

KELLY THOMPSON

A woman with vibrant red hair and striking blue eyes is peering through a jagged hole in a light-colored, textured wall. Her face is dark, and her expression is intense. The wall is made of irregular, cracked pieces of paper or plaster. The overall style is a detailed illustration.

STORYKILLER

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BY
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ONE

'There's something wrong with me,' boomed through Tessa's head on repeat. She nearly shattered the flimsy stall door as she kicked it in with her combat boot and got over the toilet only seconds before she vomited what felt like everything she'd ever eaten. A pair of girls at the sinks behind her groaned and got bitchy.

"Ewww."

"Gross. Way to go, new girl."

Tessa stepped on the flush with her boot and staggered out of the stall, glaring at them.

"Double ewww," the blonde said, looking Tessa up and down and making a gagging sound. Tessa thought for a moment about punching her in the throat, but the pinch of pain in her stomach made her feel strangely kittenish. Instead, she just moved to the sinks and turned the tap, which immediately snapped off in her hand as if she was The Hulk.

"Balls," Tessa muttered, tossing the broken knob to the floor. "Piece of junk," she said squinting her eyes shut through a wave of sharp pains while the cool water gushed from the faucet. Tessa leaned over the sink and rinsed out her mouth as the girls slid from the bathroom giggling and calling her names. She washed her face, not caring that her hair or the heavy black make-up around her eyes was getting wet.

She glanced at her watch.

2:25 pm.

She'd been 17 for three minutes.

What an awesome start to what was sure to be a banner year back in Lore, Oregon.

TWO

After the first two stops, the school bus was almost empty, not that it had been full to begin with, but now they were only three. Tessa in the very back and a pair sitting a dozen seats in front of her that seemed like the kind of best friends you only read about in books. The boy and girl had a laughter and intimacy that rivaled the closest brother and sister. It had Tessa so envious she thought beams of jealous green light might come out of her eyes.

She felt weird.

Nothing had been quite right since she'd thrown up in the bathroom. Actually, it had all gone wonky just before that, but she wasn't sure why or how.

Also, someone was following them.

And not the kind of person that you think of when you think of creepy people that follow school buses. She'd been behind the bus since it left the school. She was obvious as all get-out and not just because she followed too closely. It was more the fact that she looked like some kind of albino supermodel in the most expensive-looking vintage silver jaguar convertible Tessa had ever seen. Big black sunglasses covered the woman's eyes, but her pale skin glowed as if lit from within. She was also wearing the lowest cut sweater Tessa had ever seen. It was made of thin silvery fabric, unreal in how it moved and caught the afternoon light—glittering like a damn sparkly vampire. And it plunged, *literally* to the woman's belly, showing off even more porcelain-like flesh and defying all kinds of laws of physics in how it didn't expose, well, *everything*.

Tessa knitted her brow. The lady wasn't exactly trying to blend in. Bizarre outfit be damned, she was also the kind of beautiful that didn't seem real—almost as if she had been shaped from stone and born of imagination, not the messy business of flesh and reality. The bus slowed to a stop and Tessa stood, watching the woman curse at the bus when her hair—white as the driven snow—blew across her face as she was enveloped by a burst of dirty bus exhaust.

Tessa stepped off the bus and glanced at the two friends who had also gotten off and who were now looking at her curiously. Tessa turned for home and began walking.

“Hey!” the boy called out. Tessa knew he was talking to her, but she ignored him, she still didn’t feel well and wasn’t in the mood. “Hey. Don’t I know you?”

Tessa turned around and was surprised to see the boy and his friend just a half dozen feet behind her, as if they’d followed her. Tessa narrowed her eyes at him. He was on the tall side, shorter than Tessa, but she was tall so that wasn’t particularly notable. He was lanky and lean, a bit disheveled. Cute in a kind of ‘mad scientist that doesn’t know what to do with himself’ kind of way. His brown hair was slightly mussed and he wore a Flash t-shirt and jeans. Tessa didn’t recognize him.

“I don’t think so,” Tessa said honestly, turning back around to continue her walk.

“No, I think I do,” he said, and Tessa could tell that he and the girl were still following her.

“Brand,” the girl said, a warning tone creeping into her voice. “Leave her alone.”

“You used to live here, right?” Tessa didn’t stop walking but he was right. Maybe he had known her a million years ago, back before her mom left, before her dad shipped her off to the first of many, many boarding schools in Europe. “I think we used to go to school together. You have a cool last name or something. I swear, I remember, it’s like—” he trailed off, as if it was on the tip of his tongue.

Tessa stopped and turned around. The boy and girl were so close on her heels that they crashed into her. They both fell back awkwardly onto their butts. Together, they looked up at Tessa from the sidewalk, apologetic.

“Sorry. Our fault,” they said, almost as one. Tessa smiled a little bit. They were kinda funny.

“What are you sorry for? You’re the ones that fell down.” Tessa reached out her hands to help them up.

“Thanks,” the girl said, brushing herself off as the boy continued to scrunch up his face trying to remember Tessa’s name.

“Battle,” Tessa said, filling it in for him.

“Excuse me?” the boy said.

“Battle. My name. It’s Tessa Battle.”

He pointed his finger at her. “Yes! That’s it!”

The girl rolled her eyes at him and even groaned. Tessa smiled again. They *were* funny, like a little comedy troupe. The girl reached up and her small hand poked out of her giant sweatshirt to adjust large black-framed glasses on her face.

“I’m Micah Chen.”

Tessa smiled at Micah as the girl blew at her black bangs, lifting them briefly away from her eyes. “Tessa Battle.” Tessa repeated.

Micah smiled back, shy, and thumbed over at the boy, who was examining Tessa as if she was a bug under a magnifying glass, “This is Brandon Ellis.”

Tessa nodded at Brandon. “Uh-huh, but people call me Brand,” he said, barely acknowledging the conversation, his eyes narrowed and his mouth screwed up contemplatively. “Your hair is different.”

Tessa looked up at the unnaturally bright cherry-red strands falling across her eyes.

“Yes, Brand, you’re right. I did not have a borderline mohawk when I was in the fourth grade.” Tessa and Micah shared another smile.

“No, no. Not that,” he said, ignoring them. “The color. That’s not your natural color.”

Micah elbowed him. “Brand. That’s not anyone’s *natural* color.”

Tessa stifled a laugh. “Correct. It belongs only to Manic Panic. Technically I’m a blonde. I think. I can’t really remember. It’s been a long time since I saw my real hair.”

Micah chuckled and Brand nodded knowingly, “I thought so. I think we were in Miss Castle’s fourth grade class together.”

Tessa reached back into the vault of her memory, most of which she’d tried to block out since it reminded her of her mother. It all felt so long ago. She *had* been in Miss Castle’s class. Did she remember a tiny version of this kid running around in superhero t-shirts? She didn’t.

“Yeah, maybe, you do seem kind of familiar,” Tessa said. Brand beamed and Micah cast a knowing look at Tessa, as if acknowledging that Tessa had done Brand a kindness and appreciated it.

“I knew it!” Brand said. Tessa turned and began walking again. It was actually impressive that he recognized her. Tessa hadn’t thought anyone would or would bother trying. Brand and Micah fell into step behind her and Tessa wondered if their houses were even in this direction. There weren’t many houses this way.

“Brand is great with faces,” Micah said. “In fact, he’s got a great memory in general, especially for people, names, history, stories—less so for math.” Brand elbowed her.

“Hey, I do just fine in math.”

“Is a C fine?” Micah asked.

“A C is totally average. That’s like the...*definition* of a C,”

“So fine means average?”

“I don’t know but you’re, like, embarrassing me here, Mike,” Brand complained under his breath.

“Okay, okay,” Micah said, giving up.

“Hey, it’s October, why haven’t we seen you before today?” Brand asked.

“I just got back to the States yesterday,” Tessa said.

Micah hissed at Brand. “Stop being so nosy!”

Tessa chuckled as they jostled about, arguing behind her. They seemed so genuinely nice. That was rare in Tessa’s experience and it intrigued her. Just as she was softening up and going to ask a question of her own, she caught a glimpse of the silver convertible in her peripheral vision and stopped suddenly. Micah and Brand both crashed headlong into her back and fell down again.

Tessa crouched down to help them up, again, one eye locked on the woman in the convertible. “Sorry, sorry, my fault this time.”

Brand rubbed his head, “Jeez. What are you, like, made of adamantium?”

Micah reached for her glasses, which had gone shooting across the sidewalk. Tessa handed them to her. They all stood up again and Brand adjusted his backpack on his shoulder. “Adamantium is what Wolverine—” Tessa cut him off.

“I know what adamantium is,” she said and then nodded to her house. “This is me.”

Brand and Micah looked up at her, almost like puppies. Adorable, funny puppies.

“Oh. Yeah.” Micah scratched her head and pointed back the way they had come, almost as if confused. “We’re actually that way.”

“Guess I’ll see you tomorrow then,” Tessa said, trying not to make it sound too abrupt, and keeping one skeptical eye on the woman in the car across the street. Brand and Micah headed back the way they had come and Tessa, from her front lawn, watched to make sure that the albino supermodel didn’t do anything to them. She would hate it if the first nice people she’d met in just about ever got *something’d* by the sharp-looking supermodel. But the woman watched them go and then promptly returned her attention to Tessa, never more than swiveling her head. Tessa sighed and gave up, turning to her front door.

THREE

There's something in the house.

The thought crashed through Tessa's head so loud as she put her hand on the front doorknob that it almost knocked her over. And as startling a thought as that was, she was more freaked out by why she thought some*THING* instead of some*ONE*.

That was weird, right?

Tessa paused, her hand on the door, fear rippling through her. She felt her fear so solidly that she suspected it of radiating off her, like some kind of stinky cartoon character. She didn't *have* to go inside. She could just not go in. But where would she go? Her mind raced for a moment, possibilities and options rifling through her head and then she felt a prick of anger.

This was her home, even if she hadn't lived here for the last eight years.

She wasn't going to be scared away from her own home. Besides, she didn't know anyone in town. Like, not a soul, except for Brand and Micah, but she didn't think two kids her own age and half her size counted as anyone that could help her. Besides she didn't want to get them into trouble, if there was indeed trouble behind her front door.

Tessa heard thumping inside, somewhere near the kitchen she guessed. She pressed her ear against the door but it didn't elicit any more information and in fact it became quiet inside again. Tessa looked around. It was the middle of the day, horror-movie-type things didn't happen in the middle of the day, right? She imagined for a moment that maybe it was her dad. She'd arrived last night, after a very long flight from London, to an empty house, a white envelope full of crisp twenties, and a short note telling her he'd be back next Tuesday and to stay out of trouble. He hadn't even mentioned her birthday in the note. Maybe he'd remembered and come home early?

Yeah, right. He'd missed the last eight, no reason to be here for this one, even if she was back home.

Besides, her dad was a *someone*, not a *something*.

Tessa edged open the door and the increased noise made the hairs on the back of her neck prick up wildly. The crashing sounds in her kitchen vaguely resembled massive footsteps. But like the way a mountain might sound if it had feet and began walking around on your

hardwood floors. “Balls,” Tessa breathed before sliding into the foyer, her eyes on the kitchen while she reached into the hall closet for her father’s old baseball bat, right where it had always been as though it hadn’t moved once in the years Tessa had been gone. She rested the bat on her shoulder, grateful for her father’s perfect predictability.

She caught just a glimpse of the mountain lumbering from one side of the kitchen to the other and her jaw dropped open. This wasn’t your run-of-the-mill suburban burglar, this thing was covered head to toe in brownish green scraggly hair. This thing had a shoulder span wider than a doorway and must have been nearly seven feet tall. Its shoulders were stooped so that gnarled hands attached to arms as wide as tree trunks nearly dragged across the floor. Tessa raised an eyebrow. It appeared to be opening cabinets and drawers as if searching for something. Tessa shook her head hoping to make the sight go away, but the monster remained. A jagged tremor of fear ran through her, settling deeply and nauseously in her stomach, and she bit her tongue to quell it. She turned for the front door. This was way over her teenage pay grade, no matter how long she’d been on her own.

With her hand on the door to escape, the noise behind her suddenly stopped. The thing said something under its breath that sounded like “*whore killer*,” but that couldn’t be right, could it? Tessa turned to look toward the kitchen, and the thing stood there, giant and terrifying, but also kinda funny-looking, filling up the massive doorway to the kitchen, one hand holding an empty kitchen drawer, its contents strewn all over the floor. Its nose was like a misshapen light bulb, its mouth long and thin with sharp teeth poking out, and the eyes were black and small like shiny beads. When it spoke again, Tessa expected a growl or a roar, but instead she got broken but polite English, slightly accented. It sounded...Norwegian?

“Scion. You are it?” the thing said more than asked.

“Huh?” Tessa asked, dumbfounded.

“You are it. Scion,” it said, dropping the drawer it was holding. Tessa stared at the drawer.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, and then bit her lip, unsure why she cared.

“You is what I am looking for,” it said simply.

“You thought I’d be in a drawer?”

“I do not know your size. Mortals come in all sizes, I think,” it said, explaining itself, and then added, “Like goats.”

“Yes, well, I suppose, but few fit in drawers, or would want to,” Tessa explained, blinking stupidly, feeling as if she’d stepped into a *Twilight Zone* episode.

“I don’t know of such things. But now you are here.”

“Yes. Now I’m here.” Tessa repeated back while looking around her house at all the destruction the thing had caused. Books pulled from shelves, furniture tipped over, a plant toppled, soil spilling across the floor. Looking at the mess she realized how pissed her dad was going to be and she found herself suddenly very angry and unable to stop herself from popping off. “Thanks for destroying my damn house. What do you want?”

“Now you are here. Now we fight,” it said simply.

“Um. No?” Tessa said more as a question, simultaneously gripping the bat in her hand more tightly, preparing for anything.

It came at her much faster than she anticipated considering its size, and Tessa was so startled that she wasn’t able to do anything except squeal a little and dodge out of the way, escaping into the dining room. She stood gaping at where the thing had clearly gotten into the house—the massive picture window that looked out onto the back lawn was smashed to bits. “Dammit!” Tessa shouted but before she could say anything else, the thing tackled her from behind. They both tumbled through the already broken window and rolled onto the lawn outside.

Tessa got to her feet and looked around. Better at least to be out here where there was less fine china, she thought. She looked at her arms and legs, surprised that nothing was broken. In fact, she felt pretty good. Like, a lot better than you should feel after being hit by something that must weigh 500 pounds and going through the remains of a broken window. She turned to look at the thing on the grass only to find that it had already gotten up and was in mid-swing. It clipped her across the face with its giant fist, and the force sent Tessa flying partway across the yard. She landed painfully on her back.

Okay, so, whatever was going on with her she could definitely still feel pain. But a blow that probably should have killed her hadn’t.

“Not so tufffff,” the thing grumbled as it lumbered toward her and then stood over her, preparing to punch her again while she was still down. Tessa drove her foot up into the thing’s groin area. She didn’t know if it actually had a groin, but she figured it couldn’t hurt matters. And indeed the thing fell to its knees and then rolled away from her with a sighing groan of pain. “Mean though,” it said, as if narrating its thoughts on her to itself as it slowly climbed back to its feet. Tessa

popped herself into a standing position and they stood there looking at one another, about eight feet of bright green lawn between them.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t break into your house now, did I?” Tessa said, eyeing her bat, which lay on the ground between them. Tessa had been in her share of fights before, well, okay, way more than her fair share of fights, but this was ridiculous. And she didn’t even know what they were fighting about.

“Suppose,” the thing said, grumbling a bit and taking a long armed swing at her, apparently not caring one way or another about the bat on the ground. This time, however, Tessa saw the punch coming. While she didn’t have time to get out of the way, she squared her shoulders and anchored her feet in the dewy grass, raising her arms defensively, preparing to take the hit. It hurt like blazes when the punch landed but she didn’t go down this time and slight surprise registered on the creature’s mossy face as Tessa took her turn at a punch. She connected with its general jaw area and the thing reeled back. It looked at her while massaging its face. “Strong,” it said, still narrating. Tessa looked at her fist, more shocked than the creature was. She couldn’t believe she’d actually connected, let alone hurt it.

“Thanks,” Tessa said, distracted, wondering how her hand wasn’t broken. The creature lunged at her and they went down together in a pile of arms and legs, rolling across the lawn, jockeying for position, until they crashed into some heavy cast-iron lawn furniture, Tessa on top. Tessa reared back, straddling the thing and punched it three times in the face, trying to stun it, which worked, like, not at all, and instead just seemed to annoy it. Plus it oofed out a breath of foul air from somewhere deep inside that made Tessa wince in horror. The creature returned the punches, and Tessa felt her jaw nearly slip out of joint on the last punch. She tried to say “ow” but it came out more like a growl. Tessa reached up to the top of the nearby patio table and pulled down a pair of massive hedge clippers. She spun the clippers in her hand like she was possessed by some kind of Kung Fu weapons master and drove them pointy side first at the creature’s head. It jerked to the left, and the clipper blades buried themselves in the grass and dirt. The creature growled at her.

“Mean and strong and fast,” it said and then pushed her off with a powerful blow to her chest. Tessa toppled backward off the creature but rolled into a crouching position, and when it came at her again, she reached for the legs of the heavy iron chair nearest her. Digging deep within herself, she swung the chair upward as she lunged forward into

standing position. Whatever bizarre strength she was sporting plus her momentum was indeed a force to be reckoned with, and when the chair connected, the creature flew a good dozen feet into the air and almost seemed to pause there for a split second before crashing down again. The weight of it hitting the ground sent a tiny shockwave through the yard. The thing stayed down for a moment. Tessa watched to see if it was dead.

She wasn't sure if she wanted it to be dead or not.

She'd never killed anything that wasn't some kind of bug before, and she didn't feel great about it. At the same time, she thought it might eventually kill her if she didn't kill it first.

Tessa's heart hammered in her chest as she waited for it to move.

Or not.

Finally she saw it take a breath, and it lumbered to its feet but didn't come any closer to her. She watched it, unmoving, still holding the chair by one leg. "Mean and strong and fast and smart," it said and then turned away from her and ran at full speed toward the tall wood fence at the back of the yard. When it was a second from crashing headlong into the fence, it reached long arms up, grabbed the fence tips and pulled, launching itself almost gracefully into the woods behind the house. Tessa saw a rustle of trees and a few birds fly into the sky, crying out in protest, and then nothing. It was as if nothing had happened at all. Just Tessa and the stupid, torn-up yard.

And then a small cough behind her alerted her to someone standing there.

Two adorable someones, in fact.

FOUR

Tessa turned around, knowing even before she did so that it was going to be Micah and Brand.

Sure enough, they were both standing, just on the other side of the wooden gate, staring at her with their mouths hanging open like fish.

“Um...hi?” Brand offered.

Micah looked at him like he was insane.

“What...what was that?” he asked, not even missing beats. “Am I, am I having a stroke?” He looked at Micah now. “You saw that, right? Tell me you saw that!”

Micah just nodded.

“Tessa?” they asked as one, as if her name itself was the question.

Tessa looked at them. She had no idea what to say. Her mind was utterly blank. She didn’t know how much they had seen, and she didn’t understand a lick of it anyway so what could she say?

Her mind raced, but somewhere deep down she felt sure that the best thing she could do for them was to get them away from her.

Something was happening to her.

Something bad from the looks of it.

And they didn’t need to end up as collateral damage. Innocent bystanders. And super nice ones at that. All she could think was that she had to get them out of there and away from her no matter what, and if boarding school had taught her anything it was deny, deny, deny. Admit nothing. Oh, and how to be mean. She’d learned that too.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. And you’re on private property, kindly get off it,” she said, a cruelty in her voice that made her cringe inside. But they didn’t move. They just stood there, gape-mouthed and confused. So she looked at them for just a moment, making her eyes hard. “Get out of here, right now.” She didn’t even watch to see their shoulders sink, their expressions fall, she just picked up the bat, stepped through the broken picture window, and disappeared into the house.

Tessa sat on the kitchen floor for a while listening to them argue in hushed tones. They finally gave up and left and then Tessa burst into tears. She curled up on the hardwood and sobbed into a dishtowel until she fell asleep.

Tessa woke to the sound of the doorbell buzzing. Disoriented and confused, wondering if perhaps she had dreamed the entire bizarre incident, Tessa stumbled to the front door, tripping on overturned furniture that suggested it had not been just a nightmare. Tessa peeked through the window to the side of the door and then yanked herself back at the sight of the albino supermodel standing on her front porch. It was still light outside, but several hours had passed, the sun low in the sky. The woman called to her through the door.

"Scion. Bluebeard has your minions."

Tessa crinkled up her nose. What in seven hells did that even mean? Tessa spoke back through the door.

"What's a Scion?" Tessa asked and then, frowning her brow even more deeply, she raised her voice, "Exactly who are you and what do you want?"

The woman sighed, clearly irritated. "I am The Snow Queen. I've simply come to tell you that Bluebeard has your minions."

Tessa scrunched up her face and unlocked the door, but kept it mostly shut, peeking through the crack, "Who has my what?"

"Bluebeard. He has your minions."

"Lady, I don't understand like...ANY of the words in that sentence."

The woman sighed even more deeply. "Those two small Mortals I saw you with before—your minions—"

"Micah and Brand?"

The woman looked offended, "I don't learn minion names, Scion. But those two small Mortals, they have been taken by Bluebeard."

"What's a Bluebeard?"

The woman sighed again and pushed her way into the house. "You are entirely tedious. I was led to believe that Scions at least had their wits about them, even if they were just Mortals." The woman looked around the disheveled house, her judgmental gaze deepening until she noticed the broken window. She looked more carefully at Tessa, puffy eyed and more than a little ruffled. "You look a fright, Scion—has something happened?"

"Well, I was attacked by something." Tessa said, trying to explain and rubbing her head, still confused by, well, everything.

Snow looked her up and down, still judging, "I should hope so."

"Something big and furry," Tessa reached her arms out showing how wide and tall it was before returning her hand to her head. She started rambling. "It was looking for something. Then it wanted to fight

me. It had...a Norwegian accent?" Tessa collapsed onto the couch and looked up at the woman. "And it said something about goats."

"Ah," Snow said, and looked around the room, examining the books still on the shelves. She took her time but eventually pulled an old volume off a shelf and flipped through it. After a moment of this, she brought it over to Tessa and pointed a perfectly manicured finger at a black-and-white drawing in the book. It looked almost exactly like what Tessa had been fighting. Tessa snatched the book and sprang from her seat.

"Yes! That's it!" She then turned the book over. "What is this—" she stopped when she saw that the title of the book was *Fifty Famous Folktales*.

"The bridge Troll, from *Three Billy Goats Gruff*," Snow said, unimpressed, and then added under her breath, "Stupid Trolls just cannot shut up about goats. Gives them away, every time."

Tessa sat down and stared at her. Her head hurt.

"Wait. You're saying I just fought a troll from a Folktale? You expect me to believe that this thing, like, came to life and—"

"It didn't come to life, Scion. It was always alive. Stories are real. Everything in that book and every other book is alive," she said, gesturing to the shelves of books that lined the room. "They are and always have been alive, though they generally don't live in this dimension, which brings us back to Bluebeard."

Tessa stared at her dumbly and shook her head a little, as if her brain had come loose. "You can't expect me to believe that."

Snow shrugged. "I don't really care what you believe," she said sniffing and examining her nails for imperfections, of which there were none.

"Get out of my house."

"You can throw me out, Scion, but it won't get your minions rescued."

"Stop saying that! They're not minions! They're—wait—you're saying someone has actually, *literally* kidnapped them?"

Snow sighed dramatically, "Yes. Bluebeard. A big bad Story. Quite old, quite nasty.

Tessa swallowed her fear, but it tasted like acid. "And this person... thing...whatever...has Micah and Brand?"

"Yes."

Tessa stood up. She felt called to action. But then immediately sat back down again. She looked at Snow helplessly, "What do I do?"

Snow looked at her, a look of something resembling pity crossing her face briefly. “Well, you have all sorts of Scion skills, I’d say go get them back.”

“Scion skills?” Tessa looked at her hands and thought about her fight with the Troll. That would certainly explain things, if it wasn’t completely insane.

“What? You thought you fought off a Troll with your complete lack of charm?” She was dripping with sarcasm and then mumbled to herself, “They really should have sent someone more appropriate to do this.”

“What is *this*?” Tessa asked.

“Listen, Scion, I’m happy to give you the full rundown, but you might want to rescue your minions before they’re decapitated.”

“For the last time, they’re not—decapitated?!?”

“Yes, that’s what he does. His M.O. if you will.”

Tessa suddenly felt pale and feverish. “I have no idea what to do. Can I call the police? Or is there someone else we can call for help? Someone *else* with *skills*...or whatever?”

Snow nodded, “Perhaps, if we knew anyone to call. There are Stories that would help The Scion I suppose, but *I* don’t know them, certainly *you* don’t. For now, I suggest picking up a weapon and heading over there to free them yourself. You’re imbued with incredible power—you probably totally have a chance.”

“You think?”

“Probably,” Snow said shrugging.

Tessa sat quietly in the living room for two full minutes and then sprang from her chair. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?” Snow said, watching Tessa move across the room and pick up a baseball bat.

“Okay to your plan.”

“And that’s your weapon?”

“It will have to be, I don’t keep a stash of like, melee weapons on hand.”

Snow seemed bored and made a move toward the door, “Well, you should get on that,” she said, opening the door.

“Wait,” Tessa said, pointing the bat at her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” Snow said nonchalantly.

“Uh-uh. No way. You’re coming. You’re helping.”

Snow shook her head, “I have no idea what you’re talking about but the answer is a resounding no.”

Tessa tried to reason with her, “Listen, I don’t even know where they are, but you know, right?”

Snow nodded almost imperceptibly. “Yes, I tailed him after I saw them get grabbed outside.”

“Good,” Tessa said, holding the door open for Snow. “Then you can take me to them.”

“How about I draw you a map?” Snow suggested brightly. Tessa scowled in response. Snow walked through the door grumbling like a spoiled child. “Fine. I’ll take you there, but that’s the extent of it.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Tessa said, pulling the door closed behind her. Tessa and Snow climbed into the Jaguar in Tessa’s driveway and Snow took off through the damp and winding streets, taking hairpin turns with incredible speed. Tessa gripped the dash and tried not to complain in the hopes that Snow’s speed would get them there in time to save anyone and everyone from decapitation.

“So, why *did* you follow his car?” Tessa asked, digging her fingers into the plush leather on a particularly sharp corner.

Snow pretended to ignore her.

“I mean, you didn’t want to come help, you don’t seem to care for me a bit, why would you care that they were kidnapped?”

Snow sighed and then mumbled under her breath, “I suppose even I know it doesn’t hurt to have The Scion owe you one.”

Tessa almost smiled, but then scrunched up her eyebrows, “What’s this word you keep using—Scion?”

“It’s what you are.” Snow said, her white hair trailing behind them like a streak of light.

Tessa groaned. “Elaborate, please. You can certainly talk and drive at the same time, right?”

Snow pushed her sunglasses back on her head and rolled her eyes. “Tck. I hate history. Okay, here goes. Story is another dimension where all Fictional characters from all Fictional worlds live. And The Scion is the only descendent of a Mortal and a Story getting it on.”

Tessa eyed her like she was bonkers. “Lady, you have got to be kidding me.”

“Do you want to hear about this or not?”

Tessa raised her hands in surrender before bracing herself for another turn. “Fine, fine. Continue.”

“Okay, so some-thousand years ago or whatever a Mortal and a Story got it on—not as unusual as you’d think, by the way—however, in this case it produced a child, heretofore believed impossible and never having happened since blah, blah, blah. Thus, the offspring of that offspring has through the years been called The Scion. As the only creature that exists with both Mortal and Story blood, The Scion inherits a whole bunch of power on its 17th birthday —and—ta-dah!” she said, sarcastically gesturing in Tessa’s general direction.

“And you expect me to believe all that?”

“I don’t care what you believe, Scion, but quite plainly, the monsters under the bed are all real. All of them. And a whole lot of them hate you. So, you know, weigh your options or whatever.”

“And you’re supposed to be...The Snow Queen,” Tessa said.

“I’m not *supposed* to be anything. I AM The Snow Queen.”

“Never heard of you,” Tessa said, half just to piss her off.

Snow growled under her breath and then pulled to a stop outside a massive Victorian house not unlike Tessa’s but far larger and more ornate, set a ways back from the road and rather buried in a rural wooded lot. The nearest house was at least a mile away and it was getting dark. The whole set-up made Tessa nervous. She chewed her lip and looked at the house skeptically. “How did you just happen to see this go down by the way?”

Snow pursed her lips. “Well, I was following you.”

“Yes, but why?”

“The Story Court sent me. They wanted me to give you the drill, convince you to come to Story so they could give you the whole run down, begin the relationship on the right foot.”

“They want to start on the right foot and they sent you?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, haha. Very funny,” Snow said, thick with sarcasm, before reaching over Tessa to open the passenger door for her. “Okay, have fun!” she said cheerfully, as if dropping Tessa off for camp. Tessa wouldn’t have been surprised if Snow actually tried to push her out of the car. Before she could do so, Tessa grabbed Snow’s slender wrist mid-reach.

“You’re coming.”

“No way.”

“Yup.”

“I’m not a fighter,” Snow said, taking back her arm and massaging her delicate wrist.

“Well, there’s something we can agree on,” Tessa said. “So fine, you can do what you’re clearly best at. Go. Be pretty.” Tessa said, waving her hand in the general direction that was Snow. Snow straightened her shoulders and looked blankly at the woods in front of them. Tessa snatched the keys from the ignition and got out.

Snow scrambled out as well and hissed at Tessa over the top of the car. “Okay. Done. See? Pretty. Now give me the keys!”

“Be pretty *at him*,” Tessa said, nodding her head at the house.

“Eww. No.” Snow crinkled up her nose in disgust.

“Yes. I need a distraction. I’ll go in through the back, you keep him busy in the front.”

“You really have language comprehension problems, Scion, I said no,” Snow crossed her arms, faint hints of her shimmery sweater catching in the fading light.

“How about this,” Tessa said, holding up the car keys, “Do it or I throw your keys as far as my super strength will carry them into the woods.”

Snow glared and stamped her impossibly tall heels into the dirt like a child. The temperature around Tessa dropped at least ten degrees. She raised her eyebrows at Snow in surprise. Snow’s skin looked even harder and whiter, her eyes a crystalline blue, much brighter and sharper than before.

“Are you...are you doing that?” Tessa asked, flexing her hand as the cold bit at her skin and the temperature continued to drop around them.

Snow put her hands on her hips and harrumphed. Her eyes and skin softened slightly, and the temperature shot back up almost as quickly as it had dropped.

“Scion, you are already such a huge pain in my—”

“Yes, yes,” Tessa said. “Don’t worry, the feeling is mutual.” Tessa pocketed the keys, shooed Snow away and took off into the woods, bat in hand. She waited a moment in the thick trees to see what Snow would do. Snow’s shoulders fell into a little curl, but after a moment she straightened them and smiled broadly and began the hike up the winding drive, her heels periodically sinking into the dirt, her bright white hair and sweater like a beacon in the oncoming dark.

Snow climbed the front steps to the porch cursing under her breath all the way. When she reached the front door she rapped lightly, half hoping she had tailed them to the wrong house. If she was wrong

she could go back home to Story and a long cool bath and forget all this Scion nonsense. Unfortunately by her second knock, the door swung open wide and Snow was faced with Bluebeard. She hadn't seen him in at least a hundred years. Unfortunately, he looked the same. Recognition sparked in his face immediately and his eyes widened in something between shock and fear. Snow spoke first.

"Don't worry, I'm not here on official Court business."

"Then they don't know I'm here?"

Snow sighed, "I don't know and I don't care, I just know that it's not what brings me here."

Bluebeard brightened ever so slightly. "This is a social call?"

"You wish," Snow said, pushing past him into the house. He stepped to the side, too late since she was already inside, but he tried to make up for it by bowing slightly. Snow rolled her eyes. She'd hated this guy the last time she'd met him and it seemed nothing had changed. When he looked up, Snow gave him a tight smile and looked around the grand house, filled end to end with antiques and fussy-looking furniture.

"Nice place," she said, turning on him. "I see you've been abusing your Story talents."

Bluebeard closed the door and stood with her in the large foyer. "Well..." he began.

Snow cut him off with a wave of her hand. "I don't really care. Get me a drink already," she said sighing. Bluebeard escorted her into the parlor and went to a bar cart in the corner while Snow sat back on a dark red velvet couch, crossing her long legs in front of her and inspecting the room if only to cure her boredom.

"So, if you're not here on Court business, then what?" Bluebeard asked, a creepy grin spreading across his face, "I don't suppose you're in the market for a husband."

"Gross," Snow said, frowning. Out the far window, at the back of the house, Snow saw a flash of Tessa running across the lawn. She slit her eyes dangerously and looked back to Bluebeard. "Get yourself a drink too. This is going to take a while."

Tessa looped around the back and was happy to find there was no fence, just more woods, endless woods. She arced back around the house, trying to get a lay of the land before making her move.

Dropping through an unlatched basement window, Tessa landed with a soft thud on the concrete floor. The basement was piled high with paintings and furniture covered in white sheets. Tessa hurried across the

floor to the stairs near the center of the room. She made her way up the stairs, listening for Snow's melodic yet cutting voice drifting through the house, demanding more ice, then her lilting false laugh, the occasional baritone of what Tessa assumed was Bluebeard. Tessa opened the basement door and found herself just under the main stair in the foyer.

She slipped up the stairs to the second level to find a slew of doors off of a long hallway. Tessa opened door after door to find only empty, overly furnished rooms. Finally, she reached the end of the hallway where a pair of doors stood opposite one another. Both were locked. Under the one on the right, Tessa could hear a distinctive shuffle that could totally be a couple kidnapped someones trying to escape. Tessa laid down on the wood floor and peeked under the wide gap at the bottom. She saw Micah, her hands and feet bound in thick rope. Next to her, similarly tied but knocked unconscious, was Brand and another man, perhaps mid-30s, dark hair, attractive in a stuffy young professor kind of way, his glasses broken and a trickle of blood falling across his face. Tessa bit her lip.

"Micah," Tessa whispered under the door. Micah's head yanked up and she stopped struggling.

"Tessa?" she asked, shocked and confused, but clearly relieved.

"Stay back," Tessa whispered. "I'm coming in."

Micah scooted around a little behind the door and Tessa stood up. She sized up the door. She was pretty sure she could break it down if she still had whatever she'd had when fighting the Troll, but it would be loud. And then she'd have three tied-up hostages, two of them possibly unconscious, while Bluebeard came crashing up the stairs. But she didn't know how to pick a lock. She thought maybe she could just snap the doorknob off, but would that open the door or make it impossible to open without breaking it down? As she looked around considering her options, a key ring with at least a dozen large old-fashioned keys slid under the door right in front of her.

"Or I could go with the key," Tessa said to herself, picking them up and trying them in the lock one by one. On the sixth try, she got it and swung the door open to a smiling Micah, with Brand and the stranger just coming to.

"Ohmigod. What are you doing here?" Micah asked, blinking a tear or two from her eyes.

Tessa shook her head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she said.

Brand struggled to sit up. “Does it have anything to do with the fact that we saw you fighting some kind of monster in your backyard and you seem like you’re a superhero, that possibly IS made out of adamantium?”

Tessa shot him a look and then softened. “Maybe,” she admitted.

The man spoke as Tessa worked on Micah’s knots.

“Tessa. I am so sorry, getting taken hostage certainly was not how I wanted us to first meet.”

“Dude, who are you?” Tessa asked as she fought with Micah’s bonds.

“He’s the freaking high school counselor,” Brand said.

The man cut a look at Brand and then turned back to Tessa. “That’s true, but much more importantly, I’m your Advocate, Benjamin Bishop. I’m supposed to help you with the—,” he glanced at Micah and Brand and edited himself, “With—stuff—but we didn’t know it was you—between all the boarding schools you were bouncing around in Europe and your dad kept listing you under his last name, instead of your mother’s name—it wasn’t until I saw your corrected name on the school register and the photocopy of your passport in your file this afternoon that I realized who you were, and that you were here. I came rushing over to your house, but—”

Tessa managed to free Micah’s hands and started to work on Brand’s while Micah began on her feet. “Mr. Bishop, I appreciate all that, but let’s just deal with the present ordeal and figure out the rest later, okay?”

“Of course. You’re right.” He nodded before continuing, “I’m certain it’s Bluebeard you’re dealing with, he’s rumored to have been living in Lore for a long time. Add that to the large number of young women that fit the profile disappearing over the last few years and...wait...is he still here in the house?”

“Yes, I’ve got someone distracting him.” She looked at Brand and Micah, still trying to free their feet, as she began to work on Bishop’s bonds. “Do they know what’s going on?” she asked, nodding at Micah and Brand.

“I told them some, I felt I should given the circumstances, you know, kidnapped and bouncing around in the back of a van together. I’m not sure how much they believed, but whatever they saw at your house certainly put them in the mood for believing the unbelievable.”

“The headless women in some of the rooms helped too,” Micah piped in absently as she picked at the ropes.

“And also, you know, the beard,” Brand chimed in. Tessa glanced at him, a questioning look on her face. “I mean, it’s straight up blue,” Brand said, shrugging his shoulders.

Tessa shook her head, nobody was supposed to learn this much stuff this fast. It couldn’t be good for her brain. She tried to listen to Bishop explaining about Bluebeard while keeping one ear on Snow downstairs.

Snow was running out of things to say to Bluebeard and if he waxed poetic about one more useless antique tea set she was going stab him with a cup. She yawned as he pointed out the slight chipping on an otherwise flawless hand-painted set he’d acquired the previous weekend. He smiled at her as she stifled the yawn.

“I still don’t understand what you’re doing here, Snow. Not that I don’t enjoy the company.”

“Yes, well...that is something of a delicate matter,” Snow said, walking back toward the couch. She made the mistake of glancing at the stairs. Understanding broke across his ugly face.

She saw it and opened her mouth to scream for The Scion but only got out the first half before he hit her across the face with a silver serving tray.

Tessa spun around as Snow let loose a scream loud enough to practically tear out all the windows in the house.

“SCIIIIIIIOOOO—“

But it cut off abruptly, as if Snow had been silenced. Tessa looked into the hallway and heard someone coming up the stairs. Whoever it was, they sounded big. Tessa nodded at the three of them to help one another, and then kicked Micah the keys again before going into the hallway. Tessa gripped the bat with both hands and planted her feet some distance ahead of the door, fully prepared to take his head off if it came to it. Though she definitely hoped it wouldn’t.

As he reached the top of the stairs, she drew in a breath. He was indeed big. Broad-shouldered and at least six foot four with a face that looked like it had already been hit with a bat today. His dark-blue, bushy beard looked like he had slept face-first in a basket of blueberries. Tessa drew in a breath.

“So then, that is a *literal* blue beard we’re talking about,” she said. A flash of rage swallowed up his face and he ran at her. There was no room to swing the bat in the narrow hallway, so Tessa thrust it in front

of her and ran toward him as if it was a tiny battering ram and he, a castle gate. She swore that there was a hint of happiness in his eyes as she came at him. A second later, she understood why as he deflected her with seeming ease. She went crashing into the stairs that led to the next level.

Tessa nailed one of the steps with her chin, and her jaw snapped shut with such force, she was shocked her teeth didn't shatter. Rather than turning over to fight, she pushed herself up and ran up the stairs to the third level, hoping he would follow. He did but he was too fast, managing to grab her ankle just as she neared the top of the flight and yanking her back down a few steps. She came down on her jaw again, nearly shattering her teeth a second time. Tessa cursed under her breath and rolled onto her back just as he came at her. She was barely able to get her foot up in time to kick him in the gut, sending him flying down the stairs backwards. He landed with a crash but was back on his feet almost instantly. She groaned and scrambled up the last few stairs. She'd lost her bat on the second level and looked around frantically for a new weapon.

At the other end of the hall, a pair of swords hung on the wall, all decorative and shining. Tessa tried to make a run for them but as she launched herself across the long hall, Bluebeard's hand came up the stairs. Unfortunately, the rest of his body followed. Tessa lurched to a halt and backed up a few paces, looking desperately around. Short of a table with a bright green vase on her left, there was nothing but drywall.

"I knew this was a good idea," he said, standing up straight and taking Tessa in, his face both amused and utterly unimpressed.

"What idea?" Tessa asked, unsure.

"Grabbing your little pals to flush you out. I mean, look at you. So green. Totally untrained. Word is spreading from Story to Story about you like wildfire."

"And the word is?" Tessa asked, gritting her teeth.

"Well, there are a few, but first and foremost that you're a girl, and thus The Last of the Scions. And if you're the last, then killing you will close the border to Story. And I like this world. I like it very much. If I can end you, I can close the dimension border and never have to worry about Story coming to drag me back, kicking and screaming."

Tessa blinked, she hadn't actually expected a villain-esque soliloquy.

Bluebeard smiled wider and added, "Someone also might have mentioned that you were like a stupid baby lamb, ready for slaughter," he said, shrugging. Tessa narrowed her eyes and while he was gloating, she flung her arm at the giant vase. It soared at him with shocking speed and

hit him square in the face. The instant it connected, Tessa ran, launching herself over him. Her heels clipped the ceiling, but she cleared Bluebeard with ease and hit the hardwood a half-dozen feet behind him. Tessa tucked and rolled and stood up right in front of the wall-mounted swords. Nice! Tessa yanked one off the wall and as she did the other clattered to the floor. She grasped the sword with both hands and grinned at Bluebeard as he turned around to face her. She felt good.

“Yeah, well, now stupid baby lamb has a sword, Beard-o,” Tessa said, grinning.

Bluebeard growled at her and picked pieces of shiny green vase out of his face.

“That was 14th Century Ming, you brat.”

“So sue me,” Tessa said, shrugging. “But I don’t think you’re going to have the chance being all weaponless as you seem to be, what do you think of that?” But her witty repartee didn’t seem to phase him, and she was instead rewarded only with another creepy wide-mouthed grin.

“I’m not worried,” he said, reaching out his right hand and shouting, “La Colombe Noire!”

As soon as the words left his lips, there was a crackle of bluish-black light and a pinch of static. A massive double-headed battle axe that looked as much like a sharp, black bird as it did an axe appeared out of thin air and snapped into his outstretched hand. “You’ll see I’m covered in any situation, Scion,” he said, pointing the massive axe at her.

“Balls,” Tessa said under her breath, as he came at her with the axe.

Tessa, having never used a sword before in her life, felt certain she was no match for Bluebeard’s axe. The man looked like a freaking pro and a half. So instead of standing her ground, Tessa kicked down the door nearest to her and dove through it. She slammed it shut behind her just as he turned to follow her, but she’d broken the lock mechanism when she kicked it in, so she leaned against it to keep it shut. While her back was flush against the door, she felt the jolt of what must be the axe biting into the wood on the other side. She couldn’t stay there long or she’d end up with the blade buried in her back. Tessa reached out in the dark and felt a chair, which she dragged over by its leg and wedged between the door and a big wardrobe nearby. Tessa could hear bits of wood splintering off into the hallway as she skittered back from the door.

She stood blindly and groped around the room for a light switch in the dark. After a moment of panic, she found it and snapped it on.

The moment she did she wished she could take it back.

All around her hung the bodies of headless young women. At least a dozen women and girls hung from the ceiling like gruesome decorations. “Oh my God,” Tessa breathed, staggering backward. Bluebeard peered through the face-sized *Shining*-style hole he’d managed to chop into the door.

“Scion, meet my brides, er, former brides. Former brides, meet The Last Scion. I’m sure you’ll all get along famously. Especially when I add your head to the pile. In fact, Scion, you can be the jewel of my collection.”

Tessa plunged deeper into the room, away from the door and the bodies. She crashed into a window draped with a heavy, dark velvet curtain. Throwing the curtain back, Tessa yanked the window open, tearing it from the frame in her rush to escape. She heard the door to the room break. He would be through it in a moment. She slid out the window and edged herself around the gable toward the heavily steeped roof. In order to climb, she would have to lose the sword. She dropped it and clambered up the roof unsure if he would follow her or not (she guessed he probably would). At the top, she slid down the other side, catching her feet on the edge a moment before she went shooting off into oblivion. A matching gable met her on this side of the house and she wrenched open the window in front of her and climbed through, hoping more bodies didn’t await her. In the light of the moon, she realized she had found the girls’ missing heads. Tessa choked back something between a sob and a scream. She wanted to die. She wanted to just give up and go home. To forget all of this was happening.

To definitely keep her head.

But she thought of Micah and Brand, Bishop, and even Snow all trapped elsewhere in the house. She couldn’t imagine a way in which she could live with herself if she actually escaped and left them behind.

She’d be better off headless.

Tessa inched the door open and peered into the hall. The sword that had fallen off the wall shined a few feet from her. Bluebeard was nowhere to be seen. Tessa slipped into the hallway, feeling both exposed and claustrophobically trapped. She picked up the fallen sword and crept down the hall. She made her way down to the second floor, but when she stepped onto the landing he came barreling at her from behind. They crashed together into the railing, and their weight snapped the wood with

a sharp crack. To Tessa it was almost like they paused midair for a moment before they fell down to the ground floor, end over end. Tessa avoided landing directly on her head but still smacked the parquet floor with incredible force. Her vision spun as she looked for Bluebeard. He had landed similarly, and Tessa saw him lose his grip on the axe as it clattered across the floor toward her. Tessa reached for it, but as she did it disappeared right in front of her eyes. On her hands and knees, she stared at the place it used to be and heard him call out behind her.

“La Colombe Noire!”

She felt the same pop and crackle of energy as before and when she turned her head it was to see him standing over her, the axe magically in his hand again. A damn good trick. Tessa kicked him in the stomach from her low position, and he rocketed backward, smashing into a small table, sending all the things atop it crashing to the ground. He looked at them and grimaced. “You’re ruining all my things!”

Tessa scrambled away from him, catching a glimpse of Snow, nothing but a silvery-white unconscious streak on the thick, red carpet. Tessa’s eyes searched madly for a replacement weapon. Her sword had been thrown deep into the parlor, her bat was still on the second floor, she was totally exposed. As Bluebeard swung the axe toward her, Bishop appeared from out of nowhere and jumped onto Bluebeard’s back. He was half the size of Bluebeard, but he held on tightly as the giant man reared back and thrashed.

“Tessa, run!” Bishop shouted. Tessa scrambled into the parlor and grabbed the sword but as she did so she heard a horrible snap behind her that turned her blood to ice. When she whirled to face Bluebeard she saw Bishop on the ground at Bluebeard’s feet, his neck turned grotesquely, his eyes wide open and fixed. Tessa blinked stupidly at the sight of him.

He was dead.

It had taken only an instant and he was dead.

It was so fast.

There wasn’t even any blood.

This man Tessa barely knew had risked his life for her and now he was dead. So many thoughts and emotions swarmed Tessa that she didn’t know where to put any of it. Bluebeard stared down at her, utterly unimpressed.

“Was that your Advocate, child? Tut, tut, what a shame. And what a truly terrible Scion you’re turning out to be, last or otherwise.” He

slammed the axe down into the thick carpet narrowly missing one of Tessa's feet in the process.

Tessa half-ran half-crawled through the room, losing her sword in the process. Bluebeard's axe whizzed through the air so close behind her that she could feel the breeze it created. When she reached the dining room, Tessa dived under the giant wood table just as Bluebeard swung again and took a huge chunk out of the side. He shouted something Tessa didn't understand, but that sounded decidedly like a curse.

“TOVA! Tovaïen ticcht!”

Tessa covered her face with her arms as he stood above her hacking the thick table into bits with his axe. When he broke through, she looked up to see him staring down at her, red-faced and breathing heavily. He looked completely insane and absolutely delighted with himself, the axe raised over his head, ready to deliver what could only be a killing stroke. Tessa could not believe she was going to be killed right now, here, in this stupid living room.

What a disappointment she must have been.

Tessa clenched her eyes shut, was this really how it all ended?

FIVE

Tessa opened her eyes as Bluebeard's axe came speeding toward her, no more thick, wood table left to shield her. If she was going to die right now, she was at least going to have her eyes open for it.

A blur of dark grey fur flew past Tessa's face and Bluebeard's blade landed just to the left of Tessa's head, deep in the carpet and shards of table. Tessa reached for the axe but as she grasped the hilt it vanished under her fingers. "Damn!" she cursed, glancing behind her to see a giant, grey wolf pacing in front of Bluebeard as he struggled to get back up. The animal barely even fit in the parlor, its tail knocking into furniture as it paced predatorily about the room. It turned its massive head to Tessa as she extricated herself painfully from the wood and glass mess in the dining room and bared its teeth at her.

Bluebeard called out for his weapon again and though the wolf moved, it couldn't quite avoid the axe entirely in the small space, and the axe clipped its furry shoulder. It howled and snapped at Bluebeard as he yanked the axe back, a little spray of blood coming with it. The wolf shuddered away, limping, favoring its damaged side. While Bluebeard was distracted by the massive creature, Tessa figured she'd best take her shot, and so she lowered her shoulder and ran at him. They went crashing into a glass coffee table, smashing it into painful bits as they landed, fortunately with Bluebeard underneath and taking the brunt of the impact. Even from beneath her, he tried to swing the axe but Tessa grabbed at it so that they were both holding it, wrestling for control. They rolled together out of the table and then, as Snow woke less than a foot away from them and drew back in shock, they worked their way to a standing position, neither releasing the axe.

Despite his size advantage, Tessa could feel she was stronger than he was. If only she could find a way to throw him off balance, she thought she might be able to gain the upper hand. And so when he pushed his size at her, leaning her back, she let him, and when he overcompensated, leaning too far forward, she turned her body slightly and pushed the head of the axe downward. Just when he had almost lost his balance, she drew upon all her strength and twisted back into him, thrusting powerfully with her right arm, the hand closest to the blade,

and driving it with incredible speed right through his neck with a satisfying sluishing sound.

And his head went sailing across the parlor.

Snow watched as Tessa angled the axe and then used the full force of her strength to send it through Bluebeard's neck. It was an incredibly complicated move requiring not just strength, but also an innate understanding of battle. The blade connected as if Tessa had been doing this all her life, not just a few hours. Snow blinked her eyes and clutched her own slender neck self-consciously, shuddering as Bluebeard's head landed with an impotent, bloody thud some dozen feet away on the red carpeting.

"Storykiller," Snow breathed, barely a whisper.

Tessa looked at her with sharp but weary eyes. "What did you say?" Tessa stood, spent and bloody in the middle of the parlor, the axe still in one hand, her face somehow both pale and flushed. Snow stared at Tessa, her hand still on her own neck, her eyes fixed and wide. "What did you say?" Tessa repeated.

Snow blinked and tried to regain her composure. "Storykiller," she said again, barely louder than the first time. "That's what they call you," she said, looking back at the Bluebeard head and blinking again, as if she hoped to erase what she had seen with her eyelids. "To your face they'll call you Scion, but behind your back, it's Storykiller. It's always been Storykiller," Snow looked at Tessa, "I've just...I've just never seen it." Snow continued holding Tessa's gaze for a moment and then looked away, as if wishing herself somewhere else.

Tessa closed her eyes and tilted her head back, letting out an exhausted sigh. She was bone-tired, not to mention more than a little terrified by both what she'd seen and what she'd done. She had just killed a man. And gotten another one killed. And yet both somehow seemed natural and normal and like something that sometimes just happened on Tuesdays. Tessa looked at her hands. Elaborate patterns of blood, both beautiful and deadly, laced across her skin almost as if she was wearing intricately woven, elbow-length, bright red gloves. She shook her head. What was wrong with her? How could she think for even a moment that it was beautiful? Despite the blood, she reached her hand out to help Snow up, but Snow recoiled back, rejecting her.

"How is that possible?" Tessa asked.

"What?" Snow asked, still disoriented and shaken.

“I’m guessing you’ve been around a long time, how can this be the first death you’ve ever seen?”

Snow continued staring at Bluebeard’s head. “I’ve never lived in the Mortal world before, so I’ve never seen a Mortal die. And Stories don’t die.”

Tessa pointed the axe at the dead body. “Clearly they do.”

“No, I...” Snow stood up and smoothed her clothing, averting her eyes from both the body and the detached head. “They can’t. Not by anyone but you. You’re the only person in all of this world, or mine, that can actually kill a Story,” she said. It was the most serious and non-snarky she’d been since Tessa had met her. Snow didn’t strike Tessa as someone sincere, but she seemed genuine in this moment.

“That, that can’t be true,” Tessa stumbled over the words.

“I assure you it is. No mere Mortal has the power to kill a Story, and no Story can truly kill another Story.”

“What do you mean ‘truly?’”

“Just that we give it a try—with alarming regularity, in fact—but it never holds, not permanently. Everyone eventually comes back. It’s like—think of your Mortal video games—even if we manage to kill each other, we eventually—*reset*, for lack of a better word. We don’t have the power to erase one another the way a true death would.”

“I...” Tessa started but she had no idea where to go. She tried again, “Wait, what do you mean by *erase*?”

“When a Story truly dies, it means their Mortal story dies too. You’ve not only killed Bluebeard, you’ve erased him. His Fiction no longer exists.”

“Meaning what?”

“Killing him obliterates all record of him. He’s a memory only you and Stories carry now. No Mortal will know, before, now, or ever again, of his Story. And perhaps worse than that, everyone else from his tale is now essentially a ghost. Trapped in a Story that no longer exists, they’re like the walking dead, wandering without a sense of self or purpose. You have destroyed their home, what breathed them into existence. You’ve made them orphans. It’s why we fear The Storykiller above all else—that we will become doomed shells attached to a Story you have destroyed.”

Tessa sat down on a nearby chair, afraid if she didn’t sit that she might faint. She laid the axe across her lap, and touched one bloody hand to her swimming head. She looked up at Snow with hawkish eyes. “You’re lying.”

Snow shook her head solemnly, "I'm really not, Scion."

"I, I didn't mean to do that."

Snow softened a bit, seeing how hard she was taking it, "You didn't really have a choice. What would you have done differently? He was going to kill you and your minions. And he killed your Advocate, the one who should have been your teacher. He left you no choice. Not to mention, I'm quite sure he was a serial killer of Mortals, not that I care about *that*," she added at the last moment.

Tessa lowered her head and spoke more to herself than Snow. "Yes. There were women upstairs, a lot of them. But I, I don't know. Maybe there was another way."

And at that moment Micah and Brand crashed into the room, Brand with Tessa's abandoned bat, Micah, strangely, with a pair of wooden drumsticks, their faces ready for battle, or something. But when they saw the headless body, soaked bloody carpet, and ashen head they cringed. Brand's face had the look of someone who had just painfully swallowed a throat full of vomit, and Micah turned a pale sickly green. Tessa thought she might faint.

"I killed Bluebeard," Tessa said.

Micah and Brand looked at Tessa blankly and asked in unison, "Who?"

Tessa looked from her friends to Snow, and Snow lifted her shoulders lightly as if resigned, a sad little shrug.

"See?" Snow said.

SIX

Tessa stared at Snow. “What do we do now?”

Snow looked at a clock up on the wall. “They’ll be here any moment.”

“Who?” Brand asked, still staring at the headless body.

As if to answer his question, there was a snap of electricity and a hum, the hair on Tessa’s arms stood up, and a flash of bluish light illuminated the room. Tessa shielded her eyes against what best resembled a strike of blue lightning. When she could see again, there was another woman standing in the room with them—tall and beautiful, clad in luxurious dark brown leather from knee-high boots to a fitted motorcycle jacket. She wore thick leather gloves with steel fingertips that glinted in the light as she pushed a strand of hair from her face. A longbow made of rich brown wood was slung over her shoulder, and a quiver of arrows was strapped securely to her back. A mass of shiny golden-blond hair, bound loosely in a thick braid, hung down her back. She was as impossibly beautiful as Snow, though different, her skin the color of a rosy peach, her eyes a much darker, stormier blue. Beside her stood a massive dog that Tessa at first assumed was the wolf that had saved her from Bluebeard’s fatal stroke. But this was not a wolf and it was smaller, which wasn’t saying much as its shoulder reached the woman’s hips. The dog’s fur was thick and deep black, its paws large and powerful. Its eyes glowed a steady orange-red that looked not unlike two tiny fires in its face. The woman and her dog stared at Bluebeard’s body, then looked to Snow. Although Tessa could not read her expression, it made her shudder.

Brand spoke, perhaps on accident, from the corner of the room where he huddled with Micah. “Whoa.”

The woman’s eyes snapped to Brand and Micah, and her expression was now clear displeasure.

“Snow?” she asked, a warning tone in just that one word.

“Tal.” Snow said, clipped, clearly not biting.

“Devlo. What a mess,” Tal said flatly, the dog moving from her side to investigate Bluebeard’s body.

“No kidding,” Snow said, “I told The Court we should have waited for you to return. This isn’t exactly my skill set.”

“Clearly,” Tal said, taking stock of the room. “You’re in the Mortal world for half a day and we have a dead 300-year-old Story *and* two mortal witnesses?”

“And a murdered Advocate,” Snow added, nodding toward the foyer. Tal left the room and came back a moment later, the dog trotting at her side.

“Tova,” Tal said in that same strange language that Tessa was sure she had never heard before. She watched Tal carefully. “Hecuba, search the house,” Tal said, nodding to the dog who took off.

“And, of course, there’s that,” Snow said, gesturing disdainfully in Tessa’s general direction.

“What?” Tessa asked, looking down at herself and then back at Snow.

The woman named Tal really looked at Tessa for the first time and let out a breath of shock, “Yae Simane.”

Snow nodded, “I know. She’s The Last.”

Tal turned to Snow, “Does The Court know?”

“Not yet.”

“We must get her there.”

Tessa was fed up. “Stop talking about me like I’m not here!” she shouted. Neither Snow nor Tal paid her any mind. Tessa looked at Brand and Micah, “You guys didn’t see a giant grey wolf anywhere did you?” They both shook their heads. Tessa returned her focus to Snow as she began talking about Brand and Micah again.

“What about her minions?” Snow asked, jutting her chin at Brand and Micah, who didn’t seem to like being talked about either but were arguably even more freaked out than Tessa.

“Well, we can’t take them to Story,” Tal said, her tone suggesting it was out of the question.

“Yes, but then what do we do about them?” Snow said, her teeth gritted, “They have seen far too much.”

Tessa had just about had it and so she yelled at the top of her lungs, “Knock it off!” When Tal and Snow finally looked at her, she added, “And nobody is going anywhere.”

Tal looked at Tessa in a bored way. “Kid, you’ve killed a 300-year-old Story, your Advocate is dead, you’ve got two mortal witnesses, and you’re The Last Tovaian Scion. There’s no way you’re not going to Story.”

Tessa opened her mouth to protest again and Hecuba, who had rejoined the group, growled at her. Tal looked at Snow. “Leave the

Mortals here. Maybe Morgana can whip something up to free them of these traumatic memories later on,” she said, casting another glance at Micah and Brand. Micah spoke up this time.

“Um...that sounds a lot like brainwashing or something. I’d like to vote for no brainwashing.”

Tal ignored her and turned to Snow, “Hecuba says the house is clear. I’m opening the doorway.” Snow nodded almost imperceptibly and stepped back. Tal reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small blue pebble made of glass. It looked like an average marble any kid might have. She held it between two steel tipped fingers and then threw it into the air a dozen feet in front of her, shouting, “Yonep ge rupto!”

Tessa was starting to think they were making up these words. They *sounded* made up.

The pebble froze in midair (very unlike a kid’s average marble) and then blue-white lightning snaked out of it, leaving behind a flickering blue doorway of light in the middle of the room. Snow stepped through the doorway and disappeared. Tal gestured to Tessa. “C’mon.”

Tessa shook her head. “No freaking way.”

Tal sighed slightly, like she had been here before. “Don’t make me threaten to hurt your friends, okay?” Hecuba cast a growl at Micah and Brand, her eyes sparking even more brightly in her face.

“Fine, fine,” Tessa said, raising her hands and realizing she still had the axe. She set it down, and it promptly disappeared. Tessa suddenly wished she wasn’t covered in blood as she headed into whatever lay beyond that door. She stepped forward half a step and then looked at Micah and Brand. “I’m really sorry I got you guys into this. Really.”

Brand shook his head. “What are you talking about? You saved our lives.”

Tessa smiled weakly. “You guys are nice.” She stepped forward and, after a glare at Tal, walked through the doorway. Tal followed, Hecuba on her heels. No sooner had the dog disappeared, then Brand stepped toward the doorway.

“We’re going, right?”

Micah bit her lip, unsure.

“C’mon, Mike. If for no other reason than Tessa’s the first friend we’ve made in, like, a million years, and she saved our lives, and she’s in there alone.”

Micah nodded and grabbed his arm. The doorway was already shrinking as they jumped through.

Tessa opened her eyes to find herself in a hallway that actually seemed more like a cave. The walls were intricately carved but dark and windowless and made completely of rock. The markings on the walls made no sense to her but somewhere deep inside something pricked at her, like a memory she had never actually experienced. The space was illuminated only by candles, and the effect was both eerie and magical at once, with shadows dancing across the walls.

Snow stood to the side, waiting anxiously. Tal and Hecuba appeared just behind Tessa. She was about to open her mouth and say something bitchy to Tal when Micah and Brand appeared as well.

Tal saw them and began to shout what could only be cuss words. "Tovaien kiaane! Neyersichita!"

Hecuba growled.

Tessa knew they shouldn't have followed her but she couldn't help but smile at them. She was still mad scared, but now just a fraction less. "Thanks, guys."

They shrugged their shoulders as if it was nothing, which made Tessa chide herself for writing them off as nice and adorable. They were both those things, but they were so much more. There was steel in them and fierce loyalty and goodness, nobility and incredible bravery to have followed her here, wherever *here* was.

Tal looked down and spoke directly to Hecuba. "I'm not sticking around for this." The dog snuffled in agreement and followed her into the darkness. Snow trailed after her, yelling something in the strange language Tessa couldn't make out.

A voice behind Tessa rang out, and she whirled around to see that they were not in fact in a hallway but rather at the end of one. Just behind them was an entrance to a grand open space. The room, like the hallway attached to it, was shaped from what still seemed to Tessa to be a massive cave, windowless and mysterious, and well, *cavernous*. But it also resembled the inside of a magnificent castle, with a ceiling soaring up high above her and decorations etched into the walls, patterns swirling deeply through the floor and ceiling, jewels set into those patterns so that everything sparkled.

The room was mostly bare, relying on the splendor of its jeweled walls and floor to do the work. Except candles. There were candles everywhere, like bullshit romantic, chick-movie style, just *layers* of candles. It must have taken, like, half the day just to light all of them. The only other thing in the room was a massive dais and on it, sitting in chairs that were more like thrones positioned behind a massive stone table,

were four figures robed in hooded cloaks of such a dark purple that they appeared almost black in the candlelight. One chair on the end was empty. The man at the center squinted at Tessa.

Tessa remained in the shadows, anxious about what horrible thing would happen next and not terribly eager to give him a better look at her. The man stood and threw up his arms theatrically, his big robed sleeves falling down to somewhere just below his elbows, his gloved hands spread wide and dramatically above him.

“Battle. Step forward, for you are *The Scion!*” his voice boomed, echoing off the stonewalls. Tessa opened her mouth to speak but found she had no idea what to say. She stumbled forward, away from Brand and Micah, who stood dumbstruck, as if turned to stone themselves. Tessa peered at the man to see if she could make him out from under the cloak, but all she could see was golden-blond hair peeking out from beneath his hood. Tessa took a few more steps into the light, closer to the dais, and Brandon and Micah followed her, keeping a slight distance, their mouths still hanging open.

The robed figure spoke again, throwing his arms open even wider, attempting even more grandeur than the first time (which was saying something).

“Yes, Battle. Welcome to The Court! We have been awaiting you—” he stopped midsentence and then threw back his hood and narrowed his eyes at Tessa as she came fully into the light. He squinted at her and then, his hands on his hips, and in a much less impressive, authoritative voice said, “Wait. She’s...she’s a girl.” The three other robed figures leaned forward intently. He looked back at them, confused. “Why is The Scion a girl?!” he said to the others, almost as if he was offended. The rest of The Court threw their own hoods off and looked at her more closely, equally surprised.

Tessa walked closer to the dais, unsure, and Brand and Micah inched forward behind her. “Where are we?” Tessa asked.

The figures had been talking amongst themselves since the proclamation that Tessa was a girl, and Tessa had just decided to ignore it, annoying as it was. The man with the blond hair, and Tessa could now see, an older man’s once handsome visage, turned back to her. He recoiled slightly, and Tessa could tell he was looking at Brand and Micah.

“Oh great gods! Why does she have minions?!” he whined to the others. “Since when does The Scion come with minions?!”

Brand raised his hand tentatively in protest, “Um, we are definitely not minions.” But then he chewed his lip and looked around unsure. “Okay, I am like fifty percent sure we’re not minions.” Tessa looked at him and he shrugged his shoulders. Micah just stared back, her eyes huge behind her glasses.

“Then what are you?” The head figure asked haughtily.

Brand shrugged. “I don’t know, just along for the really weird ride?”

The man kept staring at them but muttered to the handsome, dark-skinned, dark-eyed man next to him, “Sounds like minions to me.”

The handsome man nodded in agreement, “Mmmhmmm.”

Snow came back into the room, now wearing a long white gown perched precariously low on her shoulders and made, so far as Tessa could tell, of actual diamonds. She walked toward the dais, her own dark purple cloak in hand, and sent an ‘I told you so’ glance at Tessa.

“See? Minions.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. Snow ascended the dais, put on her own cloak to match the others, which seemed ridiculously formal, and sat in the only empty chair at the far end of the table. Fed up, Tessa stomped her foot like an angry child, forcing them to acknowledge her.

“Hey! Can you get it together up there!? What the hell is going on? Where are we?” The robed figures turned, and a few more whispers escaped before the blonde man shushed them.

“Okay. Yes. Sorry about that. A bit of confusion here. We weren’t expecting you.”

“Your people brought me here,” Tessa said angrily.

“Well, yes. Yes, we did send for you, but it’s your birthright that brought you. Traditionally on his 17th birthday, The Scion is activated, and when that happens, we bring him here—to the dimension of Story. It’s just...usually you’re a boy.”

Tessa crossed her arms. “I’m *always* a girl.”

“Yes, of course,” he sniffed. “I mean, usually *The Scion* is a boy. Since you are, well, *not*, then that means you are something we have read about only in prophecy. Cryptic prophecy most of us stopped believing in a long time ago. You’re something called ‘The Last Scion,’” he said, with heavy emphasis on the word ‘last.’

Brand leaned forward to Tessa, “Oh yeah, *that’s* not too ominous.”

Tessa ignored him and tried to address the figures again. “And who are you?” she asked, getting angrier by the second. The man smiled broadly.

“I am Midas. I am the leader of The Court,” he said. When Tessa remained unimpressed, he sniffed again, trying to hide his disappointment. Tessa nodded at the rest.

“And they are?”

“The rest of The Court—at the end is The Frog Prince, this is Morgana, this is Aladdin, and of course you have already met Snow.” Tessa took them in. The Frog-man could only be described as just that, a Frog-Man. He stood and sat and gestured like a man, but he was simply a frog. Giant head and eyes, green skin, the whole package. The woman Midas called Morgana was stunning. Dark-eyed and dangerous-looking, with black hair that spilled over her shoulders and back like an overturned bottle of ink. Aladdin was painfully handsome, all enigmatic dark eyes and slicked back hair. Brand sucked in a breath behind her.

“What?” she whispered.

He sidled up to her. “They’re dressed up as fictional characters,” he breathed. “The Frog Prince, Morgan Le Fay, King Midas, Aladdin, Snow...I don’t know...”

“Snow White?” Micah broke in.

“No, the look is wrong—The Snow Queen maybe?” Brand posited. Tessa nodded but kept quiet.

Midas laughed. “Silly Mortal minion, we’re not “dressed up” as Fiction, we ARE Fiction, or Stories, if you will. And that is where you are, in Story. It’s where we live, where all Fictional characters live.”

Tessa nodded. She wanted to laugh out loud and search the room for hidden cameras, but she’d also gotten superpowers, fought a Troll in her backyard, decapitated a guy named Bluebeard, seen an unbelievably giant dog, and an even more unbelievably giant wolf, felt a woman change the temperature in the air with her thoughts, and been teleported to another location via a shining blue doorway, so evidence was pretty piled up in favor of Fictional characters being real. She did worry that Brand and Micah’s heads might explode, however.

Instead, Brand’s eyes lit up. “Whoa. Like, Batman? Batman is real!?”

Midas sighed. “Yes. He’s real. And frankly? He’s kind of a dick.”

From behind Midas, Aladdin shook his head in an emphatic “No” and then very clearly mouthed, “HE’S AWESOME.”

Brand’s face could only be described as elated.

The dark-haired woman, Morgana, came down from the dais. Tessa felt herself instinctively tensing up. The woman had a calculated expression on her face, as if she was approaching a baby deer that might be easily startled.

“Battle. We apologize for the frustration you must feel. Even for those that have been prepared, which you clearly have not, this can all come as a bit of a shock,” she smiled beatifically.

“But what is *this*?” Tessa asked.

“*This* is your birthright,” Morgana said. “The Scion has always been an important part of our world, bridging the gap between us, fighting to keep things balanced, policing the two worlds as is sometimes necessary. There is, as Midas said, a prophecy that the last of The Scions, who have all been male until now, would be female. So that means you’re the much vaunted ‘Last Scion’ that some Stories have been waiting for—well, for a very long time.”

“Because when I’m dead you guys won’t be able to get back and forth or something, right?” Tessa asked. Morgana pursed her lips and Tessa pushed. “Because that’s what Bluebeard said.”

Behind her, Brand looked at Micah and whispered. “Who’s Bluebeard?” Micah shrugged in response.

Morgana seemed to choose her words with care, “Yes, it is believed by most Stories that the death of The Last Scion will close the boundaries between our worlds permanently. Some Stories will want that very much and some will do anything to prevent it,” Morgana paused and glanced at Snow, “But surely Snow has told you all of this.”

Snow screwed up her mouth, “Well, about that.”

Morgana’s gaze hardened. “Yes?”

“I gave her the Cliff Notes. But we’re actually here because Tal was summoned by a Story death. The Scion killed Bluebeard.”

And then the shit hit the fan.

SEVEN

“She did what?!?” Midas roared from the dais, incensed. For her part, Morgana stepped back half a step, as if Tessa was poison. “How dare you!?” Midas continued, all thunder and fury.

“How dare he try to kill me,” Tessa said.

This shut everyone up for a minute.

Snow spoke up finally, though she clearly didn’t want to. “In fairness to The Scion, he had kidnapped her minions and her Advocate. He did try to kill her, likely because he wanted the border closed, and he had been killing Mortals in some numbers. He also killed her Advocate before The Scion was able to defeat him.”

The group took a long moment to consider this, and it gave Tessa time to think about how much trouble she might be in. What could they do to her? She didn’t know the rules here, and she’d walked almost willingly into a totally uncontrollable situation, and she had to worry about Micah and Brand, too.

Somewhere inside her an ache for escape began.

“Still,” Midas said weakly.

Morgana leaned against the dais and held her head as though she had a terrible headache all of a sudden.

“Still, what?” Tessa said. “Guy was a killer and also a complete douche bag. I didn’t set out to kill him, but I wasn’t about to let him kill me just because it’s against rules I didn’t even know existed.”

Morgana stood back up. “Scion, we understand. It’s just, he was an old Story, this doesn’t happen everyday, the death of a Story. Snow has explained to you what this means?”

Tessa nodded. “She has,” and then opened her mouth to apologize, but felt a surge of anger over the whole situation and went on the offensive instead. “He didn’t leave me much choice.”

Morgana looked to Snow as if to confirm the situation. and Tessa registered an almost imperceptible nod from Snow. Wow, you really couldn’t count on The Snow Queen to have your back. I mean, technically, she’d backed Tessa up, but *barely*. It made Tessa even angrier.

“Maybe if I had been the slightest bit prepared it could have been avoided.” Tessa said flatly, not sure who to blame, but desperate to share blame she didn’t understand.

“Well, if anyone is to blame for that, Scion, it’s your own mother,” Midas practically spit.

And with her mother thrown down into the mud with such disdain, Tessa fully lost it. “What did you say?” she asked through gritted teeth, practically rolling up her sleeves as she prepared to punch Midas into oblivion.

Morgana stepped in her path, forcing Tessa to pull up short. “Forgive him, Scion, he has no mother. He does not understand the impact of his words.” Tessa looked at Morgana though her vision clouded with tears.

“What does he know about my mother—what is he talking about?”

Midas opened his mouth to speak again and Morgana hissed at him, “If you so much as open your mouth again I will permanently remove it!” Tessa could have sworn there was a flash of greenish-gold in her otherwise dark eyes. Morgana turned back to Tessa. “We apologize, Scion. Your mother should never even be mentioned.”

“Then why—” Tessa began.

Aladdin stepped in. “Midas only meant to say that, for whatever reason, your parents did not tell you about this. Your mother surely knew, or suspected, and they have chosen to keep it from you. You have moved around much, have you not?”

Tessa nodded, her fists still clenched.

“So it was hard to find you. Even for your Advocate we must assume, since he did not find you until today.”

Tessa’s head swam with information and emotion. She just wanted to get away from these people.

“The past is the past, Scion,” The Frog said. “What matters now is that you get to work and that you are trained and protected, so that you can defend yourself, preferably without using your gifts to kill Stories.”

““Yeah, about that...” Tessa said, looking at her hands that seemed to almost hum with power.

“Standard superhero package, no need to thank us,” Midas said, slumping in his seat like a spoiled child as Morgana threw another warning look his way.

“You people thought I was going to thank you?”

“Well, no, but we didn’t think you’d be so incensed, child. Besides, it’s not like we actually gave it to you. Surely you felt the power come to you today when you turned 17?”

“If by ‘felt’ you mean puked up everything I’ve ever eaten, then yeah, sure, I *felt* that.” Tessa continued to stare at her hands. “You realize that in the last six hours since I got these fancy superpowers two things have tried to kill me, I’ve gotten an innocent man killed, my friends have been kidnapped, and my house has been ransacked, right? Why on earth would I thank you? Great power, great responsibility, yadda, yadda, yadda. I mean, I assume these superpowers come with some kind of expectation? That’s what you’ve been going on about, right? You’re not just going to send me on my way—this doesn’t look like a place where I just get sent on my way with badass gift baskets.” Tessa paused to look at the court. “What if I just say no?”

“Scion, it’s best not to waste time denying something you cannot change,” Morgana said, before adding, “When word gets out that The Last Scion has been called, things will only get more dangerous, I’m afraid.”

Tessa eyed her, everyone, skeptically.

Aladdin spoke up. “Scion—”

“Don’t call me that,” Tessa snapped. “My name is Tessa.”

“Apologies, Fair Tessa,” Aladdin said, hands raised in surrender. “But there is no denying birthright. The powers, the destiny, all of that ‘yadda yadda’ you mentioned? We cannot do anything about it, regardless of how you feel about it or us. It comes to you regardless. You are the one.”

“Balls,” Tessa said under her breath and glanced at Brand and Micah standing there, stunned. Snow stood up and descended the dais, her glittering white dress flashing under the robe as she moved. Her purring voice was like clinking icicles, irritating clinking icicles.

“Scion. Listen to me. Everyone is handling you with kid gloves. You are no kid. Or if you were, you are one no longer. You’re going to fight to save your world and ours, to keep the balance, there’s no way around this, so just deal already.”

Tessa clenched her fists and Morgana seized on her hesitation.

“And it’s not just that, Scion. Something has been happening in Lore.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t know exactly,” Aladdin said, “But we’ve had some very concerning reports coming in—some missing Mortals, some unaccounted for Stories.”

“So they just live there, in Lore? Just running around pretending to be Mortal?” Tessa asked, trying to make all this new information fit in her head.

“They are not tied to Lore, they can go anywhere in the Mortal world, and many do. But many also stay in Lore because there is a dimensional rift there, and it’s comforting to be close to home even when in another dimension,” Aladdin explained.

“So what, they have, like, jobs and stuff?”

“Some of them, those that can pass or have magic to help them pass. Others have, let’s call it family money. Stories, just like Mortals, come in all varieties, Scion,” The Frog said.

Tessa lowered her head and closed her eyes. She took some deep breaths. There was so much to know.

And it was all freaking crazy.

Micah and Brand watched her closely and just as she opened her mouth to speak, Midas sighed again from his throne.

“I don’t know why you are all even bothering with her. What can she do? She’s just a girl. She’s untrained, clearly irresponsible. The idea of her being able to help us at all is ridiculous. Let the child go. Really, what do we care if she gets eaten by lions, tigers, bears, or worse? We have adult problems, not bratty untrained Last Scion ones.”

Tessa’s fists clenched, her eyes narrowed in anger. The entire court was glaring at Midas when Tessa looked up at him, seething.

“Nobody ever wants to hear from the guy telling the truth,” Midas said, gesturing dismissively at everyone. Tessa relaxed her hands.

“You know what? He’s right. I don’t want any part of this. I can’t help you and I kind of don’t want to. So—good luck!” She spun on her heel and headed for the hallway.

“Scion, wait!” Morgana called.

“What are you worried about, Morgana? It’s not like she can leave anyway,” Midas said, unconcerned.

Tessa looked back over her shoulder at him, her voice steely. “Wanna bet?” Tessa raised her arms in the air, looked toward the ceiling, and screamed, “Return me!” As she said it, there was a crackle of blue light and a snap of power and the doorway made of brilliant, glowing blue stood before her.

“Oh great gods,” Morgana breathed.

“Tova,” Snow whispered, stunned.

“She...she opened a door. How can she do that? Can a Scion open a door?” Aladdin asked, clearly shaken.

Morgana shook her head. "Not until now."

"Scion," Morgana pleaded, "Let's not be rash, there are many things still to discuss."

Tessa looked at Brand and Micah. "You coming non-minions?"

"Oh, hell yes," they said in unison. And the trio walked through the blue gateway, which swallowed them up, snapping closed behind them.

Gape mouthed, the Court stared at the empty space where, just moments before, the three teens had vanished. Morgana, closest to the closed gateway, turned to them, a helpless look on her face. Aladdin sat down, defeated.

Morgana whirled on Midas. "You idiot!" she shouted and then unclasped her cloak and cast it aside on a chair, revealing a glittering red dress, too clingy and low-cut to be considered PG-13. She sat on a chair and leaned forward, massaging her temples. "Tova," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

"I don't know what all of you are so worried about," Midas grouched.

Aladdin glared at him. "She has been The Scion for less than a day and she has killed a powerful 300-year-old Story. You do not think that is worthy of concern?"

Midas tried to shrug and looked to Snow for support. "Was it really that impressive?"

Snow looked at him. "To be honest, I have never seen anything like it in all my days."

"We didn't even have a chance to tell her about the war," Frog said.

"I doubt it will matter," Midas said dismissively.

Morgana rolled her eyes. "Only an absolute fool would think that The Last Scion is not going to play a part in this war. Things are going to come to a head much more quickly now."

Snow removed her own cloak and spoke to everyone but Midas, "We need someone from Story to be close to her."

Midas perked up, seizing on the idea, "Yes!"

Everyone ignored him.

"A spy?" Frog ventured.

Snow chose her words carefully. "An...emissary." Frog and Aladdin nodded.

Midas tried to join in. “Who can we use? A Story that’s already in the Mortal world?” he ventured.

Morgana shook her head. “No, you know how twitchy some Stories get when they’ve been out there too long. We’ll have to send someone ourselves, just to be sure.”

“Agreed,” Aladdin said, running a well-manicured hand through his dark hair. “Who should it be?”

Morgana looked up. “Snow.”

Snow snapped to attention, her blue eyes flashing in anger. “Me?! What? Are you insane?!”

“She already knows you, it’s half the battle,” Morgana said.

Midas’ hand shot up. “Seconded. All in favor?” Aladdin and Frog both raised their hands less enthusiastically. Midas surveyed the hands. “And the motion passes.”

Snow turned on the lot of them and seethed, “No. No way am I going to LIVE in the Mortal world—you can’t—you treacherous little imps—you traitorous fools!” and realizing the futility of her words she spun on Morgana. “You bitch.”

Morgana eyed her coolly. “Regardless. It’s done.” She waved her hand and a crackling blue gateway similar to the one of moments ago opened next to Snow and she was sucked through it without another word.

The Court was silent for a long time, and then Frog cleared his throat.

“What about the mortal boy and girl?”

“Yes,” Aladdin said. “Do you think they’ll change?”

Midas sighed, annoyed with the level at which they were all ignoring and disrespecting him. “Of course they’ll change. No Mortal has ever set foot in Story and not exhibited some side effects.”

As much as she hated to admit it, Morgana knew he was right. “They’ll change. Time will tell exactly what the change will be, but they’ll change, that much is certain.”

Tessa, Brand, and Micah lay prostrate on the floor of Bluebeard’s home in an exhausted shape that looked part triangle and part circle. They had been lying there, face down on the plush carpet, breathing quietly and not saying anything for maybe three full minutes. Brand, as always, was the first to speak.

Without lifting his head and talking directly into the thick carpet, he said, “So, are we going to talk about this...or what?” Tessa and Micah

turned their faces toward the center of the triangle. Brand did the same. Tessa sighed and pushed herself up to a kneeling position.

“What’s there to say?” she asked, and then stood up.

“What’s there to say?! Well, for starters, Fictional characters are real—including Batman—which I just have to mention again, because, well, it’s awesome,” he paused and then pointed at Tessa. “You’re some kind of badass superhero and you can basically teleport. I mean, these are things that deserve to be discussed over pancakes.”

Brand and Micah were kneeling now too, looking up at Tessa, waiting for her to say something. Just as she was about to speak, there was a crackle and pop of blue energy and Snow came stumbling through a gateway. She was cussing and spitting in a rage, her gown even more inappropriate here than it had been there. Tessa crossed her arms defiantly.

“And just what are you doing here?” she asked, an unfriendly bite in her voice.

Snow spun around to see the trio staring at her and tried adjusting her totally unsuitable clothing. “It was decided that you needed an emissary.”

“And you got the short straw?” Tessa hazarded.

“I volunteered,” she said haughtily, straightening her wrinkled dress. “Honor and all that. I’m full of that honor crap.” Snow had the look of a wild animal trapped in a suburban house. Tessa raised an eyebrow. Snow clearly didn’t want to be here any more than Tessa wanted her here.

“Yeah. I vaguely remember The Snow Queen story, that’s who you are, right? The *villain* of the freaking story. Yeah, you’re just mad crazy with the honor,” Tessa said rolling her eyes.

Tessa gazed at Snow for a moment and then left the room. Everyone waited for her to return, but after a few moments they heard the front door slam and ran after her.

“Tessa, wait!” Micah called. But by the time they got to the porch she was gone, the woods dark and teeming all around them.

“You think her powers include super speed?” Micah asked Brand, looking around, wondering where she could have disappeared to in so little time.

“Or flight,” Brand said, looking up at the night sky and scanning it for some trace of her.

Snow sidled up behind Micah and Brand and cast a bored expression their way, “So, which one of you minions has a place for me to stay for the night?”

The two friends continued staring at the empty night sky and, in unison, said “Not it.”

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