

THE WINTER LEGACY:
Awakening

C. Håkansson

1.

It first happened during English class.

The teacher, fifty-something with graying hair and no neck, was going on and on about the importance of reading books while the students were looking longingly out the window. It was a hot day; summer had not yet given way to fall and the blazing sun poured through the windows. A few students fanned themselves idly with paper, and cursed the failing air conditioning. Natalie Winters was no exception. Sweat pearly upon her brow and she wished she was lying on the beach rather than being locked in a class room. Pen in hand, she doodled idly in her notebook when she noticed the words:

'You are powerful.'

She frowned at the words because she could not remember writing them. Perhaps she had been more out of it than she thought. Amongst the stick figures and flowers, these three words stood out. They weren't written with her hand writing.

She cast a fleeting look at the other students. Perhaps they'd written it. Still, the words were odd for some random stranger to write on a new student's paper. On top of that, none of the others were looking at her – had it been them, Natalie was sure they would be giggling and pointing at her by now.

Figuring she would find out soon enough if it was some sort of weird joke, Natalie sat back. The teacher's monotonous voice soon had her thinking of things completely unrelated to English class.

Then she saw, out of the corner of her eye, rather than felt, her hand move.

When she tensed her hand, it stopped.

She frowned deeply at the first words that had been written – what was going on? Her heart beat quicker than usual in her chest and a drop of sweat made its way down her nose to splatter on the paper. She glanced around at the class again, but no one was watching her.

Natalie raised her hand. Her teacher, Mrs. August, nodded to her.

"Yes, Miss—" she looked into her papers to find the last name, "Miss Winters?"

"Could I please have a bathroom pass?" asked Natalie.

A minute later, she was hurrying towards the bathrooms, not caring about the class' stares. Her heart thumped rather loudly now, as she thought more of the image of her arm moving without her making it. Natalie reached the bathrooms and skidded to a stop in front of the mirrors. An image of her wide blue eyes and strewn blond hair stared back at her.

"Get a grip," Natalie mumbled to herself. "It's nothing."

She splashed cold water onto her face. It felt nice but did little to calm her quick-beating heart. Had it been real, or was she imagining things? Perhaps she had just fallen asleep and dreamt that the words had appeared. Certainly, there must be a rational explanation.

A part of her knew it was not true. It had been real.

She had brought the notebook. It laid beside her on the sink and with she looked at it, frowning deeply. The doodles were still there – and so were the words.

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'You are powerful.'

Just below those three words, was another 'You' written. It must have been what she had started to write before she'd stopped it. Now, she wondered what it would have said if she had not stopped but she was scared to find out. *'You are powerful.'* – what did that mean?

She shook her head. This was a fabulous way to start her freshman year at Lake Sunflower High School, she thought sarcastically – going insane and writing things without knowing it. Next, she would be hearing voices and rambling incoherent things and then they would lock her up in a nice, padded room and with pretty white clothes to wear.

Her hand suddenly rose into the air again and she stared at it wide-eyed, but did not fight it.

Because she had not brought a pen with her, her hand landed on the mirror instead. Natalie stared wide-eyed as her finger made marks in the grease and dust on the mirror. By the time words were formed, her knees were shaking so badly she almost for got to read the words. Almost.

"You are not insane?" She snorted and a nervous giggle followed. "Yes, I'm a perfectly normal girl, watching my hand write on a bathroom mirror. Perfectly normal."

Natalie jumped when the bathroom door swooshed open. A girl entered, walked over to stand by the sink next to Natalie, and studied herself in the mirror. The girl was dressed in all black: military boots, a skirt, a belt of chains and a t-shirt. Her short, curly and very red hair was pulled back with a diadem, also black.

"Playing hooky too?" she asked, barely even glancing at Natalie as she added dark lip-gloss to her lips.

"I— no! I— needed to go to the bathroom."

The girl raised an eyebrow. "Jeez, are you always this uptight over a simple question?"

"I'm not!" Natalie said.

"Whoa, relax," said the girl with a smirk. "I'm not going to rat you out. We all need to get out sometimes."

"I should go," Natalie said. "Bye."

The girl merely chuckled. "Nice to meet you too."

Hurrying back to the classroom, Natalie prayed there would be no more strange words written by her without her realizing it. If any of the other students saw it, they would certainly peg her as crazy.

When Natalie noted that the red haired girl was in her math class, she sank down and tried not to be seen. The red haired girl did not care; she sat alone and looked wholly uninterested in the subject, just as the rest of the class appeared to be. The teacher tried valiantly, but failed to gain their interest.

At lunch a couple of hours later, Natalie sat alone in the cafeteria. She had brought lunch and was only just unwrapping her sandwich when someone sat down right in front of her.

"Well, if it isn't Bathroom Girl."

The redhead began eating her own sandwich without another word.

"Uh, hi."

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The girl was odd. Natalie could not quite decide if that was a good thing or a bad one.

“Hi,” the girl said with a fleeting look at her.

As the girl seemed more interested in the music coming out of her Ipod, Natalie shrugged to herself and began eating. She wondered if she would be making friends any time soon – though the redhead had now spoken to her twice, she did not seem the least bit interested in befriending her. Still, it was more than anyone else had done, as no one else had spared her so much as a glance.

“You’re not very social, you know.”

The redhead’s voice brought Natalie out of her reverie. She noted that the song in the music player was over – she had been able to hear it rather well as the volume had been loud to say the least.

Natalie cocked her head to the side. “I wasn’t aware that you wanted me to be social. You seemed to be enjoying your music.”

“I did, but now the song’s over. So let’s talk.” She held out a hand. “Regular people start with an introduction, so I suppose I should try to pretend that I’m regular. I’m Ava Simonsen.”

“Natalie Winters, it’s nice to meet you,” Natalie replied, taking Ava’s hand.

“So where did you come from?” Ava asked. She chewed on her sandwich. “I mean, you’re new here, aren’t you?”

Natalie nodded. “I’m from New York. We just moved here a couple of weeks ago.”

Ava nodded and, after finishing the last bite of her sandwich, wiped her fingers. “An Apple girl, then. Sounds better than Bathroom Girl. People get weird ideas sometimes.”

“You could just call me Natalie. But I suppose you’re the one with all the right ideas?”

“Oh no,” Ava said with a quick grin. “I’m far worse.”

Natalie could not quite get a grip on the girl before her – the best word she could come up with to describe her was quirky. Ava spoke quickly and with conviction.

“So what teachers do you have? If you’re new, you obviously don’t know them well enough to know which ones to avoid.”

“I have Mrs. Miller in math, Mrs. August in English, Mr. Hensley—”

“Oh, Mrs. August. What do you think of her?” Ava asked, interrupting Natalie before she had to try to remember the rest of her teachers. Really, she had only been to Lake Sunflower High for two days and names were not her strong suit.

“She seems fine to me. She told us we’d be reading a lot this year and she said we should read a lot outside of school as well.”

Ava nodded slowly. “Yeah, she always tells us that.”

“What do you think of her? Is she good?”

“Oh, I like her. She’s very good,” Ava said and gulped down some water. “But watch out for Mr. Hensley. If he decides he doesn’t like you, he won’t give you a good grade no matter what you do.”

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“Right,” said Natalie and wondered what else she could say. The silence felt rather awkward, but she was saved from having to speak again at all. The bell rang signaling that it was five minutes until class would start again.

Ava stood up. “Nice meeting you again, Bathroom Girl. See you around.”

Then, without another word, Ava turned and disappeared into the large crowd of students now moving towards the classrooms. Natalie emptied her trash into the trashcan, grabbed her bag and headed towards her next class.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Natalie wondered if there would be any more strange writings but she made it through the two afternoon classes and all the way home without incident. Loneliness stabbed at her as she walked home. Save for Ava and two of her teachers, no one had spoken to her all day. Everyone seemed to be paired off or belong to groups already and there was not enough room for her to fit as well.

“Hello?” said Natalie when she returned home but there was no answer. It was not surprising; the others were at work and would be so for another couple of hours. Natalie was glad; it meant some time to herself.

Dumping her school bag next to her bed, Natalie sat down at her desk. It was a rather small, simple wooden desk that nonetheless served its purpose. Grabbing a pen and a piece of paper, Natalie took a deep breath.

“All right, let’s pretend this isn’t crazy...”

She closed her eyes and counted slowly from ten to zero before opening them again.

The paper stared emptily back at her.

Natalie repeated the procedure but with the same result. She sighed to herself. In the middle of class, her hand flew around by its own accord but now that there were no people around, of course nothing happened. Perhaps she should feel relieved.

She put the paper and pen away and went about her chores. It was never a good idea to leave them undone until Emmanuella came home.

Hours later, the Turners’ car pulled up in the driveway and Richard and Emmanuella Turner exited. Richard stood a tad shorter than his wife, with granite colored hair and blue eyes. He looked older than his forty years. Beside him, the beautiful Emmanuella with long dark hair, curves and chocolate eyes. She knew she looked good. She wore expensive clothes and most of her salary – and some of Richard’s – went to days at the mall.

Unsure of what the Turners saw in each other, Natalie still had hopes it would not last. They had only been married for two years, after all.

She had prepared roast beef, potatoes and vegetables and while Emmanuella barely spared her a glance, Richard placed a hand on her shoulder.

“It looks delicious,” he said. He handed her not one but two wrapped gifts. “Happy fifteenth birthday.”

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She stared with surprise at the two gifts. Ever since Emmanuella came into their lives, Natalie had only received one birthday gift a year. Natalie smiled at Richard.

“Thank you.”

“Could we possibly eat today? I’m famished,” Emmanuella sneered rudely to ruin the moment.

Natalie barely managed to hold back the eye-roll. Sometimes she would swear that Emmanuella was a five-year-old in a grown up’s body; it would explain her childish behavior.

Emmanuella talked to Richard throughout the dinner and ignored Natalie, like she always did. Natalie had never been able to figure out what it was about her that annoyed Emmanuella so much – perhaps Natalie’s mere existence in their lives made Emmanuella irritated. Emmanuella did not see why Richard had to take care of his niece and Natalie suspected that if she had gotten the chance, she would have shipped off Natalie to boarding school. Luckily for Natalie, Richard would not let that happen.

Natalie glanced at the presents curiously. They sat there, invitingly, both neatly wrapped and rather small. The blue one had silver ribbons and one red had golden ones. The red package appeared older than the blue one, as though it had been wrapped for a long time. The ribbon would not get as dull, and the edges not as worn, if mere hours had passed since Richard wrapped it.

After dinner, Natalie did the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. A few years ago, there would’ve been cake and singing but Emmanuella claimed cake ruined her figure and Richard was, for the lack of a better word, whipped. His wife’s wish was his command, at least most of the time. Natalie shook her head at this.

She returned upstairs to her room once done but she had only barely shut the door behind her when the phone rang.

“Natalie!” screeched Emmanuella a moment later. “It’s for you!”

Natalie’s heart skipped a beat. No one here knew her number which meant it had to be her best friend from New York – her only reason for not wanting to leave.

She picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi Natalie, it’s Ava.”

Natalie swallowed her disappointment. “Uh, hi.”

“I’m not stalking you,” Ava said quickly.

“I did not think you were, but where did you get my phone number?”

“The school likes to keep records of these things,” Ava said. Natalie could almost hear the shrug that followed the statement.

Natalie did not push further though she doubted the school would just hand out the phone number to a student. She suspected that Ava did not always follow protocol when going after something she wanted.

“By the by, happy birthday,” Ava said.

“Did they give you all my registration info?” asked Natalie, more amused than irritated.

“I can be very persuasive,” Ava said happily. “Did you get any good presents?”

“I don’t know,” Natalie said. “I was just about to open them when you called.”

She fingered the red gift. It was more interesting to her than the blue one.

“You can open them now, with me. Gifts are fun. Though last year, my brothers had wrapped a spider up – I really didn’t appreciate that.”

Natalie wondered if she ought to remind Ava that they did not really know each other. Twenty-four hours earlier, the two had never spoken and Natalie still did not know anything beyond Ava’s name. Ava obviously knew more about her, though it was merely basic information such as her address and phone number – but for some reason, it did not feel right to say no to Ava. She was the first nice person Natalie had met at Lake Sunflower High School and something about her quirky personality appealed to Natalie.

“All right,” said Natalie. She picked up the blue present and made quick work of the wrapping. “I got a cell phone!”

As she described the phone to Ava, she read the note on the back of the carton.

Don’t tell Emmanuella. Happy birthday, my dear.’

Natalie could not help but giggle at this and then she had to explain the note to Ava.

“Who’s Emmanuella?” asked Ava.

“My uncle’s master. Well, she’s his wife, but really, in this case, it’s the same difference.”

Ava giggled with her.

When she had studied the phone and had figured out at least some of the finesses it had, Natalie put it away and reached for the other gift. Ava kept talking but Natalie toned it out. Carefully, she peeled off the tape from the red wrapping paper and pulled out a small box inside. It was a black, thin jewelry case.

Natalie flicked it open and gasped.

“Ava, could you call me later? I have to—” she trailed off.

The silver necklace in the box glimmered.

She hung up the phone without waiting for Ava to finish talking. Then she stretched over her desk and picked up a picture frame. The picture frame held a single picture, a bit bigger than a regular photograph, and quite old. Fifteen years old, to be more accurate.

A beautiful woman with hair the same color as Natalie’s, her eyes closed, rested in the picture. Just below her chin, a newborn baby was tucked in, sleeping soundly. The woman’s hand rested on the baby’s back. Around the woman’s neck hung a necklace – the same necklace that was now lying in front of Natalie in a simple jewelry box.

“Mommy,” whispered Natalie. She traced the contours of the woman’s face gently with her finger.

She picked up the necklace and it glittered in the late evening light. The chain was thin but seemed strong and on it hung an ornate piece of jewelry. It had a crystal base, an opaque and glimmering stone shaped in a form that reminded Natalie of a woman’s curvaceous body. Around the crystal ran threads of silver in a beautiful pattern. It was exquisite.

Natalie hung it around her neck, her hands trembling. When she looked in the mirror, she thought for a moment that she could see her mother. She hoped it was not just her imagination.

When she sat down once more, her heart felt heavy. It always did when she thought of her mother.

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There was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” Natalie said.

Richard entered. He stood in the doorway for a moment, gazing softly upon her. Natalie smiled back. She loved Richard. They were only uncle and niece by blood, but Natalie had lived with him for as long as she could remember and she had always looked upon him as a father.

“I see you’ve opened your gifts.”

Natalie nodded. “Thank you for the cell phone. I can’t believe you actually bought me one.”

Richard grinned. “I figured it would come in handy at some point. Just don’t ruin me by talking on it all day long.”

“I’ll only call in emergencies,” Natalie promised. She doubted she would have trouble keeping the promise – after all, who would she call? Her one friend still lived in New York and she would only call him at night anyway. Ava was, perhaps, looking promising as far as friendship went but seeing how they would be in school together, she saw no reason for them to call each other.

“Good,” said Richard.

Silence spread. They both knew what they would bring up next but Natalie felt both her own and Richard’s reluctance. Speaking about Natalie’s mother always reopened the hurt. Sometimes Natalie wondered if it was actually worse for Richard – after all, she had never known her mother as Richard had. She had been his sister. Where Natalie only had the picture; Richard had memories of a real person.

“She wanted you to have it,” Richard said finally. “I don’t know what was so special about your fifteenth birthday, but today was the day she wanted you to have it.”

Natalie spoke quietly. “I wouldn’t have been able to appreciate it before.”

“Perhaps.” Richard smiled. “You look more and more like your mother every day. You know, she wore that necklace for as long as I can remember. Our mother gave it to her on one of her early birthdays, I think.”

Natalie smiled at this. Though the idea of looking the same as her mother was lovely, sharing something with the mother she never knew was what truly appealed to her.

“It’s beautiful.”

Richard stood hesitantly and produced an envelope from his pocket. The paper was creased but it had not yet been opened. Natalie got the odd feeling that Richard had taken it out many times and looked at it.

“What is it?”

“It arrived this morning,” Richard said, studying the letter. “It seems to be a letter from your—”

He trailed off and handed the letter to Natalie. She took it and turned it over to see the sender’s name.

Madeline Turner.

“Your mother? My grandmother?”

Looking a bit concerned, Richard nodded.

It was probably not odd for a grandmother to send a grandchild a letter on his or her birthday, thought Natalie, but in this case it was very strange. Natalie had never heard from her

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grandmother, in her whole life – because she had been missing since mere days after Natalie’s mother had died in a terrible accident.

2.

The letter was dated to two days earlier so the explanation of a very old letter that had only now found its way to the right addressee did not work. Besides, the print on the front addressed it to Lake Sunflower rather than New York. Her grandmother knew where she lived.

Richard had left. The letter was private, addressed only to Natalie, and as such Richard felt it was Natalie's to read on her own.

'Dear Natalie,

I suppose you are shocked to see a letter from your grandmother in your mail today but I assure you, it is me. I wish I could have written you sooner but I have had to await the right time.

Let me start by wishing you a very happy birthday. I hope that by now, you have received your mother's gift. She wanted you to have it and as such, I hope you like it. Wear it; for now it will hold some protective abilities.'

Protective abilities? Natalie wondered at this but did not linger long. Her curiousness drove her to find out what else her grandmother had to say.

'I hope that you will consider something. I would like for you to come visit me. I live not far from you and an old lady such as myself would very much appreciate the company.'

Natalie paused. Her grandmother lived close enough for her to visit? Richard had absolutely no idea where his mother lived – had they just happened to move to the same area, the same city? Natalie turned the envelope over for a return address but found none. Only Madeline Turner's name was printed on the back.

If someone was making a joke, it was certainly a strange one.

'If you'd like to take me up on my offer, there will be someone to pick you up after school on Friday afternoon at two forty-five. Don't be late; if you are, I will assume that you do not want to come.

I hope to see you then.

All my love,

Your grandmother'

Natalie sat down. It did not seem like a joke. For one, who would do it? She knew no one here. Secondly, who would think it was funny to pretend that a dead grandparent was writing to her granddaughter?

Finally figuring that her grandmother was not dead after all, Natalie wondered if her grandmother really thought that Natalie would not take her up on her offer. Natalie knew no other family than Richard; he had so far been her only link to anything concerned with her heritage. All other family members were, according to Richard, dead or missing. Her grandmother had been missing, assumed dead, for nearly fifteen years. Of course Natalie would go, no question about it. She wondered what she would find. Richard had told her very little about the younger days of his life and he had never been all that specific about anyone or anything. Natalie wondered what her grandmother was like.

Friday was two days away; Natalie supposed she would find out then.

This was turning out to be the strangest birthday of her life. The mysterious writing that had happened in the morning almost seemed less strange now – almost. A necklace from her dead

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mother, a letter from her supposedly dead grandmother and an odd invite from said grandmother – perhaps Elvis still lived after all, Natalie snorted to herself.

Natalie went to bed that night, still thinking of her family. Her dreams filled with ghosts without faces, just out of reach. She imagined one of them to be her mother, but no matter how she begged, the ghost would come no closer.

The next morning, as she walked to school, Natalie was joined by Ava.

“Good morning, Strange One,” said Ava.

“Hi,” said Natalie. Then she blushed, remembering how rudely she had hung up on Ava the day before. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I just—”

“Don’t worry. As mentioned in your new name, you are strange.”

Natalie smiled, “I suppose I am.”

Ava kept quiet, but only for a moment. She did not seem to be able to stay quiet any longer than that. “Did you know there’s another student transferring to Lake Sunflower tomorrow?”

Natalie shook her head ‘no’.

“It’s insane. No one ever moves to Lake Sunflower, only from! Before you, there was no new transferring student in like three years. Then all of a sudden, there’re two in a week?”

Natalie glanced at Ava with an amused smile. Ava waved her arms to empathize her words.

“I’m sure the new student’s family have a good reason to move here,” Natalie said.

She tried to keep from laughing at Ava’s horrified expression.

“There is no ‘good reason’ to move to Lake Sunflower. This place is like sleeper’s paradise. Nothing ever happens, so it doesn’t matter if you sleep through the days, weeks and years. I swear, if we were time travel fifty years into the future, this place would still look the same.”

“You sound as though you love it here,” Natalie said, giggling. Ava glared at her. “So who’s the new student?”

They walked onto school ground. The tall building of Lake Sunflower High School rose before them. A large sign made of marble with the school’s name on it stood next to the entrance. Students poured into the school, most of them resembling zombies.

Natalie and Ava headed towards the freshman lockers as Ava spoke.

“I don’t know much,” Ava said, “but it’s a girl and she’ll be a freshman, just like us. She’s arriving this afternoon, as I understood it. She wanted to have a look around before she starts tomorrow.”

The bell rang a minute later and after a decision to meet up later, each hurried their own way. Natalie’s first class was history. She had barely managed to find her seat before her eyelids started drooping sleepily. She unpacked her notebook and pens on the desk. Her eyes fell on the words that had appeared the day before.

‘You are powerful.’

Natalie shook her head. She was not a bit powerful, but rather a very tired, ordinary girl. She would certainly have liked to sleep for a couple more hours.

As Mr. Hensley began lecturing about a war in the sixteenth century Europe, Natalie began doodling in her notebook once more. After a few minutes, the doodling stopped as she lost

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herself in daydreams of a prince on a white horse coming to sweep her away from school and give her a nice big bed in a kingdom where no alarm clocks existed.

When she looked down on her paper to find new words written there, her heart sped up but did not feel as frightened as she had the day before. The words did not keep her from being scared, despite the content – rather, it was the knowledge that it had happened before and it had not been dangerous then.

‘Don’t be scared.’

Natalie wondered if the words were really supposed to make her feel better. Yet she grabbed her pen and, trying to stop her hand from shaking, she wrote, *‘Who are you?’*

She relaxed once more and tried to forget that she could control her own arm. Looking down a few moments later, she found a new sentence written.

‘Someone. I want to help you.’

Natalie raised an eyebrow at the words. Whoever the writer, he or she – it – certainly wanted to be secretive.

‘Help me do what?’

Her heart thumped against her ribcage. A boy on her left glanced at her with an odd look on his face and Natalie realized she had been completely lost in her notebook for a bit too long. She looked up at her teacher and pretended to listen to his lecture.

‘Reach full potential.’

Natalie frowned. First the notion of her being powerful, now this? She was fifteen years old – how much ‘potential’ could she have? She jotted down as much as an answer to the ghost words. It did not take long for a reply to appear.

‘A lot.’

The two words made out the simple answer. Natalie stared at the words as though they would give her a deeper answer if she just looked at them hard enough. No explanation came, however, and no new words appeared. The ghost had fallen silent, leaving Natalie to wonder with many questions swirling in her mind.

The rest of the day passed and Natalie could only call it uneventful, especially compared to the way the day had started. Though she tried to zone out enough for the ghost – she had to think of it as a ghost because that was the only concept she could even begin to grasp – to take over her arm but there had been nothing. The only thing it had led to was Mrs. Miller, the math teacher, calling her out for an answer to a question she had not heard.

At lunch, Natalie met up with Ava in the cafeteria. Ava showed no interest in eating. Instead, she grabbed Natalie and pulled her along.

“The new girl’s in the administration office. I thought we’d go have a look.”

“What is she, a chimpanzee at the zoo?” Natalie asked, her tone amused.

“She’s new,” said Ava. “It’s what made you interesting, it’s what makes her interesting.”

Natalie chuckled. "I'm interesting?"

"Not anymore, you're hardly new by now," Ava said with a quick grin.

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks."

The administration office was just to the left of the main entrance. The rather large area had lots of small offices for the different administrators to work in – the principal's office, the student counselors, a few secretaries, finance and so on. Ava and Natalie headed towards the waiting area at the end of the corridor. Two couches were placed against the walls in the shape of an 'L', together with a small, low table. No magazines lay scattered on the table as there would be in any other waiting room – the administration claimed any magazines they put out there disappeared immediately.

When Natalie and Ava caught sight of the new girl, they both stopped.

The girl was sick.

Even at a distance, anyone should be able to tell. The girl was so thin it looked like her bones would snap if another person hugged her too tightly. Circles beneath her eyes stood in stark contrast against the pale skin. Her dark chocolate hair reached her waist easily and some of it hung in her face.

She looked up when she heard Natalie and Ava approaching.

"Hello," she said softly.

The girl stood up, trembling slightly before gaining her balance, standing a head shorter than Natalie.

Then something shimmered behind her. Something light and bright; Natalie could not tell what it was. She squinted her eyes but just as quickly as she had seen it, it was gone.

The girl was looking at her. "Are you all right?"

Natalie wanted to laugh but it died in her throat. This girl, this obviously very ill girl, asked her if she was all right, rather than the other way around.

"I'm fine," said Natalie. She walked over and held out her hand. "I'm Natalie Winters."

The girl glanced up at her. A gentle smile on her lips and something in her eyes told Natalie that the girl already knew her name.

"Cecily," said the girl and took her hand. "Cecily Cordell."

Natalie expected Cecily's hand to be cold but it radiated warmth, just as the girl's eyes did. There was something special about her.

Ava decided she had been left out long enough. "Ava Simonsen," she said and held out her hand as well.

Cecily smiled at Ava and shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Just then, the counselor who had registered Cecily returned from wherever he had been. "Ah, good," he said. "You two can show Miss Cordell around the school."

Natalie and Ava glanced at each other. Ava shrugged. "Sure."

After receiving passes that allowed them to walk the halls though classes had started, Natalie, Ava and Cecily set off. Natalie and Ava soon noticed that Cecily could not quite keep up if they walked too quickly. Her breath became labored and her already pale face became even whiter.

Neither Natalie nor Ava felt they could ask Cecily what was wrong with her, so they kept quiet and slowed down.

They covered the first floor quickly. Natalie stayed silent as Ava spoke about the school – after all, though Ava was only a freshman as well, she had lived in Lake Sunflower her entire life and had likely visited the high school on several occasions.

Cecily trailed along and asked questions here and there. For the most part, though, she remained quiet and listened with a small smile gracing her lips to Ava's stories.

Natalie watched her closely, partly because she worried that Cecily might suddenly drop dead, but mostly because there was simply something about her – something unique. Despite her frail appearance, power emanated from Cecily. Also, the shimmer that Natalie had seen behind her back in the administration office reappeared every now and then, when Natalie did not think of it and did not try to see it. It simply appeared, see-through and bright and it made Cecily look other-worldly.

"Why did you move to Lake Sunflower?" asked Ava as they headed toward the second floor.

"My father wanted a specialist here to look at me," Cecily said. "He has a good reputation."

Natalie stopped and the other two with her. "I'm sorry if this is too personal," she said quietly, "but what's wrong with you?"

Cecily studied the floor for a moment. Her neutral voice gave nothing away when she spoke. "They don't know. I think they've run every test in the book, but they can't find anything."

Natalie and Ava studied her in silence.

"Oh," said Natalie finally, because she could not come up with anything else to say.

"My body is breaking itself down," said Cecily. Her voice was surprisingly steady for someone explaining how sick they were, but then again, Cecily had probably had some time to get used to the idea. "None of the medicine they've tried has worked. The specialist I'm going to see now is in alternative medicine."

Natalie did not ask anything else. Already, she felt she had too much information. She had not wanted to find out that Cecily truly was as sick as her body suggested. She had wished to hear that a treatment made her look that way.

Cecily smiled again, though it was weak. "You were taking me to the art classroom?"

Ava stood still for a moment. She looked as shocked as Natalie at Cecily's news. Even though they had only just met her, Natalie cared about Cecily and it seemed Ava did the same. Even if not, it was still awful news to hear.

"Yes," Ava said, "yeah. The art classroom. Do you like art?"

"I can't draw worth a penny if that's what you mean," Cecily said, "but I do enjoy looking at art. Do you paint?"

Ava nodded. "I like to do it. I'm not sure I'm all that good though."

Natalie cocked her head to the side. "But you're not in my art class. Shouldn't you be taking art if you like it?"

"I do take art," Ava said, rather proudly. "I'm in advanced art."

Natalie's eyebrows rose in surprise. "That makes you a good artist. Not just anyone is allowed into that class."

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The art classroom was filled from wall to wall with art. The advanced students over the years had been allowed to paint murals on the walls and there were all styles, from the ballerina tying her shoe and the dolphins swimming in clear blue water, to the odd shapes and forms that no one but the artist knew the meaning of but everyone was free to interpret.

The desks in art stood close to each other. The busy advanced art worked on still lives with a western theme. Ava brought Natalie and Cecily along down to her desk. Every advanced art student was allowed a desk of their own, in which they could store their works in progress. Ava unlocked it and took out her sketches.

“These are beautiful,” Cecily said, leaning over and looking closer. “You have a great eye for detail.”

Ava grinned at Cecily’s words. “Thank you.”

“Miss Simonsen.”

The three girls turned around. A rather short man, just tad taller than Cecily, stood behind them. He had trimmed black hair, a moustache, and a plastic apron, stained with all the rainbow’s colors, tied around his waist.

“Mr. Connell,” said Ava. “This is Cecily Cordell. She’s new here and I’m showing her around.”

Mr. Connell raised an eyebrow at Ava, who looked a bit uncertain in turn. Then he turned to Cecily.

“Welcome to Lake Sunflower High School,” he said. “Are you going to take art?”

Cecily flashed him a smile. “I think I will have to, sir, but don’t expect me to be any good.”

“I will merely expect you to do your best and a little more,” said Mr. Connell, smiling back. He glanced at Ava, raising a bushy eyebrow at her. “And, of course, be in class.”

Ava blushed and Cecily giggled. Natalie hid her smile behind her hand when Ava glared at her.

“Now, there’s not much point in you starting on anything,” Mr. Connell said to Ava, “but I’m sure there are a few brushes over there that need cleaning.”

Ava rolled her eyes at him but did as she was told.

Mr. Connell turned to Natalie. “And Miss Winters, isn’t it? Your class starts in ten minutes so you may as well stay here until then.”

He told Cecily that she was welcome to stay as well but Cecily had to decline the offer. “My father will be out to pick me up any minute,” she said, “but I’ll be here tomorrow and the rest of the year.”

Cecily said her goodbyes to Ava, who washed brushes in the sink, and then to Mr. Connell.

“Would you like me to follow you to the parking lot?” Natalie asked. “I have the hall pass and like Mr. Connell said, class doesn’t start in another ten minutes.”

She could tell that Cecily was on the verge of saying no but then changed her mind. The soft smile that seemed to grace her features most of the time replaced the quick frown that had passed over her face.

“All right. I might get lost otherwise.”

Natalie smiled and the two left the classroom.

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Walking down the hallway, Natalie felt unsure why she had asked to come along. Getting lost on the way to the parking lot was likely impossible, it being twice as big as the school, and visible from at least two sides of the school building. Cecily walked silently next to her. Even her footsteps could barely be heard. They walked down the stairs and exited through the main entrance. Natalie held open the thick, wooden doors for Cecily.

Cecily's father had not yet arrived and the girls stood alone by the road. The silence was not uncomfortable but at the same time, Natalie wanted nothing but to ask Cecily questions.

"Where did you live before?" asked Natalie finally.

"Just outside of Los Angeles," Cecily said. She rubbed her temples with her fingers, wincing. "And you?"

Natalie did not answer. Instead, she reached out and placed a hand on Cecily's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I get headaches sometimes," said Cecily. She shrugged lightly as though it was nothing but the simple movement made her cringe again.

Natalie frowned at her. As she could not find the words to express the concern she felt for Cecily in a simple way, she opted to stay silent. It seemed odd to her that she already cared so much for a person she had only just met. Then again, it did not feel like they had just met.

A silver car pulled up just next to them.

"That's my dad," said Cecily. "Thank you for walking me. I'll see you tomorrow."

Natalie nodded. "I hope you feel better."

Cecily smiled gratefully at her words and seated herself in the car. "So do I."

3.

Sitting in school the next morning, Natalie could only barely keep herself from impatiently drumming her fingers against the desk. She had awoken before her alarm went off and for once, she did not yawn her way through her history class. She wished school would end, but classes had never seemed longer.

She would meet her grandmother. A grandmother she had had no idea was even alive until two days ago – and now she would get to see her. Excitement rose in Natalie just thinking about it and she smiled to herself.

When Natalie arrived in the math class room, it was to the nice surprise of Cecily already sitting there.

“Good morning,” said Natalie and sank into a seat next to Cecily.

Cecily smiled at the sight of her. “Good morning. How lovely to see a familiar face.”

Natalie grinned, “I’m sure you’ll make friends in no time and then you’ll have forgotten all about me.”

“Of course not,” said Cecily and looked affronted. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Natalie chuckled. “That’s good to know.”

They fell into easy conversation about how far along in math they had gotten and Cecily asked what the math teacher was like. It felt completely natural and she wondered if Cecily had the same feeling as she did – Natalie forgot that they had only just met.

A few minutes later, Ava arrived as well and the three girls spoke in hushed whispers all the way through class, which earned them a reprimand from Mrs. Miller.

Ava left for her history class after math while Cecily joined Natalie in English class as well. When Physical Education came around just before lunch, however, Cecily headed off to French instead. She explained that she had been excused from PE and Natalie had no problem understanding that a girl who had trouble walking at a quick pace should not be running around playing soccer or hitting volleyballs.

Ava, however, appeared in PE for the first time since Natalie had started at Lake Sunflower.

“I didn’t know you were in this class,” Natalie said.

“I try not to be,” said Ava with a roll of her eyes. “Phys ed isn’t quite my thing. I mean, look at the clothes.”

Natalie giggled, but had to agree that it looked odd to see Ava, who usually dressed in black, fishnet gloves and chains, wearing grey sweat pants and a t-shirt instead.

They sat together during lunch in the loud cafeteria. Cecily joined them not long after and the three busied themselves with small-talk and giggling over stupid things. Cecily told them about Ontario, where she had lived before moving to Lake Sunflower. Just as with Natalie, Ava jumped in her seat with excitement as she listened to what it was like to live anywhere that was not Lake Sunflower, though Ontario was not that far away.

Suddenly, someone behind them spoke.

“Trying to make friends with the new girls, Simonsen? No one here can stand you so you have to try elsewhere?”

The boy standing behind them was half a head taller than Natalie. He had dark blond hair and blue eyes in a face that would have been handsome if it had not been for the smirk he wore. Behind him stood two other boys and a stunningly beautiful girl.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Go back to your little groupies, Eadan. Without you, your one joint brain cell won’t function.”

The boy, apparently named Eadan, chuckled. The other boys did the same and a smirk not unlike Eadan’s graced the girl’s lips.

Eadan turned to Natalie and Cecily. Natalie noted the designer shirt and shoes. The boy came from money.

“You don’t want to be friends with her. She’s the school psycho.”

Natalie rolled her eyes and was just about to reply when Cecily beat her to it.

“Maybe we’re psycho too and don’t care if she is as well,” she said. “Maybe we’re perfectly happy being who we are without having to worship a great big leader such as yourself.”

She said it in a sweet tone but her eyes were dark with annoyance.

Eadan looked as though he wanted to ask why they did not want to be cool but he managed to stop himself. Cecily’s eyes made him hesitate to say anything else so finally, he turned around and gestured towards his followers.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s leave the freaks behind.”

Then they strutted off, the girl shooting one last glare at Cecily, Ava and Natalie.

As soon as they had gone, the three girls burst into giggles.

“Nice,” said Ava to Cecily. “It usually takes a punch or two to get him to shut up.”

Natalie’s eyebrows rose, though she was still giggling. “You’ve punched him?”

“He’s been acting that way since we were in kindergarten together! Of course I have. You would have too.”

Cecily looked at the door through which they had left. “Who is he?”

Ava shook her head and took a sip of her drink. “Chase Eadan. One of three sons born to Mr. Charles Eadan, Lake Sunflower’s richest man by far and the biggest jerk you could ever imagine.”

Natalie gave a low whistle. “I figured he was rich but—”

“He’s more than rich,” Ava said. “You should see the mansion they live in. It’s insane.”

“And the other kids that were with him?” asked Cecily.

“Those are his followers, and really, I wasn’t kidding about the one brain cell. Those idiots do anything Eadan Junior tells them to do,” Ava said with a shake of her head. “They’re like his trained monkeys.”

Natalie chuckled. “I don’t think I have to ask why he doesn’t like you.”

Ava shook her head. “I refused to give up a toy to him when we were in kindergarten. He’s pretty much hated me since.”

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“I suppose we’re not very popular in his eyes either,” Natalie said. Then she added with a grin, “But that was so worth it.”

The three chuckled and continued their lunches. While Cecily and Ava fell into conversation once more, Natalie sat quietly and watched them. It was funny, she thought, that in a week at Lake Sunflower High, Natalie had made more friends than she had had in total during all her years in New York.

Ava and Cecily were truly opposites. They looked different and they acted different. Cecily’s ill, small form contrasted against Ava’s curvy body and where Cecily wore white and flowery clothes, Ava was all for black to the point of Goth and military colors. Even their complexions were opposite each other; Cecily’s dark features versus Ava’s red hair and freckles.

Natalie wondered for a moment if two people so different could really make good friends but listening to the two, it seemed entirely possible.

“What are you guys doing this afternoon?” asked Ava suddenly, the question directed to both Natalie and Cecily. It shook Natalie out of her reverie and she was reminded of where she was going when school was out. “We could hang out.”

Natalie shook her head. “Any other afternoon, but this one. I’m going to see my grandmother.”

“I’m guessing you don’t see her very often?” Ava said.

“I’ve never met her at all,” Natalie said. “I thought she was dead until I got a letter from her.”

She explained to Ava and Cecily about the letter and its content. She smiled widely just by talking about it.

The excitement lasted until the end of art, her last class of the day. Cecily joined her as she walked out to the main street and scanned the busy street for her grandmother. The street milled with cars and students and since Natalie had no idea what her grandmother looked like, it made for quite the hard task to try to find her ride. Perhaps there would be a sign or something.

A man cleared his throat. “Miss Winters.”

Cecily and Natalie both turned to find an older man standing behind him. If ever Natalie had pondered what a ‘gentleman’ would look like, the image she would create would likely be exactly the man standing before her. Somewhere in his sixties, the man had grey hair parted straight down the middle. He wore a button-up white shirt and a black vest, black pants and well-polished shoes.

The man looked down his rather large nose at Natalie.

“Miss Winters,” he said again, “your grandmother sent me to pick you up.”

He sounded very nearly irritated. Natalie exchanged looks with Cecily. “Right.”

“Shall we? Your grandmother wanted me to bring you straight back with me,” said the man. His accent was very British.

Natalie hugged Cecily goodbye. The man turned and started walking without looking back to check whether Natalie followed or not. She did, having to almost run to keep up with his long strides.

The man turned a corner and Natalie stopped dead in her tracks.

A large carriage pulled by two huge, red horses stood before her. The carriage was breathtakingly beautiful; the silver base was decorated with a multitude of small flowers and other details. It

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rested on four large wheels and looked like it had been taken straight out of a book from the seventeenth century.

The man who had led her there held the door open for her.

“Miss Winters,” he said and made a gesture for her to get into the carriage. He looked impatient and Natalie scrambled into the carriage. The inside of it was spacious, with comfortable seats and large pillows. Natalie rested back, still in a bit of a shock. What kind of person was her grandmother?

Only moments after sitting down, the carriage started moving. There were no windows, or at least they were all covered with drapes. A light hung in the center of the carriage but it was dimmed. The gentle rocking of the carriage as the horses pulled it soon made Natalie drowsy and she fell into slumber.

She dreamed of the carriage flying through the air, the horses winged as fairytale creatures. She smiled at the dream, because she had always enjoyed the sensation of soaring through the sky. She dreamed that they landed smoothly in a bare, stony landscape that seemed to go on and on.

She could not be certain of whether it was a dream or not, but a man lifted her out of the carriage. She wondered fleetingly, as often done in dreams, if he was her prince charming. He did not smile at her. Instead he carried through a passage and suddenly, the light sky outside disappeared, darkness taking its place. A bad feeling settled in Natalie’s stomach. Huge pillars grew around her, leaning over her and closing her in. Dark shapes moved between the pillars and she thought she could hear wicked laughter. Natalie’s heart raced. This had turned into a nightmare! The cackling followed her as she tried to claw her way out of the dream. Her body wouldn’t allow it – something tied her there.

The man dumped her unceremoniously on the ground. The hurt stabbed at her, and her addled brain began to realize that this was not a dream at all. Forcing herself awake, she slowly started gaining control of her limbs and her mind.

She gasped as she truly woke up. The man glanced at her and then, with a cruel smile, he placed a knife to her throat.

“Welcome back, Miss Winters.”

She screamed.

The man holding the knife to her throat chuckled cruelly. “Who do you think will hear you?”

Natalie managed to look up and saw the gentleman who had picked her up. There was a gleam of madness in his eyes that she had not seen before. She wondered how she could have missed it. A black necklace with a round blood-red stone hung around his neck, shimmering almost as though it held life within.

The man touched it and for a moment, darkness surrounded him.

When it faded, the gentleman no longer the one holding her. In his place was a new man, a different one.

He looked a bit younger and black hair flowed behind him. His features were as sharp as the knife blade he held to Natalie’s throat. He had dark, bloodshot eyes – but they flashed with the

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same madness Natalie had seen in them before. Natalie stared wide-eyed, her breath coming in short intakes. He had just changed his appearance. Just like that. And it had not merely been pulling a wig off – he had changed his entire face, his entire body. She wondered for a moment if she could be hallucinating – but the pain was too real.

The man unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“That butler wears it too tight,” he whispered to her, into her ear. “But we all do what we have to.”

Natalie shook with shock and tears formed in her eyes. The knife had her bending her head back in a hurting angle. It pressed hard and cold against the side of her throat, its touch just shy of piercing the skin. The man grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back.

“What— what do you want with me? Who are you?”

Her voice wavered and the tears began spilling over at the new pain in her arm. The man chuckled at this and something in him reminded Natalie of a giddy child. An insane giddy child, but still.

“I am Ramon,” whispered the man. “But that answer will cost you.”

With a touch more pressure, Ramon broke the skin on Natalie’s neck in a thin, red line. Immediately, blood started seeping down her throat. Natalie cried out and attempted to cover her throat with her hand. Ramon stopped her by twisting her other arm up further, nearly to the breaking point. Natalie’s vision swam with a mixture of pain and tears.

“Please,” she said, “don’t kill me.”

Ramon did not say a word. The knife swung around and for one excruciating moment, Natalie thought he was going to plunge it into her. When she felt no pain, she looked up – only to find him holding her mother’s necklace in his hand. He had broken the chain with the knife.

“No!” she cried, “that’s mine!”

“Not anymore,” said Ramon and pocketed the necklace.

He threw her down on the ground. She landed hard and smashed her head against the ground. Only now did she notice the surroundings; the cold stone floor and the large pillars holding the roof up, far above their heads. She had not been dreaming earlier. Beyond the pillars she saw only darkness and Natalie could not tell if there were walls or not. The circular room had a round slab of stone in the very middle of it. Right above, Natalie saw a large, round hole in the roof. Shocked, Natalie noted the dark sky – it was night.

She pressed her hand against her throat and whimpered. The cut was not deep and it did not bleed much, but it throbbed dully and colored her hand.

Natalie looked at Ramon, circling her. The knife shone blue in the dim light.

She glanced around, trying to find a means to escape the lunatic. She berated herself for getting into the carriage in the first place – she should have realized. Then again, what should she have realized? The whole thing had been surreal, from the letter from her grandmother to the carriage and the gentleman. The whole thing had probably been some insane plan from the beginning to kidnap her. Her grandmother was probably dead after all.

“If it’s ransom you want, we don’t have much money,” Natalie cried. “I live with my uncle and his wife and they – they don’t make all that much—”

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“I don’t care about your money,” snarled Ramon, interrupting her. “I am above such things. You are here for one reason only: to die, at midnight.”

Natalie gasped and fresh tears fell down her cheeks. She looked around again. At the side furthest away from her, a large door rose. She could not be entirely sure it led out but she did not want to risk the darkness beyond the pillars being walls, so the door was her only choice. But how was she to get there? Ramon kept his eyes trained upon her, circling her like a vulture. Natalie felt rather certain Ramon was quite adept at throwing the knife. He seemed to be handling it with skill.

Still, the other option was to wait and die. No one else knew where she was. She had not told Richard because he would not be home until later anyway – she had counted on being back before him. Cecily and Ava knew she had gone to her grandmother, but they had no reason to suspect anything. And there obviously was no grandmother.

Natalie felt utterly alone.

But she refused to let any more tears flow. She would get out of here, or she was going to die trying. She did not want to think about how likely a prospect the latter was.

Slowly, as to not raise his attention any more, Natalie pulled her legs in. She would need to get up very quickly if she was to have any chance. Every now and then, Ramon glanced at the sky. It would be her window, her chance, as it was the only time he took his eyes off her.

He had not bound her, likely thinking she had no chance of getting away anyway. It was probably right.

Trying to steady her breathing, Natalie watched Ramon with the same intensity he watched her. He did not seem to notice, or at least he did not care.

Then he looked to the sky.

Natalie’s muscles nearly exploded with the power she put behind. Quicker than she had thought herself able to move, Natalie rushed up and towards the door.

Ramon screamed at her. Then he threw his knife, his aim as precise as a trained sniper’s.

4.

The doors before Natalie slammed open with such enormous force, they were blown off their hinges. A shower of cold water surrounded her and soaked her, chilling her to the bone. Still, Natalie ran blindly towards the door.

She waited for the knife that would surely embed itself between her shoulder blades. She waited for the pain and the sensation of warm blood, seeping down her back.

It never came.

When she finally stopped, and dared turn around, the knife had stopped in midair a mere arm length away from Natalie. It hung there, as though it was completely natural for a knife to float. Natalie's heart beat so hard she thought it would make its way out of her chest.

The room before her was now empty. Ramon had disappeared, even though Natalie could not figure out how. There were no other exits than the doors behind her and he certainly had not run past her, had he?

“Are you all right, my dear?”

Natalie swirled around, jumping at the sound of a gentle female voice.

Before her stood an old woman. She had grey hair gathered in a bun at the nape of her neck and she looked as though she was dressed for a ball several centuries ago, in a green dress with lace and several skirts. The woman had pale blue eyes that seemed a bit cold, with which she looked upon Natalie. She had concern written on her face.

“I—” said Natalie, but found she was unable to say anything more. She sank to the ground as all the energy left her. She was shaking badly and, she noticed dimly, the wound on her throat still bled lightly. The woman before her, whom Natalie felt far from sure she could trust but really had no choice but to, kneeled next to her.

“Sleep,” she said.

Natalie felt darkness sweep over her mind, lovely oblivion following.

When she woke up again, she was lying in a bed. The sheets felt soft to the touch, the mattress large and comfortable. She felt warm and comfortable but wondered idly where she was – it certainly did not feel like her own bed. She had the nagging feeling she should remember something, but did not. Then Natalie felt something pressing against her throat. When she touched it, she realized it was a bandage – and suddenly the memories came rushing back.

She sat straight up and looked around. The room was a good sized bedroom. To her right, a window with the drapes pulled, allowing only a bit of light through. Still, as she recalled that it had been dark when she had been trapped with Ramon, she supposed she had been sleeping for quite some time.

There was a knock on the door and without waiting, the lady that had come to her rescue entered. Tall and thin, with a long nose and hollow cheeks, she looked stern. Behind her trailed a round woman, who appeared only slightly younger than Natalie's savior. The younger one, dressed in a skirt, button-up shirt, an apron and a rather silly-looking hat, carried a tray with toast and juice.

Natalie's rescuer wore a blue dress, the same style as the day before, but this one was navy blue.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” Natalie replied hesitantly.

The woman with the apron placed the tray before Natalie. Then, with a slight bow, she exited quietly.

The lady pulled back the drapes from the window and light spilled in, momentarily blinding Natalie.

“You’ve been sleeping a good long while,” said the lady. “I thought maybe you were more seriously injured than we first believed. It appears not. Now, eat.”

Automatically, Natalie took a piece of toast. The woman’s voice was demanding. After swallowing her first bite, Natalie said softly, “I’m sorry but— who are you? And where am I?”

The lady turned to Natalie. She smiled slightly, amused. “Why, I’m your grandmother of course.”

Natalie simply stared.

“Did you believe you didn’t have a grandmother after all?”

Natalie frowned. “It was a rather easy conclusion to reach, when I was kidnapped by a lunatic rather than brought to you. That, and the fact that you were pronounced dead fifteen years ago.”

“There are things we have to do,” said her grandmother evasively and Natalie did not press, still in shock. “And I am sorry about the kidnapping. I found my butler Thomas, who was going to pick you up, bound and unconscious out in the stables when I started wondering why you hadn’t arrived yet.”

“So the carriage is yours then?” asked Natalie, amazed.

“Of course,” said her grandmother as though it was the most natural thing in the world. “I have a tracking stone on it so it was easy enough to find you once I realized you were missing.”

“A tracking stone?” asked Natalie dumbly between bites.

Her grandmother made a sound. “Eat up first, business will come later.”

With those words, her grandmother turned and headed towards the door. “I will be in the living room. Come there once you’ve finished eating and have dressed.”

She left, leaving Natalie staring after her. What a strange woman.

She found that she was dressed in a white night gown with frills, which style-wise fit rather well with what her grandmother had been wearing. However, it did not fit the bill as something one could wear anywhere out of bed, so when she had finished her breakfast – which she did with another two bites – she looked around the room for her regular clothes. They were nowhere to be found.

Standing up and opening the door to the large, old-looking wardrobe, Natalie found a dress in the same style that her grandmother had worn. Shrugging, she figured it was better than nothing to wear and she put it on. It reached the floor and fit snugly around her waist. The light blue color shimmered in the daylight. Natalie felt a bit like a fairytale princess and could not help but giggle at the thought.

She left the room she had slept in, heading down the corridor in what she hoped was the right direction. Looking around, the place seemed huge. A number of closed doors could be found on each side of the corridor. The floor had thick carpets into which her bare feet sank pleasantly.

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Curiously looking around, Natalie eventually found the living room. It appeared she had been sleeping on the second floor. At the end of the corridor, there were rails on each side and she looked down, finding the cozy living room. It had couches and a table and a fireplace but not a single electronic device, Natalie quickly noted.

“Ah, there you are,” said her grandmother as Natalie descended the stairs. “Oh my, you look so pretty.”

Natalie smiled. She looked around with great interest. The living room was larger than she had been able to tell from upstairs. Another set of couches sat on the other end of the room. Still nothing that required electricity, however – not even any lamps, only candles.

Then Natalie caught sight of the view from the windows and she could not help but gasp.

“It’s— magnificent,” she said.

And it was. Before her, there a downward, green slope led into a immense, green forest that seemed to simply go on and on until it merged with the blue skies. The huge trees reached for the skies and above them flew birds that twittered on, filling the air with song. Even from this distance, Natalie felt the life forces that emanated from the forest. It was somehow— powerful.

“Why thank you,” said her grandmother. “I can often sit and simply watch the animals.”

Natalie smiled. “This whole place is rather fantastic. I mean, the clothes, the house—”

Her grandmother looked down her nose at her and Natalie thought she detected a smile. “Shall we take a walk?”

Natalie was handed a shawl by a maid who suddenly appeared. Where had she come from? She was allowed no time to think about it. Her grandmother headed outside through one of the large glass doors. Natalie shrugged the jacket on – it matched her dress perfectly – and hurried to walk next to her grandmother.

“Where are we? I didn’t think this kind of forest existed anywhere near Lake Sunflower.”

Her grandmother merely smiled and remained silent.

There was a small stone stairway leading down the slant into the forest. On each side of it grew beautiful flowers, each more colorful than the other. Chattering birds flew happily overhead. Natalie thought she saw a group of deer hiding beyond the trees but she could not be sure.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and suddenly, the large trees loomed above them. They hid the blue skies and surrounded them in dusk. Her grandmother trotted on and Natalie followed duly. The darkness around them dimmed her mood and it reminded her forcefully of how she had been brought to her grandmother’s home. Those were not pleasant thoughts.

“Grandmother,” she said, not quite knowing what she should call her, “what am I doing here? What happened yesterday?”

Her grandmother hesitated for a second, but then said simply, “I will answer you in a moment.”

Natalie and her grandmother reached a clearing mere moments later. It was perfectly circular, the trees around reaching high towards the sky. It reminded Natalie of the room in which she had been the day before; the tall roof and the pillars, and far above, the sky and stars. This clearing felt much more inviting and calm – though that might be because she did not have a knife to her throat this time. With a gasp, Natalie noted the large round stone in the middle of the clearing – just like in the room Ramon had held her in. The stone was large enough for Natalie to be able to

lie down and stretch out on. A crack ran down the middle of it as though it had once been split in two, but put together again.

Her grandmother knelt at the side of the stone.

“Sit, Natalie.”

Natalie sat down on the soft grass. It was thick and a bit damp still from the cool night, as the sun had not yet reached high enough to warm it.

“What is this place?” asked Natalie.

Her grandmother still stood tall, appearing thoughtful.

Her grandmother ran her hand over the pale green stone that hung on a necklace around her neck, a motion reminiscent of what Ramon had done the night before. Her grandmother’s appearance did not change when she did however. Were the necklaces or the motions significant? Something told Natalie they were.

“You are in my Mithridates,” her grandmother said, looking around, her face soft. She said the words as though they would explain things.

Natalie sat silently and watched her grandmother, unsure of whether she should speak or not.

“I suppose I should start a bit more towards the beginning of things,” said her grandmother, her eyes coming to rest upon Natalie. She frowned, “Though I’m not sure what the beginning is. I’ve never awoken anyone.”

“Awoken?” echoed Natalie. She attempted a joke. “I don’t believe I’m asleep.”

Of course, she had to add in her thoughts, this might be a dream. It sure was strange enough.

Her grandmother did not appear to appreciate her words. She said nothing. Natalie glanced around uncertainly. What was this, some kind of cult? Really, considering the clothes and the style of her grandmother’s home, it might well be. Cults probably also always had psychos – and for that, Ramon certainly qualified.

“Do you believe in magic, Natalie?”

Natalie was thrown by the question. She would expected a few different questions but that had certainly not been one of them.

Memories flashed before her – hazy images of flying horses, a man changing his appearance simply by touching a stone, and finally, clearly in her mind, a knife hanging still in the air, no strings attached.

After a moment, she answered, her tone that of a question. “I think so.”

“Good,” said her grandmother. “That helps.” She paused for a moment. Then, looking away from Natalie, she said, “Magic does exist. It’s not a thing of fairytales and fantasy books. It is very real and you will be able to wield it.”

“Magic? Wield it? Huh?” Natalie felt rather stupid, repeating her grandmother’s words, but she could not help herself. Though the evidence stared her hard in the face, and though she wanted to believe, Natalie still had to have doubts. There could be some other explanation for the knife and Ramon’s changed appearance, could there not? And she was certain the flying horses had been of her wild imagination. Perhaps her grandmother was crazy.

“I’m not crazy,” her grandmother said.

Natalie scrambled back. “What do you do, read minds?”

Her grandmother chuckled. “No, dear, but your thoughts were rather obvious – and it’s an easy conclusion to reach. Perhaps this will help you.”

She placed her hand on the red stone around her neck again. She held it there for a moment, her eyes closed. When she pulled away, a blue light floated above her fingers. It slowly transformed before Natalie’s wide eyes – into a large drop of water.

Natalie stared.

Her grandmother looked at her, her face deeply serious. “Magic exists.”

The drop of water was catalogued in Natalie’s brain right next to the knife hanging in the air. Her thoughts ran a million miles a minute with all sorts of questions – magic existed? Her grandmother, a witch? Why would she tell Natalie about it? Who was her grandmother?

Her grandmother let the drop of water she had created fall to the ground. Natalie touched the spot with a shaking hand. It was soaking wet.

Finally, her voice barely above a whisper, Natalie asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m a Wielder,” her grandmother said. “A Master Wielder of magic and within magic, mostly water. It is my most powerful element.”

Natalie could not decide what she felt. Amazement? Fear?

“You are a Wielder too, Natalie,” her grandmother said. “A Novus as of yet, but a Wielder none the less. Take out the necklace you received from your mother and you will understand.”

Natalie looked up suddenly, remembering. A lump in her throat formed. “I don’t have it.”

“You don’t— where is it?”

Natalie studied her hands. “That man, yesterday – Ramon – he took it from me.”

Why Ramon had taken it? Of all things – save for the photograph she had framed, the necklace was the one thing of her mother’s she had ever owned.

Her grandmother looked distressed. “Then Ramon got part of what he was out for yesterday after all.”

“What do you mean? What’s so special about that necklace? To anyone but me, I mean.”

“That necklace is more than a mere family heirloom,” her grandmother said. “It is powerful. It is made with a immensely powerful crystal and in the wrong hands, that stone can wreck great havoc.”

“But it’s just a necklace,” said Natalie.

“Haven’t you been listening?” asked her grandmother. “Magic! The magic is in the stones. Like the stone I have around my neck – it is my power source. With it, I can cast weak magic in all magic fields, and strong magic within the water bound magics.”

Natalie remembered water from when her grandmother had rescued her. Had that been magic, her grandmother’s doing? Had the knife been stopped, thanks to her grandmother?

“Like spells? With wands and stuff?” asked Natalie.

“We don’t use wands – pieces of wood are of no use when it comes to magic,” her grandmother said shortly.

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Natalie stayed silent for a moment. “Who is Ramon?”

“I don’t know,” her grandmother said. “He reeked of strength but I have never heard of him before. The tracking stone on the carriage was the only reason I found you, and met him. But he disappeared before I had a chance to get a grip on his strength.”

“He said he was going to kill me,” Natalie said, her voice small.

Her grandmother stopped and stared at Natalie for a moment. Then she smiled slightly. “Then it was lucky that I showed up when I did, wasn’t it?”

Natalie nodded.

Her grandmother held out her hand to Natalie. “Now, stand – even if you don’t have your necklace, it doesn’t mean I can’t start teaching you.”

5.

A single bird flew across the sky as Natalie's grandmother undid her necklace and fastened it around Natalie's neck. Though unsure of the idea of powerful stones, Natalie imagined she could sense something emanating from the green, opaque rock.

"Our magic isn't complicated," said her grandmother. "There are no Latin words to be remembered, no long verses to call upon ancient powers. There are a few rituals, but mostly, our magic is simpler than that. For one, you either have it or you don't. The most powerful stones in existence would still have no effect if the wearer wasn't a Wielder."

"And I'm a Wielder?" asked Natalie.

Her grandmother chuckled. "You have the makings of one, although you are not one yet, no. You come from a long line of Wielders and in the last nine centuries, there hasn't been a female born in the family without the ability."

"Oh," said Natalie. "That's quite a few Wielders, isn't it?"

Her grandmother shrugged. "Not all are powerful and even fewer know that they have the ability."

Natalie did not dare to ask if her grandmother thought Natalie would be powerful.

"The first level of Wielders are Novus Wielders," said her grandmother. Her tone was that of a teacher holding a class for a student. "A Novus will perform accidental magic, such as protective magic, at times of great distress. A Novus will have little control over his or her powers, but can sometimes perform small spells on purpose."

Natalie doubted she even qualified for that – she had never done magic at all. She had been in great distress the day before and nothing had happened.

"The second level of Wielders are regular Wielders," her grandmother continued. "There are many levels within this stage, of course, running from just above Novus to the ones ready to take the Master tests, but we generally call them simply 'Wielders'. As a Wielder, you control your own magic. The size of the magic performed depends on the individual Wielder's power and as such, I can't tell you how much a Wielder in general can do."

Natalie tried her best to keep the information straight, rather convinced that her grandmother would not appreciate repeating it all once done.

"Finally, there are Master Wielders, a status only a select few will reach," her grandmother said, obviously proud to be one of them. She glanced down at Natalie. "But there is no need to speak of that now. Instead, let's see what you can do."

Natalie hoped her fear did not show on her face. "Okay?"

"For a Wielder to use her powers, she needs only to think of what she wishes to have done," continued her grandmother. "Imagination, the Wielder's inherent power, and the powers of the stone are what set the limits. For example, only a handful stones in the world will allow you to fly – and then it will only be possible if the Wielder is strong enough and truly believes in it."

She smiled at Natalie's wide eyes. "Don't worry, dear," she said, "flying will not be the first thing we're going to try."

Natalie laughed nervously. Though she was not adverse to the idea of flying, she would rather have a pair of wings instead of a stone and her belief lifting her into the air.

“Now, let us start out gently. My power stone’s strength is water, because it is my element,” her grandmother said. “So try doing what I did – create a drop of water. Close your eyes if necessary; you will have to visualize hard in the beginning to make it work.”

Natalie glanced at the stone hanging around her neck and then back up at her grandmother.

She closed her eyes.

“Take a deep breath and try to concentrate on water,” her grandmother said. “The ocean, rain, a small lake – it doesn’t matter as long as it’s water.”

Natalie tried. She imagined a lake with the breeze creating ripples on the surface and small fish swimming below.

“When you have a clear picture in your head, place your hand on the stone and pull the magic out.”

Natalie did so. She thought she could feel something extraordinary, that she could truly pull magic out of the green stone, and that when she opened her eyes there would be a drop of water—

—but there was not.

Natalie sighed and her grandmother let out her breath.

“I’m sorry,” said Natalie.

“Don’t be,” her grandmother said, but Natalie could hear the note of disappointment in her voice. “Like I said, a Novus such as you can often not control their powers, especially not in the beginning. We’ll try again later. Perhaps it’s time for you to be getting home anyway.”

Natalie’s slumped her shoulders. She had let her grandmother down by not being able to do magic. Perhaps she was not a Wielder after all, despite her family. She, a magician? It sounded impossible.

A part of Natalie wished it was true. She would like to be special in some way.

They headed back to the house. In her room, Natalie changed into her old clothes. They had been cleaned and felt fresh but ordinary, unlike the dress she had been wearing. Just outside the main entrance, the butler Thomas awaited with the same carriage that had picked her up the day before outside of school. Natalie hesitated; that thing had taken her to Ramon and a knife to her throat.

“Don’t worry, this time Thomas is driving and no one else,” her grandmother said, placing a hand on Natalie’s shoulder. “I have double-checked.”

“Yes, right,” said Natalie, unable to shake the nervous feeling completely.

Her grandmother held out a small, square case to her. “Since your mother’s necklace is gone at the moment, I thought you should have something else.”

Natalie took the case and opened it. She gaped at the necklace she found; a red, completely round stone set against a golden backdrop. Natalie reached out and touched it – and this time, she did not just think she felt the power coming from the stone. The air around it seemed to vibrate.

“Thank you.”

She hung the necklace around her neck and held back a gasp at the energy it emitted. She hesitated at telling her grandmother about it – perhaps she would expect Natalie to be able to do magic with this. Natalie still doubted she could.

She hugged her grandmother briefly.

“You’re welcome.”

Her grandmother opened the door to the carriage and Natalie hauled herself inside.

“Will I see you again?”

Her grandmother smiled. “Yes. Say hi to Richard.”

Before Natalie had a chance to answer, her grandmother closed the door. As the carriage began moving, Natalie waved goodbye. Once she could no longer see her grandmother, Natalie sat down and made herself comfortable amongst the pillows. She looked around the carriage and discovered several small stones in different colors sitting on the walls. She supposed one of them was the ‘tracking stone’ her grandmother had spoken of, and looked curiously at the other ones, wondering what they did.

She pulled her new necklace out. The deep red almost seemed to glow and when Natalie touched it, she felt something.

Mere minutes later, Natalie fell into slumber. Perhaps one of the stones in the carriage made the passenger sleepy, because she had not been the least bit tired when she got into the carriage.

When Natalie entered the house, Richard sat waiting for her in the living room. She was a bit nervous, as the lie she had been preparing hung over her head. She usually never lied to anyone, least of all Richard. There had never been any need for it. As she hung up her coat, Richard came into the hallway. Relief and worry mixed on his face. He embraced her and Natalie sighed, glad to be home once more.

“I was so worried when you didn’t come home – I thought you’d only stay at mother’s for a couple of hours – and then there was a message from her saying you’d sleep there – sent at midnight of all times and I didn’t know what to think!”

Natalie pulled back. “I’m fine.”

She did not want him to know exactly what had happened – she feared he would not allow her to go see her grandmother again if she did – and so when she spoke, it was a lie:

“We just lost track of time talking and we decided it’d be better for me to sleep there.”

Richard looked a bit unconvinced and Natalie reminded herself that this was, after all, his mother they were talking about. When she lied, she had to do so with that in mind. Did Richard know what his mother dealt in? He’d never mentioned anything of the sort.

“Please – call me the next time. I worry about you.”

Natalie nodded briefly, though she wondered if her cell phone worked wherever her grandmother lived. “I will.”

She was half-way up the stairs when Richard said, “A girl called for you. Cecily Cordell. She wanted you to call her at this number when you got back.”

Surprised, Natalie took the note Richard was holding out. “Thanks.”

Cecily had called her? And earlier this week, Ava had called her. The thoughts made her smile; perhaps there could be a nice friendship between them. Natalie hoped so; she liked both Cecily and Ava. They were unlike her best friend in New York. Ava’s quick talking and fast temper complemented Cecily’s calm manner and easy smile. Natalie only wished she knew what was wrong with Cecily and even more, she wished she could do something about it.

She dialed the number and before two signals had gone by, a man picked up on the other end. Cecily’s father called for his daughter, who picked up the phone a moment later.

“Cecily.”

“Hi, it’s Natalie. You called?”

Cecily sounded as though she smiled. “I did. I was simply curious about how your visit to your grandmother’s had gone.”

“It was— eventful,” Natalie said. She hesitated and wondered if she should continue. Telling a new friend that she had been kidnapped on the way, how would that go over? She would likely think her to be lying. Still, Natalie had a feeling Cecily would believe her.

“How so?”

“I— well, it’s not really a phone kind of deal,” Natalie said.

Cecily giggled, sounding excited. “Well, my door is open if you’d like to come here. Unfortunately, I’ve come down with a fever, so dad won’t let me out of the house. But don’t worry, I’m not infectious.”

Worry stabbed at Natalie’s heart but she kept the tone light, as Cecily had. “I’ll come over. Just let me take a shower and change clothes. I got in the door a minute ago.”

“Of course. Come whenever you’re ready.”

They hung up and Natalie freshened up. She cleaned her room before leaving, knowing Emmanuella would breathe down her neck if she did not. At least the weekend meant no chores except vacuuming; that could be done later.

Cecily lived four blocks away from Natalie, in a little white two-story house next to a large garage. It looked quite like a doll-house. The front yard was well-kept and groups of colorful flowers grew in carefully planned patterns. The colors reminded Natalie of the wild flowers in her grandmother’s back yard.

Mr. Cordell opened the door when she rang the doorbell. He was perhaps in his early fifties, tall and very thin. His hair was steel grey and was beginning to thin out.

“Hi,” said Natalie. “I’m here to see Cecily?”

He smiled, and wordlessly led Natalie up a flight of stairs. The house reminded her of Richard and Emmanuella’s though it was smaller. Natalie wondered about Mrs. Cordell, but Cecily had not mentioned her and as such, the house was likely a perfect size.

Mr. Cordell knocked on a door straight ahead of the stairs before opening it.

“Cecily? You have company.”

Cecily smiled when she saw Natalie. “Thanks dad.”

Mr. Cordell left and Natalie gazed after him. What did it feel like, to have a father who adored you? Mr. Cordell obviously cared deeply for his daughter, and the dark circles beneath his eyes made it equally apparent how much he worried for her.

“Come in,” Cecily said. She was sitting in her bed, sheets pulled up to cover the lower half of her body. She was dressed in pink pajamas that made her look terribly cute.

“How are you feeling?”

“So-so,” Cecily shrugged. “I’m used to it. This isn’t a bad day, not by far.”

Natalie sat down gently on the bed. She had thought Cecily looked frail on the first day she met her, but she still managed to look worse now. The pajama revealed her collarbones, which were standing out from her thin frame.

“Natalie, I’m sick. There’s nothing you can do about it, so you can stop looking so horrified.”

Natalie half-smiled guiltily. “Sorry. I just— I don’t know. It hurts just to see you like this. I just want to make you better.”

“You and me both.” She sighed and abruptly changed the subject. She obviously did not want to talk about her illness and Natalie could not blame her. “That’s a beautiful necklace.”

Natalie smiled for real this time. “Thank you. My grandmother gave it to me.”

“What happened to the necklace your mother gave you?”

Natalie looked at her for a moment. The girl had an uncanny ability to get straight to the point, even though she was not supposed to know the point. Where Natalie had hesitated to tell Richard anything at all, however, Cecily seemed to invite it.

“This is going to sound insane,” Natalie said and studied her hands. “I was kidnapped.”

She glanced up to see Cecily’s eyebrows rise, although she could not tell if Cecily was about to start laughing at her, or if she believed her.

“Kidnapped?”

Natalie giggled nervously. It sounded strange even to her own ears. “I was picked up—” she decided to leave out the part about the seventeenth century carriage for now, “—and I fell asleep. When I woke up, this guy was holding a knife to my throat and threatened to kill me.”

Cecily sat up straighter, her face now completely serious. “But you got away, obviously.”

Natalie shook her head. “Not really. I was going to try – then all of a sudden, the doors to the place were thrown open and my grandmother of all people comes barging inside.”

“What happened to the guy?”

“I don’t know,” Natalie said. She stood up and began pacing. “I think I fainted because the next thing I knew, I was lying in a bed at my grandmother’s house and a maid came in with breakfast.”

Natalie could not read Cecily’s face; it was blank. Did she believe Natalie was lying to her? Natalie could not really blame her if she did.

“I know it sounds ridiculous and like something I made up, but I swear – it’s not,” Natalie said.

Cecily blinked and shook her head. “Oh, I’m sorry. I know, I believe you.”

“You— you do?”

Cecily nodded. “I—uh,” she began but stopped. She looked uncertain and nervous. “Would you close the door please?”

Natalie frowned but did as asked.

Cecily looked up at her. “Sit down, please,” she said and Natalie did. “I believed you when you told me about being kidnapped. Will you do me the same favor and keep an open mind about what I’m about to tell you?”

Natalie nodded slowly, wondering with a sudden inappropriate, internal giggle if Cecily was about to reveal that she was, in fact, Ramon, meaning that she was a cross-dressing would-be murderer. Perhaps they were all going crazy. It did not seem entirely impossible.

Cecily’s deeply serious eyes suggested otherwise. She nervously straightened the blanket that covered her legs, keeping her eyes firmly on her fingers as she spoke.

“I—I knew it was going to happen.”

Natalie frowned, thrown. It was not what she had been expecting. “What do you mean, you knew?”

Cecily wrung her hands. “I knew. I’d dreamed about it. I have—prophetic dreams. Well, only sometimes, but—”

Natalie stared at her. With her grandmother’s recent revelation about the existence of magic, Cecily’s ability really was not so strange, though it was still shocking. She had half a mind to doubt Cecily’s words but with the drop of water her grandmother had conjured fresh in her mind, as well as the horrifying image of the knife hanging still in the air, she knew better than to think it false.

Cecily spoke softly. “A week ago, I came down with a fever and I dreamed of you.”

“But a week ago— we’d never met.”

Cecily shook her head. “I know. But I knew we would. I don’t know how or why I have these dreams— I just do.” She sighed. “I dreamed that you’d get into a horse-drawn carriage and that you’d be taken to a tall building with a circular room. I dreamed that a man with long black hair holding a knife would take the necklace you were wearing, and would threaten to kill you at midnight.”

If Natalie had had any doubt, it had now vanished. No one but Natalie and her grandmother knew what Ramon had looked like and no one but Natalie knew when Ramon had been planning to kill her.

“I— how—” said Natalie, even though Cecily had told her she did not know how. She looked sharply at Cecily. “Why did you move to Lake Sunflower?”

“Because of that dream,” Cecily said, meeting her eyes squarely. “There was a flash of the sign in front of the school so I realized where you were when I focused on the dream. I just— I knew I had to meet you. Then it was just a matter of convincing my father.”

Natalie leaned back against the wall heavily.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything about it,” Cecily said. “I didn’t know it was going to happen so soon and besides, what was I supposed to do – go up to you and say, ‘hi, I’m Cecily and I had a dream about you?’”

Natalie gave a weak chuckle. “I consider myself open-minded, but with an opening like that, I don’t think I’d have thought you sane before today.” She paused. “So there are no specialists here to see you?”

Cecily shook her head. “The best doctors in the country have already checked me out. There is no one left to try to diagnose me and I’m sick of the meds they give me. I’ll rather go with the fevers and the bad days now and have my good days, instead of all bad because of wrong medication.”

Natalie nodded. The news about Cecily saddened her, but the feeling that there was something very special at work, bringing Cecily to her, overrode any other feeling Natalie might have at the moment.

Magic, she thought and touched the necklace hanging around her neck. Her fingers touched it and she felt the power surrounding it.

An idea formed in her mind. She closed her eyes and visualized what she wanted, as hard and clearly as she had ever tried to picture anything. The world around her disappeared, quieting until it no longer existed. Then she pulled at the red stone and something sparkled at her fingertips. She opened her eyes to find a small ball of light floating above her open hand. Cecily stared at her. Still, there was no fear in her eyes, only wonder.

Natalie pushed the light towards Cecily.

For a second, the light hovered just outside Cecily’s body – then it disappeared into her. For the briefest of moments, Cecily seemed to shine herself. Her skin glowed with a warm, yellow tone and her hair floated behind her like a great, dark halo.

Then the light stopped and Cecily slumped against the pillow behind her back.

Frightened, Natalie scrambled back. What had she done? She had not been thinking – she had just wanted to help Cecily and now—

Cecily took a deep breath and looked up at Natalie. There seemed to be a shimmer around her, lighting her features. She looked beautiful – other-worldly.

“What did you do?” she asked incredulously.

“I— I don’t know. I didn’t—”

“I feel— better,” Cecily said. She cocked her head to the side. “The fever’s gone.”

“It is?” Natalie asked, her voice very small.

Cecily nodded. After a moment, she asked, “What did you imagine?”

“I just wanted you— I don’t know if I— I didn’t know—” Natalie stopped mid-sentence. “You know how magic stones work?”

Another nod. “The basics of it. But I am not a Wielder, I can’t make them do anything. So what did you imagine?”

Natalie forgot to ask how Cecily knew. “I imagined you healthy. I wanted you to be well.”

Cecily smiled. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Natalie, still rather horrified by what she would managed to do, was not so certain of the sweetness of it. “It could have gone so wrong. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Yes, you did,” Cecily said. “You knew what you were doing. I saw it.”

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“But I could have hurt you.”

Cecily shook her head. “Not unless you imagined me dead – and even then, I doubt you could have given me more than a cold. You’re not a powerful Wielder yet.”

Natalie registered Cecily’s use of ‘Wielder’ but stored it away to ask how she knew for later.

“So you’re not healthy for good?”

Cecily shrugged. “I don’t know. I doubt it, but I’m feeling much better at the moment. Let’s go outside – I want to enjoy the sun for a bit. Dad doesn’t want me outside when I’m sick.”

Natalie agreed to the idea. Cecily quickly got dressed and then the two headed outside. The Cordells’ back yard was small but lovely with a lot of flowers and a marble bird bath. Two fat birds fought about the water. Sitting in the hammock, Natalie and Cecily spent a lovely afternoon. In an unspoken agreement, the two did not talk more about magic, kidnappings or prophetic dreams. Only when Natalie was about to leave several hours later did Cecily say, “Natalie?”

“Yes?”

Cecily looked momentarily uncertain before saying, “Do me a favor, will you? Keep that necklace on all the time. It would make me feel better.”

Natalie gazed at Cecily and nodded. She would probably feel silly at some point refusing to take it off, but she too could feel the power it held. “All right.”

Cecily smiled and Natalie said goodbye.

6.

Natalie sank down in her seat on Monday morning, her eyes already drooping. Since Saturday had been spent with Cecily, all of Sunday had consisted of catching up on school work and cleaning the house. The events of Friday and Saturday now felt rather dream like to her.

As she dozed off, Natalie suddenly saw her hand moving out of the corner of her eye. It was definitely not by her own accord.

In the insanity of her weekend, she had forgotten all about the strange words she had written. With the revelation of magic's existence, the words no longer seemed as freaky. She smiled at the thought that they probably had a perfectly logical, magical explanation.

Now written on her otherwise empty paper were five words:

'You now know of magic.'

A statement, not a question. The writer knew. Natalie blinked – who made her do this? No one but Cecily and her grandmother knew what she had learned over the weekend – and surely, neither one of them could make her write things without her being aware of it, could they? And even if they could – because if Cecily had prophetic dreams and her grandmother had created a drop of water out of nothing, perhaps it could be possible after all – why would they? Neither one had mentioned anything about it.

Natalie flipped back through her notebook. *'You are powerful', 'Don't be scared'* – Natalie still nearly snorted at this because no, why would writing things without realizing it frighten her? – *'Someone. I want to help you.'* in answer to the writer's identity and then the comments on her potential.

It did not sound like her grandmother and it certainly did not sound as Cecily.

'How do you know about that?'

Up front, the teacher droned on about some war or other. Natalie looked up, trying her best to pretend to be interested for a moment. As she had expected, there was an answer when she looked down again.

'I know a lot about you.'

Natalie frowned. That did not bode too well. The thought struck her like lightning – could it be Ramon? She dropped the pen and it fell to the floor. Her breath came in quick bursts. What if he was the one doing this? Could he get into her head? Was that how he had known she would be going to her grandmother? It made a frightening kind of sense.

Natalie swallowed. She could guard her tongue and not talk about magic – but how could she not think about it? Perhaps Ramon followed her every step, just waiting for a new chance to grab her. Feeling silly even as she did it, Natalie glanced nervously around. Her fingers went to her necklace and she touched it gently. She recalled Cecily's words about not taking it off. With these new suspicions, Natalie would certainly not.

She resolved to discuss it with Cecily the first chance she got and tried to put magic out of her mind for the rest of class. The dull voice of Mr. Hensley did not make things easier as her thoughts kept drifting off.

When Natalie arrived to math a bit later, Cecily sat waiting for her, smiling as always. Natalie noted with some sadness that the circles beneath Cecily's eyes, the ones that had faded a bit with

the magic Natalie had managed to perform on Saturday, had returned. As Cecily had thought, Natalie had not been able to cure her more than temporarily.

In a hushed but quick whisper, Natalie said, “I think Ramon can get into my head.”

Cecily looked fittingly horrified at the prospect, mirroring Natalie. “What do you mean? Why would you think that?”

“I—I’m not sure. But I think he might be able to read my thoughts. Can Wielders do that?”

Cecily nodded slowly. “Some Master Wielders can, although it is quite rare.” She hesitated a bit. “If he can get into your head, there will be nothing anyone can teach you that will be a surprise for him.”

Natalie shook her head and felt ready to cry.

“What is it that makes you think he can read your thoughts?”

Another student came in and sat down just behind Cecily. When Natalie looked around, she realized that students had filled the classroom, making it far from the perfect environment to discuss the possibility of Ramon magically controlling her body and reading her mind.

She bit her lip. “Not here. Are you doing anything after school?”

Cecily shook her head. “Sports and activities are not exactly for me.”

Natalie was about to answer but at that moment, the bell rang, signaling the start of class.

Two minutes after the bell rang, Ava strolled into the classroom. She did not look even the slightest bit concerned as she handed the teacher a note and then, with a slight grin to Natalie and Cecily as a way of saying hello, sat down in the desk behind Natalie.

For a few moments, Natalie pondered what to tell Ava. Ava appeared – as far as Natalie could discern – not the least bit magical. In fact, Natalie had a feeling that Ava would have a harder time than Natalie had had when it came to grasping the concept of magic’s existence.

“Miss Winters, would you care to solve the problem?”

Mrs. Miller’s reprimanding voice cut through Natalie’s thoughts. Natalie’s cheeks reddened; she had not heard a word of Mrs. Miller’s lecture. She shook her head. “No. Sorry.”

“Well then, perhaps you could spare your daydreams for later and pay attention now?”

Natalie mumbled into her desk and Mrs. Miller continued with her class.

Glancing back with a grimace, Natalie caught Ava’s sympathetic look. Cecily on the other hand was focused on the teacher’s writings on the board. Natalie noted that it looked as though Cecily understood every word. It did not surprise Natalie much – Cecily struck her as the very intelligent type. Then again, she did not seem to have much else to do, but to study.

The rest of the day’s classes passed in a blurred boredom for Natalie. When art finally finished, Natalie and Cecily walked outside into the warm weather. They had agreed to meet Ava by the parking lot.

“Do you think we should tell her?” Natalie asked.

Cecily looked thoughtful.

“I’m not sure she’ll— understand.” She hesitated on the last word. Then she sighed. “But if we want to have her as a friend, we can’t exactly keep her out of the loop. She’ll know we’re hiding something.”

A small sigh escaped Natalie as well. “Yeah, ‘cause I’m a terrible liar.”

They walked in silence and soon reached the student parking lot. Neither one of the girls had a driver’s license but as they were heading that way anyway, it was as good as any meeting spot. Once together, the three headed towards Cecily’s home.

“You wouldn’t want to go to my place anyway,” Ava said with a roll of her eyes. “I have four siblings and they wouldn’t give us a moment’s peace.”

Natalie and Cecily glanced at each other. They certainly needed both privacy and peace if they were to tell Ava everything. Natalie thought of the notebook she had in her backpack and the necklace she wore. It was all part of something very different, something very hard to believe. Once again, the thought of Ramon invading her brain hit her like a ton of bricks and she tried to think neutral thoughts instead. It did not go too well.

Cecily’s room was as well-organized and clean as it had been on Saturday. Natalie suspected two reasons for this: Cecily was a well-organized person and her father did not want any place where bacteria could grow and make his daughter sicker. Natalie had noted how sparkling the rest of their house was as well and Cecily had merely rolled her eyes and said that her dad was obsessed with cleaning.

“Nice place,” Ava commented, looking around. “Cozy.”

Cecily smiled. “Thanks. It’s my space – I want to have a bit of a personal touch.”

The room did, Natalie thought. Though Cecily and her father had only just moved to Lake Sunflower, Cecily’s room felt familiar and welcoming with pictures of herself and her father and other friends from her old home-town. Two pictures of a dark-haired child and a rather stunning woman stood on her desk. Natalie could only assume the woman to be Cecily’s mother.

There were several types of flowers on her windowsill and at the moment, the room was gently lit by the slowly sinking afternoon sun.

“So what do you want to do?” asked Ava, looking from Natalie to Cecily and back.

“We actually have something we want to talk to you about,” Natalie said, leaning against the closed door.

Ava sat back and crossed her arms across her chest but looked entertained. “That sounds serious.”

A frown crossed Natalie’s face. “It is, actually. And we’re not quite sure you’ll believe us.”

One of Ava’s eyebrows rose. With a chuckle, she said, “Okay, you’ve got me hooked.”

Cecily pulled out the chair by the desk and sat down. She seemed tired and Natalie worried, as she always seemed to do nowadays. Cecily was an easy person to worry about.

“Do you believe in magic, Ava?”

Natalie was struck by the way Cecily started out; it was the exact same words that her grandmother had used.

This time, both of Ava’s eyebrows rose. “Magic?” she echoed, disbelievingly. “Like fairytales and wands and stupid movie effects?” She laughed. “No, I don’t believe in magic.”

Cecily glanced at Natalie. Concerned, Natalie bit her lip.

Ava looked between the two. “What? Do you believe in magic?”

Natalie felt it was better that she was the one doing the talking; her calm voice might convince Ava that they were serious.

“Yes,” Cecily said. “We both do.”

Ava laughed. “Magic. Right. And little pretty unicorns perhaps?”

“They’re not magic,” said Cecily, surprising even Natalie greatly. Was Cecily saying that unicorns existed? “They’re magical creatures. We’re just talking about magic. From stones, if you’re interested in the how,” she added.

Ava began looking suspiciously around the room. “All right, what is this? You’re trying to pull something – why? Why are you trying to convince me of this stupid nonsense? What kind of fool do you take me for?” She got up from the bed. “Well? What is this?”

“We’re not trying to pull anything and we don’t think you’re a fool at all,” Cecily said. “We’re simply trying to tell me that magic exists. We thought you should know because—”

“Oh, simply that!” Ava spat sarcastically. “God, what kind of weirdoes are you? I actually thought you two could make good friends.”

“We’re not weirdoes!” Natalie said, breaking into the conversation.

Ava was certainly not taking this as well as Natalie had hoped she would. This was the way Natalie had feared the conversation would go. Why could she not simply conjure something and convince Ava that way, like Natalie’s grandmother had done with Natalie? Or stop a knife mid-air? She did not think she could – she had only done magic once and then it had come to her naturally. There was no such feeling now.

Ava’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “No, you’re not weird. Not at all.” A pause, then, “You’re idiots. What do you take me for?”

“We’re not idiots,” Natalie said heatedly. She could not keep her annoyance out of her voice. “And neither are you – we thought that you’d, perhaps, give us the benefit of the doubt until we could prove to you—”

“Prove what, exactly?” exclaimed Ava. “That I’m naïve enough to believe you? That you can make me believe anything? Magic is one of those things that people wish existed but it doesn’t. Just like little pretty unicorns don’t exist.” She looked first at Natalie, then at Cecily. “I actually thought you were cool to hang with. I’m such a fool.”

“Ava—” began Natalie but Ava shook her head.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

“But—”

Without another word, Ava all but pushed Natalie out of the way, and before either one of Natalie or Cecily had time to utter another word, Ava was out of the room and had disappeared down the stairs. Natalie winced at the sound of the front door slamming shut.

For a whole minute, neither Natalie nor Cecily spoke. Natalie simply stared at the stairs down which Ava had disappeared, her heart rate slowing down. The annoyance slipped from her. How could she ever have imagined that the talk would end in any other way? Her own initial reaction had been disbelief, but she had had the evidence staring her in the face. With Cecily it had been even easier – she had already known. But initiating someone else? No, they should not have expected it to go any other way. Any sane person would think they were either psychos or trying to make a fool of the other, as Ava had.

Cecily sighed. “You had something to show me?”

Natalie stared dumbly at the stairs for another moment. Then looking back at Cecily’s dejected expression, she understood that Cecily did not want to deal with Ava’s reaction at the moment. Natalie grabbed her backpack and with a small sigh of her own, she pulled out her notebook.

“I’ve been writing things,” Natalie said. “Only I haven’t been aware of them.”

Cecily looked intrigued, with a small line of worry appearing between her eyebrows. Natalie opened up to the page where ‘*You are powerful*’ was written and pointed at it for Cecily to see.

“It appeared last week, just before you moved here,” Natalie said. “I was sitting in class and all of a sudden, I’d written that. It was not just—doodling or anything. I have absolutely no idea how it got there, it just was, all of a sudden. And then, twice, I’ve actually seen my arm move out of the corner of my eye. I just—it’s not me doing it.”

Cecily looked thoughtful but did not say anything. Natalie flipped forward to the next couple of ‘entries’. When she came to the last one, ‘*I know a lot about you*’, Cecily nodded.

“I see where you got the idea that it might be Ramon.”

“Yes – who else knows about my finding out about magic?” said Natalie, speaking quickly. “I mean, I don’t believe my grandmother would do this – why would she? And I don’t think it’s you either.”

Cecily chuckled. “Like I said, I’m no Wielder. I wouldn’t be able to.”

“No, you just dream prophetic dreams,” Natalie said with a pointed smirk, glad she was able to make Cecily smile. “But what do I do? It only happens when I zone out but really, I do that quite a lot.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Cecily teased. “Math class today was no exception.”

Natalie stuck her tongue out as a childish answer. “Just because I’m not a genius like you.”

Cecily sobered. “I don’t know what you should do. Don’t answer perhaps? If he is trying to contact you and make you write back, then there are probably things he doesn’t know and wants you to tell him about.”

“True,” said Natalie, who had not thought of it that way.

“I think it’s really the only thing you can do, if you can’t stop zoning out.”

Natalie paced. “It’s just—creepy. Someone else is actually controlling me, making me write things. I mean, if they can control my arm, shouldn’t they be able to control other parts of me as well?”

Cecily did not look convinced. “I think your arm is quite a bit easier to control than say your heart or some other vital organ, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Natalie stayed silent. She could not quite decide what she worried about, but she had a strong feeling of having been violated. Someone had controlled her, most likely Ramon. She did not like the idea of that creep being even remotely close to her in any way.

“What do we do about Ava?” asked Cecily quietly, breaking Natalie’s thoughts.

Natalie shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m not particularly convinced she’ll ‘come around’ or anything. The concept of magic is not a likely one. I thought my grandmother was crazy when she first told me and I still wasn’t entirely sure what to think when she’d stopped a knife for me with it.”

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“A knife?”

Natalie had not gone into detail about exactly what Ramon had tried to do to her. “Never mind.”

Cecily shot her a disbelieving look but she did not ask. She moved over to her bed, sitting down and leaning against the wall. She closed her eyes.

“Are you all right?”

Cecily smiled weakly. “A bit too much excitement after a long day of school, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” said Natalie. “Definitely.”

“I like Ava,” Cecily said, looking at Natalie. “She’s— different. Strong. Very unlike me.”

“You’re strong,” Natalie said.

“Not in that way. She’s the forceful kind of strong. I’m a wall flower. If someone made her angry, I imagine she would tell them off. If someone made me angry, I’d just stay quiet.”

“Good to know,” Natalie said, grinning. “Though you are very welcome to tell me what I’m doing wrong if I piss you off.”

Cecily smiled. “All right. I’ll try to be honest.”

Natalie stayed silent for a moment, then she said, “I like Ava too. She was the first person to actually talk to me when I came here. It was just after I’d written the first *‘You are powerful’*. I fled to the bathroom all scared and there she was, skipping class and being cool. Not that skipping class is cool, but you know – she’s cool.”

“Sounds like her,” Cecily said quietly. Then she added, “She seems to skip class a lot.”

“Yeah,” Natalie said. A moment later, though not completely convinced herself, she said, “She’ll come around.”

Cecily did not answer. Her eyes were closed and Natalie noticed that her breathing seemed a bit heavy.

“Cecily?”

Cecily squinted at Natalie. “Natalie? I don’t feel so good.”

Natalie rushed to her side and helped Cecily lay down. A light sheen of sweat covered Cecily’s forehead and her breathing was becoming heavier.

“Cecily, stay awake!” Natalie said. Panic was rising in her – no one else was home and she had no idea what was wrong. She did not know what to do. “Cecily!”

“Natalie...”

She went limp in Natalie’s arms.

7.

An ambulance took Cecily to the local hospital. Rushed through the emergency room, Natalie was left behind as the doctors and nurses worked on her. No one could tell Natalie what was wrong with her friend – with what Cecily had told Natalie of her medical history, the doctors did not know either.

Numbly, Natalie asked the desk clerk to use the phone so that she could call Cecily's father. She found his number in Cecily's cell phone. When he answered, she was unsure of what to say.

"Cecily— she collapsed," Natalie said and suddenly felt the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Where are you?"

"At the hospital," Natalie said. "I called an ambulance."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Mr. Cordell said.

He hung up and she was left standing in the small but full emergency room. Tears began falling down her cheeks as she slowly made her way back to the waiting area.

People rushed by as time passed. Telephones rang, nurses ran and doctors gave orders. Ambulances came with critical patients and they were shipped off to different rooms. Visitors spoke quietly, some screamed, others cried. Natalie simply stared blindly at the scenery before her, feeling as though she did not belong in this cold place.

Mr. Cordell looked disheveled as he hurried into the emergency room, red-faced, his hair on end and his eyes filled with anxiousness. He caught sight of Natalie and came to stand before her.

"How is she?" he asked.

"I don't know," Natalie said quietly. "They won't tell me anything."

Mr. Cordell left and walked to the desk. Natalie could not hear him speaking but she knew what he was asking. She saw the desk clerk look at the board and disappear off, probably to find someone who knew how Cecily was doing.

Minutes later, a med student approached Mr. Cordell. They spoke in hushed tones and Natalie saw Mr. Cordell's face fall. Just as they were about to walk, Mr. Cordell stopped and motioned for Natalie to come along. He did not say anything as they followed the med student to one of the smaller rooms.

Cecily was lying in one of three beds in the room but the other two were empty. She looked tiny against the machine that registered her pulse and her blood pressure, and the saline drip secured in her arm. Her skin color matched the white sheet that covered her up to her waist.

"Cecily," said Mr. Cordell and took one of her hands in his. Natalie stood back, uncertain.

Cecily blinked slowly. Her eyes seemed unfocused and she was obviously disoriented.

"Dad?"

Mr. Cordell ran a hand over her forehead, pushing her hair out of her face. "I'm here."

A very small smile graced Cecily's lips. Then she saw Natalie standing back and she raised a hand towards her. "Natalie."

Natalie hesitated before walking over to Cecily. She did not want to intrude on Cecily and Mr. Cordell; she felt out of place and useless in the situation. Still, hesitantly, Natalie walked to Cecily's other side. She squeezed Cecily's hand gently, afraid of hurting her. Cecily smiled weakly, then looked at her father.

"I want to go home."

"But Cecily—" said her father, and Natalie sensed this to be a discussion they had had before. She could almost hear the wordless conversation between the two and she could feel the dislike Cecily had for hospitals. Her father only wanted what was best for her, of course – even though no hospital had been able to help his daughter so far.

"There is nothing they can do," Cecily said. "I'd rather be home, dad."

In the end, she won. The doctors did not agree with her decision but as her father allowed it, they could do nothing but say that she went against their advice. A nurse wheeled a wheelchair into the room and her father lifted her into it.

Cecily said nothing to Natalie – she did not need to. Though Natalie worried about Cecily, she understood her wish to be home instead. Cecily's room was a room for healing with the large window, warm colors and many flowers – her sanctuary, like no hospital could be.

They rode in silence back to the Cordell's house. Cecily's kept her eyes closed and Natalie watched her carefully. She wanted to voice her worries but she would rather not do it in front of Cecily's father.

Mr. Cordell carried Cecily up the stairs to the bedroom and Natalie stood hesitatingly in entrance hall, wondering if she should go home instead. Really, she should – Emmanuella would be furious with her for not having dinner ready. Natalie found that she did not care. Cecily was more important than Emmanuella in every way, and Richard would understand her decision to stay with Cecily.

However, she felt unsure of whether she should stay now. Cecily had returned home again, with her father taking care of her. They did not need Natalie – she could not be certain that she was even wanted.

"Natalie?" Mr. Cordell came down the stairs. He looked old. "She'd like to see you."

Natalie headed up the stairs and into Cecily's room. Cecily did not look quite as sick under the warm yellow bedcover as she had beneath the hospital's white. The sun still shining through the window made her almost glow.

"Hi," said Cecily.

"Hi," Natalie answered. She could not quite convince herself that mere hours had passed since they had been here trying to tell Ava that magic existed. It felt like ages ago.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," Cecily said.

Natalie was not quite sure what to answer. Cecily had scared the wits out of her. Calling for an ambulance had been all she could think of. She merely nodded in answer to Cecily.

Silence spread for several long moments. Cecily gazed at Natalie, but Natalie looked out the window instead.

"I get sick like that sometimes," Cecily said finally. "It— I can't do anything about it. It's just the way it is."

Natalie nodded again. There was a lump in her throat and she swallowed.

“Natalie.”

She held out a hand, much like she had in the hospital but now looking stronger. Natalie took a deep breath. She had already cried about it; it would not help. She sat down on the side of Cecily’s bed.

“I was scared. And I realize now that I haven’t really grasped how sick you are.”

“Well,” said Cecily, “you’re not the only one. No one knows how sick I am because no one can diagnose me correctly.”

Natalie thought for a moment. “Do you think I should try to heal you again?”

“No, save your powers. I’m feeling better. However—”

“However what?” asked Natalie.

It was Cecily’s turn to take a deep breath. “I dreamed.”

“Dreamed?” It took a second for her to understand what Cecily meant. “You mean you dreamed a *prophetic* dream?”

Cecily looked uncertain. “I think so. It was jumbled, but still too clear and unlike any of my other dreams for it to be just a regular one.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw you and Ava. And Ramon was there. I believe he grabbed Ava to make you follow him. I’m not sure where – he teleported away but you knew where he was going.”

“But I don’t know who he his, much less where he’s going.” Natalie frowned, “And did you say teleported? He can do that?”

She looked around, rather worried. Not only could the madman control her and make her write odd things, he could also be able to teleport? That would make it possible for him to just appear anywhere – the options were endless.

Cecily said, “It would seem that way. Still, there are rules even to teleporting so you shouldn’t have to be too worried.”

“Too worried? He’s going to kidnap Ava! We have to stop him!”

“But I wonder—”

“Wonder what?” Natalie asked.

Cecily cocked her head to the side. “If he can teleport, then why didn’t he simply grab you? Why take Ava?”

“I don’t know,” Natalie said, “because he wants to make my life as miserable as possible?”

Cecily appeared thoughtful. “Ask your grandmother about him. Perhaps she knows more about Ramon than she’s told you.”

“But I don’t even know how to get in touch with my grandmother!”

A hint of a smile appeared on Cecily’s pale lips. “I think she’ll get in touch with you as soon as she realizes you’ve performed magic.”

Natalie wondered how her grandmother would know about her performing magic, but then again, there were probably ways to check on that. If teleportation was possible, Natalie suspected that almost anything could be done. She stood up.

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“Was there anything else in the dream?”

“No, not that I can remember,” Cecily said. “But Natalie, I wouldn’t worry too much right now. My dreams usually don’t come true immediately. The few I’ve had have taken everything between a few days to several weeks from my dream to it coming true before.”

Natalie bit her lip. “I can’t really take that chance.”

Cecily smiled slightly. “No, I suppose you can’t. We can’t.”

Natalie leaned over and hugged Cecily. “I have to go. I hope you feel better.” Then she added, softer, “Don’t scare me like that again.”

“I’ll try not to.”

As Natalie had expected, she arrived home to an Emmanuella in a down-right terrible mood. She and Richard had just finished eating Chinese take-out and Emmanuella’s eyes filled with fury when her eyes fell upon Natalie.

“Where have you been?”

Natalie sighed. “At the hospital. A friend collapsed.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” scoffed Emmanuella.

“Em, perhaps we should give her the benefit of the doubt,” Richard said and held out a carton of food for Natalie.

“I’m not hungry.”

Actually, she was starving, but she did not feel like spending any time whatsoever with Emmanuella, who would not going to stop picking on her.

Without another word, though Emmanuella yelled after her to stop, Natalie headed up the stairs to her room. It felt like an eternity since she had been there last, though it was only this morning. She dumped her backpack beside her desk and threw herself onto the bed.

Images ran through her head – Cecily, mostly, as she fainted and became limp in Natalie’s arms, and her pale face at the hospital. But also Ava’s anger and belief that they were trying to play her for the fool, and Ramon’s face laughing at her, taunting her, and lastly, her grandmother speaking about magic and giving her a necklace.

It was simply too much.

A knock on the door, followed by Richard’s voice. “Natalie?”

“Come in,” Natalie said with a sigh and sat up.

Richard carried a tray of food – the carton of take-out he had offered earlier, and a tall glass of water. The food smelled delicious and she immediately started eating. She had not had a thing to eat since lunch, seven hours earlier.

“Didn’t you say you weren’t hungry?” asked Richard, amused, as he closed the door behind him.

Natalie grinned sheepishly at him.

“How is your friend?” Richard asked.

The smile fell from Natalie's face. "She's sick. She collapsed at home after school and I had to call an ambulance. I couldn't get her to wake up."

Richard nodded. "I didn't think you were making it up."

"I know."

Richard was silent for a few moments as Natalie ate, then he said, "If you need to talk, I'm here for you."

"I know that too."

A moment of uncomfortable silence – Natalie drowned it out by eating.

"Just put that into the dishwasher when you're finished."

Natalie nodded and Richard left the room. Natalie inhaled the food as quickly as she could and had to remind herself to chew. She had not realized her own hunger.

That night Natalie went to bed early. Her dreams filled with people and she dreamed that Ava did not get kidnapped by Ramon – she left with him by her own choice, claiming he was a good guy and had not tried to make her look like a fool. She yelled at Natalie that magic did not exist and she took out a knife and threw it at Cecily. The knife embedded itself in Cecily's heart and Natalie's dreams became violently red.

Waking up the next morning, Natalie felt far from rested. On top of that, she still worried for Cecily's health and felt unsure what she should think about Ava's quick dismissal of them.

When the first group of people she saw when she came to school turned out to be Chase Eadan and his group of friends – or perhaps worshippers made for a more correct term, considering one of them polished Chase's shoes – Natalie knew she was in for a bad day.

"Oh look, it's the new girl," said Chase with a smirk. For some reason, it was funny enough to warrant snickering from the rest of the group.

Natalie ignored them but Chase would not have it. He stood up and stepped over the boy who had been fixing his shoes.

"You really ought to choose better friends, Winters."

"And why is that?"

She did not feel up for the games Chase obviously enjoyed playing.

"They might not be around when you need them."

Did codes to follow exist as far as magic went, about hurting other people? She imagined there were but decided that if she ever managed to control her magic, she would embarrass Chase in most suitable manners. Uncertain of what those manners were, Natalie felt certain that Ava would help her come up with something fitting.

Sadness stabbed her heart when she reminded herself that there no guarantee existed for Ava coming around to even talk to her again. Then Cecily's description of her dream echoed in her mind and she hoped that it had just been a regular dream, not a prophetic one.

Chase waved a hand in front of her face.

"Hello? Are you as deaf as you are stupid?"

Natalie rolled her eyes with a sigh. "No, Chase, I was thinking. Though I doubt you are familiar with the concept."

With that, she pushed her way past Chase and walked into the school building. Chase yelled obscenities after her and she was glad when the large door fell shut behind her.

Natalie concentrated in History to keep her hand from writing messages – and to her great surprise, she found the class very nearly interesting. Perhaps she ought give listening a try more often.

In math, Cecily and Natalie sat in their usual places. The fact that Cecily had come to school surprised Natalie and she said as much.

“I can’t be home every time I get sick. I’d fall so far behind it’s not even funny.”

“Are you all right then?” asked Natalie.

Cecily shrugged. “I’m okay. I don’t have a fever.”

With those words she closed the subject and the rest of Natalie’s worries stayed unspoken.

Ava entered the classroom but did not so much as glance at Cecily or Natalie. She seated herself on the other side of the classroom and immediately dug her books out. They were truly in the dog house, Natalie thought dejectedly. She liked Ava and enjoyed her company. She really did not want to fight. Still, she knew that there would have been no way she and Cecily could have kept magic from Ava – she would have found out sooner or later.

Math was as incomprehensible as always for Natalie and she did not appreciate how Mrs. Miller continued to pick her to answer questions. Cecily should do it instead – she clearly understood it. Ava sat unusually quiet in her seat, her face dark and her arms folded across her chest. Natalie felt miserable.

Three whole days passed the way Monday had. Chase Eadan decided that Natalie made for a fun person to pick on before school, Mrs. Miller chose her to solve math problems she had no idea of where to even begin, and Ava ignored both her and Cecily all day long. At night, Natalie dreamed nightmares laced with pain in black and red.

On Thursday afternoon Natalie arrived home after school, achingly tired in both mind and body, and found a letter addressed for her. Turning it over, she found that it was from her grandmother.

Dear Natalie,

If you wish to continue where we last left off, Thomas and I will be by your school tomorrow when you finish. I will come along this time to make sure that nothing unexpected happens.’

It was signed by her grandmother and Natalie felt a small smile on her lips. Though she did not know what to think of her grandmother – she struck Natalie as both strict yet loving at the same time and on top of that, she was a powerful Wielder – it still made for a break from the dull and saddening reality that Natalie currently resided in. It also made Natalie a bit happy because she doubted that Ramon would try anything when her grandmother was nearby, which hopefully meant Ava should be safe until Monday when Natalie next saw her. Ramon would, according to the dream, attack with Natalie present, after all.

Natalie made dinner with a bit of renewed strength.

“You’re looking happier,” Richard commented when he arrived home.

“I’m going to see grandmother tomorrow again.”

She smiled, and Richard gave her the look he had given her every time Natalie had mentioned her grandmother since she had visited the first time. Natalie did not know what it meant, but she

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figured it had to be strange for Richard that Natalie got to see her grandmother but Richard did not – after all, it was his mother.

Natalie felt a bit surprised that he had not asked more about his mother. He had not asked how she had been, or what she had been like now. He'd asked nothing at all, really.

“That’s nice,” he said neutrally. “Will you be home tomorrow night or sleep there again?”

Natalie avoided Richard’s gaze. She still had not told him of the kidnapping and had no intention to do so either.

“I hope I’ll be home tomorrow night.”

Emmanuella arrived home a mere minute later and Natalie had no more chances to speak to Richard about her grandmother. Perhaps it was for the best – Natalie had never been good at lying and Richard already appeared to suspect that more was going on than Natalie told him.

She hoped there would be nothing else she needed to hide from him after tomorrow, but suspected there would rather be a lot more.

8.

Cecily waited with Natalie outside of school for Natalie's grandmother and butler to arrive. Cecily looked healthier now, with a hint of color in her cheeks. It was a good day.

"I would love to meet your grandmother," Cecily said.

"She's kind of weird," Natalie shrugged.

"She's a Wielder. They can be weird but they are always interesting."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "You find everyone interesting."

Cecily smiled. "That's because everyone is interesting."

"Even Chase Eadan?" asked Natalie. Chase just left the building, his group in tow and his girlfriend hanging off his arm. Natalie had learned that the beautiful blonde was his girlfriend, Lindsay Weaver. Though not quite as rich as the Eadans, the Weaver family apparently had enough for the son to accept her.

"Of course," Cecily said. "Just imagine the upbringing that boy must have had to become what he is today. Getting him to open up would be fascinating for sure."

"There is nothing even remotely fascinating about him. He's a self-absorbed jerk."

Cecily smiled serenely and Natalie knew what she was saying – that no person is one-dimensional. Natalie could only call Chase Eadan and Lindsay Weaver the exceptions that proved the rule.

"Miss Winters," said a male voice suddenly and Natalie jumped.

Her grandmother's butler, Thomas, stood behind her. He gave a light bow. "I can assure you that it's me this time, though I doubt that will give you any peace of mind. Your grandmother is waiting for you in the carriage."

Natalie nodded and followed Thomas. Butterflies flitted about in her stomach – she hoped it was in fact Thomas this time.

The carriage stood around the corner on the same small, people-free street that it had been parked the last time. Thomas opened the door and held out a helping hand for Natalie's grandmother, who climbed out gracefully. Like the last time, she wore the old-fashioned navy blue dress.

"Natalie," she said and then turned to Cecily. "Hello."

"Grandmother, this is Cecily Cordell," Natalie said. "Cecily, this is my grandmother, Madeline Turner."

Cecily held out a hand and Natalie's grandmother took it a bit hesitatingly, looking as though Cecily's thin hand might make break upon contact.

"Cecily knows about magic," Natalie said. "She has prophetic dreams."

At this, interest showed in her grandmother's eyes. "Prophetic dreams?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Cecily shyly. "Though it's only happened a few times."

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Natalie's grandmother said nothing, then, "How interesting." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps you'd like to join me and Natalie at my house?"

Natalie's eyebrows rose in surprise at the sudden invitation. Her grandmother certainly found something about Cecily fascinating. Then again, Natalie had never met anyone who dreamed prophetic dreams before – perhaps it was not very common even among those who knew about magic.

"Oh, that would be lovely. Just let me call my father first."

Natalie smiled. She felt certain it would be fun to have Cecily come along to her grandmother's mansion. Between home work, Cecily's illness and Natalie's chores at home, they had barely had time to talk all week.

Cecily stepped back to phone her father. Natalie felt uncertain in the company of her grandmother as she still did not quite understand the older woman and her moods, which seemed able to change at any time without any kind of notice.

"She seems like a nice girl," her grandmother said

Her voice sounded neutral, her eyes still on Cecily, studying her from afar as though she was an object of value.

"She is."

Cecily returned a moment later after her short conversation with her father. "As long as I'm back in a reasonable time tonight he did not mind."

The three women climbed into the carriage and with a single nod to Thomas, it started moving.

"This is comfortable," Cecily said, looking around with interest.

"There are stones in here that will make you sleepy," Natalie said.

"Oh," said Cecily. "Yes, I can feel that."

"Then you girls should give in," Natalie's grandmother said. "It's better if you sleep now, rather than when we arrive at the cottage."

Natalie snorted at the word used for her grandmother's mansion.

"That is very true," Cecily said, yawning and letting her eyes fall shut. "Wake me up when we're there."

Natalie leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes, already feeling the beginnings of sleepiness sweeping over her. Friday afternoon and she had been in school all week – she felt her tiredness was justified. Cecily placed her head on Natalie's shoulder. She felt small and frail. Natalie thought that it strange how different one's body could be from one's personality. Cecily's personality was not frail. A bit shy, yes, but not weak.

Natalie had meant to answer her grandmother, but she fell asleep before she had the time to.

Natalie's grandmother shook her shoulder gently to wake her up. It felt like they had only been asleep for a few minutes but checking her watch, Natalie saw that they had slept for nearly an hour.

“We’re here,” her grandmother said.

Natalie gently shook Cecily awake as well. She looked around seeming a bit disoriented, before realizing where she was and smiling at Natalie.

“I suppose ‘good morning’ is not the correct way to greet you?”

“Well, someone told me it’s always morning somewhere in the world,” Natalie said with a wink.

They exited the carriage. Natalie did not miss how Cecily’s mouth fell open at her grandmother’s supposed ‘cottage’.

“This place is huge,” Cecily said. “Where are we? I didn’t know California had places like this.”

Natalie’s grandmother came over from speaking to Thomas. “We’re not quite in California anymore, Miss Cordell.”

Natalie turned around, surprised. Her grandmother had refused to answer that particular question the first time she had visited, opting to simply ignore Natalie’s inquiries. “Then where are we?”

“In a slightly separate but still joined reality,” her grandmother said, as though that made things clear. She evidently did not wish to answer any more questions.

Cecily looked as though she understood a slight bit more than Natalie – though she still seemed confused – and Natalie decided that they should discuss this once they arrived back home. For now, both girls followed Natalie’s grandmother into the house.

Natalie had a better chance to look around this time. Her grandmother asked them if they were hungry and at their affirmative replies, she left to tell her cook to make something light.

Cecily leaned over to Natalie. “This place is fantastic.”

Natalie nodded. “I would like a slightly better explanation as to where ‘this place’ is though.”

Cecily giggled. “Me too. But I have to say, I feel very refreshed after the journey here. I slept deeper than I usually do at home.”

They peeked around the room in silence. They were in the living room. The great fireplace that Natalie had noted when she had been here last had been lit and the flames heated the room to a nice temperature. The great windows showing the breathtaking view of the forest surrounding her grandmother’s mansion lay before them. Down there somewhere was Mithridates, where Natalie had been introduced to magic.

“Enjoying the view, girls?” asked Natalie’s grandmother. Behind her stood the cook that had delivered Natalie’s breakfast the last time. The plump little woman carried a tray of cups containing what smelled like hot chocolate, and two sandwiches.

“It’s beautiful,” Cecily said.

Natalie’s grandmother motioned for them to sit down in the comfortable, huge couches. The cook set down the trays on the low glass table before them.

“Thank you,” chorused Cecily and Natalie, and the cook bowed and left.

Natalie sipped her hot chocolate.

“So, Natalie, how was your week?” asked her grandmother.

Natalie bit her lip. She did not know how much to tell her grandmother – she did not really know the lady and perhaps she would be angry if Natalie told her she had managed to do magic once she had left? Either way, she would not tell her grandmother about the strange messages she had

been writing. She had no idea where they came from and though both she and Cecily were convinced that Ramon was behind it, neither had any proof. It felt better to keep it to herself until they knew more.

“I did magic on Sunday,” Natalie said, studying her hot chocolate with great interest.

“You did?” asked her grandmother and she sounded delighted.

Natalie looked up. “Cecily was feeling sick and I made the fever go away.”

Her grandmother’s thin lips drew a smile. “That’s great news, dear.” She looked to Cecily. “Are you often sick?”

“I’ve been sick since I was a baby.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Despite her words, Natalie could not hear any kind of remorse in her voice. Rather, some sort of odd curiosity flickered in her eyes. A moment later, she turned back to Natalie once more.

“Tell me what happened,” she said.

Natalie did. Cecily filled in with a bit of detail that Natalie forgot and Madeline Turner listened carefully to their words. Natalie finished her sandwich and Cecily half of hers. When they were done retelling the tale of Natalie’s first magic, her grandmother stood.

“Let’s return to my Mithridates,” she said.

Without another word she left the room. Natalie and Cecily hurried after her.

The late afternoon air was chilly but not cold. Still, as Natalie saw Cecily shudder in her light shirt, she handed over her sweater to her. Cecily gave her a thankful look and shrugged it on.

They passed the beautiful flowers that grew along the stone stairway and entered the forest. The tall trees emanated peace and though birds flew here and there and the wind ruffled the leaves and branches, the world felt still and quiet.

The three women entered the clearing that Natalie’s grandmother called Mithridates. It looked as it had when Natalie had last been there.

Cecily stared at it. “It’s as I imagined it would look.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Natalie, sending a weird look at Cecily. “Have you dreamed about this place too?”

Cecily shook her head. “No, silly. Mithridates – don’t you know? Each Master Wielder has his or her own Mithridates. It’s their place of power, where their powers are the very strongest. The closer to Mithridates the Wielder is, the more powerful he or she is.”

Natalie’s grandmother nodded. “Very good, dear. You’re clearly well-read in the field of Wielders.”

Cecily shook her head, her cheeks reddening at the praise. “Not really. I only know the basics.”

Natalie could not help but feel out of the loop. She wished she knew as much as Cecily obviously did, as it would be a great help to understand things. Still, she was thankful that Cecily was her friend – that way Cecily could at least explain things as they happened.

Natalie’s grandmother nodded to Cecily. “All right. It doesn’t make your words less true, however. This is my Mithridates, my place of power. It’s been in our family for generations,

which is why it is also a good place for you to learn about magic, Natalie. As my granddaughter, you will be aided by my Mithridates.”

Natalie looked at her, unconvinced. She had not been able to do anything the last time she had been there. “Uh-huh,” she said.

Her grandmother ‘tsk’ed at her. “No negativity, please. It will not help.”

Natalie only barely kept from rolling her eyes. She attempted to share a look with Cecily but the other girl studied Natalie’s grandmother.

“Now, let’s try again,” her grandmother said. “Ramon is still out there and I would sleep better at night if I knew you could actually protect yourself.”

A note in her voice made Natalie feel like a chore because someone tried to kill her. She glared at her grandmother’s back, irritated with the notion. She could not help that some insane man was after her!

“So concentrate,” said her grandmother. “You don’t have to focus on water this time – I’m rather certain that is not your strongest element. Focus on anything that comes natural to you, whether it is fire, or wind, or light or even love. Try to conjure it, try to wield it.”

Natalie did not understand what her grandmother was saying. Still, unlike the last time, Natalie had now performed magic once. She knew what it felt like to be able to draw energy from the red stone that hung around her neck.

She thought of the things her grandmother had suggested to her. None of them felt right. A part of her felt like she might be able to create fire at some point but it not right now. Fire was passion and heat – at the moment, Natalie felt more annoyed than anything else. Wind was not it, nor was light. Though she felt love towards Cecily, it was not something she was about to create at the moment – she was not even sure what that would mean. Could she make one person fall in love with another once she wielded that power?

She pushed the thoughts aside and suddenly, there was a spark of something inside of her. It was created from the annoyance Natalie felt towards her grandmother’s nagging, from the frustration she felt about the situation with Ava and from the feeling of helplessness she felt about Cecily’s illness. As these things flashed before her eyes, Natalie felt the spark grow into something bigger. Her fingers began to shake as she drew them towards the red stone and her blood felt like it was boiling within her.

Slowly, she placed her fingers on the stone and drew out the powerful magic she had created. It rested in her palm, floating just above her fingers, and though Natalie’s eyes were closed, she could still see it. It was beautiful, she thought; it was pure magic.

“Well done,” she heard her grandmother say. Natalie barely registered it.

She opened her eyes to find something that she could only describe as sparkling electricity hovering just above her palm. Blue and intense white sparks flew from it but it did not hurt. Natalie knew that her own magic would not hurt her.

Natalie gradually pulled her fingers in, closing them to a fist. As she did, the ball of electricity became smaller, just as she knew it would, until it disappeared completely. Natalie stood perfectly still and noted that her chest heaved as she tried to regain her breath and her eyes attempted to re-adjust to the regular light of the sinking sun. She could hear her own blood pounding in her ears.

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“That was amazing,” she heard Cecily say, though she sounded awfully far away. Natalie could not find her voice to reply.

The next moment, Natalie’s legs gave out and she collapsed into a heap on the ground, feeling distantly giddy.

9.

Natalie did not know how she made it back to the house, though she thought she recalled Thomas carrying her. She had no idea when he had gotten there. Back at the house, the others let Natalie recover on the couch. Her grandmother disappeared and when Natalie had gained enough energy to ask where she had gone, Cecily told her that she ordered dinner.

Natalie closed her eyes. “I feel like there’s no energy left in my body whatsoever.”

Cecily giggled lightly. “I imagine you do.”

Natalie glanced at her through half-closed lids. “What did I do?”

Cecily squeezed Natalie’s hand. “You did magic that is very advanced for a Novus Wielder. I wouldn’t have recommended it for your second try at magic but you handled it.”

“I— I knew. I just— I knew exactly how to handle it. I even knew how to end it.”

“You did – though your grandmother stood ready with a shield for us if you hadn’t known.”

Natalie shook her head. “I have no idea how I knew. Did I scare you?”

“No,” Cecily said softly. “No, I knew you’d never hurt us.”

“I wouldn’t.”

A comfortable silence spread. Natalie took long deep breaths and ever so slowly, she felt life start to spread in her body once more. She still felt tired and when the delicious smell of beef and sauce met her nostrils, Natalie licked her lips.

The table had been set with three plates the two girls walked into the dining room. It felt like they had switched roles – for once Cecily helped Natalie, rather than the other way around. Natalie suspected Cecily liked the change, considering the small smile on her lips and the delight she showed in doing things like pulling Natalie’s chair out for her. Natalie in turn felt exhausted enough to simply accept the help she offered.

Natalie’s grandmother joined them shortly thereafter. There was a slightly amused smile on her lips as she began to eat.

“Well, I certainly don’t have to doubt your magical abilities anymore,” she said.

Natalie smiled sheepishly, taking another bite of beef. Each mouthful refilled her energy reserves and she started to feel a lot better.

“Are you angry?”

Her grandmother shook her head. “No, why would I be? I told you to do magic and you did.”

Natalie chuckled. “Apparently.”

“I’m sure Miss Cordell here has told you that the magic you did is more advanced than you’re supposed to be able to do?”

“She has.”

“Well, perhaps it had to do with Mithridates, or perhaps you’re stronger than I imagined.”

“Will you sleep better now?”

The annoyance she had felt before was gone now – she had showed her grandmother that she could do what she wanted her to do and she had done it well. More than well, really.

Her grandmother gave a curt nod with a tight smile. “I believe will.”

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly. Natalie’s grandmother asked both Natalie and Cecily about their school work and lives in general. Natalie told her about Richard and saw a hint of sadness in her grandmother’s cool blue eyes. She ended that note with a few gentle words about Richard probably wanting to see her as well, as she was his mother. Natalie’s grandmother did not reply.

Briefly, they landed on the subject of Cecily’s prophetic dreams. Cecily told Natalie’s grandmother of the two she had had concerning Natalie and her grandmother listened eagerly. As there was not much to say on the subject once they had gone over the dreams, however, they soon continued on towards other things.

A few hours later, as Natalie and Cecily stood outside about to get into the carriage, Natalie turned to her grandmother with a request that would perhaps seem a bit odd.

“Do you have an extra tracking stone like the one you have on the carriage?”

Her grandmother’s eyes showed a hint of amusement. “Who do you intend to trace? A boy, perhaps?”

Natalie blushed. “No, grandmother, it’s for a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Yes,” Natalie said, “the one Cecily dreamed would be kidnapped.”

“That seems like a reasonable enough idea. Just a moment.”

She disappeared into the house only to exit again a minute later. She placed an opaque, crystal-like stone in Natalie’s palm.

“This will do. But don’t forget to link it to you or you won’t be able to follow it.”

“Link it?” asked Natalie.

Her grandmother nodded. Natalie did not understand, but pocketed the opaque stone, hoping that Cecily knew more. Then, after a quick hug with her grandmother, she climbed into the carriage where Cecily waited. Thomas closed the door behind them and both girls waved to Natalie’s grandmother as the carriage set off.

Saturday morning found Natalie awake surprisingly early for someone who usually slept very late when she could. She figured it was all the sleeping she had done in her grandmother’s carriage – though she and Cecily had not gotten back to Lake Sunflower until nearly midnight, they had gotten a good hour of sleep in the carriage as they returned. Cecily had fretted about what her father would say. She had, after all, been out quite late. Natalie simply snuck into the house quietly – Richard had known she was likely to be late.

Now the sun shone through Natalie’s window. It would be another beautiful day for sure. Natalie touched the necklace she had promised to wear at all times – could create magic here and now?

She thought of the beautiful sun outside, the birds singing and the peace she felt as she lay warm in her bed. Closing her eyes briefly, she pulled the magic from inside. It was not nearly as powerful as it had been the day before in Mithridates but it was still there, thriving within her.

Natalie pulled it out of the stone as though it was liquid and when she opened her eyes, a small ball of light floated above her palm. It did not seem dangerous in anyway, like the electricity the day before. No angry, blue sparks came from it – instead it simply shone in all its beautiful simplicity. It looked like a small sun, though Natalie did not think it fire had been involved at all. It was simply light.

She gazed at it in amazement, wondering briefly what she would have said if someone had told her merely two weeks ago, that she would be able to do this, or even a week ago, when she had been at her grandmother and had failed her first attempt at magic.

She did not fail now.

She guided the light back to the stone and the stone absorbed it, making the red stone glow gently for a moment. Natalie felt warmth spread inside and knew that this time, she had not lost the magic and made herself weak as she had the day before. Then again, she felt rather uncertain that her body could have handled the immense energy she had drawn up then.

When Natalie had finished breakfast later that morning, she passed the hallway on her way up to her bedroom. She stopped when she saw a chubby-looking letter lying on the doormat. When she picked it up, she instantly recognized her grandmother's writing.

She brought it up to her bedroom and opened it once inside. A small, yellowish stone on a thin golden chain fell out. The accompanying letter said,

'Natalie,

Give this to Miss Cordell with my regards. It will make her feel better.

Your grandmother'

Natalie looked at the yellow stone. Its shape looked vaguely star-like, with several sharp edges. What powers did this stone have – and how did one know? She glanced at the tracking stone she had received to give Ava. Her grandmother could obviously tell what different abilities the stones had in themselves.

There was a knock on the door and Richard stuck his head inside. "Natalie? Em and I are going to the mall. Is there anything you need?"

Natalie shook her head. "No, I'm good."

"Well, we'll be gone a couple of hours."

"Okay. Have a good time."

Richard smiled at her and nodded once more. "You too," he said and then he disappeared down the stairs. Natalie heard Emmanuella's shrill voice, then the front door slammed shut and the house fell quiet.

Natalie looked at the necklace in her hand. Then she picked up the phone and called Cecily.

An hour later, the two girls sat in Natalie's room. Cecily looked curiously at the picture of Natalie as a baby with her mother.

"That's a beautiful photograph."

Natalie smiled softly. "It's the only one I have of her."

“I guess it’s your mother?” asked Cecily and at Natalie’s nod, she continued, “What happened to her?”

“She died just after giving birth to me. Something went wrong, I don’t know what. They never told me.”

“I’m sorry,” Cecily said. She paused briefly, then added, “My mother is dead too.”

Natalie swallowed the lump in her throat that always formed when she thought too long of her mother. “What happened?”

“She got sick. Cancer. The doctors didn’t find it until it was too late, dad says. I was only four so I barely remember it. I just— I remember her, a bit. Her smell and her warmth.”

Natalie wished she could remember her mom. She did not – understandable considering she had only been a few weeks old when her mother died. Still, she could not help but wonder what her mother had been like. Richard had never been willing to answer any of her questions, other than to say that his sister had been a loving and strong woman.

She would ask her grandmother the next time she visited.

Cecily gave a sudden, slightly choked laugh. “Look at us, getting all down on this beautiful day. I’m sorry.”

Natalie smiled, a bit forced just as Cecily. She took a deep breath to steady herself. “No worries. We probably should talk about them.”

“I talk about her with my dad. He loved her so much.”

Natalie smiled. Then she admitted what she had only told a friend once before. “I don’t know who my father is at all.”

Cecily gazed at her with her calm, dark eyes. She did not say anything, merely waited for Natalie to continue.

“Richard is my uncle – he won’t talk about my mother at all, and certainly not about any relationship she might have had,” Natalie said. “As far as I know, I have no other family other than him and my grandmother – and I only met her a week ago.”

“You should ask her,” Cecily said softly.

Natalie nodded, feeling rather distraught all of a sudden. She did not think about her mother very often anymore – and she thought of her father even less. There had been a period a few years ago when she had been obsessed with trying to find out who her father was but she had never gotten anywhere in her attempts to find him. Richard had been all she had to go on and either he did not know or he simply would not tell her. All Natalie had found out had been that Carolina Turner, her mother, had never been married and on her birth certificate, only her mother stood listed. She had tried to research men with her last name – she obviously bore her father’s last name – but had come up blank there as well.

“I should.” Natalie ran a hand through her hair. “But perhaps there’s a reason Richard won’t tell me about my father.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t know,” Cecily said.

“Yes, but what if it’s something else? What if my dad’s a criminal or something?” Natalie had given that particular idea quite a bit of room but had found no prisoner with her last name. It had not calmed her – perhaps he was simply smart enough not to get caught.

“I’m sure he’s a good guy. You’re a wonderful person so neither of your parents could possibly be too bad, could they?”

Natalie smiled slightly, feeling the rise of a blush. “Thanks.”

She sat down again – she had not even realized she had stood up and started to pace.

Natalie picked up the envelope containing the golden necklace with the yellow stone her grandmother had sent to her to give Cecily.

“Here,” she said.

Cecily took the envelope, looking at Natalie questioningly. She turned it over and the necklace fell into her palm.

“What’s this?” Cecily asked, looking at Natalie.

“Read the letter,” Natalie said, motioning towards the envelope.

Cecily did and then looked closer at the necklace. “That was nice of her.” She frowned slightly. “I can feel something. It emanates— good, somehow.”

Natalie walked over to her and placed her hand on the necklace. At first, she felt nothing, as she had before when she had held it. Then, as she concentrated, she too felt what Cecily had said. For the lack of a better word, Cecily had explained it – the necklace did radiate of goodness.

Cecily clasped it around her neck. The color of the stone complimented her.

“I didn’t know you could feel the power in stones,” Natalie said.

“Neither did I. I’ve never been able to before. Then again, ‘good’ isn’t exactly what I’ve read that magic stones usually emanate.”

“Read?” asked Natalie. “You’ve read about magic?”

Cecily smiled slightly. “Of course. How else do you think I know things?”

Natalie did not have an answer; she merely had questions. “So there are books on magic?”

“Yes, silly. How else would the knowledge of Wielders of old be passed on? Not everyone has families. Many Wielders are loners and do not have anyone to tell, so they write about it instead. Of course, the books aren’t given to just anyone. They are either found – the books tend to have a life of their own and decide who is allowed to find them – or given away or inherited.”

Natalie still did not quite understand. “So where did you get yours? I thought you said you’re not a Wielder.”

Cecily shook her head. “I’m not. My mother gave it to me.”

“So she was a Wielder?”

“No,” Cecily said. “I don’t know how she got it.” Cecily looked thoughtful for a moment. “Actually, now that I think about it, all I know is that when she gave it to me, she told me to read it and then guard it. She said someone was going to come along who’d need to read it.”

“Someone was going to come along?”

“Yes,” Cecily said and looked up at Natalie. She laughed suddenly, as though she had realized something funny.

“What is it?”

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“I simply realized I’ve been really stupid,” Cecily said, shaking her head. “The person who needs to read it is you, of course.”

10.

The two girls left Natalie's house and headed to Cecily's. They walked in silence, each deep in thought. Natalie's mind raced a mile a minute, filled with questions. What was this book Cecily was talking about? Who had written it? How had her mother gotten it? What had her mother meant by 'someone would come along who'd need to read it'? On top of that, thoughts that had been re-awakened by the earlier conversation also ran in her head, mixing with the rest – who was her father? Her mother? Why did Richard refuse to talk about them? Did he not know? Why had her grandmother not so much as mentioned them?

She thought to ask – Cecily ought to have at least some answers – but she could not make sense of the jumbled mess of questions and she did not know where to start. When they reached Cecily's street, both were too deep in thought at first to notice anything out of the ordinary. Then Cecily grabbed Natalie's arm.

"Natalie," she said, "look!"

The front door to the Cordell's house stood wide open, swaying slightly in the wind. A man like Mr. Cordell would never leave the door open like that.

Natalie and Cecily ran towards the house. A feeling of dread settled in Natalie's stomach.

They snuck into the house, both wary that someone might still be there. Feeling like a cop on a TV-show, Natalie snuck quietly from room to room, hoping not to find anyone there. The house was terribly quiet and she could hear her own quick breathing. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest.

They made their way upstairs and winced when Natalie made the stairway creak.

They found no one, but Cecily gave a cry of anguish at the sight of her own room.

Someone had turned it upside down. Papers were lying all over the floor, her clothes strewn about as her wardrobe had been searched, and her books had been pulled from their shelves.

Cecily hurried to her wardrobe. For a moment, Natalie thought it strange but then realized that Cecily would not leave the book on magic out.

"Damn."

Natalie had never heard her swear before. She stepped closer. "Cecily?"

Cecily turned to her. She looked a cross between angry, upset and sad, a look not too flattering on her pretty face.

"The book is gone."

Cecily called her father. Natalie only heard Cecily's end of the conversation but could sense the worry that her father felt. She could only imagine how she would have felt if someone broke into her house and went through her things. It was a violation on a very private plane, she thought.

Cecily looked distraught and when she hung up the phone, Natalie pulled her close and hugged her.

“It was my mom’s!” Cecily said softly but forcefully.

Natalie stroked her hair but said nothing; she did not know what she could say that would make Cecily feel better.

Finally, Cecily pulled away. “Dad’s coming. He said he was going to call the police but he didn’t think they’d make a big deal out of a simple burglary where only a book was taken.” She sighed. “If only they knew – it’s not just any book. It’s a Script Magia. It’s—it’s a Wielders thoughts and spells, theories on magic and the history of it – I wish I could have shown it to you! You were supposed to read it, I’m sure of it.”

“You’ll have to tell me instead,” Natalie said. “I still need to know.”

“Yes – but I don’t remember all of it and I might remember wrong. And some of it is just necessary to read – I can’t tell you about it, because the details are so intricate.”

They were silent for a moment, Cecily looking dejectedly around her wasted room. It looked like a tornado had swept through it. Natalie had no doubt that Ramon, had been the ones to steal Cecily’s book – it made absolutely no sense if it was not. The person who had broken into the Cordell home had obviously known what to look for.

“I’ll find him and get it back for you,” Natalie said, quietly but her tone hard.

“You think it was Ramon?”

Natalie nodded shortly. “Who else?”

“There are other Wielders in the world who’d probably want to get their hands on that Script,” Cecily said, shrugging. “Every Script Magia is unique, a fingerprint of the Wielder who wrote it – sometimes, the Script is passed down and filled in through generations – like the one I had. Seven generations of Wielders – gone, just like that.”

Cecily certainly seemed to know more about a lot of things than she first led on, Natalie thought. It all made for a rather secretive shimmer that surrounded her persona.

“Did it say anything about Ramon?” asked Natalie.

Cecily shook her head. “It was among the first things I looked in it for, but there was nothing. There was a bit about resurrection spells, but the rituals for those didn’t sound like what you said Ramon was planning to do to you.”

“But there are resurrection spells?”

“Not really,” Cecily said. “The dead remain dead, but Wielders that have turned to darkness have been known to reanimate them and use them as soldiers.”

“Like—zombies?”

Cecily nodded. “It’s not a pretty sight.”

At that moment, Mr. Cordell arrived home. Feeling more than a bit out of place as Cecily hugged her father and spoke of the book that had been taken, Natalie finally bid her goodbyes and left the house.

She wandered aimlessly, not quite willing to go home yet. Questions ran through her mind – what did Ramon want with the Script? He was obviously already a talented Wielder, considering his ability to completely alter his appearance at will, so what did the book contain that was interesting for him? Something important – or perhaps he simply did not want Natalie to read it.

A leaf fell from one of the trees and landed on Natalie's shoulder. A sign of autumn, Natalie thought distantly. The air felt warm still, and fall seemed a good way off yet.

After an hour of walking, Natalie returned home to an empty house. Natalie had not expected it to be anything but. Emmanuella's shopping sprees had been known to last for hours and hours, which was one of the reasons Natalie never joined – she got bored. Besides, Emmanuella never wanted her to come along.

Natalie closed the door to her room, enclosing herself in her very own space. She wanted to block out the world. Too much had happened too rapidly. In just two weeks, Natalie had gone from a very ordinary, rather unpopular new student at a new school, to – well, what was she now? A Wielder? Her unexpected and sudden bursts of magic could hardly make her a Wielder. Natalie remembered her grandmother's other term – Novus Wielder. That seemed to fit.

She shook her head and sat down at her desk. She caught sight of the small, opaque stone her grandmother had given her to trace Ava with. She recalled her grandmother's words about linking the stone to herself and frowned. She held the stone in one hand and her necklace with the other, studying them. She knew she ought to have asked her grandmother more about it – after all, it was important. But she had not, and she would have to figure it out. She did not know if the 'linking' was automatic, like two computer programs working together, or if she had to do anything.

Soon enough, she received her answer.

Both stones began to feel hot in her hands as she concentrated on them and suddenly, without any warning, a red beam of light shot from the necklace to the opaque stone. Natalie squeezed her eyes shut against the strong light.

When she opened them again, she found the opaque stone no longer completely opaque. Instead, it held a small, red center that appeared to be alive, if looked upon long enough. The two stones had been linked and somehow, Natalie could feel it. They were—connected.

Natalie pocketed the stone. The photograph of her and her mother caught her eye and she smiled slightly.

"I really should ask grandma about you," she said softly. "Perhaps you were a Master Wielder too, like grandma."

Her thoughts carried her away – what would it have been like to grow up with a mother and father, instead of with her uncle? Her conversation with Cecily had re-awoken her curiosity though she still knew that unless someone decided to open up, she would find out no more now than she had two years ago.

She sighed and looked away from the photo. Only then did she realize that the paper that had previously been completely blank, now held a single line of writing.

'I am not Ramon.'

Natalie's breath caught in her throat and she had already backed away from the table before realizing the stupidity of her behavior. She was afraid of a piece of paper? There was obviously either nothing to be afraid of, or she should be trying to run away from her own body since that was what the writer controlled.

Shaking, Natalie sat down again. The words still stood there, simple and unthreatening on their own. Only how they had appeared frightened Natalie.

Perhaps she should give the one behind the writing the benefit of the doubt for a moment. Perhaps she would find something out about Ramon, whether he was the writer or not – after all, he or she obviously knew about Ramon’s existence.

Her mind made up, Natalie grabbed the pen once more. Her hand trembled badly enough to mess up her handwriting as she wrote back:

‘Who are you then?’

She closed her eyes and willed herself not to think about controlling her hand. It took only a moment before she could feel the slight changing of fabric as her arm moved. It was barely noticeable.

‘I told you, I am someone who wants to help you.’

Natalie recalled the words the ghost writer had made her write before.

‘How can I know that when you won’t tell me who you are?’ Natalie wrote, her heart still beating rather wildly in her chest.

A very short answer appeared:

‘You can’t.’

Natalie sighed. The ghost writer did not seem like Ramon. The ghost writer had never been rude or mean, but rather very nice and calm. She could not quite believe that the man who had held a knife to her throat would then be so cordial.

Natalie wrote, *‘How do you know about Ramon?’*

It took a moment longer than before for the ghost writer to give an answer to this question. Finally it appeared,

‘I know a lot.’

Natalie rolled her eyes. The ghost writer really would not give her anything to work with. Before Natalie had time to write another answer, however, her hand started moving again and the ghost writer wrote,

‘He is double.’

What? Natalie frowned deeply. What on earth was that supposed to mean? Double-what? Agent? For what, in that case? It was weird, even for the ghost writer, who always seemed to be writing in riddles. Still, Natalie got the feeling that it held some importance.

‘What are you talking about?’

She waited, biting her lip all the while. When nothing happened, she closed her eyes and tried her best to relax – it did not work too well but then she did not think she had been relaxed during the ‘talk’ at all this time.

Nothing happened. The page remained clear below Natalie’s last words and there was no inkling that the ghost writer would write any more.

After a few minutes, Natalie wrote once more, *‘What do you mean by double?’* but nothing happened.

Natalie wanted to rip the piece of paper to bits but felt that it would not do any good – saving these ‘conversations’ was probably the wise thing to do, so she could read them through again later on. She slumped in her chair and put away the pen. She recalled that it had happened before, that the ghost writer suddenly stopped. Perhaps it took a lot of power out of it and it could not

do it for too long. It seemed like a reasonable explanation, but it did not make Natalie any calmer. What did ‘*He is double*’ mean? Double agent was still all that came to mind – and double agent for what, exactly, would that be?

Annoyed, she crumbled the paper in her hand and threw it into the wall. It bounced and landed on the floor. After a minute of frustrated huffing, Natalie sighed and picked it up. She unfolded it and placed it in one of the desk drawers, where it would not be so easily found. The last thing she wanted was for Richard to find the piece of paper with the odd writings.

Things were getting more complicated by the minute. No longer did Natalie feel at all sure that the ghost writer was Ramon – it no longer made sense. Why would Ramon tell her ‘he is double’ in reference to himself? At the same time, she was fairly convinced that Ramon had been behind the break-in at the Cordells’ house. Who was Ramon? Why was he doing these things? Why had he kidnapped Natalie and told her he would kill her at midnight? Would Cecily’s dream come true – would Ava go to be kidnapped by Ramon as well?

Natalie sighed again and then she stood and headed downstairs. Making dinner qualified as a task that would occupy her thoughts well enough without being overly complicated at the same time.

Richard and Emmanuella arrived home an hour and a half later. By then, Natalie had chicken and potatoes roasting in the oven and a chocolate cake for dessert ready to be baked. Natalie glanced briefly at the multitude of bags Richard carried. Apparently, this shopping spree had been no different from any other Emmanuella went on.

“It smells good,” Richard said.

Natalie smiled back. “It’ll be done in a few minutes.”

Richard held out a bag to Natalie. “Such a good cook needs some show of appreciation.”

Natalie gaped at him for a moment – they hardly ever bought her anything. She opened the bag. A cute red shirt and a small envelope lying on top of it could be seen. Natalie opened it and found three movie tickets.

“I thought you could take your new friends with you,” Richard said. “I’m sure you girls need to go out and have some fun.”

Natalie smiled widely at Richard. Three tickets meant he had actually kept track of the friends she had mentioned. “Thank you.”

Richard waved it off. “I’m glad you’re making friends.”

Natalie had not told him of the fight with Ava and did not intend to do so either. She still hoped it would resolve itself and though she liked that Richard had some semblance of knowledge about her life, she did not need him to know any more intimate details.

Emmanuella sauntered into the room clad in an assortment of her new clothes. Natalie gave a small shake of her head at her antics. Emmanuella did not notice.

Monday came far too soon for Natalie’s liking. As she sat in class, she hoped for new ghost notes to write themselves in her notebook but nothing happened. It made Natalie somewhat frustrated – when she finally did want answers from the ghost writer, it was nowhere to be found.

The Winter Legacy: Awakening
by C. Hakansson

In Natalie's pocket, the tracking stone weighed heavily. Ava avoided her and Cecily in class and showed no inkling to wave a peace flag any time soon. Natalie knew she had to place the tracking stone on her either way – Cecily's dream was bound to come true sooner rather than later and it would not wait for them being friends again.

At lunch, Natalie attempted to talk to Ava. Sitting on a bench under one of the trees with Cecily, she spotted Ava walking past. Ava's face was sour and she stared straight ahead, never glancing towards Cecily and Natalie.

"I'm going to talk to her," Natalie said decisively.

Cecily looked up at her, squinting against the sun. She was eating an apple. "Are you sure that's a good idea? She seems very angry."

"I have to," sighed Natalie.

She hurried after Ava and quickly caught up with her.

"Ava!"

Ava barely spared her a glance. Without a word, she kept on walking.

Natalie felt it was time for drastic measures. She grabbed Ava's arm. "Ava. Come on."

Ava whirled around. Her eyes were flashing with fury and she pulled her arm out of Natalie's grip. "Don't touch me."

"But Ava—"

"I don't know you," said Ava icily. "You're not allowed to touch me, or say my name, or do anything that's even remotely connected to me at all."

Natalie took a step back at the vehemence in Ava's voice. Ava took this as her chance to get away and with a final glare sent Natalie's way, she stalked off.

Someone clapped their hands, slowly and theatrically.

"What a show."

Natalie looked up to find Chase Eadan smirking at her. His girlfriend hung on his arm like a trophy wearing too much makeup.

"What?" spat Natalie.

Chase sniggered. "Oh, it seems it just got cold out here, didn't it, *Winters?*"

His girlfriend laughed.

Natalie open hands became fists of anger. "Did you come up with that all by yourself? Really, you're quite the comedian."

Chase smiled self-assuredly. His eyes glittered with something Natalie could not quite place. "I know."

As Natalie started to reply, Cecily appeared at her side. She took Natalie by the arm and led her away from Chase and his followers. Chase laughed after them.

"Saved by the sick little angel! Can't defend themselves so they flee," he cackled. "Flee, like animals waiting to be hunted down."

Natalie sent him a final glare, wishing she could set him on fire and hoping that in time, she would learn how to do that. Then Chase Eadan would know how it felt to burn with anger – or at least to burn.

Cecily shook her head at her. “You can’t let him get to you like that.”

“He’s the most despicable excuse for a human being!” Natalie exclaimed. “How can I *not* let him get to me?”

“He’s not worthy of our attention,” Cecily said. “Didn’t Richard ever teach you not to respond to bullies?”

Natalie sighed and her shoulders slumped. “Yes, he did. It’s just hard to remember.”

“I take it it didn’t go well with Ava?”

Natalie shook her head. “She hates me.”

“Us,” Cecily corrected. “Not just you.”

Natalie sighed. “Why couldn’t she just be excited or curious about magic – or know about it already, like you did. Why is she so angry?”

Cecily looked towards the end of the building, where Ava had disappeared. “Perhaps she doesn’t like the idea.”

Natalie shook her head. “I don’t think that’s it. She’s mad at us, not at the idea. She thinks we’re trying to fool her and she doesn’t like that.”

Cecily appeared thoughtful. “Perhaps you should do magic for her.”

“I don’t know,” said Natalie, taking a bite of her sandwich. “For one, I don’t think she’ll stick around for a show. Second, I can’t control it very well – and I’ll probably be nervous when I try to show her, and then it won’t work at all. Like stage fright.”

Cecily smiled slightly. “You’ll be fine. Your magic control is just fine –you healed me—”

“For a day.”

“—and you haven’t shown any sign of not being able to control it. Even when you wielded a huge ball of electricity at your grandmother’s Mithridates, you had no problems controlling it.”

Natalie looked down. She knew Cecily was right – she had not had any trouble. Still, she felt that with the added stress of having to get it right in front of Ava, coupled with the fear of Ava’s reaction, she felt less than certain about her ability.

“We still won’t get her to stick around,” Natalie said, shrugging.

“So that’s it?” asked Cecily. “You’re going to give up? Natalie, you *have* to get Ava to keep that stone with her.”

“I know,” Natalie snapped at Cecily. Then she promptly buried her head in her hands. She wanted to scream with frustration. “Sorry. I’m simply worried about—”

Just then, a blood-chilling scream pierced the air.

11.

Natalie ran faster than she ever had in her life. It did not matter – it still felt as though she was running through thick mud, as though each step took an eternity.

She rounded the corner to the front of the school and found Ava standing face to face with Ramon. He had wrapped his hand around her wrist, just about to pull her along.

Natalie heard her own blood pounding in her ears as she tried to reach the two. She fumbled with the stone in her pocket and seized hold of it.

“Ava!” she yelled. “Catch!”

Ava turned around and their eyes met. Natalie threw the tracking stone to Ava and as in slow-motion, Ava reached up to grab it. Her eyes were wide with terror. Ramon reached for his necklace and with his black eyes trained on Natalie and a smirk on his lips, a white light swallowed him and Ava.

The light blinded Natalie and she could not tell if Ava’s out-stretched hand had ever closed around the opaque stone.

Her breath coming in uneven gulps, Cecily caught up with her. “Ava?” she asked between tries to get enough oxygen into her lungs. She leaned forward, hands on her knees. Around them, people stared, both at the spot where Ava had disappeared from and at Cecily’s weak form. Curious whispers started to spread around the area and a few pointed at them.

Natalie’s arm went around Cecily and she lowered them both to the ground.

“I think she caught it,” Natalie said, her throat thick with tears. She was not nearly as sure as she sounded.

Cecily continued to draw small hacking breaths for air. “Good,” she whispered and closed her eyes. “Then we— need to find— a map.”

Natalie realized then that she had not thought of how the tracking stone worked. She had been able to feel it before but now she could only make out that it was far away. Wherever Ramon had taken Ava, it was not within Lake Sunflower.

“I think there are maps in the library,” Natalie said.

Cecily nodded. “Just— let me catch— my breath.”

Natalie fretted – each second they stayed put, could be the second that cost Ava. Her heart pounded in her chest and she looked around, eyes passing over the road, the grass and the stairs they were on. She searched for clues but found none.

The scene played before Natalie’s eyes over and over again. Ava’s terrified eyes locked on Natalie every time and she felt useless, that the only thing she had managed to do was throw her a stone.

“Was it like in your dream?” asked Natalie.

Cecily nodded. “Yes. Exactly.”

They stayed still for a minute longer. The other students around them stared wide-eyed at them. Some were talking between themselves, shooting meaningful glances at Natalie and Cecily and talking animatedly about how Ava had disappeared. What they would think now – would everyone realize that magic existed? Would they suddenly know?

“A man just came and grabbed her. I think they left in a car.”

Natalie turned her head, surprised. The words had been uttered by one of the girls who’d seen the event. Natalie frowned. Did people come up with explanations for the inexplicable?

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. It had not been inexplicable. It had been magic. Magic *she* could do – magic *she* could wield. Magic that made life dangerous for both Ava and Cecily.

The bell rang. How could everything that had happened have taken place during the forty minute lunch break? It felt like it had been much longer.

Natalie helped Cecily stand. She still looked worryingly pale but she had her breathing under control and she could stand up straight.

“Let’s go to the library.”

It did not matter to either one that they ought to be in class. They had to find Ava. Natalie hoped that the few minutes Cecily had needed to recuperate had not cost Ava – they could not be helped. Without Cecily, Natalie would be at a loss for how to use the tracking stone and without that, Natalie still would not be able to find and help Ava anyway.

They snuck into the library and quietly made their way to the back where the map books were. The old librarian, a small man in his mid sixties with hardly any hair, sat in his office, deeply captivated by the book he was reading. Natalie hoped he would stay that way – if she and Cecily were caught, they would be sent straight to their respective classes with a detention slip in hand. Natalie really did not have time for that.

“Here,” whispered Cecily and spread out a map of California on the floor. “Let’s start with that – hopefully she’s still in the state. Of course, he could have taken her anywhere.”

“What do I do?” asked Natalie, ignoring Cecily’s last sentence. She hoped Ava was close – if she was not, how could Natalie get there on time?

“Hold the necklace over the map. It will pull itself to the spot where the tracking stone is.”

Natalie did as she was told and watched, amazed, as the necklace started moving. Natalie had placed it over the area where Lake Sunflower and her heart sank, the amazement disappearing, as the necklace pulled itself away from the area and up north. When it stopped, Natalie was close to tears – the necklace had placed itself in an area that would take at least four hours to drive to.

She did not have that kind of time. *Ava* did not have that kind of time. Ava had no way to protect herself against Ramon and though Natalie did not have much of an idea of how to do it either, at least she was a Novus now. She needed to get there. But how? A car was out of the question – she did not know how to drive and she had no car. Bus would take far too long – in fact, everything Natalie could think of took far too long.

“Natalie,” she heard Cecily say.

Natalie had not realized she had closed her eyes, but obviously, she had. When she opened them, she found her necklace glowing bright red. She only had a second to think before Cecily suddenly blurred and a sea of white light replaced her.

Suddenly, Natalie was flying. The wind around her was hard and strong, pulling at her hair and making her eyes water and tears stream down her cheeks. She was traveling fast, faster than humanly possible. Below her, a blur of colors passed that Natalie could only barely make out. Brief thoughts went through her mind as quickly as she was traveling. Where was she going – was

she really going to where the tracking stone had pointed? Was she going into danger? Should she be scared?

As abruptly as the journey had started, it ended.

Everything stopped at once and Natalie, who was still moving at great speed, landed on the hard ground and rolled around several times before finally stopping. Her body felt like one big bruise. Her vision swam for a moment before she realized what she was seeing.

She had tumbled into the round room that she had been once before, when Ramon had first kidnapped her. Her first violent meeting with magic – this was where it had taken place.

“Took you long enough.”

Natalie felt the unpleasantly familiar feeling of cold steel against her throat – Ramon’s knife.

Natalie swallowed. In her mind she answered her previous questions: Yes, she was going into danger. Yes, she should be scared. How would get out of this? What had she been thinking? She reminded herself that she had not been thinking, that the only thing she had thought of was to save—

“Ava!”

Ava sat a few feet to the side of Natalie. Her hands and feet had been bound together with thick rope. In her left fist, she held tightly onto something. There were several cuts on her forearms and one across her cheek – she had obviously put up a fight.

“Natalie?” Ava’s eyes were wide. “How did you—”

“Are you all—”

Natalie did not get to finish the sentence. Ramon’s grip on her hair tightened and the pressure of the knife increased.

“No talking,” he hissed in her ear.

Natalie wanted to break free, to slap Ramon hard, to grab Ava and get away. What had she been thinking? What possible way had she thought she would be able to help? She had learned a touch of magic, yes, but she was barely able to control it and even if she was, Ramon was still a much more experienced Wielder and would make mince meat out of her.

A small whimper escaped her and she could feel the smile on Ramon’s lips. It made her want to shudder, but she managed to restrain herself as Ramon’s knife still pressed hard against her throat. Any movement could result in a cut.

When she spoke, her voice did not sound as strong as she would have wished.

“What do you want with us?”

“Not ‘us,’” Ramon said. “She was just bait. Easier to get to than you, now that grandma’s got you all protected. But you’re what I want. Just you, just like the last time.”

At this, Ava’s eyes became wider. “Last time? You *know* this mad-man?”

“Know’ is a strong word,” Natalie muttered. “He kidnapped me two weeks ago.”

Ramon seemed proud of this but then his face darkened. “If it hadn’t for your grandmother, I would have succeeded with my task.”

“What task?” asked Ava. Natalie could hear both frustration and fear in her voice.

“Killing her,” Ramon said. “Killing young Winters here, you see – it would raise *her*.”

“Her?” both Natalie and Ava echoed.

This was news for Natalie – she had thought him to be just a regular mad Master Wielder who killed girls for fun, but obviously it was worse than that. Was this man a necromancer? Cecily had told her they existed – and Ramon certainly seemed to fit the profile for such a creepy specialty. But who was ‘her’? A dead lover?

“Yes, her,” said Ramon. “*Chaos.*”

Natalie and Ava shared a meaningful look, all fighting forgotten. This man was insane. That did not bode well for the two of them.

“You would never understand,” Ramon said.

Natalie did not think she wanted to understand what went on in Ramon’s head.

What would hurt him if she did manage to conjure something? Fire? The great ball of electricity? He would probably be able to wave it off somehow – after all, he was far stronger than her.

She did not have time to think anymore as Ramon pulled her to her feet. He stood at least a head taller than her and could easily keep his grip on her hair and continue to press the knife to her throat. He wore long black robes this time – she could see them as she glanced around. She suspected that if she could get a good look at him, he’d look like something out of a movie.

Ramon turned her around and she saw the slab of stone in the middle of the room. Suddenly, she knew where they were.

“We’re in your Mithridates!”

The grip on her hair hardened and she tears sprang to her eyes.

“I hear you’ve learned something since the last time we saw each other,” Ramon hissed.

Then he unceremoniously shoved her towards the round stone. She held up her hands to protect herself as she stumbled. As soon as her hands touched the stone, she realized her mistake. The stone seemed to be magic in itself – it grabbed hold of her and made it impossible for her to get away. Behind her, Ramon smirked.

“But you have obviously not learned much,” he said. “Yes, you are in my Mithridates. I hope you like it – after all, it’s the last place you’ll ever see.”

“At least let her go,” Natalie begged.

“Why?” Ramon asked cruelly.

“She has nothing to do with this!” Natalie screamed.

She felt as though ghost hands pulled her towards the stone. She tried to fight it but it did not bulge – her hands were nailed to the side of the stone.

“Stop it!” yelled Ava. She struggled against the ropes. There had to be something else holding her down as well – if not, she would have at least been able to stand. As it was, she fought uselessly. Natalie could only watch, equally useless, over her shoulder.

Ramon turned his back to Natalie. His voice was low and threatening as he bent before Ava.

“What are you going to do about it?” he hissed at her, barely loud enough for Natalie to hear it.

Natalie wanted to cry but did not because it would not help. Then again, there was nothing that would help her at all. Her grandmother would not come to her rescue this time. She sank down to a kneeling position, still with her hands glued to the stone.

The Winter Legacy: Awakening
by C. Hakansson

Her necklace, dangling on the thin silver chain, felt cool to the touch. A crease appeared between Natalie's eyebrows – what if she *could* do something? Ramon's back was still turned and Natalie doubted that he thought she could do anything that would enable her to escape. And even if she could escape, where would she go? What would happen to Ava? She had come to rescue Ava and that was what she needed to do – she could never leave her behind to be killed by this madman.

No, she had to get away and she had to be able to take Ava with her.

The ghostly arms of magic still pulled her towards the stone. Natalie looked at her hands – could she make the stone's magic work with her rather than against her? She had no idea.

Still, Natalie could not help but try. She had to. If she did not, the only thing both she and Ava had to look forward to was death – a death that would likely be excruciating and slow.

She focused as she had in her grandmother's Mithridates. What was to say that this Mithridates was only Ramon's? She made herself believe that she could use it, that Mithridates weren't specifically made for one person.

She drew upon the raging fear and anger – even hatred – she felt towards Ramon. It boiled within her, red-hot, like an angry ocean of flames. Natalie could feel her breathing grow quicker, her heart speeding up in her chest. The air around her seemed to vibrate, making the hairs on her forearms stand on end. Her body felt hot, as if burning.

She felt the magic flow in her veins. Squeezing her eyes shut, Natalie had to work hard to stay in control of the powerful emotions that rolled through her. She could easily lose herself in this. This was power, raw and tempting as forbidden fruit. The ghost hands that had been pulling at her began to form to her wishes; Natalie imagined the small, brightly shining magical creatures bowing before her as though they were her servants. The magic did not come only from the stone, it came from the ground beneath her, through her shoes and legs, traveling up through her body and spreading.

When she opened her eyes, she let hell break loose.

12.

Ramon never had time to react.

In one huge blow, the magic Natalie had collected inside herself blew up in a white explosion. It vibrated through the air, spreading around Natalie and shaking the very foundations of the Mithridates. Natalie imagined it in her mind, as it continued outside of the Mithridates, like the ripples moving in every direction created when one drops a stone into water.

She was free.

The magic that had been holding her just a second ago now worked with her, for her. She had never felt this way – powerful, completely in control. She liked it.

Ramon stood temporarily stunned. He squinted at her, because the white light of magic still surrounded her. His black robes looked almost white in the light she emanated.

Behind him, Ava stared wide-eyed and fearful at Natalie. She trembled badly.

It took only a second for Natalie to get her limbs to start working again. When they did, she ran towards Ava. Ramon stood in her way but he did not move. He obviously had not expected her to be able to do anything, least of all this. Things seemed to move in slow-motion.

Natalie grabbed Ava. Her rough treatment could not be helped – they needed to get out of there while Ramon had other things to think about. She had not figured this part out yet – Ava’s legs were bound so she could not run and Natalie herself already started to get tired from the excessive use of magic. She knew she would have to find a solution, quickly.

Something fell to the ground as Natalie yanked Ava to her feet. The small tracking stone – the thing Ava had held in her hand since Natalie had arrived on the scene. The stone bounced once on the ground and Natalie picked it as it flew into the air once more.

Ramon started moving towards them, his eyes returning to normal and shaking his head to clear it. His eyes were lit with black hatred as he turned around, searching for Natalie.

Natalie’s hand closed around the tracking stone and she placed it to her necklace.

“Think about Lake Sunflower High!” Natalie yelled to Ava.

Ava looked at Natalie, still terrified.

Natalie concentrated as hard as she could. Her heart pounded so hard it nearly hurt and her legs had started to feel like they were made of lead – but it seemed luck was with her. White light shone from the tracking stone once more and just as Ramon made a grab for the two, Natalie and Ava disappeared. Natalie’s held Ava’s arm tightly enough to leave bruises, but neither cared.

Ava screamed in terror as the ground started moving at horribly quick speed below them. Natalie struggled to stay in control. This burst of magic did not come anywhere nowhere near the strength of the first burst – and it left her even quicker. Natalie’s eyelids began to feel heavy. The sound of blood pounding in her ears replaced the whooshing sound of air around her.

The magic slipped from her, suddenly just out of reach.

They started falling and then the world stopped moving around them. The two hit the ground hard.

Natalie lost consciousness.

Ava woke her by shaking her. Slowly, Natalie's world came into focus, though at first she thought Ava had two heads.

Her body felt like it was made of stone – she did not have the power to move so much as a finger. Her head hurt with the worst headache she had ever experienced and Ava's worried questions about how many fingers she was holding up only made it worse.

Ava helped her sit up. Her eyes were filled with concern, which Natalie's pain addled brain thought was a rather nice change from the disgusted looks Ava had been sending her and Cecily lately.

"Are you okay?"

"Peachy," Natalie replied, her voice pathetically weak.

Ava watched her with worried eyes. After a few moments of silence, she said quietly, "I believe in magic now."

Natalie glanced at her. Had her head not hurt so badly, she would have rolled her eyes. As it was, she thought it likely she would lose consciousness again if she did – and Ava would not appreciate that.

"So that was all I had to do to convince you," she whispered.

Ava smiled slightly, her cheeks reddening with embarrassment. "Sorry about that."

"That's okay."

With that, it was in fact okay. Natalie understood the source of Ava's anger – Ava had likely been made a fool of several times, probably by Chase Eadan and his group. Now she felt thankful that Ava's anger had abated, that she had understood that she and Cecily were actually telling the truth about the existence of magic. Perhaps their friendship would come out stronger for it.

As they sat in silence, Natalie had a chance to look around. They were definitely not at Lake Sunflower High. Rather, it seemed they sat, stuck, in the middle of the desert. They sat in the shade of a tree and a few bushes. Natalie did not know if they had landed there or if Ava had dragged them there while Natalie had been unconscious. Either was possible. Still, Natalie noted that Ava's feet and hands had yet to be untied, so if she had in fact pulled them to the shade of the tree, they had not landed far off from there.

"Here," Natalie said, motioning for Ava to hold her hands out.

She untied the ropes around Ava's wrist rather easily now. The magic Ramon had placed upon Ava had obviously stopped working. Why, Natalie did not know – perhaps it depended on the distance, or perhaps it was the magic Natalie had performed that had broken his hold?

Ava rubbed her sore wrists before untying her feet. Then looked around uncertainly.

"Do you have any idea where we are?"

"No," Natalie said. She fought the urge to shake her head. It would do absolutely nothing for her headache.

"We have to find something to give us a clue where we are," Ava said. "Can you walk?"

Walking felt like the last thing Natalie ever wanted to do again. Mostly, she wanted to lie down in a bed and sleep for hours. Of course, she would not get to do that unless she got up and found some sort of landmark so that they could find their way back to civilization. She pulled herself together and tried her best to stand.

Her legs would not hold her up. Ava grabbed her at the last second and lowered her to the ground, as Natalie's legs gave out beneath her.

"Obviously not," Ava said. "I'll go then. You've done enough."

"You'll find me again, won't you?" asked Natalie, unable to stop herself. She did not like the idea of being left alone in the desert.

Ava smiled slightly and kissed Natalie's forehead. "No, I'll leave you here and then they'll find you in a few years, just a skeleton left. You'll be one of those mysteries they run on TV."

"Oh good," Natalie said.

Ava shrugged her bag off her back. She had been wearing it since the start of this 'adventure'. Natalie on the other hand, had not had the time to grab her bag before flying off to Ramon's Mithridates. Ava fished out a cell phone from her bag.

"I hope this thing still works," she mumbled and flicked it on.

The screen acted oddly and the battery blinked 'low', but the phone worked.

"Good," Ava said, satisfied. "I'll call someone as soon as I know where we are."

"Call Cecily. Her dad can pick us up."

"Cecily? Why?"

Natalie made a face at her from her place on the ground. "Say, what are you going to tell your mom, or anyone else you're thinking about calling, when they ask us what we're doing in the middle of the desert?"

Ava chuckled. "Right. But Cecily's dad won't ask?"

Natalie shook her head. "I don't think so. I think he knows about magic – he and Cecily are too close for him not to know."

"Cecily," Ava said thoughtfully. "She's different than us, isn't she?"

Natalie did not know what to answer. Ava was right, of course – Natalie had sensed something different about Cecily the moment the two met. Besides, not just anyone had prophetic dreams. Yet Natalie did not know what made Cecily different – she was not a Wielder like Natalie.

"Yes," said Natalie eventually, "she is."

Ava paused for a moment, then asked, "And you?"

"Me?" asked Natalie.

"Yes," Ava said, "What are you? I'm pretty sure that not just anyone can do what you did back there, when you went all glowy. Though I don't really know what it was you did."

Natalie smiled slightly. She did not know either. Just as the times before when she had performed magic, she had simply gone with her intuition. She had done what felt right and she had drawn upon magic she felt around her. Obviously, she did not always realize she was doing it until she was well on her way, like in the case of healing Cecily.

"I'm a Wielder," Natalie said. "I do magic."

It felt strange to say the words. She had not called herself a Wielder before because she had not felt like one. After today however – Natalie could hardly call herself anything but. Perhaps still a Novus – Natalie did not know where the lines were drawn between one and the other – but she had most definitely become a Wielder. She had done magic. It had not just been any kind of magic either – it had been strong enough to stun Ramon, though Natalie suspected that had to do with the fact that the man had not expected her to do anything.

“I thought you were kidding about magic,” Ava said. She added with a sigh and a roll of her eyes, “Like Santa. Dad or one of my uncles always used to dress up like Santa and when I finally found out that Santa was not real, I was devastated.”

Natalie smiled slightly. “I promise magic is real – as real as reality gets.”

Ava snorted. “Yeah, I gathered as much. When that man grabbed me – we flew, just like I did with you. It couldn’t really be anything but magic.”

“Sorry about the violent introduction,” Natalie said sheepishly. “Mine was better.”

Ava shrugged and shook her head. “If I hadn’t gotten angry and stormed out on you guys, I’m sure I would have gotten a better intro.”

Natalie nodded.

Ava pulled out the opaque tracking stone from her pocket and asked curiously, “What’s this? Some form of magic?”

Natalie gave another short nod, but stopped when her headache started banging harder inside her skull once more. “It’s a tracking stone. It allowed me to find you.”

Ava did not look as though she understood and Natalie did not blame her. She still did not understand how the tracking stone worked and how she had managed to get to Ramon’s Mithridates the way she had. She also did not understand how they had been able to escape, or why they had ended up in the desert in the end. It would have made more sense if the tracking stone had returned them to the school from where Natalie had disappeared – but then again, Natalie had lost consciousness so perhaps that had something to do with it.

She did not voice her uncertainties. Ava would not be able to help her anyway and perhaps it would only scare her to find out how little of this Natalie actually knew.

Ava pulled her backpack back on. “I’ll go find some landmark or whatnot, but you need to stay awake –you might have a concussion and I don’t want to come back to find you dead.”

“But I—” Natalie said weakly.

“No buts.”

Ava left, and Natalie glared after her. Her body relaxed as she moved into a comfortable position beneath the tree. A slight wind sent some sand flying, and Natalie shut her eyes. The darkness was welcome in her fight against the pounding headache as well. Ava’s words about staying awake echoed through her head – but sleep sounded so very lovely. She tried to fight it off, yet drifted in and out of sleep.

She had no idea how much time had passed since Ava had left, when someone shook her lightly once more.

“I told you to stay awake,” Ava scolded her quietly.

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Cecily and Mr. Cordell stood behind Ava, looking rather concerned. Natalie blinked several times and sat up. Her body felt like it had truly been through the ringer and her head felt only slightly than it had before she had fallen asleep.

“Hello sleepyhead,” said Cecily.

“Hi,” Natalie said softly. “What time is it?”

“Almost six. It took us a while to get out here and then we had to find Ava as well,” Cecily said. “The car is just five minutes away, so it’d be good if you could walk.”

Natalie nodded and with some help, she managed to stand. She ached in muscles she did not know she had.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?” asked Mr. Cordell.

Natalie felt through her body. Though in pain, nothing seemed to be broken.

“I don’t think so.”

The walk to the car took a bit over five minutes because Natalie could not keep up otherwise. Most of all, she felt like lying down and just continue sleep for a few days but she knew she could not so she trudged on. Ava looked worn as well. The sand dirtied her clothes and face, and Natalie suspected that she had been out walking for quite a while before finding civilization. She felt bad for making Ava find help on her own.

They reached the car. Mr. Cordell handed Natalie a bottle of water and a chocolate bar. Natalie emptied the bottle and ate the chocolate so quickly she hardly tasted it. She could not recall ever being so hungry.

They rode back home in quiet. Natalie rested her head on Ava’s lap, a large blanket covering them both. Natalie smiled at how Cecily seemed to enjoy mothering the two of them. Ava petted Natalie’s hair slowly, sleepily, appearing just as tired as Natalie. Then Natalie started drifting in and out of sleep once more, as they headed back towards Lake Sunflower.

“Where have you been? The school called and said they couldn’t find you!”

Natalie winced at the loud question. Richard stood before her, his hands up in the air and he looked angry. Of course, Natalie had never skipped class and been gone the rest of the afternoon before.

She had no idea how to answer his question. The truth? Richard would think that she was making fun of him. He would not believe her and why should he?

“Cecily got sick again,” Natalie answered. She kept her eyes on the floor, hoping that Richard would not notice how pale and dirty she looked, or see the lie in her eyes.

She could feel his gaze upon her. Then his posture relaxed a bit and his voice sounded a bit softer when he spoke again.

“Why didn’t you tell the school if she had to go to the hospital again?”

Natalie gave a very small shrug and lied. “She fainted. I asked if I could come with the ambulance when it came to get her. I didn’t really have the time to tell anyone.”

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She still could not meet his eye for more than a second at the time, fearing he would detect her lie if he did.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. His tone told her he did not quite believe her but was willing to let it go. “Just—call me the next time. I gave you the cell phone for a reason. I just want to know where you are and that you’re safe. You had me worried.”

Natalie smiled slightly and looked up, daring to meet his eyes for a moment. “Sorry.”

Richard surprised Natalie by pulling her into a brief hug. “Don’t worry me, okay?”

Natalie nodded. “Okay.”

Then she excused herself and sped up the stairs as quickly as she could make herself. Richard retreated to the living room, where Emmanuella waited.

Natalie closed the door behind her as she entered her room. The last three steps across the room felt awfully long but finally Natalie could sink down on her own bed. Without bothering to undress, she pulled the covers over herself. She took several long, deep breaths just taking in the fact that she had made it home. The questions and thoughts on the day could wait for tomorrow – then she and Cecily and Ava could try to figure out who Ramon, Chaos and who the ghost writer all were, and what connections they had to one another.

For now, however, Natalie felt perfectly content with simply sleeping, even though the clock downstairs only chimed seven.

The whole school whispered about Ava and Natalie the next morning. Apparently, Ava had been whisked off by an odd but good-looking fellow in a stretch limousine. The man had in fact been Natalie's old boyfriend from wherever-she-lived-before and so she was horribly jealous and a catfight between the two had only just been avoided.

When Natalie heard the absurd rumors, she laughed. Then again, she thought, reality could be called even more absurd.

Cecily, Ava and Natalie did not have any opportunity to talk freely all day. Even during lunch, students walked past, much closer than they usually did, throwing curious looks at Natalie and Ava. The boys seemed to be hoping for the alleged catfight to break out.

"Throw in some mud and those boys will be drooling all over themselves," Ava muttered with a shake of her head, making the other two fall into fits of giggles.

Being the center of the school's attention did not prove to be much fun, however. By the end of the school day, Natalie already felt heartily tired of the stares and whispers sent her way. How did the cheer leaders and the 'hunks' of the school do it? Though she signed most of them off as stupid carbon copies of real people, she had to admit a sliver of respect for them, for putting up with everyone's gawking. Then again, they probably thrived on it.

The three walked home once the school day ended.

"Don't worry," Cecily said, "they'll have forgotten all about it by next week."

"Yes, but I'm tired of it this week," Natalie said.

"You're whining," Ava said. "It's not attractive."

Natalie stuck her tongue out and Cecily chuckled.

An air of happiness surrounded them – despite having to be picked up somewhere in the desert, Natalie still felt proud that she had managed to get herself and Ava out of the situation with Ramon. She would probably not be as lucky the next time – and she did not doubt that there would be a next time – so she took the time to enjoy the delight she felt. Ava in turn seemed to be glad to be friends once more, though she did not mention their fight.

Cecily seemed as serene as ever. Natalie had, despite her exhaustion the day before, noted with some worry that Cecily looked sicker again. Running around in the desert looking for lost friends had probably not been the best way to spend a Monday evening for Cecily.

Mr. Cordell was still at work when the trio reached the Cordell home so they seated themselves in the kitchen rather than Cecily's room. Cecily played the good hostess and set the table with toast, cheese and chocolate milk to drink.

"So what happened?"

Cecily asked the question while sipping on her chocolate milk, looking between Natalie and Ava.

Ava looked at Natalie for a moment, then turned to Cecily. "I can give you the start but really, I don't get what she did."

Cecily chuckled. "I'm sure she doesn't either."

Natalie shook her head. "I really, really don't."

Ava cleared her thought and said gravely, “Once upon a time—”

Cecily giggled. “Oh, so it’s story time?”

“Well, it would have been if you hadn’t interrupted me,” Ava said. “Really, the start isn’t that interesting. I was walking towards the school building and out of nowhere, this man appears. He looked odd – black hair, robes, the mad glint in his eyes – so I stopped. He asked me about you, but really, he looked like he already knew that I knew you. Then he grabbed me and I screamed but no one did anything. Then you came running like a madwoman, around the corner and yelled for me to catch something. The guy smiled and when I’d caught it, there was a light and all of a sudden, we weren’t at the school anymore.

“The guy bound my wrists and ankles – I fought him and he cut me with his knife – and when he was done, he told me that I should sit down and that now we just had to wait.”

Ava sighed softly. “I’ve never been so scared in my life and if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll kill you.”

Natalie smiled slightly. “I was just as scared when I got there.”

Ava looked at her. “Which begs the question, how *did* you get there? I assume it was something magic-y?”

Natalie chuckled but then looked to Cecily. “I don’t know what happened. I just wished I was there and suddenly I was.”

Cecily shook her head at her, amused. “It’s called transportation magic. The tracking stone makes it much easier – you must have figured out as much, Natalie – otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to get away. It can be done with most stones, but the tracking stones, and other stones to do with traveling, are the easiest.”

Ava and Natalie both gaped at her.

“That’s what the guy did with me?” asked Ava and Cecily nodded.

“Transportation can be a very power-consuming form of magic, especially with another person. I think only Master Wielders use it with their regular power stones,” Cecily said. “And since many of the Master Wielders are loners, few feel the urge to move all that quickly from one place to another.”

“Then Ramon is powerful,” Natalie said. A light sigh and she added, “I figured as much after yesterday.”

“He is most likely a Master Wielder,” Cecily said.

Natalie nodded. “We were in his Mithridates yesterday, so I’m guessing he is.”

It was Cecily’s turn to gape. “You were at *his* Mithridates and you still managed to get away? How?”

Natalie made a face and had to smile. “Pure luck, I say. I managed to do some magic and he was taken by surprise.”

With some pride, she relayed the story of how she and Ava had managed to get away from Ramon. Cecily listened with large eyes and a mouth that kept falling open as she was stunned several times throughout the story.

“Natalie, I don’t think you realize how lucky you must have been to be able to get away like that,” Cecily said. “To get away from a Mithridates’ Stone of Sitis set on keeping you – it’s amazing – and then to actually be able to use the tracking stone backwards—”

Her eyes filled with awe as she looked at Natalie. Natalie blushed.

“It wasn’t *that* big a deal,” she said, studying her now empty plate.

“Yes, not that big,” Ava said, butting in without pardon, “and let’s not forget about me, who trekked through the desert to find a gas station that could tell me where I was. They looked at me kind of funny.”

Natalie felt glad for Ava’s interruption. Cecily’s stare had been a bit too intense. She chuckled and patted Ava’s arm.

“You did very good. By that time, I wasn’t much help at all.”

“Definitely not,” Ava said but her voice held no malice.

“Natalie, I’m sorry,” Cecily said, “but I need you to listen.”

“What?” asked Natalie. A slight annoyance built – she had been lucky to get away from Ramon but it had not been anything more than that. She had not saved the world or anything – she had not even hurt Ramon in any way or made it impossible for him to try another stunt like yesterday’s again. She had done nothing but get away.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Cecily said softly. “Ramon’s Mithridates is the place where his magic is stronger than anywhere else in the world. You should hardly have been able to do magic there – let alone use the magic inherit in the Stone of Sitis, in the Mithridates itself, for yourself.”

“Cec’, just drop it,” Natalie sighed. “I was lucky.”

“But you don’t understand,” Cecily said. “It should have been completely impossible!”

“Well, it wasn’t,” Natalie snapped. “It worked. We got out of there.”

Cecily fell silent at Natalie’s harsh tone. The hurt look on her face made Natalie feel bad immediately and she sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just— I’m still tired from yesterday and the fact stands: we did get out. Whether or not it’s impossible.”

Cecily did not meet her gaze, just said quietly, “Of course.”

Natalie did not appreciate the idea of starting a fight with Cecily as soon as the one with Ava was over but she did not know how to make it right at the moment. Cecily felt hurt and a quick apology would not be enough.

Silence spread and the uncomfortable tension spread between Cecily and Natalie, while Ava watched uncertainly. Natalie did not know what to do – she suddenly realized that she did not know Cecily all that well after all, for she had no idea what she would need to make the sudden strain between them go away.

Natalie stood up. “Thanks for the food. I need to be getting home.”

Ava appeared uncertain. She obviously felt the tension but did not know if she should leave as well or not. In the end, she opted to stay seated.

Cecily nodded silently to Natalie. “You’re welcome.”

Natalie grabbed her bag and headed towards the door. As she did, she concentrated briefly on an image of a more healthy Cecily. She ran her hand past her necklace, which glowed faintly, and then she sent the tiny ball of healing magic she had created towards Cecily. Cecily did not notice; she watched the glass before her with great interest. The light glowed around her for so brief a time that if Cecily blinked, she would have missed it.

Ava had not missed it, instead she sat gaping at Natalie. She did not say anything, however, and Natalie knew she would not believe the magic she just done to Cecily had been anything but good.

Natalie said, "See you tomorrow."

Ava's gape became a half-smile. "See you."

Ava called later that evening, as Natalie put away the dishes. Drying off her hands, she took the phone from Emmanuella, who looked disdainfully at the phone as though she wondered who would ever get the silly idea to call Natalie.

"What did you do?"

Ava's words came with no preamble.

"What?" asked Natalie, playing dumb.

"You know," Ava said and Natalie could almost hear the accompanying eye roll, "to Cecily. All of a sudden, she got some color on those pale cheeks of hers."

Natalie headed upstairs, away from prying uncle and aunt ears. She doubted Emmanuella would get the idea to listen in on her phone conversations, but she did not want Richard to overhear anything. He probably already suspected something and that something did not need fuel.

Once upstairs, Natalie closed the door behind her and made herself comfortable on her bed.

"I did some healing magic," Natalie said.

"So she's well now?"

Natalie sighed. "No, it's just temporary. I'm not strong enough to heal her permanently, or even for a very long time. The last time, it lasted for a few hours."

"The last time?"

Natalie told her of the time she had healed Cecily, though she had not known what she had been doing at the time. It felt good that her magic control was improving. The magic she performed on Cecily today had been completely hers – her idea, her doing. She smiled to herself.

"You guys are way ahead of me in this," Ava said. "I don't get half of it and the half I think I get, I can't keep straight anyway."

Natalie chuckled. "You'll get it. At least you only have to learn the theories – I have to learn to actually do it."

"I would have liked to," Ava said, her voice becoming a bit dreamy. "Could you imagine – when Chase and the others start picking on me again, I'd simply transform them into rats or pigs or something equally fitting."

Natalie chuckled. “I don’t think it’d be good to go that far. I mean, how would you explain it?”

“Oh, all right,” Ava said. “I’d make them ugly. Butt-ugly. You know, pimples and discolored hair and cellulites – it’d horrify them even worse than being turned into animals.”

Natalie laughed. “I think my grandmother would frown upon using magic that way.”

“If you can’t have fun, what is magic good for?” Ava asked. Her voice held both a light note and a deeper one, truly asking Natalie what magic was good for.

Natalie became more serious. “I get it if you don’t see the good in it. You’ve only seen the bad so far – but it is wonderful, I promise. It’s—beautiful. It’s light and colors and shapes that form into something more – something that is part of you and yet beyond you.”

“It sounds like a good ruse,” Ava said softly.

“It’s more than that, it’s chaos in control—”

Natalie stopped suddenly. Memories washed over her like a tidal wave. Ramon’s voice echoed through Natalie’s mind, word by word, one by one. Was it so easy?

“Killing young Winters here, you see – it would raise her.”

“Her. Chaos.”

Was that it?

Had Chaos been what she had felt – and what Ramon wanted to raise? Was it that simple? That horrible? Natalie could not imagine how anyone could raise that power but she did not think anything good could come out of it if possible. Complete darkness and evil – all the opposites of what Natalie believed magic to be. A never-ending black power.

It had not been the crazy talk of a madman.

Chaos was not just a word for something else and it did not solely exist in Ramon’s mind.

It should be taken at face value.

Chaos was that thing that Natalie had felt the beginnings of in Ramon’s Mithridates, as she stood in the middle of the surge of magic she had pulled out. Chaos was the dangerous, and yet alluring, force that she imagined she could live in forever. Blindingly strong, and dark and completely untamed.

Chaos meant magic at its darkest, mightiest power – and Ramon planned on releasing it.

14.

Several hours later, Natalie twisted and turned in her bed. She could not sleep after the sudden realization.

Ava had not understood much of what she had said and Natalie did not blame her. For one, Ava did not quite understand the concept of magic existing yet. Unlike Natalie, she had never done it herself – she had never drawn magic out of her own body and soul, and the ground and everything around her. She had not been even close to that feeling of wanting to let go in the midst of the blinding power she wielded.

Natalie had.

She tried to tell herself that she had gotten it wrong, that the idea was both silly and impossible – but she could not. In her heart, she knew she was right. The Chaos Ramon had referred to was the chaos Natalie had felt at his Mithridates.

It still brought the question why Natalie's death would result in Chaos' rising but that was something to be answered later. First, Natalie had to figure out a way to stop Chaos from rising at all, meaning figuring out a way to stay alive and well ahead of Ramon. However, with two best friends who could not wield magic, it would not be problematic for Ramon to simply kidnap one of them again. In fact, Ramon could probably just kidnap her if he really wanted to. Natalie would not be as lucky as she had been the first time – he had far more power than her.

Finally, Natalie turned her light on, grabbed a pen and paper, and began writing everything down. She had to stop several times to figure out a way to make it coherent. During one of these stops, she zoned out enough for the ghost writer to take control.

'You are troubled.'

Natalie's heart skipped a beat. The ghost writer was back! She did not know whether to be happy or worried about this – or perhaps she ought to feel annoyed, because the ghost writer would simply give her new cryptic messages.

'What did you mean by 'double'?''

Natalie could almost hear the chuckle in the answer.

'Now, now, calm down.'

Natalie took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. It did not work.

The ghost writer wrote another sentence: *'What is the matter tonight?'*

Natalie bit her lip. How could she say what was on her mind in a short, understandable sentence? She re-read what she had already written – despite her efforts, the words still did not make much sense.

In the end, she wrote, *'What do you know about Chaos?'*

It took a little longer before the ghost writer answered, perhaps because Natalie felt so tense she could not relax her body, or perhaps because it the question was one the ghost writer did not want to answer. Natalie did not know which one – unlike with real people, she did not have the chance to look at and read the other person in this case.

'It is the most potent magic there is. It is raw power.'

Despite her conviction that she had been right, Natalie still had to gasp. Thinking it had been one thing but reading it, being told of it by someone else, was quite another.

'Can it be raised?'

This time, the answer did not take long. *Yes.*

Natalie swallowed. It would have been so nice if the answer had been no.

'How?'

It took almost a minute before the answer came. By then, Natalie had started to wonder if the ghost writer had once again abandoned her.

'The way that comes to mind is a ritual that needs a strong host, a blood sacrifice and a special ritual.'

Natalie shuddered. Blood sacrifice – that did not sound pleasant at all. But a host, Natalie thought. Who would be a host? Who would willingly take in that kind of magic?

The answer was simple: a lot of people. Natalie did not doubt that there were many who would willingly let their bodies be taken over by the strongest force on the planet. Ramon would not have a hard time finding someone who would do it, though it might be harder for him to find a strong one.

Perhaps he intended to be the host himself. It would not surprise Natalie – he struck her as the power-hungry type.

Natalie wrote, *'Has Chaos been raised before?'*

This time, Natalie did not get an answer. She stared at the piece of paper before her for several long minutes as her eyelids started to droop but there was nothing. Finally, Natalie turned off the light and she fell asleep before she had the time to put away the paper and pen.

When morning came, Natalie felt horribly tired. She could barely keep her eyes open as she walked to school.

Ava whistled when she saw her. "You look like hell."

Natalie rolled her eyes and wished for the day to be over. "Thanks."

"I'm guessing the new look has something to do with you pretty much hanging up on me yesterday?" Ava asked. "I'm getting kind of used to that. Do you always do that?"

Natalie blushed. She had forgotten that she had done it back on her birthday as well.

"No," she said. "Not really."

"Oh, so it's just me then?" Ava asked, pretending to be offended.

"Yes, it's just you." She rolled her eyes. "I realized something when I was talking to you and then I couldn't stop thinking about it."

"And what was that?"

"I think I know what Ramon is looking to raise by spilling my blood – and I don't think it's for the good of human kind."

Ava made a face. "He doesn't strike me as the good-of-human-kind type of person. So what is it?"

Natalie did not know how to explain it well to someone who knew even less about magic than herself. Finally, she said, "It's magic. The rawest, purest and most powerful form there is."

Ava looked confused, as Natalie had expected. “But how do you *raise* magic – I’ve seen you *do* magic, is that the same thing?”

“I don’t know!” Natalie said, frustrated. “I just— I know it’s what he’s going to do but I don’t understand it. Apparently, it needs a host and a blood sacrifice—”

“How do you know that?” Ava interrupted her. “I thought you figured this out on your own?”

The bell rang and Natalie did not know whether to be relieved or annoyed.

“I did, sort of,” she said. “It’s complicated and weird – but I promise I’ll tell you when we have more time – okay?”

Ava did not look happy with her answer but nodded. “Fine. I’ll see you in math.”

The hours passed slowly enough for Natalie to wonder if someone had poured super glue onto the clock. She slept through her classes – even math because Cecily would not look at her more than just briefly. Still polite as ever, but Cecily was obviously unhappy – and Natalie thought it easier to sleep than to try to solve it. Mrs. Miller seemed happy enough that the three did not chat all the way through class.

Tired thoughts lingered in her mind. Had Chaos been raised before? What would the ghost writer – who seemed to know a lot about magic – have answered? It seemed likely that, given the knowledge of the existence of Chaos and the possibility to raise it, it had been done. She imagined that power-hungry Wielders existed and Natalie did not know enough about magic to completely rule out the possibility.

Chaos.

Such a fitting name for it – Natalie imagined it could wreck true havoc.

At lunch, Cecily had vanished into thin air. Natalie did not worry too much about it – if she had been angry with someone, she would not have wanted to sit around and eat lunch with them either. She and Ava ate the contents of their lunch boxes in relative silence. Natalie watched the surrounding students lazily and Ava watched her curiously.

“What?” Natalie asked.

“You’re off in space somewhere.”

Natalie sighed but did not say anything. It was true – her sleepiness combined with the jumbled thoughts made her drift off again and again no matter how she tried to concentrate.

“Are you going to tell me how you found out more about that pure-and-oh-so-powerful magic?”

Natalie frowned. “After school’s out. My place?”

Ava agreed to this and Natalie merely hoped she could stay awake for long enough. Watching her sleep would not be helpful for Ava.

Cecily did not show up in art when Natalie got there later that afternoon. Natalie tried to sign it off to her feeling a bit worse for wear and leaving, as she sometimes did. Mr. Cordell had come to the school to pick her up several times in the last three weeks, when Cecily had felt too tired or sick to stay. Natalie tried not to worry – she would be back tomorrow – but a small ball of anxiousness settled in the pit of her stomach, no matter how she tried to stop it.

Ava and Natalie walked home, to a quiet house. Richard and Emmanuella had not yet come home from their respective jobs.

“Nice place,” Ava said.

Natalie shrugged. She thought neither here nor there about their new house. It did not quite feel like home yet. She was not entirely sure it ever would.

Natalie's thrashing during the night had left her bed a mess, and she made a quick attempt at making it look better. She picked up the paper she had been writing on and skimmed through her notes. Most were intelligible but she still understood what she meant with 'Chaos' written in large letters and around it, words like 'Ramon', 'Cecily/Ava kidnapped' and 'raising' were written. Below that, she had written the conversation with the ghost writer.

"You haven't thought about putting a poster or something on the walls?" Ava asked, looking around. "It's kind of bare."

"I haven't had time, between moving here and being kidnapped and learning about magic and all."

Ava chuckled. "You need to prioritize."

"Yeah, that's how I solve this Ramon-problem," Natalie said with a smile and roll of her eyes, "I prioritize him away."

Natalie handed Ava the piece of paper. Ava read it and frowned.

"Is this supposed to mean anything?" she asked. "And what's this, a conversation with yourself?"

Natalie dropped down on her bed. "No. Do you promise you won't freak again if I tell you?"

Ava glanced at her, an odd expression in her eyes. Then she shrugged and said, "I'll try my best not to."

"Good enough, I suppose," sighed Natalie. She took a deep breath – how was she supposed to explain this? It had been hard enough to tell Cecily, who had already known more about magic than Natalie to start with. "Sometimes, a ghost or something takes over my arm and writes things."

Ava stared at her. A nervous giggle escaped but then she was silent. When a full minute of silence, during which Ava alternated between staring at the paper and at Natalie, Natalie asked,

"Ava?"

Ava shook her head. "Yes, right, sorry. *Ghost?*"

She did not sound as though she believed it.

"I think so, yes," Natalie said. "Something takes control of my hand and writes these things when I zone out."

"Right. You get it if this is a bit—much, even when I've seen magic? I mean ghosts – that's a whole different thing."

Natalie supposed it was. She had not given that part much thought – with everything else, the idea of ghosts existing had not been much of a concern. She did not even know if it was a ghost – she had been convinced that Ramon had been behind it, but now she thought it could be pretty much anything. However, telling Ava that it could be anything would have been an even wider concept to present to Ava and as such, she had chosen to go with the ghost theory. After all, she did think of the writer as 'the ghost writer'.

Finally, Ava said, "Fine. If magic exists, then I suppose ghosts can exist too. Perhaps. Maybe. But that still doesn't explain why this one is telling you about – Chaos, is it?"

She read through the notes on the paper.

“Yes, Chaos,” Natalie said. “I don’t know why it knows anything about it. It just does and I’m glad, because that means I can find out more about it.”

“And you’re sure it’s not just some bad guy feeding you bad information?”

Natalie shrugged and sighed. “I don’t know. I hope not. I thought it might be Ramon but I’m don’t think it is anymore. This person is too helpful. He’s just—evil.”

Ava shook her head suddenly. “This is just too much,” she said. “Ghosts and magic and teleportation and healing and—I think I’m going insane. Perhaps I’m in an asylum just imagining all this and the doctors are pumping my body full of meds.”

Natalie gave her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Ava said. “It’s not your fault. Well, you told me so that’s your fault, but it’s existence, if it exists, isn’t really your fault and if I’m simply going mad, then that’s no ones fault but my own.”

At this, Natalie had to chuckle. “I suppose it isn’t.”

Ava smiled at her. “I am glad I became friends with you, Bathroom Girl.”

“Ditto. And just so you know, I’d just had my first ghost writer experience when I met you in the bathroom. I freaked out completely.”

“It’s good to know that even the mighty Wielder gets freaked out.”

“I wasn’t a Wielder back then,” Natalie said. “That was when this whole mess started, on my birthday.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “That’s some timing, to start on your birthday of all days.”

Natalie frowned suddenly – she had not thought of this. It *was* odd that it had all started then, on the day she turned fifteen. In the span of that one day, she had had the first ghost lines written, she had received her mother’s necklace – which had soon been stolen by Ramon – and she had gotten the letter from her grandmother. Was there a reason it had all happened on her birthday?

“It is weird,” she said, looking up at Ava as though she had the answers.

The phone’s shrill ringing interrupted their thoughts. Natalie grabbed the phone. Her thoughts still lingering on her birthday and everything that had happened, Natalie picked up the phone.

When she hung up, her face was ashen white and all thoughts of the last few weeks had gone out the window. Her hand shook as she placed the phone back on the desk.

“What is it?” asked Ava worriedly. “Who was that?”

Natalie swallowed. “That was Mr. Cordell, Cecily’s dad. Cecily is in the hospital again.”

“Oh no,” Ava said. “Is it bad?”

Natalie nodded slowly and her own voice suddenly felt very foreign, thick with tears and sadness. “Her dad says she fainted when they were at home – and now she won’t wake up.”

15.

The hospital smelled of antiseptics and illness. It made bile rise in Natalie's throat and she fought the urge to puke. Ava walked white-faced next to her, not looking any better.

"Natalie," Mr. Cordell said, appearing before them. "Miss Simonsen."

"Hi," said Ava. Natalie merely nodded.

"How is she?" asked Natalie.

"We can't make contact with her," Mr. Cordell said. It felt strange, to see a man like Mr. Cordell on the verge of tears. He did not seem the type to cry. He looked at Natalie. "She's been saying your name."

"My name?"

Natalie did not see the sense in that – she had hurt Cecily. Why would Cecily be asking for her of all people? Perhaps her subconscious did not remember her hurtful words. Still, it would make more sense for Cecily to be asking for her father, or a friend from Los Angeles – not Natalie, whom she had known for only a few weeks.

Mr. Cordell led them down the hall. They were not in the emergency room this time, but in a ward on the second floor of the Lake Sunflower Hospital. Natalie assumed the walls had been painted in their light green color to soothe visitors, but it did nothing of the kind for her. Mr. Cordell's tense posture had her fully aware that it was serious. Cecily would not simply walk out of the hospital this time.

Cecily's skin color matched the sheets she rested upon. A tube ran just below her nose and she had several lines in her arms and hands. There were monitors around her, one checking her pulse and blood pressure. Natalie barely registered them. She did not have to look at Mr. Cordell's quiet tears to know that Cecily was dying before their eyes.

"Cecily," mumbled Ava and knelt at her side. As carefully as though she was made out of glass, she took one of Cecily's hands in her own. She bent her head and squeezed her eyes shut, tightly, to keep the tears away.

Cecily moved briefly, her face contorted in pain. Ava let go, afraid she had hurt her. An impossibly tiny whisper escaped Cecily. Only because the occupants of the room stood completely silent could they make out the words.

"Natalie... help me."

Mr. Cordell made a choked noise. "The doctors – they have her on pain killers but because they don't know what's wrong with her— they can't do anything. They've tried it all!"

Natalie stared at Cecily's still form. Her hair had been pulled away from her face, tied in a loose braid, to avoid being in the way if the doctors had to do some procedure. She did not have an ounce of color in her cheeks.

"I'll—I'll leave you for a moment," Mr. Cordell said. His voice sounded rough and his face showed his obvious agony. He turned around quietly and left the room. The door closed softly behind him, leaving the room silent save for the steadily beeping pulse machine.

Natalie's heart ached – she did not want to see Cecily this way. Yet she could not take her eyes off the other girl. Slowly, Natalie stepped towards Cecily. Ava looked at her with wide eyes.

“Natalie—your necklace,” whispered Ava. Natalie did not take any notice.

She felt as though Cecily called to her, a whisper singing through the room, only meant for Natalie’s ears. A cry for help that Natalie had to answer, desperate in its quietness.

“Cecily,” said Natalie softly, calling to her.

A part of her felt certain that Cecily would be able to hear her and take solace in her voice. Perhaps it could even guide her back from the brink she was standing on – the brink of death.

Everything else began to fade away. Ava’s voice grew weaker in Natalie’s ears until silence had replaced it. The beeping of the machine to Cecily’s left also faded until Natalie could focus solely on Cecily. It felt like she floated through a dream and she neither could nor wanted to break out. She reached out a hand automatically to touch Cecily. Her own hand appeared tan next to Cecily’s white one – and then Natalie made contact.

Suddenly, Natalie fell, down, down, down.

The hospital disappeared completely around her and a white mist replaced it. Natalie could barely see her own hand in front of her but her mind did not focus that as she plummeted – it was on the fact that she had nowhere to place her feet. She could not tell if she tumbled or not – everything around her looked the same shade of white.

Then, in an instant, darkness replaced the white. Solid black surrounded her. Natalie noted that she at least felt as though she stood on something, though she could not be sure.

“Hello?” she said. It did not echo – the word died as soon as it had left her lips.

Where was she? How did she get here? Natalie had only touched Cecily and then this had happened – but why?

No one answered her call. She did not know whether that was a good thing or not.

“Cecily?” Natalie said, this time a bit louder. “Ava?”

Her eyes seemed to be getting used to the dark, for at least now she could make out her hands in the blackness. She was dressed as she had been a moment before, when she had been in reality. She felt fairly certain that wherever this was, it was not reality. Then again, ‘reality’ could be considered a relative concept.

Natalie shrugged the thoughts of – she did not have time for philosophy right now.

She started walking, having no other option. She supposed she could simply stay standing where she had landed but she liked the idea of action better, even though she did not know where she headed in the darkness. She tried to walk in a straight line, as she did not want to be walking in circles.

Suddenly, she heard sobbing and stopped mid-step.

“Hello?” she said.

No response came this time either. Natalie started walking again, trying to decide where the sound had come from. She heard another sob and she sped up her steps until she ran – the sound seemed to come from straight ahead.

A tiny figure appeared in the distance – one easy to spot when everything was compact black and the figure was not.

“Hey!” said Natalie and ran faster.

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A few moments later – Natalie had no idea if time passed in this strange place – she could make out the form more clearly. A child – a young girl with dark hair and pale skin. She could not be more than four years old. Her face was buried in her hands.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Natalie asked, coming closer.

The child looked up and Natalie gasped. It could not be anyone but—

“Cecily?”

The girl’s eyes were tear filled and she wiped quickly at them. “How do you know my name?”

Natalie tried not to let the shock show on her face. The clearly upset child did not need Natalie staring at her as though she was a freak. Natalie glanced around, wondering again where she had come to. She had a feeling she knew. With all the other strange things that had been going on in her life, it seemed entirely possible.

“I’m your friend,” Natalie said. “Do you mind if I sit down?”

The girl looked around. “I’m waiting for my mommy.”

Natalie’s heart broke at the child’s words. Cecily at four years old looked so sweet and innocent that she just wanted to scoop her up into her arms and protect her from everything bad in the world.

“Can I wait with you?” Natalie asked.

The child bit her lip and nodded, looking uncertainly at Natalie.

Natalie sat down. She stayed an arm length from the child despite wanting to hold her much closer.

They sat in silence together. Natalie studied Cecily’s young form, smiling slightly. She had been an adorable little girl. Cecily studied Natalie back, pale tears making their way down her cheeks from wise eyes.

When a light suddenly appeared behind Natalie, both the child and Natalie noticed immediately. It was hard to do anything but, with everything else still pitch black.

“Mommy!” cried the small child and stood up and began running towards the light.

The light in the distance was tall and had the shape of a woman but there was something more, surrounding her. Unlike Natalie and Cecily, the female form emitted a warm glow, so bright Natalie could not make out the face or features, but merely the shape of her body.

The child threw herself in the arms of the light form and they disappeared, as suddenly as the female form had appeared. Natalie sat, alone once more.

When she blinked again, her surroundings had changed. The darkness had gone, replaced by a room that obviously belonged to a girl. It reminded her of Cecily’s room and Natalie could only suppose that this was what Cecily’s room had looked like in the house she had lived in before. Everything here felt light and warm – yellow walls and a big window – in stark contrast to the previous dream.

“What are you doing here?”

Cecily’s voice sounded more like the one Natalie was used to this time. She looked perhaps ten years old. Clad in a pajama and covered with a blanket, she sat in her bed, still looking very small. Her hair had been long even back then, falling down her shoulders and pooling on the bed sheets.

“I don’t know, actually,” said Natalie. “Perhaps you can tell me?”

“You can’t help me,” Cecily said. She shook her head. “No one can.”

Natalie frowned and stepped closer to the bed. “Help you with what?”

Cecily looked up at her, her expression frank. “I’m going to die.”

“No,” said Natalie, shaking her head. “I won’t let that happen.”

“There is nothing you can do to stop it,” Cecily said softly. “I’m not like you.”

Natalie was confused. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry I’ll leave you,” Cecily said. “I don’t want to, but I have to.”

“Don’t!” cried Natalie. “Don’t say that. Don’t give up – fight!”

Cecily shook her head. She lay back against the pillow and closed her eyes. She looked serene. The light fell on her face, making her skin glow and making her look other-worldly.

“There is nothing you can do,” Cecily said and then she stopped breathing, going limp on the bed.

“No!” Natalie exclaimed, taking a step towards her. The ground gave out below her and the room disappeared, replaced by the building that made out Lake Sunflower High School.

Cecily stood looking at the building. She looked like herself now, dressed in a white, simple but flowing dress and her hair braided.

“Who are you?” she asked, looking at Natalie.

They were alone; the school was deserted.

“I’m Natalie. You know me,” Natalie said.

Cecily shook her head. “I don’t.”

“You will,” Natalie said.

Cecily gazed on something beyond Natalie. “He is bad, but it’s not him.”

Natalie turned around. There was no one there; the grass field was empty.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

Cecily focused on Natalie again. “You need to break him out. He needs your help.”

Natalie stared at Cecily. This dream kept getting stranger. What was Cecily talking about? Natalie started to wonder if she would ever get out of here – or would she simply stay, jumping from dream to dream of Cecily’s until Cecily— no, she refused to think that.

“I don’t understand,” Natalie said.

“You will,” Cecily said, smiling slightly as she used Natalie’s words.

Then she turned around and walked in the other direction. Pitch black darkness replaced the school and the grass and the street even as Natalie yelled for Cecily to stop. She did not.

“Great,” mumbled Natalie to herself as she stood in the darkness on her own again.

Was she doomed to be doing this over and over again? Was there actually a point to why she was here? Was Cecily trying to tell her something? Natalie looked down, noting for the first time since falling into this dream that did not have her necklace. Why? She had all the rest of her clothes. Of

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course she would be missing the most crucial part of her attire, the one thing that might allow her to leave.

“There you are, I’ve been looking for you.”

Natalie turned around and found Cecily standing behind her. She was clad in a floor length white gown and she was glowing as the female figure she had run to as a child had.

“You know who I am?” asked Natalie.

Cecily smiled slightly. “Of course I do. You’re my friend.”

“I am,” Natalie said.

Cecily looked pained. “I’m sorry I won’t be there.”

Natalie frowned at her. “Won’t be where?”

“I would if I could. I would change things if I could,” Cecily said. “But I can’t. They won’t let me.”

“Who won’t let you? Change what? Cecily, please, I don’t understand,” Natalie said, feeling helpless and on the verge to irritation at Cecily’s vague hints.

“You’re my reason,” Cecily said.

“Reason? What are you talking about?” Natalie swallowed and she met Cecily’s soft gaze. “Are you going to die?”

Cecily smiled, a pain-filled smile. “Everyone does, sooner or later.”

Natalie shook her head. “No, I won’t let you! You’re not going to leave me! I’ll find a way! I’ll make things right – tell me what to do, tell me! Please!”

She reached out and grabbed Cecily’s hand in her own. The moment she did, blinding, white-hot light surrounded them. Natalie’s eyes stayed trained on Cecily, nothing but Cecily, even as her eyes watered and she wanted nothing but to close them. A roaring wind built around them, deafening. Power unlike anything else ran through Natalie’s body—

—and then she slammed, hard, back into reality.

16.

“Natalie!”

The scream echoed through her mind. Natalie could not be sure to whom the voice belonged – Cecily or someone else. She existed in a void, floating between Cecily’s dream and reality, both worlds blurred white.

When she came to, she found herself kneeling before Cecily, her fingers tightly wrapped around Cecily’s. The world slowly returned to her and the images of people rushing past in the corridor outside and the sounds of cars driving on the street below began to penetrate her senses once more.

“Natalie?”

This time Natalie could tell who had said her name. She stood and looked to the other side of the room where Ava lay in a heap on the floor. Various medical equipment lay spread around her.

“What are you doing on the floor?” asked Natalie, still feeling out of sorts.

Ava stared at her. “You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“You reached for Cecily – and then there was a—well, explosion, really,” Ava said. “You both *glowed*. There was a light and—I got thrown back into the wall by the sheer force of it.”

“Are you okay?”

Ava nodded and stood, albeit a bit shakily. “It just knocked the wind out of me.”

Natalie glanced at Cecily. The dream replayed in her mind, though it felt nothing like a dream to her. “How long was I out?”

Ava sent her a confused look. “What do you mean ‘out’? You just reached for her and then there was the light.”

Natalie frowned at Ava. She did not see any reason for Ava to lie and it could be true – dreams did not operate under the timeline the real world did. A dream could be a second long, or much more.

“What happened?” asked Ava, glancing curiously at Natalie.

How Ava would handle the truth? “I think I was in her dream.”

Ava gaped at her but before she had time to reply, nurses rushed into the room. Only then did Natalie realize that the machine that had been beeping out Cecily’s pulse had gone silent. The monitor was black.

Her heart stopped – had she just killed Cecily?

“Insanity,” muttered one of the nurses. “Every electrical device in the hospital stops working at the same moment – and the electrician says there’s no problem.”

“There was a light,” said another nurse to the first one. “I wasn’t the only one who saw it.”

“A light!” sneered the first nurse. “I have never heard anything so silly.”

Ava and Natalie stood back, allowing them to work. Natalie's eyes were wide as saucers – had the white light taken Cecily's life, was that why she had been expelled from her dream?

She wanted to cry out in relief when the nurse turned the pulse machine on again and the beeping sound filled the room. She did not – just a moment later, Mr. Cordell came rushing back in. He looked even older now than when he left.

“Is she—” he asked.

“She's doing just fine, sir,” said the first nurse. “Just some problems with the machines.”

The two nurses left, obviously having other patients to tend to. If it was as they said, that every piece of electrical equipment had stopped working, they probably had some work to do. Natalie felt a rush of color to her cheeks – what had she done?

Mr. Cordell's eyes rested upon Natalie. “What happened?”

Unlike with Ava, Natalie did not know what to tell Cecily's father. She had no idea how much he knew, although she suspected that he knew quite a bit. Cecily was too close to her father for him not to know anything. Still, Natalie did not know what to say.

“I'm sorry, sir,” she said finally. She did not know what she apologized for – that she had hurt Cecily with her words? Was it that she could probably have killed Cecily with whatever the white light had done? Was it that she could not help Cecily?

All of the above, Natalie decided. She felt sorry for everything. She wished she could help Cecily but her silly healing magic, which had made Cecily well for an afternoon, would hardly wake her from a coma. She wished it would but she knew otherwise.

Mr. Cordell gazed at her softly. “I know.”

Why could magic not heal Cecily? Natalie wanted to scream. Then suddenly, she thought – why not? She had to try. She just needed—

Natalie ran. Out of the room, out of the hospital, as quickly as her legs could carry her. It was a different thing, running in the real world than in the black nothingness of a friend's dream. Her pulse raced and pounded in her ears, her legs became heavy and down her cheeks streamed tears. She did not stop. She forced herself to continue on – she did not deserve to feel good when her friend was dying.

When she finally did stop, she stood in the middle of a green field. Lake Sunflower High's football field. When the tears began to wane and her sight became less blurred, she saw the goal posts and bleachers around. How did she get there?

She needed to help Cecily. She had told her in her dream that she would not let Cecily die and she would not. Not without a fight – she had not fought yet. There had to be something she could do, some way to save her. What good was magic if it could not save what mattered the most?

She needed something *more* – something bigger than what she could do by herself.

She thought of Ramon. He wanted to raise Chaos, wake her from a long sleep. A blood ritual where he needed Natalie's blood – and if it could wake Chaos, why should it not be able to wake Cecily with the same? Perhaps even heal her?

Ramon, Natalie thought. Ramon knew.

She needed to find him.

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She allowed the power that had already started to flow in her veins to prosper and grow. It fed on her feelings – her worry for Cecily, her fear for Cecily’s life, but also on her love for both Ava and Cecily. The good and the bad mixed with the wish to find Ramon. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks.

The skies drew together, dark clouds drawing in to cover the blue skies.

“Natalie!”

Ava stood at the end of the football field, her curly red hair wild in the sudden wind.

“Go back!” yelled Natalie. “This is not your battle!”

Ava began to run towards her, not listening.

A lightning bolt cracked the sky, deafening thunder following.

“Natalie, don’t do it!” Ava said. “You’re upset and you can’t possibly fight him that way! Please, Natalie!”

“What other way is there?” asked Natalie. She felt strangely calm – a part of her knew this was what was meant to happen. In a moment, she would be on her way towards Ramon, wherever he awaited her. This time, he would not be stronger than her. This time they were enemies on the same level. She had learned, she had power now.

“Natalie, no!” yelled Ava.

“Go back to Cecily,” Natalie said.

The power closed around and inside of her. The wind picked up even more, making it hard for Ava to reach Natalie.

Natalie reached her hand to the skies, her mind screaming for the magic to find Ramon and bring her to him and then, as another lightning bolt split the sky, the air swept her off her feet and she disappeared from the football field in a rush of colors and shapes.

Natalie landed a moment later, impossibly far from the football field. She looked around, recognizing Ramon’s Mithridates. It did not surprise her – where else would he be? She doubted Ramon to be the type to own a bachelor pad and go shopping at the local mall.

Only then did Natalie realize that she had a passenger with her.

A white-faced Ava held onto Natalie’s leg tightly enough to cut off blood circulation to Natalie’s foot.

“Well, well, well,” said a voice just behind them. “What have we here – has the little kitten thrown herself into the lion’s den once more?”

Natalie rose to her feet. Ava let go, still in shock it seemed. Though Natalie felt bad that she had come along, she could not let her thoughts linger on her friend – all of her energy must be focused on Ramon. A single second could mean victory for him – and certain death for both Natalie and Ava.

“You are going to help me,” Natalie said, her voice dark.

Ramon smirked at her and took a step closer. He looked pleased, in a twisted way, as though he finally thought her worthy. “My, have we gone and bought ourselves a bit of attitude?”

Natalie’s eyes narrowed at him.

“Natalie,” said Ava uncertainly. She stood, hiding behind Natalie.

“Not now,” Natalie snapped at her.

Ramon snickered and took another step, “Trouble in paradise?”

“This isn’t paradise,” Natalie said. “This is hell.”

Ramon’s smirk deepened. “Finally, something we agree upon.”

He thrust his arm out and a burst of magic hit Natalie square in the chest. It sent her flying across the room, crashing into the wall. She felt something crack inside; she had likely broken a rib. Pain spread like wildfire through her body but she knew she could not let that stop her. Hazily, she looked up at Ramon, all the while calling upon magic to heal herself.

Ramon used magic to lift Ava off the ground, choking her. Ava struggled against the strong, invisible hands that squeezed around her neck but in the end, she lost consciousness and Ramon tossed her aside like a broken toy. Natalie hoped that she was only unconscious. She had come to save a friend, not to kill another.

The magic surged inside of her. The pain diminished and Natalie could stand.

Ramon moved towards her. He seemed to flow across the floor, his robes floating around him. It was the only thing about him that made him seem gentle.

His hand went out once more and the same invisible hands that had strangled Ava lifted Natalie into the air.

“Silly girl,” hissed Ramon. “Did you really think you could beat me, a Master Wielder – and in my Mithridates nonetheless? You don’t even know the basics – and now you never will.”

He flicked his fingers and an old book became visible, hanging freely in the air. Natalie had never seen Cecily’s Script Magia, but considering Ramon’s cruel smile, she could only assume that it was this book. Pages hung out of it – Ramon had not been gentle with the book.

His hand became a fist and Natalie noted the jewelry he wore on his hand. It looked like a glove of sorts, though it did not cover his fingers. A stone on it glowed bright red as Ramon began pulling magic from it. A ball of fire appeared.

“No!” cried Natalie, realizing what Ramon meant to do.

“Yes,” hissed Ramon.

He held the ball of fire just below the book and it did not take long until the fire licked the paper and caught hold. Within moments, the pages turned black and soon only ashes would remain of the Script Cecily had cherished. Natalie wanted to scream at Ramon, to rant and call him names. She did not – it would not help.

Instead, she struggled angrily against the strong hold of his magic for a several seconds. Black dots began to dance before her eyes – she would never be able to fight her way out of this. Magic was best fought with magic, not muscle strength. She needed to use both her head and her heart. She did not need much, just enough to break Ramon’s hold.

The living magic around her shuddered as she drew upon it. For a moment, Natalie thought it would not work – then the hands suddenly released their hold on her neck and she fell to the ground, coughing and gulping in air into her burning lungs.

Ramon stared at her. He seemed shocked, but nowhere near at a loss for action. “You shouldn’t have done that. You will not leave this place alive. This Stone of Sitis and this Mithridates is *mine*.”

“I have done it once,” Natalie said, glaring hatefully at him, as she stood up, “and I’ll do it again.”

“You were lucky that time. Doing it again? Impossible,” Ramon growled and this time his necklace glowed. The cold blue stone emitted an almost white light.

“Not impossible,” Natalie said, her voice low. “Improbable.”

She focused all her senses on the want to bind Ramon to be able to question him. He in turn gathered his own magic – and he did it quicker. Realizing that she would not have time to gather the necessary magic to hold Ramon for any length of time, Natalie caught sight of the Stone of Sitis.

The Stone of Sitis, the great stone in the center of the Mithridates, was magic in itself – it had bound Natalie to it. She had no idea if it could work the same way on Ramon but she knew it was her best – and only – shot.

Directing the magic she had gathered towards Ramon, it shot from her as a white ball of light. It hit Ramon in the chest, not unlike his magic had done to Natalie just before. As it was not nearly as strong, it did not send him across the room – but it made him stumble backwards and he tripped to touch the Stone of Sitis.

Ramon grinned manically at Natalie. “Good idea,” he said, “but it won’t work. It isn’t set on holding me. You don’t know how to do that.”

Natalie swore under her breath.

Then, out of nowhere, a red whirlwind came rushing and hit Ramon from the side. He stumbled and fell and Ava landed on top of Ramon. Immediately, she twisted his arms up on his back in a position that looked anything but comfortable.

“Stun him, or something,” yelled Ava to Natalie, who stood staring dumbly at the two. “Natalie, come on, now might be a good time to use that magic of yours!”

Shaken into action, Natalie threw what magic she could gather onto Ramon. Ava stayed sitting on his back, locking his arms. Natalie hurried to them and bent down. She enjoyed the sight of Ramon’s face squashed against the ground.

“Now you’re going to talk,” Natalie said. “Tell me about the ritual.”

“No,” spat Ramon.

He made an attempt to struggle out of the magic binds and more so, out of Ava’s uncomfortable grip. Natalie added new magic to the binding that held Ramon, hoping nervously that it would keep him. She still had no idea how magic casting truly worked, although she did her best to keep that fact from Ramon.

“Could it wake a regular person? Could it heal someone?” asked Natalie, urgency making its way into her voice.

Ramon let out a sudden, rough laugh. “*Heal* someone? No, you silly girl, the ritual could never heal anyone. It is a ritual to raise Chaos, not to rid the world of evil.”

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His dark laughter echoed in the Mithridates. Ramon obviously found great joy in other's suffering.

Natalie's world came tumbling down once more. The ritual could not do it; it could not help Cecily. Despair and darkness filled her mind and as it mingled with the magic that flowed in the room around her, Natalie once more could feel what Ramon wanted to raise – Chaos. It swirled around her, all powerful and as dark as the outer ends of the universe. It was everything and nothing at the same time and Natalie could so easily lose herself in it. Hatred grew there, together with anger and terror.

“No! You're lying!” yelled Natalie and lashed out.

The magic she had drawn, so heavy and dark, hurled through the room like a knife and cut Ramon's cheek deeply. Dark red blood started seeping from the wound – at least he was human, Natalie thought briefly before the disarray of dark thoughts once more took over her mind.

“You could always try it,” Ramon chuckled darkly. The trail of blood that trickled down his cheek made him look insane. “But I wouldn't recommend it.”

Dark clouds filled the skies above – Natalie could see them through the hole in the roof. Even inside the Mithridates, stormy clouds began to build, surrounding them in a storm.

Natalie swore at Ramon and another burst of magic left her, cutting Ramon once more. He smiled widely.

His chuckle echoed darkly through the Mithridates.

“Perhaps I won't have to raise Chaos,” he said. “Perhaps she is already here.”

It was – Natalie could feel it. She held Chaos within, weakly restrained with thin lines of happiness and love that Natalie could only barely remember feeling. Her mind felt as black as the darkest night, without a single star in the sky.

She lashed out – so simple, with this magic. A deep cut appeared on Ramon's cheek, starting to bleed at once, and he growled with pain. Natalie flicked her wrist again – he deserved pain. He had done nothing but bad – he'd tried to kill her.

Hatred thrived within her, darkening her mind. Another cut – on his arm this time, and she could see the blood seeping out, dripping onto the floor—

“Damn it, Natalie, stop it!”

Ava's strong, very nearly annoyed voice broke through Natalie's dark thoughts. The accompanying slap, slightly weaker than it could have been because Ava still held Ramon down with her other hand, woke her completely. Shocked, Natalie stared down at what she had done – blood colored Ramon's cheeks and arm. She had hurt him.

She was not Chaos – she would not let it consume her. She would not give Ramon that pleasure. It would bring no good and it would not save Cecily, of that she felt certain.

At that moment, the magic that held Natalie weakened. In an instant, Ramon felt it and broke loose. The magic he had built up while confined exploded from him and it threw Ava across the room into the wall, head first.

A sickening crack echoed through the room and then all was silent.

17.

“Oh god no.”

Time had never moved so slowly.

Ava sank down, completely lifeless, the wall colored with her blood.

Natalie ran to her, not minding Ramon. Ava lay on her side, her eyelids closed and not a muscle in her body moving. She bled from the back of her head, the blood pooling around her. She was not breathing.

Natalie placed two fingers against Ava’s throat, checking for a pulse. All the while, she whimpered under her breath, “Oh god, oh god please no, Ava...”

She found no pulse. No pulse, no breathing, nothing – and her neck angled in a way that could only mean bad things. Tears began streaming down Natalie’s cheeks, her heart beating wildly in her chest. Her fingers ran over Ava’s face and cheeks, and did not want to register her crushed skull and the blood that would just not stop coming. It covered her hands and clothes and she did not care.

It was not possible, was all she could think. Ava was not dead, she could not be. She could not be.

No.

The painful grip on her hair came suddenly but Natalie hardly felt it. Ramon lifted her to her feet and threw her, this time by hand, across the room. She stumbled but did not go flying into the wall this time – not like she had done before and not like Ava had done just a second ago. Ava. She was not dead.

It could not be possible.

“Now that she’s out of the way, let’s get down to business,” Ramon said.

With a simple, uncaring flick of his wrist, he sent another ball of magic hurling Natalie’s way.

Time slowed down again. Tears trickled down Natalie’s face and she waited for impact, when the ball of magic would hit her. It would hurt, perhaps even kill her. She could not bring herself to care anymore.

Ava.

Her name repeated itself in her mind over and over again, like a broken record. She could not be dead. It could not be possible. Yet over there, in a heap on the floor laid her still body, not moving, not even her chest to take a breath. Not even her heart to beat.

She was dead.

The ball of agonizing magic hit her at that very moment, sending her flying through the room. Her mind only barely registered the bodily pain, too busy trying to understand – Ava was dead.

Ava was dead.

She screamed out, though not aware of it. Black pain surrounded her, sorrow unlike anything she had ever felt before. Waves of hatred towards Ramon, towards Cecily’s illness, towards all the world’s unfairness rolled over her, faster and faster until nothing remained but a dark void.

She rose into the air, flying though she did not know it. Chaos allowed her to do things she could not otherwise. Chaos filled her now, one with her, one with her mind, controlling her as much as Natalie could control it. She could feel the darkness grab hold of the shards of her broken heart. With Chaos, she embraced the feelings she would otherwise be scared of – hatred, fury and malice.

The shining necklace that hung around Ramon's neck became a target in her black mind, a magic that had to be destroyed. A single shot of her impossibly strong magic and Ramon fell down, unconscious or perhaps dead, the necklace shattered in a million pieces.

The walls of Ramon's Mithridates moved, the magic Natalie controlled shaking their very core. Cracks ran up and down the walls and bits and pieces began falling.

Then suddenly, Ava's voice echoed through her mind.

"Natalie, stop it, please."

She slowed down, answering to the ghostly words as though they were a homing beacon.

"Please."

Ava would not have wanted this. She did not want Natalie to go with Chaos, to allow Chaos to reign. Ava had wanted her to be Natalie – she had died because she had brought Natalie back to her senses. Was Natalie going to waste that gift, and make Ava's death pointless?

The waves of black abated somewhat. Slowly, Natalie sank to the ground once more.

They – she and Ava – had fought their way out of Ramon's clutches once before, all to avoid allowing him to raise Chaos once more. Was she to simply let Chaos nest within herself now? It would be to spit on Ava.

Her feet touched the ground and a surge of normalcy washed over Natalie. Fresh hot tears began flowing down her cheeks.

She ran to Ava's side, the darkness seeping out of her veins along with the magic. The walls still shook, the magic having stirred them up too badly to hold for long. Still, Natalie fell to her knees at Ava's side and picked up her lifeless body in her arms. Ava's head fell to the side as she did. Blood painted Natalie's hands, arms and legs. So much blood.

Hoping against hope that Ava would now be breathing, Natalie once more held two fingers to Ava's throat.

Nothing.

Natalie broke, this time without magic. This was simply her own feelings, her own great sorrow at losing her friend, possibly her best friend. She sobbed, great, hulking sobs.

"I'm so sorry," she said between tears. "I'm so, so sorry."

She buried her head in Ava's hair and wished for a way to bring her back. But she knew, in her heart, that it was not possible. Ava could not be brought back to life by magic – who knew what that would bring – a zombie? A soulless shell?

Chaos might have had the kind of power needed to bring back Ava. It did not matter – Chaos was what Ava had died saying no to and Natalie would not give into those powers. This time, leaving them behind had been easy enough – next time it might not be that way.

A large chunk of stone suddenly crashed down on the ground, leaving a gaping hole in the Mithridates' walls. Bits and pieces of debris had already filled the air, dust rising. The whole place would come down – soon.

Ramon groaned from his place on the ground. He still bled. Natalie looked at him, a rush of hatred going through her. She should leave him here to die. He had killed her best friend, and nearly killed her – he deserved nothing less than death.

Yet she could not leave him.

As gently as she possibly could, Natalie laid Ava's body back on the ground. She placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Sleep tight,” she whispered. Another stone came down, as if to accentuate her words. “I love you.”

She had never thought to tell her friend that before. They had only known each other for a couple of weeks but Natalie knew – Ava had been the first friend she had made in Lake Sunflower, and she tied with Cecily in first place.

Cecily.

Natalie was instantly reminded of her other friend. Would she lose both on the same day? Would the message of Cecily's death be waiting for her once she returned to Lake Sunflower?

Closing her eyes, Natalie squeezed Ava's hand tightly.

Then she stood and hurried over to Ramon. He had only just started to come out of whatever stupor he had been in, blearily blinking against the light. His features seemed softer somehow – probably because he seemed only partially conscious.

With great cracks and booms, the walls around Natalie and Ramon began coming down at a quicker pace.

“Where— who—” mumbled Ramon, looking at her. He looked utterly confused.

Natalie fought the urge to simply run out of there and leave Ramon to die. He deserved it – he had killed Ava! He had *killed* her. He deserved the same. But no, she should not be the judge of that and she could not simply go. She did not have it in her to leave him behind, even after all he had done. If he wanted to fight her again, she would kill him – she could defeat him, she knew that now.

She slung his arm over her shoulder.

“I'm getting us out of here,” she said grimly. “Hold on.”

She felt the drain it put on her to summon magic once more. It could not be helped – a great chunk of the walls already blocked the exit. The Mithridates would be in ruins within minutes.

This time, Natalie closed her eyes and pictured Cecily and Ava together, both smiling widely, and she drew on the image for badly needed strength. Then she imagined a forest, any forest – great and lush and beautiful and peaceful as it could only be in a person's imagination. She wanted peace. She wanted bliss and ignorance and to not remember.

With a crack, the Stone of Sitis of Ramon's Mithridates was smashed into a million pieces by a great chunk of the ceiling – and Natalie and Ramon were transported out of there, guided by the last bit of magic Natalie could summon.

She could hear voices, far off. Someone placed something soft over her, gently wrapping her up in a cocoon of warmth. She felt safe. One of the voices sounded familiar but she could not place it as she soared weightlessly in a warm, comfortable fog. She felt no pain and nothing could hurt her.

When she awoke many hours later, everything had changed. Her brain tried to make its way out of her skull, banging hard with a headache like nothing she had ever experienced before.

Opening her eyes, she immediately squeezed them shut again. It was too bright in the room and she moaned in pain.

A door opened – Natalie could hear it creak. She did not dare to open her eyes again, though she wondered where she was.

The curtains were pulled shut and her surroundings became darker. Natalie dared to open one eye just slightly. She found her grandmother standing at the side of her bed.

“Good morning,” her grandmother said.

Natalie, feeling utterly confused, attempted to answer the same thing back, but only a croaked, “Mornin’,” left her dry mouth.

Her grandmother held a glass of water to her lips and Natalie drank slowly. It did not taste very good, but it was far better than the parched feeling in her mouth.

Her grandmother placed the glass on the bedside table and looked at Natalie. She looked more concerned than Natalie had ever seen her before, and Natalie drank in her grandmother’s worry for her. However, she could not quite remember what she was doing here or how she had gotten here.

“You’ve been sleeping for a good long while,” her grandmother said. “Would you care to tell me what you were doing, appearing in my Mithridates in the middle of the night?”

Mithridates.

The memories came crashing down upon Natalie – Cecily’s illness, the dream, Ramon and—Ava. Tears immediately filled her eyes and spilled over her cheeks. She studied her hands, unable to look at her grandmother.

“Natalie?”

“She’s dead,” Natalie whispered brokenly.

“Who is?”

“Ava,” Natalie said. “My friend. My best friend. Ramon killed her. She’s—dead.”

Her grandmother had no reply for this. Natalie closed her eyes and flashes of what had happened flew past her. It made her head ache even worse and she gave a great sob.

To her surprise, she felt her grandmother’s arms around her. She had never thought of her grandmother as the mothering type, but now she stroked Natalie’s hair gently, her other arm around Natalie’s shoulders. Natalie leaned into the embrace and cried.

When the flow of tears ebbed out, Natalie wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“How did I get here?” she asked.

“I was hoping you would tell me.”

Natalie frowned. “We were in Ramon’s Mithridates. I wanted to get out of there – that’s the last I remember.”

Her grandmother’s eyebrows rose. “That is possible, of course – to travel to a different Mithridates – but it takes far more magic than you’d be able to control.”

Natalie stayed silent. She remembered the feeling of Chaos as it invaded her mind. She had held the powers of the universe right there. Still, she did not feel comfortable telling her grandmother this. She had no idea what she what she would say.

“I suppose I was desperate,” Natalie said finally. “Perhaps that was why it worked.”

Her grandmother nodded thoughtfully. “Desperation is often a patent motivation.”

Natalie lay back against the pillows. She felt impossibly tired, her body weary. The only reason she could not claim this to be worse than when she and Ava had gotten away from Ramon was that this time, she laid in a bed rather than in the desert waiting for a car to pick her up.

Suddenly, she sat up straight though her body screamed in pain as she did.

“Where is Ramon?”

“Ramon?” asked her grandmother. “I haven’t the faintest. Should I?”

“I rescued him from his Mithridates when it fell apart,” Natalie said. “He was with me when I came here, I’m sure of it.”

Her grandmother shook her head. “Traveling with another person? No, Natalie, you are certainly not strong enough to manage that. I believe you are imagining things, my dear. And what are you talking about – why would a Mithridates fall apart?”

Natalie, who had opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. She was not strong enough? She had done it twice in the same night – first with Ava to Ramon’s Mithridates and then, she felt certain, with Ramon out of there. Ramon had been with her, she knew it. He must have woken up while she had been out and left. If he had not been with her – if she had not managed to transport with him – then he was dead now.

“Oh,” said her grandmother, “but I noted that you got your mother’s necklace back.”

Natalie frowned. “What?”

“You’re wearing it, dear,” her grandmother said. “I’m proud of you for managing to trick it off him.”

Her grandmother’s words echoed in Natalie’s mind. Trick it off him? Natalie had not given her mother’s necklace so much as a thought in the whole time she had been in Ramon’s Mithridates. She had been a bit preoccupied. But as she looked down, her grandmother was right – her mother’s necklace hung securely around her neck.

She knew instantly that he had not died. But what had happened? Who was Ramon? He had killed Ava – but when Natalie had been about to pick him up to leave the Mithridates, he had looked at her as though he did not recognize her. He had looked – softer. Why? And why had he returned her necklace – the one he had stolen to begin with?

Several hours later, Natalie managed to get out of bed. Stiffly, she walked around her grandmother’s house in one of the beautiful dresses. Outside, the sun shone warm and inviting. Natalie made her way down the steps, into the forest and to her grandmother’s Mithridates.

The Winter Legacy: Awakening
by C. Hakansson

Where Ramon's Mithridates had appeared cold and dark with all the stone and old architecture, her grandmother's Mithridates felt gentle and appealing. The magic in there sang to Natalie, a beautiful song that flew on the wind and mingled with the leaves of the surrounding trees. Natalie walked to the Stone of Sitis and placed a hand on it. It felt warm beneath her hand, pulsating with life.

Images of Ava's body flashed before Natalie's eyes. What was she going to do now? Ava was dead but no one knew about it. No one would be able to find a body – at least Natalie doubted it. She did not think Wielders' Mithridates could be easily found. What would her family think?

She would tell Cecily.

The thought made her heart stop beating for a moment. Cecily – what had happened with her? Was she still alive, or was Natalie now alone? What news awaited her upon her return?

A warm breeze swept through her grandmother's Mithridates, embracing Natalie almost as if it wanted to hug her. Natalie took solace in it.

Then she turned back to the house – it was finally time to return home. It felt as though an eternity had passed since she left Lake Sunflower.

18.

The carriage let Natalie off just outside Lake Sunflower's hospital, on one of the smaller streets. Natalie had asked butler Thomas to take her there rather than home. She wanted to see Cecily – she wanted to know that she was still alive – before returning home. Still, as she waved the carriage off, Natalie took her cell phone out of her pocket. Surprisingly, it had survived the last twenty-four hours – the battery blinked on 'low' but other than that, it worked perfectly.

She dialed her home number.

"Hello," said Richard, picking up after only a signal.

"Hi," Natalie said softly. "It's me."

"Natalie!" Richard exclaimed, his voice filled with relief. "I was so worried!"

Natalie choked. "I'm sorry. I just—some things have happened but I—"

"Are you all right?" asked Richard worriedly. "Do you need me to pick you up? Where are you?"

Natalie shook her head. "I'll be home in a little while. Don't worry. I'm—okay."

She could not bring herself to say 'fine'. She did not feel fine. She did not even feel okay. She felt tired and grief hung in the air around her like a heavy blanket. She did not know whether she would ever be all right again.

"I have to go," Natalie said thickly. Her eyes traveled to the building of Lake Sunflower Hospital. "I'll see you soon."

She hung up before he had time to answer. She held the cell phone in a tight grip in her hand and had to take a deep, steadying breath before entering the hospital building. It loomed before her, grey and impersonal.

She stood in the reception, feeling disconnected to the world. What would she do if the clerk said that Cecily had died? What would she say? Natalie did not know, did not want to know – but she also could not stand not knowing and in the end, she caught the attention of the clerk.

"I'm here to see Cecily Cordell," she said, only just managing to keep her voice from breaking.

The clerk looked at the computer screen, then back up at Natalie. "She's been moved to room number three on the second floor."

Natalie's legs shook and she had to fight to stay standing. Cecily was still alive! Natalie dimly listened to the clerk's directions on how to get to the second floor and then her legs took her there on their own accord. She opted for the stairs instead of the populated elevators and she moved mechanically down the hallway.

Number three.

"Natalie!"

Natalie could not believe her eyes. Before her lay Cecily on the bed – looking so much better that she could hardly believe the same person had been comatose a day earlier. Not only was she alive, but also awake. Her brown eyes danced with life, glittering in the light that spilled through the window. The shimmer Natalie had noted the first time she met Cecily had returned, almost taking the shape of—

Natalie's legs gave out, finally. She sank to the floor, once more sobbing but this time at least some of the tears were happy ones.

Cecily got out of bed and padded barefoot to Natalie's side, wrapping her arms around Natalie. Natalie clung to her like a lifeline.

"I thought you were dead," she said between sobs. "I'm sorry about what I said before, when I snapped at you."

"Oh, I'm sorry too," Cecily said gently, stroking Natalie's hair. "And how could I be dead? You saved me."

Natalie fell silent, pulling back. Then, after several long moments, she said, "What?"

"You were in my dream," Cecily said softly. "I dreamed that you were there and that you pulled me back from—well, the other side. You would not let me die."

Natalie could not tell if Cecily knew she had actually been there, or if she just thought it was part of the dream. It did not matter. All that mattered was that she was still here, still alive, still breathing. Natalie did not care how.

"Could we move up on the bed, perhaps?" asked Cecily with a slight smile. "It's kind of cold down here."

Natalie nodded, blushing. "Of course."

They supported each other as they returned to the bed. Despite looking better, Cecily obviously still felt far from healthy and strong. She should probably stay in bed for a while longer.

Settling on the bed, Cecily gave Natalie a long, searching look.

"Natalie," she said, "where is Ava?"

Something in her voice told Natalie that Cecily already knew what had happened. But how could Cecily know? No one but her, Ramon and her grandmother knew.

"Ramon—" began Natalie softly but could not bring herself to say the words. They still felt foreign to her, so completely wrong. In her imagination, Ava could still walk through the door this very minute, still alive and healthy. Ava was young – she shouldn't have—

"Oh god," whispered Cecily, watching Natalie closely.

"I—I couldn't do anything," Natalie said. "I don't think I could—it all happened so fast—he just—and she—I didn't mean—I didn't want—"

She had already cried so many tears but though she tried, she could not keep new ones from falling. It did not feel like it had only been yesterday everything had happened – the dream, the fight with Ramon and Ava's death. Natalie held Cecily close, feeling the wetness on her shirt as the dark haired girl cried as well.

Eventually, the tears subsided, but the dull ache that had settled in Natalie's stomach even before she had really woken up at her grandmother's house, stayed with her. Natalie suspected it would remain for a long time.

"I don't know what to do," Natalie said. "I can't tell anyone she's dead – they'll wonder how I know. But what will her parents think? Her siblings? Everyone in school? That she ran away? That she got kidnapped? Murdered— she *was* murdered."

Cecily watched her gravely, eyes red-rimmed.

“Perhaps you should tell me what happened,” Cecily said. “I don’t know anything that happened since yesterday noon, when I fainted. Next thing I knew, there was you and then this blinding light and I was awake and Dad was sitting next to me.”

Natalie allowed herself a small smile over the ‘blinding light’ Cecily described. The dream had really happened – Natalie had been in Cecily’s dream.

Then, with a soft sigh and a lump in her throat, Natalie began to tell Cecily of the events of the day before.

By the end of it, tears trickled down Cecily’s cheeks. Natalie felt distant to the story – it sounded too strange, as though it could not really have happened to her. It must have been a dream. Ava had not died, she could not have.

“You saved Ramon,” Cecily said softly, “even after what he did.”

“I don’t know why. I just—I couldn’t leave him there.”

“I—understand. He needed your help.”

Something about Cecily’s words made Natalie frown. They reminded her of something. Thinking back, she tried to grasp what it was, but it seemed just out of reach. The words – something about the words she had said.

“You need to break him out. He needs your help.”

She gasped as she remembered – Cecily had told her, in her dream. But how had Cecily known? And what had she meant, ‘break him out’? Natalie pushed the thoughts aside, she could not deal with that now. She sighed.

“He’s gone now, anyway. He left my mother’s necklace with me and disappeared before my grandmother found me in her Mithridates.” Her eyes darkened. “If he tries anything again, I won’t hesitate to kill him.”

A slight crease appeared between Cecily’s brows. She looked thoughtful. “I don’t know why, but I don’t think you’ll have to.”

Natalie shook her head. “I—I don’t think so either. He was changed – there was something different about him.”

After a moment, Natalie remembered something. “He burned your book.”

“My Script Magia?” asked Cecily and a crease of pain appeared between her brows.

Natalie nodded. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t—he had me bound with magic at the time. He just—burned it.”

Cecily took a steadying breath. Natalie suspected that the reason why she had felt attached to the book had not been because of the book itself or its content, though she had been given it to keep safe – no, the reason was that it had belonged to her mother.

“It’s not your fault,” Cecily said softly and she looked as though she meant it. “I’ll tell you about it later. There are things you need to know.”

The two girls fell silent. Each fell deep into thought though they still held onto each other, drawing strength and understanding.

Natalie thought of Ramon. He confused her. There was something in his eyes that made her think he did not recognize her. Had she hit him so hard while in the tumult that she had given him amnesia? She supposed it could be possible, considering the sheer amount of magic she had

controlled at the time. His amulet had been like a shining target which she had struck hard and fast. She shuddered at the memory of the darkness she had been in.

“What do we do about Ava?”

Cecily’s soft voice broke through Natalie’s reverie.

Natalie sighed heavily. “I don’t know.”

“Like you said, I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell people that she’s dead,” Cecily said and her voice did not sound quite as matter-of-factly as she probably hoped it would. “There will be no body. Mithridates are impossible to find for non-Wielders – they are almost always in the second universe, not here. She won’t be found.”

Natalie squeezed her eyes shut. “It just seems horrible – she won’t get a funeral and the proper respect and her family will think she’s just left them.”

“I know,” Cecily said. “There isn’t much we can do.”

“I know.”

They agreed, in the end, to not say anything at all. There was nothing they could say. Ava’s body would not be found and they should not know anything about her disappearance.

“That’s not an eternal resting place,” Natalie said softly. “She deserved more.”

Cecily looked up at her, eyes warm and cheeks wet.

“Of course she did. She deserved life.”

Natalie could not bring herself to go to school on Friday morning. Richard, who had been horrified by her exhausted appearance when she had finally arrived home late on Thursday afternoon, was more than willing to call her in sick. Worried, he fussed over her and had she not been so emotionally and physically drained, Natalie would have enjoyed the brief period of Richard’s attention and the jealous looks from Emmanuella. As it was, she simply slept through all of Friday, barely eating or drinking.

On Saturday, she still did not feel rested but did get out of bed.

Cecily would be all right, for now, she was told. Apparently, Mr. Cordell had called while Natalie slept and he had told Richard that Cecily had been discharged. She was not fine – whatever had been wrong with her since Natalie met her, and long before that, still remained – but she was no longer in any immediate danger. Natalie felt happy to hear this – it was the only thing that made her smile at all.

All other thoughts hung around Ava and they all made her cry or want to scream at the unfairness. Ava should not even have been there! Natalie should have gone alone! The only reason Ramon had gotten a chance to strike had been that Natalie had lost her grip. Her fury had dropped momentarily – and that had cost Ava her life. Again and again, Natalie saw Ava sailing through the air and she could do nothing to stop her – and then came the sickening *crack* that resounded through her head.

Thoughts of Ramon came and went, but those were mostly just questions. Who was he? Why did he want to raise Chaos? How had he known about Chaos to begin with? Why had Natalie’s

blood, and no one else's, been needed? Why had he looked so utterly confused when Natalie had moved to help him?

She sat down by her desk and began to write down her feelings, unable to keep them bottled up inside anymore. Cecily was the only one she could talk to but at the moment, she wanted to be alone.

She had not gotten far when she zoned out and suddenly, the ghost writer returned.

'Your sadness can be felt for miles.'

Natalie was not in the mood for cryptic sentences.

'What do you want?'

It did not take long for an answer to appear on the paper.

'I know about your friend.'

'I don't care. Leave me alone,' Natalie spat back angrily, sudden rage welling up inside of her. It had all started with this: strange messages written by someone other than her, but with her hand. It had led her to her first meeting with Ava – without the ghost writer, Natalie would not have known Ava and Ava would not have died.

Three weeks after the first line, she still had no idea who the ghost writer was. And how did the person know everything about her? Why was it able to tell her that she was powerful, long before she had started learning of magic?

Words appeared on the paper before her again, several minutes after the last one. Natalie had almost believed the ghost writer to have gone again.

The ghost writer wrote:

'You know now that you are powerful.'

She saw the truth in those words now – she was powerful. More so than she could have ever dreamed of when the words first appeared on the paper. Something had awoken within her, something mighty and not yet explored. Something different.

Perhaps it had all been meant to be. Perhaps she had been meant to meet Ava and make friends with her – that in turn had led her to Cecily, who had brought out the first bout of magic out of her. It had led to the second meeting with Ramon and the first experience of living magic, which she had quickly learned to control to get them out of the situation.

Without Ava, where would she have been? Where would she turn now that she was gone?

She hoped there was a reason for her death as well. She could not see one – it was a needless waste.

'Yes, I do.'

She knew. She had even felt what she imagined to be the strongest of all magic forces within her. Chaos.

'Good. Then you are worthy.'

With those words, the ghost writer disappeared once more. Natalie echoed her words back to her – *'Worthy?'* – but received no answer. She stared at the last line – what did that mean? What could she possibly have been deemed worthy of now?

Epilogue

Monday morning came far too soon. Natalie had stayed in for the remainder of the weekend, her head filled with a million questions and no answers. Her emotions raced from denial about everything that had happened – it had to have been a dream – to sadness – she had lost track of how many times she had cried in the last few days – to anger – at the unfairness of Ava’s death – and finally a strand of happiness, that Cecily was no longer dying. No one knew quite how but Natalie could not help but believe that whatever else the burst of light had been, it had at least been part healing magic.

As she walked to school on Monday morning, Natalie barely kept from crying. Richard had asked her if she really wanted to go to school today – he had seen the shadows beneath her eyes and worried still – and she had said yes. She needed to get back, to start up her routines again.

Without Ava.

The last time she had been here, Ava had been with her. She had been alive. And with that simple thought, the walls burst once more and tears fell down Natalie’s cheeks. She felt as though the tears would never end.

“I hear Simonsen ran away. Good riddance, I say.”

Natalie stopped dead in her tracks at the sound of his voice. She looked up slowly.

Chase Eadan stood before her with his group, a smirk on his lips and Lindsay Weaver on his arm. Lindsay and Chase both smiled cruelly at Natalie while the rest of the gang was sniggering though Natalie distantly thought that they probably did not have a clue as to what they were laughing at.

Chase Eadan did not have a clue what he was talking about either. Natalie knew, on some level, that even he would likely not have been so cruel if he’d known what had really happened, but it did not matter.

“What did you say?” asked Natalie slowly, red-rimmed eyes staring at him.

Chase looked down his nose at her. “I said, good riddance.”

“She’s a low life. No money, no class – no nothing,” said Lindsay with the air of someone who believed herself to be of importance. “I understand that she ran away.”

Natalie stood perfectly still. She had held back before when Chase had spoken degradingly about Cecily, Ava and herself – but this was taking it too far, much, much too far. Even if Ava had run away instead of died, it would still not have given them any right to say the things they were saying. Natalie’s hands shook with anger. Power began to build up inside of her. Her necklace gleamed in the sunlight. Anyone who knew about Wielders and magic would have run away long ago.

Chase Eadan and Lindsay Weaver knew of neither.

“Ava Simonsen is a better person than any of you could ever hope to be,” Natalie hissed at them. She had to remind herself forcefully to say ‘is’ rather than ‘was’, though the lie nearly made her tear up again.

“Simonsen is dirt that should have been polished off from this school long ago,” sneered Chase.

Those words did it for Natalie. She knew how to control her magic now and she was good at it. She allowed the power flowing inside her boiling blood to gather in her mother’s necklace and

then, with a shock of green light, it passed through her fingers. The flash of magic surrounded Chase and Lindsay and bursts of it continued on to enclose the rest of their worthless gang.

When the light faded, all the people before Natalie stood stock-still. She had fought the urge to vanquish them from the face of the earth – she suspected she could not have even if she wanted to. She did not have that kind of power nor did she want it – and she had fought her first idea, which had been to turn the whole party into pigs or some other fitting species, like rats.

No, she had allowed them to keep their human forms. But where the prettiest of Lake Sunflower High School’s students had stood before, now people with faces full of pimples, their hair discolored and their noses running from a sudden cold stood instead. Natalie knew she had used enough power for a long-drawn cold and pimples that would stay for weeks or even months. She allowed herself a half smile, though her mind was still on Ava. She remembered how they had talked about this moment, though they had both expected to be there to witness it.

That was for you, Natalie thought, and pushed past Chase and Lindsay. The two were still in shock but as Natalie reached the top of the stairs, she heard their horrified screams as they caught sight of each other.

“What did you do to us?” they screamed at Natalie, their words laced with fright.

“Magic,” Natalie said simply and entered the school building. She could not bring herself to smile.

Natalie passed through the noisy hallways. Students were everywhere, talking and laughing and going on with life as though nothing had changed. Nothing had, for them. For Natalie, it was different. Everything was different.

She had watched a friend die.

She was supposed to go to class but could not make herself. The bell rang and the other students disappeared until the halls had emptied and her footsteps echoed through the corridors. She did not give any thought as to where she headed, but she unwittingly made her way towards the second floor bathroom, where she had first met Ava.

The bathroom was empty when she got there. The bad lighting in the room made her look as pale as a vampire when she looked at herself in the mirror. Dark circles were obvious beneath her eyes and her eyes appeared dull. Natalie leaned against the sink and started crying again. She could not possibly do this. Her heart ached too badly.

“I wish you were here, Ava,” she said. “I miss you so much.”

She bent down and splashed her face with water. The coolness mixed with her hot tears and washed them away, but her eyes were still puffy and red. She dried her face on a paper towel and threw it in the trashcan.

Then she stood. With a sigh, she turned to leave.

She froze in mid-step, her heart stopping in her chest. Her mouth fell open – shock did not even begin to cover what she felt. She could not get a word out. It was impossible. Completely impossible. Yet before her stood—

“Ava?”