

WE WERE WONDERS

THE ABANDONED FIGHTER



TRISHNA SAHA

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BLUE PENCIL

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*For young dreamers
and readers around the world*

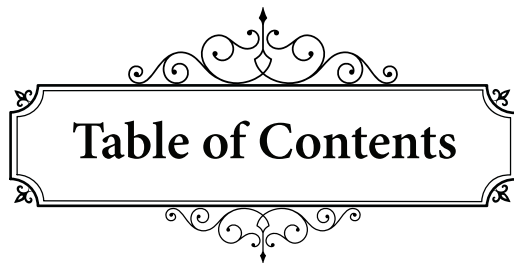


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Prologue

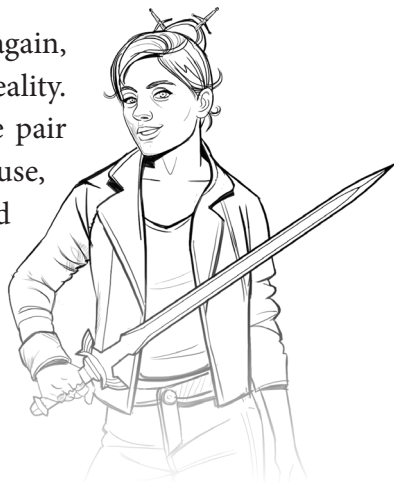
30 August 2016

Natasha

Nightmares are the worst kind of self-induced torture. I don't think I hate anything more than I hate them.

With that thought bouncing around in my head, I grab the bedsheets as sweat trickles down my cheeks. Or are they tears? *Who cares?*

I am seeing the two figures again, filling my senses like a graphic reality. The woman, wearing the same pair of jeans and the white silk blouse, and the man in his trousers and the black button-down shirt. I also see the weird creatures appearing like huge wolves, lunging at them and clawing at their throats.



The lady looks at me and mouths, “I love you, baby,” and then, just like every day, she is gone. She falls to the ground and blood starts pooling around her. Her eyes are still open, looking up at the stars. The man screams, seeing the lifeless body of his wife (or his girlfriend? Or sister? They look nothing alike, though), and then in a flash, he too drops to the ground. I hear a small scream that is essentially alien to my own, but I’ve heard it many times now. The sudden bursts of screams are followed by a whimper, a sniff and then finally the pounding of tiny fists on the car’s window. After listening to it for three years, this has become all too familiar. Familiar in a rather terrifying way that makes you want to stop sleeping, just to stop seeing the nightmare anymore.

I wake up, startled, shaken, and sure enough, my sheets are in shreds. I cut my nails so small that it hurts when I write, and still, I am astonished to find that I discard at least one bedsheet every week. I try to concentrate on my breathing and bring it back to normal, with a lot of effort, as my heart pounds loudly within my chest. I have read in books and on the internet that recurring dreams—or in my case, nightmares—have something to do with unsolved problems or feelings without closure. But what connection can I possibly have with two strangers and their plight? And why are the nightmares so vivid, graphic and horrific?

I stopped getting scared, or hiding behind a pillow—or my hands—while watching horror movies a long time ago. I don’t even scream or cringe anymore when I happen to see them now. Yet, this nightmare makes me want to wrap a blanket around myself, curl into a ball and

keep screaming.

I pick up the water bottle that I always keep on my bedside table, and gulp down the mint-flavored liquid. The tattoo on my wrist stares back at me. Why can't it just go off? I wonder if my birth parents were lunatic, giving their toddler kid a tattoo. Is that even legal?

I sigh as I stand up and pull the shredded pieces of my bedsheet away from the mattress and toss them into the laundry basket beside my door, which I specifically bought for this purpose.

I coil my hair into a bun and look into the floor-length mirror beside my dresser, looking at the image of the girl in the mirror intently. She has the same ocean blue eyes and light coffee brown hair. The same curve of her nose. The same line of her jaw. The same thin lips. The lady in my recurring nightmare looks exactly like the girl in the mirror—just older. She must be in her late twenties, wearing elegant, expensive clothes. The girl in the mirror, the prettier version of me, is in her sleep shorts and a tank and is just thirteen. I look at the digital alarm clock on my desk: 2:25 A.M. Well, fourteen now. What a good start to a birthday with a nightmare, right?

My mind goes back to the nightmare as questions swirl in my head. *Who is that woman I see, who resembles me? Is she my mom?* I have asked myself the same question from the day the nightmare started, three years ago. I know I am adopted, but because Mom and Dad never told me my biological parents' names or showed me any of their photos, I am absolutely in the dark about their identities. I once tried talking to Mom about the nightmares but she just shooed me away, saying I watch

too many thrillers. I do watch them a lot and I have re-watched all the movies I watched before to see if it is a scene from any of them, but it really isn't.

After I annoyed her some more, she finally sent me to a therapist who doesn't do anything, except for filling his pockets with wads of cash. The guy is fine—a little sexist, but fine. He never complains about my sarcasm or rudeness and listens to me blabber for hours, so I am quite satisfied, at least for now. With Mom always at work, Elena gone, and me being friendless, Dr. Martin is the only person I open up to. But it still hasn't helped me with the nightmares.

At first, I thought the nightmare might be just a flash of memory or a *déjà vu*. Maybe they *are* my parents and that's how they died. But once, last year, I caught an image of myself in the rearview mirror during the nightmare. I didn't have brown hair, it was black instead. The kid did look around three years old—the same age when I was orphaned. But even if my hair color magically changed in the past eleven years, I am not that kid. The toddler, through whose eyes I see, is a boy. And that makes sense, because my parents died in a car crash. Reason number one, why I've never liked cars. Reason number two: they add a lot of pollutants to our already dying planet. I like motorcycles, though. Not that they don't add pollutants, but it's just that my adopted dad had a Ducati and I loved when he took me on rides. The wind blowing, ruffling my hair always gave me a sense of freedom that I enjoyed.

I hate fire too. Reason number one: it's hot. *Duh!* Reason number two: my adopted dad died in a fire accident. So yes, it is just me and my awesome Mom now.

Thankfully, the nightmare only happens once a night and if I am lucky, then some nights, I also skip seeing it. It didn't happen in the past four days, so I was hoping that it wouldn't happen on the night of my birthday. But well, we don't always get what we wish for. I know, *I* definitely don't.

Yawning, I pull my sweaty top above my head. I toss it to a corner in my room, pull on another one and lie down on the little couch to the opposite wall. I can put on new sheets and sleep comfortably on the bed, but I'm too tired, so I just close my eyes and pray to God to give me a pleasant birthday.

And once again, God does not grant me my wish. After coming back from the most boring day at my new high school, I sit down on the couch and prop my legs onto the coffee table, watching yet another episode of *The Mentalist*. I am addicted and this is my first birthday without Elena and I have no interest in celebrating it. So, swooning over Patrick Jane it is!

After two episodes, one puking session (because Charlie, the school Cook, put some cheese in the plain sandwich which I usually have, and I was too upset to check), three cokes and two packets of Ritz crackers, I am unquestionably having the worst birthday ever.

I am socially awkward and a certified introvert, hence, going out with 'friends' is out of the question. I can go and check if the gymnastic studio is open, but then Miss Keller will make a big deal out of my birthday and I am not in the mood for any drama, not today at least. I can

amputate yet another dummy, but I need to clean the sword and I don't know where the cleaning liquid or the oil is and it is the last Jane Doe left, so I let it be. So, after another episode and a second puking session, I sit down on my bed and decide to catch up on my homework. So, when my mom comes home around eight, I am still writing, with only Ritz in my tummy.

I shut my books and thunder down the steps. Mom looks up from placing her gun and badge in the locker in her room and smiles at me.

“How was your day?” she asks.

I plunk down on the blue floral armchair beside her bed and pick up a newspaper article from her work file. “Boring,” I say, as I scan through the article. It is about an accident that happened near Mom's workplace. Two blonde fourteen-year-old kids got into a fight with an eighty-year-old lady. ~~What the...~~

She comes over and perches herself on the arm of the chair and runs her hand through my hair fondly. “That bad, huh?” I shrug my shoulders. I mean, there is nothing to say. No one except Sierra remembered my birthday and she just gave me a small smile and whispered ‘Happy Birthday’ when she passed me in the halls.

“I have something for you. I don't know how you will react, but I need to give it to you. So, why don't you go and wait in the kitchen and I'll get it?”

I nod and exit the room. I pour myself a glass of almond milk, add little bits of cocoa in it and sit at the breakfast counter. Mom comes out of her room, now in her pajama bottoms and a frayed grey V-neck shirt,

holding a medium-sized cardboard box in her hands. Her face is a little grim, but she manages a faint smile when she sets the box in front of me. “I am sorry I never told you all this, but I promised your mommy.” She pats the box and sits down on the seat opposite mine. She motions for me to open the box, but I hesitate.

Mom is never vague and she has never mentioned my birth mother before until I pressured her, so her behavior at the moment makes me nervous. I gulp a huge lump in my throat and take the lid off. There are numbered books inside the box, with the numbers going from one to fifteen, and thin sticks that you put in your hair. There are also photos and a beautiful ring with a glowing sapphire. I put the lid down on the counter and notice a folded paper stuck inside. I pull it free and unfold it.

It’s a handwritten note. Addressed to me. It reads,

Dear Natasha,

if you are reading this, it means something has happened to your dad and me, and I am so sorry that I left you alone, baby, and I really hope you are happy. Happy Fourteenth Birthday, sweetheart. Everything you need to know is in the diaries and if you have any questions, I hope Mark and Anna will be able to answer them.

I never meant to leave you like this, but your Dad and I made some very stupid and impulsive decisions and put your life in danger. I hope once you realize why we did

what we did, you will forgive us. The world you are going to be exposed to is scary and I hope my diaries and weapons will help you navigate through the labyrinths of obstacles that you will face.

They will find you soon, and when they do, remember to make smart and thoughtful decisions—decisions that will depend on your knowledge and wisdom and not feelings or family. Always remember that Luna, we and he are always looking out for you. Remember that I love you and I never meant to do what I did. I am sorry. And if you find him, please take care of each other.

Love,

Mom

I look up and then back again and slowly pick up the photos in the box. All of them portray a young couple. The woman has coffee brown hair and blue eyes that shine in the sun. She is looking lovingly at the man beside her. He has black hair and eyes as black as his hair. He is smiling down at her, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. It is *them*. They are smiling and laughing, looking happy and at peace, instead of screaming, instead of being terrified. They *are* my parents. But who is ‘he’? Who am I supposed to find?

I put the photos back into the box and pick up the sapphire ring. It has a small piece of paper attached to it that reads, *Your dad proposed with this ring*. It has always

helped me feel safe. Hope it does the same for you. I place the ring back and pick up one of the diaries. The pages are adorned with the same beautiful handwriting as the one in the letter.

I am still staring at the box with my hands on the counter, shaking, when Mom puts her palms on my knuckles and holds my hands. “They were werewolves. And so are you.”

And that, people, is how I get to know the truth behind my existence.

Chapter

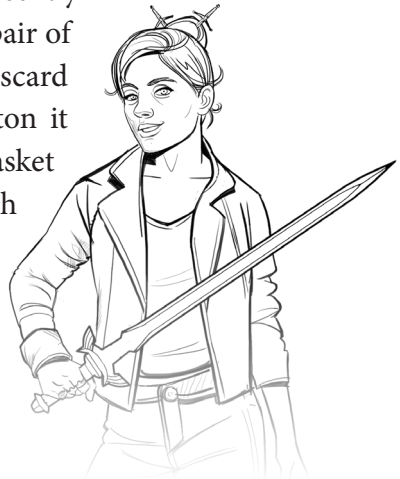
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Almost three years later...

19 August 2019

Natasha

I look down at my denim-clad legs and groan. Trust me, I am really excited and happy about the growth and the extra strength I have recently discovered, but this is the third pair of jeans that I have been forced to discard in the past two weeks. I unbutton it and toss it into the laundry basket that I had started to use as a trash can when I was eleven. It used to contain pieces of bedsheets earlier, but now it contains three pairs of jeans (that rise high above my ankles), two pairs



of shorts (that rise up to my butt) and five crop tops (that barely cover my breasts). I had to throw a few of them out as soon as I started growing, but then I foolishly went and bought new clothes and then had to discard a few of them too in the last couple of days.

I had lost all hopes of my human body ever changing into that of a werewolf after my sixteenth birthday, but then all the symptoms started showing a couple of weeks ago and the hopes came rushing back.

There has been a sudden growth spurt in my body and now I have regular visions of some unusual people—species, or animals—on the streets and my nails keep growing at a record speed. I have severe headaches too, but I guess that is a really small price to pay for what is coming. The fact that I had to discard my favorite pair of jeans combined with the allowance for buying new ones is a big price but I am too excited and overwhelmed to care.

Deciding not to buy new jeans till the growing stops, I pull on track pants and a black tee. I knot my hair into a bun and insert the hair stick—slash the occasional rapier into it. Then I pull out my phone from under my pillow and stick it into the side pocket of my bag.

Walking down the stairs, I notice a sticky note on the refrigerator's door and pull it off. *Appointment with Dr. Martin at 5. Get an Uber. Love you,* it reads in Mom's cursive handwriting. After grabbing a banana and a non-dairy chocolate bar (I have no idea how they make those, though), I lock the front door, walk down our porch steps and step into the warm, bright Californian sun. Mom has already left for work, so I have to walk to school as my

motorcycle license has been confiscated by the city police.

I don't actually have a problem with that. I like walking, it calms my nerves. However, I miss my bike. Last month when I went for a ride, anger brimming in my mind, the worst thing happened. On my way to the beach, I saw a water nymph drown a girl with beautiful blue hair and cocoa skin. Mad because of Liam and distracted by the scene, I crashed my Harley-Davidson into a tree, startling an older couple who were sitting nearby. They complained to the cops, saying I am a threat to nature and shouldn't be trusted with driving. Melodramatic, I know. And the next day I said goodbye to my license for three months.

It has only been a month so far and I am already getting sick of it. I toss the banana peel into the trash can and walk into Nicholas Warrior High School for my first day of senior year. By the way, I really think it should be named, Nicholas Torture High.

I walk through the sliding doors and get into the sleek lobby of the building, where Dr. Martin, my therapist practices. I am fifteen minutes early as I have come directly from the school. I had cross-country practice and after a cold shower, I took a ride with Sierra and got here. I start watching the first episode of the newest season of *Stranger Things* on my phone. But after the first five minutes, it starts buffering. I tuck my phone into my pocket and then walk into my sanctuary.

Dr. Martin is sorting through files when I walk in. He nods with a smile the moment he sees me. "Just give me a

minute.” I nod as he gets back to stuffing files into a rack and pulling out new ones.

It has only been a couple of weeks since I last walked in here, but the place looks very different. Dr. Martin loves changes and likes renovating the room at least once every three months. Now, instead of the old yellow theme which was there only weeks back, the room is blue. The feather dream catchers have been replaced with ones that have beads and pebbles. And lots of thread.

I drop my backpack on the rug beside the couch and sit down. I have been sitting on this same cushion since I first came here for my sessions when I was twelve, and it still gives me the same sense of comfort and security.

Dr. Martin finally sits down on his chair with his writing pad and the centuries-old Parker pen. I mean seriously, he never throws it away. It has been with him since the first day I walked in here. “So, did the nightmare return?” he asks as he picks up his wire-rimmed glasses and places them on his nose.

The nightmare disappeared around two years ago, but other dreams have taken its place. They aren’t the same as my parents’ nightmare. They are random sights. No more memories.

I shake my head. “No. But I did have a strange dream last night. I was on a beach with a few teenagers surrounding me and singing the birthday song. There was a chocolate cake and I cut it with some blonde guy. I think it was his birthday too. I don’t even eat cake. And my birthday is twelve days later. I mean, what is the significance of it all, if it is not related to me? This is so

confusing,” I whine as Jonah Martin scribbles on his pad.

I usually don’t talk much, but once I start talking and sharing all the details during my sessions, I can’t seem to stop.

“Any more recently, or just this one?”

“I had one last month about vampires and a human being with wings, who also had extremely elegant and beautiful features. A faerie, I think. It was really weird and damn vivid in its details. Same as the nightmare. I could feel myself move, but I wasn’t moving. I felt myself grabbing the bedsheet vigorously with my fists like the last time and screaming, but the bedsheet was hardly wrinkled when I woke up and Mom said she hadn’t heard anything, when I asked her the next morning. Is that normal?”

Jonah Martin is half-elf and half human, so he understands most of this.

He nods and rubs his stubble lightly and looks up, he looks tired. The man is in his mid-fifties with graying hair and a wrinkled forehead. He is very lazy and spends most of his time in this room, sitting, so he already has knee and back pains. I should take him to my cross-country practice.

“Your brain is connected to someone else’s, Nat. These images or memories are theirs. You are like a screen where their dreams or nightmares are projected. You feel what they feel. You see what they see.”

“But how would you explain the nightmare? Mum said ‘I love you’ to that kid. Why would she say that to someone else’s kid?” This is at least the twentieth time

I have asked this question. I kick my Chucks off and lift my socked feet onto the couch, hugging my knees to my chest.

“Maybe it wasn’t someone else’s kid. It could’ve been your sibling too.” He tries to convince me and make improbable connections, peppered with his southern accent, as he clicks the pen to the pad in an annoying rhythm.

I shake my head. Saying I have a sibling is like giving me false hope, but I gave up on hope, faith and luck a long, *long* time ago. “No, it couldn’t have been. That kid was the same age as me, so we would have to be twins... and do you know how rare it is for a boy and a girl to be twins?” He raises an eyebrow in question. “*Very rare.*”

He chuckles. “Twins and triplets are very common in werewolves. But for now, let’s leave the twin subject here. Any more dreams?”

I tell him about a couple more dreams and nightmares, and he asks me to leave when it has been an hour. I catch an Uber home and then decapitate a dummy and clean all the weapons at home.

Around eight, Mom sends me a message, saying she might be late. So, I eat some mashed potatoes, drink a glass of soy milk and after checking all the locks on the doors and windows, I go up to my room and collapse on my bed.

After a week or so, I finally stop growing. I go shopping with Sierra and spend quite a lot of money renewing my wardrobe. I don’t have a notable taste in acquiring stylish

clothes. So, I don't spend *that* much money on them. I am in and out of H&M, Gap and Levi's in an hour with only three shopping bags that contain jeans, shorts, yoga pants, tanks, and T-shirts. Lots of T-shirts. Sierra tries to force me into buying dresses and skirts, But I have never been comfortable wearing those and I am sure I never will be. I mean, why bother when you can wear jeans anytime, anywhere you need to go?

I am shopping for shoes when a blonde bumps into me and I feel like my arm has been electrocuted. But it's gone as fast as it happened. So I just shake my arm as the girl mutters something that sounds like Spanish, but I am not sure. I tried Spanish for one semester in freshman year but when I understood nothing of it, I switched to French. "*Lo Siento.*" She shakes her head and stashes her phone—the reason why we bumped into each other—into her pocket. "I mean sorry," she says and looks up at me with a smile. I smile back, and her eyes widen a little as her smile falters. She stares at me for a few seconds before hesitantly speaking, "Um, by any chance are you a Dinzler?"

My eyebrows rise in astonishment. I am registered as Natasha Chen in all of my school files. Very few people know my actual surname. I used to be Natasha Dinzler, but after my adoption, they changed that surname. I give her a small nod and her eyes widen further.

The girl is very pretty. Blonde hair with red ends and golden eyes. Her bob frames her face perfectly. I am sure the boys at our school will fall head over heels in love with her if she ever decides to step inside Nicholas Torture High.

“Are your parents still...alive?” she asks hesitantly, fidgeting with something in her hand that glints under the store’s lights. I focus my eyes and realize that it’s a knife. Seeing me stare at it, the girl tucks it into the back pocket of her jeans and raises her eyebrows. “Are they?”

I know I shouldn’t be answering, but that knife looked familiar. I think it is called a karambit or something and I had seen it in one of my dreams. So I give the girl an involuntary shake of my head. “No.”

I see her trying to suppress a squeal. She grins at me, places a hand on my shoulder, and squeezes it. “Emma and Chris would have been so proud. I’ll see you soon. Bye!” And she goes away, leaving me to stare at a pair of sneakers. What kind of heartless, insensitive person would be happy to know that someone’s parents are dead?

Wait... How did she know my parents’ names? Or my surname? Why did she look so familiar? And which sane person carries a knife around like that, much less a knife covered in blood?

I am breathing really hard when Sierra comes and finds me. “You, okay? You are not having a panic attack again, are you?” she asks, rubbing my back with her small hand. I shake my head. Panic attacks and Liam are finally out of my life. “Cool. Let’s get this over with. You are not letting me buy any heels anyways and I have an algebra test in two days. You have to teach me. C’mon,” she says, pulling me with her to the cash counter.

I am still thinking about the girl when I am eating dinner that night. I saw her in numerous dreams of mine. The moment she touched me, I felt a significant tremor,

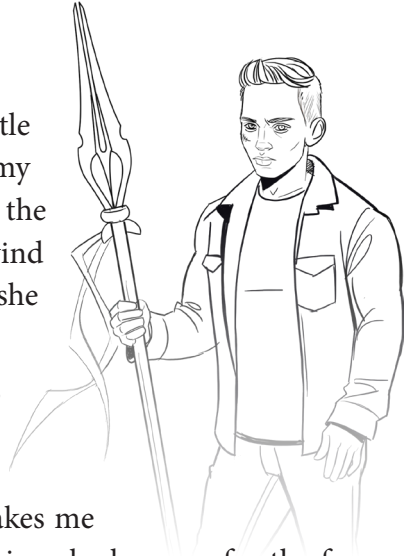
a vibration of some energy. What is going on? Is she part of the dark world? I wonder whether she has mystical powers. But she looked too normal and composed to be anything but human. Her beauty was special and unique, though. She could be a faerie. I wanted her to be a werewolf, but she didn't look like one.

Brandon

“Lift your elbow a little more, nice and...throw,” my sister instructs as I release the knife from my hand. The wind blows my damp hair as she shakes her blonde head.

We are on the grounds where young werewolves like us train ourselves. The strong breeze around us makes me lose focus. Karl, the name given by humans for the fog that accumulates in the mornings, has disappeared, but it is still cold. Other werewolves are training too, but not many are near the knife-throwing area. As for myself, I will give anything to get away from this place. “That wasn't so bad.” I pick another knife. “It hit the dummy.”

She snorts. “Not at all bad if you were aiming for its cheek,” my sister, Kat, says sarcastically. She is sitting on the grass beside me, stretching her legs. Her bright, beautiful face doesn't exactly fit her dull, gloomy surroundings. She is so pretty that anyone who doesn't know what she is capable of could never imagine her



killing demons with knives.

I am being forced to practice throwing knives even though I hate it. And Kat is here to keep an eye on me and make sure I don't run away and jump off the cliff on the other side of the grounds. "Hey! You know I am not as good with knives as I am with spears. Knives and daggers are your thing." As soon as the words leave my mouth, a knife flies past me, missing my shoulder by just a few inches. I freeze, but after a few seconds, when my mind finally registers that I am fine and that the knife didn't actually hit me, I turn around to where it came from.

A boy, barely twelve, comes running, picks up the knife and looks at me apologetically. "I'm sorry. I missed the target."

I am still a little wide eyed in bewilderment, but such things happen very often at the Lupus Ring. So, I smile and say, "Clearly." The boy, Max, runs back to his trainer and positions himself again.

Kat laughs; she is now doing the bound angle pose or Buddha something—that's what she calls it—while flexing her neck. "The look on your face was extraordinary," she says and laughs again. "And just so you know, you lost a spear fight with Aunt Kris yesterday, so I don't think you are any good at that either."

I ignore her and shuffle the knives on the table. "Shit, I forgot to tell you. I went to Puma yesterday to get some running shoes and I bumped into this girl who looked exactly like—" she is cut mid-sentence as our little sister comes running towards us, breathing heavily.

"Lily, are you alright? What happened?" I leave the

knives and walk over to my sister. “*Espere*. Slow down first. Catch your breath and then talk.” I kneel down opposite her as she sits down on the grass.

She takes 2-3 deep breaths and then starts talking in her soft voice, “Dad asked me to call you. He said he had something important to tell you. I cut my hand and so if any of you could help me...” She shows us a tiny slit above her left elbow.

Kat joins us while sharpening her knife. “I will take care of it,” she assures us. She turns to me and continues, “Well, looks like he got you out of your worst nightmare. But I still have a practice session lined up for the evening. Please overcome your fear of knives and come.” Kat loves mocking me, because I am her brother. Her *twin* brother.

I get back on my feet and dust off my pants. “I am not scared of them. At least not like you are scared of faeries, *princesa*.” I know some very interesting ways to make her angry that I implement once in a while, and this is one of them. As a matter of fact, I also know why she hates faeries, even if she thinks I don’t. It’s a sour subject to talk about, but so are knives.

She points the karambit in her hand at me in a thrusting manner. “*No soy una princesa!* Not even close! Do not call me that ever again,” she orders, completely ignoring the previous comment about the faeries. I try to hide the grin that is making its way onto my face and prepare to meet our father, one of the heads of the Lupus Ring.

The Lupus Ring is the headquarters of all the werewolf

activities in San Francisco and the surrounding cities. Humans can't see it. The dark world is covered by a cloak that only shows humans what they are ready to see. It is only because of the limitations of the human senses that they see the old remnants of a castle instead of huge white marbled buildings. It occupies a huge area and happens to be my home. Walking from the training areas to my dad's office takes five minutes and I loathe walking—even though I am a werewolf and I should be more 'active'.

“Brandon!”

I turn around to see who called my name. “Good morning, auntie.” It's my paternal aunt, Kristina Winters. She is the trainer and budget handler at the Lupus Ring. She has mastered using almost all the weapons which are part of our repertoire and she also helps my father with his work. All the students call her the “multi-talented teacher” because she also teaches us about demons and tries to make the experience of learning about them as scary as possible. We teenagers have seen and fought with our share of monsters, so most of us don't get scared. The young ones, however, are terrified of her demonstrations and her classes. We have had episodes of them crying and some even peeing in their pants. Good entertainment for us.

Her silver hair shines in the Californian sun as she moves towards me. “I thought I asked you to practice knife throwing. You know how bad you are at that. Forget the dummy, if one of the knives touches just the board around it, I'd be thankful,” she goes on rebuking me. I open and shut my mouth in quick succession, in an unsuccessful attempt to explain.

I look down and try to free my leg that somehow got stuck between the vines of a plant. Stupid magic plants. “I was practicing till now and you will be happy to know that one of them did hit the dummy.” My skills are terrible at knife-throwing and no amount of training is going to alter that fact, so why are we even trying? Give up already!

My aunt frees me by cutting the vines with her dagger and looks up. “Really? Where did it hit? Was it the butt or the ear?” I can sense her mocking laughter, springing from within. She thinks she is funny, but she is not.

I roll my eyes as she stands up and tucks her dagger back into her belt. “Actually, it was the cheek and I am supposed to go meet father, so if you will excuse me...” I look around for something so that I can distract her with and run away.

“Cheek? Seriously?” She gives me a skeptical look. “And I was coming to you for the same reason. I have good news for you. You are going to be spending some time with a beautiful girl.” She wiggles her eyebrows, acting like a high-schooler, even though she is in her thirties. Her golden eyes gleam with amusement.

Everyone on my father’s side of the family has some distinct features. Silver or golden hair, golden eyes or shimmering skin. The blood of the Winters was infected with some warlock blood long ago and it still makes us stand out. I like it.

“What? I thought father called me for some mission or something,” I somehow manage to utter, as my aunt starts smiling like the intimidating high schooler again.

“Oh, trust me it’s a mission.” She smirks and starts walking towards the sword fighting arena.

That was weird.

I knock on the huge wooden door of my father’s office and wait for the cold, distant voice to pronounce his welcoming words, “Come in,” but it doesn’t. So I knock again. Still no response. The area where all the offices are located is pretty old-fashioned compared to most of the other parts of the Lupus Ring. The offices still have old teak doors and windows whereas the rest of the LR has been modernized in recent years.

I am about to knock again when a voice behind me stops my movement. “I am here. Stop torturing that door,” my dad says. I turn around and see my silver-haired dad limp towards me. His left thigh is severely burnt, due to which he limps. The burn was caused by a silver knife which he took to save my youngest sister a few years ago during an attack on the Lupus Ring. It didn’t save her, though. She was gone within minutes. I am always reminded of Laura when I see Dad’s legs. Her shimmering skin and her tiny hands with which she drew amazing pictures at the tender age of five. I push the thought and my tears away and look at my old man.

“Good morning. You wanted to see me?” This particular door is kind of dead and brittle, so it is still making some creepy noises from my knocking.

My father walks past me towards the door. “I have an assignment for you. You remember Christopher and Emma Dinzler, don’t you?” He opens the debilitated door

to his office.

I perk up at those names and follow Dad. “How can I forget Uncle Chris and Aunt Emma? Their pictures hang in our drawing room.”

The room is well decorated with a huge classy wooden desk, and indoor plants lining the walls. I feel unexplained anger bubbling inside of me. The room looks the same, just the way Kat had left it when she was fifteen, the last time she did anything for Dad’s approval. He hadn’t even thanked her for her act. I clench my jaw in despair as the memories of that incident flash through my mind and I stare at him, trying to hide my feelings.

The room is dimly lit, but the morning sun filters in through the open windows and fills the room with a golden glow. The ceiling is high, as in most of the other rooms in the Ring. It’s still as scary as it was the last time I walked in here, my seventeenth birthday. The frightening portraits of werewolves in their wolf form are kind of unnerving and spine-chilling even for me.

“It’s good to hear that you still remember them, but I don’t suppose you remember that they had a daughter who is now of your age?” he asks, placing some heavy books about the alpha powers of werewolves and vampires on his desk.

Oh, so that’s what Aunt Kris was talking about.

“No. I don’t remember her.” I try to recollect any get-together in which we might have met. “I thought their children too died with them in the car crash.”

My father sighs indicating that he is disappointed. “First of all, it wasn’t a car crash. They were attacked

by other werewolves. I told you this before. They died fighting and they had a son and a daughter. Their son died with them in the incident, but their daughter wasn't with them when this happened. So, she is alive and I know where she is." As my father sits on his huge black chair, I notice his huge stature, with broad shoulders, his light beard, and big muscles. With all his attributes, he almost looks like a giant.

I remember the attack because even though I wasn't there, I have seen it. So has Kat. We used to have nightmares about it till we were fifteen. It had started when we went through lycanthropy, which was when we were around twelve. The same nightmare continued haunting us for a few years, returning every few days, but then one day it just vanished. We were sure that it would come back, but we've never had it even once in the last two years. But every time I think about them, I can still see the whole scene playing out in front of me. I tell myself they died in an accident, a car crash, so I don't have to remember that nightmare again.

I sit on the seat opposite to my father's. "Right. But you said she was my age so shouldn't she have gone through *lycanthropy* already?" Almost all werewolves *change* between the ages of twelve and fifteen. "So why isn't she already here?"

He nods a little, which gives me a feeling that I, his son, am not such a disappointment after all. Well, honestly, that nod can mean anything, but I have seen the disappointed look on my dad's face at least a million times in the past five years, and this isn't it.

"That's the problem. Christopher didn't want them to

get into all this... so when they were only a year old, he injected them with a serum that didn't let them change for the next sixteen years. In fact, I helped to create it and initiate the process. But she is going to turn seventeen on the next full moon which is tomorrow, and then she will most probably change," he says. I feel like he is holding something back. Omission is his everyday thing, but he seems nervous now.

I try to ignore it and get back on point but then my eyes widen as I try to absorb everything my dad just said. "Wait a second. You created a serum that could stop a werewolf from changing! That's so cool!"

"Brandon." My dad levels his eyes at me and I gulp the lump of fear that starts developing within me. He is a scary dad, and though I hate him, I am also in awe of his powers and knowledge.

"Sorry." I regain my composure. So, that's where I get my craziness for science from. At least something good came from this man.

I've never understood how my dad and aunt are siblings, being so different in their natures. While my aunt is all fun and humor, my dad hardly smiles and is always serious or strict. Okay, not always. Since 27th November 2014.

"I don't want her to go through *lycanthropy* alone. I want her to know about her parents and werewolves as a whole. So, I want you to go meet her tomorrow and bring her here before the moon comes up. Do you understand?"

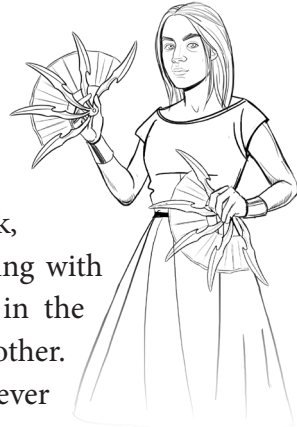
"Yes. But how did you find her after all this time?"

He looks up and I see him clench his jaw. *Ah, Kat!*

“Katherine did,” he mutters, still not admitting that she is good or even important. But at least he utters her name, which is better than most days when he just grunts at the thought of her.

Katherine

“I still don’t understand the logic. Why you? Why not me? It was me who found her!” I ask, sitting on Brandon’s bed, fidgeting with his guitar. He is the musician in the house. He got that from our mother. She was the best singer I have ever known and I had been the biggest fan of her lullabies.



He folds another paper and looks up at me from his place on the floor. “Because she’s a girl and we all know how rude and mean you can be when you are around other girls. We don’t want to make a mess. That’s why *me* and not *you*,” he says as he completes making a paper butterfly for Lily. I know that isn’t the reason. It is him and not me, precisely because Dad doesn’t trust me with the task. I drop the subject. I gave up on trying to please Dad long back, and I am not going to start again now.

I look at my brother, the only guy in my life presently, and smile. Brandon is a great older brother to Lily and she loves him more than any of us. She lost Mom and her twin when she was only five, so we are the only family she has. Dad loves her too—or at least I hope he does and is not resentful of her, like he is of me. He tries to spend as much time as possible with her, but between his work

and handling the Lupus Ring, he can't give her enough of it. He never gave us enough time either, but we had each other, so we turned out fine. Or so I hope...

Auntie is like a mother to Lily. From feeding her to putting her to bed, Aunt Kris takes care of everything Lily needs. Brandon and I are her substitutes. We take care of her when Aunt Kris is busy. We love spending most of our free time playing with her and teaching her the fun things about the *dark world*. And Lily's favorite things in the whole world are things made out of paper, so we make a lot of them to make her feel loved. Her room is filled with hundreds of paper animals and birds. Butterflies are her favorite.

I mess up the tuning of my brother's guitar and try to get it back to normal. "How many are you going to make? She is not going to forgive you even if you give her a thousand of those. You know that, right? You are just killing trees by doing that."

The guitar plays a weird tune, sounding like a goat bleating in pain while giving birth. Don't ask me how I know that...it's only part of the things you know, being on a farm for a month... I shudder at the memories.

"I know but it will make her a little happy and she just might be okay and not kill me," he says as he completes making a yellow camel. We can become origami experts with the amount of time we spend doing this. Not even a single fold is ever out of place.

"I really do want to meet her. I mean, I met her but I wanna know her. And I have a weird feeling that we might become good friends and make a great team."

I normally don't get along with people, but once I do, they mean the world to me. And the things I know about the girl make me feel like we would get along just fine. I mean, even our choice of shoes is similar.

"Te ves muy emocionada. Should I talk to Dad about it?" Brandon asks as he sits down beside me. He always switches to Spanish when he is concerned or trying to be soft. I do it too.

"Like that would work." He frowns at my grim face. *"Está bien.* You earned this, weirdo," I say as I place my head on his shoulder and hand his guitar back to him. The relationship between siblings is weird and often hard to explain. We fight like crazy but still love and support each other a lot; after all, we only have each other.

"Can I at least get some of the profit? I did find her," I ask. We get paid when we bring back a werewolf without getting hurt.

"Twenty percent and I'll be home with her by tomorrow night. You can get to know her then." He squeezes my shoulders and stands up from the bed. "Now, I have to go face the devil and give her these," he says, waving the bag with the paper animals. He broke Lily's crossbow and origami is his way of apologizing.

"Buena suerte," I say, as he smiles at me and leaves.

Chapter

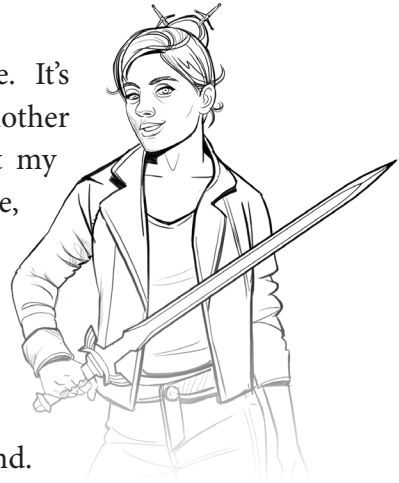
2

Natasha

“Sierra! Try to concentrate. It’s not that hard,” I say as I solve another problem. I am a math tutor at my school. I hate having free time, it makes me restless. Hence, in between sword fighting and gymnastics, I spend time tutoring other students who are poor at math and don’t hate me, which also includes my best friend.

I am still tired from all that I blabbered at Dr. Martin’s office during today’s appointment and now I have to prepare this math-hater for a test. Yeah, life’s great.

“It is! It’s math. How is it not hard?” Sierra Nash says and starts chewing her pencil, which she often does when she is frustrated or angry.



Unfortunately, I am her tutor and I have to make sure Sierra doesn't fail her tests just because she thinks math is stupid and lacks real logic, as per her understanding of it.

"Exactly my point. It's just math. C'mon, you can find 'x,'" I say.

Sierra puts the pencil aside and takes out her phone. "You know what? I can, but after I eat my tacos and fries. So, can we please go to Penny's? Please, Natasha," she begs as I give up on her algebra lessons and get up from my bed. Sierra eats like an elephant, but is as thin as a stick. I don't get how that is possible.

I want a burger pretty badly too, so I agree to go out with her. "Fine, but only for an hour. Okay?" I say, but we both know we are definitely not coming back in an hour.

Sierra smiles brightly at me and that's kind of frightening. "Okay! You are the best tutor ever!" she says as she gets up and pulls her lipstick out of her purse and starts applying some.

This is my best friend, Sierra Nash. The most gorgeous and popular girl at school, who carries a whole make-up kit in her purse. I would have never become friends with such a girl but my mom and Sierra's mom are work friends and I know Sierra from when we both were seven. So... we stuck together. We have known each other since we were tiny, but became good friends only two years ago.

I put my earphones into my bag so that if Sierra happens to find someone at Penny's, I won't have to listen to their crap and can just get lost with McDreamy and McSteamy. "Those are my heels, Si. You aren't allowed to wear them," I say irately, but she slides them on anyway.

They won't fit me anymore, but I still haven't gotten back my things that she borrowed in the past and those are the only pair of heels I have. I will need them in case my mom ever forces me to come with her to some colleagues' wedding or when Sierra takes me to some party.

"You don't need them, Nats. Have you seen how much you have grown in the past two months? It's like you went through the whole puberty cycle in just a few months!" Sierra says in her British accent and starts brushing her long hair. Her family moved to California from Nottingham when she was hardly five years old, but she still has her British accent, reminding her of her birthplace.

I know Sierra is right. I have grown at least four inches in the last two months. I have had a few muscles showing up due to gym and sword fighting, but they have started to grow remarkably strong and they are very visible now. My speed and flexibility have also increased, which is a good thing as it helps my gymnastics. And I know exactly why all of this is happening and I have hoped for this to happen for at least a couple of years now. But I can't explain all this to Sierra as she won't understand. No one will. Well...no one except Elena will, but unfortunately, she decided to leave.

"So, how tall are you now? Six feet?" Sierra asks as she finally completes putting mascara on her eyelashes.

I put my hair in a bun and shake my head. "No. Just five-feet-ten." I slip on my favorite boots and pull on my bag. I have never really been the pretty, popular girl whom everyone admires and being with Sierra has not changed

that. I am still the jock girl who people don't treat much like a girl. I am the only girl in our class who matches the speed and agility of guys and I am very proud of that. The one time I tried being a girl and dated, it back-fired.

"Seriously? I was joking when I said six feet. Five ten is too tall for a girl. You were five feet six when I last checked." Sierra gives me her most surprised look, with wide, gaping eyes, her mouth, also parting a little. The wide eyes remind me of the blonde I met at Puma yesterday. I am unable to get her out of my head and the most recent dream of me—or the person whose eyes I usually see her through—watching her swimming in the ocean does not help!

I groan. "I was, but as you said, puberty hit me hard. Now can we please leave? It's already nine."

She closes her mouth and nods, still squinting at me. She is looking at me as if she knows something about me that I myself don't know. "Sure, let me grab my purse."

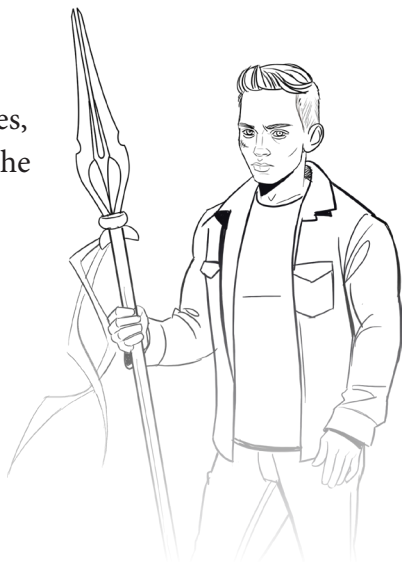
Brandon

"One burger and two fries, please," I order as I check the messages from Kat.

Princess Katy: Wyd?

Me: At a restaurant. Sup?

Princess Katy: The devil just won't sleep and auntie is busy with some work, so, I have to handle her. Why did you



leave me alone?!?!

Me: Sorry, sis. Handle her for one night. I'll be back by tomorrow.

Princess Katy: Ugh, fine. Bye.

Me: Love ya. Gn.

“Will that be all, sir?” the old man behind the counter asks as he punches my order in. The man is wearing a plain gray shirt and a pair of trousers and looks like he is in his late sixties. He has greyish black hair that reminds me a lot of my maternal grandfather. My grandparents shifted to Spain when they got married and have been living there with my uncle for the past five decades. Mom moved to California when she was eighteen. I have never met my uncle or my cousins since I was born, but I have seen a couple of their photos.

I put my phone back into my jeans pocket. “Yes. That’s all. Thank you.”

I smile at the man and go around to find a vacant booth. The diner is all blue. Blue seats, blue tables, blue floor, even the waiters’ uniforms are blue.

My father asked me to go to the school where Natasha Dinzler—that is her name—studies. But it is 9 p.m. Even though I don’t know much about human schools, I know that they don’t operate at night. So, I am free for the evening and thought: why not eat without Kat stealing my fries for a night? So here I am, at a fast-food hangout called Penny’s Diner.

I finally find one empty booth at the very end of the restaurant and sit down, waiting for my order. The food

END OF SAMPLE

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