

BROKEN TOYS

by

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B.A. University of Manchester, 2002
MPhil University of Cambridge, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2018

Major Professor: Tison Pugh

ABSTRACT

This novel is about a character, Felicity Gourd. She's Cinderella, but she lives in twenty-first century Boston and knows the Cinderella story as well as anyone else. She's also one of a small number of people who are able turn into the creatures represented by their childhood toys. Felicity's toy was a mouse. Her godmother's was, of course, a fairy.

Through her godmother, Felicity enters the community of Toys, where she finally finds a home. But the Toys are the only people who stand in the way of Clarity, a secret organization that wants to place humanity under the rule of a personality-type based master race. The Toys' victory comes at the cost of most of their lives, leaving Felicity to find her own way, with neither stepmother nor fairy godmother.

For its own sake

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For love and for my belief in myself, I would like to thank Joy Eliot, Michael and Antonia Eliot, and all my family.

For instruction, feedback, guided reading, and support, I would like to thank Tison Pugh, Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, Obi Nwakanma, and the faculty and students of the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Central Florida.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Broken Toys*, the first of what I hope will be a series of four novels, I use both the Cinderella story and a speculative device, “transformation” of characters into the creatures represented by their childhood toys, to explore rejection,

its consequences, and a character’s struggle to overcome them. This is a novel about that character and her discovery of the unexpected. But the supernatural isn’t the only element of the story she doesn’t expect. The other is friendship.

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This is a polished fifth draft of the novel, and I expect to continue improving it. In particular, I intend to:

- Continue to think about ways to deepen my world building, to show the Toys in a subculture that is extraordinary even as I situate them in the world we know. For example, I recently added details of Toys in other countries with whom Toys in Boston have formed friendships (page 107).
- Find ways in which Felicity might change more radically over the course of the story, perhaps from greater timidity at the beginning to greater courage at the end.
- Continue to think about which details add to and which detract from the pace. For example, I recently trimmed extraneous details of Felicity’s mother’s childhood (page 35) and of food eaten by characters (page 164).

- Think about alternative ways of telling this story that exclude the fantastical while using similar characters, relationships, and situations, perhaps involving a student based on Felicity and a teacher based on Joan. Not having extraordinary powers, Joan would have to nudge Felicity towards a better life using the limited means at her disposal.

1: A STORY YOU THINK YOU'VE HEARD

You've heard this story before, so you'll know how it ends. You'll know as soon as I tell you that the girl holds an immaculately polished copper dustpan, that she shined it herself, unwillingly but kept her unwillingness secret. Now she kneels, face averted from the center of the room, and sweeps ashes from a brick fireplace.

Perhaps you already see the girl's stepmother stand over her, a laugh beginning in her eyes, and her two stepsisters lounge on a blue satin sofa, smiling and muttering insults. The girl can only just hear them, which is her stepsisters' aim. One of them hold a bottle of pink nail polish while the other lazily paints her nails.

You know Cinderella will go to the ball, secretly, and leave, hurriedly, before midnight, losing a slipper. The Prince will find it and use his father's considerable resources to search the kingdom. When he finds Cinderella, amid the blood from her stepsisters' mangled feet, he'll marry her, for no reason other than that she is beautiful. All this will happen, or happened "once upon a time," in some kingdom, no one knows where. In the end, everyone will live happily ever after. Except for the wicked stepmother and stepsisters, I've always assumed.

You also know, of course, the story isn't true.

But there are things you don't know, and, because spoilers can't spoil fairytales, you might as well find them out now. First of all, Cinderella isn't beautiful. Secondly, the story doesn't take place in a kingdom but in a republic, one people don't associate with magic. Thirdly, as of now, not long after the events I'm about to relate, no one is exactly living happily ever after, though that could still happen.

Cinderella isn't married. She is in love but not with a prince. Actually, this part is a little embarrassing. I'm worried it might make you squeamish. You see, Cinderella's dating a dragon.

There is a fairy, and she is Cinderella's godmother. There are also three birds, a horse, a donkey, a cow, a tiger, a rhinoceros, two elephants, two grizzly bears, a dinosaur, a goat, and a 1980s cartoon action hero.

And there's a villain who wants to rule the world. The truth is, she's the reason I've gone to such effort to learn this story. But, after what she's done, I expect I'm the only person who cares about her. You want a story about Cinderella.

So be it. Once upon a time...

2: HER ONLY FRIEND

Felicity squeezed one last book into her backpack and glanced over her shoulder to make sure her stepmother wasn't watching. She wasn't hiding drugs or cigarettes or something she'd stolen, but packing for the first day of her senior year of high school. She'd already packed six textbooks, while Violet, her stepmother, made sure her own daughters carried their new phones, make-up, and an excess of lunch money. As soon as Felicity tightened the straps, she left the family's faux-Revolutionary redbrick house to wind her way on foot through the Boston suburbs.

As she walked, she breathed more easily. She knew she mustn't let Violet see the textbooks, because then the woman would know about her advanced classes. This would make her feel inadequate about her daughters' lack of achievement, but they wouldn't be the ones she took it out on. Felicity had forged the parent/guardian signature on her class enrolment form. She could tell Joan Light, the school's guidance counselor, knew what she'd done, knew why, and let her get away with it.

"Felicity," Dr. Light had said with half a smile, "I'm going to do everything I can to get you to the kind of college you deserve to go to."

Felicity smiled at the memory of the conversation. Then her mind replayed her first meeting with Dr. Light, the first day of freshman year. The counselor called her out of PE, took her to her office, brewed her coffee, and asked how she felt about starting high school. They talked until Felicity's next class. It was the longest conversation Felicity had ever had, and she couldn't remember what it was about. She could only recall wondering how Dr. Light had

known she needed more than just advice about curriculum and college applications. She wondered if, for school counselors, mind reading was a professional skill

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Felicity turned right after walking through the school's wrought iron gates. The other students turned left and walked past white rose bushes and a large sign that read "The Rose Park Academy, Independent School, Grades 9-12."

The school I go to so my stepmother can keep up appearances, she thought bitterly.

She walked round the side of the students' parking lot and across overgrown grass behind the English and Science buildings. She stopped at the Math building, where she could avoid the smirks and jibes of her peers. She began the day with AP Calculus, so she wouldn't be near the worst bullies for more than an hour.

She arrived twenty minutes early to find grey haired, grey suited Ms. Rome shuffling papers at her desk. The teacher looked up and smiled when Felicity entered the room.

"Morning, Felicity," she said. "How did you and Dr. Owens get on?"

Felicity supposed she should start with "thank you." After all, Ms. Rome had helped Dr. Light arrange her internship with Dr. Owens.

"Thank you for helping Dr. Light set that up," she said. "We calculated how far other solar systems are from our own, how far the planets are from the stars in those solar systems, and how large the planets are. Astrobiologists use that data to decide where to look for extraterrestrial life."

She remembered using those two sentences on every journalist who'd called Dr. Owens' office that summer.

Ms. Rome nodded slowly, her eyes wide.

“Are you going to apply to MIT?” she asked.

“Yes, definitely,” Felicity replied.

“How was the rest of your summer?” Ms. Rome asked.

“Good, thanks. I read and hung out with my family,” Felicity replied, forcing her face to look sincere. “How was yours?”

Ms. Rome told her about what sounded like an uneventful summer with her son and grandchildren in Portland. Felicity listened to details of picnics and games, and smiled until the other students arrived and Ms. Rome stopped mid-story to hand out course packets. The bell rang, and Ms. Rome summarized her classroom rules and syllabus. Felicity half paid attention. Then Ms. Rome asked the students what they knew about Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. A few groaned, almost inaudibly, but Felicity tuned in.

After the bell for the end of class, she left quickly so she could walk between the buildings before most of the other students left them. She went to the Social Studies building and headed upstairs for AP Economics. As she’d predicted, that lesson consisted of syllabus, rules, and students telling the teacher about their summers. When it ended, she asked to stay behind and read during morning break. The teacher, twenty-something Mr. Winston of the cool clothes and haircut, shrugged and said “sure, whatever.”

She pulled out her Calculus book and began to read ahead, but she knew she couldn’t avoid the other students forever. When the bell rang for the end of break, she headed for the World Languages building. She looked at the ground as she walked, reminding herself there was no benefit to noticing mean looks and laughs. A boy stuck his foot in front of her as she passed between buildings. She saw it in time to hop over it. As she walked on, he shouted after her. She didn’t catch what he said, and she tried not to wonder.

She headed into the building and down the overly bright hallway towards Dr. Yates's classroom. Dr. Yates never wasted a second of class time. His students read children's books in Chinese, learned the words and unpacked the word arrangement in the stories, and wrote their own stories in Chinese. Felicity knew he'd give them something to do the first day.

She walked through the open door to his classroom. Three students sat behind tables, facing the front, where, behind a wooden desk, sat not Dr. Yates but Coach Jim. Felicity felt her eyes close and her face fall. She opened her eyes and made herself smile.

As two more students walked in, Coach Jim announced Dr. Yates was absent.

Is he really? Felicity wanted to ask sarcastically.

Coach Jim held a stack of construction paper and bags of skittles. He told Felicity and the other early arrivals he had a "team-building activity" for them. When all the students arrived, he put the paper and skittles on the desk in front of him and told the students to form groups of four and help themselves to his "supplies."

"I'm nearly eighteen," Felicity groaned under her breath.

The room now contained seventeen students. The other sixteen moved effortlessly into four groups, pulled tables and chairs together, and sat. Coach Jim walked among the groups, pumping his fists.

"Humans are group animals," he said, grinning. "We're supposed to help each other succeed."

Felicity stood at the side of the room, unsure what to do. Coach Jim faced away from her and spoke to the group farthest from her. She looked at the nearest group. Its members tossed skittles from open bags into their mouths. Their arms looked tense. Felicity could tell they were poised to stop eating before Coach Jim turned to them. She took a step towards the group. A girl

with perfect hair and makeup turned her face just enough to give Felicity the stink eye. Another girl stifled a laugh.

Coach Jim was still speaking: "I'm terrible with names, but I know I know you..."

A skittle fell out of each of the four students' hands and landed in their bags. All four began nodding and smiling at Coach Jim, and Felicity realized he was talking to her. She suppressed a sigh, looked at him, and tried to smile.

"...And I'd like to give you the most important job anyone in this room is going to do today!"

Felicity willed the corners of her mouth upwards as Coach Jim bounded to his desk, picked up a piece of paper, bounded back to Felicity, and handed it to her like a birthday present. He reminded her of a dog playing fetch. She looked at the paper and saw the names of all seventeen students with check marks next to them.

"I'd like you to serve your school community by taking this to the front office!"

"Sure," she said.

She only cut class about once a month, and she'd never done it first day of the school year. But she decided she'd find an excuse not to make it back to Coach Jim after she delivered his attendance sheet. She took it and left the room.

She sauntered along asphalt pathways to the front office, relieved to walk through the school without having to watch out for other students. She handed the attendance sheet to a receptionist she didn't recognize and headed to the library to hide in the stacks, read whatever she liked, and wait for the lunch bell.

She spent twenty-five minutes behind a dusty stack of poetry books, perusing *British Poets of World War One*. She opened the book to random pages and read the poems she found.

She'd always found this a good way to explore, but nothing drew her in until the last verse of the fourth poem she turned to:

Falling asleep ... the herons, and the hounds....

September in the darkness; and the world

I've known; all fading past me into peace.

She could hear hounds and herons.

The lunch bell rang. She put the book back on the shelf and walked casually out of the Library. If Coach Jim caught up with her, she'd say "the office" didn't know what they were supposed to do with his attendance sheet. That wasn't unrealistic.

*

Felicity turned the corner to Dr. Light's office, opened the door, peered in to make sure Dr. Light wasn't meeting with someone, and walked in. Dr. Light looked up, smiled, and said, "I've been looking forward to our lunches together."

Felicity felt suddenly happy. This was the first time someone had been happy to see her since June, and that someone had, of course, been Dr. Light. The counselor had brought sandwiches for them both, as always. As always, they sat either side of the desk in the little office, rows of beige filing cabinets to either side, and ate.

As they ate, Felicity glanced at a wall-mounted photo of a younger Dr. Light hitting drums, her black hair a flying tangle, in front of a small crowd. Felicity didn't think her tall but slight body looked up to the task, but members of the crowd danced and cheered. Three male guitarists stood around Dr. Light, along with a keyboard player and a saxophonist, also men. The whole band wore a mix of denim and leather, and Dr. Light wore a pearl-white pendant just

above her breasts. Felicity had seen the photo before, but every so often she found herself drawn to it, wondering who Dr. Light had been all those years before she'd known her.

Felicity recounted the details of her work at MIT: the long hours, painstaking checking and re-checking of data, and the thrill of seeing the final number and knowing it represented the distance between herself and somewhere no one had been.

"I'm a co-author of an article he's publishing in *The Astrophysical Journal*," she said. "I think I'm seventh on the author list, after Dr. Owens and his graduate students."

Dr. Light cracked a broad smile.

"Congratulations," she said. "High school students don't manage that very often."

Dr. Light wasn't tactless enough to ask about the rest of Felicity's summer, so they talked about hers instead. She'd stayed in Boston, reading, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and driving to Tanglewood to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Felicity smiled at the contrast between Dr. Light's summer and Dr. Light in the photo as she asked questions about orchestras and composers. She wasn't all that interested. But this was conversation, and she hadn't really had one of those since June.

*

The bell rang for the end of lunch break, and Felicity walked with Dr. Light to AP US Government. With a dramatic eye roll, Dr. Light said she'd only just been told she was teaching it. Felicity smiled. She'd grown used to Dr. Light's snide asides at the administration.

They entered a classroom in the Social Studies building. It contained twenty plastic chairs around a rectangular wooden table. Dr. Light gave Felicity photocopies of four newspaper articles and asked her to distribute them as the other students walked in. Felicity always felt

strangely enthusiastic when she did something for Dr. Light, though the pleasure of it felt childish.

When all the students had sat, Dr. Light began to talk. She said the syllabus, rules, plagiarism policy, ETC. were on handouts in an electronic folder she'd shared with their school e-mail addresses, and that if they'd stopped using their school email addresses they could get new passwords from the technology office next to the reception desk. Then she hit the topic all the students must have known she'd hit: the Throat Surgeon.

Felicity remembered the gory details. Senator Grant Mead of Vermont and Evelyn Douglas, editor of a British newspaper, were found dead in their offices the same day, at approximately the same time: mid morning in Washington, early afternoon in London. Felicity watched the story unfold on CNN, when Doreen and Melanie weren't monopolizing the television, and read more details in the *Boston Globe*. The victims' throats were cut open, but not slashed across with a knife. Holes were punched into the centers of their throats and cuts made from the holes outwards, one upwards and one downwards.

No one knew how it had been done, or by whom. So everyone started calling the perpetrators the Throat Surgeon, using the singular even though there must have been more than one culprit. Theories made the rounds. Experts and self-styled experts blamed Islamist terrorists, right-wing terrorists, left-wing terrorists, and personal vendettas made to look like terrorism. But, the day after the Governor of Vermont named Mead's replacement, the news cycle moved on to plans for the super-bowl half-time show. Felicity hadn't heard anyone talking about the Throat Surgeon in several days.

The students read the articles Felicity distributed, about the victims and how they'd changed the politics of their countries. Then Dr. Light led a discussion on the likely political

outcomes of their deaths. Felicity marveled at the way she drew the quietest students into the conversation and brought out ideas that weren't in the articles.

She knew that the more serious students respected Dr. Light. The rest avoided her, and kept their college applications as far away from her as they could, for fear she'd persuade their parents to rule out party schools. After one-on-one meetings with her, they repeated things she'd said in mocking voices. That hurt Felicity, but the insults about Dr. Light's eyes hurt her more. "Ten pound bulges" was one favorite, "inflatable eyes" another.

But Dr. Light's eyes weren't just unusually large. They were almost perfect circles. In other words, they were the size and shape of Felicity's own.

*

Felicity smiled at Dr. Light as they left the room. Then she walked to the English building, guessing the worst bullies hadn't made it into AP English Literature but knowing that didn't mean she could feel safe. Mr. Swim read most of his syllabus in a monotone, pausing to give the students an intense stare when he got to something he thought especially important. With ten minutes left, he passed around photocopies of a poem. Felicity read the title, "Falling Asleep," and the poet's name, Siegfried Sassoon. She sat up. It was the poem she'd read at lunch.

"Felicity," Mr. Swim said, in a tone that suggested he'd given careful thought to his words, "Would you read us the first two verses, please?"

She drew breath and began,

Voices moving about in the quiet house:

Thud of feet and a muffled shutting of doors:

Everyone yawning. Only the clocks are alert.

A picture of her stepmother's house formed in her mind. The place was quiet sometimes, on

weekend mornings while her stepsisters lay in bed. She might hear the maid's feet as the woman crept around the house, fearful of angering her Violet with sound. The rustle of students sliding papers into their backpacks brought Felicity's attention back to the classroom. She carried on reading:

Out in the night there's autumn-smelling gloom
Crowded with whispering trees; across the park
A hollow cry of hounds like lonely bells:
And I know that the clouds are moving across the moon;
The low, red, rising moon.

She hoped Mr. Swim didn't ask her about that, because all she could find to say was, *it's beautiful*.

"Thank you, Felicity," Mr. Swim said as she finished the poem.

Then he addressed the class: "For the first assignment of the semester, research Sassoon's experiences in World War One and write at least a page about how it helps us understand this poem. The deadline is tomorrow."

As the bell rang, he began shuffling papers, all impression of interest in his students gone. Most of the other students made it through the door in seconds. Felicity followed, wondering what to do with afternoon break time. As she entered the corridor, she heard a crooning voice from behind her: "The looow, red, riiising moon," followed by the laughs of girls and a boy. She guessed she'd read the poem with too much feeling.

The girls ran ahead of her, four of them. She knew she should look away, but, before she managed to, she noticed Doreen, her older stepsister, approaching from the other direction. Doreen and her clique walked down the hallway towards Felicity, smiling approvingly at the

girls who'd mocked her. Felicity looked at the ground. She knew the girls targeted her because they'd seen Doreen, knew that explained all the other students' attempts to humiliate her. Her stepsisters ruled the school. They hated her, and hating her with them was the easiest way to gain their favor. A friendly word to Felicity amounted to social suicide.

*

Other students never went to the area of grass behind the classroom buildings, so Felicity ducked behind the English building to wait until her History of Science elective started.

She stared at the sky, blue with a few wispy clouds, until she heard footsteps from the other side of the building and guessed afternoon break was over. When she entered the Science building, she realized she hadn't waited long enough. Dozens of students moved along the hallway, bumping into or making room for one another. She dodged a girl who seemed to be trying to walk through her. A boy stepped out of her way but didn't look at her. When she drew close to the room she was heading for, she saw a rapid movement out of the corner of her right eye and turned her head. On the other side of the hallway, five yards down from her, a boy thrust his crotch in her direction repeatedly, to gales of laughter. She grimaced, walked past the boy, and took a left into the classroom, as the laughs grew louder behind her.

She could almost feel something dirty in her mouth and on her skin. She told herself she'd known this year would be the same as the previous three, reminded herself to avoid the other students as much as she could. But she knew more days than not one or more of them would use her as way to make the others laugh. Sometimes, they'd laugh at her intelligence. More often, they'd mock her looks. Her strawberry blonde hair fell haphazardly over her oddly circular face, which the sun had colored pink. Her green eyes were big and strangely round, like Dr. Light's. Felicity hoped they made her look like a girl from an anime, but she knew they

really made her resemble something a child might draw with crayons. Her body was gaunt from a summer of near-starvation. Her breasts were flat, and she detested their pancake shape. Dr. Light's figure and face made up for her eyes, but Felicity didn't think hers ever could.

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Felicity sat numbly through the day's sixth syllabus. When the final bell rang, she stayed in her seat a minute while the classroom cleared. Then she walked slowly to the door, hoping the hallway had cleared.

Only a few students stood in the hallway. Only a few walked along the paths around the campus. As she walked toward the main gate, she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Dr. Light.

"Drive you home?" the counselor asked.

Felicity wanted to say yes. She knew Doreen and Melanie wouldn't be seen with her in their convertibles, Doreen's yellow and Melanie's an equally obvious red. But she didn't want her Violet finding out she had a friend. She thought about asking Dr. Light to drop her a couple of blocks from her Violet's house, but she figured Dr. Light might wonder why. Felicity didn't want Child Protective Services taking an interest in her.

"Thanks," she said. "But I like walking."

Dr. Light nodded and smiled.

"See you tomorrow then," she said.

So, with no money for the MTA, Felicity shouldered her backpack and began the hour-long hike. She took her usual route, avoiding major roads in favor of New England wooden houses, painted white, blue, yellow, and green, with wooden chairs and potted shrubs on their porches.

Back at her Violet's house, she stepped out of the shower, wiped condensed steam from the mirror, looked at her body and face, and sighed in disappointment.

She heard a bang on the door, a groan, another bang, and a voice shouting, "Mom, she won't let me in the bathroom!"

The voice belonged to Melanie, her younger stepsister. Felicity groaned, yanked a towel around her body, opened the door, stepped sideways to avoid the oncoming Melanie, and headed down the wide upstairs hallway. She hoped the sunlight from the big windows would dry her wet footprints from the polished wood floor before her stepmother discovered them.

"Cute ass-bones," Melanie called after her, voice even more sarcastic than usual.

Felicity adjusted the towel to cover her backside properly, wondered when asses had started having bones, and quick-marched the rest of the way to her bedroom. Under the mournful safety of its sloping ceiling, she pulled on cheap underwear, a worn grey T-shirt, and a pair of black jeans. Then she lay on her narrow bed, which took up most of the room, and breathed for a few minutes, jumped up, opened the single tiny window, climbed through it with a practiced sureness, hung for a second from the ledge, let herself fall with knees slightly bent to cushion the impact, and landed cleanly. But, before she was quite through the window, she looked back at the top of her bed, where three inches of grey fur snuggled under her pillow.

"See you later," she whispered.

*

Felicity was whispering to Squeaker. He had soft grey fur and pink feet and face; he was a mouse. He'd been her only friend until she'd met Dr. Light. She knew he was just a toy. But that was a good thing, because, as a child, she'd been able to choose his personality. So, from before she could remember, he'd been mischievous, brave enough to break all Violet's rules. He

encouraged her to creep around the house when everyone else was asleep, taught her how to steal from the refrigerator when she was barely tall enough to open it, told her which pieces of food her stepmother wouldn't notice were gone, reminded her how to rearrange what remained exactly as Violet had left it, and returned with her to her room, where they ate their midnight feasts.

Most importantly, Squeaker knew how to justify the theft. *It's OK to take food*, he told her. Sometimes, he confided this opinion in a whisper. Sometimes, he cried. Sometimes, he sounded angry. *Violet should give it to you*, he insisted. *She buys it with your dad's money*.

She knew she was too old for imaginary friends now, but she still liked talking to Squeaker and sleeping next to him. And she still took him with her to raid the refrigerator.

3: WHAT SHE KNEW, AND WHAT SHE DIDN'T

Felicity walked through the fading daylight to a small park, a square of grass with an assortment of trees and a wooden bench on each side. She sat on one of the benches, looked at the orange tinge at the edge of the sky, smiled, yawned, stretched, and thought back to the discussion in Dr. Light's class.

Both Grant Mead and Evelyn Douglas had been idealists. The Senator argued America should cut military spending, tax the rich heavily, boost welfare programs, set up government-run hospitals, and more or less open its borders. Douglas, the editor of *The Guardian*, exposed corruption in business and politics and wrote in favor of strict pollution controls.

In Dr. Light's class, she'd learned they were also different. Douglas hailed from a former coal-mining town, now a sink of poverty, Mead from one of the oldest and most powerful families of New England. His grandfather also sat in the United States Senate, and two of his forebears served as governors of Massachusetts. But they had convictions in common, especially about freedom of information. A court acquitted Douglas of treason after she published secrets about "special operations" in corners of what was once the British Empire. Mead sponsored bills to make corporations and investment funds open their books.

So the killers probably had a political motive, but Felicity couldn't understand how they carried out the killings. They couldn't have reached Mead or Douglas' offices from inside the buildings without being caught on the security cameras. Mead's windows didn't open enough to let a person, or even a person's hand into the room. His aide found his body at his desk, in an

alcove without a sight line from the window, so the killer couldn't have thrown or fired anything from the window. Douglas's windows did open, but a security camera monitored them.

Another question struck Felicity as important: Why did people stop talking about the killings so quickly? The media hadn't seemed interested in anything else for three days. Then a few radio hosts became angry over a controversial singer scheduled for the super-bowl half time show. She'd been a man until a year ago, and she released a video of her surgery set to praise songs. Felicity couldn't see how that took the spotlight from the assassinations. One day, everyone asked the right questions. The next, the Governor of Vermont replaced Grant Mead. And the next, everyone obsessed about a singer.

The sky grew almost black. Knowing she wasn't going to resolve the murders in one evening, Felicity walked back to Violet's house.

*

The window of Felicity's second floor bedroom sat low enough to the ground to jump from but too high to reenter through. She knew Violet would be upstairs, getting ready for bed, and her Doreen and Melanie would be in the living room, watching television, so she could avoid them easily. She took the spare key from under the plant pot where her stepmother hid it, unlocked the door, replaced the key, and snuck through the house to her bedroom. She sat on her bed with Squeaker, as she always did in the evening. After all, he was more than her oldest friend. He was the only one of her father's gifts her stepmother had let her keep

Her father had given her Squeaker when she was five years old, the day after he told her he was dying. She cried in his arms all night and all morning. In the afternoon, he drove her to a little vintage toy store and asked her to find a new friend. She walked through rows of old-fashioned wooden toys and nearly life-like stuffed ones before settling on the little grey mouse.

She remembered that day clearly, but her other memories of her father were cloudy. When she thought of him, her mind flashed pictures of a man in faded T-shirt and polished silver wristwatch with black leather strap, his face indistinct apart from short, dark hair and sometimes a little stubble. Sometimes, her mind's eye saw him cooking, sometimes reading. Sometimes, she remembered sitting in his lap as he bounced her up and down, or walking with him through Boston, or drinking hot chocolate in Harvard Square, or picking apples. Often, as she remembered, she could taste hot chocolate or cider doughnuts, or hear a strange guitar melody. A renaissance guitar sat in a glass cabinet in the hallway, smaller but proportionately longer than modern ones, made from varnished wood. She wondered if he'd played it, but she didn't ask her stepmother.

Her stepmother scowled whenever Felicity asked questions about her father, so Felicity had stopped asking. She never saw a photo of him, but she overheard snippets of information in conversations at dinner parties with her stepmother's relatives. She learned her father came from a wealthy family, was an only child, and lost his parents aged sixteen, when a train hit their car on a railroad crossing with broken signals. He brought money to his second marriage, to Felicity's stepmother, and died from a brain cancer just two years after their wedding.

Felicity's stepmother didn't work, and her relatives didn't seem as rich as she did, so, in her early teen years, Felicity had realized everything the woman possessed had been bought with Felicity's father's money. She thought the money should be hers, but it and the power belonged to her stepmother. With no living relatives, she had to choose between her stepmother, "the system," or a homeless shelter.

She knew nothing about her mother, because she'd died when Felicity was a baby. And no one talked about her, ever.

4: AN INVITATION

Felicity woke from the dream she'd dreamed all summer. In the dream, she ran through wheat fields, woods, and gardens, ran as a grey mouse. Everything around her seemed devoid of color and frighteningly big. She looked around, scanning for danger, but everything more than a few feet away blurred. She could run fast, and she could smell every plant distinctly and hear even the slightest breeze.

She woke to a gust of air on her face from the open window, blinked, yawned, put her hand around squeaker, and wondered why she kept having the dream. After holding her toy a minute, she dressed and walked downstairs for breakfast: the usual fruit, skimmed milk, and muesli. Violet, Doreen, and Melanie refused to eat anything with an ounce of fat, but Felicity appreciated what food she could get. In addition to refrigerator raiding, she'd become good at sneaking larger than the permitted servings into her bowl at breakfast. Her stepmother never invited her to share dinner.

In the kitchen, Maria, the maid, unloaded the dishwasher. Felicity noticed her painstakingly careful movements. Violet frowned on noise. She also frowned on Maria speaking except when spoken to. She imitated the maid's accent, behind her back and to her face. But Maria smiled at Felicity whenever their eyes met, and, when they were alone, she would start conversations. She would talk about Mexico and her family, and Felicity would laugh to hear her talk about her celebrity crushes.

When Felicity finished eating, she handed her bowl and spoon to Maria, picked up a cloth, and started wiping down the sideboards. No one told her to. Violet never told her to clean the kitchen, iron clothes, or sweep the ashes from the living room hearth. She did not teach her how to do those things, but she punished her if she didn't do them, so Felicity figured out how by watching Maria. Now, her stepmother almost never made her spend time alone in her room.

She finished cleaning the sideboards in a few minutes and turned to clear the table as Doreen muttered, "Do we have to take her?"

"Her name is on the invitation," Violet replied in a reluctant tone. Felicity's ears switched to alert mode.

"It's embarrassing," hissed Doreen. "She doesn't talk to people. And nobody wants her to anyway. She isn't exactly pretty."

Felicity stared out the window, her back to the breakfast table, and started folding dishcloths. She didn't want to let them see hurt on her face.

"But William has invited her," Violet replied. "It is a point of etiquette. You must both learn these things."

Felicity wanted to know who they were talking about. Her stepmother bought the attention of important people by giving money to charities and political campaigns. Expert in name-dropping, she usually managed to convince those people she was important too. And she always affected to call them by their first names.

Which William is this? Felicity wondered.

"Well, she'd better stay away from Hugo," Melanie said.

Felicity had it: Hugo, the rich, Hollywood handsome, and utterly vacuous son of Lieutenant Governor William Mast. Of course Melanie, and probably Doreen, were dying to

meet him. He probably hadn't ever stayed with a girl more than twenty-four hours after he'd slept with her, but Felicity knew her stepsisters wouldn't let that stop them.

She remembered, probably from her stepsisters' gossip, that Hugo Mast would turn eighteen that fall. The celebration would include a buffet lunch with family, friends, and acquaintances, followed by an evening party for guests of Hugo's own age. Felicity guessed she was going to one or both, if her "family" couldn't cook up an excuse to leave her at "home."

Violet left the dining room, followed by a sighing Doreen and a huffing Melanie. Maria shot Felicity a sympathetic smile.

"You don't want to go to their stupid party," the maid whispered, "and you don't want to date a worthless playboy. There's a good boy waiting for you."

Felicity whispered "thank you," thinking the sentiment nice, but she knew boys didn't want to date her any more than girls wanted to be her friend.

*

Doreen and Melanie started inventing excuses the following morning. First, Doreen suggested Felicity could have too much homework, but Violet told her that wouldn't satisfy the Lieutenant Governor.

Like the Lieutenant Governor cares, Felicity thought.

Then Melanie wanted to invent a broken bone, but Violet ruled that too obvious. So Melanie begged Violet to claim Felicity lacked the right clothes or was too shy for company, but Violet replied that either would shame the family. Felicity helped Maria clear up breakfast in silence, knowing she was expected to neither speak nor leave the kitchen until the discussion ended. Doreen and Melanie looped through a small list of ideas while Maria dried dishes and

Felicity wet a cloth, knelt, and wiped the floor. Finally, Doreen and Melanie wore their mother down, and she ruled Felicity would stay behind with a case of stomach flu.

*

Through the school day, Felicity tried not to think about what had just happened. Aside from mean looks and snickers, the other students ignored her. Over lunch, she raised the Throat Surgeon killings with Dr. Light. She asked who might have carried them out, why, and how? Dr. Light answered with variations on “no one has a clue.” Dr. Light didn’t usually give up on interesting questions, so Felicity pressed her.

“Grant Mead and Evelyn Douglas believed in the same things,” she said.

“Yes,” Dr. Light replied, in a measured tone.

“So there has to be a connection,” Felicity said.

Dr. Light pursed her lips.

“I’m not omniscient,” she replied.

They spent the rest of lunch break in silence. Then they walked to class, Felicity handed out copies of the constitution, and Dr. Light opened a discussion about the preamble.

*

Felicity churned out homework late into the night, but she couldn’t help thinking about the invitation. She thought missing the party shouldn’t bother her. She wouldn’t know anyone there anyway. Besides, the party was two months away. But she stayed awake through the night, thinking about the injustice of it all. After finishing her homework, she lay curled on her side with Squeaker an inch from her chin. She stroked his back with one finger, and found a measure of comfort in doing so.

Lunchtime the next day, she broke down in Dr. Light's office and told the whole story. She said she didn't know why she cared. She didn't like people her own age, and adults didn't talk to her. She didn't care about the jewelry, makeup, or clothes people wore to parties. At least, she didn't think she did. She'd never had a chance to find out.

Dr. Light listened and brewed coffee, and they drank it while Felicity continued to talk. Dr. Light didn't offer advice but listened as Felicity tried to understand herself.

"I don't get why I want to go so much," Felicity said. "I hate Melanie, and Doreen, and my stepmother, and their friends. Why do I want them to include me?"

By the end of lunch break, she'd found the answer.

"I don't like being hidden," she explained, more to herself than to Dr. Light, "I hate that they're ashamed of me. They make me ashamed of me, too."

"I'm sorry," was all Dr. Light said. It didn't make Felicity feel better. But, she realized more than an hour later, as she walked from Government to English, it made her feel she was allowed to be upset.

She reached the classroom just as the bell rang and sat in front of Mr. Swim while the other students went for the seats closest to the back. She pulled out her pad of paper and pencil case and opened the pencil case as Mr. Swim passed around photocopies. Inside lay a yellow post-it note with words written in the sapphire ink Dr. Light always used:

"You're going to the ball."

She stared at the note, squinted, and read it again, wondering why Dr. Light would write it and how she could have put it in her pencil case. When Mr. Swim started speaking, she still hadn't found answers.

5: THE USUAL THINGS

As the semester rolled on, Felicity read, worked math problems, translated Chinese stories, wrote stories in Chinese, wrote papers, and did chores for her stepmother. She didn't talk much to anyone but Dr. Light.

She researched colleges during her lunch hours with Dr. Light. She didn't know, and didn't dare ask, if her stepmother would pay for her to go to college, but told herself she probably would. Violet was pathological about keeping up appearances.

With Dr. Light's help, Felicity started drafting applications. Dr. Light advised she apply early admission to MIT.

"It's ideal for someone with your interests," she explained. "And they already know you. That doesn't guarantee admission, but it helps a lot."

She didn't ask Dr. Light about the note, because, though she kept it and looked at it at least once a day, she couldn't make sense of it. Dr. Light couldn't have slipped the note into her pencil case, Felicity reasoned. Her backpack had lain beside her chair throughout the lunch period. Dr. Light had sat behind her desk or stood next to the coffee machine, at least five feet from the chair Felicity sat in. And how could Dr. Light be so sure Violet would change her mind?

*

Felicity heard nothing more about the Throat Surgeon. Instead, she vaguely noticed a rush of news about celebrities. An NFL player purchased a breeding pair of water buffalo. The

Smithsonian found a pop singer's cell phone inside a thirteenth century African statue in a high-security glass case. The entire cast of a sit-com bribed an Amtrak driver to let them take the wheel for a few minutes each. The Amtrak Police Department arrested them, both for driving the train and for having snorted cocaine before they did.

Felicity heard those stories from Doreen and Melanie's conversations at breakfast, and wondered why so much bizarre news was breaking at once. She also thought about the Throat Surgeon, but that seemed less important as her classes became more intense.

Everyone except Dr. Light continued ignoring Felicity. The other students spent recess crowded around Doreen and Melanie, the queens of the senior and junior classes. Everyone feared them, so no one talked to or even made eye contact with Felicity, unless her stepsisters sent them to crack a mean joke. The jokes targeted her intelligence, her love of math, and her looks. Students called her anorexic and, when they walked by her, loudly estimated the circumference, radius, or surface area of her eyes and face. Girls asked if good will stores had rejected her clothes, and boys pretended to want her while other boys and girls cheered them on.

The pranks were predictably unimaginative. Some students threw soda in her face. Others tripped her and laughed if she fell. One morning, she found the words "beauty queen" carved into the black metal front of her locker. The school's maintenance office took more than a week to get rid of them. The following day, "hot, not" replaced them. The Director of Maintenance refused to do anything this time.

"They'll just write something else," the he told her, one eye on a television in the corner of his dust-coated office.

Back at her stepmother's house, she didn't exist except to do chores and keep out of the way. Maria tried to start conversations, but they never got past pleasantries before the maid started glancing over her shoulder with a frightened expression.

6: THE UNUSUAL GODMOTHER

As the party drew nearer, Doreen and Melanie grew more excited. Pouring over teen magazines and “grown-up” gossip columns, they discovered everything they could about Hugo Mast. Felicity heard them tell each other what they’d found out: Groton and two slightly less prestigious prep schools had expelled him. Drugs may have been the cause, but the schools kept silent. He’d signed a modeling contract and then lost it for failing to turn up to photo shoots. The Boston Police Department had taken him in for urinating in the doorway of a well-known French restaurant but released him after a call from one of his father’s underlings. That drew an “eww” from Doreen, but it didn’t dampen Melanie’s enthusiasm.

The day before the party, Violet made her carry bags all over central Boston while she and her daughters shopped. Then she made her wait in the family’s SUV, beneath the imposing facades of Regent Street, while the three spent four hours at their regular beautician. Felicity sank into cushioned leather and read a school library copy of *Dune* until Violet, Doreen, and Melanie returned, gabbing at one another about mud baths, facial treatments, pedicures, and hot stone massages.

She cried in her sleep that night. When she woke at three in the morning, she tried to convince herself she wouldn’t enjoy the party if she could go. The guests her age wouldn’t talk about anything worthwhile and probably wouldn’t talk to her at all. The adults would ignore her, too. Not going meant a day with books, a chance to get ahead on homework or read a novel.

And, with Violet out of the way, she'd have a chance to get to know Maria better. It would be the first time they'd been alone together. And she'd have Squeaker.

But she wouldn't be included.

*

When Felicity walked down the stairs the next morning, she found the house empty except for Maria. The maid had cleared the breakfast table and was loading the dishwasher.

"Would you like coffee?" Felicity asked, noticing how tired she still felt.

Maria stood up straight and turned around.

"I'll make it for you," she replied, and headed for the coffee machine.

Felicity thought of trying to get to it first, but Maria crossed the kitchen before she processed the thought.

"OK," she said. "Thank you, Maria. I'll make us a cake."

"No, no. I'll make it."

"Please, Maria," Felicity said. Maria smiled and inclined her head.

Felicity gathered flour, baking powder, cocoa, sugar, butter, eggs, and chocolate chips. As Maria mopped the hallway, she mixed batter and put it in the oven, set the timer, whipped together a raspberry buttercream frosting, and picked up the day's edition of the *Globe* from the kitchen table. She wanted to talk to Maria but had no idea how to start a conversation. She resolved to try over cake.

She took the newspaper into the living room, switched on the sculpted brass floor lamps on both sides of the brick fireplace, noticed dead embers on the brickwork of its base, made a mental note to sweep it before Violet returned, sat on one of the blue satin couches that were usually Doreen and Melanie's territory, against a mahogany paneled wall, and looked at the front

page of the newspaper. The headline announced William Mast and the Governor had reached a fifteen-point advantage in an opinion poll, six weeks from the gubernatorial election. She grimaced and turned to the opinion pages. The pundits who'd written them predicted the Democrats would lose their majority in the US Senate and the Republicans would gain a larger one in the House of Representatives and noted President Glass had lost her positive approval rating.

Felicity put down the newspaper, went back to the kitchen, took the cake out of the oven, and left it to cool. From upstairs, she heard a vacuum cleaner. She returned to the couch, picked up the newspaper, and looked at the editorials. The first praised President Glass for cooling down a territorial dispute between China and India, noted the two countries were still engaged in a naval arms race, and detailed the numbers and types of ships in both countries navies.

Felicity yawned and let the newspaper fall to the floor. Within minutes, she slept.

She woke to the creak of the door from the hallway. Through a half open eye, she saw the door stood open. She expected Maria to walk into the living room, but, instead, pearl tinted light seemed to hover just outside the door. As Felicity peered at it, the light moved into the living room and burst into brightness so intense she squinted, closed her eyes, and hid her face behind the arm of the couch. She asked herself where the light could be coming from.

Is Maria adjusting lights? Is she still in the hall? She wondered.

She raised her head, but her eyes hurt even before she tried to open them. She listened, but she heard nothing apart from her own suddenly exaggerated breaths and heartbeats. The light dimmed as quickly as it had brightened, and she peered around the couch arm, wondering if she'd see little green people with antennae.

Instead, she saw a pair of tan sneakers on the mahogany floor. Looking upwards from the sneakers, she saw blue denim jeans and a brown leather jacket. The jacket's arms extended to strong female hands, nails long and painted a shade of white almost as blinding as the light Felicity had hidden from. One of the hands held a wooden drumstick.

Felicity didn't have time to look at the intruder's face before the drumstick pointed straight at her and her clothes disappeared. She was naked less than a second, and then she felt silk against her skin. She looked down her body and saw silk of a color between bronze and gold. It hugged her, but not too tightly. Her face felt strange. She touched it and found a thin layer of some substance. She guessed she was now wearing foundation, and probably lipstick and other kinds of makeup as well. She touched her hair to find it formed little spikes. Finally, she looked up into the intruder's face and gasped.

"As I told you," Dr. Light said with a smile, "you're going to the ball."

*

A full-body halo surrounded Dr. Light, but Felicity could now look directly at her. She looked like a small cloud with pearl-white light around its edges.

"What...How come...?" Felicity stammered, unable to settle on her first question.

"Long story short," Dr. Light replied, "I knew your parents. Your father and I played in the same band, and we dated until he fell in love with your mother. He broke it to me gently, but I freaked out and punched your mother in the face twice before he got in the way. Then I punched him, the band broke up, and I hated them for years. We reconciled when you were born, and I became your godmother."

"You knew my parents?"

"Well enough to love them, hate them, and then love them again."

In the awkward pause that followed, Dr. Light's halo faded, and Felicity wondered which question to start with. She wanted to know how Dr. Light could do what had to be magic, but she wanted to know about her parents even more.

"We'll talk in the car," Dr. Light said.

As she stood, Felicity noticed a velvet sensation on the tops and soles of her feet. She looked down. Semi-transparent, gold-tinged shoes encased her feet, with low heels and slightly pointed toes. They felt like cushions. She stepped forward and followed Dr. Light out of the living room and across the hallway.

Before they reached the front door, Felicity heard a sound between a sob and a laugh from the banister sided staircase. She turned to see Maria standing on the top stair, tears running down her cheeks.

"I knew an angel would come to get you," the maid choked.

"Maria, this is..."

Felicity started towards the stairs, but Maria fled down the upstairs hallway. Dr. Light stepped in front of Felicity and raised her drumstick, and several sheets of paper flew up the stairs.

"What?" Felicity asked.

"The deed to her family's home," Dr. Light replied, "and a low-rate, no-collateral business loan from their local bank. You told me she was kind to you. I've been finding out about her ever since."

*

Dr. Light opened the front door to reveal a dark blue Sports car under the bright mid-day sunlight. Felicity perched in the passenger seat, hands twitching in her lap, as the car careened

past every other vehicle on the freeway. Dr. Light waved her drumstick at the occasional police car. Felicity stared at the leather dashboard, the tinted windows, the sunlight, the blur of the road, and the cars left in the dust, all at the same time in burst after burst of adrenalin-fueled wonder. Between the bursts, she noticed how safe she felt. She guessed this was because of the seat, which shaped her body into a position of comfort that would normally have sent her to sleep, and because Dr. Light, her godmother, sat next to her.

“Your mother grew up in a small town in Nevada,” Dr. Light told her. “She ran away from home when she was fifteen and hitchhiked to Olympia. She’d been told rock music was Satanic, and she wanted to defy her parents and their church. We were touring, your father and I and the rest of the band, playing dives along the West Coast. Julia, your mom, hung out with us. Barney, our saxophonist, let her sleep in his truck and didn’t ask for anything...you know...in return. Julia turned out to be a natural with technology. She fixed our semi-functional amps, and we asked her to tour with us. Three months later, we asked her to be our manager.”

Felicity’s mind settled on a single thought: Her mother had been awesome!

“We all thought we’d make the big time,” Dr. Light continued. “Kids in bands always do, and we were damn good. We were a little out there though, pushing the artistic boundaries. We used harmonies from medieval and renaissance music. That was your father’s idea.”

Felicity’s mind flicked back to the guitar in the hallway cabinet.

“A few bands that push boundaries become legends,” Dr. Light said, wistfully. “Most become obscure. We turned out to be part of the ‘most.’”

All the information seemed to float in front of Felicity. Her parents had been adventurers, had grabbed hold of life. She cracked a smile.

“What did my dad play?” she asked.

“Richard. He played bass guitar.”

“Was he good?”

Dr. Light didn’t answer for a moment.

“He was the best bass guitarist I ever heard,” she said quietly.

“What did my parents do after your band broke up?”

“They went to college together and had you while they were there. They’d just graduated when they found out Julia had less than a year to live.”

Felicity’s heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t known her mother had died that young.

“What did she have?” she asked.

“Your father wouldn’t say,” Dr. Light replied. “He only told me they spent their last months travelling with you in tow. They bought a car in Calais and drove it to Calcutta. They even went through Iran. Your mother knew she’d die even sooner without her doctors, but we were all the kind who’d take better lives over longer.”

Felicity wondered if she was that kind too.

“How did my father meet my stepmother?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Light replied, “And I don’t know what he saw in her. It wasn’t her hoity-toity style. Your father was rich, but he wasn’t a snob. I wish I could tell you more, but your father lost contact with the old crowd after your mother died. I tried to call, tried to visit. Barney, the saxophonist from the band, did too, but your father just went cold. Maybe he couldn’t deal with the memories we all shared. The sadness in them, I mean.”

Dr. Light’s voice began to break up.

“I found out he was dead in time to make the funeral,” she said. “Your stepmother didn’t look sorry to lose him. She just sat there with two other sour-faced women and your stepsisters.

When the service ended, they walked out, one of the women dragged you with them, and they drove away. Your stepmother didn't even look at you. That was when I knew you were in trouble."

"The only way I could get to you was through the school system, so I decided to work in it. I'd just finished my political science PhD, so I was a free woman. I took a sales job and studied for my teaching license. Then I taught history and government while I earned my counseling diploma. By the time you were ready for high school, I was ready too."

"Thank you."

Felicity could only murmur the words. She remembered her father's funeral, remembered feeling completely alone. She'd felt alone every day from then until her first day of high school, the day she met Dr. Light. But now she knew she hadn't been alone, because her godmother had been in the shadows, waiting and planning. Felicity felt a tear drop from her right eye.

"I don't think I've missed anything important," Dr. Light concluded, "except that your parents were the coolest, cleverest, and kindest people I've ever met. I'm sorry you're stuck with your pathetic excuse for a stepmother. You can live with me when you're eighteen, if you like."

Felicity's heart jumped as she thought about living with Dr. Light instead of Violet, but it didn't seem practical.

"Won't Principal Booker fire you for, I don't know, inappropriate conduct with a student or something?"

She felt embarrassed as soon as she'd said it.

"Yes, if your stepmother wanted him to," Dr. Light replied. "But if he does, I can teleport cash out of the first five armored cars I see."

Felicity looked hard at her godmother, surprised by her casual attitude to magic and wondering whether to feel shocked that she'd use it to steal. Dr. Light grinned, and Felicity moved to another question:

“Actually...meaning to ask...not meaning to be nosey...but...how...how come you're a...witch?”

Dr. Light eyebrows rose.

She has to be, Felicity thought. Should I have said “magician” or “sorcerer” instead?

“I'm not.”

“But you just...”

“Conjured your dress. You look lovely, by-the-way.”

“Thanks.”

“I'm your godmother, and I used magic to dress you for a big party your wicked stepmother wouldn't let you go to. Don't you know which story this is?”

“You mean I'm...”

She couldn't say it.

“Yes, you're her. I don't know how, and I don't know if it's happened to anyone before. But she's not all you are. You'll find out more soon. Do you still have the toy mouse you were holding at your father's funeral?”

Felicity laughed, embarrassed Dr. Light knew she still had a toy. But, though she'd left him on her bed, she could almost feel Squeaker's fur in her fingers. She wondered why Dr. Light asked about him, and how on earth she and Dr. Light could be characters from a fairytale.

“What am I going to find out?” she asked.

Dr. Light's forehead furrowed.

“I’ll explain after the party,” she replied.

7: THE THROAT SURGEON

The sun had sunk half way to the horizon when Dr. Light slowed the car and drove off the freeway. They cruised along country lanes. Trees surrounded them much of the way, sometimes forming canopies, leaves still mostly green, but the red, brown, and gold of the New England fall appearing in little patches. Dr. Light drove between red brick gateposts and cast iron gates, then up an asphalt driveway with trimmed hedgerows on both sides, and parked next to a manicured rosebush. Behind it stood a redbrick three-story manifestation of affluence, with battlements on top, white doors and window frames on the sides. Felicity turned to her godmother, who reclined in the driver's seat and looked back at her.

"I've brought you as far as I can," Dr. Light said. "I wasn't invited."

Felicity opened the door and stepped out of the car, and her gaze settled on a bush of white roses whose flowers looked brighter than normal. She wondered why they did. She looked at the other rosebushes, with pink and blue flowers, and thought they too looked more brightly colored than they should. She wondered if they looked that way because her life seemed brighter for knowing more about her parents and for knowing Dr. Light was her godmother.

"Be back before midnight," Dr. Light ordered.

Felicity saw a twinkle in her eye and realized she meant it as a joke.

She walked up a gravel path, past a hedgerow to her left and a bed of shrubs to her right, towards the house. She wanted to think more about her parents, her godmother, and magic, and she thought about turning around and skipping the party.

But Dr. Light went to so much effort to bring me here, she thought. I've got to attend the party for a few hours.

As she neared the house, the hedgerow ended, and, to her left, she saw waiters in bowties offering hors d'oeuvres to several hundred guests on a vast lawn. She walked past the crowd, afraid to look directly at anyone. She entered the house through a large white door, held open by a waiter, and stepped into a wide hallway with a high ceiling. An oil painting hung on the wall in front of her. She guessed Violet would live here if she could.

Violet walked through a side door. Felicity shuddered and looked away, hoping to hide her face, but Violet walked right past her and through the front door to the gardens.

People see what they expect, Felicity thought.

She walked through a side door opposite the one Violet had appeared through and spent about an hour wandering through large, elaborately decorated and furnished rooms. Most contained at least half a dozen guests. She thought she should enjoy herself but wasn't sure how. She accepted a glass of white wine from one waiter and a quail's egg from another. Still nervous, she swallowed the egg quickly, barely tasting it, and sipped the wine as she continued to move through the rooms.

She thought about trying to make conversation, but the other guests already stood in little circles. She looked out of windows at lawns, flowerbeds, trees, shrubs, and blue sky. She thought about sitting down, but felt she wasn't allowed to.

She began noticing other people's clothes, the men's perfectly cut suits and the women's shapely dresses. She didn't know about fashion, but she suspected her dress looked at least as good.

She wanted the restroom, but didn't dare ask where to find it. Instead, she opened doors along hallways. Most led into closets, but the fifth door she tried revealed a small room with a brass faucet, a pewter basin, and a toilet with ceiling tank and chain flush. A second door stood next to the toilet. She walked in and bolted both doors.

No sooner had she sat on the polished oak toilet seat than the handle of the door she'd come through turned violently. Then she heard a voice. It was Melanie's:

"Someone's in there. I hope they're fast. I don't want Hugo to know I'm here."

Felicity laughed, and kept laughing until she pulled the chain.

As she washed her hands, she looked in the mirror, and her spiked hair caught her eye: sharp points an inch long. She looked at the rest of her face. In spite of its roundness and her peculiar eyes, the spikes, and her brown mascara, well-defined brown eyebrows, and classic red lipstick were what stood out. Between these accents, foundation gave her skin a porcelain tone. She'd never meaningfully had eyebrows or lashes before, and her hair had always looked bedraggled.

After she'd finished washing her hands, she ran them along the fabric of her dress. She felt no friction. The dress embraced each part of her tightly but comfortably, and its colors shone subtly.

She unbolted the side door, laughed again as she left Melanie to wait indefinitely, and entered a small room overlooking the garden.

*

Blue carpet matched blue drapes drawn back to reveal French doors open to a sunset of uneven red, orange, and gold stripes. Bushes of lavender grew in terracotta pots on a stone patio just outside the doors. Further out lay a terraced lawn, empty of people. She guessed the

Lieutenant Governor had restricted the party to certain parts of his grounds. To the left and right of each level of the terrace she saw beds of chrysanthemums, pink, red, yellow, orange, purple, white, and blue. The terraces led down to a field where two bay horses stood and swished their tails. A grey stood apart from them and looked in Felicity's direction. Its tail didn't move, and Felicity got the impression it was staring directly at her.

As Felicity watched the sun sink, realizations set in.

Dr. Light is my godmother, she thought. She loved my parents, and she loves me. And she's a fairy, and I'm Cinderella. This must be the ball, and the Prince must be...

She immediately dismissed the idea of even speaking to Hugo Mast.

She heard a loud electronic beat and guessed the older people had left. As the sun disappeared, beats and voices mingled outside the room at increasing volume. She guessed she should try to mingle, but, as soon as she thought of it, fear made her chest clench.

They'll be like the other kids at school, she thought, as she turned from the French doors and looked around the room.

A writing desk and chair stood under a small window on the wall opposite the door through which she'd entered the room, and, on it, a shaded lamp cast a pale yellow light over the room. In the back wall, opposite the French doors, stood a closed door. Felicity guessed it led back to the hallway. In the center of the room stood a gold-covered upholstered sofa and matching armchairs, arranged around a wooden coffee table. In one of the armchairs sat a finely tailored grey suit, white shirt, and silver tie, held up by what looked like a skeleton with skin.

She felt surprised she hadn't noticed the old man. He didn't seem to notice her either, and she guessed he was asleep and would leave when the party woke him. Across the width of his tie,

something glinted in the sunlight. She looked at it closely and saw it was a tiepin, and it looked like real gold.

She turned back to the French doors. Under moonlight, a breeze blew through them, and she smelled lavender.

I wanted to come to this party, she thought. I have to at least try to take part in it.

She stepped across the room and through the door to the hallway, where she found a cluster of a dozen girls around her own age. They wore shiny dresses that left their legs, arms, and shoulders bare. They also wore statement jewelry and lavish makeup, and their posture made them look confident. Felicity stood up straight and forced herself to smile, but none of the girls seemed to notice her. Further down the hallway, two girls moved their bodies to the beat. From somewhere in the house, Felicity heard loud whoops. She took a step towards the clustered girls, hoping they'd move to let her into their circle, but they didn't shift or seem to notice her. She retreated to the little sitting room and closed its door on the party.

She stepped back to the French doors and was looking at the first stars when she heard a faint sound and glanced over her shoulder. The old man hadn't moved. But the door from the hallway was closing, and another man stood in the room, wearing a blue suit and supporting himself with two walking sticks. She wondered if she'd crashed a part of the house reserved for older people who were staying for the evening, until she saw the newcomer's face looked no older than hers. Hazel hair flopped onto a face that looked as if the bottom of its left side had been smashed in. The dent distorted the boy's mouth, leaving some of his teeth permanently visible. To make matters worse, he had eyes as big and round as Dr. Light's and Felicity's. He looked at the old man, sighed, and looked at Felicity.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

He seemed to force the words through his misshapen mouth, but the right edge of his lips twisted into a smile. He looked through the French doors, dropped the walking stick from his right hand, sank further into the stick in his left, pointed down the garden, smiled, and saluted.

Felicity stared at him as long she thought could be polite before speaking:

“Hi, I’m Felicity, Felicity Gourd.”

“Paul Heath,” the boy replied. “I’m not supposed to be here, but people don’t want to be seen questioning you when you walk with sticks and look like me.”

He laughed.

She heard a buzzing and looked back at the French doors. She saw something in the air, just inside the room, a blurred shape. It moved towards the ceiling, towards the carpet, to the side, to the ceiling again, so fast she could barely follow. It looked no more than four inches long, and it seemed to vibrate. It moved towards the old man in the armchair. His eyes opened, and his hand shot upwards and covered his throat.

The object hovered in front of his face, still buzzing, and Felicity could see it properly: a tiny bird, with wings vibrating so fast they blurred on both sides of its body: a hummingbird, its throat and the front of its chest bright purple, the rest of it a greenish brown. Its beak looked too long and too sharp.

“Me too?” the old man asked the bird. Then he pursed his lips and conceded, in an utterly neutral tone, “It’s probably time.”

She saw what was wrong with the bird’s beak: Long razor blades had been attached to it, one angled upwards and one downwards. If the hummingbird got to the old man’s throat it would be able to...

As the bird drew back its head, Paul Heath raised his right hand, palm upward, and the old man's tie rose between his neck and the bird's beak. Felicity heard a thud, and the bird darted backwards. Its beak had hit the tiepin.

The bird moved to the side of the room and hovered, staring at Paul, and Paul looked at the old man in the chair.

"Good morning, Congressman Andrews," he said gently.

The old man looked at him, and his grey eyebrows rose.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Paul didn't answer. He leaned toward the hummingbird and growled an announcement:

"I can move faster than you. If you don't leave, I'll eat you."

He leaned further forward, as if his gaze could bore into the bird. The bird moved closer to him and darted side to side in front of his face. His suit fell to the floor, empty, a shade bluer than the carpet, and something beneath it flashed red. Then a red snake darted upwards, towards the bird. Its scales seemed to come alive in the lamplight, each a soft red flame. It closed its mouth around the bird, so the bladed beak was the only part Felicity could still see.

She ran backwards until she hit the wall. Her mind raced through *what?* And *who?* And *what now?* The snake disappeared, and Paul lay naked on the floor. He dug his elbows into the carpet and used them to edge his body back towards his suit. The old man stared at him, looking considerably less surprised than Felicity felt. Paul lay on his back and pulled his underpants to his waist. Felicity kept her eyes averted as he dressed.

Moments later, as he struggled into his suit jacket and draped his tie around his neck, she heard a grunt of breath behind her, and she whipped her head around, expecting another attack.

Instead, she found a grey horse kneeling at the side of the room. She recognized it as the horse she'd seen below the garden.

The horse looked at Paul as he crawled towards it. Now he was clothed, Felicity felt able to act. She offered him her arm. He grabbed hold of it and pulled down as he struggled to his feet. It took all her strength not to fall as he did this. Once upright, he staggered towards the horse. She moved with him, holding his body more or less upright, and helped him hook his arms around the horse's neck. He swung his left leg over it and moved his body to sit on the horse's back, and Felicity handed him his sticks.

"Bring the Congressman," he commanded, "and sit behind him."

Felicity stepped back. She did not want to go with him.

"We're going to Joan," he explained.

"Joan?" she asked.

Then it hit her.

"Dr. Light!" she exclaimed. "You know Dr. Light?"

She turned to the old man, who fixed her with a look that included no emotion.

"That horse isn't big enough for three," he said, "and I'm far too old to ride. My aide will be here momentarily. She's trained to do things Congressional aides usually can't."

Felicity hesitated, looked at Paul and the horse, and looked back at the Congressman.

"You need to go now," he said. "I've rarely seen anyone of your kind before, and I know less about them than I'd like to, but I'm sure this young man will explain things."

She straddled the horse, just behind Paul. The shape of its back pushed the hem of her dress to mid-thigh.

“Thank you for saving me,” the Congressman added, looking at Paul. “I’ll do what I can in the time I have left.”

The horse rose gracefully, and its hooves thudded against the ground as it stepped out of the French doors into the night and began to trot. Felicity lurched as it jumped from the topmost lawn terrace to the next, and she grabbed frantically at its back. It whinnied but did not slow or change course. She righted herself and tightened her legs around its sides, and felt horsehair against her legs. She also felt it against the bare skin of her right foot, accompanied by a chill not of fear but of realization: She had lost a slipper.

8: AN EXPLANATION

The horse cantered into woods a few miles from the mansion, where it slowed to a trot. In the now bright moonlight, Felicity noticed speckled-white birch trees surrounded them. Somewhere in the near distance, she heard running water. The horse stopped in a clearing and knelt. Felicity dismounted and helped Paul to the ground.

“Thank you,” he said, taking his sticks from her. He walked a few yards to a tree stump, sat on it, and said, “We might as well start making the fire while we wait for the others.”

“Fire?” Felicity asked.

“Tonight’s going to be cold,” he replied.

The horse walked in circles, watching their surroundings. Grateful for something to do, Felicity started picking up sticks. Her mind felt numb, but the most significant moments of the day flitted through it: She’d seen the Throat Surgeon. This boy, Paul, turned into a snake and killed it, or killed one of them. Dr. Light turned out to be a fairy, Felicity’s fairy godmother, and Felicity was Cinderella.

She held two fistfuls of sticks when a cloud of them landed next to her and formed into a wigwam shape. Small branches fell from the air and layered themselves around the twigs. As Felicity stared, a layer of larger branches followed.

Dr. Light descended from the air, feet first, and landed next to the woodpile. A humming accompanied her, not unlike the sound of the hummingbird’s wings. Something vibrated behind her. Felicity couldn’t quite see it, but it slowed until she could distinguish two paper-thin white wings, too bright to look at directly. They continued to slow, and, before they were still enough

to properly examine, they vanished. Dr. Light nodded to Paul, and he pointed a finger at the woodpile. A crackle came from inside it, and flames licked gently from the center to the edges.

Felicity gestured hesitantly in Paul's direction.

"Is he a fairy, too?" she asked her godmother.

"No," Paul replied. "Joan's the fairy. I'm a snake. Jasmine's a horse." He gestured to the grey, now standing still by the fire.

Felicity tried to make sense of this: Paul was a person who was also a snake, or a snake that was also a person, and the horse was human too, or a human was the horse.

And magic was real. She wanted details.

"So, you're animals who turn into humans?" she asked. "Or humans who turn into animals?"

"It's not that simple," Paul replied. "I've never had to explain it before. I thought Joan planned to fill you in before you met the rest of us."

He looked sideways at Dr. Light, who looked from Paul to her and back to Paul with a guilty expression.

"The old man thought I was..." Felicity hesitated before continuing: "...was like you."

"Congressman Andrews?" Dr. Light answered. "Felicity, that's because you are. It's why you have round eyes."

Dr. Light sat down on another stump and stretched her arms.

"I'm sorry for what just happened," she said. "I wanted you and Paul to meet. I wanted you to know a few of us before I told you the rest of...of the truth."

"That's not the plan you discussed with Adam and me," Paul snapped.

"She's my goddaughter," Dr. Light retorted, "and you and Adam aren't in charge."

She drew breath before continuing: “We’ve watched the Congressman since Mead and Douglas’s deaths. Other than them, he’s the most radical supporter of freedom of information of any significance in any country. A year ago, he sponsored a bill to force private investment funds to publish details of their purchases. With Douglas gone, America wouldn’t make much progress on corporate openness without Andrews, so we knew they’d try to kill him. But I didn’t expect them to act today, with so many people present. I wouldn’t have sent you there if I had.”

She stood, walked to Felicity, and hugged her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, drawing out the hug. “I screwed up. They moved faster than we expected.”

“They?” Felicity asked.

Joan guided her to the stump she herself had been sitting on. Felicity sat, and Joan crouched in front of her and smiled. Felicity didn’t realize she’d reached for her godmother’s hands until she held them.

Paul spoke again: “They probably didn’t intend to move that fast. Felicity was looking out of the French doors when I entered the room. The assassin probably panicked when he saw her eyes.”

“One of the assassins who killed Grant Mead and Evelyn Douglas?” Felicity asked, thinking maybe she could piece it all together if she started with this.

“Yes,” Paul replied. “We don’t know as much as we’d like to, but we know they’re powerful. In fact, they’re getting closer to control.”

“Control?” she asked.

“They’re not presidents or senators or congressmen,” Paul explained. “But they’ve bought a lot of those people with campaign money and blackmailed them with compromising

information. They own some of the biggest investment funds, so they control a lot of companies, and they own a great deal of the news media, most social media, and the big search engines.

That's why you haven't heard of them."

Felicity stared at Paul. She couldn't understand how he forced so many words past his ruined mouth. She couldn't understand what he was talking about either, or what it had to do with magic. Actually, this conspiracy, or whatever it was, sounded about as real as magic. It sounded like...

"The Illuminati?" she asked.

Paul and Dr. Light laughed together, and Dr. Light answered: "The Illuminati doesn't exist. Neither does any other conspiracy you've heard of. These people don't let anyone find out about them."

"Then how did you?" Felicity asked.

"They gave themselves away by using hummingbirds," Dr. Light replied. "The hummingbirds must be people like us. No doubt they think they're the only ones, so they didn't know we'd figure out what they were. After they took out Mead and Douglas, I thought about likely political outcomes, and Paul and I put my conclusions together with unusual trading patterns he noticed on stock markets. Paul's an investment genius."

She nodded at Paul, and he smiled.

"Are they just powerful in America?" Felicity asked.

"No," Paul answered. "They control companies and politicians in Japan, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Russia. We think they started in Russia, when the Cold War ended and the new government started selling companies. They're expanding into China

and Brazil. They target the most powerful countries, except India. We think they don't rate its economic prospects."

"How do you know all this?" Felicity asked.

"I'm a medium to high risk investor," he explained. "I front-load on..."

"Simple version, Paul," Dr. Light cut in. "She's as smart as you, but most people don't study finance."

"Of course," Paul conceded. "Simple version: I watch the markets, worldwide. I'm good at it. I notice mathematical quirks, and write code to make my computer notice them for me. You can't control large parts of an economy without creating market oddities. Even I couldn't do it."

He smiled again, and Dr. Light looked irritated.

"Why are they doing all this?" Felicity asked. "Is it just about money?"

Paul smiled weakly.

"We don't know" Dr. Light said. "But we know they killed Evelyn Douglas and Grant Mead to cover their tracks."

No one spoke for a minute, and Felicity thought through what she'd learned: Magic was real, people could turn into animals, and, somehow connected to this, a conspiracy was trying to control the world and killing people to cover its tracks. Their assassins turned into hummingbirds, she'd just seen a boy turn into a snake to kill one, and the congressman the hummingbird tried to kill thought she was one of these shape-shifting people.

"So how am I like you?" she asked.

Dr. Light pursed her lips, looked Felicity dead in the eye, and answered, "Felicity, we don't understand this, but...well...kids that grow up... the way you did...How old were you when your father died?"

Felicity's memory pulled her away from the wood to a nursery, where she cried and threw Doreen and Melanie's toys with the rage only a child can summon.

"Five," she answered.

"I'm sorry to ask this, but how many people have loved you since then?"

Felicity forced tears from the backs of her eyes.

"Only you," she replied.

"Who was your friend between your father's death and the day you met me?"

She knows the answer, Felicity thought, so why does she have to ask?

"Squeaker." She forced the name through the beginning of a sob.

"Mine was Magic Mary."

"Was she...?"

"Yes. She had wings like mine. The rest of her was white, too. She was small enough to fit in my pocket if I wore baggy pants. My great-grandmother gave her to me on her deathbed, and she was the only thing my mother wouldn't take from me."

"When my mother drank, she hit me. One day, I might have been six or seven, she hit me in the mouth. Then she ran to her bedroom and slammed the door. I lay on the living room floor for hours. I can't describe the pain. I found bits of my front teeth in the carpet."

"My mother came down, and I turned away from her. She said she was sorry and she loved me. I tried to run out of the room, but she grabbed me and turned me to face her. When she saw me, she screamed and ran back up the stairs. When she came down, she had blood streaming from her mouth. She opened it and pointed to her gums. I saw bloody spaces where her front teeth had been. She picked me up, carried me to her bed, and held me until the next morning. I struggled to get away, until I fell asleep."

“When I woke up, I found her stroking my hair, and I thought things might be OK. I’d grow adult teeth, and if my mother would love me it would be worth losing the baby ones. She left me in the bed and went downstairs. I heard the coffee machine start, and, after a few minutes, I heard her walk back up the stairs. I thought she was bringing me breakfast, but she opened the door and looked at me with dead eyes and pointed to her mouth and said, ‘You did this to me.’ And she stood in the doorway and stared at me like she wished I was dead.”

She paused, and, apparently noticing the confusion on Felicity’s face, added, “She blamed me for that fact that she knocked out her own teeth. She’d done it out of guilt over what she’d done to me, so she decided it was my fault.”

“From then on it was me and Magic Mary, alone in a house full of hate. I ran away when I was fifteen, like your mother. I knew I’d stayed too many years already. I’d watched a few music videos and fallen in love with harmony and rhythm. One night, I stole my mother’s purse, bought a set of drums from a used musical instruments store, hot-wired a car, and drove away with purse, drums, and Magic Mary. I slept in the car that night and dreamed I was a fairy.”

Felicity gasped. “I’ve had that dream!” she said.

“But you weren’t a fairy, were you?” Dr. Light asked.

“No. I was a mouse,” Felicity replied.

“You were Squeaker.”

Felicity stared through the leaves and listened to the stream.

“What happened next?” she asked.

“I had the same dream the next three nights,” Dr. Light replied. “The fifth night, my mother caught up with me. I was walking back to the car from a bathroom in a deserted rest stop. She walked towards me with her fists balled. I backed away until I hit the wall of the bathroom,

and, suddenly, I was holding my drumstick and waving it at her. I don't know what I thought it would do, but I know what it did. I saw a flash of light, and my mother fell to the ground five yards from where she'd been standing. I felt an incredible pain in my back, like something tearing its way out. I doubled up, and, next thing I knew, I'd risen six feet from the ground and my mother was running."

"Did you let her get away?"

"No."

Dr. Light was silent for a few seconds.

"She got away because I didn't know how to control my magic," she said. "If I saw her today, I might well kill her."

Felicity froze at the word "kill." Dr. Light drove too fast, talked about using magic to steal, and now she said she might use it to kill.

Is she a dark fairy? Felicity wondered.

She didn't realize she'd muttered "dark fairy" aloud until Dr. Light said, "Fairies aren't light or dark, anymore than anyone else is. You're too old to think like that."

Felicity didn't know what to say. Dr. Light had never spoken to her harshly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you're a good person."

Dr. Light smiled.

"Would you tell me the rest of your story?" Felicity asked.

Dr. Light continued: "When I got back to my car, I looked at the passenger seat. Magic Mary wasn't there. I drove on and carried on sleeping in the car. When the cash in my mother's wallet ran out, I shoplifted and snatched purses."

“I learned to use magic. I can do anything I imagined Magic Mary doing when I was a child. I just imagine it and wave my drumstick. Sometimes I think ‘come on, come on’ or something like that, and it happens. I don’t know why I need the drumstick. Maybe it’s because I ran away to become a musician. Maybe it represents my soul.”

“Anyhow, I conjured fake transcripts and SAT score reports and got into Brown. It was easy. So was Brown. I met your father there. He played a gig in Providence. We went on tour the summer after I graduated, and met your mother.”

“Were they...?”

“Toys? No. Your father had loving parents who died when he was in high school. I’ve told you your mother’s were bad, but she had friends. Even if she’d only had a cat, she wouldn’t have become like us. It’s only when a child is utterly alone, except for a toy, that the child becomes the toy.”

“I wasn’t alone until my father died,” Felicity said.

“You were five when he died,” Joan replied. “That’s young enough.”

9: AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

Felicity stared at the ground and intermittently looked up at her godmother. No one said anything, and she guessed the others knew she'd taken in as much as she could.

An elderly African-American woman knelt beside Dr. Light and hugged her. Felicity studied the woman, wondering how she'd suddenly appeared. Beneath her shaven head, the woman wore a silver-grey button-down shirt, above jeans and leather boots. Her bare arms caught Felicity by surprise. She'd never seen such large muscles on a woman. Dr. Light returned the hug and whispered, "How did you get your clothes back?"

"I'm not an idiot, Joan," the woman laughed. "I chose this clearing to bring Paul to if I had to get him out. My clothes have been here since four-thirty in the morning."

Felicity looked around for the horse but couldn't see it.

"Jasmine Knight," the woman said, extending her hand to Felicity.

Fairy, snake, horse, Felicity thought as she shook it.

Dr. Light said she'd parked by a small road about a mile away. She and Jasmine left, and Felicity and Paul spent the next half hour looking at each other, away from each other, and back at each other, smiling occasionally until Dr. Light came back with a tent, four sleeping bags, and metal skewers.

"Where's Jasmine?" Paul asked.

“She’s gone for food,” Dr. Light replied. She crouched in front of Felicity again, a questioning look in her eyes. Felicity looked back, wondering if she was supposed to say something.

“Help me with the tents?” Dr. Light asked.

Felicity had never put up a tent before. Soon, she realized Dr. Light hadn’t either. By a soft light from the end of her godmother’s wand, they mixed up poles, mixed up pegs, and spent more time scratching their heads than working. At one point, they raised a tent only to realize they’d turned it inside out. Felicity laughed more with every error, but, by the time Jasmine returned, two green tents stood in the middle of the clearing.

“Why are we camping?” Felicity asked, a few seconds after realizing she had no idea.

“I cast a spell to hide us as I arrived,” Dr. Light answered. “We don’t know whether the hummingbird was alone. I have trouble maintaining the spell while I move, so we’ll wait until morning.”

Jasmine returned with grocery bags, and Paul sat by the fire, skewered sausages, held them over the flames, and turned them slowly.

“Won’t your arms get tired?” Felicity ventured.

“Paul’s arms are strong,” Jasmine remarked.

“They get strong when you use them to help you walk,” Paul explained, looking shyly at Felicity.

Jasmine mixed butter, flour, and salt together, and added a little water. She stirred vigorously, biceps flexing, and then twisted dough around skewers and held them close to the fire. Dr. Light and Felicity copied her, and, when they’d made two-dozen “twist rolls,” as Jasmine called them, Paul announced the sausages were ready.

They piled sausages and twist rolls onto plates. Felicity's hunger hit when she smelled the sausages up close, and she bit into one and savored spices and meat. The bread tasted like it had absorbed the fire's woody-smokiness. When their eating slowed down, Jasmine asked Felicity about school, plans for college, and whether she played sports. Felicity recognized these as the questions adults always ask teenagers, but she felt glad to answer them. The questions were normal, and normal felt good.

If I'm Cinderella, she thought, this meal can be time out from the story.

But, as she answered Jasmine's questions, she realized that, between her discoveries about her parents, her discoveries about Dr. Light, and her experiences of both magic and attempted murder, she'd forgotten that she'd also found out she was Cinderella.

I'm an orphan, she thought, as she finished telling Jasmine she didn't know what she wanted to do after college. And I live with my stepmother and stepsisters who treat me like crap. And I have a godmother whose a fairy, and she helped me go to something that might count as a ball. But no prince. Is Hugo Mast the prince?

She promised herself she would under no circumstances marry Hugo Mast.

Melanie can have him, she thought, if she can get him. But I lost a shoe. Is he going to come chasing after me, holding it?

By the time she finished eating, her eyes began to close. But the others started toasting the marshmallows, and she felt like she should help.

"Hold the marshmallow three or four inches from the flame," Jasmine advised as she skewered one. "And turn it until it's golden-brown."

She tried, but every time her eyes drooped her marshmallow caught fire.

"That's not the way to do it," Jasmine scolded through a laugh.

Felicity gave up helping with s'mores but ate plenty of them.

"We'll clean up in the morning," Jasmine yawned as they finished eating. Felicity crawled into one of the tents, and Dr. Light crawled in after her and lay down beside her. It felt only slightly strange.

*

Felicity woke to daylight and the sound of her godmother, Paul, and Jasmine talking outside. She lay on her side, stared at the fabric of the tent, too numb to join the others, and pieced together what she'd learned the previous day: Children, with no companion in the world but a toy, gained the ability to become whatever the toy represented. Judging by the fairy, the snake, and the horse, they transformed into the creatures themselves, not toy versions. Dr. Light had played with a toy fairy, Jasmine with a toy horse. Paul must have played with one of those rubber snakes. And Felicity herself would transform into a mouse. The process had already started, with her recurring dream about being one.

All the previous day's events: Joan's magic, Paul's fight to protect the congressman, the escape, the camping, everything she'd learned, had been real.

With her memories pieced back together, Felicity stretched, sat up, and crawled out of the tent. Someone had relit the fire, and Joan, Paul, and Jasmine sat around it, talking. Bacon rested over the fire in a foil pan, and the smell of it wafted to Felicity's nose. Four cups of coffee and a zip lock bag of biscuits sat on the ground a yard from the fire. Felicity picked up one of the cups, sipped the coffee, and sat down next to Dr. Light.

"How did you sleep?" her godmother asked.

"OK."

"It's a lot to take in."

It was, but Felicity's curiosity won out over her shock.

"So, can we all do magic?" she asked.

"Actually, no," Dr. Light replied. "I can do the things I imagined my toy doing as a child.

Paul can make and manipulate fire, and manipulate gold. That's another thing we don't understand: Why fire and gold? He's an inexplicably successful investor. He started with a few bills. Now he's one of the richest people in America, and he's only eighteen. So maybe there's a connection between that and his power over gold."

"He invests in gold?" Felicity asked.

"Not often," Paul put in. "I'm a risk taker."

"He makes money like its easy," Dr. Light continued, "and he can manipulate gold, the actual metal, by magic. We think the two facts must be connected."

Felicity remembered the congressman's tiepin rising to block the hummingbird's attack.

"We don't know why I can control fire, or make it," Paul added, looking off into the trees.

"The others can't do any magic," Dr. Light finished. "So you probably won't be able to."

"Where are the others? What are...?" Felicity began.

"What do they turn into?" Dr. Light interrupted. "Two turn into bears, both grizzlies, two into birds that aren't of any real species, one into an elephant, one a rhinoceros, and one a donkey..." She counted on her fingers. "...And one into He-Man."

"Who?"

"An exceptionally strong character from a bad children's comic and cartoon, big in the 1980s."

“And they all played with toys of those things, and then turned into the real things?”

Felicity asked.

“They didn’t just play with them,” Dr. Light replied. “They only survived because of them, and they barely managed that. Most of us take pills for one psychological disorder or other. Some go to therapy. Some have criminal records. The rhino’s in jail now, actually.”

“What did he do?”

“He was in a bar fight. He didn’t start it, but he finished it, without transforming, thank god.”

That made sense, Felicity thought. These people would be damaged and act the way damaged people acted. After all, Dr. Light was no angel.

“When will I transform?” she asked.

“Soon,” Dr. Light replied. “The first transformation happens at a time of need, usually in the teen years. You’re already dreaming about being a mouse, so you’ll probably transform at the next moment of need. Squeaker will disappear after you do.”

Felicity didn’t feel sure that price was worth paying. No one but Squeaker had mattered from her father’s death until she started high school. But, if she became one with him, he’d still be alive in a sense. She couldn’t figure that out yet, so she asked another question:

“So, is the Throat Surgeon like you?”

“Yes,” Dr. Light replied, the edges of her mouth twisting.

“And you exist to fight them?”

“It’s ‘we’,” Dr. Light replied. “And no. So far as I know, we don’t exist to do anything. We exist because of something no one understands about magic, about the mind, maybe even about the soul. I’ve tried to find psychological explanations. I’ve read up on psychiatry and

neurology, but I came up dry. The others aren't interested in fighting them, anyway. They just like to go to abandoned buildings and other places we won't be seen, transform, and spend time together. Only Paul, Jasmine, Adam, and I are interested in a higher cause. Adam's He-Man."

That took Felicity aback. She'd assumed she'd walked into a super-hero versus super-villain situation, but she'd actually found people, strange people, like her. As children, they connected to the only things they could connect to, connected so strongly, that they became those things. The only real mystery was Paul. Dr. Light's magic went with her toy, but his ability to control fire and gold had nothing to do with snakes. She shifted to face him, and he looked up and smiled in his crooked, toothy way.

"So..." She tried to phrase her question politely. "What did you call your snake?"

He looked into the fire. "I didn't have one," he replied. "I had a variety of toys, but none of them made it between foster homes and the orphanage. I never had a snake."

"So how come...?"

"That's another thing we don't know about me."

He grinned into the fire, and Felicity wondered if he was covering bitterness with amusement.

"What kind of snake are you?" she asked, wanting to get to know him.

"No real species," he replied. "I don't have venom, but I have large fangs."

Paul stared more intently into the fire, and Felicity realized she'd learned very little. She suspected Paul wanted it that way.

*

After breakfast, the four walked to the road, piled into the Aston Martin, and drove into the center of Boston. They dropped Paul at a red brick and shining glass apartment building,

where he lived alone, and drove another hour to drop Felicity at her Violet's house. Violet, Doreen, and Melanie still slept. She walked to her little room, sat on the bed, picked up Squeaker, and looked at him. As she held him to her face, she thought about Dr. Light, her godmother who loved her. She knew her father had loved her too, and her mother had loved her. And perhaps these new people, the Toys, would love her. Perhaps it wasn't too much to hope for.

She spent the day moving between those thoughts, her novel, and, around mid-afternoon, her homework. Before the sunlight through her window began to fade, she made a resolution: If she was a fairytale heroine; if, better than that, she had a godmother who loved her, then she did not deserve her tiny bedroom, her cheap clothes, insults, or neglect. And she was going to do something about it.

10: A BETTER LIFE

Instead of sleeping, Felicity made a plan. Violet didn't want her, but she couldn't be seen rejecting her stepdaughter, because she lived for what people thought of her. So Felicity needed to make it more embarrassing for Violet to keep her. Then she could live with Dr. Light.

After school that day, she took a bottle of scotch from the pantry, waited until Melanie left her room, walked into it, locked the door, picked a rap album from Melanie's collection, cranked the volume, climbed out of the window, made it to the ground with the help of a drainpipe, opened the scotch, and reeled around the garden pretending to drink. Melanie, Doreen, and Violet ran at her. As obscene lyrics hammered across the garden from Melanie's bedroom window, she swung the bottle at them, and, when they backed off towards the house, she beat the bottle on the fence separating her stepmother's garden from the neighbors. When most of it lay in shards in the flowerbed, she climbed an apple tree and sung along with the music until the police arrived.

Violet, Doreen, and Melanie retreated into the house, and Violet stared at her from a living room window, fury pasted on her face.

Felicity realized the woman hadn't said a word to her. She ran at her and tried to grab the bottle; she retreated. Now she glared from a window. She hadn't spoken to Felicity at any point in the confrontation.

She hasn't in years, Felicity thought. Not since the last time she punished me.

That had happened three years ago, Felicity remembered. Violet had towered over her and furiously accused her of wrecking her favorite dress with an iron. Felicity denied it, though she didn't know whether it was true, and Violet sent her to her room and locked her in it until the afternoon of the next day. She only unlocked the door because Felicity resorted to relieving herself into a towel. The last words she heard from her stepmother were "mumble, mumble, disgusting smell."

Since then, Violet hadn't said a word to her.

But she must have ordered me to do chores, Felicity argued to herself.

Then she realized her stepmother hadn't even done that. By the time of the towel incident, Felicity had known what chores to do and how. And Violet had ironed her favorite clothes herself from then on.

A police car parked in the driveway, and two officers got out of it, walked down the garden, and stood under the tree. Violet stalked away from her window.

"Time to come down, miss," one, a middle-aged woman, announced.

Felicity started singing again.

"If we have to come up there, we will not be happy," the officer warned.

Felicity looked at the houses to the left and right of her stepmother's. Both sets of neighbors stared from their windows, half hidden by curtains, and Felicity laughed, knowing she had what she wanted. She jumped down and landed on her feet.

"I'll take that," said the second officer, a chubby faced young man in his twenties, as he reached for the remains of the bottle.

Felicity figured she'd rather be with the police than with Violet, after what she'd done. She held the bottle out of the officer's reach.

“Miss, hand over the bottle or we will take you in,” the first officer said.

Felicity grinned at her.

*

Felicity spent the night lying on a bed next to a wall of transparent plastic. The cell was clean and the mattress comfortable enough to allow her to sleep, but for several hour she lay awake, because the realization about her stepmother’s three year silence came again to her mind.

Three years, she kept thinking. Over a desperate crap in a towel.

And, with that thought, the pieces of her stepmother slid into place for her: perfect home, perfect clothes, perfect etiquette, daughters with everything they needed to be beautiful and socially powerful.

“She wants to be perfect,” Felicity whispered.

She finished the thought in her head: *She thinks she knows what perfect means, and she can’t cope with any deviation from it. A spoiled dress is a deviation; so is a crap in a towel. So are my looks, my brains, and my father loving my mother before he loved her.*

*

In the morning, a pretty young female officer lectured her from the other side of the bars.

“You’ve never been in trouble before,” she told Felicity. “And I don’t want you in trouble again. Have you drunk alcohol before?”

“No,” Felicity replied, putting on a shamefaced look. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you do it?”

“A boy at school dared me.”

After a lecture about peer pressure and substance abuse, the young officer released her, and she walked to school. At lunchtime, she didn’t tell her godmother about her escapade but

instead peppered her with questions about the other Toys, but she didn't get as many answers as she wanted.

"You'll meet them on Saturday," Dr. Light assured her, "if you can make the meeting."

"Don't worry, Dr. Light, I'll make it," Felicity replied.

"Joan," Dr. Light said, in a gentle but insistent tone. "I'm your godmother. I'm Joan to you."

*

Back at her stepmother's house, Felicity put on an incompetent martial arts display in the garden, complete with loud "hi-yahs" and "wi-eiys." She kept it up until her Violet, Doreen, and Melanie dragged her to her room and locked it from the outside. That night, she jumped from the window and repeated the performance in the gardens of several neighbors until the police dragged her away again, sat her behind a table, shouted across it for an hour, and locked her in the same cell as the previous night.

She figured the cell was no worse than her stepmother's house.

*

Felicity continued her plan the rest of the week. She spent Wednesday and Thursday nights in the cell -- her cell, as she now thought of it. She wondered why the police didn't charge her, or even recite the Miranda rights at her, and guessed Violet had asked someone to pull strings. A stepdaughter in court would embarrass her.

When she returned from school Friday, she found Violet in a wood and fabric recliner on the lawn, sipping white wine. She stuffed down her fear and spoke.

"Good afternoon," she said, in a voice of fake sweetness. "I don't want to cause you any more trouble..."

Violet looked up and stared at her as though she'd sprouted extra limbs.

Felicity continued: "...so I'd like to move in with my guidance counselor for the rest of my senior year."

On Violet's face, she saw a flash of anger and then a wave of relief, and she knew the blackmail had worked. An hour later, she'd packed her belongings into two suitcases, which Violet actually gave her, climbed into a taxi, which Violet actually paid for, and arrived at Joan's apartment. Joan only looked surprised for a second.

"I didn't expect you so soon," she said, emphasizing the last two words.

She hugged Felicity, took one of her cases, and led her to a spare bedroom. The room was small, but still three times the size of Felicity's old one. Photos of rock bands and tuxedoed orchestras hung on the walls. Felicity took Squeaker out of her pocket and set him down between cream-colored silk pillows on a queen-sized bed, opened her suitcases, and looked around for somewhere to put her clothes. A wardrobe stood between the bed and the door, and, on the other side of the bed, at the back of a deep alcove, stood a painted armoire. She took a fistful of underwear out of one of the cases, walked to the armoire, and paused to examine the paintwork along its top. She saw pumpkins, carriages, footmen, and mice in blue on a silver background and, covering the front in the same colors, a man in riding clothes and a crown kneeling before a girl in a peasant dress. One his hands held a shoe. One of hers covered her mouth and the other held a dustpan.

I don't have a prince, she thought. And, if I find one, it won't be Hugo Mast or anyone else at that party. But I have a godmother, and I'm somewhere new. Perhaps I can be someone new.

She opened the topmost of four drawers. In it, she found a pink envelope with the name of a lingerie store in black letters. She laughed at her worn panties as she placed them next to it and wondered what she'd replace them with. She'd never thought about nice underwear before.

She closed the top drawer and opened the one below it to find an envelope with the name of a cosmetics store on the front. The bottom two draws held envelopes from a department store and a bookstore.

She walked out of the room, heard a sizzling sound, and walked towards it, passing through a large living room with sleek, chocolate brown leather couches and black glass dining table and chairs. Wall-mounted lights with wicker shades lit the room, and the smell of cooking meat filled it.

She followed a sizzling sound to a small kitchen wrapped with black appliances and black granite counters. Joan stood at the stove, stirring the contents of a large skillet. Felicity stared at her. Then she stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. Joan put down the spatula, turned to her, wrapped her arms around her, and squeezed.

*

Felicity and Joan ate steak with a salad of tomato and fresh herbs, and Joan opened a bottle of red wine. Felicity savored its fruity-peppery taste, and Joan filled their glasses as they ate. By the end of the meal, they'd emptied the bottle. Felicity stood, wobbled, and, when she'd righted herself, began to step with extreme care from Joan's dining table to the doorway that led into the passageway to the bathroom. As she made her way from the bathroom to her bedroom, it occurred to her people who worked in the school system didn't usually serve alcohol to seventeen year olds.

Whatever, she thought, as she lay fully clothed under her new bedcovers. *Joan doesn't care about rules.*

She figured she could survive a hangover and still get her homework done, but she might have to put off the homework to go shopping.

Joan opened the door, smiled, walked to the bed, and handed Felicity a large glass of water.

“Drink it all before you sleep,” she said.

11: FRIENDSHIP

The morning after Felicity moved in with Joan, she woke with the feeling of a drill boring into her head. She willed herself out of bed, into the shower, into her clothes, and through a ninety-minute drive with Joan at the wheel. Her hangover half faded by the time she and Joan walked beneath red and gold leaves to a remote corner of a state park. She held her third cup of coffee, but the cool breeze did more than the coffee to revive her.

They stopped under a cluster of oaks and ferns, in a patchwork of shade and sunlight. In front of them stood a fat, brown donkey with mud on its legs. Next to it, Jasmine and Paul stood together, Paul supporting himself with his sticks. Felicity smiled and greeted them and wondered if she should greet the donkey. She heard birdcalls from the branches above and looked up to see two birds, both about eighteen inches from beak to tail tip. On one, shiny scarlet and blue feathers covered broad shoulders and a thick body, and formed a short tail. Its white eyes and short, wide beak stood out from a dull yellow face. On the other, feathers an equally bright gold and green covered a sleek body and formed long, sharp wing tips and tail. Its yellow face included black eyes and a long, thin, pointed black beak.

“Hey Felicity,” said a voice behind her.

She turned to see four more people: a young woman with electric blue hair, a muscled, blond haired man with eyes as bright blue as the woman’s hair, a thin, middle aged man, possibly Mexican, in a wrinkled T-shirt, stubble on his face, and, holding his hand, an Asian woman in black sweats, wisps of hair on her cheeks and chin. All had eyes the shape of Felicity’s own. She

wasn't sure what to do besides smile, until the little crowd broke into applause. She heard birdcalls through their clapping.

Joan started speaking as the noise died down.

"This is Matt Bray," she said, pointing to the donkey.

"Hi" Felicity said.

"Muhammad Zazu and Tobias Zazu. Not related."

Joan pointed up to the birds in turn, Muhammad the gold and green, Tobias the scarlet and blue, as Felicity stifled a laugh at the Lion King reference.

Do they change their names to suit their transformations, she wondered.

"You know Jasmine. You know Paul."

Felicity formed a mental list: *Matt Bray - donkey, Muhammad Zazu - green and gold bird, Tobias Zazu - red and blue bird, Paul Heath - snake, and Jasmine Knight - horse.*

They definitely choose new names, she thought.

She looked back to Paul and Jasmine. In their places stood the grey horse she recognized as Jasmine and two piles of clothes. Behind the horse, the snake Felicity recognized as Paul lay coiled under a tree. She could barely see him until he moved his head out of the shade towards her and the sunlight lit up his scales like the last time she'd seen him. He flicked his tongue out and in again so quickly she only just saw it. She laughed.

"Coral Paddington and Juan Hermano."

Joan pointed to the place the Asian woman and the older man had stood, and Felicity turned to see two grizzly bears standing on their hind legs. The blue haired woman and the blond man still stood next to them, but the blond man now wore nothing but fur boots, fur underpants,

and metal forming an X across his chest. His muscles bulged out of those garments. He looked ridiculous.

“Adam Prince,” Joan said, pointing at him.

“Also known as He-Man,” he said. He almost whispered, but his voice still carried.

“Monica Horton,” Joan said.

She gestured to the blue-haired woman. She had a somewhat elongated face, and, from the prominent muscles in the sides of her neck, Felicity suspected that, under her blue fleece and jeans, Monica Horton was wiry and strong.

“Hi there,” said Monica, smiling. “I’m an elephant.”

*

Adam began the meeting. He and Joan shared minor bits of news from “chapters” that consisted of Toys in New York, Austin, Idaho, Puerto Rico, Vancouver, Denmark, Cairo, Hiroshima, and somewhere in Tibet. Felicity noted the mixture of cities, states, and countries and guessed the Toys organized loosely. Joan pointed out Matt had committed a minor violation of the secrecy rules, transforming too close to the edge of the park, and said he should have to bring cupcakes to the next meeting.

“Shall we put it to a vote,” she asked, half smiling at the donkey, which shook its head.

“He has to buy cupcakes more often than anyone else,” Joan whispered to Felicity. “It’s the penalty for minor secrecy infractions.”

“What’s the penalty for major ones?” Felicity whispered back.

“There isn’t one,” Joan replied, her voice suddenly serious, “because no one seriously compromises us. We joke about what we are, but hiding it isn’t a joke.”

The frolicking started with a game called “find the snake.” Paul slithered away, and the others fanned out to look for him.

“Come on,” Monica said to Felicity, and Felicity followed her to a large bush about fifty yards to the right, covered in ripe blackberries.

“What’s the game?” Felicity asked.

“Everyone tries to find Paul,” Monica replied, picking a blackberry. “Joan can’t use magic, but Tobias and Muhammad can fly. They’ll find him if anyone does, with their bird vision.”

Felicity picked a blackberry, put it in her mouth, savored its slightly tart juiciness, and wondered what to say to Monica. She settled on, “Are you going to transform?”

Monica laughed. “This place is remote,” she replied, “but outsiders might notice an elephant.” She sounded sad as she added, “I don’t get to transform often.”

They picked and ate blackberries as the red snake slithered across their sight line, followed at a run by a horse, two bears, and a mass of blond hair, muscle, metal, and fur.

“Yeah, it’s immature,” Monica said, “but we’re children. Well, deep down we want to be. It happens when your childhood gets trashed.”

With that, Monica ran at the snake, and Felicity followed. She didn’t know if she was playing the game right, but she was doing what Monica was doing. And it was fun. She was having fun with her new friends.

*

No one caught Paul. When everyone slowed, panting, to a walk, they brought out picnic baskets, sat, in human form, in a circle, and munched sandwiches, chips, and cookies. Her

stomach full, Felicity lay back and watched the light play on the fall leaves as they twitched in a slight breeze.

The day grew warm. After lunch, they walked to a clear blue lake, where Matt transformed again and Monica, Coral, and Felicity took turns sitting on his back while he tried to buck them into the water. Monica flew into the lake after less than a minute, blue hair flashing silver in the sunlight, and she trod water in her clothes as Coral stripped to her underwear, climbed onto Matt, and gripped his sides with skinny legs and his mane with bony hands, skin taut over her delicate face. She bounced with each buck but remained astride the donkey, the delicate strands of hair on her cheeks and chin whipping around in the air. Finally, she soared over the lake. As she fell towards the water, her underwear burst from her body and she grew huge and furry in less than a second. She went under a few yards from Monica, and, seconds later, a bear's head and front paws appeared, claws six inches long and sharp. She peeled her black lips, revealing huge teeth, growled, and swam to the side. She sprang from the water, human and naked, and Joan handed her a towel. Realizing she was staring at a naked person, Felicity turned away. The donkey's eyes met hers.

Trepidation in her stomach, Felicity took off her jeans, climbed onto the donkey, and gripped its mane. He lowered his back end and bucked. Felicity flew over his head, landed on his back, and grimaced at the sudden pain in her buttocks. Two bucks later, she soared over the lake with her stomach in her mouth.

The water felt cool. Monica swam to her and high fived her. They swam to the side of the lake, and Adam hauled them both out at the same time, put a hand on Felicity's shoulder, and smiled.

"Welcome," he whispered, his blue eyes catching her gaze.

She guessed she felt happiness, or something deeper. Belonging, perhaps.

“When will I transform?” she asked.

“When you really need to,” Monica replied. “It won’t hurt, but it won’t be your choice the first time. And you won’t know it’s happening until you’re all the way there.”

“After the first time, you’ll choose when it happens,” Adam added. “You’ll know how to transform and how to transform back to human. We can’t tell you how because it works differently for each of us.”

“And will I be literally a mouse?”

“Yes,” Adam answered. “You’ll have a real mouse body, even a mouse’s internal organs. You’ll have real fur and mouse skin and a mouse face. You’ll have you own mind, though. The mind stays human.”

12: FASHION

The following day, Monica took Felicity shopping. As they rode the MTA, Monica talked about shoes, jeans, jewelry, and makeup. She talked fast, and Felicity smiled awkwardly and thought fast about what she should say. She tried to remember what she'd heard girls say to each other.

"I've never had a friend with your skin tone before," Monica said. The word "tone" made Felicity notice her electric blue hair again.

"I know the cosmetics store your voucher's for," she continued. "They have good makeup artists, so we'll have makeup figured out by lunch. We'll hit the department store after lunch and the lingerie store last."

Felicity closed her eyes and came clean: "I don't know anything about this."

"Yeah," Monica replied with a warm smile. "Joan told me. No worries; I'm the queen of this shit."

They got off at Back Bay, and Monica led Felicity at a brisk pace to a shopping center.

"I've got to go," Monica said, as the glass doors closed behind them, and she headed straight through a door to the women's bathroom.

Felicity looked around. A wide staircase led from the mall entrance and bathrooms to the first stores. She walked up the stairs. To her right she found a nail salon, to her left a pet store.

Oh, she thought. I guess that makes sense.

She walked into the pet store and looked around. Signs hung from the ceiling, reading “dogs,” “cats,” “birds,” “small mammals,” “reptiles,” and “exotic pets.” She supposed Monica shopped in the exotic pets section, Paul in the reptiles section, Tobias and Muhammad in the birds section.

Jasmine and Matt probably go to an equestrian supplies store, she reasoned. Where do Coral and Dave go?

She walked to the small mammals section, which consists of three aisles, labeled “rabbits,” “guinea pigs,” and “rodents.” She walked down the rodents aisle.

What am I looking for? She asked herself as she passed cages, bags of wood chips, and bags of food. *Am I supposed to wash all over with mouse shampoo? Will it make my skin prettier? Am I supposed to eat mouse food?*

She reached a collection of bottles, spray bottles, and aerosol sprays. Starting to feel scared, she read the labels. On the highest shelf, she found cleaning sprays for cages.

I won't need that, she thought.

Odor neutralizers sat on the next shelf down.

I won't need that either, she thought.

Then a frightening idea came to her: *What if I will need it? I don't want to smell like a mouse!*

She stepped back.

The others smell fine, she thought. *But maybe that's because they use pet products.*

She looked at the third shelf. “Fur shine shampoo,” read the label on one bottle. She picked it up and turned it around to find the ingredients list. There was no ingredient list. She grew more nervous, until a hand tapped her shoulder and she turned to find Monica.

“Do you have a pet mouse?” Monica asked.

“No,” Felicity replied. “I thought...I assumed I had to...”

Monica grabbed the bottle from Felicity’s hand, looked at it, and burst out laughing.

“OK, I’m going to go find the elephant toothpaste,” she said when she’d recovered.

Felicity felt embarrassed.

“You mean we don’t...” she said.

“No!” Monica exclaimed through more laughter. “Well, you could if you wanted to stay transformed for a week, but no, we use ordinary products from stores for people. We’re not animals.”

That didn’t sit sit right in Felicity’s mind.

“Aren’t we half animal?” she began to ask as Monica led her out of the store.

“No,” Monica replied. “We’re human beings. We work at human being jobs. We live in human being homes. We eat human being food, wash in human being showers, use human being cosmetics, watch human being TV, and sleep in human being beds. We’re one-hundred percent human, except when we transform.”

“So we live in the human world,” Felicity said, the thought forming as she spoke.

“Yes,” Monica replied. “Because we belong in it.”

“Can we have friends who aren’t Toys?” Felicity asked.

“There’s no rule against it,” Monica said. “But generally we don’t. You can’t get close to someone while keeping something as big as transformation from them.”

Monica breezed into a cosmetics store.

“Makeover?” she asked an attendant as Felicity caught up to her.

The attendant called over another woman, who sat Felicity in a chair in front of a large mirror with two smaller mirrors at diagonals to either side. An hour later, Felicity had brown eyebrows and lashes, as she'd had at the ball, and wore glittery gold eye shadow and bronze liner, nude lipstick, and pale foundation.

She smiled at her reflection. She liked everything about the way she now looked, except her hair, which looked malnourished next to her face.

"Forgot to mention, stylist before lunch," Monica said. "We'll check out and go to one Coral told me about. It's round the corner. We don't even have to go outside."

"What are we checking out?" Felicity asked.

"I made a list while she worked," Monica replied, gesturing at the makeup artist.

Felicity held a large bag when they left and tried to remember how the makeup artist had applied the makeup. She wanted to wear some every day, but she didn't know whether to go it alone or ask Joan for help.

*

Monica had a long conversation with the stylist before they settled on spikes. Then the stylist washed Felicity's hair, blow-dried it, and began cutting. Felicity felt like a third wheel, until she saw her new hair: black, inch long spikes, with sharper ends than at the ball. She loved them!

She settled up for her cut and the shampoo, conditioner, hair spray, and gel Monica thrust at the receptionist. After a quick lunch at a doughnut shop, they walked down Boylston Street and stopped outside a department store, and Felicity snuck a look at herself in the mirrored door handles. The sight of her lashes, brows, and spikes made her smile. She knew she'd never look

like the popular girls at school, but she looked like she took herself seriously and expected the world to.

*

“Welcome to the temple,” Monica said as they entered the department store. Then she led Felicity to the women’s clothing section.

“Always start with jeans,” she said. “They’re the hardest. If you need formal crap, come back with Joan. Her area.”

Felicity didn’t think she’d ever seen her godmother dressed formally.

An hour later, she’d decided Monica was right about jeans. As she walked back and forth between the dressing room and the store shelves, took pairs off, put pairs on, examined herself in mirrors, and turned a full circle in front of Monica, she realized she’d never worn a pair that fit properly. She turned out to belong in something called the “boyfriend cut,” and she frowned until she noticed Monica nodding like it was a good thing.

Monica tossed boyfriend cut jeans in several colors into Felicity’s arms. Among them, Felicity noticed shiny gold and pink pairs. She didn’t want to wear them.

“I’m not sure...” she ventured, making herself look Monica in the face.

“It’s OK,” Monica shrugged.

Felicity discarded the gold and pink pairs and deposited blue, black, grey, and red pairs beside a register. Then Monica led her to a rack of belts, pulled down four of them, and held them under Felicity’s nose. Felicity chose a thick black one with a silver zigzag pattern. Then she turned to the rack and glanced up and down it, and a blood red fabric belt caught her eye. She thought it would look good with her red jeans and maybe the grey ones. Her arm’s movement towards the belt stopped for a second, as she realized she’d made a judgment about fashion.

She pulled the belt off the rack, wrapped it around her waist, and looked at Monica.

“Yeah,” Monica said with a smile, “good move.”

Four belts joined the jeans beside the register. Over the next two hours, T-shirts, cardigans, and a brown leather jacket followed them. The jacket reminded Felicity of Joan’s. By the time the pile stood higher than the register screen, Felicity had chosen as many items as Monica.

“Now for the most important thing,” Monica said, and she led Felicity to tables and shelves full of shoes.

“Get pumps, flats, and a couple pairs of sneakers,” she suggested.

Felicity chose black and red pumps, blue and grey flats. She tried on sneakers and jumped around in each pair. Wearing them made her feel energetic.

They added the shoes to the collection by the register, and, from a rack beside it, Felicity chose four pairs of costume earrings: gold and silver hoops and gold and silver balls.

“Yeah, those are what you should start with,” Monica said when Felicity pointed them out. “Are your ears pierced?”

“Err, no,” Felicity replied, feeling stupid.

“A lot of stores do it,” Monica said. “Or you can go to a tattoo parlor. It doesn’t hurt much.”

Felicity took the earrings to the register.

*

They left the store beneath starlight.

“Lingerie?” Monica suggested.

But Felicity remembered another priority. “Never let a girlfriend help you shop for a whole day without treating her,” Joan had said over breakfast, and she’d given Felicity a credit card and directions to an Afghan restaurant.

They rode the green line to Lechmere.

“I’ve never eaten Afghan,” Monica said as they walked from the T to the restaurant.

“You and Joan are the coolest chicks.”

Felicity grinned.

Am I really cool? She wondered.

*

After dinner, Monica escorted Felicity back to Joan’s apartment. As they walked through the door just before midnight, Joan appeared from the living room in her nightgown.

“School day tomorrow, Felicity,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

“I texted,” Monica volunteered.

“That didn’t add hours to the night,” Joan replied, voice measured.

“I gotta go,” Monica said. They hugged, and she left quickly. Felicity turned to face Joan, whose expression brightened as she asked, “Did you get nice things?”

*

The next day, other students stared at Felicity as she moved through the hallways in a well-cut black T-shirt, grey jeans, red belt, and red pumps, hair spiked and makeup applied with Joan’s help, silver hoops hanging from her ears. She noticed she walked differently, with her back straighter and her strides longer, and that she looked ahead instead of at the ground.

As she walked to Chinese class, Doreen appeared in front of her. Felicity looked levelly at her stepsister, and Doreen looked her up and down and seemed to think for a second before smiling and saying, “Hi, you’re new?”

“No,” Felicity replied, “I’m your stepsister, you bubble-head.”

Doreen’s face screwed up. “Where did you get those clothes?” she asked.

“A magic elephant helped me choose them,” Felicity replied as she sidestepped Doreen and carried on walking. Seconds later, she realized she was smiling.

By lunchtime, the other students stared and whispered as Felicity passed. As she headed for Joan’s office, she saw Melanie sitting on a three-foot wall with her junior class popular girl clique and Josh Diamond, the school’s best linebacker. Melanie rested her hand on his inner thigh, an inch from his crotch. As Felicity approached, Melanie whispered something in his ear. He stood as Felicity passed, and she felt a sudden pain in her right buttock and heard a cacophony of female laughter.

She stopped dead as she realized Josh had slapped her butt. It hurt, but she knew it wasn’t meant to hurt. It was meant to humiliate.

“Josh,” she said, turning to face him.

He grinned. She looked him dead in the eye and spoke loud enough for everyone within twenty yards to hear: “My step-sister’s dating you because you don’t have the brains to do anything more complicated than run into other boys. You probably couldn’t even figure out how to throw a ball. That’s why you’re popular, and Melanie wants a piece of your popularity.”

She walked away at a measured speed, smiling even more broadly than after she’d put down Doreen.

*

When Felicity got to Joan's office, she kissed her godmother's cheeks. Then she turned to the photo of Joan and her band.

"He's the one on the left," Joan said quietly.

Before anything else, Felicity noticed the soft lines of her father's face. As she looked at him, she remembered bouncing on his lap, walking with him, and the day he gave her Squeaker, and she could almost smell hot chocolate and cider doughnuts.

"I have more at home," Joan said, as Felicity examined her father's buzz cut and slightly too big ears.

13: IDEOLOGY

After school, Felicity walked to Joan's car. Joan had driven her to school in it. Having walked to and from school every day since Doreen and Melanie learned to drive, Felicity felt like her godmother was treating her.

But when she reached the car, she found Jasmine standing by it, smiling warmly. On both sides of her green blouse, her bare shoulder and arm muscles bulged.

"Joan has to stay late," she said. "I can drive you to her place, or we can have dinner at mine."

"Let's go to your place," Felicity said, relishing a chance to spend time with one of the Toys.

Jasmine led her to a grey hatchback, and an hour later they stood in the kitchen of a small but comfortable two-story row house in Quincy. Jasmine prepared a simple pasta dish with bacon and shallots, and Felicity took the bowls and set them down on a circular wooden table.

"I'm afraid wine and teenagers is something Joan and I disagree on," she said. "Would you like cola?"

"Yes please," Felicity answered.

"So how are you feeling?" Jasmine asked as she poured two tall glasses and added ice and lemon wedges.

"OK," Felicity replied.

Jasmine arched her eyebrow.

“Well,” Felicity added, “it’s all pretty strange.”

Jasmine laughed as she sat down at the table.

“That,” she said, “is the biggest understatement I’ve ever heard. It’s ‘pretty strange’ for all of us when we meet others like ourselves, and it’s probably stranger for you than for most because you haven’t transformed yet. Let me guess: You don’t believe you will.”

Felicity nodded, realizing Jasmine was right.

“You will transform,” Jasmine said, “And you don’t have to wait for it to be one of us. You’re one of us now.”

“Thanks,” Felicity replied.

“And now, because you’re one of us,” Jasmine continued, “You can hear our stories. Joan’s told you hers, and I’m going to tell you mine, to prove you’re one of us.”

“As a child, I lived with my great-grandparents. They weren’t cruel. But they were senile, and they just didn’t remember I was there. Some nights I slept under the porch because they forgot who I was and thought I wasn’t supposed to be in the house.”

“My school wasn’t great, but it wasn’t terrible. I worked hard. That cut me off from the other students. The teachers disliked me for wanting help outside class time, but I got into a state college. I’m a pharmacist now.”

“In college, my freshman year, I walked to my dormitory late at night, and a man tried to grab my purse. I ran and ducked around buildings, but he ran after me. I grew tired and ran slower, and his footsteps came closer and closer. I was terrified. Suddenly, I doubled up and my clothes flew off my body. By the time the man reached me, I had four very strong legs and no idea what had just happened. He stared at me, and then he walked up to me and tried to touch me face. I kicked him in the stomach and trotted away.

“When did you meet the others?” Felicity asked.

“I didn’t know there were any others until I was thirty-five,” Jasmine replied. “Then Joan got a prescription from me and said my eyes looked like hers. We talked and ended up having lunch together, and she brought me into the chapter a month later. Before that, I just went for gallops in the countryside and put together a normal life. I didn’t date though. It’s not a secret I’d want to keep from a husband.”

She looked sad. Felicity remembered Monica telling her few Toys had friends who weren’t also Toys, and she wondered if being one might involve as much isolation as companionship. She waited a minute and changed the subject.

“What will we do about the evil conspiracy?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” Jasmine replied. “We weren’t absolutely sure they existed until two and a half months ago, when they killed Mead and Douglas. We know they’re getting more powerful, but there’s been nothing strange in the news in ten weeks: same wars, same starvation, same climate change, and same rigged elections. Joan knows about politics, and Paul knows about the economy. Even they can’t find anything terrible those people have done, except for killing Mead and Douglas and trying to kill Andrews.”

Felicity felt a twinge of disappointment that Joan and the others didn’t know as much as she’d thought.

“How do you know what kind of power they have,” she asked.

“Paul analyzes investments,” Jasmine replied, “and Joan works out which politician’s actions promote which politician’s career, so we know a little about who they are and how they get their power. We just don’t know what they’re going to do with it.”

“What can we do?” Felicity asked, and she heard urgency in her own voice. “They kill people,” she continued, “And they want to take power, and we don’t know what they’ll do when they get it.”

“Joan and Paul are working out what they can,” Jasmine said soothingly. “Adam and I are trying to bring the others around.”

“Bring them around?” Felicity asked.

Then she remembered Joan saying most of the Toys didn’t think this was their fight.

“Felicity, being a Toy doesn’t make you an idealist,” Jasmine explained. “Most of them just want to live their lives. They’re hurting, and most of them are poor. Joan, Adam, and I earn decent salaries. Paul’s richer than God. Monica’s a shift manager at a coffee shop, and she’s kept that job since she was eighteen, which is quite an achievement for a Toy. But the others aren’t even stably employed. You haven’t met Eddie, the rhinoceros, because he’s in jail. Matt’s been in and out of jail for shoplifting, and when he isn’t there he’s chasing women and occasionally working a few weeks at a time. Tobias and Muhammad live together because they only ever have one job between them. Coral and Juan barely ever keep jobs more than a year, and Juan avoided jail three years ago on an insanity plea. He lives in supervised accommodation now. Paul’s offered them all money, but hurting people tend to be proud.”

Felicity stared at Jasmine, shocked that she hadn’t known what precarious lives many of her new friends led. She’d laughed and had fun with the Toys and decided they were her friends, and she hadn’t known.

“So you can’t expect them to make saving the world their first priority,” Jasmine concluded, “especially when they don’t think it’s threatened.”

Felicity saw she had a point: No one could point to an actual threat.

“Whoever the enemy is,” Jasmine explained, “they’ve killed one politician and one journalist and tried to kill a second politician. Most people don’t care about politicians, and the journalist was foreign so Americans don’t automatically care about her.”

Felicity nodded, realizing this made still more sense of the others’ inertia. Much about the world was broken, and most people didn’t spend their time trying to mend it. The Toys were no different.

*

When Joan arrived, she, Jasmine, and Felicity drank coffee, and Felicity left with Joan.

“Did you have a meeting?” she asked her godmother.

“I suppose I should tell you,” Joan replied, “in case Principal Booker asks you questions. I met with him, the Superintendent, and the School Board’s lawyer. They weren’t happy about you living with me, but I told them they had no case unless your legal guardian objects. The lawyer called your stepmother, and she promised to sign a document. I think you scared her.”

She flashed Felicity a smile.

Felicity hesitated before asking, “Are you OK?”

Joan laughed. “I’ve never been Principal Booker’s favorite faculty member,” she said.

“But I have tenure, and they have nothing on me. You mustn’t worry.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Felicity felt numb, but she noticed Joan’s hands resting nonchalantly on the wheel.

She’ll be OK, she told herself. She’s Joan Light. She’s a fairy.

When they walked through the door, Joan threw her leather jacket onto the sofa, stretched, and said, “I’m going to make hot cocoa.”

“Teach me?” Felicity asked. “And show me photos of my parents?”

*

While Felicity watched the milk warm on the stove, Joan left the room and came back with a large black album. Felicity poured the cocoa into mugs and joined her godmother on the sofa. They both blew into their mugs, and Joan opened the album and turned a few pages.

“This is your father just after the band formed,” she said.

Felicity looked at the photo. Her father sat on a rock in front of a range of hills. He wore jeans, a leather jacket, and a buzz cut. Felicity wondered if he was trying to look tough, but she saw the soft, almost curving lines of his jaw and cheeks made that impossible. He looked as she remembered him, cozy and kind, and she wanted more of him than a photograph.

Joan turned a page.

“This is your mother,” she said.

The moment she saw the photograph, she remembered seeing it before; her father had shown it to her many times. She gazed at it again. Her mother had the same strawberry blonde hair as she did. She stood next to a sign that read “Portland” and grinned, her hair thrown to one side and falling to her hip.

She had my hair, Felicity thought.

No. I have hers.

14: PAIN

Between Monday night and Friday afternoon, Felicity tried to keep her mind on her classes, but the pictures in her mind's eye made this hard: Paul slithering around trees as a snake, hugging the trunks, sunlight playing gold on his red scales, Jasmine, Coral, Juan, and Matt running around one another as horse, bears, and donkey, the sensations of falling and then rising through water after Matt bucked her into the lake. Her tongue recalled blackberries, her ears the birdcalls of Tobias and Muhammad.

In the evenings, she helped Joan cook and clean. Her stepmother hadn't appreciated her doing chores, but Joan thanked her and told her how thorough she was. Felicity sensed she was telling the truth, and, knowing that, she didn't hate the chores. After dinner, she studied. Her homework seemed to belong to another world, but she knew college applications made it a world she couldn't ignore. Before she went to bed, she looked at Joan's photo album, at her father in front of hills, her mother grinning by the sign to Portland, at concerts, practice sessions, meals, parties, and her father, mother, godmother, and their friends in the cramped seats of a van.

Joan gave Felicity her spare phone, and she and Monica texted throughout each day. Monica wanted pictures of every outfit, and they talked about everything from movies scheduled for release to the colors of each sunset. Felicity hadn't carried a cell phone before, so she lacked the other students' practice at texting in class, and the dean made her wipe tables in the cafeteria Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday before she realized staring into her lap and smiling gave the game away. She learned to glance down less often and avoid visibly reacting to texts.

*

Thursday morning, Monica started texting about the weekend. By Friday afternoon, she'd arranged dinner for that evening, for "the young people." Besides Monica, that included Tobias, Muhammad, Matt, and Paul, and now Felicity, she guessed with a smile.

She took the T to meet the others at Porter Square. As the train pulled alongside the platform, she realized she had no idea where they were eating. She stepped off the train and looked around for the others. Paul leant on his sticks, his back to the wall, wearing a navy woolen sweater over grey pants and black leather shoes. He moved towards Felicity surprisingly fast, and, when he reached her, shifted his weight onto his left stick and lifted his right hand, still holding its stick.

"I'm glad you could spend more time with us," he said.

She smiled as she closed her hand around his and shook it. She felt unsure what to say, so she settled on, "Thanks. Me too."

She felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped.

"Sorry," said a familiar voice.

She turned to see a flash of electric blue and, beneath it, Monica's face leaning into hers. Felicity stepped back, panic rising as she realized Monica wanted to kiss her cheek.

Monica looked startled. She held her hands up, palms facing Felicity.

"OK, OK," she said, and waved towards the steps that led to street level. Matt, Muhammad, and Tobias stood at the top. People walked around them, looking annoyed, but the three didn't seem to notice.

Felicity felt sick at the thought she'd offended Monica.

"Come on," Paul said. "Let's eat."

They walked up the stairs and along the street to a storefront restaurant.

“It’s Tibetan,” Monica said to the group. “You have to try momo. They’re these pastry parcel things. If you’re up for a dare, order the Tibetan tea. It’s salty.”

Felicity wondered if she should drink the salty tea to make Monica happy with her again, or if that would amount to trying too hard.

They followed Monica through the door, and a woman in an apron smiled and beckoned them to a table in front of a counter. They sat and browsed menus. As she pondered options, Felicity glanced up. Tobias and Muhammad sat opposite her. For the first time, she noticed how unlike each other they looked, Tobias short and a little chubby, with dark curly hair hiding his ears, Muhammad tall and cut underneath his grey T-shirt, eyes bright blue, hair light blond. Those seemed strange features for a man called Muhammad.

“Have you chosen?”

She looked up to find a server holding a notepad and smiling.

Yikes! she thought, as she realized she’d stared at Muhammad too long.

“I’ll have...tea...Tibetan tea...with...err... lots of salt, please,” she said.

“OK,” the woman said, shrugging and smiling. “Just send it back if you don’t like it.”

Her raised eyebrows said she thought Felicity would be doing just that.

Felicity smiled nervously across the table, and Muhammad smiled back. Then, as he looked up at the server, Tobias leaned towards Felicity and asked, “You’re a senior, right? Will you go to college?”

He stuttered over the words “senior” and “college.”

After Felicity rattled off names of colleges she'd applied to, Tobias told her he'd dropped out of Brandeis sophomore year. He said he "kind of" regretted it but sounded like he hadn't forgiven himself.

"He might as well still be there," Muhammad said with a grin. "Never puts down the *Globe* or his library books about history. Don't go to college; you'll end up like him."

His pitch rose and fell a little as he spoke, making his words sound slightly like a song.

"Stay in school," Tobias rejoined, "or you'll end up unemployed like him."

He said "unemployed" slowly, and Felicity guessed he was trying not to stutter.

"I thought Muhammad had a job now," Paul interjected.

"No," Muhammad replied. "We both had jobs for three months. Then the supermarket fired me because I walked away from a customer who wouldn't shut up about the store not having the pancake mix he wanted."

Again Felicity noticed his rising and falling pitch.

"I've still got my gig at the ice cream parlor," Tobias said. "We only owe two months rent, and I get to work night shifts."

"That means he can read instead of work," Muhammad added.

"Will your landlord evict you?" Paul asked.

Muhammad and Tobias looked at each other, shrugged, and laughed. When they turned back to the table, Tobias still grinned, but Felicity saw a hint of concern streak across Muhammad's blue eyes. She thought she should worry about them but instead found herself wondering again about Muhammad's eyes and hair.

Muhammad and Tobias made Felicity laugh with their affectionate jabs at each other. Better still, they let her talk. She talked less than they did, but they didn't cut in. Monica, Matt, and Paul held their own conversation at the other end of the table. Felicity couldn't hear it.

After dinner, Paul walked with her down the stairs to the platform of the T station. She stepped slowly as he negotiated the steps, placing his sticks one step below his feet and then swinging past them to land his feet a step below the sticks. When they reached the bottom, he turned to her.

"Monica sometimes takes things the wrong way," he said. "When she gets angry, it doesn't last long. She needs people as much as the rest of us do."

Felicity didn't know how to respond.

"Your train," he said, nodding past her to the tracks.

*

Paul waved to Felicity as the train began to move. When she could no longer see him, she started to worry. She didn't know what was wrong with Monica, or how Paul knew about it. Monica had tried to kiss her cheek, she resisted, and Monica seemed offended. She didn't know why she resisted. She knew women kissed all the time.

Her phone vibrated against her thigh. She pulled it out, and a text appeared on the screen: "You should care more about Joan. It's not fair to get her in trouble."

The message came from Monica. Another popped up: "She's done a lot for you, and you don't care. Do you care about anyone except yourself?"

Felicity's hand shook as she typed a reply: "She isn't in trouble. My stepmother agreed to let me live with her."

Monica's reply arrived a second later: "You'd better be right," and, three seconds after that, "Just so you know, I only like boys."

That cut, and Felicity felt angry as she texted, "I didn't say you didn't. And that doesn't matter to me."

She stared at her phone until Monica's reply appeared: "Then why did you freak about me kissing you? I aimed for your cheek!"

Felicity didn't know what to say, because she didn't know why she hadn't wanted the kiss. She just felt scared when she saw Monica's face moving towards hers. No one had kissed her before, not even on the cheek. Not even Joan.

No more texts came. After a few minutes, Felicity texted, "I'm sorry. It was stupid of me."

Monica's reply arrived a second later: "Yeah, it was."

Felicity guessed she should let Monica have the last word.

*

Joan poked her head from behind her bedroom door as Felicity walked into the apartment, and Felicity shut the door and turned to face her.

"Are you in trouble because of me?" she asked.

"No," Joan replied. She sounded surprised.

Felicity looked at her, unsure what to say.

"Monica?" Joan asked.

Felicity nodded. Joan closed the door, opened it again, and walked through it in her white bathrobe.

"We should have 'the talk,'" she said, and headed for the kitchen.

Felicity followed her.

“Joan, I, err...I took sex ed.,” she stumbled.

Joan laughed as she took a small pot from the wall, the pot she made hot cocoa in.

“I mean the talk about Monica,” she said. “Actually, about Toys in general.”

She poured milk into the pot, spooned cocoa and sugar onto it, shook in cinnamon, and began to whisk. Felicity moved to the range, took a match from the box beside it, turned on the gas, lit the match, and held it over the range. The gas ignited, reassuring in its blueness and warmth, and Joan placed the pot onto it.

“I don’t usually compare people’s suffering,” she said. “It isn’t a competition, and I don’t have the right to tell you other people’s stories. So I’m just going to say yours isn’t the worst.”

She paused before continuing: “Of course, that doesn’t make yours less bad than it is, but you’re...you’re better adjusted than most toys. I think you know that?”

Felicity nodded, remembering her conversation with Jasmine.

Joan continued: “Monica’s story is one of the worst. She clings to people. She’s afraid they’ll reject her, because most have.”

She paused to whisk the milk hard for a few seconds and then lifted the pot from the stove.

“I’ve said more than I have a right to,” she sighed.

Felicity handed her two mugs, and she poured cocoa into them. They sat on the couch and sipped for a few minutes before Felicity said, “Monica tried to kiss my cheek, and I didn’t let her.”

She told Joan about Monica’s coldness and the text messages. Then she took out her phone and texted “kiss” to Monica, followed by a red heart. Joan squeezed her shoulder and

walked out of the living room. Felicity stared at her phone. The screen grew dimmer, then dark. She lay on the sofa and guessed the friendship was over.

I messed it up in less than a week, she thought.

The screen lit up with a text from Monica: “Kiss, kiss, kiss,” and an electric blue heart.

*

Felicity slept soundly until Joan shook her and told her to be ready in thirty minutes. She washed, dressed, and put on make-up. She could do this by herself now. They left the apartment and walked down the long corridor to the apartment building’s parking complex. Light rain hit the windshield as Joan drove them out of the complex. They stopped at a bakery and carried on driving while they drank large cups of coffee and ate croissants.

Felicity looked out of the window at the Atlantic, as gray as the sky, and smiled, because she was with her godmother, she was going to see her friends, and this would never get old.

As she drained the last of her coffee, they stopped in front of an enormous building scaled by a variety of half dead plants, with four stories of windows. None of the windows had glass. The ones on the bottom story had sheets of metal instead, and the ones above were empty. Felicity didn’t want to be there, until she saw Adam, Paul, and Monica sitting against a great iron door. Then she felt her smile grow, and her hand jumped to the car door.

Monica reached the car by the time Felicity stood. Felicity raised and spread her arms, and Monica grabbed her. Felicity hugged her friend back and planted a kiss on her chilly cheek. Monica carried on hugging and began to sway to left, right, and left again, and Felicity swayed with her, figuring this was how Monica hugged.

Joan waved her wand at the iron door, and, seconds later, they all stood inside the building. Brick walls surrounded an expanse of empty air. A few metal racks stood against one

of the walls. This might have been a warehouse, Felicity thought. The red snake caught her eye, slithering across the grimy wooden floor to the far end of the building. Felicity looked at Monica, but Monica shook her head.

“Ceilings aren’t high enough, and the floors won’t hold me,” she said. “You’ll see me some time, I promise.”

Felicity noticed Monica’s slight emphasis on the word “me.”

She felt something against her back, and she turned quickly to find Matt’s donkey nose straining towards her face, lips curled back. She swatted it gently.

“I’m not kissing your lips,” she said, stifling a laugh, and she planted a kiss between his eyes.

The brilliantly colored birds landed on his back. He shook them off, and Felicity chuckled as they flew towards the ceiling.

I have a new life, she thought.

15: NEW NORMAL

As winter drew closer, the chapter began to meet in Joan and Adam's homes, where they watched movies and played board games. Occasionally, Felicity joined in with Matt, Muhammad, and Tobias's video game sessions, but more often she stuck with Monica and Joan, which meant Jasmine, Adam, Coral, and Juan as well, playing *Monopoly* and *Risk* and watching old Hollywood movies. Paul sometimes joined in, but just as often he sat apart from the others with a newspaper or a book.

Some meetings served as group therapy sessions. No one judged or gave trite advice. In fact, Felicity quickly realized, the chapter had a taboo against making suggestions unless the person making the suggestion knew what they were talking about. The taboo didn't make all the conversations comfortable. One day, Adam tried to fight back tears as he described a beating from his father, which involved a cane and a belt. Worse, it involved insults that went to the center of who Adam was. He didn't say how but fell to the floor of Joan's living room and sobbed, occasionally hitting the carpet, for most of an hour.

The first time he struck the floor, Felicity felt a little nervous. By the time he sat back down on the couch, she couldn't look him in the eye. Previously, she'd felt comforted by his broad shoulders and strong jaw and loved him for his soothing voice when someone else needed comfort, so she felt ashamed of her fear, and, when it ebbed and died, the shame remained. Adam was her friend, she reminded herself. She ought to love him properly.

*

Felicity spent most Sundays with Monica. She'd never had a friend other than Joan, and she didn't always know how to handle having one. At first, she felt awkward showing up at Monica's apartment, and she had to tell herself Monica really did want to see her, really was different to the girls at school. After a few visits, she could ring the doorbell without pausing to talk herself into it.

She and Monica binged on TV shows, popcorn, cookies, and pasta with chili flakes and cheese, and drank beer. Felicity couldn't stand the bitterness of her first beer, but after that she started to like the yeasty taste, like liquid bread. Monica talked about men, and Felicity tried talking about them with her, admiring male stars of the shows they watched.

Time and again, Felicity noticed her own surprise at the normalcy of these days: Two girls eating, drinking, watching TV, and talking about men, one of them going to work and another to school the next day.

Toys aren't all that different to normal people, she thought. We do normal things, most of the time.

*

As fall turned into winter, Felicity began to invite Monica to Joan's apartment, where they watched the same shows with wine and better food. Then she invited Tobias, Muhammad, and Matt. Joan said she should plan an activity, so Felicity racked her brain for one. She liked board games, but they already played them. Movies seemed too obvious. She settled on cards, and spent several evenings online, learning poker.

They played for candy. No one said anything, or even looked surprised, when Felicity gave Squeaker his own place on the carpet, in the circle of bodies surrounding the game.

Felicity hardly ever thought about the hummingbirds or the conspiracy they worked for. When she did, she reasoned she couldn't do anything. She wasn't special; she couldn't even transform. She had Joan, Monica, and the others, and she decided that could be enough.

She also had Joan's photo album, with two dozen pictures of her father and ten of her mother. Her mother wore sundresses, and occasionally sweaters and wooly socks. She clearly hadn't been into fashion, but she had shining strawberry blonde hair down to her hips.

Felicity stopped spiking her hair and let it grow. Every time she noticed it reached a new spot on her neck, she looked back at the pictures of her mother.

*

New England reached its vicious winter chill, and, like everyone in Boston, Felicity wrapped herself in coat, scarf, gloves, and hat whenever she went outside.

She'd always hated Christmas. Christmas lunch had been an ordeal, like every meal with her old "family." She had to sit in silence, unless members of the extended family made conversation with her. She received a few token presents, usually clothes. She could get the books she wanted from libraries, but she felt hurt by the lack of meaning in those few resented gifts. They made her miss the father she hardly remembered and the mother she never knew.

She knew the coming Christmas would be different, and not knowing what to expect made the anticipation all the more exciting.

What she did know to expect was snow. November brought brief gusts of it, whitening the city, and December began with the first school-free "snow day." Felicity and Joan stayed in their pajamas, slippers, and robes, Felicity put Squeaker in the pocket of her robe, and they made pancakes and sipped coffee as they stuffed themselves. Felicity injected a question into their mutual food coma, a question she'd been meaning to ask:

“When did you meet the other Toys?”

Joan sipped her coffee and replied, “After your father’s funeral.”

“I’d avoided trying to find out whether anyone else could turn into their childhood toy, but deep down I knew nothing happens except by some law of nature and laws of nature always work the same way in the same situation. But I liked being unique, and I had a lot on my plate: practicing and touring, then college, then grad school.”

“At your father’s funeral, I noticed your eyes. They’d already started to widen. And I saw no love between you and your stepmother. You sat in the same pew, but at the edge, as far from her as you could get. You hugged Squeaker like he was all you had left, the way I used to hug Magic Mary, and you flinched when your stepmother looked in your direction. I could tell you wanted to cry for your father but felt too scared to let the tears come.”

Felicity remembered the funeral, remembered knowing she would never see her father again, remembered willing herself not to cry so her stepmother wouldn’t punish her.

“I knew I had to help you,” Joan continued. “I also knew I wasn’t alone. Two abused children. Two sets of eyes like ours. Two treasured toys. I started looking for others with round eyes. A few months later, I saw Adam on Boston Common, he introduced me to Coral and Dave, and we joined the network of chapters.”

“When I met Adam, America only had four chapters, and the world had fewer than fifty. Transformation has probably happened as long as children have had toys, but we couldn’t connect with each other before the Internet age. Now, we have close to a thousand chapters and ten thousand members worldwide. Even North Korea has a chapter.”

“Do the chapters talk to each other?” Felicity asked. “Do we have friends in other countries?”

“Some of us do?” Joan replied. “I talk to Toys in Australia and the UK, and Juan and Coral have friends in a Mexican chapter they visit occasionally. Tobias has friends in Israel. Adam had a friend in Japan, but I’m not sure if they’re still in touch.”

“Who’s in charge?” Felicity asked.

“No one really,” Joan replied. “One or two people take the lead in every chapter, sometimes officially, sometimes unofficially, like me and Adam. Alarica’s the Webmaster, and she keeps a list of chapters and contact details, so she’s the closest thing we have to a worldwide leader. She lives in Hamburg, in Germany. Paul’s friends with her.”

Felicity felt surprised that the Toys had a website, and she supposed it must be very secure. She also realized she was part of something bigger than a group of close friends in Boston; she might get to know people all over the world.

“What is Alarica?” she asked.

“She’s a lioness,” Joan replied.

Joan sat up, stared at Felicity for a second, and burst out laughing, and Felicity wondered what was funny about a lioness.

“It still gets me after thirteen years,” Joan hiccupped. “I mean...turning into toys!”

*

Later that day, Felicity received an email from Paul. It contained only pictures, photographs of palm trees and white sand and a blue sea. An hour later, she saw another email in her inbox. This time, Paul had sent pictures of the inside and outside of a large wooden building. The outside looked like simple plank construction. The inside had beams as well as planks, a granite and black metal kitchen, and giant beds that made Felicity want to sleep for a whole day. Beneath the pictures, she saw a few lines of text:

“I booked this island for Christmas. I’ll book us on a flight from Logan on the twenty-first. Reply within twenty-four hours if you can’t come.”

Felicity pulled her phone from her pocket and sent Paul a text: “My first Christmas!! Thanks, Paul.”

She knew she’d think about the holiday every day until the twenty-first.

16: HER FIRST CHRISTMAS

December seemed to stagger towards the twenty-first. As a senior with a high GPA, Felicity didn't have to take exams, so she measured the time in completed semester projects. She sent the last one to Ms. Rome the evening of December twentieth, and then she made dinner. As she and Joan waited for the oven timer, Joan asked, "Hey, did you check your email today?"

"No. Why?" Felicity asked.

"No reason," Joan replied with an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders.

Felicity raised her eyebrows.

"Oh...well...College counselors get accustomed to..." Joan said, stopping as Felicity yanked her phone from her pocket.

She entered her password and touched the email icon. Under emails from Cindy@freestorecredit.com and Jeff@massive.enlargement.net, she saw one from admissions@MIT.edu. She opened it and skimmed its text.

"I'm...I'm...going to MIT!" she exclaimed.

"Want to be roomies for another four years?" Joan asked, with a smile as big as, Felicity guessed, her own.

Felicity nodded as she realized she could keep living with Joan. And she'd go to MIT. The other students might even be as weird as her, except for the thing about turning into a mouse, which she couldn't do yet anyway. This couldn't be right, she thought. Life couldn't work out this well. But she knew it had.

*

The following morning, covered with coats, scarves, gloves, and wooly hats, Felicity and Joan drove through the late-coming light of Midwinter's Day to the airport, the words "MIT, I'm going to MIT" repeating in Felicity's head.

Only Paul and Adam beat them to the airport. Felicity and Joan found them sitting on benches in the departure lounge, Paul absorbed in the *Wall Street Journal*, Adam tapping his fingers on his knee to the rhythm of music playing through his headphones. They held large cups of coffee. Felicity set her bag next to theirs, lay on another bench, and grinned at the ceiling while Joan headed to the doughnut stand and returned with two coffees and two-dozen doughnuts.

Over the next hour, the others arrived in ones and twos from the TSA screening area and milled around the benches, yawning and stretching. The coffee-cup population increased at the same rate as the human population, and the doughnut population dropped rapidly. When the hands on the enormous wall clock reached eleven o'clock, Paul folded his newspaper and called roll.

"That's everyone," he concluded. "Let's head to the gate."

He picked up his sticks, used them to push himself up from the bench, and started forward. Adam grabbed his own carry-on and Paul's, and followed. The rest of the little herd stumbled into motion. They reached the gate, and a livelier mood took hold of them as they yearned out loud for light and heat, sea, and sand, and a chance not to care about anything for a week.

But Felicity felt a tear on her cheek and wondered why. She looked around. Jasmine and Joan stood a few feet away, laughing together. Monica, playing with her phone, sat between

them and Felicity. Adam sat next to Paul. Tobias, Muhammad, and Matt sat together, and Coral and Juan stood next to them, talking.

As Felicity's tears fell, she saw the reason for them. She belonged to this group: her friends, and her surrogate mother, or older sister, whichever Joan was, and they accepted her, her quirks, her frightened, damaged soul.

She felt an arm on her shoulder, turned to see Monica's face, smiling beneath the electric blue streak of her hair, buried her eyes between Monica's shoulder and neck, and felt in her pocket for Squeaker.

*

On the airplane, Felicity sat beside Monica. Monica fell asleep before takeoff, and Felicity took out a book but left it in her lap, reclined her seat, and gazed through the window at clouds. The sunlight gave them a pearly tint, and she felt happy, and sad, and angry, and bitter, and hopeful, and afraid. She remembered loneliness, her stepmother's coldness, and days confined to her little bedroom.

My life's different now, she told herself. It felt true, but it didn't make her past vanish, like a wave of her godmother's drumstick. She knew her album of horrors was real, knew it was with her on the plane. But Joan was with her too, and Monica, and a little army of friendship. She couldn't think of a sappier, more hackneyed, or truer thing to tell herself but that love was with her, at last, in the air, as the East Coast slid out of sight.

*

The flight passed quickly, and the plane descended towards Nassau. As the plane few close to the sea, all Felicity could think was *blue*. Monica gasped, "It's so blue!" and Felicity sensed everyone on the plane was thinking the same thing. In the horizon, she could just make

out a line of white sand and palm trees. She knew this was a postcard, an American's dream of the Caribbean, and she was going to love it. The plane turned, and she saw buildings. They grew more densely packed and colorful as Nassau came fully into view. Soon, the plane flew over the city, and, minutes later, it moved downwards to meet a runway.

They walked through the airport, and smartly uniformed customs agents smiled as they welcomed them. The smiles of Felicity's friends grew wide as they stepped into the sunlight. After a brief ride in a chartered van, they stood on a dock and waved at the pilot who sailed their ferry towards them. He waved back, a broad grin on his face. Felicity could see his persona was a shtick, a play to what Americans expected of the Caribbean, but she laughed and loved him anyway.

They boarded the ferry and made for the open deck, where Felicity took hold of the railing, leaned over the sea, let flying flecks of it tickle her face, closed her eyes, and felt the sunlight and the wet salt on her nose. She jumped at a light punch to her arm.

"Hey," Joan laughed, and handed her a bag.

Felicity parted the handles to find a purple bikini. She thanked Joan and ran to the only restroom. Paint peeled from the walls, and the basin looked like it might fall over. But the room was clean, and it was part of the boat, so it was part of the holiday. She stripped, put on the bikini, and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair now fell an inch below her shoulders, and her body had fleshed out with a normal amount of food. It was still too close to the body of a boy, but, as she turned in a circle and saw the curves of her hips and bottom, she smiled.

Back on deck, she twirled to the railing, and Monica, Jasmine, Coral, and Joan burst into applause. A wolf whistle shot through the sound of their clapping, and Felicity looked around to see Paul staring wide-eyed at her. She considered being offended but couldn't help laughing. She

was a math dork headed for MIT. Her eyes were too big and her face too round. She was a girl bathing her body in the sun. A boy was looking at her, and he liked what he saw. She was a girl, and she didn't look normal but she looked good. She could sense Paul's eyes still on her as she leaned over the railing. It was funny, and it was flattering. Truth be told, she was giving him a show. She hadn't done that before, and the fact that it was working surprised her.

She watched the sea and the horizon, and, after a time, she saw a green island with a white beach. A few minutes later, a wooden dock came into view, and, when the boat turned to position itself by the landing, and the pilot could no longer see the beach, she heard a loud splash and turned to see Monica running naked through waist-high water to the island, arms above her head, screaming ecstatically.

"Monica's buying cupcakes," Adam joked.

Monica's paces grew longer and faster as she ran through shallower water. Her body grew larger and turned grey, and she bent double. Her legs became as thick as trees, and a tail dangled from above her bottom. She no longer ran but galloped, massive ears flapping on either side, and when she raised her head Felicity saw long, whitish tusks and a trunk that seemed to tickle the sky. An enormous trumpeting sound rose above the beach as the elephant reached it and slowed to a trot. Then it turned, raised its trunk again, and saluted the boat with even more volume. Felicity gawked at its outsized magnificence.

When the boat stopped moving, she lifted her bag and stumbled onto a narrow wooden dock. As it pulled away, she heard neighing and tweeting and braying. Some people stripped, while others sent torn clothes flying as the menagerie popped into life. Adam stood in his metal and fur garments, punched the air, and shouted "By the power of Grayskull!" over the other noises. The familiar red snake appeared by Felicity's shoulder, startling her into another laugh. It

moved his head side-to-side and flickered his tongue, and she smiled, knowing Paul liked the look of her in a bikini.

*

They played hide-and-seek. Tobias, Muhammad, and Paul hid, and the larger animals made laughable attempts to creep around quietly as they sought. Felicity felt a pang as she stood in human form, cut off from the fun, until claws folded gently around her waist and great paws lifted her and placed her on the elephant's back. She grinned at Coral as Monica lurched forwards.

17: FACTIONS

Felicity just managed to stay on the elephant's back as it charged twice around the island. Then it lay down next to the dock, and, the next moment, Felicity found herself sprawled on top of a very human Monica.

"Err...did someone bring my clothes off the boat?" Monica asked as Felicity rolled off her.

Monica searched up and down the beach for her bag before holding it up triumphantly and sprinting back to Felicity. Once she'd slathered on sun lotion, she dressed in khaki shorts, a white tank top, sandals, and sunglasses. Felicity coated herself in lotion, stepped into her sandals, and pulled on a loose cotton dress and baseball hat. Then they yawned in tandem and set off up the beach to find the house.

*

The house turned out to be larger than it looked in the photos. A wide deck ran round its single wooden story. Inside, Felicity and Monica found a maze of sanded but unvarnished wood. Two queen beds dominated each of six bedrooms, and in all six big windows overlooked foliage and sand. Wicker couches and armchairs stood around the edges of the great room, which opened onto a wood and granite kitchen, the largest Felicity had ever seen. Monica flung open the doors of the fridge, and Felicity looked past her to jugs of red and white sangria.

They each grabbed a jug and carried them to the beach. Soon, everyone laughed loudly, in human form, and Jasmine slurred as she called for a cooking party to follow her to the house.

Coral and Dave followed her, and the others walked up half an hour later. They ate bacon sandwiches and tomato and mozzarella salad. Dave had made eggplant and zucchini sandwiches for Tobias and Muhammad. Everyone chomped loudly, and the meal disappeared.

Muhammad grinned at Felicity and pointed at Tobias.

“He wouldn’t eat the bacon even if he wasn’t Jewish,” he said, rising and falling pitch noticeable through his chewing.

“We talked to a pig last month,” Tobias protested, stuttering over “last.” “The S-South African guy. Remember?”

“Yeah, but,” Muhammad teased, gesturing at Felicity’s sandwich, “that pig wasn’t human most of the time.”

“Jasmine’s a h-horse,” Tobias said, lowering his voice. “Would you eat horse if we went to F-France?”

“He has a point,” Felicity said.

“Right,” Tobias said, shooting Muhammad a triumphant look. “It’s actually pretty strange that I’m the only veget-tarian.”

Felicity had to agree, but the sandwich still tasted good.

They wandered back to the beach by starlight, and Felicity and Monica kicked off their sandals and waded into the sea. Felicity felt the wet fabric of her dress cling to her legs. Soon, she felt salt in her eyes, but she looked at the stars and grinned as her mind swam over everything and nothing.

*

Felicity spent more of the week with Monica than anyone else. They splashed in the sea and lay on the sand and laughed. Paul joined them sometimes. He could swim surprisingly well,

if slowly, using just his arms. But Felicity got up before Monica or Paul and spent early mornings with Joan, talking and walking around the island. The morning of Christmas Eve, Adam walked with them. Still nervous at the memory of his rage at his father, Felicity walked with Joan between herself and him.

Adam looked to the horizon through much of the walk, and his blue eyes flashed in the morning light when he looked back at Felicity and Joan. Felicity knew he didn't talk for the sake of talking. As they rounded the far side of the island, he asked Felicity, "You're graduating next year?"

"Yes," she replied, "in June."

"What will you do next?"

"I just found out I'm going to MIT."

Adam raised his eyebrows and smiled at her, then at Joan, and Felicity knew she didn't need to fear him.

"You run a cosmetics company?" she asked him.

"I'm one of the Vice Presidents," he replied.

"How did you end up doing that?" she asked.

He began the story with his first transformation. The bullies at his high school had tried to throw him into a dumpster that held sharp metal alongside trash bags. Before they could force him over the front, he felt like his muscles were ripping open, and, the next thing he knew, two of the bullies lay unconscious on the asphalt while the others ran. He saw blood on his knuckles and dozens of students circled around him, looks ranging from disbelief to terror. He walked to a bathroom to wash his hands, looked in the mirror, saw himself in his transformed state, stumbled to a stall, and sat with his head between his legs. A teacher threw athletic clothes over the

partition and, once he'd transformed back and dressed, took him to the Principal's office, where the Principal expelled him without a single comment on his having turned into a cartoon character.

He went home, where, out of work and not trying very hard to get back into it, his father sat on an untidy deck, drinking beer and reading car magazines. Adam walked cautiously through the front door. His shirtless, beer-bellied parent stormed towards him, shouting something unintelligible, and slapped his face. Adam didn't need to transform to pin that bully to a wall while he snarled expletives of his own. Then he packed and took a bus to New York. He was just a kid, he told Felicity, so the big city felt like the place to run to.

He lived in homeless shelters and worked irregularly on street food carts, until one day he struck up a conversation with an Avon lady and she started paying him to make deliveries. He found cosmetics more interesting than he'd expected. He laughed when he told Felicity that. Soon, he had a job in the backroom of a large store, and his career came together from there, with the help of a night class business degree. Now, he worked in an office in his New England hometown. Occasionally, he passed his father, and the shabbily dressed old man looked at him with a mixture of fake disgust and real envy. Neither spoke to the other.

He smiled when he finished his story, and Felicity smiled back at him. She knew him now. She knew Joan and Jasmine too, because she knew their stories, and somehow she knew Monica without knowing hers.

And she didn't feel afraid of Adam any more. She wondered if he'd known she needed that and known how to give it to her.

She didn't know Paul, and she didn't know if he'd ever let her.

*

The rest of the day passed like the other days: a haze of swimming, conversation, games, and lazing around. Felicity, Monica, and Paul fell asleep on the beach a few hours before sunrise. When Felicity woke, Adam, Juan, Coral, and Jasmine stood around a huge grill. Felicity supposed Adam must have had carried it to the beach in his transformed state. Paul sat near them. As Felicity stumbled to her feet, he raised his hand to the grill and flames rose from it.

The others walked down to the beach over the next hour, yawning and holding mugs of coffee. Monica, Tobias, Muhammad, and Matt started playing beach volleyball. Felicity thought about joining in, but suddenly felt afraid in a way she hadn't in weeks. She thought they might send her away, afraid for their places in the teenage pecking order. But no one on the beach was a teenager, she told herself, except Paul, whose teen status was pretty theoretical. And all were Toys. They always included her. She stood and made herself walk towards the game.

She turned out to be very bad at volleyball. She could tell which way the ball was moving, but, even when she managed to get to it quickly enough, she couldn't get her hands under it in the right position. She sent it into her own face more often than she sent it over the net. The others shouted encouragement and advice, and, eventually, with the ball coming towards her for the umpteenth time, she positioned herself in its trajectory, positioned her hands, bent her knees, and quickly flicked her hands and wrists upwards. The ball flew over the net, and the game paused as players and spectators clapped.

She smelt meat cooking. Matt must have smelt it too, because he trotted towards the grill. Felicity and the others followed.

*

Felicity sat in a circle with the whole group and bit into a sausage she held in a wad of paper napkins. Lunch also included burgers, shrimp, and hush puppies. When they finished the

grilled food, Coral and Juan brought big tubs of ice cream from the house. As Felicity's stomach collected itself for another battering, she heard Adam cough the kind of drum-like cough only a big man could manage. He looked around the group, and the brightness of his eyes caught Felicity's attention as much as his cough did.

The others turned their heads, and Adam paused a couple of seconds before he spoke:

"We don't usually meet somewhere this remote, so now's a good time to talk about something we need to talk about. I'm sorry it's serious. We remember the deaths of Senator Mead and Evelyn Douglas, and we know Paul saved Congressman Andrews from one of the same assassins."

Adam nodded in Paul's direction, and Paul nodded back with a smile somehow boastful and modest at the same time.

"We know Toys carried out the three attacks, and we know the motive: Mead, Douglas, and Andrews brought secrets to light. Someone wants to hide something. Joan and Paul have already told some of you what."

He nodded at Felicity. She hadn't known she'd been trusted before some of the others.

Adam continued: "A secret organization owns some of the world's biggest companies. It owns them through investments funds. Those funds own other funds, which own the companies. The complicated ownership structure makes the organization's strategy hard to see. It buys enough politicians to avoid oversight, and it controls a lot of the media and the biggest search engines, so no one finds out about it. It's more powerful in Russia than anywhere else, but it's also important in Germany, Italy, France, the UK, and the US. It's moving into China, Korea, Japan, and Brazil."

Felicity glanced around. Other than Joan, Jasmine, and Paul, the others looked skeptical. Matt, Muhammad, and Tobias exchanged glances; Tobias frowned. Felicity wondered why she believed what Adam said, why she'd spent the past two months believing it. It sounded pretty stupid, and she wondered if she only believed it because Joan did.

Another thought slapped her: What if Joan believed it because she wasn't right in the head? The truth was that didn't feel unrealistic. Felicity felt guilty for thinking so.

"I know it sounds like a spy movie," Adam continued, "but..."

"Who are they Adam, the Freemasons?"

Felicity couldn't tell who'd heckled.

"They're not the Elders of Zion, are they?"

Tobias sounded contemptuous, in spite of his stumbling over "elders" and "Zion."

"It's the CIA!" Matt shouted sarcastically.

Adam was losing his audience.

"Adam, do you have any proof?" Coral asked, wisps of hair moving on her chin as her lips moved.

"Would everyone please listen to what Paul is about to say?" Adam responded.

Everyone quieted, and Felicity sensed Paul had only a few minutes before they lost interest. He spoke:

"I'm only eighteen and, sorry to boast, I'm one of the richest people in America. No one knows this except you guys, not even the IRS."

The joke drew laughter. Paul had their attention, for now. He smiled winningly. Somehow, his mangled face always helped him do that.

"How did I make my money?" he continued.

Felicity realized she'd wanted to ask him that, and that everyone else probably had too. Paul had his audience.

"I play the stock market, and the bond markets, and options, and commodities. Right now, I'm heavily invested in..."

Adam coughed.

"OK..." Paul said, "...the simple version. Partly, I get rich by magic: magic I don't understand. You know I can manipulate gold like I manipulate fire, and I think that's connected to how easily I make money. I have a magical predisposition to wealth."

"But I also have skill. I see quirks in the markets. I study them over time, and they help me notice unusual buying or selling. Unusual buying and selling always forms patterns. I find patterns I can only explain by the existence of a single organization with a strategy, so I predict what the organization will buy, and I buy it before they do. The price goes up when they start buying, and I sell at a profit. That's called 'front-loading'..."

Adam coughed again.

"Got it," said Paul, raising a hand in mock surrender. "Simple version. My success is part of the proof. I make money because what Adam told you is true. The murders are the other part. Does anyone think they happened for any reason except to protect secrets?"

"That doesn't prove everything you say it does," Coral answered.

"She's right," Juan said, reaching for her hand.

"What about governments? What about our government?"

Muhammad had spoken.

"President Glass isn't a member," Joan answered, "but a lot of her and both parties' funds come from the organization, through intermediaries, and it controls so much of the media it can

probably make elections go the way it wants. Besides, we don't know whether she knows about the organization."

As Joan finished speaking, Tobias jumped to his feet. He looked angry, and, when he spoke, he sounded it too:

"People have said crap like this for a century. And do you know who they said it about first? Us!"

He looked around, taking in everyone, and Felicity realized he hadn't stuttered.

"My people," he continued, raising his volume. "And six million of us died because Hitler convinced people to believe this kind of bullshit!"

"What if this crap is true? What can we do?"

Matt had spoken, and Muhammad nodded in agreement while Tobias stared out to sea. Joan and Adam looked blank, Jasmine sad, Paul frustrated. Everyone else looked irritated.

"We're unique..." Adam began, but Muhammad cut him off:

"We're not superheroes. Maybe if you, Joan, and Paul want to do something..."

"We're the only ones who know," Joan replied.

"Then go to the FBI," Tobias snapped.

Joan replied, "Paul can't call the FBI and say, 'There was this time I turned into a snake and took out a bad person who turned into a hummingbird, and hummingbirds also killed Senator Mead and that British journalist.'"

"Can't Andrews do something?" Coral asked.

"They won't believe him either," Joan replied. "They'll write him off as senile. It's us, or no one, because only we know about the problem. No one else will believe us."

“But...” Coral started. She paused, grimaced, and continued: “Sorry, but, why should we care. Three people died. That’s sad, but how many kids starved to death today. We don’t go to war with evil people over that.”

Felicity had to admit she had a point.

“We should care who calls the shots,” Joan replied. “We don’t know what these people want. Maybe they only care about making money and keeping governments out of their way, or maybe they want power for its own sake, but the bottom line is the power isn’t theirs to take.”

The others still looked skeptical, and Felicity saw the sticking point: They didn’t care about investment funds, the media, search engines, information, or who killed a politician and a journalist, and she didn’t know how to make them care.

“What do you want to do, anyway?” Coral asked, looking from Joan to Adam to Paul.

“We need to gather information,” Jasmine answered. The muscles on her arm flexed slightly as she gestured with an open hand.

“Paul knows everything anyway,” Juan shrugged.

Tobias stood, glared at Paul, and walked away across the beach, and Muhammad stood and jogged to catch up to him.

“I don’t know everything,” Paul said quietly, his eyes following Tobias and Muhammad.

Joan called after them: “We need information we can only get by getting close to them, getting into their offices and their homes, and...”

She trailed off as they carried on walking.

“Yeah,” Monica whispered in Felicity’s ear, her blue hair tickling Felicity’s forehead.

“We’re going to get close to evil conspiracy people and spy on them. That’s...safe.”

Felicity stopped herself scowling at her.

Without looking at anyone else, Matt, Coral, and Juan stood and followed Tobias and Muhammad. Paul's face fell, and Joan grimaced. Jasmine stood, threw up her hands, and rolled her eyes. Adam looked from Paul, to Joan, to Jasmine, and shook his head. Monica nudged Felicity and nodded in their direction, but Felicity shook her head and stood.

"What can I do?" she asked Joan.

She heard Monica stand, felt her hand squeeze her shoulder, and heard her walk away.

Paul glanced in Joan's direction, and, Joan looked suddenly embarrassed.

"Actually," she said, "You're the most important part of our plan."

18: TO SAVE THE WORLD

Felicity spent the rest of Christmas Day at the far end of the beach, with Joan, Paul, Adam, and Jasmine. They sat in the sand. At first, they didn't talk much. Occasionally, Joan stood, paced a few yards, turned, paced back, and sat down. Everyone's face remained blank, except for occasional narrowing of eyes. They tried not to look towards the house, because their friends sat on the stretch of sand between it and them, trying not to look at them.

But, occasionally, Felicity stole glances at Monica and saw she looked just as miserable. No one in either camp had transformed since morning.

As the sun moved close to the horizon, Felicity moved close to Joan.

"So," she asked, "what do you need me to do?"

Joan pursed her lips.

"All of us transform into something big," she replied. "A big creature can't do what we have in mind."

She didn't quite meet Felicity's eye, and Felicity wondered what she wanted to say.

"Paul and I can only find out so much watching numbers and the news," she continued. "We need to know what the enemy wants to accomplish, and we can't find that out unless someone listens in on them."

"How would I do that?" Felicity asked.

"By being in their offices, listening to what they say," Joan replied. "A horse, a snake, a fairy, an action hero can't do that, but a mouse can."

She finally met Felicity's eye.

“It will be dangerous,” she said. “I don’t want you to do it, but I don’t know how else to get the information we need.”

“I’m in,” Felicity said, as soon as her godmother finished speaking.

She registered shock passing through her as she realized she’d agreed to turn into a mouse and spy on very dangerous people. She guessed she’d gone insane. And she couldn’t get around the problem of...

“But I can’t turn into a mouse,” she said.

“We’ll wait until it happens,” Joan replied. “Then we’ll make our moves. Honestly, I hope it doesn’t happen at least until you’ve finished high school.”

*

As the afternoon wore on, Felicity noticed Paul hunched over a patch of sand, concentrating on something. Curious, she walked to him, and, beneath his face, she saw a chess set and an open book, and, on the pages, diagrams of boards with pieces in different positions. The regularity of the black and white squares seemed to call to her mind, and she began to imagine the enormous but limited variety of ways in which the pieces might be set on them.

“Are you learning to play?” she asked.

He squinted at the book before looking up.

“Yes,” he said. “Do you know how?”

She shook her head.

“We could learn together,” she suggested.

As afternoon faded to evening, they learned from the first chapter of Paul’s book, “Rules,” how to move each piece and how to checkmate the king. They each won a game, and they turned to the second chapter, “Openings.”

“The outcome of a game is often decided by which player controls the center of the board by the end of the first...” Felicity read.

*

Both groups walked back to the house as the light faded. In the great room, they moved around each other with minimal eye contact. But Felicity smiled at Monica, and Monica took a few paces toward her, the electric blue of her hair looking less brilliant by artificial light than by sunlight.

“I’m going to bed,” Monica groaned through the end of a yawn.

She hugged Felicity quickly and left without another word.

*

When Felicity woke, she looked out of the window and stared at the stars, so much more numerous and bright than in Boston. She wondered if they’d tell her what to do, laughed at herself for wondering, turned from the window, and walked to the kitchen.

Monica sat on the counter in sky blue pajamas.

“I’m making coffee for two,” she said.

Felicity smiled.

“Thanks,” she said, as Monica smiled back at her.

She knew nothing would stop them smiling at each other.

Monica lowered herself from the counter, stepped to the fridge, and opened the door, and Felicity’s nose caught an unusually strong whiff of cheese.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, as she turned back around, holding a carton of half-and-half, the smell of which was also strangely intense.

“Spy on them, learn more,” Felicity replied. “If I ever transform.”

Monica poured half-and-half into two gray stoneware mugs, spooned in sugar from a jar the same color and pattern, poured in coffee, and handed one of the mugs to Felicity. Chocolate and walnut steam rose to Felicity's nose.

"It will happen," Monica said. "And I guess mice can spy better than elephants."

Felicity nodded, thinking maybe her future transformation wouldn't be pitiable after all. The scent of cheese grew stronger, though Monica had closed the fridge door.

"Let's drink this on the deck," Monica said, gesturing with her mug.

*

The Toys spent two more days on the island. They stayed in their two clusters, except when Felicity sat on the beach with Monica. But she spent more time with Paul and the other "Action Animals," as they called themselves in tones of irony. She and Paul explored the next few chapters of *Chess From The Basics*, learning how to use pawns, knights, bishops, queen, and rooks in tandem, how to control the board, and how to defend and attack a king.

"I wonder if the strength of the queen is a flaw in the game," Paul said. "Too much comes down to whether she's still on the board."

"But combinations of other pieces are stronger than her," Felicity replied, after a few seconds of thought. "You don't need a queen to win."

They rejoined Joan, Jasmine, and Adam for lunch, and talked about who they might investigate and how, but Felicity couldn't help suspecting none of it would happen. Towards the end of the second day, she knew the reason, and, though she couldn't understand why, she wanted to tell Paul about it before the others. She asked him to swim with her, helped him to his feet, and held out her right arm for him to lean on, and they walked slowly into the sea. When they were knee deep, he stumbled, and his weight on her arm increased. She moved her left hand

around his back and held him as he found his feet. His body felt warm, and holding it felt strangely good. Her stomach tensed, she felt blood rush to her face, and she looked out to sea so he wouldn't notice her blush.

She helped him walk further out, until they were chest deep, and they trod water. She wondered how to phrase what she wanted to say.

"I think the others don't believe you because they've heard too many conspiracy theories," she said.

"I know," Paul replied. "Conspiracy theories usually are 'bullshit,' like Tobias said, but this one isn't about controlling the world for the sake of it."

"No?"

"They've got an agenda," he continued. "I didn't want to tell Tobias this, but they are like the Nazis. They believe in a master race, but it isn't white people or blond-haired, blue-eyed people. Some of their members are black. Some are Asian. Some are Arab, some Latino. It isn't a master race of smart people either, or they'd have tried to recruit me."

He grinned.

"I don't know what kind of master race they believe in," he added. "I do know their name though. They're called Clarity."

"How do you know that?" she asked. "And how do you know about their master race?"

He glanced at the water, looked back at her, and said, "We had an informant. I only know he worked for a stock exchange in a European country. I don't even know which one. He noticed bizarre trading patterns. He tried to report them, but his government ignored him. Then someone shot him. If the bullet had hit half an inch closer to his heart, he would have died instantly. He died in hospital a few hours later, after he told a detective what he knew. By chance, the

detective's husband was a Toy, a dove. That's unusual; Toys don't often marry people who aren't Toys. She told him what she'd discovered and asked him to help her dig further, so he flew into the exchange director's office and pretended to be lame. The director picked him up and petted him, and he became the director's pet, sat in his lap, ate out of his hand, and saw and heard things."

"What things?" Felicity asked.

"Confessions," Paul replied. "The director cried when he was alone. He'd lost his only child, a daughter in college, to a drug overdose, and he and his wife divorced year later. He started feeling guilty for his involvement in Clarity. He kept his daughter's picture on his desk and talked to it, confessed the crimes he'd committed, told it why he'd committed them, what he'd believed in. He said it was too late for him to get out; they'd kill him. They killed him anyway. He collapsed onto his desk one day, after his morning coffee."

"The dove's wife, the detective, filled in the blanks, worked out what Clarity was, and her husband told his chapter. Two days later, his car veered off a bridge, for no apparent reason. His wife, the detective, was in the passenger seat. The both died instantly."

"Did you learn about it from that chapter?" Felicity asked.

"Some of it," he replied. "I figured out Clarity's trading patterns myself. Then, after the dove and his wife died, Alarica relocated the rest of that chapter to other parts of Europe, told Joan and I what they knew, and asked us to figure out more about Clarity."

"She's the webmaster, the lioness?" Felicity asked.

"Yes," Paul replied. "Unofficially, she's our worldwide leader, at least when people want her to be."

"So, what is Clarity's master race, if it isn't a race?" Felicity asked.

“A master race of people they consider ‘sane,’” Paul replied. “We don’t know whether it’s a mental health construct, or whether it’s about temperament, opinions, prejudices... Basically, we don’t know much.”

That struck Felicity as even more sinister than a standard master race idea.

“You said they had a way of achieving their agenda,” she said.

“It has something to do with a substance they think will give a military advantage,” he replied. “I don’t know what the substance is or what it does, but they already have control of much of the corporate and financial world. They’ll be unstoppable if they also have military strength.”

She tried to think of more questions. Paul looked at the stars and breathed heavily as he trod water, and, as Felicity watched his lean muscles flex as his arms moved in the water, she began to imagine them holding her. The fantasy flicked between settings: the water they swam in, his living room, Joan’s living room, Boston Common, and, finally, a room full of candles.

After a few minutes, Paul nodded towards the beach, and Felicity pulled her mind back to reality.

“Sure,” she said. “We should go back.”

He sat in the shallow water as she retrieved his walking sticks, and, as she handed them to him, a final question occurred to her.

“Paul?” she asked.

“Aha?”

“Why didn’t you tell the others everything?”

“It’s the most valuable information we have,” Paul replied. “I’ve told Adam, Joan, and Jasmine, but I won’t tell anyone who isn’t completely on our side.”

*

On the morning of December 28th, they finished packing and walked to the dock. Five hours later, their plane moved onto the runway at Nassau airport, and the ice seemed to break as they gained altitude. Juan, Coral, and Adam relived the beach and the food.

“You’re mad good at grilling shrimp,” Felicity heard Juan tell Adam.

“That’s true,” Adam replied. “But you’re the hush puppy king.”

Jasmine, Coral, and Joan sat at the back of the plane, chatting and laughing, but Felicity couldn’t hear their jokes. She, Paul, and Monica sat with Tobias, Muhammad, and Matt.

“Poker,” Monica suggested.

Felicity pulled a deck of cards from her backpack, shuffled, and dealt, and, before long, all six faces wore no expression and all six pairs of eyes studied cards. Felicity stole glances out of the window beside her seat and remembered she and at least some of her friends had a world to save. She supposed it would be thrilling, and difficult, and dangerous. For now, she had a beautiful blue sky.

19: MANY RESOLUTIONS

They played poker until the airplane began to descend towards Logan. Felicity walked through the terminal with Monica and Paul, carrying his hand luggage as well as her own, through customs and baggage claim and out of the terminal. Darkness hung beyond a pool of florescent light, and snow fell slowly. Several inches already lay on the ground, and slush covered the road. Felicity shivered as she looked around for the shuttle bus. It pulled up just as she unfastened her bag to take out her winter coat, and they piled onto it with their luggage. As it began to move, Felicity leaned back, closed her eyes, and wondered how to spend the five days before school began. She guessed she should find a way to help Joan and Paul with their plans.

“Is anybody not able to walk through snow?” the driver shouted.

Felicity sat up.

“The roads are blocked,” the driver explained. “It’s about a quarter mile. Take the left in a few hundred feet.”

He pulled the bus to the side of the road, and the doors slid open.

They hauled their luggage off the bus, pulled on coats, gloves, scarfs, and hats, and walked single file towards the T station: a compact, glass fronted building.

Felicity heard a sharp noise, followed by a smattering of the same noise, repeated slowly, then rapidly. She gasped as she realized she was hearing gunshots, and she dove to the ground with the others. Someone landed on her. She drew and held her breath through two more gunshots, wondering who it was.

The person moved, and Felicity felt lips brush her ear.

“Lie still,” her godmother whispered.

The calm in Joan’s voice sounded shocking. Out of the corner of her right eye, Felicity saw her godmother flick her drumstick. The air grew still. Felicity hadn’t registered the chilling breeze until she felt its absence. Joan moved fluidly to her feet, and Felicity looked up to see a wall of ice.

“Monica, you can’t do it here!” Joan shouted.

Monica had stripped off her coat and was pulling a blue sweater over her head. She stopped, and tension fell from her body as she pulled the sweater back down to her waist. Bullets pounded the ice, and Felicity didn’t think it would hold for long.

She heard the buzz of Joan’s wings and saw them vibrating behind her godmother’s jacket, as though no leather or fabric separated them from her back. The fairy rose above the top of the ice wall, and, through the ice, Felicity saw fire-colored flashes. The sounds of explosions accompanied them, and then she couldn’t hear anything.

“Everyone follow Adam,” Joan shouted, as she floated back to the sidewalk.

Adam scooped up Paul and ran, and the others followed. One of Paul’s walking sticks fell to the ground. Felicity broke into a run, stopped to pick it up, and saw Joan. Her godmother stood still, staring at the ice wall, gripping her wand.

“Joan,” she tried to call, but the name came out in a whisper.

“Go!” her godmother ordered, and she ran towards Felicity.

They ran together, away from the T station, Joan’s hand on Felicity’s shoulder, Felicity’s heart shaking her chest as it pounded.

*

Sirens sounded. Joan kept her hand on Felicity's shoulder, not pushing her but not allowing her to slow down. Snow flew up in front of their feet.

"Right!" Joan shouted.

Felicity made a right, and they carried on running. Felicity guessed they were heading back to the terminal.

"Left!"

Knowing her guess about the terminal was wrong, Felicity ran left. Seconds later, Juan waved from behind a building, and they ran to him. Behind the building, the others stood in a huddle. Adam still held Paul.

*

"I think that's everyone," Adam said, as Joan and Felicity reached the group and Felicity handed Paul his stick.

Panting, Felicity looked around. They stood in an empty parking lot, staring at each other, and the air felt colder than before. She didn't know where they were in relation to the terminal or the T station.

She heard screeching tires and a single gunshot and saw Joan raise her wand. She heard an explosion and turned her head in time to see a fireball engulf a large black car. She looked at Joan.

"Not me that time," Joan said, nodding towards the others.

Felicity turned to see Paul, still cradled by Adam, lower his right hand from an outstretched position.

Slowly, wand still raised, Joan turned full circle, scanning their surroundings. The others stood still, and Felicity saw fear in their eyes. She guessed they could see it in hers as well,

because neither her breathing nor her heartbeat had slowed. Adam set Paul down, feet first, and Paul planted his walking sticks in the snow and straightened up as far as he ever did.

“That was my fault,” he announced. “I’m sorry. I should have thought of you all before I protected Congressman Andrews.”

“No,” Matt said. “You were right. Sorry for dissing you on the beach.”

Beside him, Tobias nodded, and, one by one, the others nodded too. Matt kicked snow into the air.

“Fuck it! Fuck all this! Fuck them! And fuck you, Paul!” he shouted.

“Yeah,” Juan said flatly, scratching his stubble. “Fuck you for being right.”

*

“We should move,” Joan said after a second.

“Take the others to the T station,” Adam said. “They won’t attack us there.”

“Good plan,” Joan replied. “Paul, can you cover us?”

“Yes,” Paul said.

“I’ll stay with him,” Adam added.

“No,” Paul replied. “I can get away as a snake faster than you can carry me.”

“I’m staying anyway,” Adam told him.

Joan led the group at a run, and Felicity gave up wondering about their direction or location in relation to landmarks. Joan ran with calm determination, wand held steady in her hand.

She killed people, Felicity thought, Is my godmother a good person?

She remembered Joan served alcohol to teenagers, talked about stealing if she lost her job, and had violent fantasies about her mother. And she'd kill again if she had to defend the Toys.

She wouldn't do it on a whim, Felicity reassured herself. She's protecting her friends.

But she didn't think Joan would care about the people she killed.

Should she? Felicity wondered. *They tried to kill us.*

She didn't know how to answer that question.

*

They ran through glass doors into the station, where a train stood at the nearest platform, and, once through the turnstile, they piled into one of the cars. As it pulled away, Felicity realized she hadn't looked at its destination on the platform screen. She wondered if anyone had.

No one spoke. Felicity forced herself to take slow, deep breaths and looked around the car. A man in a big coat, scarf, and wooly hat sat at the front, but besides him, they were alone.

The doors opened, beeped, beeped again, and closed at station after station, and Felicity's heartbeat gradually slowed. She didn't count stations. She didn't care. She looked at the others and checked them off on a mental roster. They'd all made it, including Adam and Paul. She looked out of the window into blackness.

"End of the line," Jasmine announced, after what seemed like hours.

They got out of the car, and Felicity looked at the wall of the platform. "Wonderland," a sign read. They'd reached the far end of the blue line, in Revere. Felicity wondered why the station was called Wonderland. She guessed it didn't matter.

*

They walked out of the station into a floodlit, slush-covered parking lot, containing only half a dozen cars, and Felicity looked at Joan, wanting her godmother to tell them what to do. Joan breathed raggedly, and Felicity saw fear in the way her eyes darted around. Adam held his hands in front of his face, Paul stared at the ground, and most of the others either stared at the ground too or looked around as if looking at nothing.

Felicity knew someone had to get them moving, but she also knew Joan, Adam, and Paul had nothing left.

Who else will they listen to? She thought.

She looked at Jasmine. The woman's muscular body shuddered, and tears wet her eyes.

It'll have to be someone else, Felicity thought.

And then, realizing no one would take the lead at that moment, she drew breath.

"We're going to win," she said.

She paused, shocked by the certainty in her own voice, and the others looked a little less frightened as they turned to her.

She spoke again: "But, for tonight, we're going to hide. The people who attacked us won't expect to find us this far from the city, so we'll stay in Revere, but not all in the same place."

The others remained silent a moment. Then Jasmine said, "I think Paul got them pretty good, but we should do as you say."

"We should," Joan said, and smiled at Felicity. She looked proud.

*

Felicity called three taxis. She took the last one, with Paul, Muhammad, and Tobias. Fifteen minutes later, they stood in a white, dimly lit motel reception, and some of the tension

left Felicity's body. Muhammad walked to the white desk, picked up a little brass bell, and rang it.

Felicity heard a sniffing sound to her left and turned to see a tear run down Tobias' cheek. She hugged him. He tried to stutter out a word but gave up.

"You all OK?" a voice asked.

Felicity looked up to see the desk clerk had walked into the room and spoken. She wanted to tell him it was a stupid question.

"Long day," Muhammad replied, pitch descending for the second word.

"Will you let me get the room charge?" Paul asked as Muhammad handed him and Felicity their room keys.

"Sure," Muhammad replied. "Thanks."

Paul handed his card to the clerk, who handed Muhammad's back to him.

They took the elevator. Tobias wiped his eyes with his fingers, but Muhammad and Paul looked angry. The elevator doors opened onto a semi-dark passageway, and, after mumbled goodnights, Tobias and Muhammad walked to their room. As Felicity watched Paul slide his key into the keyhole of his room, she realized she didn't want to be alone, and her fantasy about him holding her came back to her mind.

She heard herself whisper, "Can I share with you?"

He looked at her a long moment before he nodded and unlocked the door.

In the room, they found a queen-sized bed, its orange coverlet the only bit of color amid white walls and a gray carpet. Paul stood his walking sticks against the wall, sat on the bed, took off his shoes, socks, and pants, and slid his legs under the covers. Felicity turned out the light, breathed for a moment in the pitch darkness, and took off her gloves, scarf, and coat.

What am I doing? She asked herself. *I haven't thought this through.*

She wanted to lie close to Paul, wanted her bare skin to touch his. She took off her shoes and socks, then her jeans and sweater.

How far am I willing to go? She wondered. Sharing with Paul had been her idea. But the sound of gunfire still rang in her mind, and forming a plan felt like an impossible task.

She drew back the covers, lay down, and curled into the fetal position. Then she felt Paul's arm around her torso. He squeezed her and began to kiss the back of her head. Their hands found each other's, and they lay still apart from his kisses. She knew they wouldn't make love that night. He wouldn't even ask her to.

*

Felicity woke to the beeping of two phones. Sunlight crept round the edges of the gray blind. She turned to Paul to find his eyes open. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. She got out of bed, pulled Paul's phone from the right pocket of his pants, tossed it to him, and took hers from the inside pocket of her coat. A text from Adam appeared on the screen. "Meet us at the diner on Silversmith Street," it said.

They smiled shyly at each other as they dressed. Tobias and Muhammad met them in reception, and they took a taxi to Silversmith Street.

Green paint peeled from the wooden front of the diner. On the other side of the road lay Revere Beach. Snow and ice covered the sand, and sunlight shone on it from a blue sky. A bell rang as Muhammad opened the door. Felicity looked around the inside of the diner, taking in cheap pine tables and chairs, each covered with a white cloth and laid with stainless-steel cutlery. Watercolors of flowers and animals hung from the walls. Her friends sat at a table by a window, sipping coffee and looking out at the beach.

The others looked up as Muhammad, Tobias, Paul, and Felicity entered. They still looked shell-shocked, but they managed to smile. Felicity noticed a strong smell of milk emanating from a jug next to a coffee pot on the table in front of them. She sat in an empty chair and reached for the coffee as Adam began to speak.

“We’ll have to be careful,” he said. “Everyone should lock doors and close windows. Extra bolts and window locks would be a good idea. Stick to well-lit streets, and don’t go out after dark if you can help it. Give chapter members a special ring tone, and don’t ignore their calls.”

Felicity looked around, wondering if the others would resent Adam’s commanding tone, but they looked at him over their mugs and nodded.

“Shouldn’t we go into hiding or something?”

Felicity didn’t know she’d spoken until the question left her mouth.

Adam nodded and replied, “Joan and I talked it over this morning. Judging from the way they attacked us yesterday, they didn’t know about Joan’s magic, or Paul’s. We don’t think they’ll try again.”

A door opened, and the server crossed the dining room to the kitchen, glaring at the group as though daring them to ask for more coffee.

“But we should still be careful,” Adam concluded.

Felicity smiled. She knew she could do careful. She’d done careful all her life. Only this time, she’d do it for something that mattered: for her friends, for the world, because something evil wanted to own the world. It wanted to give power to some kind of elite, and she was willing to bet it didn’t include anyone she loved. And it wanted to make something dangerous, something armies would use to kill.

She looked at Joan, then Monica, and then Paul.

I will not let them do that, she thought. And I will not let them hurt my friends.

As soon as she thought it, she couldn't see Paul anymore. She couldn't see anyone. A sheet of white fabric rose in front of her. She looked up, but couldn't see over the top of the sheet. The smell of coffee hit her, along with the smell of bacon, both impossibly intense. She looked down and saw a varnished wooden surface, the wood grey instead of brown, and, on it, immediately below her eyes, lay two grey paws, furry, with sharp claws. She lifted the right paw to touch her face and felt fur there too.

Her gasp came out as a squeak. She ran her paw down her nose and found it extended to something like a snout.

"I'm a..." she tried to say, but her words came out as another squeak.

She heard whispers from up and down the table, but the whispers sounded louder than shouts: "She transformed...Felicity transformed...mouse...transformed...first transformation..."

She jumped as something moved across her back. She craned her neck and saw huge fingers stroke her, and, above them, she saw a face. It looked blurry and grey, but she could make out Monica's eyes. Beside it, just as grey and blurry, she saw Joan's face.

She stretched her back legs, walked in a circle, and squeaked again.

20: GROUNDED

Felicity kept squeaking, but Joan hushed her, whispered, “the server’s coming,” placed her hand around Felicity, and lifted her. Through her godmother’s fingers, Felicity saw the tabletop and her friends, and then darkness, and she guessed Joan had slipped her under her jacket.

“Bring her clothes,” she heard Joan whisper. “They’re on the floor.”

She guessed they were heading to the bathroom. She knew she’d have to transform back, but she didn’t know how.

She heard a door swing. The side of Joan’s jacket moved away, and she looked into her godmother’s smiling face. Joan turned her hand turned, and Felicity saw Monica smiling at her. She looked odd in black and white, without her blue hair.

“I’m sorry,” Joan said, “but you have to transform back now. Restaurants don’t like mice.”

“Human,” she thought. “Be human...come on...human.”

She still stood with four paws on Joan’s hand.

“Take your time,” her godmother said. “Try thinking about what it’s like to be human.”

“Human,” Felicity thought. “Human is like...more, and less...seeing better, and being able to talk, but not being able to hear or smell this well or run this fast.”

She imagined seeing Joan and Monica clearly, and, as soon as the mental picture formed, she collapsed into Monica, who grabbed her arms and helped her balance.

“I transformed!” she gasped. “I can transform!”

Monica grinned and nodded. Felicity hugged her, and Monica hugged back with bone-crushing enthusiasm. Felicity realized she was naked.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked.

Monica handed them over.

“Congratulations,” Joan enthused as Felicity dressed. “Today is...well...Today, you’re complete.”

They walked back to the table to applause, and Adam and Jasmine rose and hugged Felicity. She sat and looked across the table at Paul, who tilted his head as he smiled.

*

Felicity and Joan collected Joan’s car from the economy lot at the airport and drove back to Joan’s apartment while Felicity peppered her godmother with questions.

“My senses worked differently,” she said. “My vision blurred more than a few feet away, and I couldn’t see colors. But I could hear and smell much better. Is that normal?”

“Completely,” Joan replied. “You’ll have a mouse’s speed and reflexes too.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t research mice!” Felicity said.

“You didn’t think it would happen,” Joan told her, and Felicity knew she was right.

Her phone vibrated, and she looked at the screen to find a text from Paul.

“I’m so happy for you,” it read. “And I want to hear about being a mouse.”

*

“We should celebrate,” Joan declared as they entered her apartment.

She headed for the kitchen. Felicity walked into her bedroom, undressed, and concentrated on everything she could hear and smell. She heard Joan hang her coat, smelt olive

oil, and guessed she or Joan had left the bottle of it open. She imagined scampering across the floor, faster than any human could run. The walls seemed to vanish, and she found herself looking downwards. The hard wood floor looked grey instead of brown, like the chair in the diner. She lifted each leg and stretched it, walked forward a few steps, and broke into a run.

The living room furniture looked like an assortment of blurs. Another blur moved towards her from the direction of the kitchen and crouched in front of her. Joan's face became visible in black and white, along with, beneath her chin, two glasses of sparkling wine.

"I didn't think to buy mouse sized glasses," Joan joked.

Felicity ran to the sofa, used her back legs to power herself upward to the seat, hit the front of the sofa, began to fall, and made herself think about talking with Joan. Her naked human form hit the floor.

"Ouch," she said.

"Take things slowly from now on," Joan suggested through a laugh.

*

In the few days before the semester began, Paul and Joan gave the others assignments. Paul asked Felicity to analyze several hundred pages of financial data.

"I can't get through all of it by myself," he explained. "And you're probably as good a mathematician as I am."

By the first day of school, she could easily find the numbers he wanted. She made tables and graphs on a laptop he gave her. Sometimes, she found nothing but a jumble of figures, but sometimes she found patterns. By the end of the second week of school, she was up past midnight most nights. The patterns mesmerized her, and she thought about them during classes, meals, and the drive to and from school.

In the evenings, when she wasn't analyzing data, she transformed and ran around Joan's apartment. She moved fast and turned on a dime. She practiced jumping until she could make it from the floor to the seat of the sofa. Then she mastered the dining room chairs and the spaces between them, and then the coffee table. The exhilaration felt worth the occasional fall, and she found she could easily land on her feet in mouse form.

Next, she tried scampering down the sides of the sofa and armchairs, digging in her claws and moving slowly at first, then fast. She didn't really notice her tail until she jumped onto the edge of the kitchen counter and almost fell off. By instinct, she flicked her tail to one side, and its weight balanced her body.

She texted Monica and Paul every time she discovered something she could do as a mouse.

"I started to smell milk and cheese more intensely on the island," she wrote in one message. "And I still do. Is that normal?"

"Totally," Monica replied. "I became a vegetarian a week before my first transformation. It wasn't about animal rights; meat just suddenly tasted disgusting. I still eat a lot less of it than most people."

"I started eating rats ten days before my first transformation," Paul texted. "Just kidding. Nothing like that happened to me."

Felicity and Paul played chess together online, Felicity making most of her moves under tables during classes. She didn't keep count, but she estimated she beat him six times out of ten.

What are we to each other now? She wondered. Are we boyfriend and girlfriend? Is that what he wants? Is it what I want?

*

Monday of the third week of school, Felicity's Chinese class took a test, and, the next day, Dr. Yates handed back their answer sheets. "C-" appeared in red ink at the top of Felicity's. That afternoon, Mr. Swim asked the AP English Literature class to turn in the first paper of the semester, and Felicity face palmed, realizing she'd forgotten to write it.

By the end of the fourth week, all her grades stood at C, D, or F. She knew other students hid low grades from their parents. She'd hidden high grades from her stepmother, which had been easy, as her stepmother never read mail from the school if it was about Felicity. She guessed she didn't have to hide her grades now, but she started feeling nervous around Joan. By the middle of the fifth week, she knew why. Joan wasn't her surrogate older sister. That was Monica. When Joan found out about her grades, she wasn't going to be happy. Felicity wondered what her godmother would do. Would she make her do extra chores? Joan knew she didn't mind chores. Would she ground her? Felicity hadn't been going out anyway, except to meetings on Saturdays, and meetings now revolved around research, not fun. Would she take her phone? She wouldn't be able to text Paul and Monica. Would she stand over her while she did homework? Would she shout at her? Felicity couldn't imagine that, but the thought made her uneasy.

*

Paul sent Felicity mutual fund portfolios. On Friday, she took an overnight bag to his apartment. They sat on one of three grey couches, between black and white beanbags and brass and wood floor lamps, and he showed her what to look for in the portfolios.

"Anything out of the ordinary," he summarized, after talking her through the standard operating procedures of fund managers. "Any unusual concentrations in particular industries or particular companies; unusual income, expenses, profits, or losses. I'll figure out which of your findings are due to regular deviations from norms and which are evidence of Clarity's activities."

As the hours passed, her mind turned to sleeping arrangements, and she wondered whether to ask Paul if he had a spare bed.

But we shared in the motel, she told herself.

She realized she wanted to share again, to cuddle through the night, and for him to kiss her.

He closed his laptop and looked at her awkwardly.

“It’s late,” he said, “And I don’t have a spare bed. If you like, we can...”

“Yes,” she whispered.

She changed into her pajamas in the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and walked into the bedroom. Paul sat on one side of a cream silk-sheeted bed in his own pajamas, his legs under the sheets. Felicity sat cross-legged on the other side, facing him, and he smiled nervously at her.

“Can I come closer?” she asked.

He nodded.

Please don’t ask me for sex, she thought, as she scooted across the bed to him, leaned forward, and kissed his cheek.

He kissed her lips.

“Paul,” she asked, after several minutes of kissing, “Are we...um...Are you my boyfriend now?”

“I’d like you to be,” he said, and leant in for another kiss.

She put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“It’s what I want too,” she said. “But I don’t want to sleep with you...I mean, I want to sleep with you, just not...I don’t want to have sex with you. I guess I will one day.”

“I feel the same way,” he said, and she kissed him again.

But you're a guy, she thought, as their lips caressed each other.

They slept in each other's arms, caressing each others backs and shoulders until they fell asleep. The following morning, he woke her with a peck to the lips. When he tried to rise, she put an arm around him, pulled him back to her, and gave him a slow kiss.

They kissed until hunger drove her to suggest breakfast.

*

The following Tuesday afternoon, during history of science class, Felicity received a text from Joan: "My office after school."

"Well," she thought, "This is it."

An hour later, she opened Joan's door. Her godmother looked up and held her gaze, and Felicity shut the door.

"Take this and sit down," Joan ordered, holding out a sheet of paper.

Felicity took the paper, sat down, and read her name at the top, followed by "senior" in parentheses. Below that, she saw a list of her classes and grades: a D in Calculus and an F in each of her other classes.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

Joan sighed and began to speak, her voice firm but warm. She lectured about quarter grades, semester grades, graduation requirements, and the need to graduate with a high GPA to attend MIT.

"Do you understand they rescind offers?" she asked.

Felicity nodded.

Joan finished with, “You’re grounded Monday to Friday every week until you have either an A or a B in every class. You’ll study every evening, in the living room where I can see you. You’ll go to bed by eleven. Have you been texting in class?”

For a few seconds, Felicity considered lying.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Will that stop?” Joan asked, “Or do I have to confiscate your phone?”

“It’ll stop,” Felicity said.

“Abstinence is best,” Joan said, more gently, “especially at your age. Contraception doesn’t always work.”

Felicity didn’t know why her godmother had moved on to that.

“I’ll buy you the pill if you need me to. But…” Joan paused, letting the “but” linger. “...You have to use condoms as well. The pill isn’t foolproof, and it won’t stop you contracting STDs.”

“I think Paul’s a virgin,” Felicity said.

“Nonetheless…” Joan began.

“I am too,” Felicity added.

Joan smiled. “I think you should keep it that way for now,” she said. “But, if you have sex, remember what I said. Can I trust you, or do I have to ground you at weekends and lecture Paul?”

“It’s OK,” Felicity assured her.

As they walked across campus to Joan’s car, Felicity noticed a spring in her own step. That didn’t make sense to her. Joan had scolded and grounded her, and she’d taken it lying down. She hadn’t even tried the “you’re not my mom” gambit.

She stopped walking as tears welled in her eyes.

“I have to go,” she said, and walked quickly to the nearest bathroom.

As she reached it, she began to cry, because she knew why she hadn’t tried “you’re not my mom.” It wasn’t one hundred percent true.

*

Paul groaned when Felicity called and said she couldn’t see him until Saturday.

“I’ll talk to Joan,” he said.

Felicity couldn’t see what good that would do.

“Why?” she asked.

“I’ll make her see reason,” he replied.

Felicity didn’t understand. *Paul’s only a year older than me*, she thought. So why did he feel entitled to reason with Joan about how she disciplined her? She guessed he lived in his own home and had no older relatives in his life, and he made his own money.

Am I dating an older man who just isn’t older? She asked herself. *Is that gross?*

“No, don’t talk to Joan,” she said. “Actually, Joan’s right.”

“Can you still text me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “But not during class.”

“Joan won’t know,” he argued.

“No,” Felicity replied. “But I promised.”

21: WHITE COLLAR CRIME

The next three evenings, Felicity sat at the dining table in Joan's living room, ate dinner, sipped water, and studied. Joan sat on the sofa, reading and occasionally glancing at her. By ten o'clock Friday evening, Felicity cleared her homework pile. She and Joan made hot cocoa and talked into the night.

The following morning, Joan emerged from her bedroom coughing.

"I have to stay here," she said. "Go ahead to Paul's place, if you like. I'll work from here and text anything I find."

Felicity made breakfast plus lemon tea with honey for Joan and took the T.

The whole chapter, minus Joan, sprawled on Paul's couches and beanbags, staring at laptops and phones. Felicity lay on two white beanbags on top of a red and gold Persian rug.

"Let's hear what everyone discovered this week," Paul said.

Adam described stock movements that deviated from what Paul had told him to expect. Jasmine detailed corporate sponsorship of political candidates in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy. Tobias and Muhammad theorized about ministers in a new Japanese government. Coral and Juan explained six recent buy-outs of media companies. Matt tried to give background information on people who wrote search algorithms, but sounded confused. Monica reported on celebrity scandals Joan suspected Clarity of engineering as distractions.

They drank coffee and talked about companies, stocks, funds, portfolios, and news. Occasionally, Paul texted with Joan and told the others what she told him about the politics of the countries Clarity invested in.

At eleven thirty, he summarized the past few weeks' findings: "They've concentrated on the banking, weapons, IT, and telecommunications sectors in America. That means they can probably read and listen to everything, so I'll tell Joan to stop texting. It also means they can cripple anything, including the government and the military. In Europe, they've invested less in weapons, except in the United Kingdom, less in IT and telecommunications, except in Germany, but more in banking. They own most of the big European banks. In Japan, they've focused heavily on banking. Their position in the global financial sector is probably their biggest strength."

"And Russia?" Tobias stuttered.

"Everything bigger than a doughnut stand," Paul replied.

"What about Asian countries, apart from Japan?" Coral asked.

Felicity noticed angry redness on her cheeks and chin, in place of the usual hair, and guessed she'd had a bad waxing experience.

"They have the new private banks in China," Paul replied, "but a lot of Chinese finance is still state controlled. They own stock in banks and heavy industrial corporations in South Korea. They don't own anything in India. I can't figure out what stopped them there, or if they ever tried. India has strict regulations on foreign ownership, but so does China and they've made headway there."

He paused, sipped his coffee, and continued: "What I don't understand is Pakistan. Clarity's invested in it heavily over the past three years. But no one thinks of it as a major growth

economy, and it hasn't had a decent government since 1948. The army's locked up most of the elected governments, but the generals don't run the place any better. The worst part is the ISI."

He scowled at his laptop.

"The what?" Tobias asked.

"The military intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence," Paul replied.

"The army functions independently of the state, and the ISI functions independently of the army, under the leadership of religious fanatics who want to destroy India more than they want to help Pakistan."

"Oh...Kashmir?" Felicity thought, and realized she'd thought it out loud.

"Kashmir," Paul affirmed. "Pakistan only controls a third of it but believes it should control the whole thing."

On Paul's face, she saw the picture getting clearer in his mind, but the others looked confused.

Felicity summarized for herself: Clarity focused on industries they could use towards economic, political, and military dominance: technology, communications, banking, and weapons. They generally focused on the most powerful countries, except India, but they'd recently invested in Pakistan, buying stock at remarkable speed.

"What have they bought in Pakistan?" she asked.

"A little of everything," Paul replied. "I see some concentration in media, maybe for propaganda purposes, which would probably mean their other investments are a smoke screen."

*

Adam phoned for Cuban takeout. When the deliveryman arrived, Paul tossed Adam his wallet. Adam narrowed his blue eyes, tossed the wallet back, and pulled out his own.

Paul spoke occasionally as they munched sandwiches and plantain chips. He sounded less confident.

“This all makes sense up to a point,” he said. “They own half the world’s financial sector, so they give their own companies easy access to money, to loans, I mean, and shut out rival companies. Their companies grow and deliver more dividends to their investment funds, so the cash their funds have on hand should grow quickly. But it doesn’t.”

“Where does the money go?” Jasmine asked, a muscle bulging in her neck as she turned her head to Paul.

“Nowhere!” Paul practically shouted. “They don’t re-invest it. They don’t pay it out as dividends. They don’t increase salaries or give unusually large bonuses. The money vanishes, and I can’t find...”

He punched the cushion next to him and glared at his laptop.

“Nowhere,” he whispered. “Just...nowhere.”

The others stared at him as he continued to mutter unintelligibly. After a few minutes, he grabbed his walking sticks, stood, walked to his bedroom, and slammed the door.

Felicity and the others looked at each other. Adam walked to the bedroom door, rapped on it gently, and waited. A minute later, he knocked again, and, getting no response, he returned to the couch. Felicity wondered if she should take a turn knocking, or try to reason with Paul through the door, or just barge into his bedroom.

I’m his girlfriend, she thought. Maybe I should know how to fix this.

But she knew she didn’t know.

She looked around at the others. They still looked at each other and the walls.

Do they expect me to know what to do? She asked herself.

They didn't do anything that suggested they did, but, as she stared at the red and gold rug, the thought wouldn't go away.

Wanting to get rid of it, she picked up her laptop, walked into the kitchen, sat down at the black granite bar that divided it from the living room, put her laptop on the bar, and carried on reading tables and graphs. She let herself focus on the numbers as she sipped her way through two cups of cold coffee. When she finished the second cup, she closed her laptop. She hadn't learned anything new.

I'm not good at cracking conspiracies or being a girlfriend, she thought.

Unable to face that idea, she opened her laptop again. A spreadsheet dominated the screen, the accounts of a fund called Spotlight Capital. She didn't know how Paul had got his hands on it.

Most of Spotlight Capital's expenses lay under the heading Human Resources: salaries, retirement contributions, health insurance, life insurance, bonuses, and smaller items. The numbers ranged from a few hundred dollars to more than ten million, and the arithmetic led to a figure for total expenditures that, when subtracted from total revenues, left the fund with an annual profit of just below one hundred and seven million dollars, normal for a fund that size. That confirmed what Paul had said: Clarity's funds made normal profits. They should have made outsized profits, and those profits should have gone somewhere.

She clicked to another spreadsheet, which broke down Spotlight Capital's human resource expenses by regional office. It included numbers for New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Rio, Canberra, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Jerusalem, Cairo, Moscow, Frankfurt, London and Toronto. The Hong Kong office spent the most, the Mexico City office the least, but the difference wasn't dramatic.

“That makes sense,” Felicity thought. Paul had told her Spotlight Capital kept a globally balanced portfolio.

Then she realized it didn’t make sense, because Spotlight Capital spent about the same on its employees’ health insurance in all its regional offices, a lot of money. In the United States, the fund probably bought the most expensive plans, but it shouldn’t have spent as much in countries with state-provided health care.

By the time the sunset left the kitchen in semi-darkness, she learned about health insurance in more than a dozen countries. Spotlight Capital spent an unrealistic amount everywhere except in the United States. And she found the name of Spotlight’s insurance vendor: Golden Shield International, registered in Madinat, on the Western shore of the Persian Gulf. She guessed Clarity had other funds channeling money to Golden Shield.

Caught between relief and exhilaration, she stepped back into the living room. The others had gone. She guessed they hadn’t said goodbye because they didn’t want to break her concentration.

But what if they’re angry with me for not focusing on Paul, she thought.

She sat on a beanbag.

I’m being paranoid, she reassured herself.

She heard the turn of a door handle and heard Paul’s voice.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You all work as hard as me. I was wrong...”

“Golden Shield International,” she said, looking up to face him.

He stared at her.

“Spotlight Capital pretends to spend as much on insurance in other countries as they do in America,” she explained, “and they spend it with a company called Golden Shield International. It’s based in Madinat.”

“I couldn’t figure out how they bought holdings in Pakistan so quickly,” he replied. “I still don’t know why they want to.”

“I was wrong to lose my temper,” he continued, after a pause. “I’m sorry. And by the way, you just cracked the problem. We know Clarity’s next move involves Pakistan.”

*

Felicity and Paul climbed into bed an hour later. She wore the pajamas she kept in Paul’s apartment, he wore his own, and they lay with faces together and kissed. When she felt sure he’d fallen asleep, she imagined running up a wall of fabric and balancing on a thin wooden ledge at the top. As soon as she’d transformed, she jumped onto Paul’s pillow and snuggled into his head. It felt like a bolder of hair and bone. His breathing seemed loud, but it soothed her. She smelt his cologne, with its notes of rosemary and smoke.

22: A DANGEROUS PLAN

The next few weeks, Felicity spoke or texted with Paul several times each day, though she kept her promise not to text during class. They kept up their online chess, and spent weekends researching Golden Shield. She began to find that easy. She moved through numbers like she was swimming in the Caribbean again. When she looked at them, they seemed to form patterns by themselves. She couldn't explain why, even to herself, but she thought the patterns beautiful.

Paul guessed the insurance company received money from all Clarity's funds, probably for bogus policies, and moved it to Pakistan, and he told Felicity about Pakistani stock movements that looked like their work.

"I don't know how they move the money to Pakistan, though," he said. "I can't see other peoples' transfers between bank accounts, but they probably don't transfer it that way. Too visible to intelligence agencies."

Some weekend evenings, they ate out; others, they cooked in Paul's apartment. Felicity had learned a few recipes watching Maria, and Joan taught her a few more. None tasted or looked as good as Paul's cooking. The first time he made dinner for Felicity, she marveled at the way he moved around the kitchen, supporting himself against the sideboard.

He produced a platter of sushi rolls.

"How did you learn to make Japanese?" she exclaimed.

“After I ran away from my orphanage, an old Japanese lady took me in,” he said. “She walked with sticks like mine. She taught me to cook. I’m still better at Japanese than American.”

“Where is she now,” Felicity asked.

“She died a year after she took me in,” Paul replied with a sad smile. “By then, I’d started trading, and I’d made enough to pay for her funeral and rent my first apartment.”

Felicity felt glad to have another piece of Paul’s story. So far, she knew he’d grown up in orphanages and foster homes, stayed with an elderly Japanese lady who took pity on him, and made an investment fortune. She wanted to ask him questions, but a strong instinct told her to wait for him to offer his story.

*

Felicity’s parents’ anniversary fell on March first. Joan had told her the date when she asked, shortly after Christmas, and asked if she’d like to celebrate. Felicity said she’d like to have a special meal and invited Monica and Paul.

After school on March first, Felicity showered and brushed her hair. It now grew six inches down her back, and she smiled as she finished brushing, because it would be as long as her mother’s some day.

She put on a white silk dress, makeup, and green glass earrings, and walked into the living room to find Monica and Paul sipping wine on the couch. Monica stood and hugged her, gelled blue hair squishing between their heads, and Felicity lost her balance and collapsed into an armchair opposite the couch. In front of her, gift bags sat on the coffee table.

“Don’t wait for me,” Joan called from the kitchen.

Felicity had never received presents from anyone but Joan. She picked up a blue gift bag from the coffee table and opened the silver envelope attached to its side. The front of the card

showed a mouse in watercolor, standing between shafts of wheat. She opened it and read the handwriting inside:

“My Sister, I hope I can call you that. Monica.”

She felt tears well in her eyes as she looked at Monica and said, “Of course you can, if I can call you that too.”

Monica nodded.

In the bag, Felicity found a black silk scarf embroidered with bright green images of fairies, pumpkins, stagecoaches, and mice. She draped it over her shoulders and remembered the story on it was hers.

At least up to the lost slipper, she thought.

“The silver bag’s from me,” Paul said.

Felicity picked up the bag, peered into it, saw black tissue paper, and pulled it out to find a black leather box. She couldn’t see a card, so she took the box and let the bag fall to the floor. On the front, three gold clasps held down the lid. She opened them and lifted the lid. Inside the box, three shelves unfolded vertically, lined with cream-colored silk. In the top compartment lay a pair of earrings: deep green stones carved to perfect roundness, in a gold setting. On the middle level lay a necklace: delicate gold filigree with tiny stones the same green as those in the earrings. On the bottom level sat a note in scarlet ink on grey card: “Because I want you to have them.”

She didn’t know how to look at Paul. Monica saved her.

“Those are real,” she gasped. “They’re actually real...”

Felicity squinted at her.

“They’re not glass,” Monica said.

Still holding the box, Felicity crouched and kissed Paul's forehead. He took the necklace, lifted it to her throat, passed the ends behind her neck, and fumbled with the clasp. He struggled for a couple of minutes. Felicity stifled a laugh, and Monica stood, moved behind her, and fastened the clasp in a second. Joan appeared from the kitchen and grinned as Felicity stood, discarded her old earrings, and replaced them with the emeralds.

Joan gave her vouchers for books and a spa, and Felicity hugged and thanked her and helped her bring the food to the table. Monica and Paul gasped when they saw a huge pastry parcel, gold all over but brown nowhere. Through it, meat and herb scents filled the room.

"I got the recipe from a hedgehog in England," Joan said.

As they ate, Joan talked about how Felicity's parents had loved each other, about the postcards they sent from Europe and Asia just before Julia died, the places they went, the adventures they had, and how much they loved their baby daughter.

"They were unusually capable of love," she finished.

As Paul prepared to leave, Felicity kissed him on the mouth, drawing it out despite Monica and Joan's presence. Monica said goodbye a few minutes later. Felicity tried to help Joan clear up, but her godmother hustled her towards her bedroom, reminding her she had to go to school the next day.

She lay naked under soft cotton sheets, ran her fingers up and down her arms, and felt beautiful.

*

Felicity spent Saturday in Paul's apartment. By lunchtime, they finished their second pass through all the material they could find about Golden Shield, but they still couldn't see how it moved money to Pakistan.

“I’ll have to penetrate their headquarters in Madinat,” Felicity said.

“Too dangerous,” Paul replied.

“We knew I’d use my transformation to spy on Clarity,” she reminded him.

“Yes,” he replied, “but...”

“I’m doing this,” she said, trying to speak gently. “You’ve taken risks; Joan’s taken risks. Now I’m going to.”

Golden Shield’s website said the firm wasn’t accepting new clients, so Felicity couldn’t pose as one. It wasn’t on the stock market, so Paul couldn’t invest and visit as a stockholder.

The solution came to her: Golden Shield’s offices took up the nineteenth floor of a fifty-five-floor skyscraper. The eighteenth floor housed a law firm and a management consultancy, the twentieth an oilfield services company. The law firm was a limited partnership, but Paul could pose as a potential investor, or become a real investor, in either of the other firms. She could pose as his assistant, lawyer, or wife, or hide in his briefcase as a mouse.

That evening, she sat at Paul’s breakfast bar with her laptop, pulled up flight information, hotel information, maps of Madinat, and information on the companies that shared Golden Shield’s building. By four in the morning, she planned a Spring Break espionage mission. She yawned as she walked into Paul’s bedroom, tossed her clothes on the floor, made three attempts at her pajamas, got them on the third time, flopped onto the bed, reached out a hand, and brushed Paul’s cheek.

23: PREPARATIONS

Noon next day, as Felicity walked into the living room and Paul blew her a kiss from the kitchen, she smelled coffee brewing and muffins baking. As they ate, she talked him through her plan, and, after they cleared breakfast, he purchased a stake in Final Frontier Extraction Services, the oilfield services firm on the floor above Golden Shield.

“I should have bought into this outfit before its first patents,” he said, as he examined their online prospectus.

With one phone call, Paul arranged to meet Final Frontier’s Chairman and CEO two days after their arrival in Madinat.

“That gives us time to see the city,” he said. “Saving the world is important, but so is enjoying it.”

They promised him a suite at the Royal Gulf, Madinat’s best hotel. When Paul said his “assistant” would share his suite, the CEO’s assistant paused and replied, “Whatever best suits you, Sir.”

*

The week before the flight, Felicity hurried to finish projects and review for tests. She’d already brought all her semester grades within striking distance of an A, but she didn’t want to take chances with her MIT place. She spent only one evening out, to visit a tailor. A stern looking woman measured her, showed her fabrics, and helped her choose four suits and casual wear in light, breathable materials, suitable for hot climates. Two days later, the suits arrived at

Joan's apartment. Two days after that, Felicity and Paul reclined in vast seats on a first class flight, and, twelve hours after takeoff, Felicity stared out the window as Madinat came into view. Skyscrapers dominated the middle of the city. Further out, wide asphalt highways circled the outskirts. The picture struck her as odd.

"I guess I expected Agrabah," she thought, and her mind's eye flashed an image of Aladdin and Abu fleeing the sultan's soldiers through Disney's imaginary city.

They walked through a clean airport terminal, lined with jewelry stores and advertisements for hotels and malls. A woman in a sharp black suit held a sign that read "Mr. Heath" in sharp black letters. She greeted Paul in a Russian accent, and nodded at Felicity, and the three of them walked past crowds of Caucasians, Arabs, and Asians. Felicity heard words and phrases of Chinese as they passed a large party. "He said we'd meet at the hotel," one woman told another. "My legs haven't woken up yet," a man complained.

A black man and a white woman passed them. "He's finished if he plays like last season," the man told the woman in British-inflected English.

At the information desk, a man leant forward at a clerk. "Why is my luggage still in Toronto?" he shouted in a Canadian accent.

A group of four passed by, speaking what sounded like French.

At the hotel, the Russian lady walked to the reception desk while blue-uniformed bellboys took Felicity and Paul's luggage. A man in a grey suit crossed the lobby, smiled at Paul, and said,

"Mr. Heath, I'm Chris Jarvis, the manager. Thank you for choosing to stay with us."

He extended his hand, and Paul shook it.

“Please let me know if I can be of assistance at any time,” the manager said, barely glancing at Felicity as he handed her a business card.

A bellboy escorted them up an elevator to a suite on the top floor. When he opened the door, black-papered walls, crisscrossing orange lines in a picture frame, white leather furniture, and silver carpet caught Felicity’s eye. Double doors of dark stained wood stood open, and she walked through them to find a chocolate-brown silk-sheeted bed and a wall of solid glass, showing a blue sky.

The bellboy left, and they collapsed on the bed. When she woke, Felicity looked at the glass wall. Instead of daylight, she saw stars and, under them, dense city lights, some colored and some white. She knew they’d come to Madinat to do something frightening, but she wanted to have fun before they did. She nudged Paul.

“Let’s see the city,” she said.

A hotel driver in a black Mercedes took them on a tour, pointing out nightclubs. Felicity guessed he hadn’t noticed Paul’s walking sticks.

“Would you take us somewhere for dinner, please?” She asked. “Somewhere quiet.”

*

After dinner, the driver took them back to the hotel, and they changed into pajamas and cuddled under the covers. Felicity woke to sunlight, every part of her feeling relaxed.

A different driver showed them the city by daylight. To Felicity’s disappointment, it didn’t seem to contain anything but office buildings and malls, their fronts shiny-clean. Late afternoon, they went back to the hotel and ate in its restaurant, amid wood and leather décor. A server handed roses to Felicity, and Paul leaned over and kissed her.

As they waited for desert, she began to feel nervous. The next day would be the first danger day.

24: SUITS

As Felicity lay in bed, she grew more fearful and wondered what Clarity would do if they caught her. Kill her, she guessed.

When she woke, she read 6:30 on the clock on the nightstand and saw edges of sunlight around the blinds. She remembered that, in an hour, they'd get their wake-up call. In three hours, they'd arrive at Final Frontier's office. She'd pretend to be Paul's PA, follow him, nod, and smile. She'd ask to use the bathroom. In it, she'd look for the AC duct. In the heat of the Arabian Peninsula, the duct would be easily big enough for a three-inch mouse. She'd transform. Paul would follow her into the bathroom after a few minutes and lift her into the duct. Before he did, he'd attach a thin, practically weightless tracking device to her. She'd barely notice its Velcro band around her mouse body.

She walked into the front room of the suite, picked up the phone, ordered coffee, and sat in an armchair in her pajamas. The moves flicked through her mind again, like items on a checklist: smile as Chairman and CEO greet Paul, walk behind him, look mostly at him, but smile at the Final Frontier people, sit through first few minutes of meeting, excuse self.

Up to that point, Paul had the harder job, but, once she got to the bathroom, she'd have the frightening part: enter bathroom, leave door unlocked, locate duct, strip, put clothes in briefcase, transform, hide behind toilet, wait.

*

Felicity and Paul ordered room-service breakfast, washed, and put on suits. She picked at her breakfast, but he ate a lot. She couldn't understand why he didn't look frightened.

I have the tough part, she thought.

After breakfast, they picked up briefcases and rode the elevator to the lobby, where another driver waited in another black Mercedes. Thirty minutes after they left the hotel, they walked into the lobby of the skyscraper that housed Final Frontier and Golden Shield, and two men met them in the lobby. At first, Felicity thought they were brothers. Both were tall and heavily built, and wore black suits, white shirts, and red ties. Both their chiseled faces and wide smiles emphasized their white teeth.

"Mr. Heath," one boomed in a Russian accent. "I'm Nicolai Azarov. Welcome to Final Frontier. Allow me to introduce our Chairman, Christopher York."

The other took a small step forward and extended his hand to Paul.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Heath," he said softly, in a British accent.

*

Azarov and York escorted Paul and Felicity into a conference room, and Azarov offered Paul whiskey. He declined but accepted coffee. Neither Azarov nor York offered Felicity anything.

The four of them sat on slim leather couches. A sculpture sat in an alcove opposite Felicity. In bronze metal, it showed a boy reaching, but his reaching had no life. He was supposed to be aspiring, Felicity assumed, but he was only gesturing.

Paul asked about patents, intellectual property, markets, contracts, fulfillments, revenues, profits, and dividends, and Felicity watched him and nodded as he spoke. She didn't listen to

Azarov and York's answers. After a few minutes, she picked up her briefcase, smiled at the three men, left the room, and walked down a hallway to a desk where a woman sat.

"Left, then left again," the woman said, without asking what Felicity wanted or even looking at her.

Trying to look calm, Felicity walked into the bathroom, left the door unlocked, and looked around. She saw the air duct on the far wall, five feet from the floor. She stripped, put her clothes in her briefcase, closed it, set it down by the basin, and imagined scampering through a field of wheat. She looked up as soon as she'd transformed. The toilet stood in front of her, blurred but recognizable, looming like a ridiculous building. She ran behind it.

The door swung open, and two black things entered the room. She squinted and could just make out a pair of polished black lace-up shoes under black suit pants. The man took two steps towards the toilet, his pants fell to the floor, and he sat. He let out a groan, a "damn it," and another groan. Felicity heard a splash, another groan, and a louder splash.

"Perfect," she thought.

A stench filled the room, too intense for a three-inch animal with a sensitive nose. She thought she'd passed out.

She heard the man go through what sounded like a whole roll of toilet paper. He pulled up his pants as he stood, grunted, and left the room without washing his hands. A few minutes later, Paul walked in and locked the door.

"That is a seriously bad smell," he said.

He knelt by Felicity and pulled the tracking device from his breast pocket.

※

Paul tightened the tracking device's Velcro band around Felicity's torso. As she'd expected, she couldn't feel it beyond a slight pressure through her fur, and she couldn't feel its weight. Paul laid his hand on the floor in front of her, palm upward, and she walked onto it. Standing on it felt like standing on a cushion. He moved her under his jacket and lowered her into his breast pocket.

She heard his walking sticks against the floor, and her stomach lurched as he stood. She peeked over the top of his pocket. To her right, she saw his tie, and, in front of her, barely distinct to her mouse eyes, she saw the grid over the ventilation duct. It came into focus as Paul stepped toward it, his footfalls loud to her mouse ears. His hand moved into her field of vision, holding a screwdriver, and she watched him unfasten the screws at the edges of the grid, catching each one in the hand with which he held the screwdriver.

He caught the cover as it fell, and Felicity felt the downward movement as he crouched and heard a soft thud as he placed the cover on the floor. After the upward movement of his standing, she felt his fingers around her, firm but gentle. He placed her in the duct. Against her paws, she felt a coat of dust and hot metal beneath them. She guessed the duct had been cleaned recently, but not too recently. That was a relief. Her paws weren't as fragile as human skin, but she didn't know if she could have stood direct contact with the heat of the metal.

Why is the metal hot? she wondered. *The AC should be cooling, not heating.*

The air did feel cool.

No time to think about how AC systems work, she told herself.

The duct was wider than its cover, about two feet by two feet. Suddenly, it became dark, and she knew Paul had replaced the grid. She heard him tightening the screws.

"Goodbye," he whispered, and she squeaked in response.

That wasn't hard, she thought.

But walking without light was hard. She edged forward. She knew she had to find a vertical shaft and make it down one floor. After that, she should be able to take any duct to Golden Shield's offices. She ran forward, but, as she did, she grew more afraid. She imagined finding the shaft by falling into it. She imagined a fan turning on and catching her in a current her three-inch body couldn't resist, and she wondered why she hadn't thought of those dangers before.

Her right-side whiskers felt something hard and hot. It felt the same as the floor of the duct, the same to the power of three, four, or five, and she realized it was the side of the duct.

Of course, she thought. That's why animals have whiskers: to find their way in the dark.

After that, she moved quickly, until the wall slid away from her whiskers. She guessed she'd reached a corner. She turned right, stepped forward, found the side of the duct with her whiskers again, and kept moving.

She didn't know she'd reached a vertical shaft until she felt a throb in her stomach as she fell. For a millisecond, she imagined herself splattered on the duct below. She made herself imagine wading through seawater on two legs. Human again, she rammed all four bare limbs against the shaft and gritted her teeth to stop herself screaming as her fragile human skin began to burn. She quickly moved her left arm downward and shoved it against the shaft again. More pain. She did the same with her right arm, then her left leg, and then her right leg. Still more pain. Her bare buttocks touched the shaft. She clenched them against the burning and knew she had to get this over with before her skin burned away. She worked faster. Her feet found a vertical surface, and she thought about digging in soil with her two front paws.

Her paws felt warm on the steel, but not painfully hot. She licked her legs, nose and tongue parting her fur. The burned places stung as she licked them. The skin felt intact, but she guessed it was red and black in places. The pain grew less intense as she licked, and she began to run again, whiskers against the side of the duct.

She saw light and walked towards it, and the bars of a grid became clear. Peering through them, she saw a brightly lit, white room with a row of sinks on one side. She lay three inches from the grid and went back to licking her legs.

*

Felicity waited. Occasionally, she heard a toilet flush and saw a figure at the basins, but the bathroom didn't smell as pungent as the one through which she'd entered the air conditioning system. As she licked her legs, the pain dulled further.

She played tic-tac-toe in the dust to stave off boredom, but, when she tired of that, she found herself thinking about the danger. She wondered how to make someone unscrew the grid, whether they'd catch her when they did, and how much time she could spend in Golden Shield's office before they brought in an exterminator.

This is crazy, she concluded. But I can't back out now.

The number of people using the bathroom increased. Then no more came. She guessed they'd gone home. That meant the cleaning crew might arrive soon. After some time, she heard a woman humming. The woman came into view, with long dark hair, tied in a ponytail, and dark skin. She wore a simple dress. Felicity had seen people with her hair and skin color in other service jobs all over Madinat, and she remembered someone saying they came from Bangladesh.

The woman carried on humming as she sprayed and wiped basins. Felicity hurled herself against the grate, and the woman looked up. Then she looked down and carried on wiping.

Felicity threw herself at the grate again, twice, and the woman turned and walked towards her. Felicity backed away, and the woman fingered the grate and then left the room. Minutes later, she returned with a man with the same color hair and skin. He wore grey overalls and carried a stepladder. Felicity moved back and crouched. She heard screws turning. The grate disappeared, and light flooded the entrance to the duct but fell short of the place where she crouched.

She knew the beam of a flashlight would find her, and she didn't wait for it. She ran forward and jumped onto the man's shoulder. The man and the woman gave startled yelps as she scampered down his body. She reached the floor, carried on running, made it to the door, squeezed under it, and kept running, through an empty hallway and under another door. She looked around the room she'd entered. In the starlight that came through big windows in one wall, she saw felt cubicle partitions. She heard no human sounds, only the hum of air conditioning.

She scampered on carpet down the row of cubicles beneath the windows. Half way down, she found a tangle of cords sprawling out of a bank of twelve white plastic outlets. She decided to sleep under the cords and trust her mouse ears to wake her when the first person entered the room.

25: INSURANCE, SHIPS, AND MYSTERIES

Felicity hadn't slept as a mouse before, and she wasn't sure how to. All four legs still ached, but the carpet felt thick enough for comfort. She lowered herself onto her belly, lowered her chin to the floor, and closed her eyes. Instinctively, that didn't feel like a sleeping position. She rolled onto her back. Her legs splayed in the air. She rolled onto her side, drew her legs in, tucked her body into a ball, and curled her tail in front of her paws and face. Soon, she slept.

*

Felicity woke to the creak of a door, and light hurt her eyes. As she struggled to open them, she heard footfalls. She uncurled, stood, and peered through the tangled cords. She guessed she could dash under the cubicle walls if anyone moved them. But dust covered them, and that told her no one had disturbed the cords in some time.

The frequency of footfalls increased, and pairs of shoes passed her: mostly men's shoes, three pairs of women's pumps. The smell of coffee hit her, strong but stale. She didn't hear much talking at first, just greetings. After a few minutes, shoes passed less frequently, and the sound of tapping at keyboards replaced the footfalls.

The people talked more, discussing risks and actuarial tables, medical policies, liability policies, shipping policies, every other kind of insurance policy. Felicity listened, but none of what she heard sounded like what she'd come to learn about.

Her legs continued to ache, and she licked them from time to time. She felt hungry and realized she didn't know how often mice ate. From time to time, she heard the people munching and saw them discard trash in a can three yards from her.

Don't adults call that a "sad desk lunch"? She thought.

She decided to raid the trash can after they'd gone. It would also be a good place to pee, and she needed to.

By the end of the day, she'd heard nothing important: no villainous monologues and nothing about Pakistan. When the people left and the lights went out, she walked from under the cords and eyed the trashcan. She thought she'd jumped higher as a mouse. She ran at it, leaped, and cleared the rim. The trashcan wobbled a little as she slid down its inside. A spicy odor hit her along with chicken, and she rummaged through wrappers, foil bags, brown bags, and plastic film until she found a chip bag, the source of the smell. Her mouth filled with saliva. She climbed into the bag, and her whiskers found at least a dozen chips.

As she finished eating, the lights came on again. She froze as she realized she'd been too busy gorging herself to remember the janitors came in the evenings and that taking the trash out might be their first task. She scampered out of the bag. A soda can stood in front of her. Footfalls approached. She crouched, jumped at the top of the can, and landed with all four legs on it. It wobbled. She raised her tail and moved it side to side to steady herself, looked up at the rim of the trashcan, jumped a second time, cleared it, and cushioned with her legs as she hit the carpet.

She lay under the cords, whipping her head around to watch for the janitors. She couldn't see them, but a roar sounded. It continued without pause, and a janitor moved towards her, pushing a vacuum cleaner. She tensed at the thought that he might move the cords, but she remembered they wouldn't be so dusty if they were ever moved. He moved closer, pushing the

vacuum cleaner around to cover the space between cubicles and wall. He passed by the cords and moved on. Felicity lay motionless until the roaring stopped and the lights went out.

*

Felicity slept through the night, and, in the morning, her legs ached less. She licked them as shoes passed and the smell of coffee grew more intense. She heard greetings, footfalls, the sound of people typing, and then a loud voice:

“OK, shut up and listen up. You too, Morris. Board meeting’s tomorrow. I have to report on the Indian Ocean freight policies. Numbers are up, so my ass is basically safe. That means yours are too.”

The man sounded Australian. He paused before continuing: “I need to know about problems with major customers, opportunities for future customers.”

A moment of silence followed, and then another voice said, “Mr. Sanding, there may be an opportunity with a small freight line no one knows anything about. They don’t seem to carry a policy with anyone else.”

The speaker sounded Texan, and he sounded uncertain of what he was saying.

“What are you talking about, Morris?” Sanding almost moaned.

“They don’t even seem to have an HQ, Sir. They operate out of Madinat and sail to Karachi and back. That’s their only route. They only have a few small ships, so it’s not a big deal...”

“Their name?” Sanding snapped.

“White Horn Shipping, Sir. They sail under a Libyan flag.”

“If they were worth anything, I’d have heard of them. Meeting over. Back to work.”

For a few minutes, Felicity heard no sound but typing and mouse clicks. She felt puzzled by the way Sanding dismissed Morris' information, almost as if he didn't want Morris checking out White Horn Shipping. And they sailed from Madinat to Karachi, the largest port in Pakistan.

And a board meeting would be held tomorrow. She could try to find a conference room after the janitors left. She couldn't be sure the meeting would take place in this building, but the possibility seemed worth a shot.

*

The rest of the day, the people talked on and off about insurance and soccer. Felicity felt famished even sooner than the previous day and guessed she now knew why people complained about mice stealing food. She felt thirsty, too. As soon as the people left, she jumped into the trashcan, found a half-full bottle of water, and bit into the side of the bottle. The plastic didn't taste of anything at all. She ripped off a bit and spat it aside. Three bites later, a trickle of water appeared, and she lapped at it. It tasted better than she'd thought water could taste. When she no longer felt thirsty, she sniffed and took in a variety of food smells, including chocolate, which she followed to part of a candy bar, milk chocolate and caramel. She gorged.

She made it back to the cords before the lights came on again, and waited until lights and sound of vacuuming died, listened for several more minutes, heard nothing, and walked out from under the cords.

When she'd jumped from the AC duct two nights previously, she'd run straight across the corridor to the room she lay in now. This time, she could afford to look around. She slipped under the door. A narrow corridor ran between two rows of closed wooden doors. At one end stood a pair of double doors. They looked like a good candidate for the door of a conference

room. She ran to the double doors, squirmed under them, and looked around the room she'd entered.

She stood on the same carpet, thick and comfortable to her paws. Around her, she saw a large room, in front of her, an oval wooden table with a dozen chairs, to the side of the room, a cart with water bottles and glasses on it. She ran slowly round the table but saw no obvious hiding place. Then she noticed baseboard ran around the walls. She had an idea mice could get under baseboards. She nuzzled the bottom, but found barely any space between it and the carpet.

That's OK, she thought. I'm a mouse.

She chewed the wood and spat shavings to the side, and, once she'd gnawed through the board, she squeezed under the wall, where she found an open space with another wall behind it. She curled up and closed her eyes.

*

Felicity woke to the sounds of footfalls and voices and moved to her hole in the baseboard to hear the voices better. She heard three of them, two male and one female. More joined them, another woman and three more men. They sounded like they came from various parts of North America, Europe, and Asia, and they talked about one another's kids and international schools in the city.

Why no Arabs? Felicity wondered. I'm in the Middle East.

I guess I'm really in International Mega Business Land, she concluded.

"OK, this one shouldn't take long," one of the men said, louder than the others. "We just need to hear the division managers' reports."

Four men and a woman spoke briefly about sales, insurance policies, and accounts. A few questions followed each report, mostly from the man who'd spoken first, and Felicity began to think of him as the Chairman. The voice she recognized as Sanding's spoke last.

"We've sold eight new policies, all in the 50-250,000 range. Lloyds underwrote them all. All existing customers reenrolled. We're paying out for an engine room fire in a ship registered in the Bahamas, damages in the 500-750,000 range."

"Was the policy properly syndicated?" the Chairman asked.

"Yes," Sanding replied. "Lloyd's. Eighty percent of my division's policies are with Lloyd's now."

"Well, good work," the Chairman replied. "Have you heard any talk about White Horn?" Felicity listened harder.

"Morris mentioned it. Knew they don't have a policy. Wanted to chase it."

"He sounds smart," another voice said.

"Yeah, good salesman. Finds a lot of leads and usually reels them in," Sanding replied.

"I don't want to lose him, then," the Chairman said, "but I don't want him being clever in Madinat, or anywhere else in West Asia. I want you to transfer him, at least as far as London. Make up an excuse. Make it a promotion if you have to."

"Yes, Sir. I'll have him out in three months."

"Make it the first of next month."

"Yes...Sir," Sanding replied.

"We're done," the Chairman announced. "I'm having lunch with my Islamabad contact, so don't call or text before four o'clock."

Felicity remembered Islamabad was the capital of Pakistan. She heard shuffling of paper, then footfalls, the door opening, more footfalls, and the door closing. She poked her head out of her hole, peered around the room, and saw a single pair of shoes below the table. She edged forward and looked up. A tall, white haired man in a grey suit sat at the head of the table, and a briefcase lay open on the table beside him. He looked engrossed in something immediately below his nose, and Felicity saw her chance. She ran under the table and positioned herself behind the man.

The seats of the chairs rose about eighteen inches off the ground, and the tabletop the same distance from the seats. She thought she could make the jumps, just. She ran, strained all four legs, and propelled herself upwards.

Land silently, she told herself.

She bent her legs to cushion on a chair, and then launched upwards again and cushioned as she landed on the tabletop.

The Chairman still stared downwards, examining a piece of paper. His briefcase lay between him and Felicity. She jumped into it and felt suede on her paws. A mess of papers lay in front of her. She slipped under one of the sheets and crouched. The suede felt comfortable. A little light reached her, just enough to show her paws, but she didn't think the Chairman had a sight line to her. She drew her paws back, just in case.

A minute later, the light vanished, she fell, and her body thudded against more suede. She guessed the Chairman had picked up the briefcase. It swung as he walked.

Is this actually my life? Felicity asked herself as she hit the side again. When she landed, she dug her claws into the suede and kept hold until the jolting stopped. She heard the hum of an

elevator and then the sound of automatically sliding doors, felt more jolts, and then heard voices followed by the sound of a car engine.

26: VILLAINOUS DUOLOGUE

The briefcase turned ninety degrees, throwing Felicity against the side, and she heard car doors closing, followed by two voices, words indistinct. The voices seemed to come from in front of her. Some papers lay under her, some over her, and she concluded the briefcase was lying flat on the back seat. As she felt the motion of the car, she began to scratch the suede. It gave way in minutes, and her claws found a layer of wood.

The wood was soft, and she scratched through it in no time. Beyond it, she found leather. Light appeared as she scratched through that, and through the hole she saw the backs of car seats. She poked her head out and looked around. Apart from the briefcase, the back seat lay empty. She squeezed through the hole, jumped onto the edge of the seat, jumped to the floor, and ran under the driver's seat.

After a short time, the car slowed and stopped, and she heard the driver's door opening, feet on asphalt, and the door closing.

"Greetings," said the Chairman.

"Good morning," a second voice replied, a voice of forced politeness. Felicity guessed its owner had taken the driver's seat to speak with the Chairman.

"I need more money for the generals," the second voice announced. Its accent sounded British inflected but not actually British.

“You’ve received forty thousand bars,” the Chairman replied dismissively. “There’s another ten thousand on a ship sailing today. There’ll be another ten thousand on one sailing Monday. Are these men going to raise their price every month, Rashid?”

“Gold’s gone down,” Rashid replied. “And generals are stubborn.” He sounded defensive, and Felicity guessed he wasn’t the one with the power.

“You just need to arrange a few incidents, Rashid.” The Chairman drew out the word “incidents.” “India will do the rest. It’s less than six month until their election. The BJP has to look strong.”

“Yes, of course,” Rashid replied. “Incidents aren’t the problem. The ISI can make them happen for less than you’ve sent.”

So they’re bribing Pakistan’s military intelligence and its generals, Felicity concluded.

“Killing Indian soldiers in Kashmir is cheap,” Rashid continued after a pause, “but the trick is persuading the generals to lose when India’s tanks show up. These guys grew up dreaming of beating India, you know, in cricket and war.”

He laughed.

“You can have fifteen thousand more bars within the next month,” the Chairman conceded, “but, after India pushes your army out of Kashmir, I expect you to follow the plan to the letter. No more digging in my pocket. Do you understand?”

“No problem. No problem,” Rashid replied. “I’ll call on the government to resign. I’ll say it in Parliament. I’ll say it on TV. I’ll tweet it. Some junior officers will arrest the Prime Minister and his cronies. They’ll make me Prime Minister. The generals will endorse me.”

“Will the people care what the army says after it loses Kashmir?” the Chairman asked.

“One general will win one battle against India,” Rashid replied. “Only one. After the coup, he’ll be the first general to endorse me. He’ll say I can get Kashmir back, and I’ll make him Chief of General Staff.”

“Well,” said the Chairman, “You have this more in hand than we realized. Clarity owns large stakes in your country’s newspapers and broadcasters, so we’ll help swing public opinion your way.”

“My plan will work,” Rashid replied, “God willing.”

“I didn’t know you were religious. Do you even go to Mosque?”

The Chairman sounded contemptuous.

“Religion’s a load of shit,” Rashid replied. “But I still say the stuff my parents made me say. Just habit.”

The Chairman laughed. “We’ll wait three months once you’re in office,” he said. “Then we’ll start shipping the paint from Agni Dveep.”

“Huh!” Rashid exclaimed. “Do you know what that means?”

“Do tell.”

“It means ‘island of the god of fire.’ I’m pretty sure that’s not its legal name, but it’s a good name.”

“I thought religion was shit,” the Chairman replied.

Neither spoke for a moment.

Rashid broke the silence. “Have you tested this ‘paint’?” he asked. “Are you certain it protects surfaces from missiles, not just bullets?”

“I don’t say things unless I’m certain of them,” the Chairman said, enunciating each word.

“Then I’ll build you an invincible army,” Rashid said.

“I expect you to,” the Chairman replied. “I expect it to be clearly superior to every other army east of Turkey, west of China, and south of Russia. If one of your commanders commits an act of aggression, I want him in the ground. But other governments will know you’re in charge. In two years, we’ll control South and Central Asia. We’ll build our empire. In twenty years, it’ll have more firepower than the United States.”

He spoke like his mind was far away.

“We found the master race, Rashid,” he continued. “We found it hiding in plain sight, and you and I are part of it. Now we put it in the driver’s seat.”

*

Felicity felt faint. She realized the whole of her body was tense, even her lungs.

You’re just a mouse, she told herself. They won’t hear you breathing.

She drew a few quick breaths. The faintness receded, and she began to think about her situation. She’d learned something vital. She had to get out of the car and wait for Paul. When he saw her stationary in an outdoor location, he’d come for her.

She moved to the narrow space between the driver’s seat and door and listened as the two men said goodbye. When the door opened, she jumped through it and ran.

Sand felt hot under her feet; the sun felt hot on her back. She looked around as she ran. A few yards from the road, she stopped. She saw a huge, blurred shape in the distance. She guessed it was the city. But she saw no buildings around her, only desert. Back in the direction she’d come from, a car drove away. A figure in a white suit waved at it, and she guessed he was Rashid.

Sweat drenched her fur and ran down her legs. Knowing she had to survive the heat until Paul arrived, she looked around for shade. She couldn't see any. Then it occurred to her the heat wasn't the only danger; a bird of prey might see her if she stayed in the open.

She looked around again, but she couldn't see even a bush. But she noticed her paws felt cooler. They'd sunk into the sand. That made sense, she realized. The sand insulated them. She dug. Four or five inches down, she burrowed sideways. She didn't get far before her tunnel collapsed. She lay in darkness, but, while she felt warm, she didn't feel dangerously hot. And nothing could see her.

27: NEW FRIENDS

Felicity waited until she felt the sand above her move and then a poking sensation in her back. Fingers closed around her and lifted her upward, through sand and then air. The sunlight hurt her eyes, but she felt human skin against her side and inhaled Paul's smoke and rosemary scented cologne.

"I've got you," Paul said, his voice soft like the rumble of a giant.

She opened her eyes and saw he held her to his cheek. She squeaked. He held her a moment longer, then carried her a short distance and set her down on a car seat. Cool air made her shiver. She thought about relaxing in a hot bath, and her human body sprawled naked across the passenger seat. Paul entered through the driver's door and handed her a red silk shawl, and she draped it around herself and looked at him. He blushed. That made her smile. He raised his eyebrows in the manner of a question, and she nodded.

"I'm OK," she said.

*

Paul had brought her a cotton dress, sandals, sunscreen, sunglasses, and underwear, but no bra, and Felicity laughed at his male cluelessness as he drove and she dressed. They drove past desert, then tall buildings. When they reached their room, Paul called room service and ordered mixed appetizers, and Felicity realized how hungry she felt. She felt thirsty too, and she gulped glasses of water as she told Paul what she'd learned.

“So,” he said, “Golden Shield receives money from Clarity’s investment funds, in the form of inflated insurance payments. It buys gold bars and uses White Horn Shipping to take the bars to Pakistan. Rashid’s a politician. Let me read a little about him.”

He reached for his laptop, and, after a pause, continued: “He’s the leader of a small party called Nation First. And now we know he’s bribing the military intelligence service to provoke India into war and bribing the Pakistani generals to lose. When they do, he’ll overthrow the government. He’ll become Prime Minister, and the army will back him. The conspiracy will give him this material, ‘paint,’ and he’ll use it to create the most powerful military in Central or South Asia. He won’t conquer other countries, but they’ll know who is boss. The ‘master race’ will rule the region. And it’s ‘hiding in plain sight.’”

“Sorry to be stupid,” Felicity said, “but which countries are we talking about?”

“Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, of course, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and, oh yes, Tajikistan.”

“What are we supposed to do?” she asked herself as well as Paul.

He looked stumped. “I was going to ask the same thing,” he replied. “I think we should go back to Boston. Joan knows politics better than I do, and I don’t think we should tell anyone any of this except in person.”

*

Felicity and Paul checked out next morning. Noon the day after, they walked into Paul’s apartment and found Joan waiting in the living room.

“I didn’t give you a key,” Paul said.

“I don’t exactly need one,” she replied.

Joan had already brewed tea. She handed mugs to Felicity and Paul, and they all sat. Joan took in Felicity's story with a cool smile, but Felicity saw concern in her furrowed eyebrows.

"Your parents would have been proud," Joan said, when Felicity finished. "I'll be proud for them, if that's OK?"

Felicity nodded. *I guess I accomplished something big*, she thought.

"We have to act immediately," Joan said. "We'll go to Pakistan. I'd like to penetrate the ISI's headquarters, but we don't have enough espionage experience. Rashid Hafiz is an easier target. He only established his party three years ago. It only has fifteen members of parliament, and it has a reputation for being disorganized. It's an extreme nationalist outfit, but not especially religious. That makes Hafiz different from the other extremist leaders."

"He said religion was 'a load of shit,'" Felicity put in.

Joan laughed. "No Pakistani politician would say that in public," she said. "More than anything else, we need to know what 'paint' is. It could be a code the name for a WMD program."

"Pakistan already has nuclear weapons," Paul said, as Joan reached for her phone.

"True," Joan replied slowly, finger tapping at her screen. "The Chairman said he'd ship the paint from a place called Agni Dweep, didn't he?"

"Yes," Felicity replied.

"It looks like that's an island dead center of the Indian Ocean," Joan said. "No one lives there. No country claims it. We need to know what's on it, and we won't be able to rent a yacht and sail up. So we'll have to learn what we can in Pakistan. Hafiz has an office in Islamabad, of course, but his headquarters is in Lahore, in the Punjab."

"Maybe a Pakistani chapter can help us," Felicity suggested.

“Yes,” Joan murmured. Then she spoke decisively: “I’ll take the next flight I can get to Lahore. I’ll fly over Hafiz’s building. I’ll be invisible. I’ll work out a plan. Paul, you and Adam talk to a Pakistani chapter, and decide whether to trust them. Be ready to bring the others to Lahore, except Felicity. She stays in Boston.”

Felicity stumbled over her words: “But...I...I’m good at...I found out...”

“You’re staying in Boston. That’s not a discussion,” Joan told her. “You’ve done well, but this will be more dangerous than Madinat. Besides, school’s in session.”

“Only for six more weeks,” Felicity countered, “and seniors only have to be there for four of them.”

“I don’t care,” Joan told her. “You’re finishing school, you’re going to your graduation, and you’re not getting yourself killed.”

Felicity guessed she’d always wanted a mother. Now she sort of had one, and she knew the role included protectiveness. But she wasn’t willing to stay in Boston while Joan, Paul, and the others marched into danger, and Joan couldn’t make her stay.

“I’ll graduate June twelfth,” she said firmly, “and I’ll turn eighteen on the thirteenth. I’ll fly to Lahore that day.”

*

The following evening, the chapter gathered in Joan’s living room, and Felicity helped Joan pass around coffee. Joan didn’t look her in the eye. She hadn’t all day, except during their fight. The fight had happened in Joan’s office at lunchtime. Joan raised her voice, pointed her wand at the walls, probably to make them soundproof, and raised her voice more. She talked about danger, said she had to protect Felicity, said it was her duty to Felicity’s parents, said she

wouldn't forgive herself if "something happened." She said Felicity's parents wouldn't want her to go to Lahore, but she didn't sound certain.

Joan had never been visibly angry at Felicity before, even when she grounded her. Felicity didn't know how to respond, until Joan brought up her parents.

"I'm going to be eighteen, Joan, and I'm going to get on a plane, and I'm going to do this with you and the others," she said.

*

As they sipped coffee, the Toys developed a plan: Joan would fly to Lahore the following morning, and the others would join her over the next month. They figured that would be less conspicuous than twelve Americans arriving at once. Felicity would fly on June thirteenth.

In Lahore, Joan would find a way into the building. Tobias and Muhammad would listen at windows and watch computer screens with a bird from a Pakistani chapter, and Felicity would penetrate Hafiz's office, home, or car when she arrived. No one looked at Joan when they discussed that.

"Do you trust the Pakistani chapter?" Coral asked Adam. Felicity noticed the hairs had begun to grow back on her cheeks and chin.

"I think we can," Adam replied. "They're not nationalists, like Hafiz. In fact, they're not all Pakistani. They call themselves the Punjab Chapter. Apparently, Western Punjab is in Pakistan and Eastern Punjab is in India. This chapter covers both. I've been talking with the organizer. He's called Ganesh. He's..." He looked at Monica. "He's an elephant."

Monica grinned broadly. "Felicity, Joan," she said. "Dibs."

Everyone laughed, Felicity's and Joan's eyes met, and Joan inclined her head and smiled.

*

When the meeting ended, Joan and Felicity saw the others out. Then Joan turned to Felicity and hugged her.

“You’re brave,” she said. “You’re as brave as you’re mother.”

The next day, at Logan, Felicity hugged Joan goodbye and told herself her godmother wouldn’t come to harm. She could do magic, after all. But Felicity couldn’t shake her fear, and she sat at Paul’s breakfast bar most of the afternoon and stared out of the window at small clouds in a blue sky.

At four o’clock, Adam texted. He’d arranged a videoconference with Ganesh for that evening. As Felicity read the text, Paul looked up from his computer, said he’d booked her a first class seat for June thirteenth, and asked if she’d read Adam’s text.

*

In Adam’s living room, the Toys sat in a semi-circle on couches and chairs, and Adam wheeled his computer desk in front of them and drew down the wooden blinds. A dark skinned man with smooth black hair smiled from the screen. Monica leaned forward and flicked her hair. She wore mascara, turquoise eye shadow, silver lipstick and brilliant blue nail varnish, and, when she leaned towards the computer, her blouse showed cleavage and lacy black bra. Felicity stifled a laugh.

“Have any of you guys been to the Indian subcontinent before?” Ganesh asked.

“No. I wish,” Monica said with an unnaturally sweet smile. Her eyes looked like they belonged on a puppy.

“Have you been to America?” she asked.

“No. I’ve never been outside India except to visit the others in Pakistan.”

“I love the way you talk. You speak English perfectly,” Monica said.

Ganesh laughed and replied, “It’s my first language, actually. Many Indians are English speakers. It’s actually our official language, thanks to the British.”

Monica monopolized Ganesh, and Adam and Paul struggled to keep the conversation relevant. Eventually, they arranged for Ganesh and Akbar to meet them at the airport and take them to the homes of chapter members in Lahore.

*

The others left Boston over the next four weeks, and Felicity grew lonely. Joan’s texts didn’t contain more than pleasantries and questions about Felicity’s wellbeing. Felicity prepared for her AP tests and took them without caring. After the tests, the teachers didn’t ask the seniors to do anything harder than comment on vaguely relevant movies.

Paul spent every minute planning. Then he left for Lahore. He texted Felicity after his flight touched down, and then she heard nothing more from him for days.

Monica left Boston last. From the moment she got off the plane, she barraged Felicity with texts. She loved Lahore. She texted photos several times a day. Many showed people, the Punjab Chapter members with and without the New Englanders. More and more featured Monica and Ganesh together. She also texted pictures of crowded streets, food, and clothes, something called an “auto-rickshaw,” which looked like a very small three-wheel car, and a garden made of fountains and pools, red brick and red tile paths, manicured, elaborately shaped trees and shrubs, and red and white pavilions with lattice walls. Felicity wanted to walk through the garden with her friends.

“This is the Shah Lamb...” Monica texted.

“...the Salem...” she said in another text.

Felicity guessed her autocorrect was giving her trouble.

“It’s a really big, really old garden. It’s beautiful. I tried to make out with Ganesh by the fountains, but he wouldn’t let me. He says it’s inappropriate in their culture.”

Felicity wondered if they’d made headway with the mission, but she knew they couldn’t text about that.

The next day, Monica texted pictures of a red castle with curving battlements, topped by pavilions with domed rooves.

“This is the Red Fort,” Monica said. “It’s really old.”

“Such precise information,” Felicity thought with a smile.

“How’s work?” she texted.

Monica’s next text contained an angry devil face emoticon and the words “I’m on holiday, duh!”

The following morning, Felicity woke to another bombardment of picture texts. This time they showed red walls, arches, and turrets, white domes, and an enormous courtyard, and with them came the words, “This is the third biggest mosque in the world.”

“How’s everyone else?” Felicity texted. “How’s Paul? How’s Joan?”

“Aren’t they texting you?” Monica responded.

“Joan is sometimes. Paul isn’t,” Felicity texted.

“Asshole,” Monica replied.

That evening, Paul called and said he was sorry for not calling before. Felicity didn’t know whether to tell him off. His voice sounded strained, but they talked through the night about the city, the people, the sights, the culture, and the food. When he rang off, she felt lonelier than before.

The next day was Felicity's last of school. She cut and spent the day reading on Boston Common. Two days later, she went to her graduation ceremony, not because she cared but because Joan called and told her to get photos. She didn't listen to the speaker, felt no connection to the other students or the school. Doreen graduated as well, so Felicity's stepmother came and Melanie, in a white dress, handed out programs. None of them made a move to talk to Felicity. Felicity didn't care.

After the ceremony, she texted Joan a selfie, stuffed her robe and mortarboard in her backpack, took the T back to Joan's apartment, and threw the suitcase her stepmother had given her all those months ago onto her bed.

28: A DIFFERENT PLACE

Felicity woke to a six o'clock alarm. As she drank coffee, she brushed her hair, which now grew to her shoulders. The next twenty-four hours passed in a haze. She changed planes in London and Dubai. In Lahore, she stood in a long line for customs. After a bored looking official waved her through, she looked around the dimly lit terminal. A flash of blue hair caught her eye, and she grinned. Monica had come to meet her, and on a bench next to her sat Paul.

She hugged Monica hard and turned to Paul. He gave her half a smile, and her mood sank. She'd expected a more enthusiastic reunion with her boyfriend. She crouched by him and attempted to plant a kiss on his forehead, but he moved his head away from her.

"That's not culturally appropriate," he said.

The three walked past sleepy police officers to a taxi. As they sat in it, Felicity decided to ignore her disappointment and focus on Monica. She noticed purple and silver highlights amid the blue of her friend's hair as she asked, "Paul and I are staying at the tiger's house, aren't we?"

*

The taxi rattled as the driver took the roads at speeds above eighty, swerved through traffic, and drove the wrong way round a traffic circle. Felicity didn't know whether to laugh or feel scared. She looked through the window at the city. Everyone drove the same way: people driving cars, motorbikes, bicycles, trucks, large busses, small busses, some as small as people carriers, and little black three-wheelers with yellow roofs.

“Those are auto-rickshaws,” Monica said, pointing at one. “We use them to get everywhere except the airport.”

The roads looked dirty and cracked, and Felicity felt their potholes in the jolts of the taxi. Once they reached the city proper, she saw the buildings formed an odd collection: different shapes and colors, different states of repair. People filled the spaces between the buildings and roads. Workmen carried bricks and scaled walls. Vendors sold everything from fruit to magazines, out of street stalls and baskets on their shoulders and heads. Men and women milled around, or walked purposefully, wearing suits or garments that looked like loose-fitting pajamas. Some of the women covered their heads, and a few covered their faces. Color appeared everywhere, in clothes, merchandise, vehicles, and buildings. The colors mingled with dust, and grey clouds menaced the picture.

“It’s monsoon season,” Monica said. “We’ll get to Akbar’s before the rain.”

“You can only see about two feet in front of your face once it gets started,” Paul added quietly.

“Monsoon very bad,” the driver said with a laugh.

To Felicity’s relief, he drove slower as they wound along smaller and smaller streets, past houses of red brick and grey breezeblock. Most had corrugated iron roofs. Asphalt paved the larger streets, bare earth the smaller. Chickens pecked the ground, and Felicity heard the occasional moo or baa from cows and goats tethered in yards. Colorful laundry dried on lines.

The driver parked in front of one of the redbrick houses, and Paul handed him some bills while Felicity opened the door. The smells of petrol and manure hit her.

“You must be Felicity,” a voice said.

She looked up to see a tall, heavily built man who looked around thirty. His almost black hair grew slightly long, but his beard was short. He shook her hand and said, "I'm Akbar. I'm a tiger."

He took Felicity's suitcase from the driver and led her, Monica, and Paul into his home. The lower floor consisted of a single room with rattan furniture in the middle, a refrigerator in one corner, a stove in another, and a cricket bat upright in a third. A poster hung on one of the whitewashed walls, displaying curving calligraphy. Felicity didn't know whether it was in Urdu or Arabic. Wooden double-doors stood on the opposite side of the room. Felicity couldn't see a staircase to the upper floor. She guessed it ran up the outside of the building, and that the bathroom was an outhouse.

Akbar took off his grey waistcoat, threw it over a chair, unfastened the top two buttons of his yellow shirt, opened the refrigerator, took out four glass-bottled cokes, open them, and handed them around. Then he waved a hand around his home.

"It's not much," he said with an apologetic smile. "Not like America."

"It's awesome," Monica said to Felicity. "I keep telling him I love his place, but he doesn't believe me."

Paul sat on one of the chairs and stared into space. His lips moved. Felicity took another chair, pulled it in front of him, sat, and looked into his eyes, but he didn't seem to register her presence.

"What's up?" She asked.

He leaned forward and took her hand.

"Just a memory," he replied. "Nothing important."

She didn't believe him, but she knew trying to reach Paul's secrets was pointless.

*

The rain began. It sounded like a bombardment against the sides and roof of Akbar's house. Akbar and Monica updated Felicity on their progress. Joan and a bird called a hoopoe seemed to have done most of the work.

"The hoopoe's called Farid," said Monica. "He's a funny kid."

Akbar smiled. "The hoopoe's a beautiful bird," he said.

Monica continued: "Farid flies in and sits on their monitors and chirps. Tobias and Muhammad can't, because they don't look like any of the native birds. Hafiz and his staff all think Farid's cute. They feed him candy, and he hears everything they say. He can read their computer screens too, but they're not dumb enough to write down their secrets."

"What's Joan doing?" Felicity asked, suddenly wondering why her godmother hadn't met her at the airport.

"She's posing as a journalist," Monica replied. "She's interviewed Hafiz and spent a day watching the parliament with one of his assistants," Monica continued. "He's tried to get it on with her a couple of times, thinks she's easy because she's American."

"Lots of men think that," Akbar said apologetically.

"Anyway, she'll be here soon," Monica said.

"But what have you learned?" Felicity asked.

"He's not dumb enough to tell Joan his secrets, but he acts like he's going up in the world," Akbar replied. "He struts and brags and talks about buildings and roads he wants to build."

"Joan mostly talks about wanting to punch him," Paul added.

"I don't blame her," Felicity said. "What did the hoop...the bird find out?"

Monica said “hoopoe” at the same time as Akbar said “Farid.”

“Hafiz goes to meetings more days than not,” Akbar replied. “He doesn’t tell his staff where, or what the meetings are about. After he leaves, his staffers fall silent and look at each other funny. Joan makes herself invisible and flies after his car, but she always loses him. She’ll hate me for saying this, but that’s where you can help.”

It took Felicity a second to realize he meant her, and another to realize it made sense: She’d brought her tracker. She could hide in Hafiz’s car, and Joan could use the tracker to follow them. He’d probably talk to his contacts in the car, but if he got out Joan would be able to hear his conversations, if Joan would agree to any plan involving Felicity.

“Will Joan help me?” she asked.

“Yeah, she’ll help,” Monica replied. “She knows you’re going to do this whatever she says.”

*

The rain continued another hour, and then it slowed and died in a minute. Felicity opened the door and looked into the street. The rain hadn’t just drenched Lahore; it had laundered it. The dust had vanished, and the air felt cool and smelled clean. Little rivers ran along the sides and middle of the dirt street. Overhead, streaks of blue broke up the clouds.

“It will stay cool this evening,” Akbar said. “Who’d like tea?”

A few minutes later, Felicity and the others sat on Akbar’s rattan furniture with mugs of hot tea. It tasted milky and sweet, and spices balanced the sugar. The door opened, and another Punjabi man stepped in, wearing a snugly fitting blue shirt and big sunglasses. Felicity recognized Ganesh from the videoconference in Adam’s living room. Monica hugged him, but he squirmed free and pushed the door closed.

“Monica!” he exclaimed.

“Sorry, sorry,” Monica replied.

Then she grabbed him round the neck and kissed his lips, and this time he didn’t fight.

“You have to be careful,” Akbar scolded as they finished kissing. “This is not America. People will think badly of you, and they’ll think badly of me, too.”

The others showed up over the next three hours. Adam and Jasmine came with a middle-aged lady called Fatima. When she walked into the room behind Jasmine, Felicity immediately noticed her breasts, about the size of watermelons.

“Fatima’s a cow,” Coral said, after introducing her.

Coral and Juan arrived shortly after. Then Matt, Tobias, and Muhammad arrived with Farid. He didn’t look older than Felicity. When they shook hands, she couldn’t decide whether his pursed-lipped smile looked goofy or shy.

Two other Punjabi ladies arrived together. One looked eighty and walked leaning into a wooden stick with a bone handle shaped like a horn. She introduced herself as Meera, and the woman by her side, who looked half her age, as “Sara, goat.”

“I never tell anyone my transformation,” Meera said, “because I like to see the shock on their faces when they see it.”

“We come from the Indian side,” Sara said, “like Ganesh.”

A single white hair curled downward from her chin.

Akbar opened the double-doors, revealing a small yard with walls of the same red brick as his house, and Meera and Sara walked into it. The afternoon sun shone onto uneven stone tiles, now only a little damp, and several trees with large fruits hanging from them.

“Anyone fancy a mango?” Akbar asked.

Felicity, Monica, and Ganesh followed him out. He picked mangos, and Ganesh used a small knife to peel away their skin. Akbar raised one to his mouth and bit into it. Juice ran down his face.

“Only way to eat a mango,” he said, and handed one to Felicity. She raised it to her lips and bit. Its flavor spread through her mouth, far more intense than that of the mangos she’d eaten in America.

A few feet away, Farid, Tobias, Muhammad, and Matt laughed together.

“Oh man!” she just heard Farid exclaim. “I’m happy my uncle’s out of town, with you guys here.” And he pressed his lips together and outward, smiling in the way Felicity hadn’t been able to read.

She didn’t know Joan had arrived until she felt arms around her.

“This is Fatima,” Joan said, after an extended hug.

“We’ve met,” said Fatima, “but not properly,” and she took Felicity’s hand and kissed her cheek. Felicity had to lean a long way forward to accept the kiss over Fatima’s enormous chest.

“Joan’s daughter,” Fatima whispered, and she sounded certain of it.

In the rush of new people, Felicity hadn’t noticed the growing number of pots and trays in the yard until Joan and Monica took her by the shoulders and whirled her around. On a table at the far end of the yard sat dishes of rice and curries and plates of flat bread.

“Happy Birthday!” everyone shouted at once.

29: CLOSING IN

Everyone filled plates and stood or sat on the ground to eat. Monica taught Felicity to eat curries by using the fingers of her right hand like a spoon.

“Ganesh taught me my first day here,” she said.

The older Pakistanis and Indians peppered Felicity with questions about school and college; the younger ones asked her about her transformation.

“Being a mouse doesn’t make me feel as vulnerable as I thought it would,” she told Akbar, as she finished the last of the food on her plate. “I’m fast, and I move like...like obstacles don’t count, because I can climb them, or squeeze under them, or gnaw through them. What’s it like to be a tiger?”

“At first it made me feel strong,” he replied. “Now it makes me feel beautiful. Strong as well, but mostly beautiful.”

*

A metal staircase ran from the yard to a wood-fronted second floor balcony. Around midnight, Felicity helped Paul up the stairs. On the balcony, they found two doors.

“Your room’s on the right,” Akbar called from the yard.

Felicity opened the right-hand door. In the room, a bare bulb hung from the ceiling, illuminating bare brick walls and a low bed, the only piece of furniture on a floor of rough planks. Next to the bed, a standing fan hummed.

After they'd changed, Paul sat on the bed, and Felicity lay next to him. The fan cooled them, but not enough to make them want blankets.

Paul remained motionless. Felicity took his hand, but he didn't respond. She kissed his cheek. He nuzzled his face against hers a moment and then lay down. She kissed his lips, but he didn't move.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"Something's the matter," she probed. "Is it what we're up against?"

He still said nothing.

"I'm afraid too," she said.

"I'm not afraid of Clarity," he replied.

She put her hand on his head.

"Some things don't heal," he said. "Every Toy knows that."

In less than a minute, he slept in her arms.

What does he remember? She wondered. And why won't he tell me?

*

The next morning, Felicity left Paul asleep when the sun rose and drank tea in the yard with Akbar. When Joan arrived, her smile looked tight.

"If you feel you have to do this," she said to Felicity, "please would you do it with me?"

Felicity nodded, relieved her godmother had come around.

Akbar handed Joan a cup of tea and left for work.

“Hafiz will probably go to another of his secret meetings today,” Joan said. “I’ve tried to fly above his car to see where he goes, but he takes complicated routes along back streets and around tall buildings. I keep losing him.”

She looked annoyed, and Felicity realized she’d never heard Joan admit to having failed.

“I’ve never seen you fly,” she said, “except by the airport, and in the woods after I met Paul.”

“I was just levitating,” Joan replied. “Actually, this is embarrassing for a fairy: I’m scared of heights. I want to puke every time I’m up there. Actually, I did puke the first two times I followed Hafiz, hit a roof the first time and a goat the second.”

Felicity laughed and Joan chuckled.

“Did you bring your tracker?” Joan asked.

“Yes,” Felicity replied. “It’s upstairs.”

“We’ll go from here to Hafiz’ building,” Joan said. “I’ll make us invisible, unlock his car doors, and keep lookout. You strip, get in, and transform. After that, I won’t be able to keep up your invisibility because I won’t be able to see you, but you’re more than capable of keeping out of sight.”

The plan sounded straightforward and effective, Felicity thought, much easier than what she’d done in Madinat. But it felt like a letdown, just carrying a tracker so Joan could follow her target.

Joan continued: “When he stops, stay in the car. If he gets out, I’ll drop down next to him and listen; if he stays in the car, you listen. When he gets back to his office, wait for seven taps on the underside of the car. Then transform back, and I’ll make you invisible again. Get out of the car, and find me.”

Joan's voice stayed neutral through the conversation, but Felicity read concern on her face.

"We leave in ten minutes," Joan said. "Dress conservatively."

"Should I wear what Pakistani women wear?" Felicity asked.

Joan shook her head. "You'll be less conspicuous as an American dressing American than an American dressing Pakistani," she replied. "Just make sure your clothes are loose fitting and hide your legs and arms."

*

Felicity put on a long skirt and a long-sleeved T-shirt, and she and Joan crammed into the small back seat of an auto-rickshaw. The driver sat on a one-person seat in front. The auto-rickshaw bumped around even more than the taxi from the airport, and cars, motorbikes, trucks, and other auto-rickshaws swerved around it and honked. It passed them and honked back. It stopped outside a mall, and Joan paid the driver.

"He overcharged me," she said, after the auto-rickshaw disappeared. "They always do. I don't bother arguing."

The mall's concrete facade sported a few cracks. Faded signs hung above the stores.

"Why are we at a mall?" Felicity asked.

"Having drivers bring us here looks less suspicious," Joan explained. "No one will be surprised at two women shopping. We'll walk to Hafiz's office."

"Does he have a driver?" Felicity asked.

"Yes," Joan replied. "But he drives himself to his secret meetings. He looks around a lot while he drives. He seems afraid of being followed."

They walked along sidewalks, around corners, and past more shops, and stopped outside a three-story building of tinted glass and freshly painted white concrete. Between it and them stood a black metal fence topped with spiraling barbed wire.

Joan pulled her wand from her pocket and flicked it.

“We’re invisible now,” she said. “He parks at the left side of the building.”

They walked around the building to a sliding gate with no barbed wire on top. Behind it sat a large black car. Even without the sun directly on it, it shone. Next to it stood a man in black pants, black button-down shirt, and black sunglasses, holding a rifle.

“The guard goes into the building every so often,” Joan said. “He doesn’t take long though, so strip now.”

A minute later, Felicity stood naked on the sidewalk, tracking device around her wrist, feeling stupid.

I’m dreaming, she thought. I’m having the naked dream.

The concrete under her feet felt warm, but not quite hot, but she knew it would get hot as the morning wore on. She willed the guard to take his bathroom break.

The guard seemed to be looking at her, and she wondered if he could see her. She told herself he’d react if he could.

They waited. The guard looked around from time to time. Eventually, he turned and walked through a glass door. Felicity ran at the gate, jumped, caught the top bar, and hauled herself upwards and over it. The left-hand back door of the car opened as her feet hit the ground, and she jumped in, pulled the door closed, and thought about the scent of hot chocolate growing impossibly intense.

Her paws made indentations half the size of her legs in the soft leather. Her tracking device lay by her side. Using her nose, she nudged it over the edge of the seat. Then she jumped down next to it, took it in her teeth, ran under the driver's seat, and lay down.

Sweat beads formed on her back, and she wondered why Joan didn't use magic to cool the car. She cursed herself for not suggesting it, until she realized a cool car on a hot day, without its AC running, would arouse suspicion.

She sweated and waited until she heard the driver's door open, a person drop into the seat above her head, the engine start, and the door close. The AC hummed, and the car began to move.

The drive included long stretches at higher speeds and shorter stretches at slower speeds, with turns every minute or two. By the time the car stopped, Felicity felt cool. The driver's door opened, the engine turned off, and the door closed, and she hoped Hafiz had parked in shade.

She didn't wait long before the door opened and the engine turned on again. The return drive felt the same as the outward: longer, faster stretches without turns, and shorter, slower ones with many of them. Eventually, the car stopped, the door opened, the engine went silent, and the door closed.

Felicity waited. When she heard seven taps on the bottom of the car, she jumped for the back seat. As she did, she thought about warming her human hands over a fire, and her human form landed in the seat. She reached under the driver's seat, picked up her tracker, sat up, and got out of the car. Joan waved from the other side of the gate, Felicity's clothes in her other hand. Felicity ran at the gate, jumped for the top bar, and hauled herself over it. Joan handed over her clothes. When she'd dressed, they walked to the front of the building and back towards the mall.

They took an auto-rickshaw back to Akbar's house, and Felicity spent the ride wondering what Joan had heard. Back in Akbar's living room, her godmother told her: "He met a man and handed him an envelope. The man's probably one of the generals."

As she spoke, she reached into her purse, pulled out papers, and studied them.

"Lieutenant General Hamid Khoso," she said. "That confirms what we knew. Not a breakthrough, but worth something."

*

The next three mornings, Felicity and Joan went through the same adventure. They found the car in the same place, and Felicity stripped, climbed the gate, got in the car, transformed, endured the wait, and lay still through the drive, the pause while Hafiz was outside the car, the drive back, and the wait for Joan's seven taps. Each time, Hafiz met a general and gave him an envelope.

Paul spent most of his time sitting under the mango trees in Akbar's yard, sometimes with a newspaper or a book. When Felicity asked him what he'd been doing, he said either "just reading" or "just thinking." Occasionally, she persuaded him to walk with her to a little cafe, where they sat on wooden chairs at a rickety table and watched the life of the street, sipping tea from little glasses, but she couldn't strike up a conversation. It began to annoy her.

So, in the evenings she hung out with Akbar, Monica, and Ganesh. They explored bazaars: collections of dozens or hundreds of little shops, lining streets or packed into concrete structures, selling everything from pots and pans to clothing, always to the sound of Urdu pop. With Monica and Ganesh glued to each other, Felicity talked mostly with Akbar. She asked him, and he told her, about the city: the way people lived, rich and poor, the food, and the cottage

industries. He told her about history: sultans in Delhi, a conqueror named Babar, and the line of emperors he founded. Akbar was named after the third of them.

“The greatest” Akbar said. “The name means great.”

*

On Friday morning, Joan collected Felicity from Akbar’s house, as usual. They followed their practiced steps: the auto-rickshaw ride to the mall, the walk to Hafiz’s building, and the wait. Felicity got into the car and transformed. She waited through the heat and then the drive. But, when the car stopped and a door opened, the engine and AC carried on running.

A woman spoke: “Henry tells me everything’s ready.”

She sounded American, upper class New England.

“Yes. Yes, all ready,” Hafiz replied. “I’ve paid the generals. We’ll make our move in nine days.”

He sounded nervous.

“Do you know who I am?” the woman asked.

“I...I have an idea,” Hafiz replied.

“You have an idea,” she sneered. “An idea. Yet you just gave me critical information.”

“You mentioned Henry,” he stammered.

“And you thought that was a password,” she replied.

“It won’t happen again,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” she replied. “It won’t. Your plans are satisfactory, so I’ll overlook your little slip. I’ll give your orders from now on. You’ll have no further contact with Henry.”

“Not a word,” Hafiz replied.

“When we win,” the woman continued, “You’ll have played a part in the rise of the master race. The sane will rule, and humanity will grow strong.”

The passenger door opened, and Felicity heard high heels on the ground. The door closed, and the engine started.

*

Felicity found it hard to keep the discovery to herself through the trip back to Akbar’s house.

“They’re going to overthrow the government in nine days,” she told Joan, as soon as they closed the door. “The woman he met seemed to be in charge of Clarity. She talked about their master race. She called them ‘the sane,’ but she didn’t give details.”

“It doesn’t mean intelligent people,” Joan replied. “They’d have tried to recruit me.”

“That’s what Paul said in the Bahamas,” Felicity said.

“Really?” Joan asked, smiling.

“About himself, I mean,” Felicity explained.

“Of course,” Joan conceded. “Actually, both of us should have said it about you.”

Felicity tried to look disbelieving but found herself smiling.

““Sane can mean anything,” Joan said. “In this case, it probably means people with an authoritarian temperament, the type that thinks democracy’s too messy.”

30: THE TALENTS OF GOD

That night, all seventeen Toys, eleven New Englanders and six Punjabis, gathered in Akbar's downstairs room, and Felicity told them what she'd learned. When she finished, no one spoke immediately.

"So, what do we do in nine days?" Jasmine asked after a moment, the muscle in her neck seeming to deflate as she slumped. Felicity guessed she didn't think they could do much.

Akbar and Ganesh exchanged glances.

"None of us has connections," Ganesh said. "Can't you Americans do something, talk to your government?"

"None of us has connections either," Joan replied.

The other New Englanders shook their heads, except Paul, who didn't look like he was paying attention. Suddenly, Felicity felt sick of his detachment.

"Except Paul," she said. "He saved a congressman's life."

"Congressman Andrews doesn't run America," Paul snapped. "President Glass doesn't like him. He voted against her budget and said..."

Adam cut him off. "Maybe that's why she wants him out of America," he said, one blue eye on his phone.

"What?" Joan asked, as everyone looked at Adam.

“She just made him ambassador to Pakistan,” Adam said, turning his phone to face Joan. Felicity peered at the screen and saw a CNN article titled “Glass Nominates Massachusetts Congressman for Pakistan Post.”

“The Senate hasn’t started the confirmation process,” Adam explained, “but Andrews is already in Islamabad.”

“An unofficial acting ambassador will do,” Joan declared. “Paul, you need to get in touch.”

“How?” Paul asked, through gritted teeth. “You can’t walk up to an embassy and say you’re there to see the ambassador.”

He sounded like he thought Joan was stupid, and Felicity wanted to slap him.

“I think he’ll be interested when he sees the big red snake that saved his life,” she said.

“Besides,” Joan added, “I doubt this is a coincidence. He angled for the position. He knows something.”

Paul closed his eyes, opened them, rolled them, and nodded.

“I’ll drive,” Fatima offered, stretching so her breasts looked wider than her shoulders. “It will take maybe five hours.”

“Three after I wave my wand at your engine,” Joan replied.

*

Paul looked at Felicity as he rose, and she smiled, unsure whether to be angry at his attitude or happy to see him doing something. He began to walk to her. She walked to him and hugged him.

“Let’s talk when you get back,” she said.

He squeezed her. Then he left with Fatima and Joan.

Felicity looked at Monica. Monica looked sidelong at the doors to the yard, got up, and walked through them. Felicity followed.

They sat on the ground, backs against the redbrick walls, and Felicity talked Monica through her day in more detail. Most of it had been boring. The big moment had been sudden and short, and she didn't know if what she'd discovered would do any good, if Andrews would believe them, if anyone in Washington would believe him.

She put her head between her knees and told herself at least Paul had come out of his shell enough to give her a hug.

"Show me the sights tomorrow?" she asked. "The places you sent photos of?"

"Sure," Monica replied, moonlight catching the electric sheen of her hair as she smiled.

"I'll stay here tonight. We'll tell the others to meet us at the Shalimar Gardens."

Monica slept next to her, where Paul had slept.

"Hey," she said, as she lay down. "Do you remember when I freaked out because I thought you thought I was into you?"

"I never thought that," Felicity protested through a laugh. "I just wasn't used to being hugged."

She laughed harder, and Monica laughed with her.

*

The next morning, Ganesh arrived, and he, Akbar, Monica, and Felicity took a taxi to the Shalimar Gardens. Muhammad, Tobias, and Farid met them at the entrance.

"Where's Matt?" Monica asked.

"Still in bed," Muhammad replied.

The air felt refreshingly cool as they walked down a brickwork path beside a huge stone pool, past trees manicured into perfect spires and spheres, towards a red pavilion. In the pool, fountains sent cascades of water into the air. Felicity stopped and dipped her hand beneath the surface. The cold of the water seemed to tickle it. Akbar knelt next to her.

“These gardens represent The Garden,” he said. “We imagine Heaven as a garden of water and fruit trees. The first Muslims lived on the edge of the Arabian Desert, so you can see why.”

“The Garden,” Felicity murmured.

They took auto-rickshaws from the Shalimar Gardens to the Red Fort and walked inside the walls to find a series of vast courtyards surrounded by pavilions and battlements. Felicity began to feel warm as she walked through them. She looked over the battlements at the city. In the distance, clouds began to gather.

They took taxis to Badshahi Masjid, the mosque from Monica’s photo texts. Felicity felt its size the moment she stood in front of it, in its red walls, archways, and battlements, in its white domes. Then she saw its beauty. Rectangles and patterns of stars covered its walls. The patterns had regularity, a geometry that made them beautiful. She thought back to the Shalimar Gardens. The trees and lawns and paths and fountains had also been arranged with mathematical perfection.

She wondered if God was a mathematician.

Inside, they found a field of paving stones, open to the sky. Seen from here, the walls were really double rows of arches forming walkways around the courtyard. At the far end, a pavilion with a dozen white domes drew Felicity’s eye. On it, white on red, she saw the same patterns of rectangles and stars as on the front of the building.

*

Felicity didn't know how long they'd stood in the mosque when Akbar led them out and she came back to the reality of cars, motorbikes, bicycles, rickshaws, and pedestrians. Akbar led them into a café and ordered tea and samosas. Raindrops began to patter on the roof.

As they sipped tea, rain drenched the city. Felicity could barely make out the mosque, though it couldn't have been more than fifty yards from them. Farid handed her a plate of samosas. She bit into one. Her mouth tensed with pain, and she spat onto the table. Embarrassed, she looked around.

"Too hot for Americans," Farid said, and Felicity realized his duck-billed smile hid wicked humor.

"Sorry," she pleaded.

Everyone laughed, except Akbar, who glared at Farid and handed Felicity the other plate.

"I told them to leave the chilies out of these," he said.

As she munched a safe samosa, Felicity tuned into Muhammad's rising and falling voice.

"So, it's safe if you stick to the right places," he said. "I wouldn't want to live near the Christian fanatics."

"Your fanatics aren't as bad as ours, brother," Akbar said.

"The law controls them in America," Muhammad replied, pitch rising and falling on America as though he was singing "America the Beautiful." "They'd commit the same crimes as your fanatics if they got the chance."

"He's right, Akbar," said Ganesh. "Fundamentalists are the same; doesn't matter what they believe. Hey, you know I was born in Ajodhya."

"Where?" Muhammad asked.

“It’s in North-Central India,” Ganesh replied. “It’s a sacred city. In our mythology, it’s the city ruled by Ram. He’s a god, or an incarnation of a god. People argued about where in the city he was born. Truth is, he’s a myth. The point of him isn’t to be real; it’s to be about something.”

That understanding struck Felicity as profound.

Ganesh continued: “But some people said he was born in one particular temple. Then Babur conquered the area. He was the first of the Moghul Emperors. They were Muslim.”

“I told Felicity about him,” Akbar said.

Ganesh nodded and continued: “They were completely tolerant of Hinduism, but traditionally the conqueror converted the biggest temple to his own sect, so Babur made this temple a mosque: the Babri Masjid. In 1992, a small-time politician got people upset about it. He drew a big crowd from all over India, and they tore down the mosque. I was eight. Riots broke out all over India, and a lot of Muslims were killed. The politician nearly became Prime Minister.”

Aren’t Indians peaceful, like Gandhi? Felicity thought, but then she reminded herself Gandhi was assassinated.

Ganesh continued: “My parents moved back to the Punjab shortly after, and my father joined a group of idiots who worked out in the morning with sticks they fantasized were weapons and talked about how Islam and Christianity didn’t belong in India. In his dreams, he beat Muslims and Christians with his stick; in reality, he beat his son. I haven’t seen him since he went to jail for trying to set fire to a movie theatre that showed American films.”

“So I learned how to spot a fanatic. It’s in the eyes. The eyes are dead and alive at the same time. They’re kept alive by absolute certainty about things that aren’t meant to be certain. Hindu, Muslim, doesn’t make a difference.”

“Or Christian,” Tobias said. He looked apologetically at Monica and Felicity, but Felicity didn’t care and she doubted Monica did.

“You’re Jewish, right?” Farid asked.

“Yes,” Tobias replied.

“Have you been to Israel?” Ganesh asked.

“Twice,” Tobias stuttered.

As Tobias began to talk about Jerusalem, Felicity noticed a scrape of chair legs against the floor further back in the shop. Tobias was talking about the old city walls when a glob of saliva landed in his eye. Felicity turned to see a young woman walking away from the table and out of the café. Akbar rose and stared furiously at her back.

*

Akbar apologized repeatedly. Farid joined in. Felicity couldn’t see how it was their fault, but she could see their pride was hurt.

No one said anything more while the rain petered to a trickle and died. Sunshine reflected off the wet road, silver and gold in different places, and a deep voice began to sing. It sounded rich and solemn. Felicity couldn’t understand the words, but she felt the song carried meaning.

“I’m going back into the mosque,” Akbar said quietly.

As he stood, Felicity realized the song came from the mosque.

Muhammad stood. “I’ll come with you,” he said. “It’s been too long.”

Akbar winked at Farid. “Coming?” he asked.

Farid grinned. “Is my uncle here to make me?” he replied.

Akbar rolled his eyes but smiled at Farid as he and Muhammad headed outside.

“That’s the Call to Prayer,” Ganesh said to Monica.

Without thinking about what she did, Felicity walked out of the café and stood in front of the great archway that led into the mosque.

“I feel it too,” said Tobias’s voice at her side. He didn’t stutter.

Felicity peered back into the café and saw Monica, Ganesh, and Farid had started conversing again. She and Tobias stood for a minute and then began to walk along the front of the mosque. The streets had cleared. They rounded a corner and carried on walking down the sidewall, and Felicity gazed at the shapes on the walls. God was a mathematician, she concluded. And, apparently, a poet.

A clicking sound called her attention back to the street. Next, she heard a shout and turned to find Tobias kneeling and a man standing over him, wrenching his hand behind his back, holding a gun. He pointed it at Felicity.

“Run away, American slut,” he sneered.

Against her will, her feet moved backward, and she thudded into the wall of the mosque. The man pointed the gun at Tobias’s head, but he still looked at Felicity. He seemed to be staring at her chest. Then he looked her in the eyes. She thought she saw something wrong with his eyes, and Ganesh’s words came back to her: “It’s in the eyes...dead and alive...absolute certainty...things that aren’t meant to be certain.”

The man looked down at Tobias and whispered. Then he looked up at the mosque and shouted two words. Felicity recognized them. She’d heard them in the song. They’d been beautiful, but the man’s voice twisted them into ugliness.

A flash of silver and green flew from one of the archways of the mosque, hit the man's face, and resolved into wings beating and claws scratching. Felicity saw the gun fall to the road and heard it clang. The man staggered backwards, and then another man stood naked between Tobias and the assassin. He spoke, and Felicity recognized the voice.

"I know God's great," said Muhammad. "But you haven't figured out how he's great."

The man's fist almost caught Muhammad's face, but Muhammad swept it away and punched his stomach. The man bent double, and Felicity heard a low growl. A tiger stood behind him.

Akbar, Felicity thought.

The man ran, fast, but the tiger cleared the distance in a second. The man screamed as its claws tore his back. He carried on running, slower, stumbling every few paces. The tiger watched him, but Felicity turned to see Muhammad, still naked, cradling Tobias's head and whispering into his ear.

"I'll fly back and get our clothes," Muhammad said as she crouched beside him.

When they walked back into the café, Ganesh looked up first. His face fell, and he walked quickly out of the shop. Five minutes later, he called Monica and Farid outside and directed the whole group into two taxis.

"We'll go to your place," Akbar said to Farid, as he climbed into the front taxi with Tobias and Muhammad.

*

A wall with metal spikes on top surrounded Farid's home. Farid let them through the front door, into a room with ceiling to floor windows looking onto a lawn. Black leather couches and armchairs surrounded a glass coffee table. Everyone collapsed onto them.

“I’ll get Matt out of bed,” Farid announced.

He left the room, and Felicity looked at the others. Only Monica met her eye, and she didn’t smile. Muhammad stroked Tobias’s back. Farid reappeared, bent double, grabbed the arm of one of the couches, and wretched.

“Matt,” he stammered. His body shuddered, and vomit fell to the floor beneath his face.

Akbar left the room at a run. Ganesh followed, and Felicity followed him. She walked down a passageway in the direction Akbar and Ganesh had run, found an open door at the end, and walked through it. Akbar and Ganesh stood over one of two twin beds. Light shone through wooden blinds onto it. The bed had collapsed under the weight of Matt’s donkey form, and blood had hardened in lines down his back and in pools on the sheets and tiles.

31: FLIGHT

Felicity, Tobias, Monica, Farid, and Ganesh sat in Farid's living room. When a servant appeared with glasses of hot tea, Farid took the tray from her, saying something in Urdu.

Monica broke the silence. "He was such a dick," she said, "but I loved him."

"As a friend," she added, glancing at Ganesh.

"I know, Monica," Ganesh replied.

He put his arms around her, and she leant into his chest and cried. Tobias and Farid hugged as their eyes grew wet.

"Where are Muhammad and Akbar?" Felicity asked through her own tears.

"Outside. Transformed," Ganesh replied. "Muhammad's in the air, keeping lookout. He says he can see the ground clearly from a hundred yards up. Akbar's prowling circles round the house, behind the walls. If anyone messes with us, Muhammad will fly down and warn him, and he'll deal with them. The others will be here soon."

*

Adam and Jasmine arrived with Sara and Meera. Adam transformed, cradled Matt's donkey body in his muscled arms, and carried it into the garden without any sign of strain on his face. Juan and Coral arrived a few minutes later. Everyone exchanged glances, some sad, some frightened, and some blank. No one said much.

When Joan arrived, she pushed a man in a wheelchair across the lawn. Paul and Fatima followed her, and Felicity looked past the chair to her godmother's face and saw her eyes looked as red as everyone else's.

They stood around Matt, and Felicity took Paul's hand in hers. Apart from a twitch of his little finger, it felt lifeless. Adam, then Muhammad, and then Coral and Juan together gave short speeches, but Felicity barely heard them. Then Farid spoke. His duckbill smile didn't hide the nervousness in his eyes.

"I didn't know Matt for long," he said. "But I told him things I haven't told anyone else. Not even you, Akbar."

He looked at Akbar as though asking if that was OK. Akbar nodded and smiled.

"I don't want to say what I told him," Farid continued. "But Matt taught me that not being loved doesn't mean you don't deserve love."

He walked to stand between Akbar and Tobias, and each put a hand on his shoulder.

Felicity guessed she hadn't known Matt.

I thought he was just a loveable ass, she thought, but the joke didn't seem funny.

They didn't have firewood, but they didn't need it. Paul raised his hand, and flames engulfed the donkey carcass. When he lowered his hand, only a pile of ash remained, small for such a big creature.

I didn't know Paul's fire was hotter than normal fire, Felicity thought, but the observation didn't seem important.

Joan flicked her wand, and the ash rose and collected itself into a ball. Farid stepped forward with a black wooden box, the ash settled in it, and he closed the lid and handed the box to Joan.

As Felicity looked around the circle, she properly noticed the man in the wheelchair for the first time. Despite its snug fit, his grey suit didn't look like it contained very much, and his face looked thin and tired.

Felicity walked across the lawn to him.

"Congressman Andrews?" she asked.

He looked up and nodded.

"I thought I'd see you again," he said.

*

They all headed to the living room. Joan pushed the wheelchair, and Paul walked beside it, speaking to the congressman too quietly for Felicity to hear. They sat on the couches, the armchairs, and the floor. Joan spoke first.

"I'd like to welcome Congressman Andrews," she said.

Everyone nodded, and a few said "welcome" or "hello."

Then Felicity noticed a Punjabi man she hadn't seen before. He stood by the door in a gold turban, grey beard, and navy-blue suit, and looked as old and nearly as thin as Congressman Andrews.

"This is Colonel Das-Singh," Andrews said. "I knew him as India's Defense Attaché in Washington. He retired from the Indian army twenty-five years ago. He knows what's happening, he knows who and what you are, and he's agreed to help."

The colonel stepped forward and spoke:

"It was a long time ago, so even those of you who are Indian or Pakistani might not know our countries' armies were originally commanded by men who'd trained together, in Britain, when we were still part of the British Empire. I kept my friends from those days, those who

became Indians and those who became Pakistanis. We fought against each other, but they were my friends. Most are dead now, or very old, but one of their grandsons has agreed to help you to safety. He commands a company of the Pakistani infantry. He'll take you to the place Akbar told me about. You'll be in army trucks, so no one will question you. Once you're in the safe location Fatima told me of, the soldiers will leave. They don't know..."

He paused before continuing: "He and his men don't know what you are, and I don't think they should. Their only role is to drive the trucks."

The colonel laid out plans: They'd leave from an army base at five the next morning and arrive in the afternoon, by an indirect route. When he'd finished, everyone thanked him and began to disperse, and Joan put her arm around Felicity.

"Have we lost?" Felicity asked, and noticed a streak of anger in her voice. "Are we running away?"

"No," Joan replied. "We're going to hide in a ghost village that the Punjab Chapter built, where they go to transform. Andrews thinks we have enough information to involve the US government. He trusts President Glass, even though they've had differences, and we don't think Clarity has many members in the US military."

"We have a good chance then?" Felicity asked.

"We have a good chance," Joan reassured. "Fatima and I are going back to her house. We can give you, Paul, and Akbar a ride, if you'd like."

Felicity looked around the room for Paul. He stood with Akbar in a corner.

"Fatima and Joan are giving us a lift," she said to him.

Akbar smiled and nodded, but Paul didn't move or meet her eyes. Akbar placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "let's get some sleep."

32: A SOLUTION

No one spoke as they drove back to Akbar's house. Felicity helped Paul up the stairs, and they lay on the bed. She wrapped her arms round him and kissed his lips. He kissed her back, but then he moved his face away from hers.

Does he still love me? She wondered. *Maybe he'll tell me what's on his mind when we get to this village.*

*

The next morning, Joan arrived with Fatima.

"You're on our way," Joan said to Felicity, "so we're picking you up."

After an hour-long drive, Fatima parked in the middle of a collection of one-story buildings surrounded by a large parking lot containing a number of green trucks and SUVs. Around the lot stood a wall topped with spiraled barbed wire. A uniformed man led them to one of the trucks and told them to sit under its canvass-topped back.

"Thank you," Joan said. "I'm Joan."

"Major John Smith," he replied.

Felicity's face must have shown her surprise, because he added, "My family is Christian. A British missionary persuaded my great-great-great-grandfather to convert, and he took the missionary's name. There are many Christians in Pakistan."

Inside the back of the truck, dim lights shone from metal walls, and Monica, Ganesh, and Adam sat on benches on either side. Adam rose and helped Paul in, and Joan and Fatima climbed in after them.

“They’re only taking a few of us in each truck,” Adam explained, “and the trucks are taking different routes.”

A bearded soldier smiled in at them and closed the canvas over the back.

The ride felt smooth the first hour. Then the truck began to jolt. The jolts became more frequent, and Felicity began to feel sick. She guessed they’d moved off the highway onto rural roads. Paul stared at the canvas. The sides of his mouth twitched, and, occasionally, his lips parted into something like a snarl.

“What’s the matter?” Felicity asked.

“Sorry,” he said, looking away.

She wondered if he’d open up when they got to the village, or when they got back to Boston, or never. She wondered how long she could take his behavior.

As rain began to patter on the canvas, the truck stopped with a few more jolts. Adam moved to the far end and drew back the canvas, and Felicity peered past him to see Jasmine, Coral, Juan, and Akbar unloading bags from another truck. Either side of them, she saw another truck and, around the trucks, a circle of small brick buildings. Adam took Paul’s arm, and they all stepped from the truck onto dirt, still hard but no longer dry. Felicity turned full circle to take in the surroundings. Half way around, she found Akbar in front of her.

“Come on,” he said, and led her inside one of the buildings.

They stepped onto unevenly laid concrete. Adam and Paul followed them in, Adam carrying Paul’s suitcase. The room contained two sets of bunk beds and no other furniture. The

rain banged on a corrugated iron roof. The rapidity of the bangs increased, and Felicity guessed they'd come inside at the right time. Adam placed Paul's suitcase by one of the bottom bunks and lay down on the other, and Felicity climbed onto the bunk above Paul's and stared at the roof.

*

When the rain stopped, Felicity climbed down, opened the wooden door, and looked at the village. Water covered the dirt circle between the buildings. None of the buildings had windows, but Joan, Akbar, and Juan looked out of other doors. Monica tiptoed through the water towards her.

The rain dried over the next couple of hours, and Felicity and Monica watched Muhammad, Tobias, Akbar, Ganesh, and Farid carry logs and sticks to a brick-edged fire-pit in a space between two of the buildings. While they built and lit the fire, Fatima, Meera, and Sara brought out wooden boxes, opened them, and handed bowls, knives, cutting boards, and stuffed burlap bags to Felicity and Monica. Felicity opened her bag and found it contained onions. She guessed the women were making dinner.

Just go with it, she thought. It's their country.

Jasmine helped Fatima, Meera, and Sara pluck and gut four chickens. They covered them in a blend of spices and maneuvered them into the smoke on spits, and Akbar, Ganesh, Farid, and Muhammad each began turning a spit.

So we just sit around and eat, Felicity thought bitterly. We do that a lot.

We found out Clarity's plan, she reassured herself. It's out of our hands now.

The ground had dried, and they sat on it to eat. Feathers lay around the edges of the pit, just visible in the firelight. The sky had grown almost black, and Felicity saw more stars than she

was used to. She tried to imagine Matt as one of them, and told herself it didn't matter if that sounded corny.

The chicken would have been delicious, if she'd been in a better mood and all the attempts at conversation hadn't fizzled. She finished eating and went to bed.

*

Felicity woke to daylight sliding through the spaces between the walls and door. Her mind felt clear, and she decided she and her friends should make plans. If they didn't want to, she'd have to insist. She put on her skirt and walked out of the building, but no one else seemed to be up. She walked around each of the buildings and looked at the horizon. She couldn't see other buildings, just miles of a tall, green crop she supposed was rice.

When she got to the fire pit, she saw Joan sitting on its brick edge, facing Congressman Andrews' wheelchair. Joan smiled and beckoned her to sit, and, when she did, Andrews smiled at her too. His smile looked thin and tired.

"I've been given a week to return to Washington," he said.

"Why?" Felicity asked.

"I told the Secretary of State how things stood. I didn't mention the magic, of course, but he placed me on mental health leave nonetheless."

Felicity felt her shoulders slump. She guessed nothing would be done, after all. Hafiz would take power, and Clarity would win.

"What about the president?" she asked.

"I've been prevented from contacting her," Andrews replied. "Apparently, the Vice President told her the FBI was investigating me for soliciting bribes from foreign sources."

"What are we going to do?" Felicity asked.

Andrews smiled more broadly.

“The Congressman has a friend,” Joan answered.

“We were at Exeter and Harvard together,” he explained. “He’s done well. He’s been the US Ambassador in Beijing for just over a year. He’ll warn the Chinese, off the record. They have more than enough naval power to take the island. He’ll warn the Indian government shortly after he warns the Chinese, so both navies will get there at the same time. Your friend Tobias thought of that part. Smart boy; learns a lot from history. We don’t want to give either country a unique military advantage.”

“But won’t that start a war?” Felicity asked.

Andrews shook his head. “When the Chinese and Indian navies are staring each other down,” he replied, “our government will become interested. They’ll broker an agreement, and they and other governments will crack down on Clarity.”

“They won’t have any other option,” Joan added.

Felicity hoped she was right.

“Is that it then?” she asked.

“I think so,” Andrews replied. “You and your friends prevented an international catastrophe; you especially, Felicity, because you found the information I needed. I’ve no doubt Mead and Douglas died because they got close to it.”

She guessed he was right; Clarity would have won without her.

The daylight grew brighter, and, beyond the buildings, sunlight reflected off the leaves of rice plants.

“What did they want?” she asked. She noticed she’d used the past tense. “What was their master race?”

“We don’t know more than you discovered,” Andrews replied. “They believe in some idea of who is fit to run the world. No doubt the details will come to light when the minor players accept plea bargains.”

She supposed it would, but she didn’t have to care. She could go home with Joan and her friends, all but one of them.

33: PAUL

Joan pushed Congressman Andrews' wheelchair to his car. Then she and Felicity chopped vegetables with Meera, who wielded a cleaver in one hand while using the other to support herself on her horn-topped walking stick. Sara lit a kerosene stove, and the single white hair on her chin moved in the smoke. Fatima warmed oil and spices in a deep skillet, bending over to work around her outsized chest.

They made rice with leftover chicken and the vegetables stirred in. As Fatima finished cooking, Sara and Meera made tea. Each person learned the news as they joined the group at the firepit. Some smiled as they ate; others looked like they didn't know whether to believe it.

After breakfast, Akbar transformed first and roared as others dropped their clothes in piles. Tobias and Muhammad flew between the buildings with Farid, orange with black and white striped wings and a huge orange crest topped with more black and white stripes. Two bears, a horse, a tiger, a brown cow, and a white goat careened after the bird, and Felicity remembered the cow was Fatima, the goat Sara. A second elephant stood next to Monica, slightly smaller than her, and they rubbed trunks and tusks.

Two horns caught her eye. They had to be three feet long, and they extended from a rhinoceros like face, set in the middle of a jagged bone plate. Thick-looking skin, somewhere between brown and gold, covered the face, the plate, and the rotund body behind the plate.

You're Meera, Felicity thought, struggling to believe she was looking at a triceratops.

It lumbered towards her, lifted its face, nodded in the direction of its back, and lowered its body to the ground. Felicity took the edges of the plate in her hands. Its leather felt warm. Underneath the leather, she felt bone. She hauled herself onto the triceratops' neck, slid from there onto its back, and sat up straight.

The triceratops stood and walked towards the fire pit. Paul still sat on the edge. He looked at her and smiled, but his smile seemed lifeless. She pointed at her mount and mouthed, "dinosaur!"

He looked away.

She'd had enough. She leaped to the ground, stood over Paul, and threw out her arms in a gesture of frustration. He looked at her blankly. She searched for words and, finding none, she turned and walked away.

She stood behind the building they'd slept in and stared at the rice crop, the horizon, and the sky. She heard Monica and Ganesh trumpeting. She didn't want to play with the others, as mouse or human, so she went back to the building she'd slept in, lay on her bed, and stared at the corrugated iron roof.

She woke to the first raindrops and wondered why she'd slept from breakfast until the afternoon rain. She supposed bringing down Clarity had worn her out. She looked at the bottom bunks. Adam slept on top of the covers on the one opposite her. She guessed he felt tired for the same reason as her, or because he'd been running around.

Paul lay on the bed beneath her, face turned to the wall. She didn't know whether he was asleep or ignoring her, but she knew she had to talk to him after the rain, to insist on seeing into his darkness. She didn't see any other way of saving their relationship.

The rain grew from a patter to a bombardment and fell back to a patter, and when the patter stopped Felicity climbed from her bunk, knelt beside Paul's, and leaned over him. He'd rolled onto his back. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes and stared at her vacantly.

"Let's go for a walk," she said.

He rolled away. She shook his shoulder, but he ignored her. She shook harder, and he turned and stared at her without expression.

"We're going for a walk," she said.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, and she handed him his shoes and walking sticks.

He said nothing as they walked out of the door, around the side of the building, away from the circle of buildings, and along a path between rows of rice. In the aftermath of the rain, the air felt fresh and only moderately hot, and Felicity could smell the damp earth.

"What's wrong, Paul?" she asked.

He didn't answer, and Felicity realized how silent the place was without human sounds.

"You've hardly talked to me since you got to Lahore."

"Sorry," he answered, turning face from her.

She didn't feel frustrated anymore; she felt angry.

"I don't care if you're sorry," she said. "I want to know what's wrong."

"It doesn't matter," he replied, looking back at her.

She didn't know what to say to that.

"I don't deserve you," he added.

"Why not?" she asked.

His mouth twitched. His eyes lost focus, and he began to mutter. She tried to catch his words, but the only one she could make out was “unholy.” She stared at him, confused. She’d never heard him say anything about religion.

“What’s unholy, Paul?” she demanded. “You? Me? Being a Toy?”

He looked away. She took hold of his arms, but he broke away and began to walk back towards the village.

As she watched him, she noticed flecks of green and gold, scarlet and blue, and orange over the village. Muhammad, Tobias, and Farid flew in circles.

She jumped at a short but startlingly loud noise. Then she saw Tobias fall, wings fluttering fast and then failing. Muhammad dove after him. Felicity heard two more bursts of the same sound, and Muhammad and Farid fell.

She heard a loud vibration, and on the other side of the village, in a mist of falling dust, a group of helicopters rose. She counted ten. The sunlight made them look like silver suns. They moved closer to the village, forming a line that curved to surround it, and she saw figures leaning from them, figures with guns. The two helicopters on the far ends of the line broke away and flew in her direction. As they approached, the volume of their propellers grew and the ground began to shake, and Felicity’s ribs and skull seemed to shake with it.

She ran towards Paul. He turned, and in place of the blankness in his eyes she saw terror. He dropped his walking sticks and grabbed her arms, forced her to the ground, and covered her body with his own.

She fought to rise, to get to the others, to help them, but Paul grabbed her wrists and forced them into the ground. She thought about transforming, tried to imagine scampering

through the rice crop to the village, and realized there was nothing she could do as a mouse or a human.

The sound and the vibration of the ground became unbearable. Over Paul's shoulders, she saw the backs of the two helicopters, hovering a yard above the ground. A second noise joined the propellers: an unbroken buzz.

A figure rose over the village. Pearl-white light encased it, so bright Felicity could only see its outline. It raised an arm, and one of the helicopters on the far side of the village exploded.

Joan, Felicity thought, as the figure spun and a second helicopter became a supernova.

Two grey shapes pelted from the village towards the helicopter to her left. Soil and rice plants flew up around the shapes, and she knew what the buzz was: machine gun fire. The larger of the shapes leapt forward and became distinct as it closed on the helicopter: an elephant, Monica, tusks pointing towards the front of the helicopter. The elephant shuddered as it hit and swayed as it fell to the ground.

Get up, Felicity thought.

But the elephant lay still. The helicopter shuddered again. Ganesh had his trunk around its metal tail, and he bellowed as he shook it, bent his legs, and slammed it to the ground. It exploded, and Felicity felt a burst of heat as shrapnel and fire covered the space around it, including both Monica and Ganesh.

Dirt covered Paul and Felicity. As she shook her head to get it out of her eyes, she heard another crash to her right, and, through the dust swirling above her, she caught a glimpse of a triceratops pushing an upturned helicopter away from the village, its horn buried in the helicopter's belly, its shoulders and hips rolling as it lumbered, its feet slamming into the ground.

as it gathered speed. Then she felt a second burst of heat as that helicopter exploded too, in a fire that engulfed the dinosaur.

In the muddied air, she could just make out the sky above the village, in which debris fell from a cloud of smoke and fire. Joan had destroyed a third helicopter. But five remained, and they formed a circle around her. Trails of smoke extended from them, fire and noise surrounded Joan for a second, and she fell. A pink blur, human shaped, rose from the village and caught her.

That's Adam, Felicity thought. *Adam caught her. She'll be OK.*

The buzz stopped as the helicopters turned and flew a little way from the village. They turned again, the buzz resumed, and bits of roof and wall flew up and fell. A slab of brick soared toward Felicity and Paul.

She shouted, "Move, quickly," and forced herself off the ground and into Paul's body. As they rolled together, the earth seemed to jump, and the light dimmed. The slab had fallen over them.

We're dead, she thought. *The slab must have crushed us.*

Paul lay over her. She saw light past her feet and, beyond it, two rows of rice. She realized they'd rolled into an irrigation trench and the slab had fallen over it without touching them.

She heard a voice.

"By the power of Grayskull," it said, and the slab flew off them.

Sunlight hit her, framing a figure. She squinted. It was Adam, of course, transformed into that impossible mass of muscle, metal, and fur underpants. He didn't look ridiculous anymore.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, and, in his voice, Felicity heard the fear he'd wrestled down to speak.

“Paul,” she said, grabbing her boyfriend’s arms.

Paul lifted his head, blinked fast, and groaned, “Adam.”

“Paul, can you move your hands?” Adam asked.

Felicity felt Paul’s triceps flex.

“Paul, we need you,” Adam said.

“What do you expect me to do?” Paul asked through a grimace as he rose to a sitting position. “I’m not a fairy, I’m not an elephant, I’m not a dinosaur, and I’m not a cartoon action hero.”

Felicity could still hear the machine gun fire.

Adam crouched, bringing his eyes level with Paul’s.

“You’re not a snake either,” he replied. “Fire and gold, Paul. You didn’t have a toy snake. I think you know what kind of toy you had.”

In Paul’s eyes, she saw a glimmer. In a split second, a look of pain replaced it. She sat up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I suppose...I...do,” he said, and, in his eyes, peace replaced the pain. Then his clothes collapsed onto the wet ground. As they did, an object fell from them and landed on Felicity’s foot.

She didn’t look at the object. Instead, she watched the red snake as it raced towards the village, the sun turning each of its scales into a red and gold blaze.

And then it rose.

Wings extended from its sides, each as long as its body, and its body looked thicker than a tree. Its wings stretched high before each beat, and their downward movement looked powerful enough to force any volume of air to the ground. Its tail flicked side-to-side and ended in a ball

of spikes. The sunlight on the snake's scales had been nothing; each of the dragon's scales seemed to have a sun inside it, and Felicity could barely look straight at them, let alone know whether they were red or gold.

She stood and stepped backwards, unable believe the dragon was a creature of the world, let alone that it was Paul. It hovered over the village, wings moving slowly up and down, and the wind from their flapping stirred her hair.

The helicopters formed a half circle to the right of the dragon, and trails of smoke extended from them again. The trails turned into explosions against the dragon's body. Felicity gasped.

He's dead, she thought.

But the shells of the missiles fell, and the dragon did not move. Its scales glittered as before. It turned its head to the helicopters, and Felicity saw its head had the shape of a lizard's. A horn extended from its forehead, and its jet black eyes looked like stars could die in them.

Felicity felt afraid. The dragon was Paul, but that didn't mean it was tame.

It opened its mouth, revealing teeth like rows of white knives. Its body lit up even brighter, and Felicity closed her eyes and shielded her face with her wrists.

A second later, she could look again. Five balls of white fire hung above the village. Black smoke rose from them, and pieces of black metal fell from them.

Pain in her eyes made her look down again, and her gaze fell on Paul's clothes: a white linen shirt, linen khaki pants, a brown fabric belt, and a pair of brown leather sandals. She picked up the object that had hit her foot and turned it in her fingers. Under mud, it was gold and semi-transparent; a woman's shoe, really a slipper. She'd seen it before. She'd worn it, the day she met Paul.

34: REPENTANCE

The dragon beat its wings more slowly as it sank towards the village and disappeared among what was left of the buildings. Felicity picked up Paul's clothes and, still holding the slipper in her other hand, stepped onto the path and began to walk to the village. Adam walked beside her, still transformed. Neither spoke, and Felicity found she couldn't think about anything except the ground beneath her feet.

They stopped when they came to the twisted wreck of the helicopter Monica and Ganesh brought down. Adam put his hand on Felicity's shoulder and squeezed it. She walked slowly around the helicopter's carcass, scanning the ground. She vaguely processed the thought, *I might find Monica here*. But she saw saw nothing except bits of charred metal.

A little further down the path, she saw two more charred objects. They lay next to each other on the ground. Long, thin, and curved, one slightly longer than the other, they didn't look like parts of a broken machine. She knelt, picked up the longer object, and rubbed it on her shirt. Underneath a thin layer of charring, she found something white; not quite white, ivory. The longer had to be Monica's tusk, the shorter Ganesh's.

"How many made it?" Adam asked, and Felicity turned to see Fatima facing him.

"Sara," Fatima replied, "and Joan and Paul. I don't know if anyone else..."

She didn't sound hopeful.

Joan's alive; Paul's alive, Felicity thought.

"Let's go to the village, quickly," she said.

Adam nodded to his side. The brown cow stood where Fatima had been. Adam lifted Felicity onto it, and she leant forward and clung to its neck as it ran.

Most of my friends are dead, she thought as they drew nearer the village.

The cow carried her into the village. It slowed to a walk between buildings and bits of buildings and stopped at the fire pit. Sara sat on the ground, Joan's head in her lap, and Paul sat facing them, naked.

He's still Paul, Felicity thought.

She dropped from the cow's back, knelt by Sara, and put her hand on Joan's face. Joan opened her eyes and smiled, and her lips moved, struggling to form a word.

"No, no," Sara whispered.

Joan closed her lips but continued smiling at Felicity.

Sara nodded at the cow and began to raise Joan from her lap. Felicity put her arms under her godmother's back and helped lift. Sara squirmed from under Joan, and Felicity maneuvered her godmother's head into her own lap.

Sara walked away. Paul took his clothes from the ground beside Felicity. Felicity and Joan carried on smiling at each other, and Felicity told herself her godmother was alive.

But Monica isn't, she thought, *or Jasmine, or...* She couldn't bring herself to form the list.

Sara returned with an empty, blackened metal can, knelt by the cow, held the can under its udders, and began to pull down on one of its teats, and milk squirted into the can. When she'd finished milking, Sara knelt by Joan, lowered the can to her lips, and began to slowly pour. After a few minutes, Joan spluttered and turned her face to Felicity.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save everyone," she said.

“You did more than anyone else could have,” Sara told her.

“I didn’t,” Paul whispered.

“You didn’t know what you were,” Joan replied. “Adam suspected, and I told him he was crazy. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t want to know,” Paul murmured. “That got people killed.”

“You shouldn’t have had to know until you were ready,” Adam told him. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” Paul replied. “I might have been ready one day, but that doesn’t mean I’d have had the courage.”

*

Adam, no longer in his transformed state, reassembled the fire from wood that remained by the pit. Paul pointed at it, and flames began to lick outward from its center. They spent the evening around it. Felicity and Paul looked at each other. At first, they said nothing, but she saw calm in his eyes. When she turned to Joan, she saw, over her godmother’s shoulder, a pile of dead animal bodies. Adam added the bloodied corpse of a tiger, placing it on top of two bears. Felicity knew which was Coral, which Juan.

She heard a crackling sound and saw Paul withdraw his hand as flames engulfed the pile of bodies. Her nose caught wafts like charring meat.

They sat next to the burning corpses through the night. They didn’t cry or talk about the friends they’d lost, and Felicity realized they didn’t need to; the presence of the people they had left was enough.

Fatima and Sara whispered and glanced at the sky. Adam whispered too, and clasped his hands, and Felicity realized they were praying.

As she watched the flames, Paul spoke to Felicity and Joan:

“I started to remember just after we came to Lahore, in the Shalimar Gardens.”

Joan nodded as he paused.

“You know I paid bribes for the system to forget me when I was fourteen,” he said.

Felicity didn’t know about the bribes.

“No,” Joan replied. “None of us knows much of your story. You’ve kept it that way.”

“I had a good reason,” Paul said. “My first memories are of the orphanage. There were two or three dozen of us at any time. It was clean, the adults weren’t cruel, and I was safe when they were paying attention. When they weren’t, I was an easy target. I couldn’t fight as well as the other boys, because of my legs, so they took any food or toys I got, except my dragon. He was a gift from a charity, like most toys in the orphanage. He was about as long as my wrist, red with a gold sheen. I hid him under a floorboard in a closet and visited him at night and poured my heart out to him. He was all I had.”

“When I was six, the orphanage sent me to foster parents. The woman spanked me five minutes after I arrived; said it was a warning, didn’t say against what. Then she made me scrub a toilet. They put me to work the next two days, cleaning their house, pulling up weeds. I didn’t know how to do those things, so they kept spanking me. And they wouldn’t shut up about God. God will hate you if you don’t work hard. You’ll go to Hell if you break our rules. They started using a belt on me, and...”

His voice broke into something between a sob and a shout, and Felicity squeezed his shoulder with one hand and placed her other on the side of his head.

“And they found him under my pillow, and they called him a symbol of the devil. And they lit a fire. And they made me stand in front of it, holding him, and they said a lot of prayers, and then they stood behind me with a cane and made me throw him in the fire.”

He bared his teeth for several seconds, and then his jaw relaxed and peace stole over his eyes. Felicity put her arms around him.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Joan nodded in agreement and squeezed Paul’s hand.

*

As the sun rose, Sara led Adam away, and, a few minutes later, they came back with a bucket of water. It tasted exquisitely fresh, and, as they all drank it, first Paul, then Sara, then Fatima, and finally Adam, Joan, and Felicity began to cry.

Felicity didn’t know how long they’d cried when Adam announced “We should move.”

One by one, they stood. Then Felicity noticed movement just above one of the rubble piles, a little shape moving rapidly back and forth in the sunlight. She looked closer. The shape had wings, vibrating so fast they became nearly invisible.

“Joan,” she shouted, pointing at the hummingbird.

Joan pointed her wand at it, and a man sat naked on the rubble, a grimace of pain on his face. He leaped to his feet and began to run up the pile of brick, but he only managed a few steps before Adam grabbed his arms. Seconds later, he sat on the ground with Adam’s hand around his wrist, still grimacing.

The stranger’s body was muscled and tanned. Under a layer of soot, his hair was blond. He looked strikingly similar to Adam. Joan pointed her wand at him, and a pair of dirty jeans appeared on his body.

“I don’t need to see all that,” Joan said coldly. “Are you wearing a tracker?”

The stranger shook his head, and Joan continued to point her wand at him as she stared into his eyes. Felicity guessed she was deciding whether to believe him.

“What’s your name?” Adam asked. His voice sounded kind. That made Felicity angry.

He killed people, she thought. He works for Clarity.

The man’s breaths became less ragged. Felicity, Joan, Paul, Sara, and Fatima faced him in a semicircle. The others’ faces looked hard, and Joan still pointed her wand at the man.

“I don’t have a name,” he replied.

“Where are you from, and who do you work for?” Joan asked. Each of her words sounded like a bite. Felicity liked her tone better than Adam’s.

The man shuddered and looked at Adam again.

“Please,” he said. “I don’t know where I’m from. I grew up in the white rooms, with my toy.”

He added in a quieter voice, “You know what kind of toy, don’t you?”

Felicity struggled to place his accent. Maybe British. Maybe Australian.

“Why do you kill people?” Joan demanded.

“It’s what I’m supposed to do,” he replied, sounding like he thought the question was stupid.

“Who told you you’re supposed to?” Joan spat.

“The woman in the white rooms.”

“Who is she?”

The man tried to snatch his arm from Adam. Adam tightened his grip, and tears began to form in the man’s eyes. Adam relaxed his grip. Felicity felt the sun begin to warm the back of her neck. By her ear, a fly buzzed.

“She doesn’t have a name either,” he said. “She’s called the Vision Cleaner.”

“What?” Joan scoffed.

“She says wants to ‘remove the obstacles from humanity’s sight’,” he said. “Her words. She says they’re insane because they can’t see properly, and they need sane rulers to help them see, or see for them.”

He looked frightened.

He should be, Felicity thought, but she knew Joan’s tone wouldn’t get much more information out of the man. She swallowed, swatted the fly from her ear, moved to sit next to the man, put one hand on his shoulder, and raised the other to cut Joan off. Her godmother stopped speaking.

“Could you guys make dinner?” Felicity asked. She hated this man, but she could play the good cop to get information.

That’s my role in this group, she thought. *I get information no one else can get.*

Joan continued to point her wand at the man while Adam pulled one of the rubble piles apart and found the store. A bag of flour turned out to be the only food still useable. Fatima and Sara mixed dough and laid flat circles of it on a metal sheet, while the man repeatedly looked from Felicity to Joan, failed to meet her eyes, and looked back at Felicity.

After he’d eaten his third piece of flatbread, he looked at her again.

“You all have names,” he said. He seemed to think the fact wonderful.

“Yes,” she replied, forcing herself to look him in the eyes and smile. “I’m Felicity.”

“I don’t have a name,” he said.

“Would you like one?”

He looked at her with longing.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Then I’ll call you Tim,” Felicity said, picking the first name that came into her head.

Tim nodded. After a couple of minutes, he carried on speaking:

“I don’t remember much from when I was a kid. Only the white rooms.”

And from that detail, he told his story: He’d grown up in three rooms, painted white, with no windows. One contained a bed, the other a chair and television, the third a set of free-weights and a treadmill. A woman, whom he knew only as the Vision Cleaner, brought him food three times a day. She made him exercise and punished him if he didn’t. She didn’t punish him physically, even once, but she took away the television, the chair, or even the bed. He spent most of his time watching television and playing with his toy hummingbird. He learned to talk from television, learned to speak at least some of thirty-three languages, because she varied the broadcasts. As a child, he never had a long conversation with the Vision Cleaner, and he never saw anyone else. He didn’t learn to read.

When he reached puberty, the Vision Cleaner visited more often, stayed longer, and talked more. She started taking him on outings, each to a different place, and taught him to blend into crowds, dress unobtrusively, and move without being noticed. Before long, he could look inconspicuous in any country.

Once he perfected those skills, she made him transform by throwing him from a building. Once he’d learned to move with agility as a hummingbird, she tied the blades to his beak with thin wire and made him kill people, people she picked at random. She called it practice. She always made him do it in poor, rural places, usually in Africa. After a few years, she sent him on his first real mission, in which he killed Evelyn Douglas. He didn’t know there were others like him. He hadn’t heard of Senator Mead or Congressman Andrews.

The previous day, the Vision Cleaner sent him to the village to make sure everyone was dead after her helicopters finished. He didn’t know where she was now.

“Far away,” he said. “You won’t find her.”

At first, he hadn’t felt anything when he’d killed. The victims were things. Then he started noticing they writhed and screamed just as he’d done in the white rooms, and he wanted to get away from the Vision Cleaner. When he saw a fairy and a dragon destroy the helicopters, he guessed he’d found people who could stand up to her.

“I wasn’t brave enough to approach you,” he said, “But I’m not sorry you caught me.”

The sun lit the bricks where Tim sat wiping crumbs from his mouth with his hand, and Felicity found she could look into his eyes without forcing herself, because Tim hadn’t made himself bad. He’d been the plaything of someone evil.

And suffering had broken him. That was why he was a Toy.

She asked her most important question: “What does the Vision Cleaner want?”

Tim didn’t answer immediately. Adam, Paul, Fatima, and Sara moved to Felicity’s side, eyeing Tim and waiting. Felicity noticed Joan’s wand now pointed at the ground, and her hand gripped it loosely.

“She said she was telling me the ‘simple version,’” he said. “She wants to put the sane people in charge, so they can make everyone else sane too. She calls it ‘vision cleaning.’”

“Who are the sane people?” Felicity asked.

“They’re the master race,” Tim replied. “That’s what she says. They’re not sentimental, so they’ll kill all the criminals. And they’ll kill people suspected of crimes, even if they can’t prove they’re guilty, and they’ll kill people who might commit crimes.”

“How does she know who might commit crimes?” Felicity asked.

“She says people whose parents did are more likely to,” Tim answered. “And people whose friends did, and people who use drugs.”

“She says the master race won’t take money from winners and give it to losers. They’ll let winners win, and losers will have to work harder or starve. The master race won’t make rules to stop winners doing what they need to do to win.”

“What makes people who think that way a race?” Joan asked, her voice calmer now.

Tim looked at her for the first time.

“They already have clean vision,” he replied, “They don’t have a lot of feelings that get in the way of their thinking. She said parents pass that to their children. She’s clever, so I thought she must be right.”

“So the sensitive, the compassionate, the non-judgmental, they’re out,” Joan said quietly, as though to herself. “Clarity’s a cult of personality type.”

“But that’s not hereditary,” Felicity objected.

“Not entirely,” Joan replied, “but to some extent. The mechanism may be nature or nurture, or both.”

Felicity looked at Tim.

“We’ve set the world’s governments after her,” she said. “What will she do now?”

“She’ll hide,” he replied. “She’s good at that.”

Joan leant close and stared at him.

“You seem to know a lot, Tim,” she said. “Why would she tell you so much?”

Tim curled his lips. Over the next few seconds, his expression moved from a sneer to a laugh and back to a sneer. Then his face lost expression for several minutes. Felicity waited.

“I was the only person she had to talk to,” he replied. “She created Clarity, and everyone in it obeys her. They’re scared not to. But they’re too scared. That’s her problem. They won’t spend time with her unless they have to.”

35: THE VISION CLEANER

Felicity walked out of the village with Paul. The others walked behind so as not to walk too fast for him. Joan walked stiffly.

They reached a bigger village, with several shops along an asphalt road, and Fatima called for two taxis. They took an hour to arrive.

Felicity wanted Monica back. She wanted all her friends back. The loss seemed to make her love the people she still had more strongly. She looked back at Joan. Her godmother seemed to walk more naturally. Felicity stroked Paul's arm, put her hand in her pocket, and touched her slipper. She supposed Paul must have gone back to for it the night after she'd met him, while she, Joan, and Jasmine slept in tents.

*

The taxis took them to Fatima's home, a single room with concrete walls and a tin roof. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, its light just strong enough to show a few boxes, a few baskets, and a kerosene stove. They sat against the walls while Fatima borrowed extra blankets from her neighbors. Felicity supposed their houses were as small and basic as this one. She hadn't bothered looking around when they arrived.

Joan took out her phone, and, a few minutes later, she announced the Chinese and Indian navies had converged on a small island in the Indian Ocean, an island no one had heard of.

"Clarity's finished," she said.

Tim shook his head.

“The Vision Cleaner won’t be on that island,” he said.

Paul found satellite images on his phone. On a calm grey-blue ocean, ships surrounded a small patch of green.

“That’s the island,” he said, pointing to the green spot.

The image updated every fifteen or twenty minutes. The positions of the ships changed. Some moved away from the island and formed curved lines around other ships, and Felicity guessed the Chinese and Indian navies were trying to flank and surround each other.

“The UN Security Council just went into session,” Joan announced.

Over the next three hours, in the images on Paul’s phone, they watched two flotillas separate and move to opposite sides of the island. Then, in a single image, helicopters appeared over the island. In the next, they were gone.

“The British newspapers say Royal Marines took the island,” Adam said, “covered by...”

He paused and ran his fingers down his phone screen.

“...the French air force,” Joan cut in. “I’m on the website of a French TV channel.”

“This British TV channel think it was the Royal Air Force,” Adam said. “Any news from the Security Council?”

“No,” Joan replied. “They’ve been in session four hours, but they haven’t issued a statement.”

Felicity took out her phone, navigated to the website of the *Boston Globe*, and read the headline: “Vice-President Resigns, Surrenders to FBI.” She read far enough into the article to see the paper didn’t know anything beyond the content of the headline.

“Oh!” Adam exclaimed, as Felicity returned her phone to her pocket. “The Secretary of State’s been found dead in his home. He shot himself.”

Felicity guess that, even if the Vision Cleaner wasn't on the island, they'd achieved what they'd been trying to achieve since they stood in the freezing air near Logan Airport. She wondered if she should feel excited, or if the situation should feel anticlimactic. After all, the victories were being won so far away, in the Indian Ocean, in New York, and Washington, and no doubt the capital cities of other countries.

She guessed they were the Toy's victories nonetheless, but she didn't care.

Victory isn't worth their lives, she thought.

Fatima came back in with blankets and a bag of rice, and then left again. Over the next three hours worth of headlines, the FBI started questioning cabinet ministers, congressmen, senators, bankers, investment fund managers, the list went on. Officials resigned in Japan, Germany, France, and the UK, and reporters heard rumors of generals and intelligence officers secretly arrested in Pakistan.

The others didn't smile; they merely nodded. Felicity wondered if they'd ever smile again.

"Just in," Joan said, "The President's appointed a new Vice-President. It's Congressman Andrews."

Paul sighed.

"That's good," Joan told him.

"He wanted to retire," Paul said. "He's eighty-four."

"He's the only person the President can trust," Joan replied.

*

Fatima returned with bamboo mats, and Felicity lay on one and slept through the rain. When she woke, she looked around to find Tim staring at the ceiling and the others sleeping. A few minutes later, Joan woke, and Felicity moved her mat and next to her. Neither spoke.

“None of us will be the same, ever,” Joan said after a few minutes. “Sara isn’t going home. She’s from Amritsar, on the Indian side, and there aren’t any other Toys there now, so she’s going to live with Fatima. Pakistan’s immigration authorities aren’t up to catching her or turning down a bribe if they do.”

A part of Felicity wanted to cry, but she forced it down.

Feeling it won’t do any good, she told herself.

“I’ve booked a flight home for Friday morning,” Joan continued. “Tim’s coming with us. He doesn’t know where he’s from, but he’s got an American passport, among others.”

“And when we get there?” Felicity asked.

Joan paused before replying, “We’ll live the best we can.”

They ate in silence, read news stories that gave them the same information as the ones they’d already read, and fell asleep again.

*

The next morning, Felicity went out with Paul and brought back samosas. Fatima made tea, and, as they drank and ate, Felicity again forced herself not to cry. The last time she’d had tea and samosas, she’d seen Akbar transform, the only time. She remembered his growl and the terrifying sight of him. She remembered the mosque, the call to prayer, and the day she’d spent sightseeing with her friends.

She knew she’d always remember all of it.

They spent the day in one another's near-silent presence, which seemed to sooth them more than crying or talking about their sadness could have. In the afternoon, Felicity walked briefly around the neighborhood with Paul. People stared at them, and children pointed. Felicity guessed they hadn't seen many white people.

They made plans: Tim would move in with Paul, and Felicity and Paul would try to rehabilitate him.

"I'll need something to do," Felicity said. "I'm not going to college."

The thought only occurred to her as she said it, but, when she said it, it felt true. College didn't seem to matter anymore.

Paul looked uncomfortable, but he didn't reply.

*

The next day was their last in Lahore. They woke before dawn and took a taxi to the Red Fort. Joan wanted to watch the sunrise from its battlements again, and, when she suggested it, Felicity found she did too. She'd looked over those battlements with the friends she'd lost.

Fatima and Sara brought a flask of tea and cups. They arrived before opening hours, so Joan levitated them to the roof courtyard. As the sun began to emerge from a thin line of orange, the battlements became visible, a black zigzag that would be red when the sun finished rising.

The orange line became a gold river with a pool of fire in its center, and the walls, pavilions, walkways, and domes became visible, their shapes striking in the half-light. They slowly assumed their colors, red except for the white domes.

Fatima handed Felicity a cup. It felt hot to the touch.

"Sara and I will miss you," Fatima said. "Will you come back to Lahore?"

"Often," Felicity replied.

As she said it, she saw a white, faintly shimmering shape behind Fatima, at the far end of the courtyard, floating over the battlements. She looked hard and discerned a horse's outline. As it landed, it raised its head. A horn extended from just above its eyes, tinged pink by the dawn. It trotted noiselessly towards them. Feathered wings lay folded at its sides. It trotted faster but still made no sound.

"Look!" Felicity exclaimed.

The others turned and gasped.

But Tim began to whimper. His body went half limp, and he backed away from the unicorn, legs buckling.

A thought hit Felicity like a shower of ice: White Horn Shipping.

The unicorn's back rippled as it broke from a trot to a gallop, and it lowered its head, pointing its horn straight at them. Joan's arm moved, and her wand appeared in her hand. She raised it towards the unicorn, too late. Its horn entered her chest.

Blood splattered the unicorn's face, but it kept moving, not galloping but rising, wings beating, Joan's body affixed to its horn, her blood pouring onto the courtyard. A gust of air from its wings caught Felicity's face. The unicorn shook its head, and Joan's body fell to the edge of the courtyard. The unicorn cleared the battlements and became a small shape against the sky.

Felicity ran to Joan's body. Blood formed a gradually widening pool around it. She felt her godmother's neck for a pulse, but didn't find one. She'd known she wouldn't.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Adam pinning Paul to the ground.

"You can't fly over a city," he shouted.

She turned to Tim. He lay curled on the ground, shaking. She ran at him and shouted, "Why didn't you tell us she was a Toy?"

He looked up and then shied away.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she repeated.

Tim looked up, confusion on his face.

“You could have stopped this!” Felicity shouted.

Tim nodded slowly. “I thought you were stronger than her,” he said, and his clothes fell to the ground. Where he’d stood, Felicity saw a vibration of brown and purple.

The hummingbird flew to the battlements over which the unicorn had left, turned, flew back, and passed over Felicity’s head. She watched it fly over the battlements over which the unicorn had arrived.

Good riddance, she thought. *You killed Joan*.

She walked back to Joan’s body. Fatima and Sara knelt over it, and Joan’s wand lay to one side. Felicity knelt next to her godmother and touched her face. She knew now she had to cry, but she didn’t want to do it then. She’d do it in Boston, in Joan’s apartment, and never stop, because she and Joan would never talk again, never share a home again.

She picked up her godmother’s wand and gripped it until her knuckles turned white.

36: STRAWS OF LIFE

The gates of the Red Fort would open at seven-thirty. Paul cremated Joan at seven twenty-five. Fatima emptied her flask, and Sara scooped the ashes into it and handed it to Felicity.

They stood in a circle. Felicity held the flask and spoke a eulogy for Joan, but spoke it in her head. Joan had watched her from the day of her father's funeral, brought her from the rejection of her stepmother's home to the company of people who loved her. Joan had loved her. With Joan's help, she'd turned from a frightened girl who hoped for the grudging tolerance of others into a woman who knew the love of many people.

She was my fairy godmother, she thought.

*

The first visitors appeared. Felicity and the others left, and Adam hailed a taxi.

"I'm going to find the Vision Cleaner," she said, as soon as Adam pulled the door closed.

"I'll find her with you," Paul replied, and Felicity heard hate in his voice.

Adam looked at them both for a time.

"How would you find her, and what would you do when you found her?" he asked.

"She has to pay," Felicity answered, knowing she was ignoring his question.

"The world's intelligence agencies are looking for her," Adam replied. "Even you two won't find her if they can't."

"Don't be so sure," she snapped.

Adam smiled for the first time in two days.

“No,” he said, “I’m not. But you won’t get Joan back, or the others.”

“But I’ll have revenge,” she spat.

“And it will kill you,” he replied. “You won’t be Felicity anymore. Joan wanted you to live. She devoted herself to it since you were five.”

She wanted to shout at him. Instead, she whispered, “Oh yeah. I’ll just go live.” She drew out the word live, twisting it into sarcasm. “I’ll go live while everyone who loved me is dead.”

“That’s not true.”

It was Paul who’d spoken.

“I’ll always love you,” he added.

“I will too,” Adam said. “You know what I mean, I hope. You know I’m...”

She nodded.

Of course he is, she thought.

*

Felicity barely noticed the journey back to Boston. The customs officer at Logan asked for her passport three times before she registered the request. He looked annoyed, but she didn’t care.

Back at Paul’s apartment, they ordered pizza. After Adam went home, Felicity and Paul held each other in his bed.

“I want Joan,” she whispered. “And Monica, and all of them.”

“I do too,” he whispered back.

Over the next week, they didn’t do much besides eating, sleeping, and sitting together. Adam visited every day and shared their silence, and Felicity filled the silence with her

memories of Joan and of her friends. She preferred the silence to futile attempts to sooth each other with words. Paul was there; Adam was there. She loved them for their presence and loved that she could give them hers.

After a few days, Adam produced Joan's will. It named him executor and Felicity sole heir. The lack of a death certificate would delay the inheritance seven years, Adam explained. But Felicity had the key to Joan's apartment, and Joan had owned it free and clear.

She summoned the courage to go to the apartment and spent a few hours there, remembering. She took Joan's album out of its drawer and turned to the photographs of her parents. She realized she hadn't looked properly at the ones Joan was in. She guessed she'd felt awkward about her father having broken up with Joan for her mother.

In one photo, the three sat on a felled tree above a river. Felicity's father held her mother's arm in one hand and Joan's in another, as both women strained their legs to test the water with their bare feet. In another, Joan and Felicity's mother walked out of the sea, fully clothed, towards the camera.

Felicity wondered if Joan had ever been tempted to tell them she was a fairy.

Probably not, she thought as she returned the album to its drawer. Only another Toy could understand.

She sat on the couch and let her shoulders fall and her tears run down her cheeks as she kept the appointment she'd made with her own grief.

"Thank you, Joan," she whispered. Then she shouted it through a sob. A minute later, she whispered, "Thank you, Monica. Thank you, Jasmine, Coral, Dave, Tobias, Muhammad, Matt, Akbar, Ganesh, Farid, Meera."

*

The rest of the summer passed in a blur of three-minute conversations, three-hour pauses, and junk food. The only happy moment came when Felicity, Paul, and Adam picked up the rhinoceros from the front gate of Old Colony Correctional Centre. Adam introduced him as Eddie, and Eddie looked nervously at Felicity and said, “I’m sorry. Joan was...she was...”

His stumble turned into a pause and then a silence.

“I know,” Felicity replied.

Paul drove them away from the red brick and barbed wire façade of the jail, and they spent the afternoon at Adam’s house, eating the foods Eddie had missed: chicken fried in beer, onion rings fried in beer, bread rolls made with beer, and beer.

That evening, Paul tried to convince Felicity to go to MIT.

“I’m not going,” she answered again and again. “I know Joan would want me to, but I’m not going.”

“What will you do?” he asked. “I can look after you, but I don’t think you want to be my housewife.”

“I don’t want to be anything,” she replied.

37: THE ONLY CHOICE

Four more weeks passed. Felicity thought about calling MIT to withdraw. She picked up the phone twice, but couldn't bring herself to dial.

Paul went back to managing his investment portfolio. Felicity bought a new copy of *Dune*, which she'd stopped reading when she left her stepmother's home. She read it for most of two days but put it down when the hero started winning.

Heroes only win at a price, she thought.

Paul didn't mention MIT again.

As the start of term approached, her indecision turned into moments of nausea. She tried again to call and withdraw, but hung up when the admissions office answered. She guessed she just wouldn't show up.

A week before graduation day, Paul made breakfast for the first time since their return to Boston and announced he'd rented a cottage in Maine for the coming weekend. They'd leave Friday morning and get back Monday afternoon.

"That sounds nice," Felicity said.

She didn't care where she'd spend the weekend.

*

On Friday morning, Felicity put clothes and books in a suitcase without much thought. Paul drove them northward, and the sight of trees and fields lifted Felicity's mood enough to let

her think about learning to drive. Paul tuned the radio to a jazz station, and a saxophone melody made her smile.

They stopped at a roadside shack and ate lobster rolls. Mid-afternoon, they arrived at the cottage. It stood alone by a country road, built of stone, with a stone tiled roof, and smoke rose from a short chimney. In front stood a dry stonewall, a white gate, and a mixture of wild flowers and grass.

The owner walked across the grass, handed over the key, said he'd left a chicken stew on the AGA, and left. They walked into the living room. Felicity sat on the end of terracotta red couch, kicked off her sandals, and felt the deep carpet beneath her feet. Paul sat next to her, and they gazed at the fire in the hearth. An hour later, it gave the only light in the room.

Felicity brought bowls of stew from the kitchen, and, when she'd finished eating, she drew the curtains, unzipped her suitcase, and took out a book. She looked at the cover and laughed when she saw the title: *The British Poets of World War I*.

"I've got to give this back to my high school's library," she said. "This and a bunch of others."

"I don't think you need to bother," Paul replied.

"Yes, I do," she told him as she opened the book. A folded sheet of lined paper lay between two of the pages. She turned to those pages and smiled when she saw the poem.

"Falling Asleep," she read aloud, "by Siegfried Sassoon."

She glanced at Paul, and he smiled.

"Voices moving about in the quiet house," she read aloud, as though it was a question.

She read the rest the same way: "...only the clocks are alert...And I know that the clouds are moving across the moon; The low, red, rising moon...where today was dreamlike, build my

dreams...now the beauty swings across my brain, ghosts of remembered chords...And count their faces; faces; sunlit faces.”

She asked herself if living in memories was wrong, and if it meant she couldn’t live in the present too.

She laid the book open on the couch and reached for another, the book she knew she’d reach for eventually. She laid it in her lap, opened it to a page she’d marked with another piece of folded paper, months ago, and read aloud:

“Once Upon a Time there lived a girl called Cinderella. Her father loved her with all his heart, but, when she was very small, he died. Cinderella grew up with her stepmother and stepsisters, and they hated her.”

She didn’t want the details of their hate. She’d lived through it. So she skipped a few paragraphs and carried on reading:

“One day the king announced a ball, and he invited all the maidens in the kingdom, because his son, the prince, was to choose a bride.”

She closed the book.

“But the prince was a dick,” she whispered, “And no maiden would have wanted him unless she was as stupid as Cinderella’s stepsisters. But Cinderella was sick of being left out, so she wanted to go to the ball even though she knew it would be boring. The only person who’d loved her since her father died turned out to be her fairy godmother, and Cinderella went to the ball and met a real prince, and she had friends for the first time, and her fairy godmother looked after her, and she was happy!”

Her voice had grown to a shout.

“They saved the world together,” she continued at a lower volume, “but most of her friends died. And now Cinderella and her prince have to spend the rest of their lives remembering the one time they were happy.”

She saw perfect sincerity in Paul’s eyes, and she heard it in his voice when he said, “You’re right that we’ll always remember. But we will also be happy, for us and for them.”

“How?” she asked, and knew from the tone of her own voice that she thought the question might have an answer.

“Step by step,” he replied after a moment. “Starting tonight. Will you fly with me?”

“Fly with you?” she asked.

“On my back,” he said. “It won’t heal everything, and it might not heal anything. But it’s what I can give you tonight.”

“Yes,” she replied, leaping from the couch in an unexpected rush of energy.

A moment later, she stood on her four little paws, under the heap her clothes made as they fell. She squeaked and scampered around the room. Then she imagined holding Paul, and, human again, she stood naked in front of him and watched him smile as his eyes moved over her. Even after a year of eating properly, she didn’t have the body she wanted: shoulders, ribs, arms, and legs too bony, hips too small for her bottom, breasts smaller than she’d have liked. But she knew Paul loved her, and right now he blatantly lusted after her.

“Step one,” she said. “I want you to have my virginity, and I want yours.”

*

An hour later, Felicity dressed, and she and Paul walked down the road that ran in front of the house. She felt surprised they hadn’t made love, surprised that Paul, when she sat naked in

his lap, hadn't tried to do more than cuddle and kiss her, and surprised she didn't feel disappointed.

Will we want to do it tomorrow? She wondered.

She realized she wouldn't, and she didn't think Paul would either.

That's OK, she thought. There are other ways to be together.

Paul walked onto a grass verge, took off his clothes, and vanished. The red snake slithered beside the road, and then the red dragon stood in its place, its nose inches from Felicity's. She leant forward and kissed it. Its scales felt leathery and warm.

A dragon instead of a prince, she marveled. Well, America doesn't have royalty, so I guess the story found a substitution.

The dragon lay down, and she walked along its side, wondering how to mount. She'd never ridden a pony, let alone a dragon. It lowered its shoulder, and she stepped onto it and swung onto his back. She found hollows either side of its spine, between its shoulders, and she sat between two vertebra and put one leg into each hollow. When her feet reached the flesh of the dragon's back, her knees bent only slightly.

"Is this OK?" she asked.

The huge head nodded, and the dragon stood.

Maybe the Cinderella story has a magical power, she thought. A different kind to Joan's or Paul's. Maybe it can tailor itself to Cinderella's circumstances.

She held her breath as its wings beat. A second later, they soared higher than a tall building. By the time she started breathing again, all she could see of the ground was pinpricks of light. The dragon flew higher. The air rushing past them grew colder, and Felicity began to

shudder. The dragon's scales glowed a soft gold, and warmth rose from them. Felicity watched the stars.

Am I the only Cinderella? She wondered, and she remembered Joan saying she didn't know, on the day she found out who and what Joan was.

Maybe the story chooses new Cinderellas all the time, she thought.

Her breath grew deep as the air grew thin. As the sun cracked the horizon into shades of silver and turquoise, she saw its light reflect off snow on a line of mountains.

They flew closer to the ground and landed in front of one of the mountains. The dawn light framed it, and its top formed a line of jagged peaks, dark grey rock jutting from snow.

She stayed on Paul's back because of the cold, and she gazed at the snowy range and the hills below it. Mist pooled in the valleys between the hills, making each one look like an island. She looked at Paul, his gold-tinged scales and the great tents of skin that were his wings, and laughed.

I'm in love with a dragon, she thought.

"I'll go to MIT," she said. "Joan would have wanted me to."

Paul turned his head to her, and his impossibly black eyes narrowed.

"And I want me to," she added.

38: THE PROFESSOR

Graduation day, Felicity woke in Paul's bedroom, flipped silk covers off her nude body, rose, stretched to the ceiling, stretched to touch her toes, stood, swiveled her torso side to side, raised her arms, and stretched them to the sides.

I'll download a workout video today, she thought.

She showered and put on a floral summer dress, and then she sat at her new vanity and put on makeup, silver hoop earrings, and tangerine tinged scent, and brushed her hair, which now grew past her shoulders. She opened the top drawer of her armoire and looked at the tusks and the wooden drumstick she'd placed there.

"I'm off to college in an hour," she whispered.

In the kitchen, one of Joan's recipe books lay open to the page she'd chosen the previous night: apple cider doughnuts. She grated in tangerine rind, because she'd never eaten them like that before. Then she juiced the tangerines and set the table.

She ate breakfast with Paul, slung a new white suede purse over her shoulder, left the apartment, took the MTA into Cambridge, and got off at the MIT stop. At street level, she slid a hand into her purse, pulled out her map of the campus, and found the building the most recent letter had told her to go to. At ten o'clock, she sat in a lecture theatre with hundreds of other freshmen as a tall man in a brown suit rose and delivered a welcome speech. He didn't say anything of substance, and finished by sending them to meetings in the departments of their likely majors.

She followed her map to the math department, where another middle-aged man, plump and stuffed into a tweed jacket, gave another speech. He said numbers, lines, and equations were as beautiful as the universe they described. She thought back to the shapes on the walls of the Badshahi Masjid, the geometry of God.

At the end of his talk, the plump man circulated a handout. On it was the longest equation Felicity had ever seen: $W =$ followed by a mash of figures, mathematical symbols, and instances of the letter N. Below the equation, a note read, “ $N=423218$.”

“Professor Melville has me dish this out to freshman ever year,” the man said with a wry smile. “Try to solve it. Take your answers to her office. Don’t be hard on yourselves when they turn out to be wrong. No student has ever solved this equation. Actually, I haven’t either. Mind you, I’ve never tried for more than an evening.”

*

That evening, Felicity sat next to Paul and squinted at the equation, but she couldn’t make sense of it.

The next morning, after she’d made herself sweat with her new workout, put muffins in the oven, and set the coffee to brew, she went back to the equation. By the time the coffee machine pinged, numbers, letters, and lines began to move in her mind’s eye. She grabbed a pencil. By the time the muffins were baked, she had the answer: 715511 W.

And $N=423218$, she thought. This isn’t just a math game.

It was a geographic coordinate.

*

The day’s campus events included social gatherings, campus tours, and a lecture on safe sex. Instead of attending, Felicity took the T and a bus to Marblehead, where she walked along

narrow roads, past colorful terraces and quaint shops, reached the shore, and stopped at a little jetty with a sign that read “boats for hire.”

She rented a nondescript white motorboat a grumpy attendant told her was the best for a beginner. The motor hung over the stern, and the tiller arm reached to a plastic bench running the width of the boat.

She started the motor with the attendant’s help, headed away from the town, and gradually increased the boat’s speed. The sea moved gently, and the sun warmed the air. She steered zigzags, accustoming herself to how the movement of the tiller translated to movement of the boat, and then she steered straight. When she could no longer see Marblehead, she pulled out her phone and opened a GPS app. She was thirty miles from Professor Melville’s grid reference.

She took the tiller in her left arm, her phone in her right, and glanced between it and the water she sped through. The grey dot on the screen drew closer to the blue dot that marked her destination. When the dots met, she killed the motor. Around her, she saw nothing but water and sky. She waited.

After a few minutes, bubbles breached the surface a few yards from the bow, and then the water began to move. The boat slid backwards, and something broke the surface, huge and white. Its mouth dominated its face, and its lips dominated its mouth.

Felicity stared at the whale. She waved, but her wave felt limp wristed and silly. The whale vanished, the boat lurched forward, and Felicity grabbed the sides to steady herself.

Then the boat lurched backward, and Felicity turned to see a naked woman climbing over the stern, torso and limbs huge with both muscle and fat, hair a white perm.

Felicity threw herself into the bow to stop the boat capsizing. The woman fell into the stern, righted herself into a kneeling position, and looked at Felicity. Her face looked somehow both old and ageless, and she had round eyes - that kind of round.

“First of all,” the woman began, “welcome to MIT.”

“Professor Melville?” Felicity asked.

“The same,” the woman replied. “I saw your eyes yesterday morning. I looked at your application papers, talked to Dr. Owens, and knew you’d be the one who solved my equation. So I changed it to make 715511 W 423218 N the answer.”

“Why haven’t I met you before?” Felicity asked. “Don’t you know about the chapter?”

“I joined one of the first chapters when I did my Ph.D.,” Professor Melville replied, “but I don’t join things these days. I do abstract math and come here to swim.”

“So...” Felicity began, wondering if she should invite Professor Melville to meet the others.

“So,” the professor replied, “you’re my mentee, apprentice, protégé, if you want to be. Anyone who can solve that equation at eighteen has quite a career ahead of her.”

I’ve had quite a career already, Felicity thought, as her new teacher stared at the horizon, patiently waiting for her answer.

- THE END -

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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