you ever, how do you know you can pull us both up?" she asks.

I know I can't lie, there's too much heat, too much pressure, and looking straight up at the exit? It's much, much higher than I remembered.

"I don't," I admit to her. "But I've got to try. Now hold on!"

I shout the words with more conviction than I feel, pulling on the rope with all of my strength. One hand over the other, one hand at a time. Sweat is pouring out of me now and my muscles shake with my effort.

"I'm sure this will be a funny parallel later," I groan. "But every time I do something involving Bridge Trolls, my hands always hurt. And there's no Lifesap this time!"

"That doesn't make any sense," Adora says bewildered. Then, "I don't know how you're doing it, but we're almost there. Keep it up!"

I don't bother to look up, how would that be helpful? So I take Adora's word for how close we are. All I know is that the rope I'm climbing is stained with droplets of red each time I

move my hands while I scale higher and higher. My shoulders ache where Adora clutches and my back is drenched where her hot body presses into mine.

Finally, my hand finds purchase on the chamber's entrance and, with one final pull, I somehow manage to yank us both up and onto the floor of the burrow. I want to melt in my relief, become a puddle on the dirt behind Scald's desk, but as I wince at the ache of my body, a red beetle whips past me and I know there's no time.

"Two minutes," Adora gasps. "Last warning."

We practically have to prop each other up to keep moving. With a puff of powder, the rocks that fell away earlier to reveal the chamber gravitate back up from the bottom of the pit to form a solid, smooth surface, closing the entrance to Scald's hoard.

"What took you so long?" Veresa spits when she first sees us hobbling out of Scald's office. But when she sees us, primarily Adora's burnt arm, she lurches forward to provide her support and ushers us away.

Somehow we manage to make it to the school nurse without ever seeing Scald himself. I don't know what Veresa tells the nurse to score Adora and me a private healing room, but I am amazed at how much pull she must have to do it. I wonder if it's just part of the territory, being as famous as Veresa Lovelace is, or if her control is specific to Amalgamy Academy. I know by the way the Green Witch medic originally wants to seat me on the waiting bench outside of the medical hut that this special treatment isn't for my sake. However, because today, at least, I am an extension of the Lovelace name, an exception is made.

The school's healer, a Green Witch, doesn't ask how Adora received such bad burns, for which I am both grateful for and suspicious of. Probably Veresa has already worked out a story with her and whether or not it's believable is the witch's problem, not ours.

The school's Green Witch healer prescribes Adora's burn a salve and ten-minute thrashing treatments to be administered every thirty minutes. The treatment looks as bad as it sounds. The salve encourages Adora's skin to heal, but thrashing requires a delicate hand to thread her new flesh together in a way that will heal over quickly and smoothly.

For my pulled muscles and exasperated tendons, the witch creates a potion for me. It tastes like caterpillar juice and is as thick and soupy as melted ice cream, but the results are almost instantaneous as I feel my muscles relax and their burning settle into more of a light tingle.

Veresa leaves as soon as the witch declares her treatment plans for us. She says that she'll see us later, for Adora's injury should be better by the end of school, and someone still needs to deliver the 'package' to Fjurnik.

Her last words before she leaves are directed towards me.

"You're lucky you both made it out mostly okay and without being caught. I'd warn you to be careful next time you deal with a troll, but I think you got the message."

I think that's it. That is everything Veresa Lovelace is going to say on the matter. Possibly the last words she'll ever speak to me. But she turns around once she reaches the door. Veresa places a hand on the doorknob and as it creaks open a smidge she adds, "I'm glad you both are ok. You did good. Both of you."

And just like that my heart jumps into my throat! Everything is okay. Everything can go back to normal. I almost want to laugh at that thought because since when have I considered being part of Veresa Lovelace's friend group normal? Since when has my new life at Amalgamy Academy with its secret treasures and unlikely friends and forbidden romances become *my* normal?

"Thank you."

Adora says it so softly that if it hadn't been the only sound in our otherwise silent shared medical room, I wouldn't have heard her at all. Still lying in my cot, I turn to look at Adora who's staring at the blank wall, tears dripping out of the corner of her eyes.

"What?" I ask, not because I didn't hear her, but because I don't understand. What would she be thanking me for? Didn't she know that I caused this mess?

But she answers, "You came back for me. So, you know, thanks."

I try to laugh it off and assure her that it probably doesn't even matter anyways. It wasn't like she was in any real trouble. We'd either have found a way to distract Scald again, or else confess everything to rescue her if it came down to it. But Adora shakes her head.

"I don't want to guess at what Veresa would have done, but it might not have mattered. You saw how hot it was down there, how little oxygen there was. How long do you really think I would have lasted with the ceiling closed up? I'm a Kellax Sith, that place was made by and for a fire Gifted..."

Her statement, which started off in high-speed, descends into sobs. Gingerly, I raise myself off my cot and walk over to her bedside. Taking her hand in mine, I sit beside Adora until her need to cry finally passes. The whole time I'm trying not to think about how dangerous the mission Fjurnik sent us on actually it was. I'm trying not to think about how I started all this by ignorantly throwing ignorant insults at a troll — how stupid can I be! Adora's sniffing brings me back into focus.

Then she surprises me by saying, "I know these past couple months have been weird between us. And I know why, I was being stupid. I was being jealous when I had no right to be."

I perk up and stare at her, a little disbelievingly. She knows? She knows about me and Ezra and *she* was jealous?

"It's okay!" I blurt out. "Oh, thank Gaia, I've been stewing on it for forever trying to figure out how to talk to you about us."

Adora laughs, "I didn't realize you could tell I was pulling away from you. I thought I was being rather sly."

I shake my head, "I didn't know you knew until just now. But oh, what a relief it is to finally have it all out there!"

"Tell me about it," she says. Then she reaches over and squeezes my hand. "From now on, you'll always have me in your corner. No more hesitation. Forgive me?"

I smile. And then realize that's not enough. So, forgetting our injuries, I plunge down and wrap her up in a big hug and say, "There's nothing to forgive!"

The slender girl's laugh is muffled against my chest and I sneeze because her pale hair is tickling my nose. She says something, though it's hard to make out. The only clear word I can hear is 'sorry' which is followed by something that sounds like 'not used to sharing' but her voice is smothered against my body and drowned out by the sound of the room's large double doors bursting open.

I tense, clutching Adora's body to mine, in anticipation of a fight. The loud bang feels like a break in the atmosphere, something urgent and demanding. But when my wild eyes land on the person who opened them, I relax instantly.

I breathe his name like a prayer, "Ezra."

His eyes never leave mine as he crosses the room. I release Adora and turn towards him as he nears, not quite sure what to expect. We haven't talked to one another in days, haven't seen each other since that day in the Glowing Glades. I wave awkwardly, but he shows no such restraint. As soon as he can touch me, his hands cup my face.

His voice is strained, rushed and breathy as if he's been running. "Are you okay? I came as soon as I heard. Denzel said —"

I reach my hands up to his, and my touch silences him instantly.

"I'm ok," I say in almost a whisper. "Are you?"

He closes his eyes and chuckles, "I find out that my girlfriend plunged into Scald's fiery, underground cave, ended up in the medical hut, and she asks me if *I'm* okay? Scarlette, you really are something else."

He sighs and rests his forehead on mine. I close my eyes for a second and just breathe in the scent of him. Wood Chips and a little sweat. When I pull away from him, his eyes widen as he, for the first time since entering the room all a-blunder, notices that we are not alone. Adora is gaping at us, mouth open and eyes wide in shock. I laugh a little at her expression and the sudden toppling of Ezra's balance as he awkwardly tries to take a step back. I don't let him though.

I take his hand and pull him closer saying, "It's okay. She knows; we just talked about it. Turns out she knew all along actually, though I don't know how."

Ezra says nothing. He only looks from me to Adora, waiting for her reaction. For her part, Adora closes her open mouth with more dignity than I would have thought possible for someone who just saw her ex-boyfriend rush to her friend's bedside in a medical hut.

Eventually, she finds her voice again. It's unusually slow and measured and interrupted with a few awkward pauses, but she admits that she hasn't known 'all along' as I had thought, but that she figured it out for herself rather recently.

That's when I'm able to spill the whole truth of it, not just to Adora and Ezra, but it feels like to myself as well. "The truth is, I like Ezra and he likes me back, but something has felt off about it this whole time because I didn't want to hurt you, Adora. I know that might not sound

fair. It's not that I'm trying to keep you, or pin you down, or lock you up or something. I just don't want to lose either of you, that's all."

I take Adora's hand in my left and Ezra's in my right.

I continue, "But it's okay now, because it's all out in the open. Adora and I were both being silly. And now she's officially given us her blessing!"

Ezra looks torn between eyeing Adora suspiciously and wanting to hug me again. His lips quiver, shifting between a half-smile and unbelieving flat line. But Adora doesn't need to say anything. She simply nods and, taking it as a sign of permission, I let go of her hand. Ezra wraps his arms around me and there, nuzzled into his chest, I sigh contentedly. I have everything I wanted. Both Adora and Ezra are by my side, there to stay indefinitely.



(An AI Depiction of the Urrug Cottage)

Mark Sixteen: Second Class

When Mom picks me up from school, she notices right away how tenderly I am treating my body. It's not that I have a limp or any bruises to show off, but I move carefully, gingerly, so as not to strain my muscles more than I already have. I tell her that I forgot we had a physical exam today in school and that I need to go on runs more often. Saying that, I cross my fingers hoping that she doesn't take that last part seriously. She's attentive, suggesting that I should bathe before our homeschooling session begins. But then I ruin everything by not being able to focus completely.

I'm not the only one distracted though. They won't tell me what's going on but I can tell the moment I enter the room that Rugrug and Mom have been fighting. It's probably something to do with his workload again. So far all I know is that MEANS wants to send him on some sort of business trip, but Mom either isn't a big fan of when, how long, or where that business trip will take him. I can't tell which since I've only been able to catch disjointed whispers of their argument so far. Either way, tensions are running high in the kitchen tonight, and there's something about Mom that feels different. The words 'manic' and 'crazed' come to mind, but neither of those are right. There's definitely an intensity about her that I don't believe is completely because of Rugrug's work. Actually, now that I am thinking about it, this has been winding up for a while.

Every time we've ended a session so far, it's like we've twisted a spring tighter and tighter. It was subtle at first. Mom's anxiety when we started all this three weeks ago used to smell like a rainy day after a firework show. Tonight, though, my nostrils are plugged with the pungent scent of gunpowder — the really, really old kind that they only make for reenactments at the museum in the city. I remember going there once on a field trip. I held an ancient human weapon, a gun

of some sort that used to shoot tiny bullets of lead. When the museum master demonstrated the weapon for my class, they made us all wear ear cuffs but gave us nothing for the smell. It is offensive to my sensitive sinuses and an all-out assault tonight.

The way that Mom opens the old tome to a worn, dog-eared page; the way she crosses her arms when she leans back into her chair; the way her eyes never leave the page when she clears her throat and commands the book to read itself; I can't tell if the tension is for tonight's lesson, or a result of another one of her fights with RugRug.

It was clear that gifting the realm to mankind was the gravest of mistakes and that the task of rebalancing the world and maintaining that balance fell upon Mythics and Mythics alone. In the time of their reign, mankind had committed an atrocity against the very fabric of life itself, against the Great Mother, Earth. Mundicide, except through no natural means but the evolutionary cycle that created the race of homo sapiens. Crude creatures boastful of their own inherent enmity.

For their crimes of depravity, humans were stripped of their status on the social hierarchy. But the Great Mother is loving, and by Her delphic command for mercy, the human race was spared extinction. Instead, mankind was given a choice:

Death, the eternal rest of oblivion, or the forfeiture of their lives and their children's lives in the name of harmony as penance for generations of wickedness. It

was Earth's dim and distant hope that sacrifice then might eventually foster the lost spiritual connection between Mother Nature and mankind so that it might one day grow again. Until such a time, humans would be bound to the Mythicals and labor for atonement.

Mom folds the book shut with a sharp snap and points it at me, as if it is evidence. As if it is an accusation.

"Now do you understand?" she asks. "What options were given? What do you think of that, huh?"

I slump in my chair, sagging like a bag of potatoes.

"Sun, moon and stars, Scarlette! Don't just slouch, answer me! Do you see the difference in the text or not? What it means historically? Socially?"

"I-I don't know," I say. Hot spikes of pain erupt on my skin as I rake my nails against my arms. "I can't think with you yelling at me, Mom!"

She slams both hands against the table between us, the already battered book under the open palm of her right hand.

"I wouldn't have to yell if I knew you were listening to me, Scar, I'm trying to teach you something!"

Rugrug scapes his chair back and stands up. In two strides he's standing behind her, gently caressing Mom's shoulders.

"It's okay," He soothes. "Let's just explain it. You read a big passage, give Scarlette a chance to process."

Rugrug sends me to fetch my current Chronicles of Eras Past textbook from out of my messenger bag. When I come back and sit down, Mom places a mug of hot water with loose leaf

tea inside them in front of each of us. I watch as the leaves unfurl and slowly shift the color of clear hot water into a bright blue.

"My dear?" Rugrug asks for Mom's attention. When she eventually raises her bold eyes to meet him, he says, "I love you for your intense passion, but its heat *can* be educationally distracting."

He spreads both books out, side-by-side. Then he offers me a gentle smile, squeezes my mom's hand with confidence, and encourages her to try to re-explain the lesson as it is so far.

She takes a big gulp of tea and sighs deeply. When she's ready, she continues her homeschooling lesson. Mom tells me that what both textbooks fail to talk about is how punishing the old Mission Camps were. How 'servitude' really meant slavery. How humans were expected to pay their debt to the Earth in blood when sweat wasn't healing fast enough. How, after entire Eras have passed, even though most humans have earned their place back in society, they are still seen by most as second-class citizens.

"What does second-class citizen mean?" I ask.

Finally, after all this time and all her scowls, Mom smiles. It feels good. Like I did something right.

"Now you're starting to ask the right questions. You're starting to understand," she declares.

Rugrug answers my question, "It means to be seen as lesser. To not be important. To be inferior."

"So ..." I pause and look at my parents, wondering how to ask what I want to ask without giving anything away. I don't want to mention Raff or Helena. Mom watches me with interest and Dad is holding his tea to his lips, waiting for the rest of my question. I clear my throat but

find that I can't look them in the eyes while I ask. So I look down and swirl my drink, as if it will somehow help.

My tongue is thick when I finally ask, "What if someone calls another person a race-traitor? Is it because they see them as a second class citizens?"

"Where have you heard that before? Yes. In a way. Humans and Mythics have a long, long history. We're living on the brink of a new Age. Coexistence used to be an impossibility. But now we share neighborhoods, schools, bathrooms, restaurants. Segregation — separating races — was a really hard thing for a very long time. But there's been a lot of progress, especially in the last forty to sixty years. But you have to understand, Mythical beings were either gone or so far underground during the Era of Man that many humans didn't believe they exist," Mom answers.

"I know that," I say impatiently. "That's obvious from the textbooks. But where did 'race-traitor' come from? 'Halfy'? Or 'tainted'? Is it second-class citizen stuff? I know it's mean..."

My parents look at one another in alarm. I chew the inside of my lower lip, knowing I've made a mistake. It was too much information. I had given too much away. The smile fell from Mom's lips.

"Scarlette, where did you hear all this?" I could feel Rugrug's concern in my stomach.

It was there in the way they had locked eyes.

In their posture, the way they had both sat up a little straighter.

The sound of his voice dipping into a lower pitch.

It made something in my tummy twist.

To answer, I settle on a version of the truth.

"I heard it at school. In my Chronicles of Eras Past class. It started when we started talking about Valeria the Victorious and her lesser-known title, Valeria the Vicious."

I have to squeeze my lips together and hold my breath to keep from sighing in relief. As I explain myself, both parents relax. Mom even picks her smile back up.

She proclaims, "That makes sense. I'm surprised they're having that discussion in your classroom. That's good. And that's an excellent example. Valeria was human-born but raised by Mythics. When she became the catalyst of the First Rebellion, the human side of the war felt betrayed by her but the Mythicals still praise her to this day. That's where the term 'race-traitor' comes from."

"As for 'halfy' and 'tainted,' well, those are horrible slurs made up by hateful, ignorant people. Those, like 'half-breed' and 'hybrid,' are mean ways to refer to people who are half Mythical and half human." Rugrug adds.

"Like me and Quellie," I say softly.

"You and your sister are my daughters. Our daughters," Rugrug states forcefully. He reaches across the table and grips my hand and Mom's.

"You are products of love and you are loved so very, very much. But that is part of why we are having this conversation. You haven't had to deal with this yet, thankfully. You don't know what it's like to be profiled, discriminated against, disliked for nothing other than the way you were born. Things are better now than they have ever been, but when your mother and I first married, we were outcasts. Now interracial unions are a little more common. There's less persecution. A little less hate everyday with every new babe. We — no. You, Scarlette, are part of the new minority. A new beginning"

"That's why we placed you in the special school you're in now," Mom adds, "I expected better taste in their choice of textbooks but..."

"We want you to have the best education available," Rugrug finishes for her. "Your private school is one of the first to teach a student body whose classes consist of both humans and Mythics alike."

What they don't say is that they hoped a school that padded their pockets with generous slices of their combined income would also offer protection against prejudice for their daughter. But they don't have to say it. By now, I already know.

I suck in a slow, shaky breath. Mom is right. Before Amalgamy Academy, the public school was so large and integrated, I never had reason to feel judgment. People looked at me and saw an orc, a Mythic. And if they knew about my relation to her, well, so what? Taking my moment of introspection as a positive sign, Mom reaches out to pat my hand too.

She explains, "It's a big part of why we moved to the northern tip of the Kingdom of Loria when you were born. Despite the anti-MEANS ideology of the locals, reformist-leaning villages also mean diversity. Inclusion. A little more liberal ideologies, a little less racial judgment. But that doesn't mean — let's call them traditionalists? — don't still exist. There are still Mythicals and humans alike out there that would rather hurt you than accept you. And that's why we are talking about this together. To prepare you."

I nod, squeeze both of their hands, and withdraw mine to hold what's left of my tea. It's almost room temperature now. For a moment, we just sit in silence. I pull the books closer and flip through their pages. I'm not really reading, just using it as an excuse to stave off more talking, just for a little while longer, as I process everything.

It is so clear that my parents love me. So obvious that they truly only want what's best for me. They moved here, for me. They stay here, for me and my sister. And they absolutely believe in every word they say. Then Rugrug's words come back to me.

YOU HAVEN'T HAD TO DEAL WITH THIS YET,
THANKFULLY. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE
TO BE PROFILED, DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, DISLIKED
FOR NOTHING OTHER THAN THE WAY YOU WERE BORN.

But what had just happened at school with Helena? What about the airplane incident? It had started because of an unexplained hatred for MEANS, but hadn't I heard other faceless voices talk about the 'halfy with tainted skin'?

When my eyes start to sting with coming tears, I bury my face in my hands. I try to push the thoughts away, forcing myself to focus on the present. Because I can't let my parents know. How can I tell them? After everything they've done, knowing that they care so much, knowing that they believe I am untouched by traditionalist hate — how can I tell them that they're wrong? I can't. I won't let them think they've failed me. And I have to get stronger, I have to be better and smarter and I have to find a way to make my world at Amalgamy Academy work. If not for myself, then for them. And for Quellie.

"Oh, baby girl, it's okay. I know it's a lot. Maybe we should just stop here for today?" Rugrug offers soothingly. His voice is husky and deep. But it's not him I'm worried about.

I pull my head up and straighten my back, looking at my Mom.

"I'm okay. I was just thinking things through. Is it okay if we stop for now? I want to write some things down. You know, take notes while it's fresh in my head." The question is poised for both my parents, but I deliberately don't look away from her.

To my surprise, she agrees. And, just like that, the meeting is over. She gets up to check on the venison, Rugrug gives me a giant hug that lasts way too long, and I'm free. The evening rolls along as Ella and Benny drop off Quellie for dinner, my sister and I watch a remake of an old human movie about an ice witch and a gryffin, and before I know it, it's time for bed.

And that's when the tears come. I try to stay quiet so Quellie doesn't know I'm crying, but the memories assault me nonetheless. I'm starting to remember things. No, not remember. This doesn't feel like forgetting and remembering. It feels like ...

"YOU'RE A MYTHIC.
MY PARENTS TOLD ME
THAT PEOPLE LIKE US
DON'T HAVE TO BOTHER
WITH PEOPLE LIKE HER.
THAT'S WHAT YOU GET WITH SOMETHING LIKE HER,
ORCISH STRENGTH AND A HUMAN TEMPER.
NO ONE WOULD THINK THERE'S A GIRL UNDER ALL THAT
SHE COULD BE DANGEROUS
JUST DON'T LET HER GET TOO CLOSE TO YOU.
I'M SURE THE SMELL IS BAD ENOUGH,
BUT THERE'S UNFILTERED MORTAL AGGRESSION
UNDER THAT TAINTED SKIN.
NO-GOOD, FILTHY HALFY.
SCAR-SPIT
YOU ARE A MONSTER

It feels like I have been misremembering memories this whole time and I'm only now starting to see them as they really are. All these small moments that didn't quite make sense at the time are suddenly cast under a new light. No, that's not right. These memories aren't brightening, they're darkening. I feel shrouded in darkness, like I'm playing with shadows and secrets. It makes me think of a wrinkly shirt that I know I have to wear. And I'm ironing it out, smoothing the creases flat, but it burns when I wrap it around my skin.



(An AI Depiction of the Educational Leveling Pyramid)

Mark Seventeen: Proctors Urrug

My social life, and relationship, finally tamed and secured, all I have to worry about now is the big Chronicles of Eras Past project due at the end of this week. It's strange, for once I'm looking forward to my homeschooling lesson with Mom and Rugrug tonight.

I should know something is wrong when mom collects me from school and says that Quellie will be joining us at the table today instead of going to Ella's and Benny's. If I were paying better attention, maybe I would have noticed the puffy redness around her eyes. Or the sad smell of lilies that followed her around like an aura. Quellie is the one who points it out, but it doesn't click into place until the four of us are seated around the dinner table, where Rugrug tells us that he's being sent very far away on a MEANS mission for a very long time.

I almost don't recognize the hollowness of my own voice when I say, "Deployment is not a business trip, Father."

The words are not spat in the heat of temper, nor chilled with a cold distance. They're just words. They felt so heavy that a second ago holding them inside felt impossible. But instead of grounding me or lightening the load, my stomach plummets when the word 'father' leaves my lips. For a very long time no one speaks as the news of his imminent departure settles over the cottage like dust.

Mom attempts to soothe the tension by saying, "This isn't going to happen right away, it's not like he's leaving tomorrow. There's still much to prepare for, still time to wrap our heads around it."

Bitterly, I translate for her. "You mean there's still time for us to adjust. How are supposed to do that? Wrap our heads around life without Rugrug?"

Rugrug says, "It's only temporary, my love."

But I don't deign to reply. I've seen how much can change in three months. MEANS wants to send him away for thirteen. And that does not include all the time he'll be gone for training between now and when he officially leaves. It does not include the months of quarantine and debriefing he'll still have to do in some other part of the Kingdom when those thirteen months are over. I suppose I now know what Mom and Rugrug have been fighting about these past few weeks. And that it's because Mom doesn't want him to leave but he doesn't have a choice.

He says, "Orders are orders."

A phrase that's supposed to explain his limitations. A phrase of restriction. A phrase that echoes in my head so loudly that it's all I can think of. It grows louder with each repetition. It cuts through me, divides me. The more I think about it, the less meaningful the words seem but they only become heavier and heavier.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

Orders are orders.

I don't know what it is that makes me snap back into focus. I don't know how long I was spiraling for. But now Mom is saying that in two weeks there will be a Family Orientation Conference in the city that all of us will be required to attend. The conference will last a week so Quellie and I will need to notify our teachers and collect our homework assignments in advance. To do this, we are given copies of MEANS orders. Their logo and motto are stamped on their certificates above my name, which someone has handwritten on the dotted line and spelled incorrectly. I wonder if that will have some kind of effect on the Conference or deployment paperwork, but I honestly can't find it in me to care.

By the time our family meeting is over and I finish swallowing my dinner, all I want to do is lie in bed. There's no homeschooling lesson tonight. My eyes sting with unshed tears as I realize things are changing again. The time both my parents invested into our homeschooling sessions, may only be a one-time occurrence after all. I'm surprised by the tears that threaten to spill out of me; three months ago I was adamant I would never want to ask my parents for help ever again. But three months ago, I didn't realize that option wasn't always going to be there. It's a lot easier to reject something you think you will never lose, something you think that you will never want, than to accept that what you took for granted, is no longer a possibility.

I don't know much about deployments, but I know enough to know that they are dangerous. That Rugrug might not come back to help me with my homework or for family dinners — he might not come back home at all. And how are we supposed to be a family without him? How is this supposed to be home without him?

I dry my eyes as my sister walks into our bedroom, Mom in tow. I wonder if she truly understands what's happening, if she realizes just how drastically things are about to change. I decide that I have to be strong for her, that whatever I'm feeling now or might feel later is something I can deal with another time. Being Quellie's big sister is more important than anything else, whether she understands what's happening or not. For now, I listen as she happily reports to Mom how her day at school went. And my attention deepens when my sister asks our mom a question about ancient humans.

"What did the Ancient humans think about school?" Quellie asked suddenly, "Did they have Levels, too?"

I love it when Mom talks about ancient humans and it doesn't matter that she's spent months teaching me about them, I still want to hear more. I decided a long time ago that the present is boring. Everything worth thinking about is either in the past or the future. And somehow, probably thanks to great-great-grandpa's old school book and her own homeschooling lessons when she was a kid, our Mom knows so much about the past. And in so much more detail than any other Proctor I've ever known dare dive into. She isn't always in the mood for it. These kinds of talks, the ones about ancient humans before the Great Return of the Mythicals, are usually so special and rare. Aside from the after-school lessons prompted by a specific school assignment, it usually takes hours of prodding and encouragement to pry anything new out of her. But it seems like our discussion at the dinner table has made her more pliable to Quellie's request.

She makes a show of considering the question, scratching her head and holding her chin. Finally she says, "Oh, let's see, what did they think about school? It depended on where you

were. Your grandma says that centuries ago, our family lived in a nation once called 'America.' They valued education there and divided everyone up by grades and age."

I can only assume that Quellie is thinking about the conversation we had mid-summer, when she was protesting our school change, when she exclaims, "Oh so ancient people got separated by age but we don't?"

I want to tell my little sister to shut up, that she is being annoying. But I remind myself of my new resolve to be a supportive big sister and shut my own mouth while Mom nods sagely and continues.

"There were no Mythics then, only humans on Earth. It was the Era of Man. And all humans grow up around the same time. So grouping people by age was just easier. Let's see," she poked Quellie on the nose, "you'd be in what they used to call 'Elementary'. And Scar, your Level and age is about the same range as 'Jr.High', or 'Middle school'."

My face splits in a smile, "See? We wouldn't be going to the same school even if we were born in the Era of Man."

But Quellie isn't satisfied. She asks, "What's the difference between Levels and grades?"

Mom sighs and starts rubbing her left temple with two fingers. An obvious sign of annoyance. It means that she knows the answer, but is disappointed. Like we are somehow asking the wrong questions, overlooking something. Already her mood is souring. This is starting to feel like I might just get a homeschooling lesson after all.

"This is the last question, girls, if I answer, you promise to go to sleep?"

We promise.

Ok. Like I said, grades were separated by age. And if you did well in school, you got to move up a grade the next year with everyone else your age. But if you did poorly, you'd be held back a year, with younger kids as your classmates."

That doesn't sound so bad. Why would anyone care about being the oldest?

Mom sees the dismissal on my face and says, "I know that doesn't sound like much, but it was different to them. Levels are more knowledge and skill-based than grades were. Levels, especially at Amalgamy Academy, have age requirements that must be met before one can attempt to Level up. That means you can stay in the same Level with the same classmates for years before advancing. In the Era of Man, one typically moved up one grade every single year. They advanced with the same group of peers every single year. Being held back meant losing those peers and integrating into the group behind you."

"Wow," Quellie awes, "grades make school sound like it must've been really hard."

"Or really easy," I counter. "If everyone was advancing that quickly. Can you imagine jumping a Level each year? Impossible. I've never even heard of someone skipping over Divisions."

"I almost skipped a whole Level once," Mom says, her eyes glinting. "When I was your age, Scarlette, thirteen. Your grandmother had just immigrated your aunties and I into this Kingdom. We weren't used to Levels and we also couldn't afford any of the all-human schools in the area. So the advisor at my new local school looked me over and placed me in Level One's Flower Division."

I feel my eyes widen and dart towards my row of school uniforms hanging neatly in the closet behind her. When I wake for school, I will pull on the green plaid skirt that signifies my Level Two placement at Amalgamy. And, on top of a crisp white button up, I will wrap a

collared jacket around my torso with a golden Sprout Division brooch pinned to the left side of my chest. I try to imagine what it would be like to Test so well that my uniform changes to a new Level color and my brooch morphs into a new Division shape. But I can't picture it for myself, it seems so impossible.

"Hey, Mom, that's close to me!" Quellie observes.

I frown, remembering the pyramid I saw in an Amalgamy Academy brochure. At the bottom half were Levels One through Four. The three Divisions of each were listed in ascension, marking the difference between beginner, intermediate and advanced classes. The second half of the pyramid, Levels Five through Seven, doesn't include all three Divisions. That's where the triangle closes to a point. Those Levels may have Sprout and Flower Divisions to separate the junior from the varsity cohorts, but at that height there is no room for Seedlings. And once you reach the tippy-top, Level Seven consists of only Flower Division scholars.

Since Amalgamy teaches limited classes of Levels Two through Four, Quellie's sliver of the triangle, along with the top half of the pyramid, was grayed out in the brochure. So that means that Mom's advisor didn't even place her in the greens of Level Two. She was at the top of the gray zone, one step above Quellie, two below me. Quellie is eight. I am thirteen. Age may not be a heavy factor in the Leveling system, but when I try to imagine going back, dropping not just a Division but an entire Level? I chastised myself for dismissing the embarrassment ancient humans must have felt when held back a grade.

"What did you do?" I ask.

Mom tucks a loose strand of hair behind Quellie's ear when addressing my question. "Honestly, Scarlette, I cried. At first it was because I was sad. It made me feel unintelligent, it made me doubt myself. It wasn't until the end of the year that another student told me about the

Leveling Placement Tests. I realized that I had been placed not based on my merit, but by the personal directive of the advisor. Then I cried because I was angry. That Spring I took the Test for the first time in my life and you know what?"

Her question hangs in the air, a verbal cliff.

"I scored so high, the next year I was studying as a Level Two Flower." Her lips twist into a cold smile. It has the gleam of victory about it but also the shadow of something far more bitter. "My permanent school record doesn't even mention Level Two's Seedling and Sprout Divisions. It simply reads that a human immigrant went from a Level One Flower to a Level Two Flower in a *single* year."

My jaw drops and when I manage to find my voice again I ask, "You skipped *two* Divisions?"

At the same time Quellie giggles, "sounds like the advisor was the one who made the mistake in the first place."

Our mother nods, her eyes alight and steady as she stands up to leave.

"Indeed, they made a mistake," she confirms. Then she pauses at the doorway and puts out the light, "But was it an accident?"

I wish I was as bold and strong and capable as my Mom. Maybe that's why, the following day while we are leaving the Glowing Glade, I decline Ezra's offer to come with me to see

Proctor Aegnor about the Family Orientation Conference. Her fashionable head wrap looks heavy today. It's burdened down with two big tassels, one on each side of her head, and a big, circular brooch. Because the center jewel is black and surrounded by smaller blue gems, it effectively looks like a dead third eyeball. I falter under its glazed-over stare, but manage to present Proctor Aegnor with my MEANS travel certificate. I hold it up between us like it's a shield, and the sight of the MEANS logo seems to burn all three of the Proctor's eyes.

She seethes, "Why would your parents choose now of all times of the year to go on vacation!" Proctor Aegnor rummages through a chest of textbooks and paperclipped assignment bundles. "It just makes extra work for me in the long run. But no, no one ever thinks of me."

"It's not a vacation. Rugrug is being deployed by MEANS. It's not up to them," I say, thinking about his orders and what Mom said about having no choices.

WHAT OPTIONS
WERE WE GIVEN?

"MEANS expects us to go. So we're going. I won't be gone for very long." This time my tone carries a note of finality. At first, it's a confidence booster, but a second later I see it for what it really was. Foolish. Proctor Aegnor already doesn't like me. I don't know why I thought, even for a brief moment, she might care that it was the Kingdom's military who decided this trip for us. If anything, the reminder only darkens her mood further.

"Well, Scarlette Urrug," the Proctor snaps, "it's just inconsiderate. Absolutely ignorant. As if I don't have other, better things to do than manage your homework separate from everyone else. What makes you so special?"

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing at all. A rattling, shaking sound surprises me. Its hypnotic precision bounce off the walls. And, after looking around for its source, I realize that it's coming from under the Proctor's hat. Were gorgans allowed to use their Gift at school, on

students? Does Proctor Aegnor even realize she's doing it? The sound of rattling is so enchanting, I don't hear the school bell ring, or notice other students filing into the room.

The rattling sound stops abruptly when the Proctor turns around to face me again and the sudden silence without it is like a slap in the face. Looking into her eyes, I realize that her anger smells like a sharp stab of mint.

She holds out a bundle of papers to me and says in a drawling, distant tone, "Here's your homework, with extra practice assignments on top. While he's still around, feel free to ask your father for help before he's sent away."

I reach out to take the bundle, anxious to leave as soon as possible, but just as my fingertips brush the pages, they fall to the ground and, like a blown-down house of cards, scatter across the floor.

"Oops," says Ms. Aegnor. "Now. I'd tell you to leave but I only have the authority to remove you from my classroom. So. On you go."

The room now eerily quiet, I scoop up the assignments in an out-of-order heap and turn to walk away. As I pass through the doorway, Ms. Aegnor is on the landline and most of her students openly gawk at me with a collective mixture of smirks, furrowed brows, and raised noses. As soon as I am out of sight of the classroom, a cloister of voices flows out of the doorway, alight with fresh, juicy gossip. My next class, Ethics of the Arcane, is on the branch below this one. I scurry across the rope bridge to approach it but as I do, Saréell steps up and blocks the entrance.

"Sorry," she says, "the Proctor said to close and lock the door. That anyone late to class has to get a slip from the security office."

"What?" It's an empty word. I heard her perfectly, I just can't believe it. This wasn't procedure. This wasn't normal. *This*, it dawns on me, *is the work of Proctor Aegnor. This is why she was on the phone.*

Saréell raises a hand to her head, awkwardly scratching herself behind a tapered ear. She glances over her shoulder, checking the fidgeting and low murmurs of a room still settling in. I can see Denzel locked in a heavy debate with the Ethics Proctor but can't make out what it is they're saying.

"Look," she says, lowering her voice, "All I know is Ms. Aegnor called a second ago and then I was told to close the door against stragglers who dawdle. It's not personal. At least, not between us."

I can see her feline tail twitch uncomfortably behind her. Saréell isn't known for her empathy, but I can tell that even she doesn't like what's happening here.

"This isn't fair!" I protest.

She agrees. Then, remembering her instructions, adds, "Just skip Ethics today and go back to Ezra or something. Obviously you don't want to go to Scald to get a security slip for being late to class. Go do homework or something instead. Or, better yet, go find Ezra."

She winks at me. I still don't know whether it was Adora or Denzel who told the rest of the Beau Monde about Ezra and me, but I'm not quite used to having our relationship out in the open yet. I hesitate, and Saréell incorrectly interprets my dazed expression as one of desire.

"Have fun," she purrs.

The classroom door slides shut before I can say anything more. The thud of the lock clicking into place clashes with the grinding of my teeth. I turn away from the classroom and walk around for a while, no destination in mind, just following my feet wherever they lead me.

Ezra and I have already left the Glowing Glade for the day, and I could easily go back on my own, but I don't want to bring my sour mood to that special paradise. The next thing I know, I'm standing in front of my wrinkled locker, studying how it hangs haphazardly off its broken hinges. I don't know whether I wanted to punch it or crawl inside. I wouldn't be able to fit, but oh Gaia! It would be nice.

I'm in a bathroom stall when the bells ring again. My eyes are dry, now, but I'm not sure whether or not they still bare the telltale sign of tears. I have just flushed the toilet paper I was using for tissues down the toilet when the banging of the bathroom door shoots through the enclosure and the trampling of a clique of teenage girls enter to dominate the wall-length mirror. I squash my face between my hands and stifle a groan, resigning myself to wait in my stall until the gaggle leaves.

Squinting through the thin opening between the stall wall and door, I see them. Three fairies. With their perfect hair and perfect makeup, priming themselves under the fluorescent light to create the illusion of even further perfection. I can see the three of them from my narrow window: Short, lithe girls, dressed in pastels fabrics and bold flora. One has long blonde hair with roses cascading down her shoulder blades. Another has a dark bob, shaved close to the neck to reveal the intricate lattice work of a bird tattoo shedding its feathers. The third is a brunette, her delicate face scrunched and spread in odd angles as she reapplies kohl around her eyes.

I prepare myself for a long conversation of light, 'Oh you're so pretty's, and, 'that guy was totally checking you out', and, 'Oh I really need to recycle this old skirt, already, the flowers are positively wilting' — even though they're probably not even that old for fairy standards. Instead, I hear my name.

"Did you hear?" asks the brunette, "Scarlette's going away."

Roses guffaws, "Nuh-uh, no way! What will she do this time?"

"It's not what she did. It's what she can't do," replies the brunette.

"What do you mean by that?" Roses pivots to face her brunette friend directly. "You're not saying she's actually failing classes?"

"If she is," says Feathers, "then I have some bets to collect!"

A cacophony of giggles.

The brunette asks Feathers for some lipstick, "If you're not going to use it then at least share!"

"Of course! You can hold on to it the rest of the day if you want, I created a masterpiece on my canvas today!" Feathers says. She cups her heart-shaped face with her hands and poses with a demure smile, "My best work so far."

"No, no. Worse!" The brunette smiles. She's obviously eager to continue gossiping about me, waving her hands around to recollect her friends' attention. "Sounds like her family can't afford to keep her enrolled after all. Remember how Proctor Aegnor said Amalgamy needs to raise their tuition two months ago? Yeah. And today I heard that Scarlett's dad's going away."

"Oh, do you know what for?" asks Feathers.

"It isn't prison, is it?" Roses giggles.

There, hiding in that grubby, cramped public bathroom, I witness the birth of a rumor and I learn how easily twisted words can change their flavor the more they're deformed.

"Oh, how embarrassing!" Feathers says. She fluffs the short strands of her hair before continuing. "But what do you expect from a MEANS soldier? My nanna says that they're all flunkies who can't make it anywhere else."

"And it's not like a human is competent enough to make good pay," Roses agreed. "Father says he only employs them as weavers for the tax break. Charity and all that. Oh, are you sure?"

I feel the skin around my eyes tighten. My jaw clench. I run a hand over my forehead and press my nails against my skin in one long, deep scratch from earlobe to collarbone.

"Heard it myself!" The brunette fairy caps her eyeliner with a pop. "She was talking about it with Ms. Aegnor right before class. Her dad is going away, they can't afford Amalgamy anymore, and, by the sound of it she wasn't doing all that great grade-wise anyways."

You know nothing, I seethe internally.

"Is it the school's fault for accepting her?" Feathers muses, "Or her parents?"

The bathroom stall bursts open. My hand levitates in the air, outstretched from pushing open the door with one forceful shove. Broken bits of the metal lock jingle against the floor. And in one strong stride I step forward into their quiet, fearful gaze. For a moment we all stare at one another. The three fairies shake like leaves in my shadow; I am at least two hands taller than them all.

"Sc-Sc-Scarlette! We didn't know —" It was the brunette. The sound of her sudden stuttering make my lips curl.

"Didn't know I was in here?" I spit, "Yeah, I know."

I step forward and Feathers throws up her arms in defense. A shimmering like the heat of the sun on stone erupts out of her fingertips. So that is her Gift. Interesting, but common. I have fought a troll and dared to enter a fire Drachkin's lair. A little sparkle of sun magic does not scare me.

"Not a step closer," she says in a shuddering breath, "I'm warning you!"

I fight the urge to release the growl building in my diaphragm, one of deep soul that wants to escape my stomach through the harsh vibrative tissues of my throat. I have a flashing vision of me sweeping the bathroom floor with the brunette's body and still making it to the cave in time for lunch. I imagine stuffing her own flowers down Roses' throat. I envision the brunette crying, black eyeliner streaking her cheeks like a widow practicing a mourning ritual.

I HAD NEVER BEEN SO SCARED
IN MY LIFE.
I WASN'T EVEN TWENTY YET,
AND HERE I WAS STANDING
OVER THIS BODY, BLOOD
DRIPPING FROM MY FISTS.

With great effort, I manage to dial back my expression from a sneer to mild contempt. It's the best I can manage.

Carefully, leveling my voice I say, "That's good, since I only need to wash my hands. You're blocking the way."

Feathers hesitates, then slowly lowers her hands. They all looked at me, at the sink their backs were pressed against, then at me again. One by one, they start to slink towards the door. In a few smooth steps, I cut them off, choosing the sink closest to the exit. In the mirror's reflection, I watch them shuffle uncomfortably. Roses' face turns as pink as the flowers in her hair and we both know why. They are trapped. Stuck between my body and the row of toilet stalls.

"So," I say, lathering my hands with soap. "You all seem to know an awful lot about me. Seems unfair. What are your names?"

I try to work up a smile but the tenor of my unamused voice rings clear. I rinse the warm water over my hands while waiting for an answer. When one doesn't come, I press, "C'mon now. You were all so chatty a moment ago. Don't you want to be friends?"

Roses is first, "Lalafeen".

The brunette, "Kreaklova".

And then Feathers, "Wrentina".

"Wonderful," I say. Then turn to face them once more. I shake my hands out to dry, flinging more than a few water droplets their way. Then, because I can, I step nose-to-nose with Kreaklova and lift the flowy excess of her dress' sleeve to finish drying my hands on.

"Scarlette Urrug, although, of course, you already knew that."

A fire burns in Kreaklova's eyes. That prompts a real grin to spread on my face. I know it's not a friendly one but it feels so good.

Go ahead. I want to say, You can hit first. But you better make it good.

WHAT
DOES
SCARLETTE
WANT?

I consider it. A little regret. A little fear, maybe. I wait for it, placing a hand on each hip to widen my stature. I want to make them see me and I know I don't have to touch them to do so. I raise myself to my full height. It might not be much in an Orcan crowd, or even compared to human women. But my height, my width, the corded muscles of my body makes these three fairies look pitiful.

They don't move. Even Kreaklova doesn't dare speak a word. But, by the look on her face, she'd shank me in the thigh with a jagged stone if she's given the chance. My eyes drift over Wrentina's. She too wears the expression of a murderer itching to kill. And then I see Lalafeen. She's surrounded by a faint pink hue, hands clenched into fists at her side. I size them up again, confident I can still take them all in a fight...

SOME BATTLES DEMAND
MORE THAN SIMPLE
BRUTE STRENGTH
TO WIN.

Pummeling them would feel so, so good. Hurting them might even feel like justice. Obviously, I would win the fight easily, but what does that prove other than I'm bigger and stronger than they are. Is that really winning? I try to channel my mom, racking my brain to say something, something both pointed and suave.

"I suppose now that we're friends, I can tell you that you're wrong. You, Kreaklova, misheard. Now I'm aware that there's plenty of people who aren't so happy I'm here, but," I examine each of them with the most intimidating form of elevator eyes I can muster. "Just between us girls, I'm here to stay. So I guess those people will just have to get used to it."

I want a startled silence out of them. I imagine saying next that we should move along, get to lunch before we miss it, but at that moment, Wrentina finds her courage. Her pupils are pools of oil, irises flickering with sparks of fiery orange.

In a surprisingly unladylike fashion, she growls, "We'll see about that, half-breed."

A low rumble resounds from my chest at the insult. I think of my mom, the way this pissant insulted humans and my Father. My fingertips dig into my flesh as I curl my hands into

tight fists. With little effort, I can imagine fairy bones crumbling beneath my knuckles. I wonder what sound Wrentina's nose will make if I break it, will it pop or crack? Personally, I want to feel it crack.

Wrentina laughed, "What's the matter, big girl? Forgot how to talk?"

THERE'S FIGHTING TO PROTECT,
AND THEN
THERE'S FIGHTING TO HARM.

I stifle a snarl, knowing that breaking their delicate fairy faces would be satisfying but fruitless. Wrentina is the type of girl who has nothing to lose and everything to gain. I'm a half-orc with everything on the line for both. This was perhaps the best lesson yet, because, unlike her, I have something to prove to the world. About myself, my parents, and humans. And though I am new to the game, I finally feel ready to play. I coat my voice with a sickly sweet sheen of false friendliness.

Leaning into the role I've prepared for myself, I gesture with my hands and say, "Not at all, but I do have somewhere to be. One does not simply keep Veresa Lovelace waiting, you know."

The expressions on their faces are genuinely delectable. Three months really isn't all that long to know the ins and outs of a place, especially with a school campus as large and spread out as Amalgamy Academy's. I certainly don't know exactly how far Veresa's reach goes, but it's obviously enough to shake these three. I was going about this the wrong way. Of course, these girls aren't afraid of me, they're fairies! They've never been in a fight so they don't know the dangers of it. Ah, but the social hierarchy *is* something they understand. My stature alone isn't

enough to give them pause, but use it in combination with the Lovelace name and they are frozen like bees in winter.

Looking at them now, I wonder why I even tried to hide from them. And, remembering how particular fairies are about appearances, I know just what to say to finish them off. I put on the perfect show for them, pausing at the right times, sighing at the precise intervals, pouting empathetically. I focus on transforming my anger into sass, then channel every ounce into my body language.

"I'd introduce you, Veresa might be especially interested in meeting you, Wrentina, but hmm. *Tsk tsk tsk*. You'd have to do something to fix your face! Oh well. Maybe after you've covered up the dark blotches under your eyes and fix the discoloration of your lips, you can help Lalafeen with her hair. It's clearly several trims behind schedule. And, oh my, don't worry about the bloating, Kreaklova. Periods are so very cruel to a lady's figure."

There it is, the startled silence I've been waiting for. Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of their makeup. As a fairy, a Mythic, she really doesn't even need it. They are each beautiful and yet so very, very fragile. A fairy's weakness is their own vanity. I take a moment to revel at the aftermath: Lalafeen is lifting large hunks of her blonde hair and inspecting them, her forehead ripples with distress; Wrentina's eyes are watery and captivated by the mirror's reflection of her pouty face; Kreakloava's cheeks turn pink as she covers her lower abdomen with both hands.

I take my leave gracefully by wishing them each a good day. And in the fresh air of the main campus, I celebrate my bloodless victory with a gratifying fit of laughter.



(An AI Depiction of Proctor Aegnor, Chronicles of Eras Past Instructor)

Mark Eighteen: Actions and Consequences

The night before I give my presentation, I am asked to join my parents at the kitchen table. It is after dinner but before bedtime so my sister and I are playing cards. It's a simple matching game, not too complicated for her and luck-based enough to keep the rhythm interesting for me. When Mom calls for me, my sister follows.

"I hope you're not thinking about having dessert without me!" Quellie asserts.

Mom says, "No of course we're not."

At the very same time Rugrug remarks, "Dessert's not a bad idea".

Quellie snorts out a laugh as they turn to look at each other dubiously.

It's Mom who breaks the staring competition by pivoting to me and saying, "Anyways, this won't take long, but we know your project is due tomorrow so we wanted to check in and see how you're feeling. Do you need any more help or have any last minute questions?"

Quellie catches my attention not by saying anything or by any gesture of movement, but because of how quiet and still she becomes. She's waiting for my answer, possibly with more eagerness than our parents. But why would she care about my project? She doesn't know anything about it. She got to go play with Benny and Ella while I was stuck here. I didn't have a choice in the matter either, Rugrug said so.

SCARLETTE YOU ARE STAYING HERE
SO WE CAN WORK ON YOUR PROJECT.
QUELLIE, YOU CAN'T STAY
BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT OLD ENOUGH.
AND IF NEITHER OF YOU LIKE YOUR ANSWERS,
CONSIDER THIS: BECAUSE I SAY SO.

Each night for an entire month, she was sent away. She wasn't given any real explanation, as far as I know no one has told her why she was told to leave everyday after school. I felt stuck in a loop of extra school time. I felt trapped. But I didn't realize until now — by the way she tenses as if scared to disrupt the atmosphere, scared to be noticed, scared to be remembered, scared to be sent away again by the mention of my *project*.

The reason she's listening so carefully now is the same reason I listened for bits and pieces of Mom and Rugrug's fights this past month. She has no idea what's going on. She's only heard snatches of what my project is, just like I only saw glimpses of our parents' fight over Rugrug's orders. The latter of which resulted in the really hard news of his coming deployment. So who am I to blame her for her curiosity and alarm?

I'm the sister who pushed her away when she reached out for help and understanding.

The realization sends a jolt through me as I remember the night she asked about my lessons with Mom and Rugrug. I set my jaw, determined to make things right.

I shake my head with finality and say, "I'm fine. Totally ready. I got this."

As soon as we are out of eyesight, I steal Quellie away to our room and ask if I can do a private practice run of my project with her as my audience.

Sensing her apprehension, I place a hand on each of her shoulders and look her dead in the eyes.

"You deserve to know too, Quellie. You deserve a chance to prepare."

The thing about my project is, it's supposed to be about human and Mythical relations from the Great Return onwards. In my presentation though, I insist that starting the story there is an injustice and would be an incomplete report. The real beginning took place so long ago that it predates the First Age, when the human race was first born and when Mythics first began to exist

in this realm. But that's it, that's where the accuracy of our records begin to deteriorate, it's when the story experiences its first split. The answer to the question 'what happened next?' changes not just according to who is answering but also when.

My presentation notes are an altered version of what I recorded during my studies at the kitchen table. Pointing between the two copies, the old and the new, I use the Goddess of Clay and the Dark Druids as examples to explain how tolerance fluctuates over time.

I tell her that over two and half centuries ago the Dark Druids hated humans and were a strong political and religious power, particularly in the lower regions of our kingdom where Rugrug is from. Their leaders openly accused the Goddess of Clay of being responsible for the creation of humans, and what was once a respected deity became a cult icon. It blew up into a big scandal, war broke out across Loria, and by the time everything settled, the DD was knocked from their seat of power. A new chapter in this Era began, the Age of Conversion.

Quellie wants to know why the Mythicals left in the first place, and she asks if maybe I got some things confused.

She says, "The Conversion isn't an Age. It's a paper. It's when the Kings' council people said humans are better now and can start leaving the REM Camps, right? Like a royal doctor's note that says 'hey you're not sick anymore you can go outside and be around other people now'."

I cackle with excitement. Not only is my presentation making sense to her, but I know the answer.

Yes, the Constitution of Conversion began the process of merging human and Mythical societies into one. Human slavery was outlawed. Segregation became illegal. It wasn't easy.

Another war broke out between Loria and other kingdoms. Pockets of DD supporters still exist

today making some neighborhoods, entire cities less safe than others for humans. But it's working.

I say, "I think we're still in the Age of Conversion, we're still shaking off the D.D. 's influences in our communities, but we're getting closer and closer to a non-discriminatory Loria everyday."

I'm interrupted by her request to define ' nondiscriminatory'. I try to answer with a list of similar words: Unbiased, neutral, fair, just, impartial, equality. She still looks confused so I try to describe the word by listing opposites: Favoritism, bias, intolerance. Eventually I sigh, put down my notes, and say what I'm thinking, explaining exactly what I mean.

"The point is, no one knows exactly what caused the Departure. The details are too skewed to know for sure. Honestly? Maybe both sides were at fault. Maybe too many Mythics were rude about their Gifts and boasted about them. Maybe humans feared them for their Gifts. Maybe their fear was mistaken for jealousy. Maybe it was all one big tragic misunderstanding! Or maybe, like the Dark Druids, during the Days of Division someone was in power, on one side or both, and they needed a unifier or a scapegoat. There's always been some friction amongst the Mythics, with or without humans. But maybe hating humans is what brought them together back then, which is what bound humanity against them in response. As far as we can tell the divide between the two categories — Mythicals versus humans — only exists because we separate the magical from the non-magical. And then, of course, there's dissension within those two groups. But all of that? It doesn't matter. All that matters is that the ancestors chose their biases over peace because it was easier.

"So the Mythics left and the human race messed up a lot. Over and over and over again for centuries and then millenia. To advocate for an unpopular opinion, maybe they wouldn't have

messed up so much if the Mythics hadn't left in the first place. I would argue that today is history because it's the closest we've ever been to true balance. It's not perfect. We as a world, as a society are still a work in progress, but at least most of us are working together now."

Quellie breathed a dry laugh, her eyebrows mimicking an uneven scale. She asks, "So what you're saying is you don't know what really happened but that the past doesn't matter because we're all working together today?"

I shake my head and explain with wide gestures and wiggling fingers. "No. The Mythics left, that was mistake number one. Then, the moment the Great Return happened, the successors picked up their dead ancestor's hatred and fear. That was the second mistake. Ever since then we've been fighting to correct both mistakes, making more along the way, for the past ten to twenty generations. The Re-Education Mission camps were a mistake, the DD was a mistake. I'm saying that the relationship between humans and Mythicals have always been complicated, it didn't just start all of a sudden when the Great Returned happened. I'm saying that the separation of Mythicals and humans is stupid because we work better together. I'm saying that everything is ruled by perspective and whoever controls the collective perspective, rules the collective. And I'm also saying that the larger that collective is, the longer it takes for the perspective to change."

"And what does this have to do with 'giving me a chance to prepare?'"

"It's all connected. And the weight of it all, it's our responsibility."

"Ours? You and me!"

"No, well yes, you and me, but not just us. Like, us and our friends and all the kids at our school, and all the future kids. But specifically people like you and me who are half human and half Mythical."

"Oh. Why us?"

"There are lots of people who don't like people like us. The fact is, Quellie, the thing Mom and Rugrug don't want you to know is that some people will be mean to us simply because we exist. Bad people will want to hurt us because they don't like the idea of us. Bad people are going to tell us that we are wrong. But we're not. We are products of the Conversion. We are the end of REM Camps. We are the future."

Quellie bursts out in such an outrageous fit of laughter tears leak from her eyes.

"It's a really good thing you're practicing your speech with me because that was awful! Please tell me you're not planning on ending there. You sound so *needy*, 'we are the future!'"

"Okay, okay. Maybe I got a little carried away."

It takes a minute for the two of us to collect ourselves and calm down. When we do, I lean on her and say, "Quellie, I am serious though. It's not fair, but there are people that hate us for just existing. But I want you to hear me when I say they're the ones who are wrong. Not us. Not you."

Her hair rubs against my cheek as she nods.

"I know, Scarlett. Thank you."

"What do you mean you know?" I ask.

She shrugs but I won't let it go. I prod and prod, poke at her and even tickle her. Finally, she confesses that she thought she made a new friend at her new school, but it didn't end well.

"She stopped playing with dolls with me during recess. So I asked her if she was still my friend. I was really happy at first when she said yes, but then she turned to her friend and whispered, 'no I'm not. She's a halfy freak.'"

Her name comes out of me like a whimper and, not knowing what else to do, I pull her in for a hug. She tenses at first, but slumps into me a heartbeat later. I apologize for her experience,

frustrated with myself for once again not even thinking to check in with her, and I say all kinds of slanderous things about the fake friend who doesn't deserve my little sister. I want to do something to make her feel better so, taking inspiration from earlier, I tell her that we should go see if we can find some dessert. But when we open our bedroom door, there's already two plates of honey cake waiting for us on the other side. Quellie shouts down the hall a loud thank you to our parents and I wonder when it was placed there. I wonder why they didn't knock on the door or come in. I wonder how much of our conversation our parents heard.

I'm glad I have the chance to share my project with Quellie because the next day I barely get through my introduction about the First Age before Proctor Aegnor interrupts me. The cloth spun around her head is a beautiful power pink and has a texture to it that resembles cotton candy.

Hers is a dry, raspy voice. "Scarlette, you realize this is a timed presentation? You do not get extra points for going over. You get marked down. The entire history of everything that has ever happened on this planet is not what I asked you for."

I assure her that I have practiced and I won't go over my time but the Proctor only sniffs and leans over to scribble something on her clipboard. I continue but when I mention the Constitution of Conversion, Helena's hand shoots up into the air. Immediately Raff stiffens, his face stormy. Helena doesn't wait for acknowledgement.

She drawls, "Are you going to talk about how people felt about the Constitution? Or just your speculation? So I know what to write in my notes. I don't want to waste good ink on something worthless."

Raff grumbles something indecipherable and I raise my eyebrows at him meaningfully, hoping that he'll do the smart thing and keep quiet. I notice a faint rattling noise swell and fade as Proctor Aegnor looks up from her notes.

"She's right, Scarlette, tie it in."

I glare at Helena. Smirking, she adds, "Oh and if you think you can manage it, can you refresh my memory? What's the Constitution of Conversion about again?"

Forgetting myself, I snarl back Quellie's description. The rattling noise returns to the room as Proctor Aegnor scolds me, "You think you're being cheeky but you're only making yourself look more and more stupid."

This is too much for Raff, and although I appreciate his desire to help, I would rather he not. Ignoring my mental plea for him to let me handle this, he stands up and argues. His high collar dances around his head as he gestures about. It's like a cone around his neck, a shuttlecock bobbing upside down in water.

"Proctor Aegnor! Helena's provoking Scarlette, can't you see that? She's purposefully asking stupid questions just to waste her presentation time."

The Proctor turns her wide vertical eyes on him, her tone merciless.

"And do you think you are improving the situation by also interrupting?"

Raff opens his mouth to respond but I shake my head at him violently.

Please Raff, please don't get in trouble for me.

Jaw clenched, he retakes his seat. Saréell motions for me to continue talking. I force myself not to look in Helena's direction, but I can still feel her leering at me. But I continue, barely even glancing at my notes and being all the more grateful for the practice run I had with Quellie last night. My speech is smoother, more clipped and contained. As I talk, audience

engagement increases. Those who were slouched back in their seats picking grime out from under their nails are now leaned forward. Some wear curious expressions on their faces, with narrowed eyes and cocked heads. I notice more than a few pens scratch out notes as I detail the Dark Druid's involvement with the fall of the Goddess of Clay. I fight back a smile when Helena breaks out the schoolbook and scans through the glossary. She can search for mention of the DD all she wants but information on them is scarce in our text. The look in her eyes when they meet mine again is one of bewilderment and refusal. I consider it a small victory, watching it dawn on her face — the realization that I offer so much more than what's printed on the pages in her hands.

Then everything falls into chaos the moment I say, "Both humans *and* Mythicals are at fault for the near destruction of Earth as a result of the Departure."

Helena jumps from her seat, her coiled hair bouncing around her head like golden springs. It's sickening how twisted her beautiful face is. The skin around her blue eyes bulge as she narrows them at me; her nose is crinkled with malice, upper lip curled in a snarl.

She growls, "Easy for someone tainted to say, of course you'd side with them. What would a disgusting wombwa like you know what it's like to be human?"

Raff, who is plainly looking for any excuse to level Helena, and has been since the day she and I met, hurls himself at her. It's not the graceful kind of movement I expect from a RadiusScythe wielder, but he is brutal and he is effective. Another human boy attempts to rip Raff away from Helena, but a second human boy intercedes, saying that she deserves what's coming to her.

Now everyone's standing up, shouting, picking sides. Another fight breaks out on the opposite side of the room from Raff and Helena. There's dispersed jeering all about, and all I can

do is stand at the front and watch in horror as it all unfolds. What happens next feels like an earthquake and sounds like thunder. A noise that grows and grows in my head, a rapid succession of short, sharp knocking reverberates in my skull. Pain lances through me, like a migraine, brightening the lights around me and smothering all else. I clutch my head and drop to my knees, my eyes clouding up with tears that cling to my eyelashes. The last thing I see before falling into darkness is a horizontal view of Proctor Aegnor striding across the room towards me, four large, muddy-yellow eyes framed by a monstrous crown of hissing vipers.

My mind wakes before my eyes open. And when I try, I find that they won't. They are not weighed down by the heaviness of sleep, my eyes are sealed somehow. I try to rub them, I think the command, I can feel a ghostly pull in my arm as the neurons in my head fire to deliver my brain's message to the rest of my body. But nothing happens. I don't move. Panic sweeps through me as I cognize that something is missing, then fear grips me as I realize it's the absent beating of my heart that by all rational reasoning should be racing in my chest right now.

Am I dead? I try to recall the last thing I remember... I was in my Chronicles of Era's Past class. I was delivering my big project on human and Mythical relations when — oh, Gaia. What happened? What did I do? How did everything go so wrong?

The image of Proctor Aegnor approaching me without her turban cuts through my mind. Turban cast aside, I remember her stalking through a row of abandoned desks and upended chairs. I remember a pair of additional gleaming pupils opening through slits at her temples. Before I lost consciousness, the pungent fragrance of sickly sweet menthol swept the room. Once

I fell, it started in my toes: A cold spasm up my body, a shutter without movement, the feeling of my soft tissues convulsing without quaver. Crouched on the floor, head clutch between my hands, I watched while a gorgan, dozens of rattlesnakes extending from her head like tongues of fire, marched for me while her Gift turned my flesh to stone.

How could she be allowed to do that? How long would this last? I know she doesn't like me but would she really turn me into a statue permanently? No, of course not. Whatever her feelings for me, she's still a Proctor. She might *want* to fossilize me into an early grave but she wouldn't get away with it.

Therefore, I decide, she can't have used the full extent of her Gift on me. I will thaw. Eventually.

It quickly becomes apparent that I have no sense of time while in this state, which makes the waiting all the more awful. My heart does not beat. I cannot smell for I cannot breathe. Movement is impossible and my sense of touch is dead. I can't tell if where I am is hot or cold, if I am on my side or propped up. At first, everything feels surreal. In a strange way, aren't I free in this moment? But then the moment stretches and becomes endless. A long time passes where I feel like if I could cry, I would leak a bucket's worth of tears. When I start to hear a muffled voice, I feel as if I could cry an ocean's worth of salt. At first because I think I've officially gone mad but then the voice starts tuning itself like a radio. It takes me a ponderous moment to recognize the falsetto before I remember it belongs to the mouth of the school's Green Witch.

Soon I can open my eyes and see her for myself. I never thought I'd be so happy to see her again. In gratifying procession, my breath returns to me. My heart beat. My sense of smell. I just manage to pull myself to my feet for the first time when the doors to my medical room creak open. In clots Principal Pericles, horse tail flickering fretfully, followed by Proctor Aegnor. The

principal's tail sways behind her in an intricate braid. The proctor, I notice, has replaced her turban. Her rattlesnakes must have shredded the pink one apart in their effort to escape its binding and obey the Proctor's desire to mineralize me. The replacement is a smudgy, dirty white. She must have crammed on the spare rather quickly because there's nothing fashionable about this version. It makes her look like a chewed-up wad of gum.

I welcome them both to my room and claim to be an embarrassed hostess for my lack of welcoming treats.

Principal Perrocles shakes her head as she speaks. "Scarlette, I'm glad to see your spirits are unperturbed but I'm not here for pleasantries. You are in some very serious trouble."

Her voice is deep and chiding. I understand why someone else might be intimidated by it. All I can say in response though is, "What?"

My meager attempt at communication is not impressive; it is overshadowed by my fear and shock. After everything that's happened to me, *I'm* the one in trouble? The principal doesn't seem to notice my indignation.

In the same baritone voice she continues, "Scarlette, you incited a riot, instigated fights, and used the spotlight of what was supposed to be your project presentation to make it all happen."

"Aside from being a distraction in class, I've also caught you cheating, little Miss Urrug," Proctor Aegnor slips in.

"That's a lie!" I shout back.

Principal Perrocles *tsks* at me but the point is mute as she also prods at the medical hut's dirt floor with a stamping of hooves.

"Manners, please! We will discuss this civilly," declares the Principal.

I glare at the Proctor who holds both hands in front of her, left hand holding her right wrist. She inclines her head towards the Principal as a sign of subjection.

The Principal accepts the Proctor's display and continues, "Thank you, now back to the matter at hand. I wish we could chalk this up to an over-enthusiastic protest."

" Oh, you mean like the assembly?" I scoff.

The Principal agrees, "Yes, like the assembly and a note I received under my office door."

My breath catches at the mention of the note I paid another student to slip under her door weeks ago. I had forgotten about it. Obviously, she hasn't. I wonder if she knows...

I eye her carefully as the Principal goes on, "The procedure for such disruptive behavior is detention, suspension, or both. Unfortunately, this demonstration was not just disruptive, it was destructive. People got hurt as a result of your scheming. The punishment for which, I'm sorry to say, is expulsion. Effective immediately. You will take the stack of paperwork home for your parents —"

I interrupt her by laughing. It's not purposeful, the laugh just kind of bubbles out of me. But as those bubbles pop all that is left is anger. Anger and an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. Why should the Principal believe me over the Proctor? What am I? Just a student. A teenager. Who's going to believe me, a teenage *halfy*. I curl my hands into fists at my side and breathe in deeply.

The door bursts open with a deafening blast. Snapping my head in its direction, I see someone framed in the doorway. A short, powerful woman. My mother.

Her black hair is twirled into a stern knot; dark almond-shaped eyes are alight and wild; and her strong shoulders are set. She saunters into the room and instantly takes control. Behind her is an eight-foot tall crimson-scaled Drachkin. He has tar-black eyes, sharp yellow teeth, and

shoulders so wide that he fills the double-door frame from left to right. Squinting, I can see his name tag reads 'Scald.' I notice that this mountain of a man makes my mother look like a dwarf and yet he mutters a rushed apology to the Principal for her interruption and — this can't be right. When my mom points to him and commands Scald to cease speaking, he obeys without question, clamping his snout shut and looking down at his large lizard feet.

"Your footman —" she begins.

"Scald is Captain of our security —" the words die on the Principal's lips.

"You will not interrupt me. I don't care if he is your florist, your hairdresser, or your poop scooper. My daughter is sent to the medical hut by one of your own teachers and no one bothered to notify me?" Mom fumes.

"Mrs. Urrug, I'm sure it was an honest mistake. But we radioed your husband to say there was an incident." Principal Perrocles tries again.

"What did I say about interrupting me?" Mom's voice rings around the room. I have to stifle a laugh because while I am used to her temper, I realize that the Principal and Proctor are not.

But then again, perhaps the reason she is not terrifying to me this time is because I'm not in the line of fire. I did nothing wrong, I know that. But she doesn't. All she knew was that something happened at school. I didn't even know where I was for who knows how long I was a statue but she came here and, by the looks of it, bullied the scary fire-breathing Scald for my whereabouts until she finally found me.

When she speaks again, the fire in her voice is tempered. Her rage is still potent, but her words are curt and measured. She sounds like a queen about to pardon or sentence a criminal.

"I know you called my husband. He's on his way too. In the meantime, I want to know why you contacted him and not me. Because it was no mistake — I am Scarlette's primary emergency contact which means someone made the decision to flip through her file and call my husband, an orc, instead of me who happens to be a nurse, by the way. As you might have heard, Chief Kerrian Urrug is being deployed by the Magical Emergency Agents of National Security. Soon I will be Scarlette's only point of contact and if I cannot trust you with the care of my child, then I will remove her from this failure of a school. And if my research is correct, which it is, Amalgamy Academy will then no longer meet the requirement for the Kingdom of Loria's Diversity Grant."

"Please, Mrs. Urrug, let's talk about this. Don't you think you may be overreacting just a little here? You don't know the full story yet, anyway. Your daughter is in serious trouble and —"

Mom holds up a hand in a palm-flat 'stop' gesture that skids the Principal's argument to a full-stop.

"If you insult me with one more interruption, we will halt this conversation and resume it only in the presence of my lawyer and the School Board. I doubt you want whatever happened today to be notarized on Amalgamy Academy's permanent record." She glowers at the Principal and the Proctor.

Proctor Aegnor opens her mouth to dispute her, but Mom quells her compulsion by urging, "Careful to not accidentally underestimate me now. Too many have made that mistake."

My studies rush through my head, Mom's anger at not being the one contacted about my condition. The conversation about her school adviser last night.

She's been through this before, I think.

INDEED, THEY MADE A MISTAKE.

BUT WAS IT AN ACCIDENT?

She's warning them, I realize. So far Principal Perrocles has tried to deter and distract Mom, but why? Because she got caught failing to contain what happened today?

EVERYTHING IS RULED BY PERSPECTIVE
AND WHOEVER CONTROLS
THE COLLECTIVE PERSPECTIVE,
RULES THE COLLECTIVE.

My own words hit me like a falling tree branch as it registers. I raise my chin and look the Principal directly in the eyes.

"It's funny that you're telling my Mom to not over react because she doesn't know everything that happened today, yet you're prepared to expel me when you haven't heard the story yourself," I say firmly.

I have no proof, only a gut feeling. But I keep my gaze trained on the Principal until I shift to Proctor Aegnor and suggest, "Consider your source."

Mom casts the Proctor a knowing, dark look. As if a long-kept suspicion has finally been confirmed.

Proctor Aegnor sucks on her teeth but says nothing.

Mom takes her place by my side and squeezes my right hand before returning her attention to the Principal and Proctor.

"Are you done? Good. Secondly, I want to know why Scald thought it was his job to keep me from seeing my daughter when I arrived. When a parent hears that their child has been involved in 'an incident' and is given no further details as to what that entails, I expect the

school's *security* to at the very least have answers on the matter. Not withhold them and certainly not attempt to keep a mother away from her child."

Mom frowns at Scald and he shuffles uncomfortably, almost comically, under her scrutiny.

"Third, you will tell me exactly what this 'incident' was and I will know who put my daughter in this medical hut."

She plants herself in front of me, crosses her arms across her chest, and scowls up at Principal Perrocles and Proctor Aegnor.

"Now you may speak."

Raff, Saréell and Helena, who were in another room within the medical hut along with half of my Chronicles of Eras Past class, are sent in one-by-one as key witnesses to the event. Apparently, there are no school rules or Kingdom laws which prohibit Gifted Proctors to utilize their abilities on students. The Principal makes a show of scolding Proctor Aegnor for allowing things to escalate to the point where she felt the need to resort to such an extreme.

"I do admit," she consoles Mom, "it is a frowned upon practice and not one I encourage Proctors to lean on."

Still, my hopes of her being fired for making me a slab of rock are dashed as Proctor Aegnor's actions are excused on the grounds that it was the quickest and safest way for her to end what she chooses to refer to as 'the riot'.

As the interviews go on, it becomes abundantly clear that the version of the story Principal Perocles originally heard was incomplete. Helena is quickly charged as the culprit, the lead instigator of the incident, and it is she who teeters between suspension and expulsion. I surprise everyone, even myself, by advocating for a suspension.

I don't know why I do it. I know that Denzel and the others would vehemently disagree. Seeing exposed as the nightmare she is is satisfying, but expelling her doesn't feel like justice.

Mom shakes her head, not understanding. "After everything she's said? The things she called us?"

But whatever bothers Helena so much, whatever makes her so spiteful and hateful, I don't think it's about me personally. It feels like there's something else, something deeper. And I don't see how sending her away will help her get better. In the end, the Principal listens to what I have to say and reserves their right to make a decision later, in private with Helena's parents. A luxury, I notice, I wasn't allowed. After all, my mom had to fight to get to me and be included in this conversation, to be consulted about what happened in class today. I feel a pang of regret for advocating for Helena but it dissolves from my mind when Rugrug enters the room wearing his full MEANS uniform. He hugs me tightly and places himself on my Mom's right-hand side.

When he asks, 'what did I miss', I want to say 'we're done.' Because everything is finally settled, my name is clear from the charges the Principal listed.

"There is one more thing," Proctor Aegnor declares. "You see, Scarlette has failed her Chronicles of Eras Past project and it was a rather large portion of her grade." A hissing sound scores Proctor Aegnor's contradiction.

I shoot a 'are you kidding me' look in her direction, but she only smiles and pushes her clipboard into the Principal's hands. Principal Perrocles shakes her head when she finishes reviewing it and passes the clipboard to us.

"It's impossible to judge humans on the same level as the Mythicals because they lack the same advantages. Unlike water Nymphs, they cannot speak to ailing fish or purify water with a song. Forests refused to speak without Ents to translate. Without the endless age of Elves, humans struggled to carry and share learnt lessons through the centuries. The

humans needed Mythicals. And the Departure, the Days of Division, the Break — whatever you want to call it — was but the first of many mistakes."

These are my words quoted on the report card that grades my project as a failure. The reasoning is written underneath:

Off-topic, did not reflect assigned subject matter. Distracting the class away from carefully selected and Board-approved lesson plans.

The wad of gum does nothing to deafen the pleased hissing underneath. At that moment, Proctor Aegnor smells like vinegar.

I object strongly, "That's not fair. That was just my opening statement! You didn't write anything else? Of course it's going to look off-topic if you end it there. It's just the introduction."

But Proctor Aegnor pulls on the cuffs of her sleeves, as if it will make her look more official. She says politely, "If it looks condemning, I assure you that it's not because of any censorship, my dear. I simply wrote what I heard."

Rugrug argues that pointing out the differences between races and why they make everyone's coexistence so beneficial is undoubtedly connected to the subject matter. Did the school not boast of having a well-rounded curriculum influenced by the voice of the student body?

The Principal, swishing their tail from side to side, admits that, on one hand, she did receive a complaint from a brownie. Her child shared concern about this new viewpoint along with a frustration that the school library lacked the resources for further investigation. After all, the brownie noted, by my promises, our school is expected to be a safe space for expanding one's scope of knowledge.



(An AI Depiction of Ella and Benny's Home)

Epilogue: Now and Tomorrow

Three months ago I was the new kid at Amalgamy Academy picking fights over paper airplanes and spending every class, every break, every lunch, every day feeling utterly and completely alone all the time. But now I have friends and even a cute boyfriend. Ezra and I still haven't kissed, but we are back to spending every break together at the Glowing Glade and this time all my friends know why I'm always late or absent for Ethics of the Arcane.

One day Kalia tries to scold me for skipping class to go on dates, but her righteous enthusiasm is met with awkward silence and shifty eyes trying to look at Adora without being obvious about it. It's either too weird or too soon, I can't tell. But for that reason Ezra and I decide that, at least for now, our routines should stay the same. So we meet every day in our private paradise, and hang out with our own circle of friends for lunch. What he doesn't want to say is that my group was his group last year, and things didn't end so well. I don't know whether or not Ezra holds a grudge against any of them for dropping him like a warty toad, but, likewise, while I wouldn't mind officially meeting Jemyr or any of Ezra's other friends, I don't push down that road very hard because I know that somewhere along the path lies Tthreandvar. At some point the two boys patched things up, but I'm not quite ready to welcome him into my orbit. So I understand wanting to keep our social circles separate for the time being.

I am shifting through my locker when Denzel sidles into view. For dramatic effect, they jerk one hand to the side and slam the metal door closed with a loud reverberating *bang!*

"Hey, I wasn't done. Now I have to reenter the code," I whine.

It's a weak complaint, made even more flimsy by the way I grin through my fake grimace.

"I just wanted to go over the plan for tomorrow," Denzel sighs.

"What plan?" I scoff, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Hey Scar!"

"What's up Scarlette?"

"Always knew you were a good one!"

The interruption comes from three other students passing by, each of them human. I turn to see two of them wave at me as they make their way to the Tree of Halls' lift, while the third nods in my direction before jumping out of the window.

"Wow, look who's Miss Popular all of a sudden," Denzel exclaims with an arched eyebrow.

"Yeah, ever since my almost-expulsion the other day. It won't last. They're all just hungry for gossip," I shrug.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Denzel muses. "You made waves with that presentation of yours. My sources say that you're the most popular half-orc girl in school. The human students here love you."

"Denzel, I'm the *only* half-orc girl in school," I snort. "And what 'sources'?"

They wave both my statement and question away, a gesture that clearly and dismissively states 'semantics'.

"You said something about a plan for tomorrow?" I remind them.

Denzel straightens their body, and that's when I notice the box they're hiding behind their back. I feel my face warp into a landscape of befuddlement.

Denzel clears their throat, and with great effort, attempts to smooth their face into a poised expression of magnificence.

"Ah, yes. I need your address so I can pick you up before school tomorrow," they orate.

I nod, "Uh-huh, and that has something to do with whatever is in the box, I'm assuming?"

Denzel's lips wobble with the strain of fighting off an excited smile.

"It does indeed. What did you call us? The Beau Monde. You're one of us now, and it's about time you start dressing the part."

This time, as Denzel pushes the box into my hands, they can't suppress their wild grin or hide their endearing crooked teeth. I reach for the lid, ready to open it, but they stop me, their hand over mine.

"What are you doing! You can't open it here, it'll ruin the surprise. Wait until you get home, darling," they say coyishly.

Before I can argue, Denzel boops me on the nose with their finger, feline claw extended for emphasis. They leave hurriedly, promising to call me later for the address.

I am bouncing up and down with nerves all the way home, chattering with Mom and Quellie about school and how excited I am to open my friend's present. But when the Buggie lands in the parking pad of a mushroom home that definitely is not our cottage, I frown.

"Your father and I have some errands to run. You'll have to stay with Ella and Benny for a few hours, then I'll be back to pick you up," she says.

It's not that her explanation doesn't make sense, but I groan anyways, pleading with her that I was more than old enough to be left home alone with Quellie. But to no avail. My little sister jumps off the pillowy mushroom and slides to the ground. I hear the home's front door swing behind her as she leaves me behind. I hesitate on the stoop, unsure if I'm welcome or not.

It's been weeks since Ella and I fought, and we haven't spoken to each other since. I don't know how I was expecting to patch things up with her, but being dumped on her doorstep was less than ideal.

"Just come in already," a familiar voice shouts from above me. "She's been miserable without you, too. Don't let her tell you otherwise."

I look up, but can't see beyond the circular window above. Then I step back and look up again. This time, farther up the mushroom's stock, I see Benny leaning out of his bedroom window. He gives me an encouraging thumbs up and motions for me to come inside. I take a deep breath in, hold the box to my chest, and follow his instructions. I'm on the last toadstool step when Ella appears in front of me, her body blocking the entrance to her home. She stares at me with narrowed golden eyes. And I stare back, unsure what to say. I open my mouth, work the joints in my jaw, but nothing comes out. Tears prick the back of my eyes as my brain suddenly floods with the image of her slamming the door in my face, of having to wait on the porch alone until Mom finally comes to pick us up.

Then, to my surprise, Ella flings herself at me so suddenly that I drop the box to catch her. And we both cry, she in my arms, and I in hers.

"I'm so sorry," she sobs. "I was scared. I thought I was losing you."

"No, you were right. You were right all along! I told Adora everything, and school has been great ever since. But my life isn't the same without you," I sputter back.

I don't know how long we cling to each other on the porch, but it takes a while before I'm able to breathe normally again. It takes even longer to fill her in on everything that's happened since our fight. And I thought it might be weird, maybe a little clunky trying to explain

everything, but it isn't. Because it's Ella. And just like everything always does when we are together, it all makes sense.

"I'm proud of you," she says, when I'm done.

"Which part? Diving into a Drachkin's lair or almost getting kicked out of Amalgamy," I laugh.

She shakes her head, "I'm talking about your project. I knew that proctor of yours was going to give you a hard time, but you did it. You beat her at her own game."

"Yeah, I guess I did. Gaia, I wish you could have been there!" I agree.

"And you not only have a boyfriend now, you're still friends with Adora?" she asks.

I nod, pick up the box Denzel had given me, and hold it out to her.

"Here's the official proof," I say. "Wanna open it together?"

Ella nods and bounds up the toadstool step to head inside, guiding me to her bedroom. But before we go inside she stops and turns to look at me once more.

Sunlight dancing in her eyes she says, "You're my best friend, you know that?"

I roll my eyes and try to push past her, but she holds her ground, solid and immovable.

She continues, "I didn't want to start a fight with you. But I got so mad. And scared. It felt like, well, I didn't want to see my friend turn into someone else's villain."

A gust of wind rustles the leaves around us, blowing her hair over her shoulders. And, for a moment, it's not Ella standing in front of me. She's just a girl. A fifteen year old human girl who is scared for her friend.

I raise my eyes to meet hers, and it's hard, so hard. Because I'm afraid I'll see her fear in them; I'm afraid they'll gleam with disappointment. But I'm wrong. When we lock eyes, all I see,

all there is to see, is her tenderness. A lump forms in my throat as I remember how hollow I felt when she left me in the clover field. And now, meeting her eyes, I understand why.

"I know. Thank you."

I don't need to say anything else because she already knows everything I could say.

Thank you for being my friend.

Thank you for being honest.

Thank you for being who I need, not just someone I want.

Ella nods contently, and together we make our way upstairs to unbox Denzel's gift.

Tomorrow I will wear my modified Beau Monde uniform. Tomorrow there will be no doubt that I belong at Amalgamy Academy just as much as anyone else.

Artist Statement

Origins

The Scarlet Saga Volume I: The Education of Half-Orc Scarlett Urrug (EHSU) is the first book of what I envision will eventually be part of a longer series that experiments with form and consists of three interwoven plotlines immersed within a fantasy setting to increase reader accessibility. I created a fictional world because I wanted Scarlett's story to be accessible to a wider audience in a way that I didn't feel would be possible in a non-fiction setting. The inclusion of Mythicals, for example, allowed me the freedom to shape cultures, ideologies, and, arguably most importantly, demographics freely and inclusively. I wrote *EHSU* with the hope that its narrative might transcend beyond a singular community subject to social injustice. In this way, I depend on fantastical elements to help translate social justice issues for a diverse audience. In order to better understand how fictional aspects of a story can create access points for readers when tackling tough topics, I referenced Jeana Jorgensen's *Folklore 101: An Accessible Introduction to Folklore Studies*. As a result, I learned that fairytales and folkloric stories are vehicles used to address difficult subjects, and examples of zeitgeist (a documentation of cultural values, beliefs, and fears which are constantly changing to adapt to new generations). That is why *EHSU* is wrapped within layers of fantasy. The intention is to communicate common fears deeply-rooted in society (such as alienation, displacement, and generational trauma) by softening the blows of reality through the addition of fictional elements. I started with ideas, silhouettes of characters and shadows of scenes, inspired by observations of our world, my personal experience within it, and a parcel of stories I've heard from others. These ideas fed

many thematic elements of the narrative as expressed through social, familial, and educational plotlines.

The Social Plot:

Scarlette's story begins with her preparing to attend a new school, Amalgamy Academy, disoriented and lonely. This sense of displacement is worsened as she experiences bullying from peers and adults in her life, challenging her sense of belonging. Racism, anti-militarism, and gentrification are new obstacles to Scarlette, and she struggles between defending herself and fighting back against oppression.

During the first week of school, Scarlette is desperate for companionship, and therefore is in a vulnerable state when Adora, another Amalgamy Academy student, introduces Scarlette to her group of friends, the Beau Monde. The social circle's members include Adora, Denzel, D'ja, Kalia, Saréell, Raff, and their leader Veresa. Scarlette's vulnerability leads her to an immediate trust of Denzel, who then tactlessly and insensitively surprises Scarlette with an introduction to what is essentially the school's version of a black market. Although Scarlette and Denzel's bond is strengthened by the experience, the Beau Monde as a whole is not the ideal friend group.

In future volumes, the Beau Monde story arch will continue further with the aim of representing how easily one can lose oneself while pleasing others in an attempt to fit in. The dynamics of the Beau Monde is in stark contrast to Scarlette's connection with her childhood friend, Ella. The relationship between the two girls demonstrates that Scarlette deeply values her friends and their opinions of her. Eventually, Scarlette will reach a turning point when she recognizes that she's become someone she doesn't want to be and must step away from that which is toxic in her life, the Beau Monde. This will launch her into an ambiguous future at

Amalgamy Academy as she will have to reevaluate who she is, who she wants to be, and the kinds of people she wants to surround herself with.

Scarlette experiences bullying several times in *EHSU* as she is targeted by peers and authority figures in her life. In the first chapter, *The Flag and the Airplane*, Scarlette is tempted to start a fist fight with a group of kids because of how they disrespect something she cares about, the Magical Emergency Agents of National Security (MEANS). This is a testament to her strong, developing sense of justice; how deeply she supports and cares for her father; how uncomfortable she is at school; and the deeply rooted nature of anti-militaristic sentiments as expressed through her peers' mockery of the kingdom's militia. The paper airplane predicament involves fae bullies, however, Scarlette is subject to the bias of her human classmates as well. In chapter nine, Scarlette refers to Fleur, a Panther Lake Center for Learning student from Scarlette's past, who rejected Ella for her humanity. When Fleur discovered Scarlette was only half-Mythical, she accused the young protagonist of lying to her for all the time they've known each other. In the same chapter, Scarlette is introduced to Helena, who at first tolerates Scarlette as a classmate because another Mythical 'vouched' for the biracial protagonist. The human girl's superficial acceptance is evident as she still refers to Scarlette through racial slurs. In fact, when Raff interjects on Scarlette's behalf, Helena dismisses him. And when Helena is indirectly punished because a Proctor dislikes Scarlette, the negativity of the peers' relationships escalates. Helena ceases to tolerate Scarlette and resorts to expressing outright hostility in public settings, and provoking the young protagonist during her *Chronicles of Eras Past* presentation. Helena demonstrates that biracial prejudices come from both sides of Scarlette's identity, while the term 'race-traitor' also hints to the complicated relations between the magical and non-magical races.

In chapter fourteen, Scarlett overhears a conversation in which gentrification is portrayed as three fairies cruelly judge her and her family. In this scene, Scarlett grapples with her morals. Though she ends the encounter feeling triumphant, the solution is meant to be bittersweet for readers. On one hand, Scarlett does find a way to achieve resolution without resorting to violence by conquering her temper and impulses. On the other hand, the protagonist revels in how deeply and efficiently she manages to hurt the fairy adversaries. This is the result of the advice she has received from Denzel (which primarily is to consider what *she* wants above all else), merging with her father's careful parenting. As Scarlett grows up, she must learn to identify good advice from bad, and find balance between standing up for herself and knowing when to walk away from a fight.

The Familial Plot:

When Scarlett is assigned a big school project in her history class, her parents take special care to homeschool her in the subject of Mythical and Human Relations. This leads to a series of homeschooling sessions in which Scarlett must reconcile with her family's traumatic history of enslavement and sacrifice. Scarlett's mother, Letia Urrug, passes down the reality of their family's generational trauma, discusses the hardships she and her own mother endured as first-generation immigrants, and exposes censorship as the manipulating social evil it is. These lessons become precious to Scarlett, allowing her to better orient herself within her family and understand her identity. Just as the protagonist finds reconciliation between herself and these hard lessons, the family dynamics change when the news that her father has received orders of deployment from MEANS. This opens a door to depict the effects of a militaristic lifestyle on civilian family members.

While Scarlett's father is actively supportive of the homeschooling lessons on human social justice issues, Letia Urrug understands human discrimination best. A human herself, Letia is passionate that her daughter learns and understands the nuances of the racist society in which they live; she references both a family heirloom (Scarlett's great-grandfather's schoolbook), and an experience from her youth when she was targeted by a Mythical student. The emotional baggage derived from her experiences with racism detracts from Letia's ability to approach the subject with Scarlett in a calm and rational manner. As a mother, Letia wants to prepare Scarlett for the bigotry of the larger world. As a human, she is weighed down by her own lived experiences.

In chapter thirteen, the parents lean into a conversation about the ways society has advanced from when they were Scarlett's age. In a comment referring to how public opinion towards interracial relationships has improved, they say, "You haven't had to deal with this yet, thankfully. You don't know what it's like to be profiled, discriminated against, disliked for nothing other than the way you were born. Things are better now than they have ever been, but when your mother and I first married, we were outcasts. Now interracial unions are a little more common. There's less persecution." Though Scarlett eventually takes this to be a positive lesson when incorporating it into her school project, her parents are incorrect in their assumption that she has not been profiled for her half-race status. The elements of this plot line follows Scarlett as she struggles to accept the parts of her identity she cannot change, and as she grapples with her sense of safety and family when Kerrian Urrug, her father, announces his orders of deployment.

The relationships she shares with her parents and sister, and the family's overall dynamics have not been sugarcoated: Scarlett's temper comes from her mother whose anger can

sometimes be seen overriding her compassion; Scarlett's father has a surprisingly violent past; and Scarlett often dismisses her sister, particularly when she is selfishly focused on her own wants and desires. Scarlett loves her family, flawed and imperfect as they are, but she is afraid of disappointing them. Though she is helpless to stop it, Scarlett foresees that her family will never be the same again once Kerrian is deployed. As seen in the first chapter, Scarlett passionately wants to support her father and, consequently, MEANS. Her blind loyalty to MEANS will be put to the test in future volumes as she learns more intimately about the consequences of what it means to be a military family.

The Educational Plot

Some of Scarlett's teachers hold their political prejudices against her, and, because there is a bias against mixing human bloodlines with Mythical bloodlines in the Kingdom of Loria, Scarlett is targeted as a half-orc and half-human individual. In a way, Proctor Aegnor's racist and anti-militaristic behavior towards Scarlett teaches students, such as the gossiping fairies of chapter fourteen, how to be biased and whom to target. When Amalgamy Academy educators display prejudiced behavior towards Scarlett for her biracial status and MEANS affiliation, her peers are encouraged to behave likewise. This is an example of how prejudice is an institutionalized, learned behavior which alienates and oppresses its victims.

This means that Scarlett is set up for bullying of a gentrified and racist nature, which is best expressed through Proctor Aegnor's unfair treatment of Scarlett in Chronicles of Eras Past classes, as well as when Principal Perrocles profiles her as a troublemaker and decides to expel Scarlett from school without proper investigation. In the later scene, all of the homeschooling

lessons Scarlett has received from her parents come to a climax as she processes the event and navigates the conversation with her mother at her side.

Rather than being at odds or feeling inferior, Scarlett finds equal footing with Letia as they team up and face the biases against them together. At one point, Scarlett notes of her mother's interaction with the Principal, "I have to stifle a laugh because while I am used to her temper, I realize that the Principal and Proctor are not. But then again, perhaps the reason she is not terrifying to me this time is because I'm not in the line of fire." This scene is an integral part of understanding the relationship between the mother and daughter by analyzing the way that they work together. Before now, Scarlett has felt heavily smothered, even berated by her mother's approach to teaching her about the ways of the world. There is a transitional shift when Scarlett is not only encouraged and strengthened by her mother's appearance and support, she comes into her own, feeling the intensity of her own empowerment through her tone, body language, and self-confidence.

This scene is one that demonstrates real growth in Scarlett for her ability to identify the nuances of the situation, stand her ground, and still express compassion for someone who has wronged her, Helena. Though *The Scarlett Saga Volume I: The Education of Half-Orc Scarlett Urrug* ends here, Scarlett still has a lot of growing up to do as she continues to face adversity. A sense of alienation arises within Scarlett as a direct result of these negative experiences, which will challenge the protagonist to either rise above the prejudices cast upon her by others, or to lean into them.

Experimental Formatting

The idea to experiment with *EHSU*'s formatting arose from a desire to immerse readers in Scarlette's head by creating an access point for their eyes to visually and contextually connect with what is happening on the page. This was executed through play with font, spacing, colors, text size, justified alignments, line spacing, bold weight changes, and highlighting. For example, there are what shall be referred to as 'thought bubbles' in which text is right-aligned with gray-scale highlighting. The shifting colors in the thought bubbles represent the voices of others echoing in Scarlette's thoughts. This occurs throughout the volume, and, as Scarlette navigates through her experiences at school while processing a collection of social injustices done to her, the highlighting progressively becomes darker to reflect the weight of her observations and how deeply they affect her perspective. In chapter thirteen, these thought bubbles undergo a noticeable transformation as they change color. Preceding the transition, Scarlette observes, "When my eyes start to sting with coming tears, I bury my face in my hands. I try to push the thoughts away, forcing myself to focus on the present. Because I can't let my parents know. How can I tell them? After everything they've done, knowing that they care so much, knowing that they believe I am untouched by traditionalist hate — how can I tell them that they're wrong? I can't. I won't let them think they've failed me. And I have to get stronger, I have to be better and smarter and I have to find a way to make my world at Amalgamy Academy work. If not for myself, then for them. And for Quellie." The transition from light to dark thought bubbles represents how Scarlette's emotional state is launched into a downward spiral when fully comprehending and comparing both her parents' love for her and her sister, versus the lack of acceptance society has for them for simply existing.

Some sections in *EHSU* are designed to slow the reader down, prompting them to ask what is happening in the scene. Salvador Plascencia's debut novel, *The People of Paper*, influenced two instances in *EHSU* in which dialogue is alternatively spaced between left-justification and right-justification. This is similar to how, in *People of Paper*, the perspective of multiple narrators is separated into columns. This formatting slowed me down as a reader as I pondered over this creative choice. Neal Shusterman, for example, wrote the *Unwind* series in which the narration also shifts between a handful of characters. The difference is the Young Adult books are more traditional and each perspective shift is indicated with a separation of chapters rather than by columns. The way Plascencia's choice to experiment with form also seems to limit the amount of detail given in the scene as each column entry is short and often did not extend more than a page. While the world and the characters of *People of Paper* remain vivid, intricate details are intuitively filled in by readers. This, for me, created a sense of minimalistic writing, which encourages readers to participate with the text on a deeper level.

The introductory focus of Claire Bishop's book *Participation* is on the social dimension of the word. She explains that participatory art is not the same as interactive or installation art, but is an idea that originates from the medium-specific breakdown of the 1960s where a less familiar focus on intangible social experiences marked a new wave of art theory-related thinking. In this way there is no separation between the performer and audience; the creator and recipients; the artist and art viewers — writer(s) and readers. Within this framework, art is only and exclusively emphasized on collective and social collaboration. This idea of creating something that encourages consumers to actively and imaginatively participate with artistic content goes hand-in-hand with Plascencia's experimental formatting in *People of Paper*.

In *EHSU*, these left-justification and right-justification conversations feature two speakers with minimal dialogue tags, and without embellishing setting descriptors. In both instances, Scarlett is engaged in conversation pertaining to the parameters of her *Chronicles of Eras Past* project. This formatting first occurs during a conversation in chapter two between Scarlett and her mother. As Letia asks pointed questions about the assigned topic, *Mythical and Human Relations*, the format is meant to invoke a sense of interrogation with the two speakers opposed to one another. It is also meant to visually mimic a text chatroom to instill a casual tone to this section. Ultimately, the desired effect would be a visual interview while readers pause to focus on the dialogue.

The hope is that this scene subtly connects to a moment in chapter fifteen when Scarlett's mother meets Proctor Aegnor. Letia's reaction to realizing the teacher before her is the one who assigned Scarlett her *Chronicles of Era's Past* topic based on her daughter's biracial status is described in Scarlett's perspective: "Mom casts the Proctor a knowing, dark look. As if a long-kept suspicion has finally been confirmed." In summary, the deliberate choice to format the text in order to slow the reader down is meant to underline Letia's distrust of the Proctor through her dialogue, and, when the two characters finally meet, the validation of Letia's suspicions. The format occurs again during a conversation between Scarlett and Ella, Scarlett's childhood best friend, around the same topic. This lends more insight into Ella's life experiences as she, a human, identifies the racially charged nature of the assignment faster and before Scarlett does.

In other sections, the formatting is meant to be disorienting. Specifically, when Scarlett overhears snippets of conversations at the end of chapter one, the text changes to different fonts, sizes and placements on the page to imitate, as it is described in the narrative, 'a fog' of voices.

The disorientation continues at the end of chapter three as Scarlett falls asleep. The formatting is meant to represent that her worry about what will happen to her the following day weighs heavily on her mind. It is the last drifting thought she has while losing consciousness; the larger text sizes, for example, represent an ebb and flow of her thoughts as she fades into slumber. In chapter ten, Scarlett takes notes during her homeschooling lesson. The change in format is partially inspired by the line "History is written by the Victors" as Scarlett and her family discuss the dangers of a one-sided narrative. As the conversation hovers around the topic of censorship, the format of Scarlett's note taking is not only meant to lend insight to how Scarlett interprets what she is learning, it is vague on purpose. Readers must build the bridge themselves between what is presented in only bullet points, to Scarlett's conclusion of that day's lesson: "Everything is ruled by perspective and whoever controls the collective perspective, rules the collective." The slim details and lack of actual conversation leaves the discussion between the involved family members up to interpretation. This allows each reader to decide the specifics of the conversation themselves, giving opportunity for a diverse deciphering of what readers glean from this scene. As readers filter the information on the page by filling in the gaps between bullet points, the message distorts to fit each individual's perspective.

Intentions

The idea for Scarlett's story was planted like a seed when I read David F. Walker's "The Token Superhero." His narrative features a fictional world in which people have superpowers as a result of a world-wide genetic mutation. Despite the dynamic changes this makes in the world's overall culture, the main character, who is assigned the name 'Black Fist' by a superhero marketing team, still struggles with racial discrimination. Reading Walker's story resurfaced

many of my own childhood and teenage memories in which I confronted different varieties of discrimination myself. Bullies found a multitude of reasons to profile me, including my status as a daughter of an immigrant; as a product of interracial marriage; and as an Army dependent. Many civilians aren't aware of the large population of military-dependents (spouses and children of soldiers) who deal with the grief and struggle of building their lives around the military. This can range from anything like having to move around a lot, or saying goodbye to loved ones as they are deployed to war zones. The book *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society*, edited by Suzanne Le Menestrel and Kenneth W. Kizer, reports a census on the number of how many military dependents there were in 2017 stating, "there were 2,103,415 active component and Selected Reserve service members, with 2,667,909 dependents." When writing Scarlett's reaction to the news of her father's imminent deployment, I referenced my experiences from when my father was deployed.

My family and I went to a Yellow Ribbon Conference in preparation for his departure for many reasons, one of which was to commune with the other soldiers and the families of deploying loved ones. Just like Scarlett, I had a teacher who was unsympathetic towards my father's deployment and my request for homework in advance. This is one example as to how my military-dependent experiences inspired *EHSU* events, and, in future volumes, I not only plan to incorporate more of my own experiences, but I will also include the stories of the other kids at the many Yellow Ribbon Conferences I attended in my youth. Many individuals have given their permission for their stories to be written and have requested that they be shared so that, one day, civilians might better understand the hardships of a military family.

Also, as someone who is bi-racial, I have been told many times that I am either "too asian" or "too white" to fit into certain social circles. I have been asked the infamous question

"what are you" more times than I can count. While my family helped develop my sense of humor around the inquiry, the alienation that derived from comments such as those was palpable. I stewed in these memories for weeks after reading Walker's "The Token Superhero" until, one day, I googled 'inspirational writing quotes' for an unrelated project. I found a quote from Madeleine L'Engle that read: "You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children." Walker provided the seed for the story already taking root in my head, and L'Engle's advice watered and nurtured it. I had already begun writing small, random snippets of *EHSU*, and as I continued with a renewed sense of vigor, Scarlette's story eventually grew to be a narrative about finding one's inner strength in the face of adversity. As I began to share the pages or, in some cases, simply the concept of *EHSU* with others, I was surprised to hear a large quantity of individuals classify it as Young Adult (YA), though I was not writing with a younger audience in mind.

YA Concern:

The common denominator as to why people were classifying *EHSU* as YA usually boiled down to the protagonist's age. This explanation, however, only confused me further, particularly after considering Celeste Ng's *Our Missing Hearts*. Though the protagonist in Ng's novel is twelve, the book is not widely considered to be of the YA genre. This left me to ponder what, exactly, is YA? Many definitions of YA refer to readership age, stigmatizing reader demographics to only include readers between the ages thirteen to eighteen. Yes, the teenage population is seen as the primary marketing target of YA literature, but it is important to note that there is no definitive age group specifying the readers of YA. The thirteen to eighteen age grouping is more like a suggestion than a rule. Antero Garcia, author of *Understanding the*

Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age, referenced Bowker Market Research to defend their conclusion that the majority of YA readers are eighteen years old or older. Although some of these consumers buy YA titles for friends, siblings, and children, seventy-eight percent of YA purchasers are typically buying them for themselves. The Bowker report indicates that readers between the ages of thirty and forty four, as a demographic, account for nearly thirty percent of all YA book buying.

In an analysis of Patticus Lore's *Lorian Legacies* series, Garcia criticizes the authors' approach to the YA genre. Patticus Lore, a pseudonym of creative collaborators James Frey and Jobie Hughes, is said to have studied the popular trends of YA at the time before writing the *Lorien Legacies*, the first book of which, *I am Number Four*, was published in 2010. They formulated the series based on what they felt was the basic components of marketably successful YA stories: A protagonist who is confronting feelings of displacement, has special powers, is targeted by a world-threatening villain, and has a heterosexual love interest. While Patticus Lore may have been correct about some of the popular trends they identified, their list did not satisfy my search as its exclusivity made the catalog appear unrefined when applied to the purpose of defining YA. Perhaps it is because *EHSU* was originally inspired by "The Token Superhero", but representation is at the heart of Scarlette's story. The exclusivity of Patticus Lore's list of popular market trends was the deciding disqualifier.

Several texts influenced my writing and shaped my search to define the YA genre, including *The Night and Its Moon* by CJ Piper. At the Emerald City Comicon in March 2023, Piper described how her desire to address elements of today's culture influenced her book. Hers is a high-fantasy narrative that contains themes of feminism. She created characters that have brains and beauty: one female lead who finds power in her sexuality, and another female lead

who has physical fighting prowess. These character choices were motivated by a desire for representation. Piper said while she was growing up, she couldn't understand, for example, why there was no female romance in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. As a writer, she said, "Write the book you want to see yourself in. The world can be whatever you want in fantasy." (Fae, *Familiars, the Four Horsemen and other flights of fantasy*, 2023). This solidified that representation of different personality types and social statuses makes a text more inclusive, thus making relatability a requirement for my definition of the YA genre.

The YA/NA Solution

The majority of *EHSU* was written while I contemplated how to define YA beyond a vague age group. I found an answer in April 2023 while attending the national Pop Culture Conference (organized by the Pop Culture Association). Megan Marshall argues that YA is merely a field of literature, an umbrella term under which she describes in detail an offshoot, crossover genre: the New Adult (NA). Marshall is particularly interested in recently published stories, including the *Hunger Games* Trilogy and the *Twilight* Saga. Marshall observes that these books, despite their YA categorization, were marketed towards a demographic of readers who are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. There are some themes, political and sexual, that would be controversial if one were to assume that all children between the ages of thirteen and eighteen are mature enough to have access to. So Marshall composed her own list of what characteristics define YA that resonates with what grew to represent my definition of the genre: The story revolves around teenage characters; a book's average page length is between two-hundred and two-hundred-fifty pages; it is often written in the first person using a conversational tone; the text uses contemporary language; character challenges are presented in a

way that readers can relate to when referencing their own lived experiences; adults within this genre often function as obstacles or background fluff more often than plot movers; concerns often considered to be common and relatable to those of the teenage community are emphasized; the decisions and actions of the main character determine the outcome of events; and finally, the text has all the elements of traditional literature, yet it retains a uncomplicated but not simplistic balance.

Writing *EHSU* was an introspective endeavor. I wrote Scarlette's story while reflecting on the experiences of childhood and teenage life, and found the reflective writing process both challenging and cathartic. As I continued to come to terms with my younger self, I entered a mindset that the demographic of my target audience would mostly consist of new adults. At the same time, advisors who read the book's early drafts continued to insist that Scarlette's story is of the YA genre. This made me consider how teenage youth might find solace in *EHSU* while new adults might find introspective opportunities to connect to their younger selves and find catharsis if not closure.

This placed *EHSU* in an ambiguous space in my mind as I grappled with understanding its genre. That is, until Marshall's presentation introduced NA as a genre that is the middle, overlapping section of a two part venn diagram: one circle consisting of youth readers, the other circle consisting of adult readers. Marshall proposes that NA literature "is a crossover genre, only partially under the scope of YA, bridging the adult perspective with memories of the teenage self, while simultaneously acknowledging the ways in which adolescence has been recently theorized to extend into one's twenties." (Queered Embodiments for the New Adult (or) the Problem Novel Crosses Over, 2023) This realization of NA as a bridge between Adult and Young Adult texts is how I came to understand and identify *EHSU*'s genre.

An Offering

Though I did not originally intend to write for children, young readers may resonate with Scarlett Urrug and the struggles she encounters within herself and her community. Protagonists in the YA/NA genre are typically in various stages of “coming of age” while confronting what they perceive to be threats to their identities. The struggle of finding comfort within one's identity creates a tension between what an individual wants to be and who they are supposed to be. This is a challenge that most readers find relatable. I've come to hope *EHSU* may interest readers who are still in school themselves and who are searching for representation that gives voice to the social struggles associated with the early growing pains that come with one's teenage years. Future volumes of *EHSU* will draw on the community discussions of antimilitarism the Teen Panel and Council held in the years I was a leading member in order to include more meaningful accounts of true stories. Just like many military dependents and other individuals in similar situations, Scarlett must learn to navigate the political climate of her hometown while simultaneously shaping her identity. This, at least partially, means coming to terms with what one can and cannot change about themselves, and who one is versus who one wants to be.

Growing up between cultures (ethnically and politically) I was plagued with inner-conflict; torn between pride and shame for who I was as an individual and as a product of an interracial marriage. I did not know how to reconcile with the complex history of the US military and the love I have for my father, grandfather, uncles, and so on who have served in the Army and Navy. I did not have the resources to help ground me in my identity. As an adult in my last year as a grad student, I decided to start writing the story I wish I had growing up. I decided to write my own narrative where I hope others will find representation.

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