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Fortune Glen

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FORTUNE GLEN

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Breea Schutt

May 2018

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FORTUNE GLEN

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Breea Schutt

ABSTRACT

A fairy may not be able to lie, but that doesn't mean they're always honest. Marine's former classmate is dead—and this isn't your typical 48-hour mystery. The crime scene is Fortune Glen, a realm populated by fairies who take great pride in their unique abilities, their inability to tell lies, and their peaceful behavior.

Well, until now.

Marine is the only one who knows about this murder, and she plans to keep it that way—at least until she's figured out who's behind this travesty.

When Marine is assigned a mission in the human realm, she does the unthinkable and materializes in front of a real-live human to ask for assistance in solving this crime.

(After all, humans murder each other all the time, right?) This human turns out being the bubbly-yet-jaded teenager, Farrah Minds. Farrah has just been placed under the wealthy care of heiress Genevieve Glessner, and is having a hard time hitting it off with her stuck-up foster sister, Alice.

Though Farrah is more than hesitant when it comes to working with a supposedly-mythical creature, Marine makes her a deal: If Farrah will help Marine solve the murder of Fortune Glen, then Marine will return the favor and heal the disfiguring burns covering eighty-percent of Farrah's body—the very scars that remind Farrah why she's been forced into the foster care system in the first place.

KEYWORDS: young adult, fantasy, mystery, female protagonist, foster care

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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A Masters Thesis
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Fortune Glen follows protagonist Farrah Minds, a sixteen-year-old girl in the foster care system, orphaned after a fluke house fire three years before this storyline. Farrah now finds herself under the wealthy care of heiress Genevieve Glessner. Though there are quite a few perks that come along with an heiress being her temporary guardian, Farrah struggles with keeping her temper in check as her new private school automatically deems her as the “unstable” type. Farrah’s jaded and slightly sarcastic attitude make her an outcast in this world of the prim and proper. Alice, Genevieve’s teenage daughter, only makes matters worse by acting as if Farrah is just another one of Genevieve’s unusual hobbies rather than a potential friend.

As if Farrah doesn’t already have enough on her plate, her storyline transforms into something fantastical as a water fairy, appropriately named Marine, appears in her bedroom on a random September evening. Marine shares the stage with Farrah, and is the second protagonist of this manuscript; each chapter switches between the two girls in a third-person, present tense point of view.

Though the shock of Marine’s presence makes Farrah question her own sanity, she semi-willingly listens to this “mythical” creature’s story. Marine has come with a request: She asks Farrah to help her solve a murder that’s been committed in the realm of Fortune Glen. In the fairy realm, murderer is something almost unheard of, something referred to as strictly “human behavior.” So, when Marine discovers the corpse of her former classmate, she decides to scout a human to help her solve this crime. The catch? No one else in Marine’s realm knows about the murder, or the fact Marine has contracted

a teenage human to help solve it. Marine's reasoning behind her secrecy is simple: If she can solve this mystery before anyone else can, perhaps she'll be seen as something more than a "putz." (The first part of this novel mentions how Marine caused a fiasco thirty-five years prior, and her realm has yet to forgive her for said event.)

Marine promises Farrah that, if Farrah is able to solve the murder of Fortune Glen, Marine will heal the disfiguring burn scars covering eighty percent of Farrah's body; the scars that remind Farrah why she's in the foster care system in the first place.

My goals for pursuing this story go beyond strictly writing a thesis for graduation purposes. Although there are only eight chapters featured in this creative project, I was inspired to finish the novel, and it's now completed at 90,000 words. I want Farrah's story to eventually expand into a trilogy and inspire young adult audiences. Farrah was created to represent a strong-yet-flawed female voice in YA literature; she's a character who's not afraid to be different and, eventually, learns that it's sometimes okay to not be okay—the personal journey I send her on ultimately leads her closer to discovering healthy coping mechanisms after tragedy, and these said mechanisms are balanced somewhere between her stoicism and temperamental nature.

The Free Indirect Discourse of *Fortune Glen*

My narrative style pulls from Mikail Bakhtin's ideas of free indirect discourse, as explained in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin writes that free indirect discourse "represents someone else's idea, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with [the author's] own expressed ideology" (85). Although the novel is told from a third person

point of view, switching between Farrah and Marine's perspective every other chapter, I didn't want their voices limited by the disembodied narrator. Instead, their voices and attitudes permeate through the narrative—from Marine constantly expressing her disdain toward the lack of respect she tends to receive, to Farrah, whose cheeky personality bleeds through even the first sentence of her storyline: "Farrah Beatrice Minds could really go for a grape soda right now" (11).

Fortune Glen's narrative is also told through present tense. I chose this tactic to complement the close psychic distance that the free indirect discourse provides. Since the narrative is meant to read as if the action is happening currently, the voice of the characters through the disembodied narrator sounds more natural, as if the train-of-thought is being produced as the reader follows along with the story.

The Merging of Fantasy and Reality

The timeline for *Fortune Glen* is chronological but, as I stated earlier, the limited point of view switches between Farrah and Marine. The lives of these two protagonists don't cross until chapter eight, when Marine travels from her realm to Farrah's in search of human advice. Once Farrah accepts the existence of fairies, Marine's presence becomes a natural element in this world. This acceptance of another realm within a reality-based setting is inspired by Lubomir Dolozel's concept of the possible worlds of fiction. Dolozel states in *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*, that "Contemporary thinking about possible worlds is not metaphysical. Possible worlds do not await discovery in some transcendent depository, they are constructed by the creative activities of human minds and hands" (30). Since Farrah, whom I created to be a

realistic and relatable character, is now interacting with Marine, a fantasy-based character, this embraced fabulism is an element I utilized to help readers suspend their disbelief; if Farrah can accept the ideas of the impossible—or, in this case, the fictional possible—the readers can, also, accept these new rules for the sake of storytelling.

Fortune Glen and its New Realism Structure

Farrah Minds takes on the characteristics of the New Realist, young adult protagonist: She's orphaned, broken-bodied, and jaded. Farrah's overall character—encompassing her sarcastic and hot-tempered personality—is largely inspired by the young adult protagonist, Aaron Corbet, whom I read about in Thomas E. Sniegoski's series, *The Fallen*. Aaron starts out his series in a similar state to Farrah's: orphaned, angry, and coming to terms with possible worlds brought to life by the power of fiction. Much like Farrah, Aaron is also tracked down by fantasy creatures; but, instead of fairies, Aaron comes face-to-face with a fallen angel, Zeke, who tries convincing Aaron that he is just like him—an angel/human hybrid.

Many young adult and children's literature stories fall into the “trope” of the lamenting, orphaned protagonist. This trend started in the 1960s when New Realism in young adult literature was starting to feature teenagers struggling with the more problematic sides of life. A few of my favorite examples which show the newfound progressive sides of literature for the young are Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964), which illustrated childhood depression; Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* (1977), which featured teenage insanity; and Judy Bloom's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970), which discussed a young adult's religious exploration. While the themes seem

dreary and depressing for young readers, they are still exploring themes that are not unfamiliar to them; in fact, the authors I mentioned above normalized these topics, making young readers feel as if someone could relate to the feelings and questions they were experiencing themselves.

The New Realism age of literature for the young brought with it parents who were either absent or negligent. This was to allow children and teenagers to be their own person without the constraints of overprotective parents. Even today, many adventures that young adult protagonists embark on are dangerous and reckless—adventures that, normally, parents would disapprove of in fear of their children getting hurt. The absence of parents gives children and teenagers alike the chance to make mistakes and learn through independent experiences.

Farrah Minds as the Orphaned Protagonist

I decided to make Farrah an orphaned protagonist because it gave me a lot to work with—especially when it comes to how much freedom Farrah has over her own choices. Granted, she does have guardian-figures (ie: her foster mother, Genevieve; her social worker, Arthur Rosebloom; and even her school counsellor, Mr. Lamour), but these guardians tend to be self-centered, rarely around, or care more about other aspects of their lives. Though this lack of guardianship does take its toll on Farrah's depression, she's able to commit more time to Fortune Glen's murder case without anyone questioning why she disappears for extended periods of time. Farrah learns a lot about herself—mainly through interactions that allow her the freedom to make choices on her

own accord. Farrah has more personal, internal conflicts; she gets the opportunity to question her own motivations for acting a certain way, or agreeing to certain terms.

The Moral Compasses in *Fortune Glen*

When Marine asks for Farrah's assistance in solving the murder of Fortune Glen, I wanted Farrah to be compelled to say yes for two reasons. The first is because of her moral obligation, thanks to her rational thought. Because I wrote Farrah's character alignment to fall under the "chaotic good" range, her conscience errs toward the side of doing what is ultimately right. In this case, she knows someone has been wronged, and she wishes to help. The second reason is more selfish—coming from a hedonistic mindset. Farrah is promised that if she solves this murder, Marine will heal the burns covering Farrah's body. At the beginning of the novel, this motivation holds a stronger attraction over the motivation to simply do the right thing. My plan for the ending of this novel was to prove that, despite unforeseen circumstances that will prevent Marine from fulfilling her promise to Farrah, Farrah will still round out as a character, allowing her compassion toward this new world and the people in it to propel her motivation.

Farrah Versus Marine; the Foils and Parallels of One Another

Farrah's character will not fully round out until she realizes Marine acts as her foil. In many ways, Farrah and Marine are—on a slight contradictory note—parallels of one another. They both come from pasts that haunt them, and feel like outcasts in their own societies. However, Marine's goals for solving Frigid's murder are not out of the goodness of her heart, but rather for the glory of solving the first murder in over a

thousand years. This leads her to hiding Frigid's corpse and covering up the fact that the murder ever happened, though she had no involvement in the murder itself. All of Marine's actions err on the side of hedonism and, though the murder case is something that could've been solved easily by simply contacting a higher authority, the only outcome Marine wants to see from this situation is a respect toward herself and her ability to be something other than a "screw-up."

As I stated earlier, and as illustrated throughout this manuscript, Farrah's motivations compare to Marine's on a certain level—Farrah cares about how she'll benefit from this situation more than she cares about the situation itself. That being said, Farrah has the advantage of the traditional *bildungsroman* on her side, which will eventually help mature these self-centered thoughts. As originally coined by Karl Morgenstern, a character's *bildungsroman* refers to a coming-of-age story (650). To be more specific, *bildungsroman* stories that feature young protagonists transitioning from childhood into adulthood introduce said protagonist to a more mature conflict in which the character is forced to make an independent decision; the protagonist could, also, reach an epiphany after witnessing a certain event that leads them to question prior beliefs. Or, they could experience a combination of both mature conflict and questioned beliefs. In Farrah's case, her coming-of-age moment will come later in the manuscript. In the first eight chapters, however, I have Farrah showing her immaturity through her jaded attitude.

Whenever Farrah thinks about her family's tragedy, she tries to lighten the weight of the memory by approaching it with sarcasm, or avoids thinking about it at all. Farrah holds back her emotions, believing they're nobody's business but her own. The plan for Farrah's *bildungsroman* is what leads to Marine and Farrah no longer being parallels of

one another and transforming into each other's foils. Though Marine will hold onto her selfish tendencies, unwilling to let anyone into her life completely, Farrah will learn that she doesn't want a life where others are constantly put at a distance. She wants to care about the new people surrounding her, even if it turns out their presence in her life is a temporary matter. This willingness to care about other people's wellbeing above her own is something I incorporated to show the maturity Farrah will obtain during the unraveling events and difficult decisions she'll be forced to make throughout the story.

Fortune Glen's Motifs

Following the same ideas of selfishness comes one of the main motifs of my novel: Isolation. This idea was heavily inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*. In Shelley's story, there is the concept of self-inflicted isolation—brought on by scientist and monster-creator, Victor Frankenstein—versus the concept of isolation as a consequence of existence—featured through Frankenstein's monster. The characters in *Fortune Glen* can be seen as a blend of both Frankenstein and his monster, for their isolation is both prompted by themselves as a reaction to how circumstance has treated them, as well as how society has deemed them as the outcasts. Farrah has a stigma attached to her as soon as she steps through the doors of her new private school, Scuttleview Academy. Her counselor, Mr. Lamour, is wary of her enrollment into his school, already aware of Farrah's tendencies to lash out when triggered emotionally. Farrah's anger issues were part of her character way before the fatal house fire, but her irrational lash-outs, along with the foster child title, create a recipe for her to be the stereotypical "unstable" teen. This instability not only deems her as someone Mr. Lamour

worries about—more for the school’s sake rather than Farrah’s own—but also as someone who is flighty and rather unpredictable.

None of the previously mentioned labels toward Farrah are untrue, and I never have her work to prove these stereotypes wrong. Truth is, Farrah *is* flighty and unpredictable. Though she doesn’t openly deny the company of others, Farrah is convinced the relationships she forges now won’t matter in the long run, which is why she rarely discusses anything more than shallow topics. Even when Marine points out that Farrah’s “Comfort Levels” on her brochure—a magical brochure which tracks not only Farrah’s location, but also the human’s emotional levels—are reading rather low, Marine never receives an insight as to why that is. And, because Marine is also a distant character who’s rather self-centered, the fairy never asks.

It’s established that Marine did something thirty-five years ago that Fortune Glen’s community has yet to forgive. Marine isn’t necessarily thrilled with being avoided by the glen community, but her character is very self-absorbed, and the friendship that she does have isn’t exactly handled with care. Marine’s only friend, Galaxy, is a fairy who’s mute, which Marine takes advantage of. Instead of giving Galaxy a chance to communicate in her own way, Marine speaks more than enough for the both of them, constantly complaining about the living conditions of the glen and the snobbish attitudes of their alumni class. Marine frequently bosses Galaxy around, and Galaxy lets her. Why? This is a subplot I explore as the story continues to unfold; but for now it’s shown that Galaxy doesn’t have a lot of friends to turn to, either, placing her in the group of isolated characters featured in *Fortune Glen*.

Alice, on the other hand, is fully a “Victor Frankenstein” character. She has the ability to make friends, her appearance is unusual but not unattractive, and she’s athletically and intellectually talented. And yet Alice only has one friend at Scuttleview High—Elias “Eli” Bainbridge—whom she refuses to associate with when others are watching. Alice’s refusal to bond with her fellow peers is a self-destructiveness she blames on her mother. Alice has been uprooted from her public school and placed into a private school upon her mother’s request. But that’s not the only way Genevieve has taken control of Alice’s life. After Alice’s parents divorced—post-Genevieve’s inheritance—Alice began to feel as if she was a doll in her mother’s new mansion, being forced to go along with all of Genevieve’s spur-of-the-moment decisions. Alice’s attitude is her defiance toward the direction her wealthy life has taken her. Alice refuses to make new friends in fear of complying willingly; the last thing Alice wants is her mother seeing the “good” she’s done, and trying to manipulate more of what Alice knows as “normal” life.

Another important motif I added to the narrative is the idea of the broken-bodied individual. According to David T. Michell and Sharon L. Snyder’s book, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, readers tend to view characters with disfigurements—such as Farrah’s skin-graft body—as characters to either be pitied or praised. Readers see the broken body as the conflict that drives the story; the body itself is seen as something which requires restoration, conquering, or acceptance (53-54). In Farrah’s story, her disfigurement is the driving force for many of her decisions. She wears turtlenecks in summer weather to avoid questions or pitied stares, and accepts

Marine's quest in the hopes that she will return to "normal" with the help of Marine's Fairy Dust.

This overly self-conscious attitude toward Farrah's appearance is unusual for her character's behavior—a character who's usually all-too willing to make a scene and stand out. (As illustrated in the mall when Farrah parkours in the middle of a high-class store to impress Alice's public school friends.) But the physical disfigurement itself isn't the purpose behind Farrah's guarded behavior. Farrah wants to put on a show; she wants to be seen as strong, independent, and able to conquer whatever task is thrown at her. Exposing what's underneath her layers of clothes shatters that illusion, and she becomes her history rather than her present. Although this could be a story normalizing the broken body, that's not its purpose. The burn scars Farrah bears are metaphorical, representing the past events she's burdened to carry. The layers of clothes over said scars represents how Farrah, though outgoing and ready to take on any and all challenges, is closed off and unwilling to discuss what orphaned her. Also, notice how Marine is a fairy with water abilities. This is another foil against Farrah's character, causing the cool and refreshing ideas of water to emphasize the harsh reality of Farrah's burns.

Conclusion

Fortune Glen was inspired by my love of murder mysteries, fairies, and young adult characters. I hope the full version of this manuscript someday reaches a wide audience; not just teens, but adults, also, who crave a complex variety of characters, themes, and world building.

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FORTUNE GLEN

Prologue

Remember the winter morning you awoke to find a premature tulip's bloom? Or when a wandering butterfly selected your shoulder to perch upon? How about that scorching day in summer, when the heat was at its driest, and an unexpected cool breeze caressed your sweaty hair? Consider it a reward—a good fortune, actually. It's a fortune fairy's greatest pleasure, as well as their duty, to brighten the days of those who populate the lowly human realm.

Yes—unlike ours—Fortune Glen is a peaceful realm, festooned with the brightest flowers, graced with the perfect weather, and filled from one corner of the glen to the next with species after species of exotic, radiant trees. Each tree is populated with a tight-knit community of winged beauties, and each fairy possess a unique ability that helps the glen continue to run smoothly. There are festivals. There are class reunions. There are late-night dates and early morning berry breakfasts.

Don't for a second believe that they are similar to us, though. They are peaceful, they are perfect (aside from a few outliers of the realm), and they never lie.

Not that they could lie, even if they wanted to. Fairies aren't designed that way.

That's what they've always been told.

Chapter One: Blank Space #5 (Marine)

If Marine were to write a scroll about her life thus far, the story might extend from the top of her head to the dip of her collarbone—but not an inch further. This was verified earlier in the afternoon when she and her friend, Galaxy, met up at their usual spot along the riverside. Marine had asked her friend, “What have I accomplished, Galaxy? What will I be known for? Besides the obvious, of course.”

(The “obvious” referred to Marine’s last mission in the human realm, thirty-five years prior. She didn’t need reminded of that. She usually was, anyway, without prompting. In some way or another. Constantly.)

Galaxy, who was born mute, had a paper and feather quill at-the-ready. She scribbled down her initial thoughts:

Marine is:

**Water-breather*

**Sapphire Wings*

**Wearer of bunches, baggy jumpers, and dotted eye makeup*

**Emotionally blunted*

When Galaxy finished, she handed the paper to Marine. Marine frowned as she read, pinching her bottom lip and tugging it outward.

“Marine is *sapphire wings*’?” she scoffed.

Galaxy shrugged. Her ruby-cruled wings flapped, their iridescent veins capturing the sunlight and distorting it into a rainbow across the grass.

“And what’s with this empty spot?” Marine continued on, skimming over the other two points—which were true but highly uninteresting—to poke at the offending blankness. “Could you seriously not come up with a fifth thing?”

Galaxy kept her legs crossed. Marine gave up on her question and jumped into the babbling current. Sometimes, the river proved to be a better friend than her only one.

Marine stayed under the water for a long while, trying to come up with a fifth answer herself. But, she finally had to admit this glen hadn’t—hasn’t—given her any real opportunities to show off her true potential. She surfaced after this completely-plausible conclusion came to her, but Galaxy didn’t notice until the Water-ability began to speak.

“I’ve got a lot of sunsets to go before my three hundred years are up, Galactic-Shine,” Marine said, smirking at her friend. “And I’m gonna finish that list of yours. You might even come up with a sixth point.” Marine flipped onto her back, feeling that wonderful feeling of water seeping through her jumper, washing over her hair, massaging her wings from the rippling waves. “I know you’re probably wondering how,” she muttered on, probably more to herself than her friend, “but don’t worry. Majesty knows I deserve some positive recognition by now. Thirty-five years is too long to go without.”

Thirty-five years is too long for a lot of things. To go without respect, yes, that’s probably the most important one. But it’s also been thirty-five years since her last visit into the human realm, thirty-five years since her regulated Fairy Dust allowance added up to more than three granules per week, thirty-five years since her alumni class began

speaking to her using very slow dialect to make sure she always understands the importance of whatever they're trying to say (which can actually refer back to point one: respect). It's also been thirty-five years since her last meaningful conversation with her former best friend and fellow alumnus, Frigid. Marine has gotten used to the silence. After all, she initiated it.

Presently, Marine flies up to the 117th level of the Hawthorne Tree. She missed the brunch hour (again) and is a little too early for dinner (third time this week), but she hasn't restocked her ice closet in eight—no...*nine* sunsets, and really doesn't want to start now. She could go to the café and grab at least a drink to go, but everything there is absinthe-based and not only makes her feel weird the rest of the night, but costs her way too much Fairy Dust. *Five* granules of F.D. for *one* drink? Yeah, she thinks not.

Thus, here she is, walking through the kitchen, stepping around individuals who are overly-focused on their cooking tasks, to try and find a snack or two. Some kitchen volunteers are busy squeezing the drupelets from raspberries into acorn bowls, while others slice mushroom caps and prepare them for the fire abilities' sizzling hands; once the fungi touches those searing fingers, the white skin transforms into a shade of glazed copper, followed by aromas so succulent it's impossible to keep Marine from wanting a taste-test.

“Ah ah ah!” one of the fire abilities tsks, slapping Marine's grabby fingers out of the way with a still-scalding hand. Marine yelps and sucks on her burnt knuckle. She considers sprinkling a granule or two of her F.D. over the burn to keep it from scabbing

over, but decides it's not worth the waste. Besides, all F.D. is good for in these situations is healing wounds cosmetically. The sensation would still remain. So, lose/lose for her.

Pyro, the fire ability with the tsk-ing and the slapping, gives Marine an amused grin. "Interesting makeup choice today, Water-Shine."

She's referring to the two black dots residing below Marine's bottom eyelashes. Marine pulls her knuckle out of her mouth with an unattractive slurp. "It's blackberry essence. On sale. 387th level. You been to Cosmo's shoppe?"

"No, I'm actually keeping myself busy. Unlike some." Pyro mutters the last part as she turns back around, continuing to crisp the five stalks that have appeared behind her. While she's distracted, Marine reaches over and snags a mushroom gill, popping it into her mouth and nearly swallowing it whole.

"Y'know," Marine says, before completely swallowing the gill. She clears her throat and tries again. "You know, I think a trip to Cosmo's would do you some good. Cover up some of those freckles. The obscene amount you have is unnatural."

Pyro doesn't look up from her work. "I'm ginger-haired."

"Also obscene, but I'll try to ignore that."

Pyro squeezes her eyes shut, takes a deep breath, then smiles and turns back toward Marine. "Did you spend all your allowance on those two dots of yours, Water-Shine?"

Marine messes with the split-ends of her bunches, not saying anything. She wants to sneak over and grab one of the raspberry drupelets on the other side of the room, but Pyro's full attention is directed on her now.

“You know how you can earn more?” Pyro continues, her smile increasing in smugness. “You actually *do* something. And I’m not talking about floating in that *frinxy* river of yours. You do something productive, something that helps out the community in any way.” She stops talking and presses her thin lips together. A chuckle escapes them. “Then again, what would *you* do? Who would trust you enough to put you in charge of anything?”

The burning in Marine’s knuckle has spread up her arms and to her cheeks. This is why she never eats during community meal times. Less than one percent of the tree’s population is from her alumni class and knows everything—too much—about her. The other ninety-nine percent doesn’t even know her name.

“Hey, Pyro!” a man with razor burn stubble and large front teeth calls out. He’s standing inside the kitchen’s ice closet, while melty water droplets roll off the walls and drip onto his greasy-looking wings. “The walls are getting a bit sloshy. We need ‘em refrozen.”

“Then I’m the last person you should be talking to,” Pyro calls back. “Go get an ice ability.”

“I think Blizzard left to open his own ice rink on the 36th branch,” Razor Stubble says. “So we lost a volunteer.”

“Hey, wasn’t there an ice ability in your alumni class, Fire-Shine?” another volunteer asks as he produces a ball of water with his hands and washes off a berry-stained counter.

Marine’s stomach clenches.

“You mean Frigid?” Pyro clarifies. “Yeah, but he was on a Fortune Mission last time I checked.”

Marine starts making her way across the kitchen again, toward the exit, seeing if she can swipe any loose breadcrumbs or corn kernels as she passes through.

Frigid. *Pfft.* Of *course* he’s on another Fortune Mission. That’s what’s so annoying about him. He *knows* he has a great ability and he flaunts it. And then Her Majesty awards him for it, along with praising him for his *wonderful volunteer work* and *positive attitude* and for even taking younglings and tutoring them in his spare time just because he *enjoys watching them succeed*, and yadda yadda yadda.

“Yo, Marine!”

Marine stops mid-step with a kale-bulge in her cheek. She spins around, unable to hide it in time.

But that’s not what Pyro asks about. “Could you go see if Frigid’s at his living quarters?”

Marine swallows the kale fast, but her stomach feels like it could vomit it back up. “Uh, I could. Do I want to? No.”

Majesty, bless the honesty of this glen.

“Come on,” Pyro whines. “Do it for your fiery ol’ classmate, will ya? If I don’t get these mushrooms crisped by sunset, we’re gonna have a lot of hungry people on the premises.”

“Not my problem,” Marine singsongs. She almost makes it to the door, until Pyro calls out, “Would you do it for five granules?”

Now, it’s Marine’s turn to get smug. “Twenty-five.”

“You’re such a putz,” Pyro huffs. Yet, she persists: “Ten.”

“Twenty.”

“...Fifteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“You just want the last word!” Pyro’s arms start glowing like embers, but she cools down quickly with a surrendering sigh. She retrieves the seventeen shimmering white granules from the Fairy Dust pocket stitched into her knee-length sock, then waits for Marine to skip across the kitchen and snatch them away.

“No refunds,” Marine reminds her, shoving the dust in her own F.D. pocket, stitched into the inner-thigh of her jumper. “If Frigid’s not there, the F.D.’s still mine.”

“More than likely, it’ll have already been spent, too,” Pyro mutters. “Go on, now.” She waves Marine away. “I’ve got mushrooms to crisp.”

Marine jumps into flight, knocking over three bowls filled with raspberry drupelets and smacking her head against a floating row of silverware, causing an uproar from the kitchen staff before she zips out of there.

The countless number of doors lining the hallways becomes a colorful blur as she whizzes past. A few casually-strolling individuals glare at Marine as her pumping wings shove them aside. She ascends the staircase to the forty-third floor. A couple younglings slide down the bannister, slipping downwards faster than Marine’s speed-flying upwards. Sometimes, Marine slides down the bannister, too, to get to wherever she’s going faster. Sure, the slippery beam was made for younglings—but no one’s made a rule stating it’s strictly for them. Yet.

Marine's flight decelerates once she gets to Room 43:18, steadily passing 43:19...43:20...43:21...and finally parking herself in front of Room 43:22. She raps on the door in three swift knocks, then takes a step back. Her hands fold behind her wings, and she rocks gently on her heels.

A minute rolls past. Perhaps he didn't hear? She knocks again—four raps this time.

Another minute; another bout of nothing.

Marine's nose crinkles. Frigid has been known to take his time with Fortune Missions, but she could've sworn he left exactly four weeks ago. (It was an accident that she found out this information. She overheard him talking about it at the café with some of their other alumni members. She sat a few tables away from them, keeping her face obscured by a menu she didn't plan on ordering from. They hadn't seen her, or else they had ignored her. Either is plausible. She's never invited to their group outings.)

“Uh, Frigid?” Marine clears her throat. “Frigid? It's Marine. I know. Pretty frinxin' weird. It's been a while, but...the kitchen's looking for you. The ice room's starting to thaw. That's all I'm here for.”

Marine might as well be conversing with a sparrow egg. She hears no stirring, no reply, no...anything. And yet the gap at the bottom of the door has light seeping through.

Marine reaches for the knob, anyway, and gives it a jiggle. As expected, it's locked.

She could walk away. She gets to keep the F.D. either way. But, then what? Next time she tries sneaking into the kitchen for a quick snack, Pyro will probably give her a reprimanding. Which isn't out of the ordinary; she's almost used to it.

But something about that light being on in his silent quarters is...strange.

Despite her better judgment, Marine knocks on the door—this time in a different, rhythmic pattern. When Frigid had first moved into these living quarters, he enchanted the door, thinking that if he ever lost his key, he'd be able to knock out a password and still be let in. He let Marine come up with the knock: two short raps, two long, pause, pause, three short, four rapid raps, and the touch of the pinky right above the knob.

She's surprised to find it still works, just well enough to manipulate the lock's mechanisms for a second or two. Which is all she needs. She slips out of the hallway and into his room.

The smell hits her first.

It's not overwhelming, but it's unfamiliar to the normal, sweet-smelling scents of the glen. No, this is the smell of dampness. Metallic. The silence she heard on the other side of the door is still prominent. Increased. Marine plugs her ears with her fingers, which does nothing except make the blood pounding in her head echo. Her sight blurs after each beat-beat, beat-beat, beat-beat of her heart. And then she sees him.

Frigid's body is sprawled across the wood floor. He's curled up like a dried leaf, his back bent at a sharp angle. His once-sparkling zircon wings now lay stiff, drained of their enchantment. Marine tiptoes away from the door, afraid to disturb his strange slumber. But he doesn't stir, not even when she steps around his feet to get a better view.

The veins in his eyes have popped, seeping through the whites and tracing a bloody line around his icy pupils. His face is pale—no, not pale...blank. There's no color, no expression, no light. A tiny stream of blood trickles out the corner of his blue lips, dripping onto his favorite white cape—the one made of felt; the one Marine used to steal

to warm herself while he went on freezing rampages. Marine leans down to brush the blood away with her thumb. It reminds her of her river; the purity of its never-ending waters as opposed to the finality represented in this crimson flow, dripping into a shallow puddle underneath Frigid's swollen cheek.

The word death is defined as something honorable, signaling that an individual has lived out his or her three hundred years and is ready for rest. It's a celebration of life.

But Frigid isn't three hundred years old. He's barely fifty-three. This can't be death. This can't be death at all. So, why does the word keep coming to her mind?

Marine's hands cup around his cheeks. His neck gives way, flopping his head limply to the other side.

"Frigid," Marine breathes more than says.

She peels one hand away. The blood has stained her palm's fate line, enhancing its indentation.

"This doesn't happen," she whispers to nobody. She runs her crimson-stained fingers through his lily-white hair—so soft and damp, like grass after an April's shower. The red soils the white. "When's...when's the last time this has happened?"

And that's how Marine completed Blank Space #5 of Galaxy's List.

Marine is: Witness

Chapter Two: Glessner Manor (Farrah)

Farrah Beatrice Minds could really go for a grape soda right about now. Not a can, a bottle. Cans taste too metallic, and they make soda go flat too soon. She ruffles her massive hair (not massive from curls or body, but rather a natural, unkempt appearance that seems to grow every time Farrah neglects it), then conks her forehead against the passenger window.

Arthur Rosebloom, a twig-like social worker with a blond mustache the size of a long-haired kitten's tail, escorts Farrah this evening. He glances over at her, seeming to study Farrah's bored, dehydrated expression, before wiggling his shoulders and saying with an overly-uppity tone: "This one's going to be a real treat for you, just you wait."

Farrah doesn't reply. She plucks a hair from her eyebrow—which surely has enough eyebrow-hair to spare, let alone make a new pair of eyebrows for someone lacking—then drops it onto her turtleneck sweater.

Is it too hot for a turtleneck today? Absolutely. The end of summer vacation is upon the students of this Philadelphia town (whose name escapes Farrah at the moment), but that doesn't mean the end of summer weather is around the corner, too. It's a piping eighty-five degrees, according to Farrah's phone, and that's not even the peak of the heat. It's not a huge deal; Farrah's learned to adjust. She's had to for three years now.

Well, not had. She chooses. After all, a little sweat on the body is normal; what she hides underneath her sweater is another story entirely.

Arthur mistakes her silence as permission to continue talking. "The woman's name is Genevieve Glessner. I'm sure she's delightful, but—added bonus!—the lady's loaded. Inherited a ton of money from her late father. Not sure what business he was

in...oil? Gold? Aglet manufacturing? Doesn't matter. Doesn't do him any good now, I suppose. Ms. Glessner, on the other hand...."

Farrah smirks at the window. She gazes at the trees whizzing past as if she's in one of those cheesy movie openings—the indie kind, where some folksy song is playing in the back as the protagonist begins to internally narrate her story:

Hi, my name's Farrah Minds. You might be wondering where I'm going, or where I'll end up next. To be honest, I'm always wondering that, too.

Farrah sneers at herself. Gosh, that was tacky. No wonder no one's ever asked her to write a screenplay.

"And she's got a daughter," Arthur continues. "Your age! Which means you'll already know someone at your new school. How great is that?"

Hi, my name is Farrah Minds. You're probably wondering how this guy next to me plays into my story. It's my social worker, Arthur, and he cares way too much about people to be in this line of work. In a few moments, he'll ask me how anxious I'm feeling—on a scale of one to ten. It's a trick my therapists and/or school counselors always use, because it's not as blunt as asking, "Do you feel like you're gonna snap someone's neck today?"

Farrah's never snapped someone's neck. She doesn't want to mislead her hypothetical audience. Back to the drawing board.

Arthur releases a breath Farrah didn't realize he was holding. It tousles the hairs of his mustache. "Farrah," he says, "on a scale of one to ten...."

Hi, my name's Farrah Minds. You're probably wondering why I'm wearing this awful sweater when it's hot as balls outside. You see, everything I've ever cared about

was destroyed three years ago in a fluke house fire. I'm told a fireman saved me before I allowed the flames to engulf my body, but the scars where the flames tried to snuff me out still remain on my arms, my torso, my thighs. But not my face. Which people who know me and my situation have been known to say, "Wow, you're so lucky your face wasn't scarred!" and I've been known to reply, "Yeah, it's really awesome that I tried to suffocate myself with a pillow before the fire had a chance to kill me, ha ha!"

That's why a lot of people don't know my situation; that's why I choose to wear the turtlenecks. It's easier for them to look me in the eyes if they're not staring at my skin grafts.

Hm. Engaging, yes. Maybe a little dark for an introduction, though. Maybe she should be more mysterious, more...positive? She's glad she's not dead; should she incorporate that to sort of lighten the mood?

"Farrah."

Farrah looks up from the window. "Hm?"

"One to ten, how's the anxiousness?"

"Like, five?"

Five's always fair. Five always gets her off the hook.

Arthur's stare refocuses on the road.

Farrah pops her feet under her rear and playfully slugs Arthur's shoulder. "You think this Glessner lady has a swimming pool in her swimming pool? Like that one episode of Spongebob?"

"Really don't know what you're referring to," Arthur says. "But I'm sure if you asked for one, she could afford it, no problem."

Farrah's just about to punch-buggy Arthur for a 'Slug-Bug red,' but her slap converts into a grasp onto Arthur's armrest. "Whoa...."

He wasn't kidding. Glessner Manor is a modern-day Victorian mansion, with a flanking tower on each side of three predominant, elongated windows. The manor looks to be three—perhaps four—stories tall, painted in a deep sangria-tint with a towering, pyramid roof. The property is protected by a gate whose steel bars intertwine within one another to create alluring, vermicular patterns. The gate opens automatically as the car continues to advance upon the winding driveway which sparkles—literally sparkles—for within the tarmac pavement rests thousands of crystal shards.

Maybe Farrah's internal narrative should begin here: Hi, my name's Farrah Minds, and I've never seen this much money wasted on the facade of a house before. And I've been to Washington D.C.

The driveway ends before fully approaching the mansion, providing more space for the lazy river wrapping itself around the perimeter. (Not a swimming pool within a swimming pool, but it'll work.) The lawn is sodded, bushes freshly trimmed, and flower garden brimming with a colorfully-alluring variety of ranunculuses, lilies, peonies, and gardenias.

Farrah releases the armrest from her knuckle-whitening grip as Arthur puts the vehicle in park. His light-hearted smile reappears. "What did I tell you, huh? Loaded."

Farrah tugs at the collar of her turtleneck, her wandering eyes still trying to absorb all the money sprouting from this front yard; the woman who lives here could've ended starvation in Africa. Twice.

Arthur strides around the nose of the car and opens Farrah's door. Before she leaps out, Farrah reaches into the back, grabbing an oversized duffel bag and a police scanner—a clunky, rectangular piece of metal with dozens of knobs (half of which don't work), and a scratchy speaker; it's a product of the late-eighties and the red-headed stepchild of the nineties. She tucks it awkwardly under her arm and slings the bag over her shoulder.

Arthur holds up an inquiring finger. "Would you like me to—"

"Nope! Got it!" Farrah shuts the door with a backwards kick and starts her venture up the sidewalk.

Arthur's finger curls downward. "Er...alright...then."

Farrah steps onto the cobblestone bridge that arches over the lazy river and leads to the fiberglass front doors.

"Would you like me to walk you the rest of the way?" Arthur calls out.

Farrah readjusts her grip on the scanner. "What am I, your date? C'mon, Arthur. I'm a big girl."

This doesn't keep him at bay. Arthur shuffles up the drive and over the bridge, coming up beside Farrah just as she rings the doorbell.

Farrah and Arthur recoil at how abruptly the doors swing open (Farrah has to brush away Arthur's clutching hand from her sleeves). Two servants, dressed in suits formal enough to be betrothed in, hold the curled brass handles of the doors with a slight bow. Farrah and Arthur exchange wary glances but enter, nonetheless.

Unlike its outer facade, the inside of the mansion has been stripped from the Victorian undertones, leaving it completely modernized. A ninety-inch flatscreen

stretches out across the back wall, with a white-and-massive wrap-around couch as its audience. There are bizarre pop-art pictures scattered about the butter-yellow walls, each screaming for attention with their rather loud color schemes. Farrah recognizes one of the people in said pictures to be a distorted version of President Lincoln, but everyone else is either beyond *recognition* or beyond her historical knowledge.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

For the second time within this five-minute timespan, Farrah nearly pees herself. A shrill scream echoes from the top of the spiraling red staircase and doesn't stop until the perpetrator dashes down to the bottom step.

The woman would normally be about two inches shorter than Farrah, but her heels double that and make her, instead, a faux two inches taller. She's wearing a gypsy skirt with a Moroccan pattern across the tawny felt, which is tucked over the bottom seam of her silk shirt. A string of pearls dangles from her rubbery neck and match the twining pearl headband pressing into her chocolate curls, making them jut out purposefully. A skinny blush brush is tucked behind her ear, still caked with pink powder. Farrah grimaces. If she sneezes, she'll blow half this woman's face away.

The woman scurries over, heels scuffing the wood floor, and presses both of her spindly hands firmly against Farrah's face. “Lord, have mercy—are you not the most precious thing?” The language she uses is southern, but the accent doesn't match. Instead, the woman speaks in a stagy English dialect. She presses Farrah against her chest in a cumbersome embrace wherein Farrah takes no part. The woman peels herself away and releases a satisfied breath. “I'm Genevieve Glessner, the woman I'm sure you've heard more than enough about.”

Farrah shifts the strap of her bag into a more comfortable position. “I’m F–”

“Farrah!” Genevieve squeals out, clasping her fingers as she turns back to face the staircase.

Farrah swallows down the rest of her sentence. Sure, yeah. That’s the “F” word she was looking for.

Genevieve smiles over her shoulder. “Please, Miss Farrah, follow me.” Her smile grows stern as her gaze shifts toward Arthur. “Honestly, would it kill you to help the girl carry her belongings?”

Arthur rubs his hand as if it’s been slapped. “Farrah insisted–”

“Ah, Farrah,” Genevieve purrs, her smile sincere once more. She begins ascending the stairs; Farrah follows Genevieve, and Arthur follows Farrah. “The maids have been readying your room for the past week. I hope everything’s up to par.”

The trio has only scaled the first few steps when Genevieve spins around; Farrah stops walking, and Arthur nearly smacks into her back.

“Shoot, I got caught up in all the excitement. I’m so sorry, but your room’s located on the third floor.”

Farrah shifts the scanner out from under her arm and hugs it against her ribcage. “That’s...okay?”

“Usually we’d just take the elevator,” Genevieve says, “but it’s out of commission at the moment. Someone’s coming in an hour or so to fix it. Not soon enough, I reckon. But if your, uh, social worker is so concerned with getting his hands dirty, I’d be more than happy to holler at the guys downstairs. They’re not just there for good looks, y’know.”

“Really, I’m fine,” Farrah says. “This isn’t as heavy as it looks.”

Genevieve raises a penciled eyebrow. “Hmm,” she says, as if tasting something displeasing. “Well, let’s continue on, then.” The rest of what she says is muttered under her breath.

Arthur taps Farrah’s shoulder “I’m going to carry your stuff,” he whispers.

“Now.”

“Nope, nope, nope,” Farrah whispers back.

“No, seriously, this woman hates me.”

“Then be thankful you’re not the one living with her.”

“The kitchen’s free game,” Genevieve’s voice booms. Even with the heels, she’s already passed the second floor and marching on toward the third. Arthur takes short, huffing breaths as he trails behind. “If you want a snack, we’ve got everything: mini muffins, not-so-mini muffins, super-mini muffins—”

“I’ve always been more of a cupcake person, myself,” Arthur interjects.

Genevieve shoots Arthur a glare so piercing it’s a miracle his witty tongue isn’t sliced off on the spot. He swallows, then flashes a sheepish smile.

Genevieve tilts her head to each side; it soothes her face back to composure. “If,” she continues, “there’s something you want that we don’t have, our chef’s speed dial is 8, installed in all the house phones, so just call. There’s three bathrooms on every floor, not counting the private ones attached to each room—that includes your own—so you don’t have to worry about ever needing to ‘hold’ it.”

Farrah steps off the last stair leading to the third floor hallway. It smells warm on this floor, like a sun-kissed orange rind, and yet the overhead lights produce wavering,

cool-colored beams of blue and sea-foam green. It wouldn't surprise Farrah in the slightest if a mermaid happened to float on by.

Genevieve waits for Farrah and Arthur to catch up before continuing on. "We have a movie room, game room, indoor and outdoor pool (heated upon request), two ballrooms, a library, ballet studio—oh! Which reminds me...."

At the fork in the hallway, Genevieve takes a sharp right, clicking onward until she reaches the fourth door on the right. She knocks once, but doesn't wait for a reply; instead, she shoves open the door. "Al-ice!" she sings. "Take a break, m'dear. We've got company."

Genevieve reaches out and grabs Farrah's wrist, tugging her forward and almost causing her to lose grip of the scanner.

Past the door is a generic ballet studio: wood floors, mirrored walls, even a ballerina bar with an actual ballerina attached.

Alice doesn't immediately react to her mother's ecstasy. She slowly, gracefully, lowers her stiff-straight leg from over her head and sets her pink flat delicately against the wood.

Alice's hair is slicked back in a typical brunette bun. Her glasses are two large fishbowls, providing shelter for her tiny, tetra-like eyes. She wears a leotard that makes Farrah ask herself: would fetus-me even be able to squeeze into that?

"Alice," Genevieve says, kneading Farrah's shoulders, "this is Miss Farrah. Farrah, this is my daughter."

Alice gives Farrah a bored once-over. "Pleasure," she says.

"Ditto," Farrah says with a two-fingered salute.

Genevieve squeals and hugs Farrah around the neck; Farrah’s eardrums internally squeal back.

“Ooh—I can feel the chemistry already!”

Alice rolls her head back to face the mirror in one fluid motion. Her eyes flutter shut as her feet default into a pirouette. The way she lifts her leg forward—bending, unbending, twisting – illustrates the fluid transitions of classical music.

Genevieve shuts the door, then turns to wink at Farrah. “We caught her at a bad time. Alice is very dedicated to her ballet. Her instructor will be here any minute now.”

The trio doesn’t walk too much further before Genevieve shouts, “Ah! Here we are!”

Farrah squints against the wavering blue-and-green lights as Genevieve turns the knob of the door at the end of the hall.

The room could easily double as an upscale studio apartment, not to mention it contains numerous aspects that Farrah’s certain she’s pinned to her Pinterest “At Home” board. For starters, there’s a wicker-hanging chair next to a colossal arched bookcase (each book is color-coordinated by its cover to create a rainbow-effect). An in-floor trampoline rests in front of a television only slightly smaller than the one downstairs. The bed is king-sized, rounded, and located in front of an electric brick fireplace. There’s a ladder in the middle of the room that leads to a second floor—the loft—which has one wall constructed purely of glass; it’s a massive aquarium, stocked with jellyfish, seahorses, eels, and numerous other aquatic lifeforms. Farrah can’t seem to pinpoint the cherry on top of this elaborate sundae—everything is an added topping on something already super sweet: there’s a bathroom (just as Genevieve mentioned), a mini-fridge (stocked), a walk-

in closet (for all of Farrah's duffel bag), and a few dozen butlers upstairs just hiding in wait for Farrah to spurt off her first request. (Okay, that last part is just a guess. But she wouldn't be the least bit surprised if it were true.)

Farah drops her police scanner and duffel on the bed, stretching her fingers to try and shake the pins-and-needles away.

Genevieve runs her finger under the fourth step of the ladder and frowns at whatever she thinks she's gathered. "I told Mitzy to dust this morning," she mutters. She presses her index against her thumb and rubs away the "dust." "I hope this room works for you. If it's too snug, let me know. I have a more spacious room on the second floor, but it's usually for 'guests,' and I didn't want you thinking you're just a 'guest.'"

Farah's wandering eyes examine above. The hundreds of tiny dots scattered across the ceiling tiles are fiberoptic and pulse different colors to the beat of the soft, pop music playing through the speaker system.

"No, this'll...it'll do."

Genevieve clasps her hands together and holds them against her cheek. "Wonderful!" Her heels scrape against the plush carpet, turning over the fibers and creating off-white lines. "Guess I'll give you some time to get settled. Would you like it if I sent Mitzy your way with a cup of iced cocoa in, oh, about a half hour?"

Farah presses her hand against a tile protruding from the wall. The tile next to it opens and exposes a control panel with tiny irradiating buttons that Farrah knows she'll never take the time to figure out.

“Actually,” she says, pressing one of the flashing yellow buttons. The music changes from pop to something hip-hop. Farrah immediately regrets her decision. “I could really go for a grape soda. In a bottle.”

“I’ll make it happen,” Genevieve says, giving Farrah’s shoulder a squeeze. That must be her thing—touching shoulders.

Genevieve’s smile puckers slightly as she passes Arthur, but she appears way too pleased to be bothered by his presence anymore. She must know he won’t be lingering around much longer; a hum escapes her throat.

When Genevieve’s hum is no longer in earshot, Farrah returns her attention to the control panel. There are a few flashing red buttons that she’s curious about, yet not curious enough to press (she’s read enough comics in her life to know the kind of trouble they cause). Instead, she presses a larger green button. At first, nothing happens. But, when Farrah belly-flops onto the bed, she feels heat radiating under the covers.

Green button. Heated mattress. Good to know.

Farrah rolls onto her back, dangling her head off the edge. Her fuzzed hair has an even greater static charge than usual, thanks to the silk sheets. From her flipped angle, she watches Arthur watching her.

Farrah flips back over, her hair a lion’s mane. “Don’t give me that look. I swear I’m not gonna let this go to my head.”

Arthur nods slightly. “Even if it did, I wouldn’t tell a soul.” He folds his hands behind his back. “If you need anything—”

“I’ll call,” Farrah finishes.

“Well, not *anything* anything, but—”

“I’ll still call.”

The two stare at each other briefly as the quiet hip-hop plays in the background. Arthur clears his throat and gives a small bow. He shuts the door behind him as he leaves.

“Bye,” Farrah says to the door.

The door says nothing in reply.

Farrah lies there, letting the bed heat her stomach until she’s sweating through her turtleneck. She glances over at the door, staring at it for a minute too long in hopes that she’s somehow developed “the force” and doesn’t have to get up to go lock the door. Alas, Farrah’s no Jedi, which means she has to stand and do this manually (not without groaning in protest, of course). When the lock clicks in place, Farrah shimmies out of her sweater and jeans, leaving her in a sweat-stained cami and boyfriend shorts.

As long as she doesn’t look in the mirror, she doesn’t have to see what her sweater and pants always hide so well. As long as she doesn’t look down, she might as well be as normal as she was three years ago. But her arms fall against her sides, and she can’t ignore their unnatural textures; the ripples and dry patches the burns have left behind.

Farrah waves her arms like a seagull getting ready for takeoff, then switches on her police scanner. Its cord, patched together several times with electric tape, has become unwound from its rectangular frame. Farrah grabs the plug-in and jams it into the nearest electrical outlet—behind the swinging chair. She switches the scanner to life; its voice cracks and purrs until Farrah messes with the knob and adjusts it to a frequency that can actually be understood. Even then, the officer’s voice sounds like static-filled garble:

“11-82, 10-38: Highway 8. Code 4.”

Farrah snags the black Sharpie dangling from her belt-loop and scrawls the codes on the back of her hand. She stares at the numbers, deciphering them in her head:

Accident with no injuries. Located on Highway 8. No need for backup. Boring.

She licks the ink and attempts to rub the fresh code off her skin; instead, the black smears, bleeds, stains, and bleeds some more. Maybe she should continue coloring herself this way, until the Sharpie bleeds across her arms, her torso, her legs. She could be Permanent Marker Girl, and maybe the toxic fumes would give her some super-sweet, noxious powers.

Hi, my name's Permanent Marker Girl. You may be wondering how I developed the power of super-unwashability....

She continues to lie on the floor, studying her hand until Mitzy knocks on the door. Farrah slips her layers back on, opens the door, and thanks the maid for the bottle of grape soda.

It's the wealthiest bottle of grape soda she's ever tasted. She only drinks half.

Chapter Three: The De-scented Strawberry Sticker (Marine)

“So,” Marine says, trying to add some life to the extending silence. She waits for Frigid to finish her sentence, because she’s got nothing. But he doesn’t. She snaps her fingers—more like fidgets with her fingers until they sound like they’re purposely snapping—and blows air past her lips. “So...you’re dead. Um. And like. Dead. In a creepy, contorted way. What’s that...what’s that like?”

If it weren’t for the sound of fluttering wings pervading the outside hallway, Marine would’ve actually waited for Frigid’s deadness to answer her. But, as the fluttering becomes more prominent, so does her sense of urgency.

She’s not ready for people to see this. She wants this to be her secret for a few sunsets longer. Just until she figures out what she wants to do with this secret.

A secret! She has her very own secret!

Marine hooks her arms under Frigid’s. She frantically scans the room, zeroing in on a smaller, thinner door on the far left wall; the closet.

Someone knocks.

“Hello? Frigid?”

Marine bites her bottom lip and starts trekking toward the closet. She shushes the dragging heels of Frigid’s birch-wood shoes as they scrape against the floor.

Another knock.

Marine extends her arm, fingers stretching for the closet’s doorknob. She comes up short; still not close enough.

“Frigid?”

The person on the other side seems to have no plans for departing anytime soon, and Marine can't drag this body any further.

“Do you have a girl in there, Ice-Shine? If so, just say the word, and I'll be outta here—”

“He does!” Marine blurts out. Her own voice causes her to recoil and drop Frigid's body. It collapses against the wood with a thud. Marine holds her breath, then expels it silently. “H-he does,” she tries again. “I-it's m-me.”

The person on the other side is momentarily quiet. “...Marine?”

Marine silently curses herself. But she knows that voice and knows it well; it belongs to a person as intrusive as she—a person that could very well know Frigid's secret knock, too.

The front door's knob jiggles. “May I...I mean...are you...are you decent or...?”

Marine's eyes dart from Frigid's corpse, to the closet, and back to Frigid.

“Yes,” Marine blurts out. She slaps her hand over her mouth. Rather than cursing herself again, she curses her entire species and their inability to lie. Humans have it so good.

“Well...,” the voice says with a cough. “Can you...will you let me in?”

So much for “saying the word” and him “being outta here.”

Marine reacts by shoving her hand inside her F.D. pocket, grabbing an overabundance of dust, and throwing it on the body. She dashes over to the closet and swings it open, summoning the body to follow. The corpse is momentarily reanimated; his face remains expressionless, head dangles unnaturally to the side, and spine hyper-extends to the point where it could easily puncture through the skin if bent a millimeter

farther. Marine covers her eyes too late—the image already taking its place within her psyche—but motions the body forward, nonetheless. Frigid’s corpse obeys, his feet flop forward as if detached from his ankles.

The knob jiggles again. “Marine?”

“Give me a moment,” Marine calls back through gritted teeth. She clutches Frigid’s clammy wrist, silently gagging as she yanks the corpse the rest of the way inside and slams the door behind him.

Marine lifts her eyes toward the wall. A fixture has gone askew—an item from the human realm which Frigid gathered during one of numerous Fortune Missions. While Frigid’s floor is bare of any major furnishings (strictly for the purpose of freezing the hardwood for impromptu skating), his walls are cluttered with tokens from his adventures—candy wrappers from peppermint bowls, colorful tips from children’s discarded crayons, antique earring studs that couldn’t have been worth more than a couple of human quarters. The tilted fixture is a scratch-and sniff sticker, a crinkled strawberry with bulging eyes and a half-moon smile. It’s no longer stuck to the wall by its adhesive, rather it’s dangling sideways by the remaining threads of spiderweb-putty he placed on its back months ago. Marine extends her wavering hand to press it back in place, but the strawberry has lost its will to stick and flitters to the ground. It lands face-up, and smiles at Marine.

“Marine?” the voice calls out. The person doesn’t bother knocking anymore.

Marine wipes the crescents of her eyes and opens the front door.

Standing on the other side, incessantly making his presence known, is Shadow—a Dark Ability who’s close to graduating from his Ability Perfection courses. Marine’s not

sure how the youngling's gotten so far, for he's still clumsy with his power and, on several occasions, has randomly sucked away the lights from establishments within the Hawthorne. His blond locks look like sunflower petals pressed into his scalp, and his cerulean eyes, wide smile, and overly-emotional responses to almost everything are only a few of the reasons Ability Experts are still baffled by this adolescent's Dark nature. Shadow's wings wave hello, their opal rims catch the light and expel dots of pastel colors across the front door.

“Hi!” He smiles.

“Before you ask,” Marine says, “no, I am not doing suggestive things in here.”

“Then what are you doing?”

Marine chews on the inside of her cheek. “I was supposed to get Frigid. The kitchen's ice room is getting warm.”

“Where is he?” Shadow's about the same height as Marine, but he still rises on his toes in an attempt to peek around her shoulder.

Despite their differing abilities, Shadow became one of Frigid's many tutees early on in the Dark Ability's studies, after meeting at the F.D. Allowance Office. Frigid had been there to sign a document approving his own allowance raise, when Shadow's unstable ability sucked the light away during a class field trip—leaving the office in a state of pitch blackness. Everyone griped and groaned and called Shadow nasty things until Frigid started defending him.

This is also a story Marine accidentally knows. Shadow is invited to Frigid's alumni get-togethers constantly. And Shadow is the only one who's ever had the audacity

to ask, “Hey, who’s the girl that keeps staring at us from over there? The one behind the menu?”

“He’s gone,” Marine says.

The smile on Shadow’s face droops. “Then how’d you get in?”

“Through the door. Don’t ask obvious questions.”

Shadow folds his arms across his chest. “I don’t think Frigid would appreciate you rummaging around his living quarters while he’s away.”

“And I don’t think he appreciates you bothering him all the time with your neediness.”

The lights in the hallway flicker. Shadow shakes his wrists—as if his hands have just fallen into a deep slumber—until the flickering stops.

“I’m only needy because I care. And because I can’t get this frinxy ability to work correctly.” Shadow sneers down at his hands. “I can’t even stand in the hallway without nearly causing a black-out. Good thing I only suck up electric lights, because my ability would probably take out the sun if it had the chance, huh? Can you imagine? Living in the dark because of me? Did you know I already darkened the café and the main study today? What if I can’t get control of my talent in time for the final? Will they fail me? They will, won’t they—Oh, *gosh*. And *then* what? Do you think Fortune Glen banishes people into Misfortune Glen if they fail their finals? Can they do that? Has that ever happened? Or worse, I’ll never get to go on a Fortune Mission! Which means I’ll never raise my allowance and—and I’ll never get the chance to witness a glenpiphany...*ohhhh*, I’ll probably have to waste my F.D. on meaningless stuff all the time to fill the void....”

Shadow's rant sheepishly fades away as he rolls his eyes up and at Marine's unamused expression.

"Go find some other Dark ability," Marine mutters

"They give me the creeps. Frigid's doesn't."

The memory of Frigid's flopping body causes the hairs on the back of Marine's neck to rise. Her eye twitches, and she hopes it's not as visible as it feels.

"Well, Frigid's gone," she repeats. "And he wouldn't be much help to you, anyway. So I suggest you practice with someone else."

"But who do I—"

Marine slams the door. She leans her head against the doorframe and waits for the sound of Shadow's flittering wings to decrescendo before releasing a much-needed sigh. She's fortunate it was only Shadow. Poor guy is such a weakling. Shouldn't he have grown out of that by now?

Nonetheless, the Hawthorne citizens are expecting Frigid's arrival. How long will Marine be able to say he's "gone" until the folks starts asking, Gone, where?

A grin slowly creeps across her face.

She knew it. She knew her time was coming.

Yes, who needs piddly Fortune Missions when one can solve a murder? An actual murder! And the first murder in over a thousand years! What luck!

But, how does one go about solving a murder?

Marine paces the bare wood floors. "Think you could help me out here, Ice-Shine," Marine mutters at the closet. "Not that you would, even if you were alive. Then again, you'd probably be just as curious to discover who did this to you. You were

always curious. It's why you like all these frinxy human trinkets so much. When's the last time I've been here, Ice-Shine? Your place hasn't changed much. It's just more cluttered. You should've cleaned this place before dying, y'know? When's the last time we talked? Probably doesn't matter currently, but has it been since our twenties? No, you bumped into me at the Scroll Room once. And we exchanged glances the other day."

She's getting distracted. She shakes her head to clear it.

"Maybe Galaxy knows where to begin, because I haven't a clue." She stops pacing, and stares, for a long while, at the closet. "Tell me if you can, Ice-Shine," she whispers, "how to feel about this. I've never been good at guessing games." She places her hand against the closet knob, but doesn't turn it. Instead, she drums her fingers against it. "It's a shame," she continues, "that the humans know more about this killing nonsense...."

Marine's head snaps upward. Her smile returns. "The humans."

Underneath the waves of honey-blond hair and deep within Marine's cerebrum, an insane idea takes place. Her gaze shifts side-to-side, stops mid-glance, and looks toward the sparse furnishing resting in the corner: a blueberry-stained, rounded-off box setting on a toadstool table. The wood of the box has never been sanded, giving it a bumpy appearance and causing its lid to sit at an uneven angle against the outer rim. (The Do-It-Yourself fad is rather popular in the Hawthorne nowadays—creating everyday items without the use of F.D. or one's talent.)

Marine hovers toward the box, leans down, and carefully raises the lid. She bites her knuckle (the unburned one), blinded by the abundance of F.D. residing within. It's like a basin filled with magic, and Marine has to hold herself back from washing in it.

She glances over her shoulder, waiting for Shadow—or anyone else—to come pounding on Frigid’s door and demand his assistance.

But none come. Which means what Marine’s about to do is as good as nonexistent, and shall remain so if she can keep her mouth shut.

“Thanks, Frigid,” Marine says. She cups her hands and dips them into the box of glitter. The excess granules trickle off the sides of her fingers and return to the chest without a sound. It’s all too satisfying, and Marine finds herself completely submerging a hand into its massiveness. The Dust works like quicksand and slowly swallows her petite palm in its expanses; it slips between her fingers and tickles her skin like butterfly kisses. Marine shovels handful after handful of Dust into her F.D. pocket. When her pocket’s near-bursting, she struggles to re-button the flap against the bulge.

Chapter Four: Parkour! (Farrah)

Farrah feels like a circus clown at the gala. Not one of the cute clowns with the rainbow hair and big red honker, but a sad clown with the face-painted teardrop and ratty umbrella; a clown that no one wants to associate with because no one really wants to figure out her act. Genevieve insisted on a girls' day out, meaning a back-to-school shopping spree. When Farrah was younger, back-to-school shopping meant 64-pack crayons and spending a good half-hour deciding whether or not the hot dog backpack is hilarious or way too ironic for an aspiring vegetarian. (The "aspiring" part lasted a whopping two weeks.)

Farrah's sneakers scuff the white tile of this upscale boutique. The blouses hang color-coded on the racks, the pants are all neatly-pressed and folded on octagonal-shaped shelving units, and the one price tag Farrah decided to glance at in passing was worth more than the four-wheeler she's wanted since she was nine. For a hat.

Plus, there are no turtlenecks here. And that just won't do. Farrah tugs at the neck of her own when no one's looking her way.

"Scuttleview Academy is an easy adjustment," Genevieve says, fingering a rack of plaid skirts. "It was for Alice. Actually, this is only Alice's second year in private school, and she fits in like a big fish in a small pond. You'll do the same, I reckon."

Alice walks with her chest, always in ballerina mode. She pinches the fabric of one of the skirts and releases it just as quickly.

"But," Genevieve says, "whether the school be public or private, me and Alice keep our back-to-school shopping tradition strong. Alice has a lot of uniforms already,

but if she finds something she just can't live without, I'm sure our budget has the wiggle room."

Alice lifts the corners of her mouth, then drops them like the skirt.

Farrah isn't sure why Genevieve insists on staying in this skirt section, but the woman is immersed—rubbing every fabric, stretching every waistband, checking every price tag. Farrah's certain she saw similar styles at Wal-Mart the other day (off-brand though, so Heaven forbid).

"What do you think, Farrah?" Genevieve asks as she holds up two styles. "You fancy the purple? Or the blue with these gold-fleck things? Although, now that I think about it, this green one would really bring out your hazel eyes...."

Before Farrah can protest the purchase of all three, a gravelly voice interrupts:

"Yo, Alice!"

Heading down the aisle is a group of four teens that make Farrah feel instantly more comfortable standing amongst personified money. Two male, two female, each wearing clothes that couldn't have cost more than her own baggy jeans and turtleneck. Surely they're not here for the well-to-do Alice Glessner.

Over the past couple days, Farrah's convinced herself that Alice isn't human but a robot, something Genevieve purchased with her pocket change in order to appear as if she had raised a well-rounded ballerina. During their first "family" dinner, Farrah counted the number of times Alice blinked: Seventeen. She sat outside her bedroom at one in the morning and listened for her to snore. Nothing. She asked what her favorite book was: Anything written by Hemingway.

No teenager's favorite book is written by Hemingway. Farrah had her cornered.

But, as the teens meander toward Alice, the sides of her mouth rise again and remain. Very un-robot.

Alice brushes past the skirts and strides over to meet the teens halfway down the aisle, just out of earshot, then signs for them to move forward. The group of now-five disappears around the corner.

Genevieve drapes three more skirts over her forearm. “I told her today was girls’ day,” she huffs, “but she still goes and invites those four. Tell me, Farrah, do you try to keep in contact with your former classmates? Or do you learn to move on, let go of past-and-fleeting acquaintances, and actually, well, meet new people?”

Farrah is suddenly occupied by the remaining skirts Genevieve hasn’t removed from the rack. “I met you and Alice, didn’t I?”

Another skirt is added to Genevieve’s growing arm-pile before it’s thrust over to Farrah. “I’m going to check out the penny loafers. You and Alice try these on, alright-y?”

Farrah’s afraid to bend her arm—if she wrinkles one, will she be charged? Is breathing okay if her breath doesn’t make direct contact with the fabric? She shuffles forward, holding her skirted arm at an awkward angle. Which is ridiculous. She’s not trying these on.

Farrah stops short before turning the corner and hides the skirts underneath a section of argyle sweaters. As she tucks in the last corner of fabric from view, a group of laughter breaks out.

“...So, that time of the year again, eh?” a gravelly voice asks.

“Mom won’t let it go. Still thinks we should bond.”

“Psh. Parents are the worst,” pipes up a nasally female.

“Was the girl with the eyebrows your new sister?” a different male asks.

“Farrah? Gross, she’s not my sister. She may be Mom’s temporary daughter, but she and me? No relation.”

“Aw,” gravel-voice says, “you jelly?”

Alice laughs. (Can robots laugh?) “Yeah, so jealous. What I wouldn’t give to be just another one of Mom’s hobbies.” She laughs again; it sounds canned. “Yeah. Please. When Mom gets bored, she’ll move onto something else. Like painting. Or knitting.”

Farrah bites her tongue between her molars. She tears the skirts out from underneath the sweaters, leaving an argyle catastrophe in her wake.

“Yo, Alice!” Farrah calls out. She takes a giant step forward and reveals herself to the rest of the group. The group seems friendly enough, greeting her with warm side-smiles and half-hearted waves, but Alice’s posture immediately straightens.

Farrah waves the wad of material. “Genevieve wanted us to try these on. She says the green brings out my eyes.” She tosses the skirts over her shoulder. “These your friends?”

“Yes,” Alice says. “Farrah, this is Thomas, Brett, Rawny, and Carrie.”

“We’re public school trash,” Nasal Voice (Rawny) says. “PST for short.”

Farrah nods once and offers up a fist-bump. Out of the four, Rawny’s even eyeliner and fresh blond highlights give Farrah reason to believe she has her life put together better than the rest of them. Not to say the others are probably unkind or unintelligent; they just look less ready for the real world. The guys are wearing baggy jeans, coffee (?)–stained wife-beaters, and backwards-facing ball caps, but one wears Nike tennis shoes with frayed laces and the other has sandals that expose his alligator-

skin feet. And then there's Carrie, who's pale and petite and wearing a flesh-toned hearing aid. Her skin blends in with her white sundress as if it's another layer of skin. One strap slouches down her bicep, the other cuts into her shoulder.

"We hear you're about to break your private school virginity," gravelly-voiced, Nike-shoed Thomas says.

Farrah shrugs. "Guilty." She rubs her chin. "In fact, I think I have everything I need before going private...except for a high horse. You'll let me borrow one of yours—right, Alice?"

The group bursts out into a chorus of *Ooooooooooh buuuuuuuurn* as Carrie fans herself with her hand. Farrah folds her arms across her chest, wrinkling the skirts.

"Look, Al!" Brett says, nudging Alice's elbow. "The girl's got a sense of humor! You remember what it's like to have one of those?"

"It's all that private school brainwash," Thomas says. "One minute they're exposed to everyone and everything, and the next? Isolated into a rich-kid bubble."

"Joy," Farrah says. "Do I also have to start taking private ballet lessons, or can I choose something else? Because I've always wanted to try my hand at water polo."

The group laughs again.

"Rich Alice jokes have been revived!" Brett cheers. "Thomas and I were starting to repeat material. It was getting old."

"Getting?" Alice mutters.

"In our defense," Thomas says, "we never touched the rich-kid ballet subject. It's kinda cheating, since she started lessons before she was eating bowlfuls of money in the morning."

Alice sucks on her bottom lip.

“Hey, listen,” Brett says to Farrah. “Thomas and I are going parkour-ing tonight at the old elementary school. You should come watch. We can always use more groupies.”

At this, Farrah releases a long, obnoxious raspberry, followed by a fit of forced laughter. She pretends to dry her eyes with the hem of one of the skirts. “Oh, you guys are too funny!”

The boys exchange glances.

Farrah stops “drying” her eyes. “Wait, you’re serious? All of you?”

“Uh, I’m assuming either you’ve never heard of parkour before,” Thomas replies, “or it means something way different from where you’re from.”

“Oh, I know what parkour is,” Farrah assures. “But it’s not a watching sport.” She nods her head toward Alice. “C’mon, Twinkle Toes, you’re telling me you’ve never pulled off some mean parkour moves?”

“I watch,” Alice says curtly.

Farrah wrinkles her nose. “Wow, really? You, too, Rawny? Carrie?”

Rawny sneers and shakes her head; Carrie pushes her fallen strap up her shoulder, only to have it fall again.

“Huh,” Farrah says. “Weird, but whatev. To each her own, right?”

“Are you saying you parkour?” Thomas asks, sandwiching his hands in his armpits.

Farrah drops the skirts on the ground.

She cracks her knuckles and leans into sprinting position, her right knee juttled forward and her left lunging behind. She rocks on the balls of her feet. Her eyes slit, almost closing. A mental gunshot triggers within. Farrah darts up the descending escalator like there's no pull against her, making it one-third of the way up before swinging her feet onto the moving rail. She continues her sprint downward as if running across a tightrope and, before the rail levels off, she springs into the air. She uses a mannequin's head for support, pressing her palms against it and flings herself all the way over, like an extreme version of leap frog. Once over the mannequin, Farrah somersaults mid-air. Her feet skid across the coat rack, too much momentum for them to stay planted there, and pop to the side where the directory board waits. The soles of her shoes push off the directory, giving her enough power to do one last vault over the jeans' shelf before planting herself back in front of gawking teens.

Sweat pimples Farrah's forehead. She smiles with teeth clenched, straining to keep her panting breaths at bay, and raises her hands above her head. "Parkour!"

There's a beat where the six teens simply stare at one another. The mannequin, which has been teetering since Farrah's vault, finally topples over and onto its friend. The smack of their plastic bodies across the tile echoes throughout the store.

The PST breaks the silence with whoops and hollers of approval.

Thomas whistles. "Dude," he says as he pushes his fingers through his hair, knocking his cap back. "Where the frickity-frack did you learn swagger like that?"

Farrah rolls back her tight shoulder. She's become very aware of her hand and the fiery heartbeat pulsing within the webbed part, between her thumb and pointer finger. She shoves it into her jeans pocket and ignores it for the time being. Instead, she sniffs

coolly and says, “Eh, I dunno. Practice? Boredom? A few too many times watching Toy Story? Guess it’s just a hobby I never got bored of.” She snatches the skirts from the ground and tosses them Alice’s way. Alice only catches one.

“Try those on,” Farrah tells her. “Your mom said to.”

Alice’s cheeks are tomato red. No, scratch that. Ketchup red. Because they’re splotchy, like someone smacked the bottom of a ketchup bottle twice and out came Alice’s cheeks.

A security guard steps off the descending escalator, eyeing the mannequin carnage. He lifts one off the floor, only to watch its head pop off the neck and roll across his feet.

“You kids know anything ‘bout this?”

The teens all shake their heads in reply. Farrah glances up at the hidden security camera jutting out of the ceiling panel and gives it a wave.

Chapter Five: The East Outskirts (Marine)

Marine waits at the Outskirts of the Hawthorne with a fresh pocketful of F.D. and a ginkgo leaf haversack dangling from her shoulder. She's standing in a single-file line, feeling rather out-of-place amongst a group of people that've actually earned their right to a Fortune Mission. The Outskirts look different from the last time she was here; more open space, a larger fence constructed of towering shrubs and thicket, an increase of Corgi transports manning the entrance.

Marine's looks back toward the direction of her river. It's so far away now, she can't even see it.

"Marine!"

Marine snaps her head back around, refocusing forward. Her bunches swipe across the face of the man behind her.

The woman hollering for Marine flies over the line, her feet at level with Marine's ear. Marine keeps herself at attention as long as she can before finally rolling her eyes up to the floating being above.

It's Stormy; a weather ability and fellow alumnus. Her long gray hair is like the texture of cotton, and her eyes are like pollen. For too many sunsets to count, Stormy's worn the same mossy smock, deeming it her good luck charm. "I predict the weather with 86.3 percent more accuracy every time I wear it," she tells people. (The sad part is she actually believes it.)

Marine forgot about Stormy volunteering at the Outskirts. She must be leaving for the day. And saw Marine on her way out. Because Marine's luck is terrible.

“Marine, Marine, Ma-*rine*,” Stormy says, clapping her hands together a little too forcefully. “Oh . . . What a *special* day. How long’s it been for you, huh?”

“Thirty-five years.”

“My-oh- *my*!” Stormy laughs through her teeth. “Good thing we’ve got triple the lifespan of the human world, eh?”

The others in line have started fidgeting in place. They glance up at Stormy, then avert their stares, as if trying to communicate with the eccentric person above that their space in line is not hers for the taking.

“I never thought you’d make it back here,” Stormy continues on. “I really thought after that last mission you’d be done.”

Marine stares at the nape of the person’s neck in front of her. If she doesn’t respond, maybe the weather-ability will just leave.

But she hasn’t yet. “Do the others know?” Stormy asks. “Pyro? Gadget? Any of ‘em?”

“Why would they?” Marine mutters.

Stormy grins. “Great! That means I’ve got something to talk about at the café today!” She emphasizes weird words, making the sentence itself sound unnatural. She finally lands and grabs Marine by the shoulders, as if she’s about to impart wisdom upon her or something. “Human realm’s changed a lot since you were there last. You should probably study up before you leave. They eat a lot of this stuff called quinoa and rainbows don’t just mean ‘the rain’s over’ anymore. Also, they shortened the term self-portrait into *selfie*.”

“Huh.”

Stormy's eye twitches slightly. "Weird but cute, right? I kind of want to name my next caterpillar that. The one I have now is about to cocoon. You wanna go see it?"

Since when in Majesty's name has Stormy ever wanted Marine in her living quarters?

"No," Marine says, and hopes that's the end of that.

Another two people move forward. Marine takes a breath and holds it. She's next.

Her eyes wander to the wooden sign greeting her at the entrance.

Welcome to the East Outskirts!

Please make sure your Fairy Dust pocket is completely stocked for a strong Ring connection. Our wonderful volunteers will go over the vial checklist with you before your departure. Upon entering the human realm, first use your Brochure Pen to reveal your assignment. We highly encourage you to familiarize yourself with the area in which your Mission will take place by studying the details of the brochure.

(Brochures will be handed out at Fortune Huts upon receiving your assignment.)

Rings hold their connection for 28 sunsets before losing power, so be aware of time passage to assure a safe return to Fortune Glen. Do not feel obligated to stay in the human realm until your Ring connection has been broken; you can return to our realm anytime you need rest. Remember, every completed Fortune Mission is a successful one, and one that concludes with a glenpiphany is even better.

Have a Shim-tastic Adventure!

--Majesty Fortune

The board is outdated. No one has used the term *shim-tastic* in over 600 sunsets. Marine twists the strap of her haversack. “I really despise missions,” she mutters.

Stormy’s eyebrows dip. “No one’s making you go, Water-Shine. You can use your F.D. on something else. Like more eye makeup. By the way, where did you get those black dots of yours? You really should take me there. Like, *now!* How about it?”

Marine doesn’t answer. She twists the strap tighter.

One of the Corgi transports waddles over to Marine. She’s forgotten how large these creatures are. It’d make Marine feel more comfortable just flying over to one of the Fortune Hut’s herself, but the Outskirts are expansive. And the Corgis are trained to know when Fortune Huts are open and ready for their next customer. They also have stubby tails that constantly wag. Nothing to do with their jobs, just a cute fact.

Marine takes in a shaky breath and flies onto the Corgi transport’s fuzzy tan back. She looks down at Stormy, who’s watching Marine with a tight side grin and a heavier twitch in her eye. Neither waves goodbye.

The Outskirts is paved with bluegrass flooring and mineral-rich soil. The Fortune Huts are located toward the back of the expanse, as well as a few gossip columns and racks filled with designer magazines that most folks already have delivered to their living quarters weekly (except for Marine, who isn’t—*no way*—going to pay up a grain of F.D. per issue...unless it features water abilities for the month. Only exception).

Music abilities hover next to one of the Outskirts’ hedged corners, drowning out the drone of Corgi panting by waving their hands in a conducting manner to produce melodies. The music transforms the ambience into something that could make any person (who’s not preoccupied by murder) feel a sense of pride; they’re *here*, where a fairy is

meant to be—in the presence of the Main Ring. Which Marine tries to ignore for the time being because oh dear *Majesty* she's actually following through with this.

There is a significant difference in the Outskirts between now and thirty-five years ago: Merchandise. Booths and counters are scattered about, some stocked with honey cakes and piping hot sweet milk, some with last-minute overnight supplies. One is a caricature station, where artistic abilities capture an individual's likeness and enhance their distinctive features on rose-petal parchment.

The Corgi transport lies down on its belly next to one of the Fortune Huts, barely getting a chance to shut its eyes for a quick nap before Marine slides off its back. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand.

Thirty-five years....

Marine's seeing double, as if still recovering from an evening of imbibing fermented nectars. Will the others assume Frigid's still on his mission? Will they come looking for him like she had done? Will the Hawthorne's sappy smell be enough to cover the stench of a decaying body? Do fairy bodies even decay, or is that just a human thing? She can't get past her morbid curiosity.

Frigid once had a powerful influence in the Hawthorne. He spoke with authority and flowery language. He had a laugh that could rattle the leaves right off their branches. (She knows. She saw it happen.)

A pressure forms behind Marine's eyes, causing her to nearly trip when the pathway switches from grass to pebble.

The Fortune Hut is deeper than it is wide, a brown rickety building constructed from random sticks that break off the trees around Fortune Glen. A few dozen volunteers

stand behind the hut's counter, dressed in the Outskirts' standard volunteer uniform: thick blades of grass spiraled into tight jumpers around the body, pistachio shell sandals, and a blue ribbon belt wrapped thrice around the hips. They hover in front of a curtain made of leaves; the curtain extends to and from each end of the hut and is, also, made from the discards of Fortune Glen: Black Ash, Aspen, Hickory. Marine notices quite a few Hawthorne leaves stitched within, too. The volunteers are attempting to corral the cluster of folks who've all just received their mission assignments. They're excitedly talking over one another. The longer Marine watches them congratulate one another, the heavier her F.D. pocket feels.

“M'lady, have you been helped?”

A rosy-cheeked volunteer smiles at Marine from behind the counter.

“Uh, no, I uh...” Marine swings her haversack to her other shoulder. “I have F.D. A pocketful. I need a mission.”

“Certainly,” the volunteer chirps. She twirls her stubby, pointer finger. “You arrived just in time, yes you did. We've almost hit our capacity of Fortune Missions for the day. It's our busiest time, really. Folks do love missions at the beginning of the colored leaf season. Not too hot, not too cold. Now, turn around, please.”

Marine grimaces but obliges. If she remembers correctly, this next part is no fun.

“Alright,” the volunteer hums. “Let's see here...”

The volunteer removes a small syringe, secured against her hip underneath the blue ribbon of her uniform. The needle is so fine, it blends against the light. The vial itself holds a milky blue liquid, swirling and active; it's a concoction known simply as *Memories*.

“Scoot up a bit, m’lady.”

Marine shuffles backward until her wings bump against the counter. She squeezes her eyes shut until they water.

Memory injections aren’t major, but Marine feels a little faint as the needle comes closer to a plump vein in her wings. It stings like an ant bite, but the volunteer does a good job and makes sure the unpleasantness ends quickly. Marine flutters her throbbing wing, causing the other one to reflexively sway, as well. The memories flood through the veins of her wings like a connection of water pipes. It feels weird and warm, like chewing a hot pepper and feeling it burn all the way down your esophagus.

“Alright-y,” the volunteer says. She takes a fat, blue glowing stick—a Wing Scanner—and runs it around the perimeter of Marine’s wings, the stick jingling with each section it successfully registers. Then, the volunteer snaps the stick in half, revealing its hollow inside, and extends it out for Marine. “Your Fairy Dust, please.”

Marine lifts the flap of her F.D. pocket and dips the cup inside, filling it until her pocket goes from distending to sagging, then hands it back to the volunteer. The volunteer hands her the scanner. “Make sure you give this a good toss into the Main Ring,” she says. “It’s now connected with your wing data and yours alone. Meaning the scanner will navigate its way through the Main Ring and land near your mission assignment, creating your Ring upon its impact.”

Marine nods along. Even though she already knows all this, she understands it’s protocol to repeat. That’s why she’s never volunteered to work in the Outskirts. Well, one of the reasons. Mainly she hates the thought of having to work somewhere that’ll give her little reward. (Which is the majority of volunteer projects here.)

The volunteer reaches below the counter, retrieving a blank piece of parchment and a bean sprout pouch. “Here’s your brochure and your pouch of F.D., strictly for mission purposes. You’ll find this F.D. to be weaker than you’re used to. Use this over in the other realm and refrain from using your normal Fairy Dust. Studies show regular dust doesn’t react well during Fortune Missions. Too strong.”

Marine has stopped nodding. Now, she stares, because she just wants to get this over with.

“Before you depart,” the volunteer continues, “let’s go over the checklist and make sure you have all your vials.” She looks at the wooden post to her left; the checklist is attached.

Marine’s counted her vials five times over before heading to the Outskirts, and she’s still unsure whether all are accounted for. When she graduated, was she given eight vials? Nine? If she’s supposed to have ten, she’s in trouble.

“Check your haversack for the following,” the volunteer reads. “Disremember Injector.”

Marine lifts the flap of her haversack, her fingers stroking the side pocket where her syringe rests. “Have.”

“Emoter Ointment.”

“Have.”

“Intangibility Oil.”

“Have.”

“Temperature Control Lotion.”

Marine pushes aside a few vials and some wrinkled scroll paper she never uses, digging to the bottom of the haversack. “Uuuuuh...oh! Here—yes, I have.”

“Brochure Pen.”

“Have.”

“Bigness Manipulator Patch.”

“Have.”

“Language Barrier Potion.”

“That one’s in the more squared-off vial correct? Blue liquid?”

“Yes.”

“Then, yes. Have.”

“Visibility Spray.”

Marine’s grasp tightens around the neck of the spray bottle filled with clear, bubbling liquid. “Have.”

“Excellent,” the volunteer says with a smile. “Remember to use your Brochure Pen upon arrival for further details of your mission. Your Visibility Spray is only to be used in dire situations when you may need the rare assistance of the other realm.” Her smile widens until it looks strained. “I pray this Fortune serves you well, m’lady.”

Another outdated saying. Such formalities are only ever used in the Outskirts anymore.

Marine turns her back toward the hut, squeezing her brochure and scanner until her palms perspire. Others walk away from the hut, too, laughing and conversing with one another, asking about prior journeys, destinations, assignments. They all pretend to know each other to a point they might actually believe it.

A blue-haired male waves at her in passing. “Hi-ya! Where’re you hoping your mission takes you?”

Marine doesn’t reply, even when Blue Hair asks for her name. She passes him by, along with another overly-enthusiastic person who’s oh-so *curious* to know why Marine insists on putting her hair in bunches like younglings do.

Marine ventures to the Main Ring alone.

The Main Ring’s name is misleading: it, in fact, is not the *main* ring, but one of four main rings throughout the glen. Thirty-five years may have passed since Marine’s last seen this Main Ring, but this part of the East Outskirts is unchanged. Every magical-based root of the trees in Fortune Glen twists together, sprouting out of the the sod like glittering, braided silver hair. The arch outlines a swirling vortex and, though the spiraling hazel-and-white appears harmless, The Main Ring is a teleportation device that no living being can survive unless they’re connected to a Wing Scanner concoction—like the one in Marine’s grasp. The Main Ring speeds through random sections of the human realm faster than Shadow can suck light from a room. To exit would be the equivalent of leaving a black hole: you wouldn’t.

There’s one exception, of course, and that’s when a new youngling comes to be. It’s a bizarre notion: a glenpiphany is triggered, a youngling appears from the vortex, society accepts it without question. Sometimes Marine tries to remember the first day of her existence. She thinks she can remember one of the youngling greeters—a friendly, blurry face now—take her hand and lead her toward the Hawthorne. She couldn’t fly then, since her wings were new and damp, but she could walk. The memory darkens after that,

but that might be for the best. Still, seeing the youngling greeters standing by the Ring today makes Marine reflexively hold her own hand.

Marine keeps her distance, far enough to not be sucked into the vortex, and throws the scanner into its enormity. There is no spark of light or indication otherwise that the glowing stick concoction has made it to the human realm, but it's never failed before. Then again, she's only done this once. Hardly enough to create a track record.

Marine's able to take in one last breath before her thirty-five year Fortune Mission hiatus comes to a close. She steps through the swirling vortex of the Main Ring, something she told herself she would never do again.

Chapter Six: Frozen Peas (Farrah)

Out of all the items Genevieve Glessner owns, Farrah assumed she'd have an icepack—or two, or three, or *hundreds*—on hand. And yet, the only thing Farrah could find was a bag of frozen peas. Genevieve probably has a separate room around here strictly for ice packs, but Farrah would more than likely get lost trying to find it. She settles for the frozen veggies, and sneaks them upstairs.

Farrah sits on the floor of her room, scribbling police codes across her hand as they ramble from the scanner. She rolls back her shoulder every few minutes to loosen her knotted muscle, then readjusts the frozen peas. It was that stupid flip off the mannequin that did her in. Her form was terrible. She can hear her mother snickering. *Always trying to show off*, she would've said. Which isn't true.

Okay, kinda.

She studies her hand, which must've gotten sliced on something during her parkour process. It stings, but only when she opens her hand a little too wide. So, of course, she has to keep doing just that to watch it crack and bleed.

There's a knock on the door—seriously, just *one* knock. Farrah figures it's only Mitzy or one of the other maids accidentally bumping against the frame while dusting. But it happens again, followed by a voice: “May I enter?”

Farrah rips the peas off her shoulder and shoves the bag underneath her bed. “It's your house more than mine!” she calls back.

Alice opens the door. (She even opens doors gracefully.) She's back to her robotic form, less like a human ballerina with public school friends and more like one found in a wind-up jewelry box.

“Lemme guess,” Farrah says, scrawling down the last few codes before clicking off her scanner. “You’re here to tell me how extremely epic my moves are and that I should be the next American Ninja Warrior.”

“Chef wants to know if you need those frozen peas cooked.”

Farrah bites down on her Sharpie cap. “What peas?”

“The ones you stole from the fridge earlier.”

What, do they have hidden cameras in this house, too? And yet they can’t invest in one lousy icepack? “He must’ve mistaken me for some other foster kid. Does your mom hoard them around here or something?”

Alice’s eyes trail to the wrinkled skirt of the bed. Before Farrah can jump to adjust it, Alice extends her leg and jabs her big toe into the bag, like a spear to a fish, dragging it out of hiding. She raises an eyebrow.

Farrah eyes the bag. She feels the tightness return to her shoulder. “I eat them that way.”

Alice’s stare narrows. “Frozen?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Alice rubs behind her ear, “or you could just admit that you hurt yourself while showing off today, which would be a lot less freak-ish sounding in the long run.”

Farrah jams the Sharpie into the cap held between her teeth, then spits it on the floor. She yanks the frozen bag out from underneath Alice’s pointed foot and slaps it back on her shoulder. “Not all of us can be ballerina-flexible all year round.”

“Serves you right for eavesdropping on my friends and me.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping. But if I *were*, I would’ve been trying to figure out why you have public school trash for friends.”

Alice folds her arms. “I used to go to public school. Is that so weird?”

“Wasn’t questioning that.”

Alice rubs behind her ear again, more furiously this time. “Don’t eavesdrop on me again.”

“But your friends are still free game, right?”

The door doesn’t shut nearly as gracefully as it opened.

Farrah rolls back her shoulder. The peas slide down her arm and land next to her cellphone. There’s a beat in which Farrah stares at the phone before snatching it up with her Sharpied hand. She presses “3” on her speed dial and rests her back against the carpet. On the second ring, Arthur picks up.

“Scale of 1-10?” he asks immediately.

“Five. Alice doesn’t like me.”

Breathy static intrudes through the speaker. “You’re calling to tattle?”

“Not tattle. It’s just an observation.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Meh.” Farrah bends and unbends her knee, rolling her ankle in the air. She mindlessly writes three more numbers on the back of her hand.

“So...you’re calling to tell me that you don’t care that Alice doesn’t like you?”

“Yes.” She rolls her ankle the other direction. “I start private school Monday.”

“Farrah, I can’t take personal calls. If nothing’s wrong—”

“Oh, *something’s* wrong. D’you know how many skirts Genevieve purchased for me today? Twenty-three. Do you know how many of those go with my paisley turtleneck? Zero.”

“It’s too hot to be wearing turtlenecks. Are you sure you don’t want to wear something cooler?”

“And, according to their dress code rules online, turtlenecks are, ‘An opportunity for students to conceal unhealthy conduct being held outside school grounds.’ That’s the long form of, ‘You can’t hide your hickeys,’ right?”

“Dress code doesn’t allow turtlenecks?”

“Once again, you’re missing the point, Arthur.” Farrah sighs and drops her heel against the carpet. “Paisley. Plaid. It’s a no-go.”

“Get some sleep, Farrah. It’s getting late.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad.”

Farrah hangs up only when she hears the click of the receiver on the other end. She spreads her limbs across the carpet like a starfish waiting for the tide to roll in and sweep her back into the ocean. The frozen peas begin to thaw; the ice melts, soaking her sock.

Chapter Seven: Her Fortune Mission (Marine)

The Main Ring has dropped Marine's Ring within a heated body of water. She's hesitant to completely emerge; the water warms her skin as she treads forward, and the long beams radiating from her Ring waver and throb like the ghosts of harp strings' past across her skin. She takes a deep breath of water, the liquid swamping her mutant lungs. The first gulp makes her sputter and gag; the aftertaste is harsh and sour and burns her nose and throat.

Marine peers above the water. An enormous living quarters residing nearby hyper-extends into the sky, blocking the clouds from view in a seemingly never-ending climb toward the heavens. The structure has large knotholes—more squared than hole-shaped—paned with glass. Marine peers behind her and above to find the stars, little lights peeking through the dark. The waves of inky grass and flowers, along with the gigantic quarters, are surrounded by what appears to be thin, silver pipes. The pipes wrap around the perimeter—like the hedges around the Outskirts—separating this area from the rest of the human realm.

Marine rises out of the river, shaking the water off her wings and haversack. She flies over to a wooden-looking island and rests on its railing. Her feet look so tiny—she *feels* so tiny. It's been thirty-five years since she's felt this bug-sized.

Marine reaches into her haversack, first retrieving her Language Barrier Potion. She squeezes the neck and pops off the cork, then takes a sip—a teeny-tiny sip—just enough to work its magic. The potion tastes like honeydew with a slight minty flavor, and takes effect immediately. Human English percolates through her mind like a smoke cloud. She rubs the wooden surface underneath her.

Bridge. She's sitting on a Bridge.

Her smile doesn't last. She removes her blank parchment and Brochure Pen next. After giving the pen a good twirl, she bites the lid off and scrawls her coordinates across the paper:

39.7458° N, 75.5467° W

The writing bleeds and fades into the parchment. In its place surfaces new writing—colorful characters in carefully-crafted calligraphy. (And the humans would call *that* alliteration.) The paper thickens, expanding from a single page into a folded pamphlet. The front reveals the name of Marine's location: *Glessner Manor: Wilmington, Delaware.*

The front inner portion of the pamphlet informs her about the area: the current temperature, some background history—nothing she'll bother reading. The backside has the interesting stuff and, even then, it's an exhausting amount of information.

Fortune Assignment For: Marine; water type

Human: Farrah Beatrice Minds

•Age 16, Female (Picture shown below)

This will be your assigned human for the duration of your stay. You will track your human's comfort level by monitoring the meters shown above his/her picture. Both meters are measured by a color spectrum, from purple representing elation to red representing depression. (A normal comfort level for humans usually resides in the green range, but each human varies.) If your human falls below his/her normal level of comfort, it will be your duty to grant him/her a fortune of your choosing, using the assigned F.D.

given to you pre-departure. (We do provide fortune examples on the third fold of the brochure in case you find yourself questioning how to proceed.)

Only use the assigned F.D. for Fortune-granting. Normal F.D. has proven too strong for humans not used to magic. This Dust also allows the glen to study your progress after your mission's conclusion, and how to best reward you for your successes.

And then there's the usual descriptions of glenpiphanyes. (As if Marine doesn't already know they're important.)

Glenpiphanyes are the most successful moments of a Fortune Mission, though they do not happen during every mission made. Usually, glenpiphanyes appear as a human's moment of realization – a life-altering conclusion that not only changes a human for better or worse, but gives life to new fairies and populates our society. If you are able to aid in a glenpiphany, you will be greatly rewarded by Her Majesty personally.

Ha—what a sale's pitch! It's almost funny how seriously Marine took glenpiphanyes in the past. Now, she rarely considers them. She doesn't even like the frinxy fairies in the glen currently, so why in Majesty's name would she want to help create more?

Ah, and just as quickly as Marine skims over the glenpiphany section, the letters scramble and rework themselves into a new brochure section—more rules.

Do not come in contact with any human other than who you've been assigned; and, even with your assigned mission, do not make yourself visible unless the circumstances are proven dire. Each human is different, meaning each fortune-granting technique should be adjusted to best fit his/her desires. To better perfect your fortune-granting methods, we strongly encourage you visit your home tree's designated Records section and study the history of your human using the Recollection Tanks. (Your assignment's vital memories were injected into your wings pre-departure, and can be accessed in these Tanks whenever convenient.)

Recollection Tanks have always given Marine the jitters. Stepping into the mind of a human, in a sad attempt to connect to a mission empathetically? The memories of this Farrah girl shall remain unexplored, safe inside Marine's winds. No use in her wasting any time there.

The words mix and reform again.

If you're ever feeling overwhelmed or have a question that has not been answered in this brochure, use your Ring and transport back to our realm anytime. Your Ring will keep its connection between the human and fairy realm for 28 sunrises, starting from the moment your Ring was created, and your brochure will last one sunrise after that. Please return to Fortune Glen before your Ring loses connection; otherwise it may be a few extra sunsets before we're able to locate and retrieve you from the human realm. (There are thousands of individuals going out on missions daily, and we ask for your patience if we do not immediately notice your mission has expired without your safe return.)

May this fortune serve you well. Stay Shim-tastic!

So. Farrah Beatrice Minds. Female. Age sixteen.

Marine's human teenager studies were hard classes to pass; very confusing. She's not even sure if her instructor understood the subject material himself.

The moving picture of the teen on the brochure reflects her current actions; she's lying on a floor, talking to...herself? Maybe she's talking to someone out of range of the moving picture. Her hand is on her ear...so maybe she's singing? Marine's witnessed a few of the Hawthorne's musically-inclined individuals fold their ears inward to hear themselves clearer, but that's a tactic usually used in noisy areas of the glen, and Farrah appears quite alone.

Above the picture is a list of Farrah's average and current comfort levels. But this average can't be correct. Can a magic parchment glitch? Marine flicks the page twice, yet the color remains. Farrah's average comfort level resides in the mid-yellow range. And, according to her current comfort meter, she's heading slightly more toward the left, a smidgen toward the orange zone.

Marine presses her face into the brochure and grumbles into its fold. How in Her Majesty's name is she going to work with an angst-y teenager for twenty-eight sunsets?

To the side of Farrah's picture is a hovering compass—the shape of a small hand, pointing in the direction of the teen's general location. Marine takes a deep breath, shoves the pamphlet into her haversack, pushes her palms against her forehead, and flies upward toward a smaller, lit knothole in the gigantic living quarters.

*

Marine doesn't enter Farrah's room immediately. Instead, she rests herself on the sill of the knothole, peering through the pane. Farrah stopped talking to herself a while back. Initially, the teen lay perfectly still like a fallen star that had lost its will to shine. But, after a few dull minutes, Farrah rolls onto her stomach and fondles a rather frightening-looking metal contraption. She then uncaps a thick pen and begins scribbling on the back of her hand until the black ink overpowers her skin's paleness. Marine sits up on her knees and pushes her hands against the glass, almost—but not quite—pressing her nose against it, too. Even with the Language Barrier potion taking its full effect, Farrah's writing makes no sense.

Marine waits a while longer, the cicadas growing louder with the passing of time. Surely it's way past this human's bedtime. Someone needs to let her know.

But no one does. Farrah continues to write. Marine continues to stall. She balls her fists into her eyes. She can't put this off forever.

It only takes two drops of Intangibility Oil. One on each wrist. Marine presses her palms against the glass once more, but this time they faze through the pane. Knowing good and well the fast-acting nature of the oil, Marine is still taken aback when her hands slip through solid matter, and she stumbles forward, head-first into the room. Her wings catch her before she hits the ground.

Marine slaps her hands against her cheeks, releasing the breath she caught on her way down.

Farrah lies inches away. And what a sight she is. The teen's hair is like dying yellow moss. Her lips are like thin, wrinkled petals; her eyebrows like caterpillars signaling a harsh winter ahead.

There's a rambling coming from the scary metal contraption, which appears even larger now that Marine is inside. It continues to shout numbers. Marine tries to interpret their meanings, since they obviously mean something to Farrah, but they're as scattered as a spring rainstorm. Perhaps Marine's Language Barrier Potion expired somehow, and it's causing English words to come across as disconnected. Do potions even expire?

The pen Farrah's using has a strong—really strong—scent that makes Marine dizzy. She hovers a few inches back and tries to cough away the hot fumes, but they continue to linger. If anything, Marine has to implement her plan now just to get that pen put away.

During Marine's vial studies back in her youngling years, she learned about the potions, patches, and oils that were presented to her upon graduation—the very vials she's carrying now. Though Marine zoned out during a good portion of these classes, she's fairly certain she's got the gist of things. Mainly, she remembers portion control; how one drop works for a hearty five minutes, one patch for an hour, one spray for a half-hour. Her instructor explained one vial could last a lifetime, if used wisely.

But Marine doomed “wise” decisions less than a sunset ago.

She takes her Visibility Spray, points it at the human, and sprays. And sprays. And sprays and sprays and sprays and keeps spraying until the human's pinky finger is sopping wet. The vial is empty when she lets it tumble across the carpet.

Chapter Eight: Rosy Cheeks (Farrah)

A gentle thud is all it takes to snap Farrah out of her zone. She looks up from her Sharpie-skin.

And screams.

Farrah shoots up off the floor and dashes backwards until her back slams against the opposite wall, never peeling her eyes away from the freak-of-nature *thing* in her room.

What is that thing?

It's human-like, as tall as one of her Kelly dolls from when she was younger, yet its body is more proportional. *Female*, she assumes from the long blonde pigtails and curvy physique. But, it looks like it's *melting*; water is dripping from its face, damp bangs sticking to its forehead and black eye makeup running down its cheeks. It's like a tiny blonde version of that ghastly girl from *The Ring*. With...wings?

"Get out get out get *out!*" Farrah shrieks, using her uncapped Sharpie as a lame weapon-of-choice.

The thing rises from the ground, fluttering its creepy, wasp-like wings. Farrah pushes herself further against the wall.

"Humans," the thing speaks, hand against its forehead, "are so loud."

Farrah stumbles against the wall, using it as a crutch for support while making her way toward the door.

"Wait, don't leave!" The thing clutches its tiny hands into fists. "I need to talk to you."

"*Me?*" Farrah's voice is getting higher.

The thing tries flying closer to Farrah, but crinkles its nose instead and backs away, now pressing both palms against its forehead. “For the love of Her Majesty, put that putrid writing-device away.”

Farrah does the opposite. Instead, she juts it out further with unsteady hands, pointing it toward the thing until the creature’s forced to back away even more.

“You’re processing a lot right now, I get it.” The thing grabs the bag strap around its shoulder and twists.

Farrah doesn’t lower the Sharpie, but her hands steady slightly.

“I need you to calm down,” the thing continues.

This has to be another one of Genevieve’s weird, high-priced purchases. Farrah’s not crazy. She’s so *not crazy*. (Or at least that’s what all the therapists have said prior.) She wants to sit down, her knees threaten to buckle, but she refuses to give this thing the chance to attack while she’s vulnerable.

“Better yet?” the thing asks. It’s hard to hear its tiny voice when it’s stationed on the opposite side of this rather large room.

Farrah shoots the creature an exasperated look.

“I get it,” the thing continues. Farrah lowers the Sharpie just slightly so the thing can approach her while it’s speaking. “It must be difficult. For all sixteen years of your simple life, you’ve assumed humanity is the highest species of them all. Take a moment; process this new species flying in front of you.”

Farrah’s tongue scratches the back of her throat, trying to find her voice. “What are you?”

The thing smirks. Kind of. “What do you think I am?”

Farrah cocks her head. The Sharpie lowers a smidgen more. “A...pixie?”

This seems to offend the thing. “I’m a fairy.”

“But isn’t that a type of pixie?”

“Don’t overcomplicate this.”

The fairy reaches into her bag and pulls out a pouch no bigger than Farrah’s pinky toenail, then reaches inside the pouch and retrieves—what appears to be—nothing. Yet, she holds that nothing in her palm carefully. “*This* is what fairies do.” The fairy blows the nothing into Farrah’s face.

Farrah shrieks again, dropping the Sharpie to wave her hands in front of her as if warding off an army of flies. She reverse-sprints away from the wall, tripping over the cord of her police scanner. The plug yanks out of the outlet with a spark. “What did you *do? What did you do?*”

“Relax,” the fairy says, returning her pouch inside her bag. She sits herself down on the scanner plug. “Check out your looking glass.”

Farrah pulls her shaking hands away from her face. She shakes the scanner cord off her foot, eyes locked on the pouty-lipped fairy, and eases toward the wall mirror.

Farrah squints at her reflection and pokes at her cheeks. “Uhm.”

“I made them rosy,” the fairy states the obvious.

Farrah’s pokes turn into her furiously rubbing at her cheekbones. “Change them back.”

“You’re very ungrateful.”

“I don’t *want* rosy cheeks.”

The fairy huffs. “It’s a Fortune.”

“A what?”

“A Fortune.” She perches herself on the top frame of the mirror, forcing Farrah to look up at her. “I’m a Fortune fairy from Fortune Glen, and you’re my assignment.”

“What, was my name pulled out of a hat or something?”

“Bizarre notion, but no. I’m injected with your memories—that’s the blue, swirly stuff flowing through my wing veins, y’see—and those connect me to you for the duration of my mission. No one knows for sure whether it’s actually based on compatibility or chosen at random, but our whole existence is based around granting humans little acts of kindness—”

“Why?”

The fairy’s mouth snaps shut. A couple of water drops drip off her chin. “*Why?*”

“Yeah, why?” Farrah asks again. “We don’t do anything for you. Heck, nobody even knows you exist. *I* still don’t think you exist, and I’m looking right at you.”

The fairy twists her bangs around two fingers and squeezes a stream of water from the stringy strands.

“Is it your job?” Farrah continues. “Do you get paid?”

“It’s our *duty*,” the fairy clarifies. “At least for the majority of us. And we don’t get paid, we earn Fairy Dust.”

“So...you get paid.”

“If that’s what you insist on calling it, sure. Though I’m fairly certain humans don’t get ‘paid’ for things like glenpiphanyes, so—”

“*Glin-piff-a-knees?*”

“Listen.” The fairy flies down from the mirror and hovers inches away from Farrah’s face. Farrah winces slightly, but doesn’t run this time. “You have a lot of questions. I get that. But I still need your help, and I don’t have time to explain the specifics.”

Without looking away, Farrah eases herself into her hanging wicker chair. She feels suddenly vulnerable without her Sharpie-weapon. She wants to say *this isn’t happening*, but a lot of stupid stuff has happened in Farrah’s life to prove anything’s possible, whether you believe in it or not.

The fairy’s seemingly permanent pout hardens, like she’s having a combat flashback.

This thing better not cry. Farrah can’t even handle it when humans cry.

“Someone’s been murdered.” the fairy says without further prompting.

Farrah drags her heels across the carpet to stop the rocking. “Like one of my people? Or one of yours?”

“Mine.”

“Oh…” Farrah says, voice trailing. “That…sucks.”

The fairy tugs at a pigtail and uses it as a counterproductive handkerchief to dry the rest of her face. When she wipes the dripping black smudges away, she doesn’t seem nearly as swamp monster-like. “There hasn’t been a murder in Fortune Glen for over a thousand years,” she continues, flicking water off the frayed ends of her pigtail. “Which is why I need help from a human, since you guys murder each other all the time.”

“Way to generalize.” Farrah lifts her feet from the ground and starts swinging again. “We *humans* don’t all go around slashing each other’s necks. But I can redirect you to our local police station and you can file a report there.”

Farrah tries to imagine this tiny creature struggling to hold up a pen and fill out human-sized paperwork.

“Nobody knows,” the fairy whispers.

Farrah stops swinging again. “What?”

“Nobody knows he’s dead. I’m the only one who’s seen the body.”

“You didn’t tell anyone?”

“No. I hid him in his closet and came here.”

Farrah jumps out of the wicker chair. It swings back and forward again, bumping against her calves. “You saw a body you didn’t murder and you *stuffed it in a closet?*”

“You humans and your *frinxy* repetition,” the fairy huffs. “Yes. That’s *exactly* what I did.”

“You don’t hide bodies unless *you’re* the one doing the killing!”

“You may not be a murderer, but you seem to know more about the process than I do.”

“Okay, *hold up.*” Farrah presses her palms together as if ready to pray. “Before you go any further, I. Can’t. Help. You.” She claps her hands after each pause. “I don’t care what it is you even need my help with—disposing of the body, taking out the murderer, taxidermy. I don’t care. I’m not—”

“I need you to figure out who the murderer is.”

Farrah blinks once. Twice. “Still not helping. I’m not a forensics specialist. I’m in high school.”

“Here’s the thing, Farrah,” the fairy says, folding her arms over her chest. “I’ve spent a lot of Fairy Dust on this mission. I *want* it to be worth the cost. I *want* to find out who killed this guy. And I *want* your help in doing so.”

“You’re wanting an awful lot there,” Farrah grumbles.

“Of course I am. Someone I personally know was the first murder victim in over a thousand years.”

Third blink. “Point taken.”

“Farrah, you’re the only human I can come in contact with, and I’m not even supposed to expose myself to you. I’m risking penalization.”

“After shoving a corpse in a closet, ‘penalization’ should be the least of your concerns.”

The fairy’s eyes widen. “You’re not wrong.”

Farrah releases a huffy breath. “Look, I’m sorry about your friend, okay? Losing someone’s tough. But I’ve got school starting Monday, and I don’t want my homework to consist of algebra, essays, and a fairy murder investigation.”

Farrah presses her hands against her cheeks. Would pest control laugh in her face if she called about a fairy problem? With a hiss, she recoils her injured hand—the one she cut while being a show-off to the PST—away from her face. She’s strained the area, making the scab reopen and ooze blood down her palm. The sting feels like it’s constantly splitting, releasing short bouts of fiery intensity.

The fairy swoops down to Farrah's level. "Leaving a wound open like that is really unsanitary."

"If you'd like to find a bandaid in this maze of a mansion, be my guest," Farrah hisses.

The fairy doesn't listen. She hovers over Farrah's injury. "It's an easier fix than that." She reaches into her bag and retrieves the little pouch of Fairy Dust again.

"I'm not kidding, fairy," Farrah snaps, pulling her hand away. "Stop sprinkling me with that stupid dust-stuff."

"Fairy Dust. It's called Fairy Dust. F.D. for short."

"I don't care what it's called. For all I know it could be some sorta cancer-causing agent."

The fairy goes to sprinkle, but Farrah pulls away once more, causing the tightness in her shoulder to return. She groans and rolls it back in a sorry attempt to loosen the muscle. That's the *last time* she vaults off an escalator to impress a bunch of people she doesn't know.

"Did you cut your shoulder, too?" the fairy asks. She starts to hover upward; a little too close for comfort.

"Don't touch me," Farrah warns.

But the fairy doesn't listen. She swoops down and pinches the shoulder section of Farrah's sweater, in an attempt to peak through the stitchings.

"I SAID DON'T TOUCH ME."

Farrah pulls back her hand to slap the fairy to Timbuktu, but the fairy avoids the blow.

But everything in Farrah's head feels heavy and threatening. This *fairy* is threatening. This thing has no consideration for personal space. She's so little and she takes up. So. Much. Space. What if she had touched her? What if this creature had learned that, in a world which assumes fairies are make-believe, Farrah was actually the most shocking presence in this room?

"Does your shoulder hurt that much?" the fairy asks.

Farrah lowers her eyes. Just a moment ago, Farrah was about to slap this creature—a creature that's the size of a pencil sharpened almost to its nub. If the fairy hadn't flown out of the way, how hard would Farrah have smacked her? How much damage would that have done? Would that have been the second fairy to die a violent death in over a thousand years?

"I can't make the pain go away," the fairy says, "but I can heal that wound."

The fairy motions for Farrah to lift her hand. Farrah hesitates, but finally obliges. Whatever this fairy's about to do can't be any worse than what Farrah almost did.

Once again, it looks as if the fairy has picked up nothing from her pouch, but the nothing catches the light and sparkles as it sprinkles down—floating, snowing—onto the wound.

The skin, once red, animates and ripples back into its original peachy pigmentation. The swelling disappears, and not even a bloody scab remains. The only indication that Farrah was ever injured is the throbbing heat still radiating from the area.

Farrah fingers the skin where the cut used to be. "Gone," she chokes out.

"I told you."

Farrah jumps up, quickly cupping her hands under the fairy's feet and drawing her in closer. "Why didn't you *tell* me you could heal things?"

"I did," the fairy deadpans. "But I can't heal *all* things. Fairy Dust has its limits. You think about what you want it to accomplish, and F.D. will do it to a certain extent, but it's not like all- powerful or anything. It doesn't take away pain, it doesn't bring anyone back to life, it doesn't mend broken wings. But, it can cure accidental cosmetic flaws. Which happen a lot in Fortune Glen—"

Farrah stopped listening. During the fairy's explanatory spiel, Farrah trembles as she unzips her pants and wriggles out of them, nearly tripping twice where she's standing. She takes a breath—a breath that fills her lungs with more air than she actually needs, causing her to hiccup once—then sheds her turtleneck next, balling it up and chucking it (The fairy has to duck to keep from getting smacked). After she peels off her socks, Farrah stands before this fairy in nothing but a white tank and boy-cut briefs.

The last time Farrah was this exposed to another living, breathing individual was at her last doctor's appointment, a check-up, to see how well the skin grafts were taking.

She lets this creature she's just met see every inch of pink skin. Raw pink. A pink that's rippled and chunky, like brain matter flattened with a rolling pin and stretched over the skeleton. It starts at the bottom: from the top of her feet—heels being spared—to the center of her neck. The skin flakes in several different places, each flap like a zipper's pull; if someone were to tug, everything would unzip.

The fairy's sentence trails away.

“Can you heal this?” Farrah says. She can feel her dimples twitch. As long as this fairy doesn’t try to touch her again, she can stay composed; this doesn’t keep Farrah’s body from sweating up a storm. She feels hotter now than she did with all the layers.

“Oh. Um.” The fairy twists her pigtail. “That...that’s a lot of skin.”

Farrah’s face falls. She wishes she hadn’t just thrown her turtleneck across the room.

“This entire pouch of F.D. may heal a scabbed shoulder at most,” the fairy continues. “But an entire body? That’d take regular F.D. Which we’re not allowed to use on humans because, well, of entirely good reasons, let’s leave it at that. And—even if you were *my* size—the burns aren’t fresh. Old scars are harder to heal, and with a body full of them you’d practically have to bathe in Dust. Which is expensive.”

Farrah reaches down and grabs her pants. “Right. Okay.”

“But it’s not *impossible*.”

“Could you hand me my sweater? Or is that too expensive to lift?”

“Lifting a sweater wouldn’t cost much. Would you rather have that?”

“Will you or will you not fix this?” Farrah extends her arms as if she’s Sherlock Holmes, ready to throw herself off the Reichenbach Falls. Her pants are now covering the scarred skin of her legs, but her arms are still a feast for the horror movie lover’s eyes.

The fairy blows back her bangs.

“That’s all I need to know,” Farrah mutters. “Now, leave.”

The fairy puckers her lips. Her expression doesn’t hide her internal debate. When she looks up, grimacing—probably at the conclusion Farrah doesn’t want to hear—Farrah reaches to unlatch the window.

“I’ll do it,” the fairy blurts. “I’ll use the regular F.D. I’ll heal you.”

Farrah’s smile returns. She releases the latch.

“But,” the fairy snaps, “only after we solve Frigid’s murder.”

Her smile hardens. *You don’t know any more about solving a murder than “it” does*, Farrah’s rationale reminds her.

Her irrational thoughts butt in: *That’s not true, I’ve watched those true crime shows.*

Yeah, and they can all be summed up in one word, her rational thoughts counter-argue. *Dangerous.*

This fairy is as big as my index finger. How much danger would this murderer be to me?

Even with the two voices refuting back and forth, they can both agree on one thing: This chance will never be offered to her again.

Farrah cautiously reaches out, touching the tip of the fairy’s blue-cruled wing like she’s pricking her finger on the needle of a spinning wheel. Marine doesn’t budge. She keeps her nose pointed forward as Farrah pinches the gossamer wing delicately between her fingertips. It feels like a thin, satin ribbon with a pulse: sturdy, yet soft. And real.

“What is your name?” Farrah asks. “Because I keep calling you ‘fairy’ and ‘creature’ in my mind.”

“Marine.”

“Marine,” Farrah whispers. Her word escapes so close to the fairy that it ruffles her hair like a blustery day. “Okay, Marine. I’ll help you.”

“Wonderful.” The reply sounds sarcastic. “So how do you find a murderer?”

Farrah releases an exasperated laugh. “Hold on there, spitfire.”

“Are you already giving me a byname? If you are, ‘spit-water’ makes more sense.”

“That’s not what....” Farrah shakes her head. Marine hasn’t explained everything to her, either. No point trying to clear up every misunderstanding. “You can’t just throw darts at suspects and expect one to hit the murderer.”

“What does throwing things have to do with Frigid’s murderer?”

Farrah mentally pinches the place between her eyes. She needs to take a step back. “I think....” Farrah says, then sucks on the inside of her cheek. “I think I need to examine the body first.”

Neither speaks for a moment, so the aquarium filter bubbles its opinion.

“So,” Farrah continues, “when’s a good time I could come to your place?”

“No.”

“No?”

“You’re not supposed to know about our realm. Plus, there’s a lot of other issues with that, such as your size, your lack of a teleportation device, your stressful human aura.” She sighs, as if Farrah’s “stressful aura” is overwhelming her as she speaks. “I’ll just bring the body to you.”

“You can’t just—”

“You may be leading this investigation,” Marine says, interrupting for the umpteenth time, “but I’m the keeper of your reward. So you will figure this out *my* way, and I say we shouldn’t shilly-shally figuring out how to get you into my realm.”

There's no point arguing. "Whatever," Farrah says, defeated. "Guess you already 'tampered with the evidence' when you shoved the body in a closet."

Marine readjusts the bag on her shoulder and flies up toward the windowsill. "I'll return soon, Farrah Minds."

"Wait," Farrah calls after her. "I never...I mean, how do you know...my name?"

Marine reaches into her bag and retrieves a tiny flask, filled with bronzed liquid. The fairy dabs a dot of the liquid on each of her wrists. "You're my Fortune Mission," she says, kneading the liquid into her skin and saying nothing more on the subject. "Make sure all those smelly markers are gone when I return. The fumes make me feel like my head's full of absinthe." She presses her tiny hands against the glass and fazes on through, as if the glass was never there.

Those final words sink into Farrah's stomach like skipping stones refusing to skip. She shuffles over to her turtleneck lying in a wrinkled wad on the carpet, then slips it back on before recapping the Sharpie.