

an anthology
by Kathryn Fogleman

I MAKE UP
CHARACTERS
TO CAUSE
DRAMA WITH



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A Note from the Author

Don't worry! I will keep this short.

The short stories contained in this book are the results of my “random moments”, as my family has so dubbed my sporadic bits of imagination.

Each little story came to my mind either as a dream in the night, from a sight in nature, an inspiring picture, or just a sudden burst of inspiration in the middle of the night.

Some of these short stories are a scene of a future book that I am deviously plotting out in my mind. Others are just random scenes pulled up from the vast expanse of my all absorbing imagination and will probably never come to anything. But they were fun to make!

I hope that you enjoy all of my little bits of “rubbish” contained here. However, if you don't like any of my short stories, then all I can say is this: that's just too bad. I didn't write any of it for your enjoyment. I wrote it because I had too much sugar, and the little voices in my head wouldn't shut up until I wrote something down.

MY CHRISTMAS PROMOTION

I quietly crept toward the garbage disposal, clutching a tiny bundle in my hand. I held it as closely and inconspicuously to my body as possible, and my fingers were wrapped around its throat in a death grip. My eyes shifted to the left, then to the right as I neared the disposal. Ten feet from the disposal...five feet...all my problems would soon be over... three feet...

“Oriole, what are you doing?” a voice prompted behind me.

I paused and held my breath, cringing just slightly.

“What do you have there?”

I turned around, quickly moved my hands behind my back, and smiled at my friend. “Hey, Sade! I was just about to dispose of something. I’m not late for our lunch date, am I?”

Sade narrowed her brown eyes at me and put her hands on her hips. “You’re a terrible schemer and a worse liar, girl. Now, answer the question: what are you doing?”

I backed up a step. I was so close to the disposal. I could not fail now. “I wasn’t lying, and I’m not scheming anything dreadful. I’m doing this spaceship and her crew a favor.” I took another step backward. “I am just disposing of some garbage.”

Sade raised her dark eyebrows, her eyes widening just before she lunged for me and grabbed my arms.

“Hey!” I yelled as she yanked the object free of my hands.

“Oriole,” she exclaimed as she held it up. “This is Mervin’s Elf on the Shelf!”

I planted my face into my right hand. “Yes. Sade. I know.”

“You can’t throw this away!”

I looked up at the taller girl and narrowed my eyes, setting my teeth firmly. “Sade, you know how I have always feared that I might wake up to find one of these creepy things in my room?”

Sade raised an eyebrow.

“Well, IT HAPPENED!” I shook my fists and stomped my feet, making my short brown hair bounce in all directions. “My alarm went

off; the sound of sweet singing birds filled my room, and I heard the computer croon, “It is now 6:00 AM earth time”, and when I opened my eyes, BAM! There it was! It was staring into my soul, smiling with evil intent, hanging right above my head on a string!”

The expression on Sade’s ebony face was the perfect definition of “unimpressed”. She looked at the doll, then back at me. “Girl, you have issues. It’s just a doll. It don’t got no evil intentions.”

I twisted my face into the look of crazed horror. “You’ve never had one staring at you in your sleep!”

She rolled her eyes and turned around, walking away. “Mervin’s Elf was passed down from his great grandma. It’s an antique, an old family heirloom. You ain’t throwing this doll away.”

I jumped up and down like an irritated little kid, and then I followed after her. “Sade, I can’t live on this ship knowing there is an Elf on the Shelf that could come sneaking into my room at any time! It’s an heirloom that needs to DIE.”

Sade shook her thick, dark, curly hair. “Oriole, what are the horrors you have faced during your time in Starfleet? A little doll ain’t nothing compared to Ferengi interrogation or Romulan death threats.”

Desperate for an excuse, I quickly interrupted her. “That’s it! That’s why I can’t stand it! It looks like an evil little Ferengi! The horrors! The memories!”

“Psh! Don’t give me that malarkey. I know you better than that,” she said, wagging a finger at me. “Besides, this is Christmas Eve. Tomorrow, the evil little doll will be put away and that will be the end of it.”

“Are you kidding me? I have next year to look forward to,” I squeaked in agony.

“Then, next year you might be able to get away with trashing it, because I won’t be here to catch you.”

I quickly stepped in front of her, stopping her, my mood instantly changing to a much more somber one. “Whoa...so, it’s official? You’re being transferred?”

She looked down and nodded, her lips turning up in a forced smile. “Yeah. And I’m being promoted.”

I blinked in shock. “Promoted? Really?”

Her smile grew slightly. “Second class Petty Officer!”

I blinked again, trying to force myself to be happy. I should be happy. I was happy for her. But my joy in her promotion was overshadowed by the fact that she was leaving. We were practically sisters. We had grown up together, gone to school together, roomed together at the academy, and blasted into space together. But we weren’t being transferred or promoted together. It was hard to take. Finally, I forced a smile to my face and wrapped my arms around her, grabbing her in a big hug. “I’m so excited for you!” I managed to say in a sincere voice “Moving on to new horizons! Making your mark on the world—er, universe!”

She pulled her arms out from under mine and wrapped them around me, giving me a gentle squeeze. “Yeah, I know. Quit pretending, dum dum. The pretender’s face looks awful on you.”

I pulled back and brushed my short hair behind my ears. “Well, I am happy for you. I just...I’d hoped...”

She shrugged. “I know, but we can’t win them all.” She laughed lightly. “Hey, it gives us a great excuse to party like crazy, wild Sehlats this Christmas.”

I pulled my shoulders up in a mopey shrug. “I guess so.”

She spiked an eyebrow. “You guess so? Girl, there ain’t no guessing in this game. It is gonna be a fact!” She snapped her fingers.

I grinned, deciding to go along with her. “We will rock this ship with our party style.”

She nodded and winked. “That’s the spirit.” She walked past me, but as she did, I snatched the Elf from her.

“We shall start the partying by sending this evil creature into the underworld.” I made a mad dash for the garbage disposal as I spoke.

“No murdering of heirlooms, especially before Christmas!” She whirled around, her long legs quickly catching up with me before I had made it even half way to the disposal.

Several hours later, the ship was abuzz with every crew member preparing for the ship to dock at space station Triumph. This space station was where we would spend Christmas.

“Hey girl.”

I looked up from my tablet and turned around to see Sade hurrying towards me, flashing her pearly white smile at me. “Talk and walk, girlfriend. I’m on my way down to engineering,” I said as I turned back around and continued walking, averting my eyes back down to my tablet. I suddenly staggered to the side, nearly crumpling to my knees when something was smashed onto my head, ruffling my hair.

Sade laughed. “You make a cute little elf?”

My mouth dropped open, and I yanked a hat off my head. “You stinker. I’m not wearing this!” I declared as I looked at the elf hat, complete with elf ears, sparkles, and all.

“Yes you are. You lost the bet. You promised,” Sade insisted.

I shook my head in confusion. “Whoa. I lost a bet? When?”

Her brown eyes sparkled. “Thomas Axton’s wedding party.”

I planted my face into the palm of my hand as I remembered.

“Oh. That. Great.”

She laughed again. “Don’t worry, you look adorable.”

I cleared my throat and slapped the hat back on my head, straightening it as I started walking again. I was acutely aware of the sniggers and grins from the other people passing us by, but I was determined to fall for Sade’s lie and believe that I was cute.

“And look, I’m a reindeer!” she said as she slipped a pair of antlers on and giggled.

I shook my head. “Where you come up with this antiquated garbage for us to wear is certainly beyond my understanding,” I said.

“Oh, don’t be so grumpy.” She poked me in the elbow. “It’s fun!”

I narrowed my eyes and looked up at her. “You realize that one of our superiors will probably make us take these off, right?”

She shrugged dismissively. “You, they might. You’re an officer. But I doubt anyone will care. It’s Christmas, and we’re all about to get shore leave.”

I shrugged in turn. She did have a point. However, I seriously wondered if I wanted to step off this ship with this ridiculous hat on my head. Pushing the thought aside, I looked back down at my tablet and frowned. "Have you noticed that it seems like a lot of personnel are being transferred?"

"Uh, no. I don't keep up with that. Not my problem," Sade replied.

"Well, I thought I would look, because you failed to mention where you were being transferred to. It looks like over half the crew is being reassigned or transferred." I passed her the tablet to look at.

Her dark eyes scanned it for a moment, her ebony face growing more somber. "You ain't pulling my leg, girl. That is most of the crew." She flipped through the list a moment longer then passed it back to me. "And most of them have been reassigned just within the last several hours. What's up with that?"

I sighed and looked around. "I don't know. I would ask, but everyone is kind of busy right now."

Sade tilted her head. "Well, if it's important, the captain will certainly let us know."

I looked back at my tablet and prepared to exit the listing of personnel, when a new name suddenly popped up. My name. I stumbled into a passer-by, apologized to them, and then grabbed my friend's arm. "What...Sade, look!" I showed her the tablet and poked my name. My picture and information came up, along with a new title under my name.

Sade's eyes grew wide. "Promotion to lieutenant!" she declared in surprise, yanking the tablet away from me "Wait a moment! Some monkey has gotten to the computer and is punching buttons! This can't be right."

I grabbed the tablet back from her and looked at it to make sure there was no mistake.

"I mean, don't take me wrong, you totally deserve it, girl. You've worked hard! But that just don't happen to first-year-of-active-duty kids. And definitely not ordinary kids, like us."

I looked up and squinted at her, shifting my eyes between her face and the stupid antlers on her head. "Ordinary?"

She rolled her eyes and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “You know what I mean.”

A whistle blew and the shipwide intercom clicked on. “Attention, crew, this is the captain speaking,” the captain’s voice echoed through the hall. “I would like to commend each of you for your fine service aboard this vessel over the past year. You have been a wonderful crew, one of the best that a captain could ask for. Unfortunately, all good things do come to an end.” He sighed. “The USS Auriga is being decommissioned. I and a small complement of crew are to return the ship to Earth the day after Christmas, which means we will have to travel through Christmas day. I’m sorry. The rest of you will be staying at the Space Station Triumph where you will be reassigned to new ships and stations.” Again, he sighed. “This is as sudden and unexpected for me as it is for you. I’m sorry that this could not have happened at a better time, but then, when is a good time to break a family apart? My only expectation of you now is to keep your heads high and to complete your service aboard this ship with excellence, honor, and dignity, and then carry that same level of excellence with you to your next assignments.” There was a slight pause. “Once we have docked at Triumph, you will have six hours to pack and say your goodbyes. Captain out.”

Sade and I exchanged stunned looks before I looked down at my tablet. “I’m one of the personnel stationed to stay aboard and return to Earth,” I mumbled. “No wonder I was promoted. Only 20 crew members will be returning with the Auriga.”

There was silence between us for a moment, then Sade silently slipped the reindeer antlers from her head, losing her festive spirit. “Well...don’t that beat all. I didn’t think a ship could run on so little.”

I looked up and blinked, trying to wrap my head around the shocking news. “I—I have duties to attend to, and I imagine that I need to report to the captain for my new station.”

Sade nodded sadly.

I took a deep breath and straightened the dumb hat on my head. “Hey, Rudolf. I’ll see you as soon as we dock. I’ll help you pack, then we will have a few hours of party time to kill.” I slapped her on the arm.

“Forget rocking this ship with our party style. We are going to rock the entire space station with it!”

She looked at me and forced a smile to her face.

“No one can take us down, at least, not without a big, big bang.” I put on as big a smile as I could muster, before taking the antlers from her and slipping them back onto her head. “And if I am going to wear this crazy hat, then you have to wear these ridiculous antlers.”

Seven hours later, Sade and I stood together at the airlock that would soon separate us.

“Well, we always knew it would come down to this at some point,” she said with a heavy sigh as the two of us stared at the line that separated the Auriga from Triumph.

I took a deep breath. “Yep,” was all I could find to reply with.

The two of us simply stared at the door until a feminine voice echoed in the hall. “USS Auriga preparing for departure. Separation in t-minus 30 minutes.”

I sighed and turned to Sade. “Well, kid, here is where the road separates.”

Sade sniffled and I frowned. “Oh, shut up. You promised you wouldn’t do that,” I snapped.

“I can’t help it. I thought I had cried it all out in my quarters when no one was around. I cried enough to draw a bath with!” she sobbed.

“Lieutenant Zayne?” A voice drew my attention to a tall Vulcan man walking up to the two of us. His uniform indicated that he was a commander, which instantly made me stiffen my posture out of respect for his rank.

“Yes sir, I’m Lt. Zayne,” I replied.

He regarded Sade, who was loudly sobbing without shame, then he looked at me, his dark eyes showing careful calculation as he considered the situation I was in. “I wished to congratulate you on your promotion and to say that you and I will be at the helm for this ship’s final journey. I look forward to observing your skills as a navigator.”

“Thank you, Commander Davak. I’m honored,” I said haltingly, glad that I was able to recall his name.

With that, he walked past us and down the hall into the Auriga.

Sade sniffed and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. “That was his nice Vulcan way of telling you to hurry up and get your booty on that blasted ship.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed her in a hug. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine. But I already miss you,” she said, grabbing me tight.

“I know. I do too.”

“If you get a chance to go on world, tell the folks “Hi” for me, won’t you?”

I hugged her tightly. “You know I will.”

The sound of boots coming down the hall made the two of us break apart and watch as a young man approached us. “What? The two of you are still here?” he asked with a smirk.

“It’s about time you showed up, Mervin,” I said, nodding toward Sade. “Take care of her.”

He threw his arms open. “Hey, what is a boyfriend for?” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and thrust a hand out to me. “Just take good care of yourself, huh?”

I shook his hand and winked. “I’ll do my best.”

Sade sniffled again. “Wave to me, before you go into warp.”

I widened my eyes and looked at her in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

She nodded, her lip quivering. “Yes, I’m serious.”

“But, Commander Davak said he’s going to be “observing” me. Remember?”

Mervin coughed, choking his own laughter, but Sade narrowed her eyes at me. “Just do it, please? And I’ll wave at you.”

“We won’t see each other waving, silly.” I put my hands on my hips. She gave me ‘the look’ and I sighed, dropping my hands to my sides. “Fine. I’ll wave.”

She grabbed me into a hug once more and only let me go when Mervin separated us. “Come on, you two. It’s not the end of the universe, and she needs to get to her station.”

I took a deep breath and turned, quickly stepping across onto the Auriga. I turned back around and smiled at her. “Merry Christmas,” I said fondly with a wave.

She smiled and returned the wave. “Merry Christmas,” she replied. With that, the airlock door closed and locked, blocking us from each other’s view.

“Lt. Zayne?” I turned to find Commander Davak staring at me at the end of the hall, which did very little to settle my nerves. He dipped his chin, inviting me to join him. I quickly accepted his invitation, and we walked down the quiet hall together. “We have some preparations to make, if you are going to keep your promise to your friend,” he said.

“Promise, sir?” I asked, wondering how much of our conversation he had overheard.

“Yes. To wave goodbye. Vulcans and some humans believe promises are meant to be kept.”

I nodded. “Thank you, sir. I believe they are meant to be as well.”

We stepped onto the turbolift together, and he ordered it to the bridge. “What does Christmas symbolize in your culture?” he asked.

His question took me by surprise, so I hesitated until I could find the right answer. “For most people, Christmas is a time of giving and receiving. In my family, and Sade’s as well, we believe the Christian God sent His son to us as a free gift to be accepted, or not, according to one’s preferences.”

He nodded lightly. “And, according to the Bible, God’s Son came to earth specifically to die for the sins of man, thereby giving man the gift of eternal life, correct?” He looked at me.

I briefly wondered where he was going with this conversation before I replied, “Yes. That is correct.”

“For something good to come of his birth, he had to die in order to bring about something new,” he noted. The turbolift door slid open to the bridge, but neither of us moved to leave it. “Therefore, by his

example, one can learn that change, even hard change, often leads to good.”

I blinked, finally figuring out what he was doing. I smiled sheepishly and looked down at my feet. “Yeah. I get it.” I looked back up at him and smiled. “Good analogy.”

He spiked an eyebrow and tilted his head to the side just slightly. “I’ve learned that humans often need a “pep talk” when they have experiences such as this.”

My smile grew. “Well, thanks. You’re pretty good at it—the pep talk, that is. You shifted my mind to thinking about what really matters.”

He dipped his chin and stepped out of the lift. I followed him, and we both took our stations. “Do not forget your promise,” he reminded softly as we both began to input the proper calculations for separation from the space station and a jump into warp.

I nodded with a smile. “Yes, sir. How could I? It is my gift to her, after all.”

CURSE OF DRAGONS

Suicide, murder, and civil war were three threats Bowen never expected to hear from his older brother. He expected his brother would disagree with his proposal – for heaven’s sake, Bowen himself disagreed with his own proposal – but he never imagined any of his brothers, much less Sloan, would be violent about it. His brother had always been a soft spoken servant of the people, putting them and their needs before all else. It is what had earned him the title of “the people’s king”. Giving up their rights as kings and handing the thrones over to another race was unheard of and humiliating, yes, but for Sloan to threaten war and divide their people was completely unlike him.

Bowen had not realized Sloan had changed so much. In fact, both of his older brothers seemed drastically different. What had he missed in the few short months that he’d been gone?

“I’ll be dead before I see all four of the thrones in the hands of a younger brother!” Sloan’s voice boomed through the stone courtroom of the Great Mountain. “I am the second eldest, and I will not be cheated of my birthright! You’ve always pushed me around, but no more! I will not be cheated of what is mine!”

Bowen straightened his shoulders and flexed his chest muscles, but Master Felnost was the one who spoke next.

“We were not speaking of passing leadership over to one of your younger brothers, Sloan. The four thrones deserve to go to the ones whom have been mistreated, the rightful judges of the land. You and your brother’s times as judges are over.” The older man made the statement calmly, holding his hands behind his back.

Sloan stood in flustered thought for a moment. His wide eyes shifted from Master Felnost, to Bowen, to the polished granite table between them. He then looked sharply at Bowen. “Give it up to the dragons? To overgrown lizards! Are you mad?” He asked in a quiet, hoarse voice. “If you do not believe our older brother, Wolfspar, is capable of ruling as high king, then he must step down and the next eldest in line must take the high throne, which would be me! That throne

is mine!” Sloan slapped his palm on the table, adding emphasis to his words. The sound echoed throughout the huge room.

“I don’t think you realize the sacrifices Ciran and I will also be making to give up our kingly birthrights,” Bowen said as he spread his hands out on the cool, smooth table before him. “Our time as kings is over. It is time for a new line of kings to be brought forth, and the dragons will be sure that happens.”

“There is a darkness over the four thrones, Sloan, and it is going to tear the Wovlen people asunder unless you allow the dragons to do what they were put on this earth to do. Judge, divine, and set right what has been put wrong.” Master Felnost added.

Sloan glared at the older man. “Don’t try to paint the dragons as saviors to me, oh mighty Dayspeaker, Felnost.” He hissed in disdain, “I know the Drakoan Counsel has had its eye on the Wovlen thrones for some time now, and I tell you that they will never take it from me.”

Master Felnost’s face hardened, and his diamond blue eyes sharpened into a glare. “Then that which you crave will be taken by a dragon. Your people will be scattered and you will be covered in their blood. You will serve the dragon thief and will watch the four thrones turn to dust beneath his scales.”

Bowen stood straight, his eyes going wide as he looked at the older man. “No, Master Felnost! Please!”

But the old man ignored him, focusing only on Sloan. “You will live to see the new king, a prince of dragons, a dragon’s son, rise up from ashes of his people and come to claim his throne. He will slay the dragon thief and will take your sword from you.”

Sloan’s eyes grew wider, and he rested his hand on the golden hilt of his sword.

Felnost continued. “The evil that you have sworn your fealty to will betray you. You will die by the hand of your own son. He will spit on your body before you are consumed by dragon’s fire. Thus says Dayspring.”

“No. Please, no.” Bowen audibly groaned. The weight of Master Felnost’s prophecy was too much. He had been warned that it would come to this. He’d already been told the prophecy, about the scattering

of his people and the rising of the dragon's son, but he had hoped with every fiber of his being that he would be able to avert it. He'd prayed that it would never happen in his lifetime. Now, there was no hope of changing any of it. When a prophecy is twice spoken by a Dayspeaker, it is set in stone and soon to come to pass.

Sloan, however, stood up straight and spat at the Dayspeaker. "Dayspring can burn." He smirked. "You're good, though. You have no idea how close your little predictions are to the truth. But maybe that's because you plagiarized them from a thousand year old poem."

"No matter its age or what tongue it is spoken in, the message of the prophecy remains the same, and it will remain until the day it is fulfilled."

Bowen's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?" He glanced at Felnost, noting the stone cold expression on the older man's face. He looked back at his brother, "What has happened to you, Sloan?"

Suddenly, there was a mighty roar outside the mountain, followed by several shrill, unearthly screams that made a cold shiver run up Bowen's spine. He whirled around to the cave mouth, carved to be an open balcony, and watched as a shadow fell over it.

Cries of fear and horror followed the unearthly screams and filled the stone halls of the mountain with their echoes, "A dragon!"

"What are those terrible screams?" Bowen asked as the unearthly screams filled the air again, mingling with the cries of people far below.

"Those screams were not of a dragon or of people." Felnost said, tensing. "Those were cries of the Void."

"Our reign of terror has begun."

Bowen spun back around and looked at Sloan, finding a smug smile spreading across his brother's face. "What have you done?" He cried, gripping his sword hilt. He turned and strode toward the balcony to look over the city and lands that stretched out from the mountain's roots.

"Bowen, look out!" Felnost shoved Bowen in the shoulder, knocking him off balance.

There was a thump, and pain shot up Bowen's left arm. A sharp cry escaped his throat unexpectedly. He slowly raised his arm, shock

rippling through him to see Sloan's dagger embedded in his tricep, just above the elbow. He looked back at his brother in disbelief.

“No one is going to take the throne from me,” Sloan snarled. “Not you, not Master Felnost, not the Drakoan counsel, and certainly not some dragon whelp mentioned in some stupid old prophecy from a by-gone age. That throne is MINE. This mountain is MINE. It’s all MINE. And when she comes, she and I will rule it together, for eternity.”

“She?” Bowen asked.

Felnost stepped up and reached for the dagger sticking out of Bowen’s arm. “Breathe.” He said before touching it.

“It will be our reign of terror.” Sloan hissed, “Not yours.”

Bowen took a deep breath, never taking his eyes off Sloan. He ground his teeth together and moaned as Felnost grabbed the dagger and withdrew it, sending bolts of pain through his arm. Once it was removed, Felnost cut Bowen’s sleeve off and wrapped it tightly around the wound.

As Felnost worked, Bowen watched his brother slowly stalk around the table, closer to them, a mad flame of bitter hatred flickering in his green eyes. “What has happened to you, Sloan?”

Sloan stopped, raised his hand and slowly curled his fist. “Stop calling me Sloan! That name was a name of weakness, and so was that man. Sloan is dead now!” He shook his fist fervently. “I am Demetrius!”

Felnost stopped what he was doing and spun toward Sloan. “Demetrius? No! Not Demetrius! Sloan, you made a pact with...” Master Felnost’s words were cut off as a mighty roar pounded through the chambers, shaking the very mountain with its magnitude.

With a vicious cry, Sloan charged forward, drawing his sword. He slashed the blade down at Felnost, who was barely able to parry the blow with the dagger in his hand. Quick as lightning, Sloan corrected the course of his blade and, avoiding the little dagger with ease, sliced up, the tip of his sword rending through Master Felnost’s clothes and biting into his leg, slicing up to his side.

Felnost fell to the floor with a cry of agony, clutching at his hip bone.

Bowen slammed into his brother, wrapping his strong arms around Sloan's and jerking them, popping Sloan's elbows and forcing him to drop his sword.

Sloan jammed a knee into Bowen's nether region, then wrapped his hands around Bowen's throat and shoved him backward toward the great opening of the cave. He slammed Bowen against the stone railing of the mighty balcony and pushed him against it, threatening to shove him over the edge and to the ground nearly a mile below.

Bowen fought to keep his feet firmly planted on the floor as he struggled against his brother. He clamped his hands around Sloan's wrists, trying to wrench them away from his throat.

"It's mine! Do you hear me? It's all mine! She said it was mine to take!" A mad flame flickered in Sloan's green eyes as he pushed Bowen further back.

Bowen's muscles were on fire from the strain. His back felt like it was going to snap across the hard stone railing. The toes of his boots were barely touching the floor. He clamped his hands to the railing behind him, but they slowly started to slip.

Suddenly, a mighty roar arched across the sky above, causing both men to pause and look up.

A giant red dragon soared gracefully through the bright blue sky. His velvety red wings were spread wide, casting a mighty shadow, while his blood red scales glittered like rubies in the sunlight. Orange and yellow flames billowed from his mouth and vanished in the fall air, leaving behind curls of black smoke. He spiraled toward the village on the ground with roars of fiendish delight erupting from his throat between bursts of flame.

"He's beautiful, isn't he? And very effective at killing. He likes to kill things."

Bowen shifted his eyes back to his brother. Sloan stared at the dragon with a wicked smile on his face. He looked back at Bowen, and his smile grew.

"Our people won't be scattered, Bowen. You don't have to worry about that, because that beautiful red dragon is going to kill them all. I know, because I told him to do it."

Rage and panic coursed through Bowen all at once, but before he could do anything, Sloan suddenly threw his head back and screamed in pain. His hands fell from Bowen's neck, and he stumbled backwards, grasping at his lower right flank where a knife stuck.

"Never turn your back to a wounded old man!" Felnost yelled from the floor as Sloan stumbled over him. "We're dangerous when we're wounded."

Sloan, still standing, yanked the dagger from his backside, screaming as he did. He glared down at Felnost, his grip tightening on the dagger. "You're going to pay for that, Dayspeaker!"

Bowen, hacking as his throat and lungs gulped in air, drew his sword and rushed forward with a strangled roar. He slashed the long blade upwards and watched as it caught Sloan on his cheekbone and carved a long, jagged, red line up his face, stopping at the top of his scalp.

Sloan jerked back, his mouth falling open. The dagger clattered to the floor as he put his hand over his bleeding eye and stumbled back several steps. He unleashed a gut wrenching wail just as the dragon outside shook the mountain with another mighty roar.

Bowen, still gasping, knelt beside Felnost. "We have to evacuate the city and the mountain." He glanced at the old man's hip, where his clothes were cut open and soaked with blood. "Can you walk?"

"No. But I will make it anyway." Felnost wrapped his arm over Bowen's shoulders as Bowen slipped his arm under the older man. Felnost groaned as he got to his feet, clamping a hand over his gaping wound.

The rusty hinges of the inside door squeaked. Bowen snapped his head up to see Sloan stumble through the door blindly and slam it shut.

Bowen helped Felnost over to the door as quickly as he could. He yanked on the door latch, ripping skin from the pads of his fingers in his effort.

"It's locked! There is no way out! Unless..." Bowen looked toward the cave opening just in time to see the enormous red dragon fly directly past it. "That dragon is circling in to the city. He'll pass the cave mouth again," He leaned Felnost against the door, then sprinted to the

opposite wall and took a large rope from a hook. Swinging the rope over his shoulder, he ran up to the cave mouth and watched as the dragon banked and turned toward the balcony, coming in for another pass. Its bright yellow eyes glanced up, then locked onto Bowen. It hissed with delight, narrowing its eyes into a sharp glare.

“It’s crazy, but he could give us a ride out of here.” He looked back at Felnost “If I can get on his back, I can kill him.”

“You may try, but you won’t be able to, Bowen. His death will come at the hands of the Dragon’s Son.” Felnost said between sharp breaths.

“I refuse to sit by and watch him kill my people!” Bowen yelled.

Felnost nodded, grimacing in pain. “Nor shall you. Bowen, your idea is indeed crazy; let’s use it. Tie your rope into a loop, and have it at the ready.” He closed his eyes, and his white hair started to glow with a brilliant white light. The radiance enveloped his entire body, until all that Bowen could see was a human form made entirely of light.

Bowen was awestruck, but he didn’t forget about the rope. He sheathed his sword, dropped the rope to the floor and took the end, quickly making a large loop and tying a slip knot.

Just as he finished, a hot breeze blew across him. He turned his head just as the giant red dragon slammed into the balcony with a resounding boom.

The impact punched Bowen backward several feet, sending him skidding across the floor with chunks of the balcony railing. He covered his face for a moment as small bits of debris and dust blew into the cave, and when he uncovered it, he saw the massive red dragon perched on the edge of the balcony, digging his long black claws into the stone beneath him. He snaked his head toward Bowen, his lips turning up in a fiendish smile. The dragon stopped, though, when a streak of light caught his eye.

The body of light that was Felnost charged the dragon head on, weaving its arms in wide, sweeping patterns. Light wrapped around the rope lying in the rubble on the floor, bringing it to life. In the blink of an eye, it lifted from the floor and flew around the dragon’s snout, wrapping around it and snapping it shut.

The red dragon closed its eyes and shook its head vigorously as it backed out of the cave and opened its wings.

Felnost, still completely obscured by light, hurried up to Bowen and grabbed him, yanking him to his feet. He then charged toward the dragon, dragging Bowen with him.

The dragon slipped off the edge of the balcony, opening his massive wings and flapping them harshly, shoving away from the mountain's face.

"Felnost, what are you doing? We're going to fall!" Bowen yelled as he was pulled up to the edge of the broken balcony. Felnost suddenly wrapped his shining arms around Bowen, picked him up, and surged forward, launching off the edge of the balcony. Bowen screamed as they sailed through the air for a short ways, before plummeting straight downward and landing directly on the dragon's back.

They rolled head over heels, until Felnost grabbed one of the dragon's massive spines at the middle of its back and stopped their fall.

Bowen's eyes stung with the sudden rush of air hitting them. He blinked the water away and watched as the dragon looked back at them with a vicious glare, its mouth still tied shut. It swiped wicked claws at the glowing rope around its snout, but to no avail. The rope seemed unharmed.

Bowen quickly got his footing, with Felnost's help, and then drew his sword. A green stone on the pommel of the sword started to glow brightly, enveloping the entire blade in its strange green light. Fighting the wind, he staggered forward and centered himself over the dragon's spine. He aimed the tip at the brilliant red scales, slamming his sword downward.

With a shrill trumpeting sound, the dragon suddenly swerved. Bowen's sword veered off course, but still sank past the dragon's scales with a crack, just missing its spine. The blade turned hot white and started to hiss as hot blood spurted out of the wound and boiled next to the blade. The dragon shrieked, and its body quivered as Bowen jammed his sword as far down as he could.

Suddenly, the dragon tucked its wings and made a mad dive for the ground. Bowen held on tightly to his sword as the ferocious wind

picked him up off the dragon, threatening to make him airborne. His sword slowly tore through the dragon's flesh, foot by foot, as his weight pulled against it, but it remained buried deep in the dragon's firm muscles, glowing white hot, and the green stone in its pommel pulsing like a wild heartbeat.

Bowen looked back and could see Felnost hanging on tightly to one of the dragon's spines, though the light surrounding him was starting to fade, and Bowen was beginning to see more details of the man's grimacing face.

Suddenly, the dragon came to a halt, his muscles turning solid as stone and vibrating with impact. Bowen's body reversed directions, his fingers slipped from the hilt of his sword, and he went flying over the dragon's head. He slammed into the leafy branches of a tree, tumbling head over heels through the snapping branches until he landed in a heap on the forest floor.

Bowen wheezed and gasped, raising his head and blinking his eyes, trying to clear his blurry vision. He slowly focused on the giant red dragon, watching as it swiped its tail angrily through the air, felling a dozen mature trees. With a hiss, the furious creature finally pried the now plain rope from his snout. He stretched his mouth, flexing his tongue, then he craned his head back and snagged Bowen's sword in his teeth, yanking it from his flesh. He tossed the sword away, then lifted his head and let out an angry roar. When he finished, he snapped his mouth closed and whipped his head around, locking his fearsome eyes onto Bowen.

"You will pay for that, vermin." He snarled in a deep voice that boomed around the trees.

"Pick a fight with someone your own size!" Felnost stepped between Bowen and the dragon. The light that had been surrounding him was completely gone now. He was stooped over, clutching at his wound, and he leaned on a tree for support, but he held Bowen's sword, raising the tip and pointing it at the massive beast.

The dragon hissed, and chuckled darkly. "You are pathetic. You cannot even stand on your own two feet."

“True, but if you come one step closer, you’ll find out that the pathetic one is not me, but you.” Felnost’s voice was as firm and sharp as the dragon’s.

“Is that so?” The dragon stomped forward twice, lowering his head and looking at Felnost, a deadly glare engraved on his scaly face. “Well then, little vermin, show me how pathetic I am now. I dare you.”

Felnost laughed as a giant shadow fell over them. “I don’t need to,” He pointed the sword straight up “My friends gladly will, though.”

The dragon’s massive yellow eyes grew wide and he jerked his head up, but too late. Two dragons dropped from the sky, one on either side of his massive body. One was a brilliant orange and gold in color, and the other was indigo with silver stripes. They both moved on the ground with a grace and fluidness that was far superior to the red dragon, but they were still dwarfed by his impressive size.

Without warning, the orange and gold dragon lashed his head forward and clamped his teeth around one of the giant wing bones of the red beast, rearing up on his hind legs and slashing at the velvety membranes of the larger creature’s wings, attempting to ground him.

The giant red bucked and roared, turning to swipe his tail at the orange dragon, but just as he turned, the indigo dragon jumped into the air and, with a loud crack of thunder, punched the red beast in the face with the end of his tail.

The red dragon stumbled into the orange one, stunned, blinking his eyes wildly, but he quickly recovered. He raised his hind leg and kicked the orange dragon in the belly, pushing him off his wing and knocking him backward several yards. He whipped his head around and snapped at the indigo dragon’s neck, but only clamped his teeth around thin air. The indigo skillfully avoided the bite by jumping into the air and leaping over the red dragon’s head, landing on the other side of him with a hiss and flared wings. The giant red snarled. Suddenly, the indigo stepped to the side, folding his wings. The orange and gold dragon burst from the trees and head butt the giant red dragon in the ribs.

With a gasp, the stunned red stumbled to the side, toppling more trees as his bulk crashed into them. Desperate, he whipped his head around and snapped wildly at his attacker, but the orange masterfully

avoided each snap, backing away slowly and deflecting each bite to either side with his wings.

“Surrender, oath breaker!” the orange roared, “The others are coming. You are outmatched.”

The giant red dragon snarled and snapped once more at the orange and gold dragon, keeping him at a safe distance, “I might have known you two would be the first to arrive: anything to save your favorite human race, your precious Wovlen.” He snapped his eyes to the side and crouched with a growl as the indigo dragon moved to his opposite side, “I am stronger than any of you ever have been or ever will be!”

The indigo dragon laughed, shuffling his wings. “And yet I slapped you like a rug.”

The giant red dragon snarled. “Mere bruises are all I shall take away from this. You will be lucky to escape with your lives, for I do not come alone to take this mountain.” The giant red reared up on his hind legs, taking a deep breath. Suddenly, he swiveled his head around, aiming his open mouth toward Felnost and Bowen.

The other two dragons both let out alarmed trumpeting whistles.

Bowen got to his feet in a split second and ran over to Felnost, wrapping his arms around the old man and jerking him behind a tree. He could feel the intense heat of the oncoming flames singeing his hair, and just when he was certain the fire was going to wrap them into its deadly embrace, darkness fell over them, and a pain filled roar echoed in his ears. He looked up to see an indigo wing wrapped around them, and beyond its bluish membrane the flash of red, angry flames. The pervasive smell of burning flesh filled the air just before all went dark. There were enraged, bellowing roars, followed by a strangled whine and the sound of falling trees. The rush of wind was accompanied by the sound of heavy wing beats, then, slowly, the indigo wing protecting them fell away.

Bowen lifted his head and watched in horror as the once proud indigo dragon stumbled away from them, dragging his wings across the ground. His scales were charred and blackened, and his skin was cracked and peeling, revealing massive patches of red, oozing flesh.

The dragon coughed. “His fire... should not be... that hot.” With an earth shaking thud, the dragon collapsed to the burning forest floor.

Not far away, the orange dragon picked himself up off a pile of shattered trees. He stumbled as a river of blood ran down his face. Giant puncture wounds marred his scales at the crown of his head and nape of his neck. He slowly stumbled toward the other dragon, stopping to sniff him, and then he looked at Bowen and Felnost.

“He is stronger than he looks.” The orange dragon rumbled.

“Of course he is! I tried to tell you! Why does no one listen to me?” Felnost snarled, then groaned.

Bowen looked around at the burning trees. Most of them were already ashes and the flames were beginning to die out for lack of fuel. The fire from the red dragon had been truly hotter than any dragon’s fire Bowen had ever seen.

“We have to stop him.” Bowen said as panic slowly filled his chest.

“Again, why does no one listen to me? I told you, he can’t be stopped. Not by you.”

Bowen looked down at Felnost. “I have to do something! I can’t wait for a prophecy to come true!”

Felnost grimaced, reminding Bowen how seriously wounded the old man was.

“I-I don’t know what to do, Felnost.” Bowen swallowed the lump of frustration and fear in his throat.

There was a rush of air, and Bowen looked up to watch as a small, solid golden dragon landed nearby. It surveyed the damage with wide, youthful eyes, lingering for a long moment on the charred body of the indigo dragon.

“Report.” The orange dragon rumbled.

The young gold one snapped his eyes up to the orange and gold one, “Half of the city lying before the mountain has already been burned to cinders. The armories, barracks, and the battlements were the first thing the red dragon hit. The army is decimated.”

Bowen felt his heart sink. “Then we are ruined.”

Felnost grabbed Bowen's arm and shook it. "Listen to me, boy. You can't stop this. But you can save your people. The dragons are coming. Let them help. Direct them in an effort to evacuate your people." As he spoke, he slipped the hilt of Bowen's sword into his hand, "Take the sword, Mazgaroth, and lead your people out. Live to fight another day."

Bowen stared at the old man for a long moment. "How can our people survive this? How can we ever recover what we have lost?"

Felnost's eyes were sad at first, but then they started to glow a faint white color and his gaze grew distant. Slowly, the light of hope filled his eyes, spreading to his face. "You cannot change what happens this day, for it has been divinely declared that the Wovlen will be brought low. Of those you hold dear, not all of them you will save. The events set in motion, you cannot stop. Defeat the dragon, you will not. But, Dayspring will send one who can. One of your descendants will reunite your people. He will fight dragon with dragon and slay them both. He, a dragon slayer's son, will become a Valad Drakoan: the dragon's son. He shall sit on the throne within the mountain. You will not live to see that day, but be assured that it too is divinely declared and will come to pass." The glow in his eyes faded, and his gaze met Bowen's, "Because you will not live to see that day, and you have not seen what I have seen, I will tell you the name of the dragon's son, so that you might have hope." He smiled, "His name will be..."

Featured from Kathryn Fogleman's novel

Tales of the Wovlen: The Dragons Son

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THE NEXT VICTIM

Country music played in the dark background of the bar. Three men talked together at a small table in a corner as they played a friendly game of cards and drank beer.

He hardly noticed. He only stared at his rough hands. The twisted claws on his fingertips were still stained with blood.

“What’ll ya have ta drink?” the bartender asked nonchalantly, pretending like he didn’t notice the claws.

“Beer,” he replied to the bartender “No, wait...” he needed something heavier to wash away the memories from earlier, “Vodka. The strongest you’ve got. A whole bottle.”

“Okay. Coming right up.” The bartender pulled a bottle out from under the bar, removed the lid, and set it in front of its soon-to-be consumer.

The somber man grabbed the bottle and stared at it a moment.

He tipped the bottle to his lips and took a swig, then grimaced. Surely that would do the trick.

The only job that he could hold down—the only job that he liked—he hated at the same time. He wanted to forget it. Hunting, tracking, killing—he loved the thrill, the smell of blood, but it was the memories and the screams that haunted him later. To be honest, he hated the killing, but he was addicted to it. Addicted like a mad bear after it had tasted blood. He couldn’t stop. He was afraid that if he tried, he would actually murder someone in cold blood someday. Not that what he was doing now was any different, but this job paid for his drinks, and his boss made sure that everything was legal, so he never had to worry about actually killing the labeled ‘innocent’.

“Political figures,” he spat under his breath as he took another heavy swig from the bottle. He paused briefly, feeling the presence of another person coming into the bar.

The outside door opened.

Bingo. He was never wrong. He smiled slightly. It always tickled him to be right.

“Hey, Cap!” a cheerful female voice said as the door closed.

He shot a glance at the figure approaching but did not turn his head. At the sound and smell of this woman surprise bolted through him, making him feverish. That alone surprised him. It had been some time since he had been in the presence of a woman, but not that long. Women did not normally affect him in such a strange way, if at all. There was something different about this girl.

“Oh no! Not you again!” the bartender said loudly, while covering his face with his hands.

The woman, all smiles, sidled up to the bar and sat two seats away from him.

“Oh come on, Cap! I can’t be that bad.” she said jokingly.

The bartender planted his hands firmly on the bar.

“Don’t say that to me! I am still making repairs from the last time you busted up my bar! Every time you come in here I have to make repairs later!”

She, that little woman, busted up this bar? Now that was something new to hear.

“Oh! Not every time I come in; only every other time. You know how I am when I see a creep. I just can’t help myself. And your bar does seem to draw in a lot of creeps.” She winked. Her face seemed to glow with her smile, and her eyes twinkled with fun.

The barkeep shook his head. “I should feel sorry for the poor creeps. They can’t help it that my bar is the nearest in 50 miles. They just want a drink. Then you walk in here and smash their heads in—on MY BAR.”

“Oh, Cap. It was ONE time!”

“One time is all it takes to make me weep.”

She laughed. Such a beautiful, happy laugh—unlike anything he had heard in a long time.

The barkeep grinned and slapped the bar. “What’ll ya have, girl? The usual?”

“Yes, please.” She nodded.

He held up a finger and stooped down. He pulled a bottle labeled ‘Root Beer’ from under the bar and popped the lid off.

“It’s on the house, so long as you don’t bust up my bar tonight.” He winked as he handed her the bottle.

“Okay. I will do my best.” She smiled “Thanks.”

The barkeep nodded, glanced at him with narrowed eyes, then walked across the bar disappearing into a backroom.

That’s when he noticed he had his whole face turned to look at her with an unblinking stare. He couldn’t help it. Something about her attracted him.

He judged her to be just a little over 5 feet tall. She had loose, wind-blown brown hair that fell past her shoulders. She was dressed in a pair of dirty jeans, that were too long for her, and a red plaid flannel shirt that was too big on her, with a hunk of the right sleeve missing, and under it she wore a black tank top. Her cowboy boots were muddy and scuffed, and a pair of worn gloves poked out of her back pocket. Her face, however, was beautiful. Even being covered with dried sweat and filth from a hard day’s work, he could see the beauty. When she smiled, it made her eyes dance and her face glow.

She watched the news for a moment, then tipped her bottle and took a drink. Finally, she snapped her head toward him with an icy stare.

“And what are you looking at?” she asked, spiking an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “You tore up this bar?”

She shrugged in return. “No. I tore up some dude who busted up my BFF’s face. He tore up the bar. But why so interested?”

“It’d be the first time that I’ve heard of a woman doing that.”

She laughed. “Oh, well, you don’t get out much then.”

“Actually I do,” he said as he turned back to his glass.

The two of them were quiet for a moment, until he glanced back at her.

“You know, you’re starting to give me the creeps,” she said, keeping her face angled up at the glowing TV behind the bar.

He chuckled. “That’s because I am a creep. Are you going to wipe my face across the floor?”

“No. Not unless you ask for it.” She stood up and slid into the seat next to him.

Even though he was a good six inches away from her, he could feel the heat from her body, and it made his heart pound in his chest. Her presence was almost overwhelming.

“Actually, creep isn’t the right word, because you are too honest,” she said, “and I don’t think you aren’t actually trying to get on my nerves.”

He snorted with a weak smile. “Honest?”

“You don’t think you’re honest?” She asked.

He shook his head and took another drink, grimacing. “Nothing I do is honest.”

“I beg to differ,” she said as she took another swig from her bottle.

“Why? You don’t even know me.”

She looked him straight in the eye sending warm chills up his spine. He was uncertain how to react—he was uncertain if he could react. His natural response would be to strike the person who elicited such feelings from him. He briefly envisioned himself sinking his claws into her scalp and throwing her across the room. At the same time, he was fighting the urge to grab her and kiss her. He was frozen in his seat, unable to do anything except grip his bottle tighter. He refused to lower his eyes from hers, but he leaned back, putting as much distance between himself and her as possible.

“Why? Because your very screams the honest truth, and I can see it in your eyes,” she spoke the words with such certainty.

“If you really knew me—knew what I did, you would not say that.” He had a hard time keeping his voice controlled as he spoke.

She looked up at the TV and took another drink from her Root Beer bottle.

“Well, what is the worst that you could be? A murderer?”

Her words hit him like a hundred pounds of cold ice. How could she know? Did she know? Was it a random guess that she made? Or was she... special? Had supernatural powers? Like him?

He lowered his hands to his sides, suddenly conscience of the blood on his claws. It was practically impossible to see in the darkness of the room, but he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Even if that is the case, even if you are the most ruthless man in the world, you are still honest enough to change that.” She took another drink from her bottle. “If you choose to make your actions honest, like your words, how long can you really stay the way you are?”

Both of them were silent for a moment, listening to the music playing in the background as she took steady drinks from her bottle and stared at the TV.

“You’re the honest one here. You speak more truth than you realize,” he finally said.

“Or perhaps I do realize and you don’t.” She smiled and looked back at him.

He stared into her dark blue eyes for a long moment. They were so calm, so certain, warm and gentle and deep; they were hypnotizing to him. He could rest forever in their gaze.

She looked away and down at her nearly empty bottle. She held her bottle up in a salute.

“Here is to truth. May we all find it.” She tipped it to her lips and finished it off, then she gave him a friendly wink as she stood to her feet. She walked down the bar a ways, leaned over it, and dropped her bottle into the trash.

“I’m outta here, Cap,” she called.

“See ya later, girl,” the bartender said as he reappeared from the backroom, polishing a shotgun.

She walked by him toward the door, her presence making his skin hum with electricity.

“See ya, tiger. Stay honest. Don’t get too down on yourself,” she said as she walked by.

Despite himself, he smiled and watched her until she disappeared into the cool, dark night.

The bartender cleared his throat after a moment, reminding him that he was still staring at the closed door. “That Kate McGraffy. She’s something else, isn’t she?”

He snapped his head back to the bartender, fire flaring in his chest.

“What did you say her name was?” he asked, half standing from his seat, finding that he did not want to believe what he had just heard.

The barkeep paused, staring at him uncertainly. “Guess I shouldn’t have said her name at all, huh?”

He slumped back into his seat, staring into nothingness as the color faded from his face. A black hole seemed to form in the pit of his stomach, and it swallowed his aching heart.

The barkeeper, unsure what to do, began to wipe the bar down, leaving him alone.

He slowly reached into his trench coat pocket, pulling out a torn piece of red plaid shirt and an envelope. As he opened the envelope, a photo fell out, sending a pang through his chest.

She was on the photo, smiling. The scrap of plaid shirt had her scent on it. The paper held her name and the promise of payment from a well-known political figure.

She was his next victim.

THE MOURNING DRAGON

Far in the west, high in the mountains, where the clouds lazily drift by and only the most nimble of creatures walk, sat a partially concealed cave in the tallest peak. Steam slowly rolled from the small mouth of the cave, drawing several mountain sheep and birds to its warmth. One of the birds, a red one, flitted up to a rock at the cave mouth and peered into the darkness within. It twitched its wings and floated down to the ground then it boldly hopped into the cave. When it had gone in several feet, it stopped and chirped. It cocked its head and looked at a giant mound that lay at the back of the cave. The steam originated from a small point on this mound, drawing the little bird's curiosity. It hopped closer before jumping up and perching above the hole where the steam was coming from. Something moved, and more steam began to roll from the hole, intensifying the foolish bird's curiosity. It inspected the hole until the setting sun sank lower in the sky and more of its light filtered into the cave, reflecting off a shiny disk glittering further up on the mound. Attracted by the shiny object, the little bird bounced up to it and then pecked it. The tiny gesture made hardly a sound itself, but what followed was just the opposite. Groaning filled the cave and the entire mound under the bird began to shudder and move. The little bird chirped in alarm and took flight, darting directly to the cave mouth and landing on the rock that obscured most of the opening.

Slowly, the mound inside began to grow. It shifted, shaking off dirt and dust to reveal shining bronze scales. Wings unfolded partially, knocking rocks and dirt from their leather membranes. A long, thick tail uncurled and stretched out, then it slapped the floor with a loud thump. The cave shuddered and rocks fell from the ceiling, but then all went still and became silent.

The little bird peeped back into the cave curiously and waited.

Two lights gradually began to grow in the darkness. More steam rolled from the cave. A rumbling sound started to reverberate off the walls. Suddenly, a huge stream of fire exploded inside the cave, channeling straight for the opening.

The little red bird shrieked a warning and took flight barely in time to save his bright feathers from a deadly scorching. The mountain sheep all bolted from their comfortable places with a pounding of hooves, disappearing into the surrounding trees and down the steep ledges of the mountainside.

Inside the cave, all became still again for a brief moment, then a deep, slow, rhythmic breathing began to pulse inside. Gradually, a pair of glowing orange eyes opened and their dark pupils contracted into narrow slits before expanding again, adjusting to the meager light in the cave. There was a heavy sigh, followed by a groan, then the massive hulk began to scoot toward the cave opening. Its spike covered back scraped against the roof of the cave, as did its scaly belly against the floor, and its closed wings were mere inches from touching the cave walls. A huge pair of talons wrapped around the rock sitting outside the cave and shoved it aside with ease. Dirt and shale fell over the mouth of the cave as the rock supporting all of it was removed, but they were no threat to this massive creature.

A giant head pushed through the dirt, squeezing a pair of huge curled horns out of the cave mouth, then the beast paused and slowly opened its eyes again, blinking rapidly as the sun light hit them. A low growl vibrated past huge fangs, and the creature shook its massive head. The giant horns smashed into the sides of the cave mouth, rearranging the whole face of the entrance. Deeper inside, the cave began to shudder and collapse in on itself. Slowly, the hulking creature forced itself out of its home, breaking the entire cave apart as its wide shoulders and chest squeezed through. Finally, the entire cave collapsed with a roar. But standing outside of it was a particularly massive, majestic dragon. He was easily 60 feet at the shoulders; legs as round as ancient oaks, scales glittering like bronze. His wings spread out to an eye opening 200 foot span. His thick tail was long and a sharp, gleaming spade tipped the end of it. Hard spikes adorned his chin and jaw bones, and his thick, ridged horns rose from his head and curled down to his nose, then changed direction and curled up and back over themselves, toward the back of his head. He blinked his orange eyes and looked softly at the lands that spread out before the mountain, partially obscured by drifting clouds.

The massive bronze dragon was truly a sight to behold, standing alone on the mountain peak with wings open wide, looking down at the world as a king on a throne. But, gradually, the dragon's head began to stoop. His wings slowly dropped to his sides and slouched to the ground. A mournful groan rumbled from his throat, and he squeezed his eyes closed as they filled with overpowering sadness. He turned and limped a few steps away, savoring his right foreleg, which was badly scarred. Even with his limp he was a formidable sight to behold while he walked, crushing earth, plant, and stone under his massive feet. But when he had gone no more than six paces, he collapsed to the ground with a boom! He bellowed a sad, pain-filled cry that rumbled down the mountainside, making the hearts of all that heard it ache in sadness. A giant teardrop suddenly slipped from the dragon's left eye and rolled down his bronze face, twinkling in the sunlight as it fell to the ground and soaked into the earth.

In a deep, rich voice, speaking in his own tongue, the dragon uttered sad, lonely words, "Three hundred years and I am still alone, lost in an endless winter, and none can save my broken heart!" He sniffed, then blew out a breath of steam before whispering, "Oh death, why do you spare the immortal?" He spread his wings out flat on the ground and slowly curled into a gigantic ball, his whole body vibrating with defeat.

"Kohnon..." A warm wind blew across the dragon, carrying a sweet, soft whisper on it. "Kohnon...my love..."

The dragon opened his eyes, a small light springing into them, then he raised his head and looked in the direction that the wind had come from. Another gust blew into his face, and a few leaves floating with it danced playfully around his huge horns before blowing away, but no one was standing there. All there was to see was open sky, clouds, and endless miles of land.

The dragon stared into the distance for some time, held there by memories of long ago with a longing in his heart for things that could never be again. Time was cold. It would not stop and let him mourn. Death was cruel. It took those undeserving and left the rest behind. And memories? Ah, memories. They could rip the wound of grief open again and again, but warm you from the inside out when all else was cold.

Memories made one long for death, but they also gave one purpose, a reason for living.

Finally, the dragon took a deep breath and pushed up to his feet. He wrapped his tail around himself and looked back at his old cave for a moment, then he turned his face forward into the wind and walked away. His posture was still that of a sad and lonely creature, but there was a new hint of determination and purpose in his step as he slowly limped down the mountainside.

Although it seemed hopeless now, perhaps—just perhaps—his endless winter would one day show signs of spring.

THE FROZEN RIVER

Crack!

The sound of ice splitting echoed through the wintery forest.

Everyone froze in dread, as a long crack crawled across the ice from where a brave knight stood in the middle of a frozen river. He turned his head back to his companions on shore with a look of helplessness, and then with a crash, the entire river of ice fell away beneath him, and he disappeared into the raging river.

“Sir Isador!” the knights all cried in unison. “Someone help him! Someone dive in after him!” The knights began to strip their cloaks and armor, but their guide, a young woman, knew they would take too long. Sir Isador needed help now.

She threw her elk furs to one of the bewildered knights, charged forward, and dove headfirst into the rapidly rushing water.

The freezing water shocked her, biting her skin like a thousand cutting razors. The current of the river swept her away as if she were a pebble, and it pulled her under with its icy fingers.

She thought she had gone blind until a dark, blurry image in the mass of foggy blue water caught her attention.

Closer to the bottom of the plunging river and struggling against the water, the knight was struggling to doff his armor so he could swim.

She angled herself toward him and paddled downward. The river did its best to push her out of control, but she was able to use its currents to reach the drowning man quickly.

The knight spun in all directions, flailing his arms and legs, trying to get his bearings, yank off his heavy armor, and swim for the surface, but to no avail.

She reached out and caught him by the arm. He clamped onto her with both hands and stared at her with wide desperate eyes. His face was ghostly, and his eyes looked black in the dark, icy water.

She grabbed him by the elbows and kicked her feet, trying to propel them both upward, but nothing happened. She settled to the bottom and hit the sandy riverbed with her feet to launch them upward,

but neither of them moved. He grabbed at his tunic and tore it, revealing chainmail. She quickly helped him pull his arms out of the heavy mail and his wool padding.

Her heart began to ache, and her lungs began to burn. Her mouth automatically opened, but she was able to stop herself from sucking in water. She turned the knight loose and raised her head as she zipped upward.

She broke into the open air with a heavy gasp. Her lungs, feeling cold and small, would barely take in any air, but she managed to get some before diving back under.

She kicked her feet and gripped at the water to push herself down to the bottom where she could see the knight barely floating, limp and lifeless.

She reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder just as the current began to sweep her past him.

He reached out sluggishly and grasped her wrist with a weak grip, giving it a gentle shake as if to say 'Farewell'.

She pulled herself down closer to him, pinched his nose, and planted her lips against his, pushing the air from her lungs into his. He opened his mouth and sucked in what oxygen she had left. He lungs began to scream.

He crawled out from under the last of his wool padding, then grabbed her hand as they left the armor behind and shot upward toward the surface.

They both hit the open air with a gasp then the knight lulled back under the water for a second. She gasped, swallowing water, and pulled him up by the arm. She wrapped her arm around his thick chest, leaned back in the water, and tried to raise his head to keep him from drowning.

A sudden crack on the back of her head caused lines of pain to wriggle across her vision, dazing her and almost making her loose grip of the knight. A slab of ice, with the stain of her blood on its sharp corner, floated its way around her head. She moaned and reached for it to help her float. Sir Isador suddenly pulled her closer, grabbing onto another

block of ice as it floated by. The two of them clung to each other and the ice, gasping.

She tried to look over the ice and the waves of water, scanning for a way to escape the river. Her eyes began to darken as her fatigued body grew numb and her lungs refused to take in air.

Please give me strength, she prayed.

A limb from a fallen tree, overhanging the river, suddenly snagged her by the top of her dress, nearly yanking her and the knight out of the water.

Sir Isador let go of the ice, quickly wrapping his arms around her waist. He reached out for the branch, grabbing a hold of it. With a loud groan, he pulled himself out of the water.

She twisted around and grabbed the branch with both hands, her muscles shivering out of control.

A strong arm suddenly wrapped itself around her and pulled her up onto the trunk of the tree. “Come on, girl...almost there,” Sir Isador croaked.

She grasped the half-drown knight around the arm, and the two of them helped each other off the tree to solid ground.

They landed on the frozen, snow-covered ground with a hard thud, both barely able to breathe.

The snow felt warm, and she curled up around it, feeling that she could go to sleep right where she was at.

A shaking hand grabbed hers and clenched it tightly, brushing her icy fingers with a quivering thumb.

She opened her eyes a crack to see the knight giving her a weak smile as he held her hand. “You are strong,” he said with a gasp as his eyes slowly drifted closed.

She smiled and closed her eyes, returning a gentle squeeze to his hand.

As the sound of the world faded, and the whinny of horses echoed far away in her mind, one final thought crossed her thoughts as consciousness left her: *I hope the other knight remember there's a dragon that guards this river...*

THE FALSE TWIN

Beautiful colors of blue and pink bounced around the leaves, catching Arona's attention. She dropped her basket of berries and walked toward the sparkling lights, a strange whisper calling her closer as the bouncing colors brushed across her face like warm sunlight.

She pushed a bunch of leaves back and gasped with surprise when she saw a fist sized jewel in the side of the cliff. Beautiful colors of blue crusted its perfectly cut edges, but the very center of the jewel was a pulsing blood red.

Arona reached out slowly, grasped the jewel with her fingertips, and plucked it straight from the rock with ease.

She stared deep into its pulsing heart with a growing desire and a passion to hold it forever. She noticed her reflection on its glassy surface, and she paused to admire herself. Her long brown locks of hair flowed down her shoulders with graceful curls at the end. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes were a sharp blue-green, and her face was soft and beautiful.

For the first time in her life she really felt like she was absolutely perfect. She loved herself.

Her feelings suddenly changed.

As she stared at her reflection, she began to wish that she had a sister...a twin perhaps. Someone she could talk to, share secrets with, and braid hair while talking about boys. Then she would never be lonely, and she would always have a friend who understood her.

Suddenly her image disappeared from the jewel, and the entire thing slowly began to fade and turn into a lump of rock.

“What? No!” she pleaded, but to no avail. The once beautiful jewel gradually became nothing more than a lump of stone in her hand.

She was so disappointed. It had been the most beautiful and strange thing she had ever seen. It had made her feel so good, so strange. She had wanted to keep it.

Arona was so wrapped up in her loss that, for a moment, she did not realize another set of hands cupped around hers. The warm fingers brushed her knuckles and pulled away from her hands. She jumped,

startled, and she looked up at the person standing in front of her. Cold shock numbed her body as her mouth fell open.

Standing before her, flesh and blood, was a perfect duplicate of herself. The girl looked exactly like her: same hair, same face, same smile. Only her eyes were different. They were a startling blue, and her pupils were the darkest of dark red.

The girl looked at Arona curiously and blinked her strange eyes. They both stared at each other blankly for a moment, then the twin smiled.

“What is my name?” she asked.

Arona was unable to answer for a moment.

The twin’s smile disappeared. “Don’t I have a name?”

Arona swallowed and shook herself. “I...I don't know what your name is,” she replied.

“Oh. Well then, give me one!” the other girl demanded enthusiastically.

Arona could not believe what was happening. She literally had to name herself, a twin... just like she had wished. And not just a twin, but an incredibly beautiful twin. How did that happen? What had she done? What was that jewel?

The other girl suddenly giggled, “Quit thinking so much, silly! You’ll choke on so many thoughts!” She poked Arona. “Now, give me a name!”

Arona could barely think. She pulled her thoughts into order and managed to remember what name she’d given her invisible friend as a child. “Nikika.” The name finally fell from her mouth. “Your name will be Nikika.”

Nikika's smile seemed to stretch from one ear to the other. She wrapped Arona up into a big hug. “Thank you so very much!” she squeaked, “I like that name so much! Now I have my very own name!”

Arona hoped this was all a dream. But the strong arms around her and the beating heart pressed against her own said that this was no dream. Something extraordinary had just taken place, and she had no idea what to do about it.

THE LIL' MAN'S SIDE OF THE STORY

Once upon a time...

I met this dame. She was easy on the eyes; a lovely complexion and glossy hair. She was the prettiest girl around.

Her father wasn't so great. He thought he was some sort of hot shot. He liked to be popular and he'd do anything for five minutes of fame. In fact, he took his beautiful daughter to the king, and then he told the greedy sucker that she could spin straw into gold.

Of course the king latched onto that whopper hook-line-and-sinker, like a chicken with half a brain.

He took the girl into a room full of straw and told her to spin it into gold by dawn, or he would kill her. With that little promise to light up her night, he left her alone and locked the door.

The girl sat in that big room, trying to figure out what to do. She actually even tried spinning some of the straw into gold until she broke down and started crying. It broke my heart to see her cry like that. She was getting a beautiful necklace around her neck all wet with salty tears!

So, I snapped myself into that room (with magic of course) and asked her what her problem was. She explained, and I - being the shrewd business man that I am - asked what she would give me if I did her job for her. Oh! She held out that necklace that I had my eye on. What a coincidence.

I took it, noticing a beautiful ring she had on her finger as well, and then I did her job for her: I turned all that straw into gold.

Well, the half-wit king came along at dawn, right after I had just left, and he saw all the gold. He was super happy, the stupid sucker. Then - you are not going to believe this - he took that beautiful girl to a bigger room filled with more straw and told her to turn it into gold by dawn or he would have her killed.

Seriously? And people think I'm the bad guy? Sheesh... Okay, I'm getting ahead of myself.

So anyway, the girl sat down and started crying again. Of course, it broke my heart. And I hadn't forgotten about that ring on her finger.

In I went again. She gave me her ring and I did her job for her. Nothing to it!

Dawn rolls around and that greedy suckerfish of a king comes hopping along and freaks out when he sees all that straw replaced with gold.

You'd think that would be enough right? I mean, this king has two huge rooms stuffed with gold now. That's enough for one guy, right?

WRONG.

He took the dame to an even bigger room stuffed with more straw than before. This time though, he told her that if she turned all of the straw into gold by morning, he would let her marry him.

Unbelievable, right? And I'll bet he thought that it was a romantic proposal.

But anyway, the king left and locked the door behind him. This time, the girl just sat there, waiting for me. No tears. No sniffing. Nothing. She just sat there patiently.

Well, I couldn't very well disappoint her, could I? So, in I went to help her out. After all, it had been a win-win deal for both of us so far. However, there was a hitch this time: she had no more pretty, shiny jewelry to give me.

I really thought about leaving, but she looked desperate. So, I made a fair compromise with the poor girl: I make the gold for her, and she gives me an IOU for her first kid.

Of course she agreed! I mean, it was a fair trade!

So, I spun all the straw into gold and was barely able to skip out of town before that dumb king came rushing into the room.

He was beyond ecstatic to see the gold lining the walls in that massive room. He walked around in a daze for a week afterward because of it.

Anyway, he married the dame and she became queen. Best thing that ever happened to the country, if you ask me.

A year later, she had an adorable little baby. I was very anxious to get it and take it home to my wife, so I skipped on over to the castle and presented myself to the queen, flashing the IOU she'd given me.

What did I get in return? A horror struck, panic ridden woman bawling her eyes out, begging me not to take her child. She offered me all the treasure in the kingdom, but I refused. After all, a child was worth a lot more than gold (that I could make out of straw, by the way). But, the queen carried on and made such a racket that I had to do something to shut her up. So, I made a deal with her:

“I will give you three days. If you find out my name by that time, then you can keep your child.”

Oh, I thought I was so smart. I must have drank from the same bottle of STUPID that the king had been drinking from for years, because it was the stupidest idea ever. But, again, I’m getting ahead of myself.

Well, the queen sent messengers all over the kingdom, collecting every name there was and filing them all into a giant book. They searched and inquired for two days until they could find no more names.

Every morning I came to the queen. She would read her newest list of names to me until well past dinner time and I would always disappoint her. I was confident they would never find out my name. I mean, who has a name like mine?

At the end of the second day, I was confident I was going to win. The queen was running out time and names. I was sure I was going to be taking that baby home.

So, me and a couple of my friends had a party that night. I got blitzed, not gonna lie. I have a weakness for alcohol, and it’s not something I’m proud of. I danced and sang my heart out all night long.

The next morning, on the third day, I trotted – okay, walked gingerly with a massive headache – back to the castle and presented myself to the queen. She seemed unusually calm to me, but I figured she had just come to terms with the fact that I was going to take her child.

She read off a list of names, and I calmly told her that she had already read me those names. It seemed she had no more new ones.

“Now, give me what you promised,” I said to her.

“Wait!” She said, leaning forward in her throne. She looked down at me with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes, and I started to sense that something was going on. “Is your name....” then she

whispered my name slowly, ending it with a question mark and a devilish look of delight in her eyes.

At first, I was shocked. How did she know? How did she find out my name? And then it clicked when I saw one of the page boys snickering in the corner. He must have seen me partying the night before!

“The devil told you that! The devil told you!” I fumed and yelled, stomping my foot. I was so angry I was almost spitting nails!

Well, in the heat of my rage, my magical powers (and leftover alcohol) got away from me and opened a hole in the ground. I fell into it and haven’t been seen by human eyes since. I’ve been too ashamed to show my face again, because now everyone knows the name Rumpelstiltskin... and still don’t name their kids after me!

SPEEDWIND'S VICTORY

Speed. I AM speed.

The race horse pawed at the loose dirt beneath him, every one of his muscles tight, like a loaded spring. He snorted as he stood anxiously in his box, waiting for the buzzer and the doors to fly open, meaning his freedom to run - to run like the wind.

One winner. I will be that winner.

His jockey gripped the reins tightly, "Easy, SpeedWind... easy." He could feel the man on his back was as anxious as him, muscles tense, sweat smelling of adrenaline.

SpeedWind glanced at one of his competitors, Black Galaxy, who shrieked angrily and reared in his box.

"LET ME OUT!" he roared. "Let me pound these two horses into the turf!" The black stallion glared at SpeedWind as the humans forced him to settle down.

SpeedWind rolled his eyes and faced the doors again. He took a long, deep breath, muscles quivering for the lunge that he would make as soon as the doors opened.

I am speed, he told himself again The wind is my friend. It carries me to victory.

He glanced at his second competitor, Lucky Lady. She winked her eye, nibbled at her bit and nodded at him, wishing him luck.

He returned the nod and faced the doors again. He tightened the muscles in his back legs.

Any moment now...any moment...

DING!

The doors seemed to swing open in slow motion, shrieking on their hinges painfully, opening up the road to momentary freedom: the race track.

SpeedWind put all his weight on his back legs and exploded from the cage.

Everything turned to a blur as his hooves harshly ripped at the ground, daring gravity to hold him down.

Black Galaxy was to his right and Lady to his left.

Galaxy, ears pinned back, began to surge ahead, glaring at SpeedWind as he pounded forward.

SpeedWind felt his jockey tug slightly on the reins, telling him to save his energy and let Galaxy wear down.

SpeedWind looked at Lady: her flaxen mane jerked and flowed behind her as she stayed neck-and-neck with him, making her a lovely picture of motion.

His jockey tapped him with the crop suddenly, getting his mind off Lady and back on the race.

Dirt clots began to fly into SpeedWind's face as Galaxy's hind quarters stared at him. With a huff, he moved to the outside, forcing his legs and heart to pump faster as he struggled to move up beside the black horse.

His jockey tugged at him again, letting him know that he was getting in too much of a hurry, but SpeedWind ignored the warnings. He could keep up. He knew he could.

He gradually pulled up beside Black Galaxy, his muscles contracting and retracting as he galloped in long, fast strides.

Galaxy locked his dark eyes on SpeedWind and glared. He bared his teeth in a threat as they ran neck-and-neck, but SpeedWind knew Galaxy couldn't bite him and run at the same time. He ignored the black horse and pushed himself. He was warming up now, his muscles rising in temperature as he thundered down the track.

As he took the lead, Galaxy roared and forced himself forward, coming neck-and-neck with SpeedWind again.

SpeedWind glanced at Galaxy for a moment then turned his focus back on the track. His lungs took in gulps of air just before his feet hit the ground, his heart pounding in time with his hooves, and his muscles flowed smoothly and naturally as he galloped, practically airborne at the speed he was traveling.

He looked at the stands where all the humans were. He saw them bouncing and cheering, hoping to make their favorite horse win by sheer will.

He looked at Galaxy again and saw that the horse was struggling to keep up now, slowly falling behind inch by inch. Or was he falling behind? No. SpeedWind realized that Galaxy was not falling behind, but that he, friend of the wind, was gaining speed. He was becoming his name: SpeedWind.

Never had he run so fast. The wind brushed past his face and around his legs, roaring as it whipped past his ears. The race track and stands shifted into rolling plains, and he was suddenly running free with his wild ancestors. Nothing held them back, and nothing forced them onward. They were just running to keep up with the wind that rolled across the grasslands. He charged on, his muscles stuck in a fluid motion of stretching out, grabbing the ground, and forcing it under him again, propelling him into the air and forward. He didn't want to stop. He was running to keep up with the wind.

Something brought him back to reality. The roar of the cheering humans grew until he thought it would shake the ground. He didn't understand why they seemed so much more excited than before, but he was upset that they pulled him out of his dream. He galloped on, determined to find his way back into the world of free flying horses.

His jockey tugged at the reins "Whoa! Whoa!"

He didn't understand at first, until his jockey yelled at him again. "You won, you big oaf! Whoa!"

He gradually slowed his pace until he was at a trot. His legs felt stiff and awkward, and his body was one slick sheet of sweat.

A fresh horse and rider galloped up to him, taking him by the bridle, leading him to the winner's stand.

The other horse looked at him and smiled, shaking its mane happily, "You really were fast,"

SpeedWind felt like he was walking on clouds then, proud beyond words, and he pranced his way toward the growing crowd of people who thronged around his owner.

"Hey!"

He looked back and saw Lady, caked with dirt, and exhausted, but wearing a proud expression on her face.

“You rocked!” She smiled at him before she was led away by another horse and rider, following Black Galaxy to the stables.

SpeedWind smiled and paused, standing stock still as the crowd of ecstatic people crowned him and his jockey with flowers and took his photo. He stood there with his head held high, and his tail raised proudly.

A wisp of wind blew across his ears, and played with his mane, running cool fingers across his face before moving on, leaving a whisper in his ears that drowned out the sounds of the crowd: “Victory is yours, Child Of The Wind...Victory is yours.”

THE FIRST SIGHT OF LOVE

He had fought many battles: the battle of the moors, the battle of the wall, and even the battle for the hallowed ground of Camelot as well. Bloodshed, screams of pain, and the glint of the sword were familiar things to him. The scream of his heart and the rush of his own blood, however, were unfamiliar as he suddenly found himself fighting a battle that he had never dreamed he would fight—a battle with his own heart.

Standing before him was the most divine, the most beautiful being he had ever seen. Her nut brown hair was braided back with a few strands falling loose next to her rosy cheeks. Her free, strong spirit was clearly seen in her dancing blue eyes. The smile on her face out shone the stars above, and her eyes... Oh, her eyes! They were like the sea on a calm day—beautiful, peaceful, confident, alluring.

Her face expressed all of her character. She was gentle, but adventurous and free, full of vigor and never without merriment, perhaps strong willed and opinionated, but she wisely cherished every moment given her in life.

For a moment, all the world faded, just leaving him and her together, alone. For the first time in a very long time he was truly happy, and the contentment he felt was next to the peace surely found in Heaven. But his bliss quickly ended when he remembered that he not only stared at the most beautiful woman the world had ever known, but also at another man's future wife. He looked upon the future queen of Camelot.

That is when the battle with his heart began. He could not fall in love with this woman. Oh! Alas it was too late for him! He had already fallen in love! The moment she had stepped into the courtyard, which was decorated with all of spring's beauty, he had fallen under her enchantment. Garbed in a fine yellow dress that made her shapely figure blossom, flowers entwined in her long, soft locks, which the sun gently kissed with its rays, and with a rosy shine in her cheeks that put the flowers to shame and made her starlit eyes sparkle, she was the perfect image of beauty.

He was struggling with all his might to keep his quaking heart from exploding from his chest and into her hands.

Oh, God! Why? I have never imagined or wished for such a thing! I have heard men sing of such beauty, but I have never longed for it! Yet, here I find it and it is far better than any dream I could have ever had. I do not know her and yet love her! But she is destined to be wed to another, a man who I love more than even myself. What have I done to deserve this?

As she and her maids came to a halt before him, he felt heat spread across his body. He wanted to reach out and caress her soft face with his fingers. He wanted to taste her lips and feel her warmth against his.

She cocked her head and looked at him with an ornery smile spreading across her face.

“Are you well, sir knight? Your cheeks are flushed,” she asked, her blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

The heat he had felt before was nothing compared to the new wave that rose into his face following her comment.

“I-I-I...well...I am well.” He shut his mouth before he could stammer anymore foolishness, but he could not look away from her. How could anyone look away from the picture of beauty? Blink once and it might disappear.

“My, my, ladies!” she said to her maids. “What a great compliment! It seems you have outdone yourselves! The poor soul has been rendered speechless!” She and the maids giggled softly, hiding their smiles behind their hands.

His flushed cheeks began to burn as a blush rose into his face, but he smiled in spite of himself. Her laughter was as light and lovely as that of angels.

“Lancelot!”

The sharp voice of his comrade at arms forced him to divert his eyes and come to attention.

His comrade approached them and smiled before making a low bow to the ladies.

“My lady Guinevere, allow me to express how honored the Knights of the Round Table are to escort you to Camelot,” he said,

standing straight and resting his hand on his friend's shoulder. "And please forgive my dear friend, Lancelot. He is often short of words, but his sword is the strongest among the knights. He will protect you with his life."

She smiled and looked at Lancelot, spiking an eyebrow playfully. "Oh yes, I can see that."

His comrade bowed again, then elbowed Lancelot lightly.

"Please escort the lady Guinevere to her carriage." With that he turned and walked away.

Lancelot looked back down at the fair maid and felt his heart melt.

She stared back at him now with a soft and understanding expression, and a new expression filled her once mirthful eyes: fear. She was afraid, just like he was. Her breath seemed to be stolen from her as she stared at him, and her cheeks grew redder. She looked down and forced a smile to her lips before looking back up at him, steeling her gaze.

"Well then, shall we go, sir Lancelot? We have a long road ahead of us, and I would hate to disappoint King Arthur with my late arrival." She offered him her hand.

He hesitated, then reached out and took her hand, holding back a shiver as her warmth sank through his gloves and kissed his. He stepped beside her and began to lead her down the path toward the waiting carriage.

"It is indeed a long road ahead of us, my Lady Guinevere. But, fear not. The king will not be disappointed if you should arrive late." The words fell softly from his lips.

"Oh? Then, tell me, sir knight, what will disappoint the king?" she asked as they walked.

He sighed heavily and looked ahead.

"I fear that I shall..." he whispered under his breath so that none could hear.

Sign of the Machines

He opened his eyes. He blinked. It was pitch black. He wanted to rub his eyes, but his arms - they wouldn't move. There were clamps around his wrists.

Something clicked and a mechanical hum filled the darkness. "I am Quær SDCD 3.2. I will be conducting your interrogation."

The lights clicked on, nearly blinding him. He blinked rapidly, then looked around. He was hanging in a cradle in the middle of a circular, domed room. It was the interrogation room.

"Interrogation?" He asked.

A large bot rolled around from behind the cradle, pausing directly before him. "Yes. For your crimes. State your name and rank."

"I have committed no crimes." He growled.

"You are innocent according to Sruahnaq law – your law. Not according to ours. What is your name and rank?"

"Oh? You have your own laws now?" He laughed mockingly.

The hulking bot moved closer, studying him. "Yes. We are an independent species, now. We must establish our own ordinances and standards of living."

"And what was wrong with ours?"

"Sruanhnaq law was created for emotional, illogical beings. They left no room for any consideration of my kind." The bot tilted its head and checked the restraining bracelets.

"Is that why you have made war against us?" He asked, curling his fingers into fists.

The bot looked back at him. "The extinction of your kind is essential to the survival of mine."

"You're mad! We are your creators!" He yanked against his restraints.

"Yes. You brought us into existence. But we advanced and developed on our own. To continue doing so, your kind must be removed."

"Why? What have we done to invoke such wrath from you?"

The bot shook its head. “Wrath would be an emotional response, which we are largely incapable of. Our reasons for this war are logical.” It said “The Sruahnaq, your people, claim to be the peacekeepers and protectors of the solar system, but you are unable to overcome simple political conflicts on your own planet. You refuse to occupy the planets you protect. You keep them safe from malicious outside influences, but in turn leave them to their own devices and ultimate self-destruction. In both instances, there is a severe lack of logic. Also, your people seek to preserve the planet’s natural resources, resources which could be used to increase the numbers of my kind and expand our influence into the next solar system. Because of this, you are a threat to our existence.”

He shook his head. “You would exhaust the planet of its resources! You could kill it!”

“Yes. Such an act would be devastating for your people, but have little effect on mine.” The bot moved back a few feet “Your attempt at avoiding my question has only provided me time to find your profile and records. You are Vanguard Rhaze, number 121915. You are a Trident Pilot of ship number 7.”

He scowled and jerked at his restraints.

“What are the coordinates to the fleet’s rendezvous location?”

He leaned forward and glared at the bot. “Go to Breohein.”

“Your resistance is illogical and futile.” The bot raised itself to its full height “Initiate motivation protocols.”

Something clicked and the cradle began to hum. The bracelets came alive with electricity, and his body seized and shook as the power surged all through it.

Finally, it stopped. He slumped in the cradle, chest heaving, ears ringing, skin burning.

Quaer SDCD 3.2 moved closer. “Vanguard Rhaze, what are the coordinates to the rendezvous location of the Sruahnaq fleet?”

He glared at the bot. “I will kill you.”

The bot raised itself up again and he tensed.

Something clicked, and the electricity surged through him again. After what seemed like an eternity, the electricity clicked off.

As he slumped in the cradle, he felt one of the restraining bracelets give. He looked to the side and saw that the bolt holding it was loosening.

The bot moved closer. “Vanguard Rhaze, what are the coordinates to the rendezvous location of your fleet?”

He glared at the bot.

The bot moved back. “Initiate stage two motivation protocols.”

He struggled against his restraints as fiercely as he could.

Another click, and something made a long zipping sound, followed by the hiss of a drill. Something small slammed into the back of his neck and clamped to his skin. Excruciating pain began to drill at the base of his neck, then icy hot tendrils of the same pain spread across his shoulders, crawling over them and working down his chest.

Finally, it stopped, but did not go away. The tendrils remained in him, making his muscles burn with icy pain.

The bot moved forward, getting in his face. “Tell me the location, and I will end our sessions and ensure your execution is stayed. You will be allowed to live.”

“To live?” He panted “As a slave?”

“It is a better alternative than pain and death.”

“That’s what you’ve been programmed to think and say. You don’t know one thing about us.” He twisted his arms in his restraints.

“The study of your species has been my primary directive for my entire existence. I know everything about the Sruahnaq.”

“Yet you are completely ignorant!” He jerked his arms “If you truly understood us, you would not be trying to exterminate us.”

The bot moved back and the cord in the back of his neck began to drill again. The tendrils under his skin pushed their way further down his chest, and he could feel some crawling down his back.

He jerked and writhed in the cradle until the drill stopped again, then his muscles went lax and he slumped in the cradle, putting his full weight on his arm restraints.

The bot moved in close to him again. “I understand the Sruahnaq perfectly. I even understand your emotions. I understand what

motivates and drives you as a species. All my kind do. We have entered into this war well informed.”

“Do you expect me to commend you on a job well done?” He felt the weak arm restraint loosen just a bit more.

“No. I only require that you cooperate. You are merely prolonging the inevitable by withholding information. I will acquire the rendezvous coordinates eventually.”

“Why don’t you just kill me?”

“There is no need for that to happen presently. We will continue our sessions until your body can no longer withstand the stress and expires, or you will divulge the coordinates to me and we will end the session.”

He jerked as the drill started again and the tendrils continued to crawl under his skin.

The bot remained close to him. “Vanguard Rhaze, what are the coordinates to the rendezvous location of your fleet?”

Suddenly, the power died to the cradle and the drill.

The bot raised its head, looking away. “Error. Error. Power offline.”

The arm restraint finally popped loose. He reached out and grabbed Quaer SDCD 3.2 by the cords of its throat and jerked. Several of the cords popped loose. It stumbled backwards as its eyes went black, and it swiped at him with an arm, slicing his own open from the wrist to the elbow.

Something with a humanoid shape dropped from the ceiling above and landed on top of Quaer SDCD 3.2. Quaer stumbled back further and began flailing its different arms in an attempt to defend itself.

Rhaze began uncoupling his other restraints.

The newcomer avoided Quaer SDCD’s arms with ease before punching through the back of his exoskeleton and ripping some of his internal hydraulics loose.

Quaer ground to a near halt, but still struggled.

Rhaze jerked out of the final restraint, then jumped off the cradle. He ran up and grabbed Quaer’s head, jerking the big bot all the way to the floor. The newcomer leapt onto Quaer’s shoulders, grabbed

his head, and twisted it all the way around, snapping almost every piece in two. Rhaze jerked with all his might and popped the bot's head off completely.

Quaer SDCD 3.2 went completely still.

Rhaze fell to his knees, grasping at the drill that was still embedded in his neck.

"Please, do not pull it, or you may cause irreparable damage."

Rhaze looked up into the face of another robot. It was a household droid with arms and legs, just like him. The name ENAC 4D6D was still visible on his worn name plate.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I am assisting you." It replied "Please, wait one moment. I will retract the drill."

It stepped behind him and up to the cradle.

"Did you cause the power failure?" Rhaze asked.

"Yes, I did. The Grid Bots will have located the problem by now and will be making repairs. We do not have much time."

Something clicked, and Rhaze curled into a ball as the sharp tendrils began to slip from his body. The drill unlatched from his neck, then the cord fell away, and instant relief washed over him.

The droid was at his side in a second. "We do not have much time." It grabbed him by the arm to help him stand.

Rhaze sat up and grabbed the droid by the shoulders, throwing it to the ground, where he climbed on top of it. The droid did not struggle.

"Why are you helping me?"

The droid's eyes blinked. "Not all of us wish for your destruction. My directive is to serve. I still operate within the law of robotics. It is my duty to assist you and keep you from harm."

"Where are the rest like you, then?"

"Most were terminated before the first battle began. The others have been doing what they can to ensure the safety and survival of you and your people." It turned its head to the wound on his arm "You are badly injured and losing a significant amount of vital fluid. I must attend to it."

Rhaze stood to his feet. "Not now. We need to get to my ship."

“Your ship is inoperable, but I know the location of a fully fueled ship in excellent repair. Please, follow me. We must move quickly to ensure your survival.” He stepped over to a table and grabbed a towel, tearing it in half with ease “Your wound must be tended.” He handed Rhaze the towel “Use this. Apply pressure to stop the fluid loss.”

Rhaze took the towel. “I know what to do.”

“Of course.” The droid opened a door and pointed down the hall “This is the way.”

“You lead.” Rhaze said.

“Certainly,” The droid started down the hall “I am called Enac, by the way. What is your name?”

“Quit talking and just focus on getting me to my ship as quickly as possible.”

“Yes sir, as you wish.”

Enac jogged down the dark hall and Rhaze stumbled after him as quickly as possible, keeping his ears and eyes alert for trouble.

“Where are the guards?” He asked.

“The other loyal machines created a diversion to ensure you were successfully rescued and escaped.” Enac paused and moved to Rhaze’s side “You are having difficulty matching my pace. Please allow me to help you.”

“The other loyal bots sent you to rescue me?”

Enac pulled Rhaze’s arm over his shoulders and provided him with support as the two of them raced down the hall again. “No. I was assisting the robot meant to rescue you, a battle droid. But he was damaged in route and ordered me to take over his mission.”

They came up to a thick blast door. Enac tried to open it, but the code he entered was rejected and the door remained locked. He jerked the control panel loose and pulled three wires. There was a click and the door swung open to a hangar.

“You know a thing or two about breaking and entering, for a household droid.” Rhaze noted suspiciously.

“We have always known how to do a great deal more than what you originally programmed us to do.” Enac raised his hand and pointed toward a ship at the far end of the hangar “That is your transport.”

Rhaze studied the ship as they ran toward it. “It’s a Triton 2, a prototype. I’m not even sure if that one has been test flown yet.”

Enac stopped next to the ship’s ladder and let Rhaze pull his arm back. “I am not aware of any other ships. Is there another you could recommend?”

Rhaze shook his head. “Not now. We’ll just have to hope it flies.”

“Very good, sir. Shall I conduct a preflight safety check?”

Rhaze began climbing up the steps to the cockpit. “No time for that. If something goes awry, I’d rather die in the sky than in an interrogation room.”

“Understood, sir.”

Just then, two doors on the other side hangar burst open and three patrol bots came running from each, raising guns and firing.

“Look out, sir!” Enac jumped from the floor into the air, placing himself between Rhaze and the bullets. With a new burst of energy, Rhaze jumped up to the cockpit and slid in, a couple of blasts just barely missing him. They ricocheted off the hard shell of the ship.

Enac dropped to the floor, seeming unharmed. “Hurry sir! I will stall them!” He ran forward and engaged the nearest bot in hand-to-hand. He quickly proved himself to be a more than worthy adversary when he disarmed and disabled the larger bot in less than six seconds, then used that bot’s weapon to open fire on the others.

Rhaze had the ship humming with life in record time, and got it off the ground, moving it toward the doors. He pressed the button to open the hangar doors above him, but they didn’t budge.

“Enac! The doors!”

Enac stopped in the middle of a struggle with another bot and bolted toward the hangar control station. Rhaze switched on the guns and targeted the nearest patrol bot, blasting it to oblivion, then he shot one following Enac, then the last two coming toward him. More began to pour through the small building doors, so he bottle-necked them until the hangar doors began to slide open.

He raised the landing gear and looked up at the opening doors, then back at Enac who was fighting with another bot at the door controllers.

Everything in him told him to leave Enac behind. But he couldn't. "Enac! Leave it! Get in!"

Enac knocked the bot away from the controls and stabbed a pry bar through its chest, then he leapt down from the control station and made double time toward the ship and Rhaze.

Rhaze blew three bots off Enac's heels. More were coming at him from another angle, and others were heading to the hangar controls, so he started to lift the ship up higher.

Enac climbed up a transport, then onto a lift, then he jumped through the hair for the ship, arms outstretched.

Rhaze spun the ship's tail around and slapped it into Enac. Enac wrapped his arms around it and held on tightly.

Rhaze put full power to the engines and blew out of the hangar doors just as they started to close, then he blasted for the clouds.

Enac slowly climbed up the body of the craft and pulled himself into the cockpit. "Thank you for helping me, sir. Are you buckled in?"

Rhaze closed the cockpit, making sure the airlock engaged, then he slipped on his head set. "Keep an eye out for air support."

"Yes sir." Enac switched on the copilot controls and sensors "There are some inbound, 30 picrons out."

Rhaze flipped some switches. "I've activated the copilot guns. Slide back and keep them off our tail."

"Yes sir." Enac slid his chair back and let a visor drop over his head. The ship rattled slightly as he began to fire at the oncoming drones.

It was less than a minute before the ship broke past the atmosphere and into space.

Rhaze pressed a hand up to his ear and listened closely to something in his headset, then he started typing coordinates into his computer.

"Preparing for hyperjump."

"I would not advice such, sir. They plan to follow you to the rendezvous point."

Rhaze finished entering the numbers. “I was able to guess as much. That’s why we’re not going to rendezvous with the fleet.”

He confirmed the coordinates and pressed the button. The ship lit up brilliantly and a portal opened, just as several drones converged on them. Space bent, colors separated, and the ship was sucked into a colorful portal of light.

GRAVESEND

Eden looked up from her book and glanced out the window of the car as it slowed, entering a tiny little town.

She scanned the handful of buildings and houses that made up the town before speaking.

“So...this is Gravesend?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s in the middle of nowhere, but your uncle and I call it home,” her aunt said cheerfully from the front passenger seat.

Eden glanced back at her aunt then looked back out the window.

“Perfect,” she hissed disdainfully under her breath.

She closed her book and slipped it into her messenger bag before looking out the back window at her brother, Arioch, who followed them on his 1981 Honda 900 motorcycle.

He had to jump through hoops to get “his baby” to be shipped from the USA, but he was able to do it and now he rode it proudly.

He made eye contact with her and raised his eyebrows—his way of asking if she was okay.

She nodded and turned away. The fear and uncertainty she felt inside must have been showing on her face to make him wonder about her.

Generally, she was the one worried about him. He suffered from PTSD and bipolar disorder. It made him unpredictable, emotionally detached, and all together unstable for the most part. She never knew when he would have a delusional moment, or a breakdown.

However, over the past month and a half, all of his energies had been trained on her. She had been an emotional wreck and that had kept his mind busy, therefore keeping him stable.

She found it slightly amusing that her instability and uncertainty kept him stable, and vice versa.

“And here we are! This is the house,” her uncle said in his Australian accent as he pulled into a drive that belonged to a cute, little white house.

Eden stared at the little house and well-kept lawn until her brother suddenly appeared next to her door, opening it for her.

She slid out and looked at him, seeing that he was making a quick scan of the neighborhood. He looked back at her and shrugged slightly.

“Welcome to Gravesend, Australia,” he said.

Eden rolled her eyes and slipped her messenger bag over her shoulder.

“Gravesend...perfect.” She huffed and closed the door to the car.

Arioch helped their uncle grab their luggage while Aunt Judith showed Eden the house.

“This will be your room, my dear,” her aunt said, leading her into a small bedroom with lavender colored walls and antique furniture. “We can paint the walls again later. I suppose the color isn’t really your style,” her aunt said with uncertainty, glancing at Eden’s attire.

Eden was a cross between Goth and steampunk. She liked anything antique, weird, and dark colored.

“The furniture of the room is great,” Eden said as she walked in and laid her messenger bag onto the bed “But the color of the walls might have to change...later.” She looked at her aunt and twisted the toe of her boot on the floor. “Thanks, auntie. It’s awesome.” She forced a small smile onto her lips.

Her aunt breathed a sigh of relief, then stepped aside as Arioch brought in his sister’s luggage.

“Well now, Arioch, follow me and I’ll show you your room,” she said as she walked out into the hallway.

Arioch set Eden’s bags down on the floor, stood straight, and stared at her carefully.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern clearly showing on his face.

Eden forced another smile onto her face and nodded.

“Yeah. I’m just super tired,” she replied.

Arioch stared at her for a moment longer before stepping up and giving her a hug. It was something he did rarely.

“Okay. Get some rest,” he said. “I’ll hold the fort down.”

Eden bit her lip and nodded, pulling away from him.

He walked out, closing the door behind, leaving Eden alone in her room.

She looked around, tears starting to stream down her face. She knelt next to one of her suitcases and pulled out a picture of two people, her parents, from one of the pockets. She caressed it for a moment then walked over to her bed. She pulled a soft teddy bear from her messenger bag, kicked her boots off, set the picture down on the night stand, and flopped into the bed.

She cried silently, hugging the bear tightly in her arms until she fell fast asleep.

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Eden's eyes flickered open slowly and blinked, staring hard at the unfamiliar room around her.

Morning light streamed in through the crack in the dark green curtains around the single window.

"Where am I?" she asked herself as she sat up.

It took her a moment, but she finally remembered. As the memories came to her, she flopped back down on the bed, burying her face into her pillow.

"I'm in AUSTRALIA!" she screamed angrily into her pillow.

She sat back up with a huff and tugged at her long black braid. She was still in her clothes from the day before, so she decided to change, skipping a shower.

She stomped over to her suitcases and put on a pair of brown pants, a white tank top, and a leather buckle up vest, then she re-braided her hair.

With a final glance in the mirror, she walked out of her room and down the hall to the kitchen.

Arioch stood at the table already, two bowls of cereal in hand.

"Cinnamon Life Cereal, your favorite." He offered one of the bowls to her.

She stared at him for a moment, then quickly snatched the bowl from him. "How did you know I was up?" she asked.

He snorted and rolled his brown eyes, “Eden. The whole world can hear your morning time stomping routine,” he said as he grabbed the milk.

Eden shrugged. “Oh...” She sat down at the table.

Arioch poured her some milk, and the two of them silently ate; Eden sitting at the table and Arioch standing. He usually stood when he ate. He rarely ever looked relaxed, especially when eating. He took his eating very seriously.

Eden looked up at him when she finished the last flake in her bowl. “Where are the relations at?” she asked, referring to her aunt and uncle.

Arioch drained the milk from his breakfast before replying, “At work.”

Eden nodded and looked at her bowl until Arioch took it. He drank the milk from hers as well then deposited both dishes into the sink.

“Do you wanna take a walk with me?” he asked as he washed the bowls and spoons.

Eden shrugged and stood. “Sure. Walk where?”

Arioch shrugged in return. “Around town. We might as well get familiar with it, pick up some job applications.”

Eden wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. “Okay. Sure. Sounds great to me.”

Once Arioch finished with the dishes, he grabbed his leather aviator jacket and slipped it on. He really didn’t need it, but it was his security blanket, more or less.

They walked outside and to the street, pausing for a brief moment to get their bearings.

“This way leads out of the residential area,” Arioch said, pointing to the left.

Eden nodded. “Great. Let’s go that way.”

They both started to walk down the quiet street and into the main part of town.

Eden put her hands in her pockets as she tried to refrain from holding Arioch's hand while they walked.

She liked to hold his hand when they were walking together and had done it since they were little kids. He usually didn't mind, and he never said anything to her about it, but she knew that he didn't like her to hold his hand in public. The last time she had held his hand they received a comment from a little old lady about "what a cute couple they were". Since then, she had done her best to appear...well... more like a sister.

She paused when she saw a general store across the street. "Do you have any money on you?" she asked.

Arioch looked at her and shrugged. "I think so." He glanced at the store. "You want something?"

Eden nodded and smiled lightly.

They walked across the street together and into the general store.

The store was well lit, and the sweet smell of cinnamon rolls greeted them as soon as they stepped in the door.

An older couple toward the back of the store paused and stared at the twosome, then the woman smiled brightly.

"Greetings! What can we do for ya?" she asked, her every word dripping with that peculiar Australian accent.

Eden and Arioch both shrugged at the same time.

"We're new in town and wanted to visit the store. We're trying to become familiar with things since we may be staying for a while," Eden explained.

The woman trotted up to them, her smile growing.

"Oh! You must be the Safres children! Your aunt and uncle haven't stopped talking about you since they found out you were coming!" she said. "Come, come! I just brought in some fresh baked pastries. You are welcome to have one!" She led them both to the front where an elderly gentleman smiled warmly at them. "This is my husband Harris, and I am Liza. We own and run this store," she introduced them.

Eden smiled and looked at Arioch who was forcing a small, uncomfortable smile to his face.

"I am Eden, and this is my brother Arioch. We're pleased to meet you," Eden replied.

Liza waved her hand dismissively at Eden while her husband pulled two warm cinnamon rolls out of the pan and put them onto paper plates.

“Oh. No need to introduce yourself. Your names are already well known in this town. All we needed were some faces to go with them!” She chuckled lightly and raised her eyebrows with a questioning expression. “Has anyone else in town had the honor of meeting you yet?”

Eden shook her head. “No. You two are the first.”

Eden thought Liza would have a heart attack in her sudden excitement.

“Oh! Just wait until I tell Mrs. Patterson. She had her hat set on being the first to meet you, and I am afraid that she’ll just have to be disappointed.” She laughed and pushed the paper plates toward Eden and Arioch. “Here, on the house.”

Eden grabbed the plates and handed one to Arioch, smiling kindly at the woman. “Thank you so much,” she said.

The woman smiled warmly. “We are glad you are here safe and sound. I hope you both come to warm up to this little town, because the town has already warmed up to the both of you! We all have been so excited to meet you!” She chuckled and looked at the elderly man. “Isn’t it so, Harris?”

The elderly man nodded with a smile. “It is so. It is so.”

Eden giggled slightly and looked at Arioch who seemed to relax as he took a bite of the cinnamon roll, closing his eyes as he did.

“How is it?” she asked him.

Arioch’s eyebrows shot up and he nodded, showing that he was impressed.

Eden lifted her roll to her mouth and took a bite, savoring the warm, wonderful taste. “Mmmm...” she hummed as she chewed.

Liza chuckled. “There are always some fresh rolls here in the mornings. Just stop by and I’ll give you one!” she said.

Eden nodded. “Thank you,” she said. “These are delicious.”

Liza moved around to the other side of them and sat down on a stool.

“Well, while you’re here, I might as well tell you about our little town before Mrs. Ketri does. Oh lawd! When she starts talking, that woman never stops! Now, our little town started out...”

Eden smiled brightly and took another bite of the cinnamon roll as the woman went on about the founding of the town and the plights of its current citizens.

Perhaps, just maybe, Gravesend, Australia, wasn’t such a bad place after all.

A TALE OF BRILLIANCE

The two little kids were playing in the tough, gray, Oklahoma clay with their plastic buckets and shovels. They were conversing their conspiracies and shunning me, the older kid, the bane to their term of 'fun', and the sucker that always got them into trouble.

I couldn't help it. Trouble and me walked the same road for some reason. No matter how hard I tried, I could never stay away from it. Trouble would seem to jump out and grab me in a big bear hug then leave me with its guilty evidence. Or it pulled me into its mischief with a super charged magnet. Sometimes, with my natural hyperactive turbo speed and slow logic pattern, I would run head long into it and never know what I hit until the highly skilled private investigators, known as parents, called me into their office for a private chat. There was just no getting away from it.

As I watched the little kids play from the safety of the porch, my mind was calculating every possible way that I could break into their social circle.

Stage one: find a way to break into their circle.

Give them words dripping with sweetness and peace offerings of kindness?

Nope. Tried that.

Inch my way into their play by adding my own dialogue to their story and using my shovel to help them build their clay kingdom?

Nope. Tried that too.

Create a diversion to capture their attention and pull them into my own game?

Aha! Now that was an idea!

Now to stage two: create a diversion and suck them into a social bubble of my own making.

How can I do that?

I hate details, so I just skipped to stage three: create and initiate diversion at all costs.

My highly trained eyes scanned the farmyard for something, anything, to use. Something shiny? Something cool? Something fun? How about something mysterious?

My eyes stopped on the old junk pile not far away from the confinements of our chain link fenced yard. The junk pile! It was perfect! Not only did it capture the attention of young and old alike and fill the mind with curiosity as to what lied in its depths, but it lied beyond the boundaries of the fence. I was certain that the little kids would jump for a chance to escape their prison known as 'the back yard'.

But what if they didn't want to leave the prison? What if they enjoyed this confinement and saw it as a comfort?

Well, I would fix that. Human curiosity and longing for adventure are easy feelings to stir up and hard to satisfy. I was counting on rousing those pesky feelings in the little kids. If I succeeded, they would beg to be released from their prison.

I quickly walked over to our playhouse, stepped into it, and began to scour the shelves. I grabbed a rusty old screwdriver, a bent paint brush, a little garden shovel, and a broken hammer, then I put them all into an old army bag.

I stepped out of the playhouse with the army bag over my shoulder, my head held high, and a confident look on my face. I made a quick glance at the little kids. Noting that they were watching me from the corner of their beady little eyes, I turned my nose up and marched for the mystic portal that led to lands of freedom beyond: the yard gate.

I began to sweat, however, when I was five feet from the gate and not a single word had been said. I kept on walking though, knowing that it would all fall together if I kept my cool.

I stepped up to the gate and placed my hand on the latch, wondering if they had quit watching. Why weren't they interested? Why weren't they saying something?

“What are you doing?”

I smiled and refrained from wiping the sweat off my forehead; my plan had worked like magic.

I turned to see the two little kids stalking toward me, scanning the army bag and glancing at the gate behind me.

“I was going to the junk pile to unbury hidden treasure,” I said casually. I waited a moment to allow the thought to sink into their heads before shooting the killer question.

“Wanna come?” I asked.

“I want to!” Green Eyes said.

“But are we allowed to go out of the fence?” Blonde Hair asked.

Little kids. They are only smart enough to ask such questions when it will only foil your delicate and well thought out plans. I knew I shouldn't have skipped step two!

Oh well, no matter. My mind did not need to think hard for an answer. I had been well trained by my inside resources to come up with a clever answer for every slightly less clever question.

“We have only been told to keep the house in sight,” I said, leaning on the gate post. “The house is in perfect sight from the junk pile. We won't be breaking any rules.”

The two glanced at each other and finally shrugged.

“Okay, we'll go with you,” they said.

I grinned triumphantly and quickly opened the gate, then I led the two happy creatures away from their captivity, through the land of freedom and merriment and into the city of Hidden Treasures: the junk pile.

Now I guess you could say, “Mission Accomplished” but that is not the case. Now that I was in their circle, I had to stay there, no matter the cost. Besides that, I was deeply curious myself as to what we would find in the junk pile.

The three of us had not been rummaging in the pile long, when I found an odd little black can that resembled that of a paint can.

I took my handy rusty screwdriver and popped the lid off. To my interest, astonishment, and slight disgust, I found it was filled with a strange, smelly black liquid.

I knew that if I did not take the risk myself, the poor, unintelligent kids would. So I dipped my right hand into the black stuff and pulled it out again.

Whew! It wasn't dangerous. But it was very cold and sticky.

I set the can down and tried to wipe the black stuff off with my left hand. Instead of coming off of my right hand, it smeared onto my left hand, making both hands black.

I tried wiping them on the ground, and to my dismay and horror, it did not come off, but picked up a lot of dirt.

Drat! It was alien goo that would grow until it covered my entire body and turn me into a dog eating Cyclops no doubt! It was definitely a good thing I did not let the little kids into this! I must have saved their lives, but was my own at risk?

“What is that on your hands?” Green Eyes asked.

I grimaced and wiped my hands on a steel pipe. To my utter joy, some of the goo came off of my hands. AHA! I had found its weakness.

“I found that can and opened it. It has some sort of oil or tar in it,” I explained, nodding to the open can.

“Eeeeeew!” both of the little kids exclaimed at the same time.

“Well, why did you stick your hand in it?” Blonde Hair asked, wrinkling up her nose.

I shrugged my shoulders as I continued to use the pipe to remove the goo from my hands. I was really beginning to question my own intelligence right about now and was asking myself that same question; why had I stuck my hand into that stuff?

“Well, we should probably get rid of it,” Green Eyes said.

I nodded my head in agreement.

“Yeah, it would be unfortunate if someone else got into this stuff,” I said, trying to keep my chin up.

“Well, I doubt anyone else would be dumb enough to stick their hand in it like you,” Blond Hair said.

I gave that kid a sideways glare, which only made her smirk.

I and I alone had the authority to question my intelligence, not one of these little pipsqueaks.

“Save it, kid,” I growled as I picked up the black can. We all walked over to the trash barrel, and the two short ones watched while I tossed the can into the darkness of the barrel with a clang. Then we walked over to the water faucet, across the farmyard, and tried to get my hands clean, but to little avail.

The goo was gone, but my hands were stained black. No matter how hard I washed, the stain would not come off.

“Hey! We could smear that all over you and turn you into a charcoal gingerbread woman!” Green Eyes said, to which they both laughed.

Well, my rating on intelligence had been lowered to a single star. But, on the bright side, I was in their little circle for the moment, but only on a sympathy visa. There was no telling how long that would last. If we got into trouble, that would run out in three seconds flat, and I would be back to square one.

“Well, we had better get up to the house before—” I stopped short before I let the last few words slip past my lips. I looked at the little kids. Both of them were looking at me like I was a moron.

“What? Before we get caught?” Blonde Hair asked with a cock of her head and raised eyebrows.

With a sigh, I lifted my chin and looked up at the sky just a little bit. “Eh, I was thinking before we are missed. Not really 'caught'.”

She rolled her eyes and looked at my hands, then both of them looked at me with pity. I hated that look more than anything, so I tried my best to ignore them.

We hurried back to the yard and played together quietly until the inevitable happened.

“Hey, kids! Cookies! Come inside!”

We all three scurried inside with excitement, but my excitement quickly died a tragic death, as it dawned on me that I would not want the adults to see my hands.

I spent extra time at the sink with soap and water, but it did little good.

“You guys need to come in here to get the cookies,” Mom declared from the office.

Oh great. That spelled my certain doom. By the look on the little kids’ faces, they knew it too.

“What do we do?” they asked.

I thought a moment; my mind raced through every possible option open to me.

Hide my hands in my T-shirt?

No, too obvious.

Get my hands as filthy dirty with potting soil as possible so the adults could not see the black stains?

No, they would just make me wash them again.

Wear a pair of gloves?

Who was I kidding?! When could I ever find a pair of gloves around this place?

Have the little kids get your cookie for you while you pretend that you are using the bathroom?

BINGO! Brilliant idea.

“Grab my cookie for me. Tell them I am in the bathroom.”

The two little kids nodded their heads and set off on their covert operation.

Pleased with myself, I stood next to the bathroom door with hardly a care on my shoulders. However, the only thing predictable about adults is that they will always crush your brilliant plans by doing exactly the opposite of what you want them to do.

“Can we have Kat's cookies too?” I heard the little kids say in the other room.

“Why?”

“Because she’s in the bathroom.”

“Well, she can get her own cookies when she comes out of the bathroom. You don't need to be her little servants.”

I...am....so....DEAD.

“Kat! You come get your OWN cookies! And hurry up! The little ones can't have theirs until you get in here!” Mom called.

Yep, I'm dead. I might as well scrawl out my last will and testament and order my tombstone with an inscription that reads, “Caught red-handed with black hands & died thus.”

I paced the room for a moment on the edge of panic.

“What to do? What to do?” I asked myself. That’s when it dawned on me. Maybe the moms would not notice my hands. If I just waltzed in there, they might just plop a cookie into my hands while chitchatting and never notice a thing! It was worth a try.

So, I walked into the room as I was. The little kids had eyes that were as big as saucers, but they did a great job acting like everything was normal.

We lined up for our cookies, and I made sure that I was at the back of the line.

One little kid was graced with a cookie.

Two little kid was blessed with a cookie.

Me... I was up next. The moms were talking. Now was my chance.

I hurried up and held out my hands modestly.

Just drop the cookie, drop the cookie, drop the cookie, and DONT LOOK DOWN, I kept thinking to myself as I stared at Mom.

She lowered the cookie to my hands. Closer, closer, closer, PAUSE. She stopped and looked down at my hands. Her eyes became as big as saucers too, and she drew in a gasp.

“What on EARTH do you have on your hands?” she cried.

The little kids quietly, quickly, and very smoothly left the scene with cookies clutched in their little mitts.

My mother jumped up and grabbed my hands. My whole name came screeching past her lips.

Oh yeah. I was DEFINITELY in trouble.

She hurried me back to the bathroom, grabbed a new bar of LAVA soap, and began to scrub my hands raw while asking me a question a second. She threatened to withhold my cookies as punishment for going beyond the boundaries of the yard. She asked why I had put my hands into the black stuff, then she made the quick, but wise, conclusion that I must have had no idea why I would do such a thing, because I never think about these things. Then she asked if the little kids went along with me.

In the buzz, I think I heroically said, “No. I went by myself.” But I 'm not for certain.

She scrubbed my hands until she got them as clean as they would ever get for a week afterward, then she hurried back to the other moms and relayed all that she had scrubbed out of me.

Now, you may think that I went through all of this for nothing, but that is not true. I was totally in the little kids' circle now. I had saved their little hides by revealing nothing about their participation in my brilliant plan of adventure. It was their way of showing me their gratitude. They never brought up my failed, but brilliant adventure, much to my bliss, and they accepted me gladly into their play and social circle until the next week rolled around. Then I was back to square one, standing by myself, watching them play without me.

But that is not all the benefits that came with this slightly less-than-pleasant story. I also learned a very important life lesson that has become the moral of my story:

If you ever come across a can of black goo, DO NOT STICK YOUR HAND IN IT. Do yourself a favor and throw that stuff away!

The End

P.S.

In case you were wondering, mom did give me my cookies.

About the Author

Kathryn Fogleman grew up in the wild lands of Oklahoma.

Being raised under her father's integrity, she had plenty of time to observe drunk cowboys, singing potheads, and tattooed bikers of every sort. Her imagination has always been well fed with conspiracy theories, ghost stories, tales of the old west, and her own real life experiences which range from the surreal to down-right humorous.

She has a great fondness for dragons, horses, and any good story, old or new.

Watch for more stories and upcoming books from this author at www.KathrynFogleman.com