

## Lisa Star and the Solstice Academy



R. Hunter Gough, 2005

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Mona Lisa Starkey had always been good at finding shortcuts. Her school was fifteen minutes away from her house, but she could head out the door at 7:55 and run, panting, into her first classroom at eight. When strolling through the mall with friends, she'd often lose track of them, only to have them show up several minutes later, wondering how she'd gotten so far so fast.

On a Wednesday in the middle of May, Mona Lisa Starkey (who preferred to be called "Lisa", since she hated the name "Mona") set out to find her dad a birthday present. Mom was being mom, as usual, which meant that Lisa wasn't talking to her and also meant that Lisa was on her own to do her shopping, and would have to walk wherever she was going instead of driving with her mom in the car. She knew what she wanted, however, and had a vague idea of where to find it. Dad liked Chinese chess, the one with the cannons and the elephants, and he didn't like "normal" chess, the one with the bishops and the towers. Lisa had seen a very nice Chinese chess set, with little carved elephants and cannons instead of the usual boring disks with the Chinese letters for "elephant" and "cannon" on them, in a magazine. In the picture two old men were playing it in New York, in Chinatown, and although Lisa felt fairly certain that Albuquerque didn't have a Chinatown like New York's, it might at least have something vaguely similar. She put on her comfy sneakers, her headphones, and her hair band, and she took off her glasses (which she always did whenever she went outside, just in case someone might think she looked like a nerd) and started walking.

Lisa's house was off to one side of a part of town with a lot of other houses, but there were shops and gas stations and fast-food restaurants nearby, so it wasn't long before she was out of her neighborhood and into something that looked a little more like what she was after. It certainly wasn't a Chinatown, and it certainly wasn't New York, but it also wasn't houses, and the further she walked the bigger the buildings got. She continued walking, and the buildings grew, looking older as she went, and stucco walls were replaced by old brown bricks and the spaces between the buildings grew thinner and the spaces between the roofs and the sky became tighter. Eventually, Lisa found herself at a big red square arch. An ornate sign at the top of the arch announced both in English and in Chinese that this was Chinatown, and Lisa was surprised to discover that apparently Albuquerque did have one after all. She strolled through, past restaurant windows where barbecued ducks hung on hooks, past fantastic-smelling incense stands, bookstores, convenience stores, and a dozen other stores all crammed together in the street, until she found, remarkably quickly, just what she was looking for.

In the front window of a shop that looked like it sold everything from woodcarvings to wall scrolls to cigarettes, sat a lovely Chinese chess set, with beautiful little carved pieces, just like the one in the magazine. In fact, it looked exactly like the one in the magazine, and Lisa was quite happy to find just what she was looking for. She'd never had any trouble finding just what she was looking for before, but if she went looking for the latest video game, or a popular CD, she'd expect to find it right away, and Lisa had thought that she'd have a little more trouble finding this.

The price tag told her it was \$40, which was fine since she'd saved \$50 for it, and she paid the sleepy-looking man behind the counter, and he wrapped it up in bubble-wrap for her, and crammed it into a shopping bag that said "thank you" on the side, and sent her on her way. As Lisa left the shop, however, she was surprised to discover that she

didn't quite know which way her way was. She looked one way up the street, the way she'd come, and could see nothing but Chinatown stretching around the corner. She looked the other way, and there was a huge city street, eight lanes wide, that she was quite sure she hadn't crossed.

Reluctantly, she put on her glasses, and discovered that she had no idea at all where she was. Even the sky looked a little different here than it did in her neighborhood. She went back into the shop, and asked the sleepy shopkeeper if he knew the way to her street, but he just nodded sleepily like he didn't understand her. She knew she hadn't passed the busy street, so she resolved to walk the other way, and this time she decided she'd wear her glasses to help her spot anything familiar. The sun began to set, and she trudged along, keeping an eye out for something familiar among the shops and stalls, down the streets past laundry hung out on lines between buildings, looking for familiar street names, listening for familiar sounds. Presently, she did find something familiar, and wished she hadn't. Down the end of a street, over run-down parked cars, under clotheslines, past flashing neon signs just sputtering up as the sun went down, she saw an arm. A big, green, far-away arm, pointing up into the sky. She walked toward it, and as she passed things and other things moved out of her way her view opened up, and she saw down into the bay ("I didn't know Albuquerque had a bay..." she thought, as her brain scrambled to escape the horrible truth). She saw ships in the harbor, docks, the big, green, far-away arm, not quite so far now but still several miles away, and the body the arm belonged to. Out in the middle of the bay, the middle of the Hudson Bay, stood the Statue of Liberty.

Lisa could walk the fifteen-minute walk to school in five minutes. The hour-long drive to Santa Fe had only taken her parents fifteen minutes once when Lisa was in the car and anxious to get there. Today, however, marked the first time that Lisa had ever

walked across the country in less than an hour, without even realizing it. She felt faint for a moment, and needed to sit down on the curb. She looked again, and the Statue of Liberty was still there. She looked around more carefully, and found trees that didn't grow in Albuquerque, buildings that weren't built in Albuquerque, license plates on cars that didn't come from Albuquerque, and a sunset that wasn't anything at all like she'd seen before. She took off her headphones, and discovered sounds that were definitely not Albuquerque. A passing car almost ran over her dad's Chinese chessboard, and she clutched it tight to her chest. Carefully, she went back over things in her mind, trying to remember what came in between leaving her house and ending up in New York. Oklahoma, for instance. And Kansas. Kansas was somewhere between her house and New York, she was sure, but she couldn't for the life of her remember walking through corn fields to get here. No, the buildings had just gotten bigger and bigger, closer and closer, and then "pop", New York.

She considered her options, which included calling home long-distance from a pay phone and asking her parents to come pick her up in New York, or finding a taxi that would drive her back to Albuquerque (she'd seen a movie once where someone drove a taxi all the way from New York to Brazil, but since it was a comedy she knew they wouldn't REALLY drive her to Brazil, but she wasn't quite sure how far they WOULD drive her). Neither option seemed particularly appealing. The third option, which seemed no more appealing but a lot more likely, was that she was going to break down and cry, sobbing loudly and uncontrollably until someone appeared out of nowhere and solved her problem for her. Of course she knew that wouldn't really work, and she knew it would make her look incredibly stupid and childish, but she began to sniffle all the same. Fortunately for Lisa, someone DID appear out of nowhere and solved her problem for her before she got to the point of looking completely stupid.

Mrs. Gale wasn't the kind of person that Lisa would've expected to find wandering around on the streets of New York city. She wasn't dirty, and she didn't seem crazy, and she wasn't pushing a shopping cart full of broken TVs and grocery bags. Mrs. Gale wore a tasteful green dress, not too poofy, and not too straight, with green-rimmed glasses and a big green clip in her silvery-blond hair. Lisa's grandmother was about 70, and Mrs. Gale looked a little younger than that, so Lisa guessed she was probably around 65. Actually, Lisa didn't notice Mrs. Gale at all at first, until she had pulled a green handkerchief out of her green pocket, handed it to Lisa, and said "Oh, darling, it's not as bad as all that."

Lisa took the handkerchief and wiped her eyes and blew her nose; it smelled like peppermint and cinnamon at the same time, and Lisa couldn't really tell at the moment if that seemed like a good combination or not.

"Now," Mrs. Gale said, as Lisa handed her back her handkerchief, "where is it that you've come from?"

Lisa assumed that the woman wouldn't believe her, but she answered honestly anyway. "Albuquerque, New Mexico."

"Well then! Quite a ways from home, aren't we?"

Lisa nodded. The woman didn't seem to believe her after all. The old lady licked her finger and held it in the air, like people do in old movies and cartoons before setting off on a long journey. She paused for a moment, then nodded to herself, and took Lisa by the hand. "Come along, darling," she said, "we'll take a shortcut," and with that they were off.

All at once, it seemed to Lisa as if they were moving very very quickly, and also very very slowly. Some of the people they passed whizzed by them in a blur of color and sound, while others dragged along next to them, as if they were moving in slow motion through jelly. The buildings also seemed to wave a little at the tops, sometimes beginning to look as though they were about to topple into the street and sometimes like they were pulling back in fright from Lisa and the old lady. At points the air stood still, and then suddenly there'd be a sharp gust of wind, blowing strange scents like roasting pork, firecrackers, and apple blossoms Lisa's way. And then, as soon as they'd started, or perhaps long after they'd started, they stopped, and Lisa staggered to a halt next to Mrs. Gale, not believing her eyes.

They stood on a grassy hill along with a small grove of peach trees and a little shrine. Down below them, across a stream and a vineyard, Lisa could see a little town with a church in the middle. There were paper party decorations hanging in the streets, and Lisa could hear singing in Spanish. She turned around, but behind her there was only a road at the bottom of the hill, leading off toward other hills and other groves of trees. The skyscrapers, Chinatown, and the Statue of Liberty were nowhere to be found.

“Well, darling,” said the old lady, “where do we go from here?”

Lisa cleaned her glasses and stared hard in every direction, but there was nothing here she recognized. Even less, in fact, than there had been in New York. “Where are we?” she finally asked.

“Why, Mexico, of course!” Mrs. Gale replied. She pulled an electronic global positioning system from her pocket and spun in circles a few times. “About 37 miles north of Aguascalientes. Which way is Albuquerque from here?”

Lisa had heard that there were people stupid enough not to know that New Mexico was one of the United States of America, and as she looked up into the old lady's

eyes, she realized she had finally met one. Come to think of it, maybe the old lady was crazy after all, but then here they both were somewhere in the middle of Mexico; maybe they were both crazy.

“I think we're further from it now than we were in New York,” Lisa said.

Mrs. Gale looked frustrated, and shoved her GPS back in her pocket. She took Lisa by the hand, and as she started to lead her down the hill she said “close your eyes, darling.”

“But I'll fall.”

“No you won't,” Mrs. Gale replied, “I'll keep you safe. Now, darling, tell me about your Albuquerque. Tell me about your neighborhood.”

Behind closed eyes, images of home floated to the surface of Lisa's mind, and she described them to the old lady.

“There's a high school at the end of my street, and when I lie awake at night I can hear the cars on the freeway. There's a gas station just a few blocks away that has miniature pecan pies. Our neighbors are the Sandovals, and they have a huge ash tree in their front yard. Their house is green, ours is white. My dad's car is in the driveway. It's red, dark red, and has a smiley face ball on the antenna.” With every word, the images in Lisa's mind became clearer and came more quickly. She described the shapes of her neighbors' lawns, the cats who roamed around and which of them were strays. She described her neighbors' cars, even listing all of their license plate numbers, and each and every tree on her street. She found herself describing things in detail that she'd never even noticed before; which shingles were missing on the Thompsons' roof, the paintings hanging on the walls in the Sandovals' house that could be seen through their front window when the blinds were open. Initials carved into trees that had scarred over so long ago that they were impossible to make out. Cracks in the sidewalk, leaves in the

gutter. Finally, as Lisa was reciting a litany of every single tool in Mr. Hanson's garage, Mrs. Gale cut her off and said "that's enough, darling. I think we're here."

Lisa opened her eyes, expecting to still be somewhere in Mexico, or back in New York, or maybe somewhere in the middle of Russia. Her first sight was the cracks in the sidewalk she was standing on, and she looked up to see her dad's car in the driveway. Chester the orange stray cat was sprawled upside-down and asleep on its hood, and beyond that stood her own house. Lisa turned back toward the old lady. "You found it! How did you do it?"

The old lady smiled and shook her head. "I didn't do anything, darling. You found it on your own. I just followed you here." She reached into a green pocket and pulled out a little box that was, not green, but brown, and handed it to Lisa. Lisa turned the box over in her hands; it was the same size as the little velvet boxes that expensive rings come in, and the lid was sealed shut with red wax.

The elegance of the gift jogged Lisa's manners, and she dropped it in the bag with the Chinese chessboard and held out her hand to the old lady. "Thank you so much! My name is Lisa."

The old lady shook her hand. "My name is Mrs. Gale, Lisa, and it's a pleasure to meet you. Take care of yourself, darling," Mrs. Gale looked down at Lisa's bag. "and I've a feeling I'll see you again very soon."

Lisa followed Mrs. Gale's gaze down to the little box, and when she looked back up to ask her what she meant, the old lady had gone without a trace, except a mild scent of cinnamon and peppermint.

It was already dark by the time Lisa walked through the front door. Her mom was furious that Lisa had been out so late, and even more furious that Lisa wouldn't tell her where. Even her dad, who was usually on her side, just shook his head and looked stern. Lisa stomped to the kitchen, got the dinner her mom had left for her out of the fridge, then stomped to her room and slammed the door.

Dinner was mango chicken, and although Lisa believed with all certainty that her mother was the most horrible person who ever lived, she had to admit that she was a pretty good cook. Lisa ate with her fingers, lying on her bed, blasting music and being careful to lick all of the mango sauce off of her fingers and then wipe them on her jeans between bites of chicken and looking at the chess pieces. She was worried that some might have fallen out during her strange adventure with Mrs. Gale, but they were all there, the board was intact, and the little box came tumbling out last of all. Lisa set the box aside like a dessert, savoring opening it for last (and at the same time, although she wouldn't admit it, a little afraid of what might be inside). She looked down at the chessboard and realized that, without thinking about it, she'd arranged the pieces in exactly the same places as they'd been in the magazine picture where she'd first seen a chessboard like this one. She was surprised, first of all, that she had done this, and then, second of all, that she would remember exactly how the pieces had been laid out in a magazine she'd glanced through once in the waiting room at the dentist. She had always had a good memory, but never THAT good. She remembered her last trip with Mrs. Gale, holding her eyes shut and remembering tiny details she'd never noticed before.

Had Mrs. Gale done something to her? “How many bricks are there in Mr. Hanson's front walk?” she asked herself. The answer came immediately. Two-hundred and thirty-seven. And she knew it was the right answer without even checking. Lisa

looked at the little brown ring box. When she was younger, Lisa had been fascinated by rings, because she'd read enough fantasy stories and seen enough fantasy movies to think that all rings were magical. Some of those feelings still lingered, even though she was old enough to realize that the only thing that made some rings special was how ridiculously expensive they were. There was something peculiar about this box, not to mention the person who'd given it to her, and now it seemed less like a dessert and more like the next step toward something completely unlike anything Lisa had ever dreamed of before.

Which, in fact, it was.

Before she could change her mind, before she could be childish and let her fears get the better of her, Lisa snatched up the box and popped open the wax seal. It opened just like any other box; it didn't turn into a black hole and suck her in, it didn't shoot out fireworks and fairy-dust. It just opened. Inside, instead of the ring she was expecting, Lisa found a little block of creamy white stone. It was shaped like an egg, squashed a little at the top and the bottom, with a thin, straight seam running around its equator. There was a blue line along the seam, and wispy blue veins trailed up and down from it. At first, Lisa had thought that it was plastic, since she'd never seen stone that looked anything like it, but it had the same coldness and weight of stone. "Perhaps it's china," she thought, as she turned it over in her hands, but it felt heavier and sturdier than china. There was suddenly a sound from it, like someone talking very fast and backwards in a high-pitched voice. Lisa yelped and dropped the stone. The voice came again, this time at normal speed, normal pitch, and using normal words.

"We look forward to greeting you," the stone said. It was a man's voice; very polite and refined. Lisa waited for an entire minute, but it said nothing further.

Tentatively, she picked the stone back up. She looked it over again, more carefully this time, and found that she could twist the top and bottom halves in opposite

directions, above and below the seam. The high-pitched, backwards voice returned, and Lisa continued twisting. The voice stopped, and half a twist later something inside the stone prevented her from twisting any further. Lisa set the stone down on the bed in front of her, and watched as the two halves slowly un-twisted, their wispy blue patterns rotating in the opposite directions from the way she'd turned them. The man's voice returned. There was a hint of an accent that Lisa couldn't quite place, and it echoed slightly, like the sound on a very old record player.

“To Whom It May Concern,” the voice said, “Your attendance is hereby requested for the next school year of the Solstice Academy, wherein you will be taught to use your natural and supernatural gifts to your greatest advantage, and the advantage of all your fellows. Be advised that one school year spent at the Solstice Academy will translate directly into one hour spent away from your home. Pack appropriately.

“To accept this invitation, await the height of the summer solstice, and follow the gilded butterfly to the Academy. We look forward to greeting you.”

When the message had finished, Lisa wound the stone back up and played it again, although it really didn't make any more sense the second time. “One year at the academy translates to one hour away?” “Gilded butterfly?”

She had a hollow book that she'd bought at a garage sale because it was cheap and she'd thought it would be cool to have a hollow book, but she hadn't ever really had anything worth hiding in a hollow book. She opened it, put the stone inside, and put it back on the shelf. The spine was labeled “Modern Classics”.

Taking her empty plate with her, so she could say she was taking it to the sink if her mom griped at her, Lisa crept out to the kitchen to the “Lighthouses of America” calendar that hung on the wall, and carefully looked over the tiny names of holidays. She

found the summer solstice toward the end of June. Almost five weeks away. That gave Lisa plenty of time to pack, but way too much time to wait.

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The rest of the summer, waiting for the solstice to arrive, crept by at a snail's pace. Lisa was dragged off on a countless number of car trips by her parents, and she spent most of them sulking in the back seat with her Gamestation Pocket. Her parents used to make her look out the windows at the scenery they were driving out to see, but had subconsciously learned not to, since when Lisa actually did look at the scenery they'd always either end up lost or, inexplicably, pulling into their own driveway when they thought that they were miles away from home. Lisa had forgiven her mother for whatever it was she had done, but then she had done something else and now Lisa wasn't speaking to her again. Her father had loved his birthday present, which made Lisa happy, but he had also chided her for worrying her mother so much when she had gone out to buy it. Lisa wished he'd just thanked her without poisoning the thanks with guilt.

In the evenings, Lisa would lock herself in her room, alternating between video games and listening to her invitation, wondering where the butterfly would come from, and where it would lead her. She used to take walks in the evenings, but since the day she walked to New York she had been afraid to go back out, since she didn't know exactly what it was that took her there. Nonetheless, in the middle of the afternoon less than a week before the Summer Solstice, her mother was vacuuming her room just at the exact moment she most needed to be alone, and since Lisa wasn't talking to her she couldn't ask her to leave. So, grabbing her headphones, she headed out for a walk.

She decided that the reason she had ended up in New York's Chinatown before was because, basically, she was looking for New York's Chinatown, so if she just

concentrated on her own neighborhood, she should be fine, and wouldn't end up anywhere she shouldn't be. She was so deep in concentration, in fact, that she stepped right out in front of a boy on a bike a few blocks from her house. He swerved to avoid her at the last second, and crashed his bike into a bush in the front yard on the corner.

“Oh crap, are you OK?” Lisa said. She took off her headphones and held out her hand to the boy. He was about her age, maybe a year or two older, and was wearing a t-shirt for a band Lisa had never heard of. The bush had broken his fall, so he hadn't skinned or broken anything, but his right arm had been cut up a little by the bush's branches. The wheels on his bike continued to spin, and Lisa realized that they were being powered by a tiny gasoline engine. The boy took her hand and she helped pull him out of the bush. His own hand was sticky with juniper sap, and he turned back toward his bike and flipped a switch on the handlebars. The engine sputtered, and then ground to a stop. He turned back to her, smiling.

“Hi, I'm Mike,” he said, “Are you OK? Did I hit you?”

“No, I'm OK. Thanks. I'm sorry I stepped in front of you like that.”

“Don't worry about it,” Mike said as he extracted his bike from the bush.

There was an awkward pause, and then Lisa held out her hand to him again. “I'm Lisa. Is that a moped?”

This time Mike wiped his hand on his jeans to try to get rid of some of the sap, but it just managed to make his hand fuzzy in addition to being sticky. “Glad to meet you, Lisa. Yes. Yes it is. Would you like to try it?”

Lisa was about to say that no, she was only out for a short walk and that her parents would worry about her, but then she remembered that, number one, that was the lamest thing she could possibly say, and number two, her mom was still vacuuming her

room, so the longer she stayed out the better, as long as she didn't stay out TOO long.

“How fast does it go?” she asked.

“Only about 10 miles an hour,” Mike replied, “about as fast as you can run.” He handed the bike over to her and she sat down on it.

“How do I start the engine?” she asked.

“You just run with it, and when you get it going fast enough the engine kicks in. Do you want me to help?”

“Yeah,” she said.

He reached across in front of her and grabbed the handlebars. He still smelled like juniper from falling into the bush. “OK, you pedal, and I'll run. That's the easiest way.” Lisa started pedaling, Mike started running, and after about 20 feet the engine kicked in and Mike let go. “Go around the block!” he yelled after her.

Lisa found the accelerator on the handlebar, and eased the speed up a little bit. The experience was loud, and terrifying, but also a little fun. She thought that she was probably barely going fast enough for the bike not to fall over, but she was afraid to go any faster, and she wished that she had her music to block out the engine noise, but she was afraid to take her hands off the handlebars to put on her headphones. She was also afraid, as she rounded the last corner, that Mike wouldn't be there, and she'd have accidentally taken another of her “shortcuts” and ended up somewhere halfway across town or worse. But she kept her eyes on familiar things, and as she came around the last corner Mike was standing there in the middle of the street waiting for her.

“How do I stop?” she yelled to him.

Mike yelled back, “Run into a bush!” She stuck her tongue out at him and steered the bike toward him. “The brake's on the right handlebar. Slow down, and then put your foot down.”

She squeezed the break until the engine cut out, and then skipped her foot along the ground a couple of times before coming to a stop just a few feet in front of Mike.

“You're an ass,” she said, grinning.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling back, “I couldn't resist.”

Lisa still had the money left over from her dad's birthday present, so she said, “hey, there's a mall about four blocks that way. If you drive I'll buy you a Blizzard or something.”

Mike nodded. “Cool. Let's go.”

Mike showed her the other way to start the moped, which involved propping it up on a kickstand that kept the back wheel off the ground until the engine started, which let them both sit down on it without either of them having to run.

The seat was long enough that Lisa fit on behind Mike, and there were extensions on the back axle that she could put her feet up on. Lisa felt she certainly didn't know Mike well enough to wrap her arms around him, but she also didn't want to fall off, so she ended up with her hands in a death grip on his shoulders. When they got to the mall Mike chained the moped to a bike rack and started rubbing his shoulders. Lisa bought Blizzards for both of them, and they sat in the mall's food court, eating them in silence for a while.

“I just moved here from Ohio.” Mike finally said.

“Is that the one with the potatoes?” Lisa asked between mouthfuls.

“No, that's Idaho.”

“Oh yeah. What does Ohio have?”

Mike shrugged. “Um... not much, really. A lot more trees and grass than here, though.”

“Probably,” Lisa said, “but do you have chilé in Ohio? We've also got the best sunsets.”

“Yeah, the sunsets are very cool. I haven't tried the chilé yet.”

“I'd get you some”, Lisa said, “but it wouldn't go well with the ice cream.” Lisa checked her watch. She'd only been gone about 20 minutes, and she'd been on hour-long walks before without her parents complaining. Actually, she often walked all the way up here from her house, although she hadn't taken any shortcuts this time; she was still shaken up by New York and she didn't know how well Mike would handle it. After they ate she gave him a quick tour of the mall. She asked him about the band on his t-shirt, and he said they were like a bunch of other bands that Lisa had never heard of. She picked up a clear plastic ring with a seven-pointed star on it from a stand that sold cheap jewelry and incense, and while her back was turned Mike bought it for her. It was only five bucks, but it was a sweet gesture. She thanked him, and added, “if I knew you wanted to buy me something I'd have picked up those hundred-dollar boots I want.” He smirked at her, and she grabbed his hand and led him the rest of the way through the mall. Most of the sap and lint had worn off, and she didn't let go until they got back to his moped.

“Hey,” she said as they got on, “I want to show you something.” She put her arms around him this time, but only held on loosely, not wanting to press up against him. “Go that way,” she said, and pointed in the opposite direction from where they'd come.

She'd made shortcuts before while someone else was driving – she did it all the time on family car trips – and she'd taken shortcuts back from the mall a hundred times before. Mike pedaled, and as they crossed the mall parking lot Lisa said, “where do you live?”

“Ash and Monroe”, Mike said.

“Cool. That's only about a block from my house.” The light turned green just as they arrived at an intersection, and they sailed on through.

“Which way from here?” Mike asked.

“Straight.” Lisa said. They rode a block past the intersection, past a park.

“The park?” Mike asked.

“No, keep going.” Lisa said. There was a shudder in the air. Mike probably thought he'd just hit a small rock, and quickly straightened back out. A block later she told him to stop. “Here we are.” She got off the bike and stood next to Mike.

Mike looked around. “So, what now?”

Lisa pointed at the street signs on the corner and smiled. Ash and Monroe. Mike looked confused. “Wow, I really got turned around...” he said. He paused for a minute, and looked like he was trying to figure out directions in his head. Lisa could see him go over the same path several times before he finally gave up. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“I'm good at finding shortcuts.” Lisa replied with a shrug.

“Can everybody in Albuquerque do that?”

“No, just me. Thanks for the ride.” She wanted to say something more, but waited a second to see if he'd take the initiative. He did.

“Hey, I have to do some stuff this week, but do you want to hang out on Saturday?”

“Sure,” she said, trying not to sound too excited.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“1340 Maple. You wanna show up at noon and we can go get lunch?”

“Yeah, that'd be great. See you then!”

Lisa nodded goodbye to him, and he biked away as she put on her headphones. This had definitely been one of her better walks. Her mom didn't even yell at her when she came in the door. Next Saturday. Something dinged inside Lisa's head, and she went to look at the calendar. If her invitation was correct, and she knew that it was, next Saturday for her would be a year away; the solstice was on Thursday. Lisa groaned and trudged to her room, slammed the door, cranked her music and flopped on the bed. She couldn't tell if she was elated or miserable. Probably both, and a whole bunch of other things all thrown together. Why did everything have to happen all at once? Elation finally won out, and she spent the next hour giggling uncontrollably.

5

By eleven on the night before the summer solstice Lisa was packed and ready. She had five pairs of underwear, five pairs of socks, two pairs of jeans and three shirts all crammed into her backpack, along with her dopt kit, which included a travel toothbrush and toothpaste, a brush, and a travel bottle of shampoo. Lisa didn't usually wear makeup, but she threw in a liquid eyeliner pen and a tube of lipstick just in case. She had her mp3 player in her pocket, her Gamestation Pocket in her other pocket, and her headphones around her neck. She also packed a few granola bars into the small pocket on her backpack just in case it was a long shortcut to the Academy. She listened carefully for her parents to go to bed, put on her backpack, and took the stone out of her hollow book. She put the stone on her bed and watched and waited, glancing back and forth between the invitation and her clock, counting the seconds until midnight.

Midnight finally arrived. She stared intently at the stone, but it did not move. She looked back at the clock. Past midnight. She looked around the room, thinking maybe the butterfly might come in the open window or materialize out of the ceiling; still nothing.

She tried winding it up again. It rattled out the same message, just like it had the first time she'd wound it all the way, and just like it had every time between then and now when she'd taken it out of the hollow book and tried to understand it better. She'd listened to it so many times that she had it memorized, and listened intently for any variations in the message, but there were none. She put it back down and kept watching, carefully, for a long, long time, and finally looked back at the clock. 12:04. Had she missed something? Was her invitation a dud? Or some kind of joke? She resumed her vigil until her eyes glazed over and everything in her room EXCEPT the stone seemed to be moving. She shook herself back awake and looked at the clock. Two in the morning, and still nothing! Maybe she was missing something.

Lisa turned on her computer and Googled for “summer solstice”. It told her what she already knew; the summer solstice is the longest day of the year, and this year it fell on this day. But when in the day? Would she have to stay up all night, never knowing when the stone would spring to life? Would she have to spend the longest day of the year staring at a rock? She went over the message in her head again, and could've slapped herself for being so stupid; the HEIGHT of the summer solstice. The highest point of the day. The butterfly would come at noon. She was sure of it.

Normally she'd be too worked up to sleep on a night like this, but staring at the stone for two hours straight had worn her out, so she tucked it under her pillow and fell fast asleep.

When she awoke ten hours later she had been dreaming that baby guinea pigs were playing in her hair, and their little grunting sounds had turned into a strange scratching noise. Half-asleep, she thought at first that it was still the baby guinea pigs, then she thought that a bug had crawled into her ear, and then she finally realized that the sound was coming from underneath her pillow. She sat bolt upright and threw her pillow

on the floor. Underneath it, the invitation was shaking, like a chicken egg with an angry, full-sized ostrich trapped inside it. She was still dressed from the night before, so she grabbed her backpack and snatched up the invitation, and ran out into the hallway. Her dad was at work, but her mom was in the kitchen. They were on speaking terms again, so she yelled “Bye mom! I'll be back in an hour!” as she ran past.

“Stop!” her mother called. And Lisa stopped. Gritting her teeth and holding the stone as tight as she could so it wouldn't rattle, she walked back toward the kitchen. “You just got up, and haven't eaten anything,” her mother said, “you're not leaving this house without a sandwich.”

The invitation began to twitch wildly in Lisa's hand. “But mom...” she began.

“Sandwich!” her mother interrupted. “Here, if you're in such a hurry, you can have the one I just made myself.” And with that she dropped the sandwich from her plate into a plastic bag for Lisa.

“It doesn't have mayo, does it?”

“It does indeed,” her mother replied, “and if you want one without you'll have to make it yourself.”

Lisa groaned, “No, this'll be OK. Thank you.”

“And a kiss!” her mother ordered. Lisa obliged and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. “Have fun, honey, and be careful.” Her mother kissed her on the cheek and let her go.

“I'll be back in an hour!” Lisa shouted as she headed for the door, a sandwich in one hand and the stone shaking violently in the other, “Thanks for the sandwich!” and with that she was out the door.

Lisa ran out to the sidewalk in front of her house and opened her hand. As soon as the sunlight hit it, the stone burst into a cloud of dust. A golden butterfly, the size of Lisa's palm, with a long, trailing tail that glittered in the sunlight, shot out and rocketed straight up, into the sky. For a moment Lisa thought she'd lost it, but the butterfly gradually drifted back down to her, and hovered over her hand. She reached out and touched it, and the butterfly alighted on her finger, paused for a moment, then rose again and drifted off at the height of Lisa's head, down the street. Lisa put on her headphones and followed.

Although she'd created shortcuts when riding with her parents before, and just a few days ago when riding with Mike, she'd only ever used someone else's shortcut before with Mrs. Gale. This had the same feeling as that trip, although the changes were more gradual. Mrs. Gale had whipped Lisa through her shortcut so fast that things had visibly warped around them, and she'd felt that at any moment everything around her would collapse into a tight little knot like a black hole. Following the butterfly, however, she could see the changes occurring gradually around her, but they were slow and subtle, a little faster than when she made her own shortcuts, but not disorienting. When she stopped for a moment to look at something or try to get her bearings, the butterfly would stop too, either landing on something nearby, or wandering back to her and waiting for her to start moving again. The changes were so slow and gradual, in fact, that it wasn't until Lisa overheard a passing couple speaking in French that she realized that she was in Paris. She stopped, and the butterfly stopped too, landing on the roof of a public toilet. She looked around, and recognized the tip of the Eiffel Tower poking up over the rooftops. She knew that the Louvre and the Notre Dame cathedral must be somewhere nearby too, but she couldn't see them from here. For a moment, she was seized with the

same panic that she'd felt in New York, but it quickly passed. The butterfly had a calming effect, and she felt confident that it was leading her the right way. Was the Solstice Academy in France? Would she be allowed in if she only spoke English? Probably, since the invitation had been in English. She'd see when she got there. She made a quick mental note of her surroundings, since Paris is always a nice place to visit, and continued on her way. The butterfly rose from its perch and lead the way, drifting away from the main streets and down little side streets filled with shops and restaurants. The French spoken by passer-bys was gradually replaced by something that Lisa thought might be Russian, but she wasn't sure. Cars became fewer, smaller, and further between, until they dwindled out completely. The streets became narrower, and the modern neon signs on storefronts and restaurants were replaced by wooden ones. Lisa followed the butterfly around a corner, and nearly jumped out of her skin as she came face to face with a furry little person with the head of a cat. The cat person yowled at her indifferently, pulled its hat down over its eyes, and continued on its way.

Lisa stopped for a moment to get a bearing on her surroundings. She had assumed, naturally, that shortcuts just took you to different places nearby, and if you were good enough they could take you to places far away, but still places on the face of the Earth. However, she was quite certain of the fact that there were no cities in the world that were populated by cat people or, as she looked around the street and through windows, dog people, goat people, and pig people. There were a few humans scattered in the crowd, however, so Lisa didn't feel completely out of place. Still, she watched amazed as a table full of well-dressed dog people sat eating with knives and forks, merrily conversing in barks and howls. It reminded her of a painting she'd seen in a number of different places of dogs sitting around a table playing poker. At another table

sat a group of goats, eating salad and gesturing with their forks to illustrate whatever points they were bleating at each other.

There was a high-pitched bark from the restaurant's front door. Lisa turned to see a Boston Terrier, standing upright and wearing an apron, staring up at her with its gigantic eyes and motioning into the restaurant.

“Oh, no thanks,” she replied. Then, thinking quickly, she added, “I’m sorry. This is my first time in the city.”

The dog nodded, made a noise that might've been a sneeze, and walked back into the restaurant on its hind legs. Lisa decided that it might be best to get past this city before she got into trouble. She did, after all, have a ham and cheese sandwich in her pocket, and many of the people here were pigs. The butterfly leading the way, Lisa continued through the city, past a bizarre bazaar where goat people sold glass-bead jewelry, dog butchers hocked roast chickens, and pig men misted stalls of fruits and vegetables with water to keep them fresh. The streets widened, and gradually the looming, stone buildings shrank and became sparser, intermixed with wooden houses, and then straw huts as the cobblestone street turned to gravel and then to dirt. The sun still hung high in the sky when the houses and roads petered out completely, and Lisa found herself walking across wide open, untamed fields, wading through knee-high grasses that rippled in the breeze.

A huge, solitary tree stood at the top of a hill, and as Lisa approached it she discovered that its roots entwined through the sprockets of a mammoth waterwheel, which lay decaying on the hillside, with no mill or even a stream in sight. Lisa found that she was finally starting to get hungry, and this seemed as good a place as any to sit and eat her sandwich. It did, indeed, have mayo in it as her mother had said, but she was

hungry enough that she didn't mind. When she'd finished the sandwich she wished she'd thought to bring along a couple of sodas as well, and a curious thought occurred to her.

She knew that her shortcuts could take her anywhere in the world. She now also knew, from following the butterfly, that her shortcuts could lead her into OTHER worlds. But how many other worlds were there? Her dad had once read her a short story about *infinite* worlds, and she now wondered if it might be true. Could every possibility exist somewhere? Could there, for instance, be a world where a stream of pure, clear water ran right by this tree she now sat under? She was curious (and thirsty) enough to give it a try.

She stood up, brushed the crumbs off her pants and put on her backpack, and started walking clockwise around the tree, listening to the sound of the wind in the leaves, and pretending it was instead the sound of a trickling stream. As she had hoped, the butterfly followed her, and would be there to lead her back to the trail to the Academy when she had finished straying from it. One turn, and two. There was something different, but Lisa couldn't quite put her finger on it. Maybe the air was more humid, or the wind was lighter. Three turns, four turns. It was working. She could distinctly hear the sound of rushing water along with the sound of the wind. Five turns, and the wind died down, barely moving the leaves at all, and the sound of water became clearer. Six turns, the wind stopped, and there, at the base of the hill, was a little stream, about six feet across, and flowing with crystal clear water.

Lisa ran down the hill, and scooped up handfuls of the water. It was delicious; better than the bottled stuff her aunt drank. Lisa hadn't realized how thirsty she was until she started drinking, and had consumed almost a gallon before she ran some of it through her hair, and sat back, sated and proud. Her theory had been right, and although in the world she was in right now this stream had always been here, she felt as if she had not just found it, but created it. She considered taking a nap here next to her creation, but

figured it would probably be best to get a move on, since now that she'd eaten her sandwich she only had granola bars for the rest of the trip, and she had no idea how long it would be before she arrived at the Academy.

She was in the process of standing up when she heard an unnerving noise from across the stream, like a cross between a tiger's growl and the incoherent mumblings of the homeless people she sometimes passed on her walks. She looked up and saw what looked at first like a man, but a man without a face. If he'd stood straight up he might've been too tall to fit through a doorway, but he was crouched down to Lisa's height, with his head craned forward. He had no eyes, but Lisa felt him staring at her. He had no ears, but she could feel him listening to her. He had no mouth, but still made the horrible growling, mumbling noise. He was pale and naked, and his paper-white skin seemed to be stretched almost to the breaking point over his bones. The growling noise grew louder, and he raised his arms as if preparing to spring. Each of his fingers ended in a long, needle-sharp, blood-red talon. Lisa was frozen with terror, and knew that even if she could run this thing with its inhumanly long legs could catch her in a heartbeat. Her mind raced for alternatives to being eaten, but she could find none. There was nothing in the world beyond her, the monster, and this half moment before it killed her.

Suddenly, from beyond the monster and to the left, Lisa heard a shrill noise, like a cross between a whistle and a shriek. The monster turned, but too late, as something brown threw itself against it, catching the monster off-guard and sending its spindly body flying. The brown thing raced toward Lisa, splashing across the stream, and she only had a split second to register that she had just been saved by a giant bunny before it grabbed her hand and yanked her away from the monster and toward the butterfly. Lisa ran with the rabbit, panting and straining her muscles to their limit. She kept her eyes straight ahead on the butterfly, and was afraid she was about to pass out because she was seeing

double and thought that there were two butterflies fluttering in front of her. After a moment she realized that there WERE two butterflies. They ran for what felt like hours, and the water sloshing around in her stomach was making Lisa sicker and sicker. Finally, her body gave out, and she collapsed to her hands and knees, retching delicious, crystal clear water and half-digested ham and cheese sandwich.

When her stomach was empty she rose, trembling, to her feet and looked around. The monster was gone. She stood on a wide expanse of black and gray rock, which looked like pictures she'd seen of the Arizona Badlands. Far ahead, a storm threw lightning bolts at the face of a snowy mountain range, and Lisa realized she should've brought an umbrella. She looked over at her new companion, and verified that he was, indeed, a giant bunny. He was about Lisa's height, although his ears stuck up a couple of feet further. There were leather cuffs, like bracelets, at the base of each of his ears, and each ear was lined all the way to the top with a variety of earrings and studs. Large, furry rabbit feet stuck out of the legs of his trousers, and clawed hands from the sleeves of his shirt. He also had a backpack, which looked a lot more primitive than Lisa's. She guessed that he was probably from somewhere that was technologically on par with Earth's Renaissance. He unslung a sloshy leather bag full of water from his shoulder and offered it to Lisa. She took a few sips and handed it back to him. She realized it probably would've also been smart to bring some antacid... and her Gamestation Pocket! Lisa had just realized that she'd taken it out of her pocket when she finally went to sleep the night before, and it was now sitting on her bed at home. Oh well, she thought, video games aren't as important when you're traveling across infinite worlds with a giant bunny.

“Thanks for saving me,” she croaked out, “My name's Lisa.”

She extended her hand and the rabbit shook it.

“MEEP!!” it replied.

Despite the fact that they couldn't talk to each other, Lisa managed to trade the rabbit a granola bar for a couple of apples, and they otherwise made good traveling companions. Fortunately, the path had changed considerably before they had reached the stormy mountainside, the rain had subsided, and the rocky badlands had transformed into a gray and decaying swamp. Far off to their right, the top half of a gigantic, sickly-green head protruded from the water, and watched them disinterestedly with filmy blue eyes, as though it would fall asleep at any moment. Their twin butterflies led on, and here and there ruined stone buildings stuck up out of the muck, covered in moss and crawling with lizards and insects. The ruins showed up more and more often, and closed in on their path, which turned from a natural soil trail, cutting through wide expanses of wetland and marsh, to a road assembled from worn marble blocks. At one point, Lisa spied a group of trashcan-sized frog people, dressed in loincloths and clutching nets, sunning themselves on broken pillars ahead. One of them eyed the golden butterflies hungrily, but as Lisa and the rabbit approached they all lazily scattered from the ruins, and sank beneath the surface of the soupy marsh.

As they walked further, the ruins gradually looked less and less ruined, and they were surrounded by intact stone buildings with thatched straw roofs and wooden doors, with festive cloth streamers strung between them. The sun was setting, and villagers were closing up their houses for the night. Even though it was a warm summer day, most of the villagers were bundled up too tightly for Lisa to get a good look at them, and they were too busy going about their own business to notice her and the rabbit. In the middle of a plaza they found a bubbling fountain gushing clean, sparkling water, and they stopped there, Lisa drinking and the rabbit refilling his water bag. The water sprayed from the

mouths of two stone fish, and the butterflies landed on the fishes' entwined tails. Looking around, Lisa discovered that the far end of the village bordered a steep mountain range, and the stone houses blended in with the mountain the further they went, until they were indistinguishable from the cliffs higher up. The setting sun cast dramatic orange and black stripes across the face of the mountain, accentuating its crags and crevices. Lisa hadn't seen any signs of mountains from the swamp, but after a day of more shortcutting than she'd done in her entire life before that hardly surprised her.

Lisa turned to the rabbit, and although she knew it couldn't understand her, she said "I wonder how much further it is to the Academy."

The rabbit shrugged, and made a whistling noise that sounded like "I don't know." For a moment Lisa wondered if the rabbit had understood her, but then she thought about it and concluded that "I wonder how much further it is to the Academy," was about the only thing she could've said in the situation, and the rabbit had probably just assumed that's what she'd said.

A voice from behind startled her. "Two strange travelers who don't know each other's languages, following butterflies beyond the horizon. It must be that time of the year again." It sounded like an old woman's voice, and Lisa was surprised to hear anyone speaking English this far from, well, anything familiar to her at all. The rabbit craned his neck to look over Lisa's shoulder at the speaker, and Lisa turned to see a small, hunched figure, so bundled up in coats and shawls that she couldn't even see the woman's face. She squinted to make out her features, and then finally relented, putting on her glasses for the first time since she'd left her house at noon.

Even with her glasses on, Lisa still couldn't make out a face underneath all those clothes. The rabbit squeaked, and the old lady chuckled, the folds of her scarves rippling in her breath. As she did so, Lisa suddenly realized that the scarves WERE the old lady's

face; and the reason that all the villagers were bundled up was because bundles were all they were. Lisa's stomach grumbled. "Well," the old woman who was really just a great bundle of old-woman clothes said, "you've probably had quite a journey and are ready for a nice home-cooked meal. Come on inside you two, and we'll see what we can cook up for you."

The rabbit whistled a few short notes.

"Oh no," the old lady replied, "no trouble at all. It's always nice to have travelers from far-away lands. You'll just have to humor me with some tales of where you're from."

Lisa looked back and forth between the rabbit and her host as they walked. "You can understand him?" she asked.

"Oh yes," the old woman chuckled, "and I understand you, and you understand me, and he understands me. I'm not really talking in the language you're hearing, you see. I'm talking in the first language, that really doesn't have a name, and that all other languages are the children of. Your mind recognizes it for what it is, and translates it to your own language for you. In turn, I can understand you because threads of the first language are sewn into my mind, and it recognizes its children." The woman chuckled again, "We've always had the first language, so we all take it for granted, but there's always a child or two every year who's completely amazed by it all. My name is Mrs. Crinoline, by the way."

She held out a gloved hand, or rather just a glove, and Lisa shook it. It felt like it was stuffed with smaller bits of fabric. "Pleased to meet you. My name is Lisa."

The rabbit shook the old woman's hand after Lisa had, and whistled a greeting.

"What did he say his name was?" Lisa asked.

"Quick, dear. His name is Wally Quick."

Lisa extended a hand to the rabbit and said, “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Quick.”

Wally Quick shook her hand, and whistled something that she imagined was similar.

“And here we are,” Mrs. Crinoline declared.

The woman unlocked the wooden door to one of the stone houses and led them inside. Where a normal house would have lamps, glowing round stones hung from the ceiling and sat on tables. They were met at the door by a football-sized tangle of cloth scraps with the demeanor of a puppy, and Lisa fell in love with it instantly. She wondered what kind of puppy food you’d feed a cloth puppy, which brought up an interesting question.

“I don’t mean to sound ungracious,” Lisa said, “but I assume you probably eat lint and things, and we need more, well, real food.” It was clear from the look on the rabbit’s face that he had the same concerns.

The old lady laughed so hard that she looked, quite literally, like she was about to come apart at the seams. “Oh, you little dear,” she said when she finally caught her breath, “yes, it would seem that way to look at us, wouldn’t it? Actually, we’re not all cloth and stitching, although that’s certainly most of us. We all have a tiny drop of liquid, a sort of lifeblood, soaked into us that animates us and makes us who we are. We need food to fuel the liquid, just like you do, although just the tiniest bite can sustain us for weeks. Don’t worry, though, we have plenty extra, and know that you have much bigger appetites.” With that the old lady went to the pantry, and began to load plates with heaping piles of mushrooms of all shapes and sizes. Lisa liked mushrooms, and breathed a sigh of relief when she discovered that they would comprise the entirety of their dinner. There were the golfball-sized brown mushrooms Lisa was used to, and big, saucer-sized portobellos. There were oyster mushrooms, truffles, tiny criminy mushrooms, and morels

that looked like little sponges. There were other mushrooms that Lisa thought probably didn't exist in her world; little red mushrooms that tasted like strawberries, and great big meaty ones that tasted like roast chicken. They drank water from the fountain, and even though the old lady knew they weren't old enough to drink, she gave them each a tiny glass of mushroom brandy. Wally wasn't interested in the mushrooms that tasted like chicken, but ate more than enough of the other mushrooms to make up for it.

Lisa told the old woman about life on her world, about computers and video games, and televisions and airplanes. Mrs. Crinoline seemed particularly interested in cars, and was fascinated by the fact that they weren't alive, but they faithfully carried people from place to place. Lisa also told her of her harrowing accidental trip to New York, and about Mrs. Gale, the kind woman who'd helped her find her way back home. She also showed Mrs. Crinoline the ring that Mike had bought for her, and told her that she didn't consider him a boyfriend just yet, but things certainly seemed to be heading in the right direction. Afterwards, Wally told Mrs. Crinoline his story, and since Lisa couldn't understand him she played with the puppyish tangle instead, which Mrs. Crinoline had told her was named, of all things, Scraps.

After dinner was finished and their stories were told, Mrs. Crinoline cleared a space for them to sleep on the floor. "I'm sorry I don't have anything soft for you to sleep on," she said, "but when you're made of bundles of cloth it's really the last thing you would need." The stone floor was smooth and warm, however, and Lisa used her backpack for a pillow, and after such a long and amazing day, and such a large and wonderful meal, she slept quite well regardless.

Lisa awoke refreshed, although it took her a moment to remember where she was. Mrs. Crinoline gave them more mushrooms for breakfast, a few large ones to take with them, and thanked them for their stories. They found that their butterflies had spent the night perched on the windowsill outside of the house, and as they walked outside the butterflies fluttered their wings and drifted down, ready to lead them. Lisa was disappointed to see that the butterflies headed toward the mountain, and although it was possible the mountain wouldn't be there by the time they got there, she had a sneaking suspicion that they would have to climb.

Climb they did, but the way was not as steep as Lisa had feared, and there were even steps carved into the face of the mountain. The going was a little cold, since they were still in the sun's shadow, but it only kept them from breaking a sweat, and Lisa had hiked worse trails in the Sandia mountains that loomed over Albuquerque. At its base the mountain had been a solid mass of granite, but as they hiked higher aspen and pine trees appeared around them, and the ground became soft and leveled out. The trees became thicker, and then they were past them, standing at the edge of a clearing at the top of one of the mountain's lower peaks. For a moment, Lisa lost track of the butterflies, and eventually resorted to putting on her glasses to try and see them. She knew it wouldn't be much trouble to shortcut back to Albuquerque from here, but she hated to have come all this way just to get lost. She was searching so intently for the tiny golden flicker of the butterflies' wings, that it wasn't until Wally tapped her on the shoulder and pointed that she saw the gigantic mansion standing in the middle of the clearing.

The mansion was five stories tall, made of stone and wood shingle, and had at least three towers that Lisa could see from where she was standing. There were several other, smaller buildings around it, and what looked like a hedge maze off to one side.

Scattered around the edge of the clearing, kids Lisa's age were emerging from the forest and walking toward the mansion. She looked at Wally, ecstatic, and he let out a happy little squeal and grabbed her hand, and they both ran, hand in paw, laughing and proud of themselves for making it this far, toward the Solstice Academy.

9

“Welcome to the Solstice Academy!” said the man at the door. There were a pair of huge wooden doors, each as tall as Lisa's house, and a smaller door, just big enough to drive a car through, which was cut out of the middle of one of them and stood open. The man stood to the side of this doorway, in a place where he could greet students as they entered but also stay out of their way. He was dressed in a modest tuxedo, like a butler, and his skin looked like it was made out of china; there were even lines down the sides of his mouth like a ventriloquist's dummy. “First year, or returning students?” he asked.

“First year,” Lisa said. Wally whistled the same.

“Very good then,” the man said, “My name is Mister Gromon. Just pass straight through here, and follow the footprints to first year registration. I look forward to seeing you both on campus.” Lisa bowed to Mr. Gromon as they passed, since it seemed the right thing to do, and he bowed back.

They continued through the door, and found themselves in a large lobby area. Hallways extended off in all directions, and wide staircases led up and down. Painted on the floor, and mostly worn away from decades of use, a set of red footprints led off down one of the hallways to the left. Another girl, around Lisa's age, stood in the middle of the lobby, staring at the strange landscape paintings and fantastic stuffed creature heads that lined the walls. The girl had green hair with blue ribbons woven through it, and wore a puffy pink dress with red and white striped stockings and heavy black boots. She was

staring up at what looked to Lisa like a stuffed Tyrannosaurus Rex head when a couple of other girls, human as far as Lisa could tell, ran by carrying tennis rackets, chattering to each other in a completely alien language. The girl with the green hair turned around when they passed, and smiled at Lisa and Wally. Lisa extended her hand “Hi! I’m Lisa. Is this your first year too?”

“Molipi dega begobop.” The green-haired girl replied enthusiastically.

“Absolutely!” Lisa said, with a big smile. She had no idea what the green-haired girl had said, but she'd found so far that smiling was a fairly universal sign. Wally walked a little ways down the footprints, and squeaked for the two girls to follow, which they did.

They passed various classrooms, most of which had their doors open, and many of which had windows that faced out into the hallway. Most of them looked like the medical classrooms that Lisa had seen in movies, with the seats arranged in a half-circle around the blackboard, each half-circle higher than the one in front of it. A few also looked like the kind of classrooms Lisa was used to, with rows of desks all on the same level facing toward the blackboard. There were also science classrooms with large workbenches covered in equipment instead of desks, and some classrooms with no desks at all, just empty rooms with the ubiquitous blackboard. Lisa also noticed that the door to each of these rooms had a small brass mask next to it, and each of the masks looked different. At the end of the hall, the red footsteps disappeared under a door with a fogged window, which stood partway ajar. There was a small brass mask next to the door as well, and as Lisa peeked in the doorway she rested her hand against the mask.

“Registration!” the mask said, in a quiet but firm voice, sending Lisa jumping back three feet. Wally and the girl with the green hair giggled, and Lisa touched the mask

again. “Registration!” it repeated, with exactly the same volume and intonation. Lisa pushed open the door, and they all three entered.

The inside of the registration office went up three stories, and every wall was covered with filing cabinets, and each had a ladder on wheels extending up to the ceiling. Just beyond the doorway was a trough full of tiny silver rings, and behind the trough stood a jolly little old woman, with thick tri-focal glasses and her gray hair pulled back in a bun, a head shorter than Lisa but ten times her age. “First years?” the woman asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” Lisa replied.

“Well then, you'll each need one of these,” she said, motioning toward the trough. Lisa picked up one of the rings and discovered that they were loop earrings, with a beautiful and intricate pattern etched all along them. Lisa's ears were double-pierced, and she had fake-topaz studs in the first holes but nothing in the second, so she threaded the earring through her left earlobe and hooked the clasp.

“What are they for?” Wally asked. He hadn't put his on yet, and was inspecting the engraved pattern. It took Lisa a second to realize that Wally had just spoken. The green-haired girl had also just put her earring on, and she and Lisa both shouted “Wow!” at the same time. Wally gave them a confused look.

“These are hear-rings,” the old lady said, “they'll let you understand anyone, regardless of what language they're speaking.” The rabbit shrugged and replaced one of his gold loop earrings with the hear-ring.

“Hello, Wally!” Lisa said.

“Whoa!” Wally said, “Hello, Lisa!” They both turned toward the green-haired girl, and Wally extended his paw. “I'm Wally, and this is Lisa.”

“Vinagrette,” the girl said, and shook hands with both of them.

“Placement comes next,” the old woman behind the trough said.

“Placement?” Vinagrette asked.

“It determines what world you're from,” the woman said, “for record-keeping purposes. Through that door on your right, and welcome to the Solstice Academy!”

They all thanked her, and followed the red footprints to the next room. “Touch a mask to begin!” the old woman shouted after them. The placement room was well-lit by sunlight streaming in through a skylight and large windows around the tops of the walls. On each wall, about at eye-level with Lisa, hung a row of ceramic harlequin masks, each one different. The middle of the room was divided by partitions, each of which also had a row of masks hanging on it. As they entered, a girl in a black and orange military uniform was standing in front of one of the masks, which was asking her a series of questions. Out of sight beyond the partitions, Lisa could hear other students and other masks having similar conversations. Lisa went to a mask whose design was split down the middle; the left eye was a sun in a blue sky with wispy clouds, and the right eye was encircled by a crescent moon, hanging in a night sky full of stars. She touched the mask, and it made a noise like it was clearing its throat (even though it was just a face) and began to speak.

“Name, please.” the mask began.

Mona Lisa Starkey hated her last name almost as much as she hated her first name. She always thought that a “starkey” sounded like some kind of nasty vegetable. She was light years from home, however, so it really wouldn't matter if she exercised a little “creativity”.

“Lisa Star”, she replied.

“Good morning, Lisa Star,” the mask continued, “I'm going to ask you a few questions so that we can learn what world you have come from. First of all, what do your people call your world?”

“Earth,” Lisa said.

“And where on Earth are you from?”

“Albuquerque, New Mexico, United States of America.” In elementary school, Lisa had had to recite everything from her street address to “Milky Way galaxy in the universe” once for a project, but she figured she could safely leave out things like her county and continent this time around.

The mask asked her about fifty more questions, most of which she knew but some of which she didn't (like “Who was president of the United States of America after McKinley?”). At the end of it all the mask said, “Thank you for your cooperation. Based on your answers, I have concluded that you have come from *Beatles Earth*. Please wear this button during orientation, and welcome to the Solstice Academy.” With that, the mask swung open like the door of a safe. Behind it on the wall was a button that looked like the ones Lisa had made with the button-press at school, which said “Beatles Earth” across its face. Lisa took the button off the wall, and although there was no pin or adhesive on the back of it, when she touched it to her shirt it stuck in place. She took it off and put it back on a few times to make sure that it would come off, and to see if she could figure out what made it stick, but the backside of the button was just a blank but slightly rough circle of plastic. From here, the red footprints led out into a courtyard, where Lisa could see that a lot of students had already gathered. Wally finished his placement about the same time Lisa did, and as he walked over to her she saw that his button had a green squiggle on it.

“Where did it say you're from?” she asked.

“Gaea Reborn,” he said. “and you?”

“Beatles Earth.”

Wally gave her an odd look. “Why? Is your world ruled by bugs or something?”

“No,” Lisa laughed, “The Beatles were a band.”

Vinagrette was still talking to her mask, so Lisa and Wally decided to wander out into the courtyard and wait for her.

10

There were around thirty other students in the courtyard when they arrived. The girl in the black and orange uniform who had been in the placement room when they came in was sitting on the rim of a fountain in the middle of the courtyard, talking to two other girls who were also dressed in the same uniforms. All three had black hair, and pale white skin which contrasted sharply with their black hair and uniforms. A girl in designer jeans and a tank top stood talking to a boy and a girl, each of whom had long, pointed ears and wispy fairy wings, and another boy whose skin looked like petrified wood. There was a punch bowl with cups, and some sandwiches off to Lisa's right, and several more kids were gathered there, eating, drinking, and talking, including a boy dressed like a monk, another boy with a cowboy hat and cowboy boots, and a goat who was dressed like a character out of *Oliver Twist*.

Wally headed off toward the food, but Lisa was still full of mushrooms from breakfast, so she mulled around, taking in the strange sights of the other students. As she passed by the fountain, one of the uniformed girls called to her, "hey, come here!"

Lisa walked over to them. She assumed they were going to make fun of her for not wearing a uniform like them or something, and was surprised when they were actually nice.

"I haven't seen your button before," the girl said, "where are you from?"

"Oh, Beatles Earth," Lisa said, "it's named after a band."

"Cool," the girl replied, "we're from Oco Earth. Have you heard of it?"

"No," Lisa said, "I don't think anyone on my world knows about other worlds."

“Oh, you're stuck on one of those, huh,” the girl shook her head, “that sucks.”

One of the other girls, a little chubbier than the one who'd been doing all the talking said “Hey, what's that around your neck?”

Lisa had almost forgotten they were there, “These are headphones.”

“Headphones?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “they make music.” She pressed play on her mp3 player and handed the headphones over to the girl, who tentatively put them on.

“Cool!” the girl exclaimed. The uniformed girls passed the headphones back and forth, listening to the music.

“Your world must be really into music,” the first girl said, “if it's named after a band and everyone has these. I'm Tyra.” Tyra pointed to the chubby girl, “this is Gretchen, and that's Mina.”

“I'm Lisa, nice to meet you.”

“My, oh, my,” Tyra said, looking past Lisa, “look what just walked in.”

Lisa turned to see a boy standing at the door from the placement room to the courtyard. He was dressed in the same black and orange uniform as Tyra and her friends, and had the same black hair and pale complexion. The boy looked around nervously, and started walking around the courtyard, following a similar route to the one Lisa had taken.

“I call dibs!” Tyra shouted. The other two Oco girls giggled.

“That is the hottest gifted boy I've ever seen.” Gretchen said as they watched him.

“Gifted?” Lisa asked.

“Like you and me,” Tyra said, “most Oco boys can't wend, but the few that can are really good at it.”

“But usually really ugly,” Gretchen added.

The boy passed closer, and Tyra shouted to him, “Hey!”

He turned and walked over to them. “Hey,” he said back.

“I’m Tyra,” she said, holding out her hand.

The boy took her hand, and paused for a moment, “Viktor,” he said.

“Hi, Viktor,” Tyra said. Lisa could almost see the rays of flirtation beaming out of Tyra’s eyes. “This is Gretchen, and Mina, and Lisa.”

Viktor looked at Lisa. “Why are you out of uniform?” he asked.

Lisa suddenly realized that with her dad’s pale Irish skin and her mom’s Hispanic black hair she looked just like the rest of the girls.

“She’s not an Oco,” Tyra giggled, “she’s a Beatle.”

“Oh, of course,” Viktor said.

There was a sharp whistle from the end of the courtyard opposite the food table. Everyone turned to see the little old woman who had been at the hear-ring trough standing on a raised platform. “May I have your attention, please,” she began. It sounded like she was speaking at a normal volume, but Lisa could hear her perfectly from halfway across the courtyard and over the sound of the fountain. “My name is Mrs. Weatherby, and I welcome you to your first year at the Solstice Academy. The first year curriculum includes Mathematics and Unarmed Combat, both of which can be skipped by students who prove that they already possess competency in the field. Competency testing for Mathematics will now begin, followed by testing for Unarmed Combat. Students wishing to test out of Mathematics, please come forward at this time.”

“Let’s go,” Tyra said, and the girls, Lisa, and Viktor joined the line that was forming in front of Mrs. Weatherby. Lisa had never been particularly good at math, but she figured that no harm could come from trying, and she’d look stupid if all the Oco girls went up and she stayed behind.

“Quite a few mathematicians this year,” Mrs. Weatherby said, “please form a single line. To make this faster, I’m going to multiply. Please don’t be alarmed,” With that Mrs. Weatherby made a few quick, strange motions with her hands, and three other Mrs. Weatherbys, all identical to the original, stepped out from behind her and spread out on the stage. A few students gasped at the trick, Lisa included.

The four Mrs. Weatherbys called students up, four at a time, and asked them a series of questions. They were far enough away that Lisa couldn’t hear them, and as each student finished Mrs. Weatherby wrote his or her name down in a notebook. “Next please!” one of them called. Lisa walked over to her. “Name, please.”

“Lisa Star.”

“Good morning, Lisa,” Mrs. Weatherby began, “What’s four times seven?”

“Twenty-eight”, Lisa answered. Obviously it was going to be one of those tests where the questions start out easy and get much harder as they go.

“Nine times nine?”

“Eighty-one.”

“Fifteen divided by three?”

“Five.”

“Twenty-four divided by six?”

“Four.”

“Two times eight?”

“Sixteen.”

“Excellent. Five out of five. You pass.”

“That’s it?” Lisa asked.

“Yep. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Lisa said, and walked away dumbfounded. She'd expected square roots and cosines, not the multiplication tables she'd had to memorize in third grade. Worrying so hard about nothing had made her throat dry, so she wandered back to the punch table and poured herself a glass. She thought it was funny that, so far away from everything familiar to her, the punch tasted just like the tropical punch she'd had a million times before. Wally was leaning against the table, talking to Vinagrette.

“How'd you do?” he asked.

“Passed,” Lisa said, “that was super easy. How did you do?”

“Oh, I didn't try,” Wally said, “I never learned numbers.”

“I passed too,” Vinagrette said.

“Whoa! You're a bunny!” Tyra said as she walked up, “what world are you from?”

“Gaea Reborn,” Wally said.

“Wally, Vinagrette, this is Tyra.” Lisa said. Tyra shook hands with Wally, but didn't even look at Vinagrette.

“That test was pop,” Tyra said as Gretchen, Mina, and Viktor approached.

“Pop?” Lisa asked.

“Totally brainless,” Tyra said, and Gretchen and Mina laughed.

“Are you going to do the combat test too?” Vinagrette asked.

“I'll try it,” Wally said.

The Oco girls acted like they hadn't even heard her.

“I don't think so,” Viktor said. Tyra gave him a strange look, and then glared at Vinagrette.

“That concludes the Mathematics testing,” Mrs. Weatherby announced. She had reverted back to being just one person when Lisa wasn't looking. “To those of you who

passed, good luck on your first year at Solstice Academy, and to those who didn't, I look forward to seeing you in my classes and teaching you the wonders of mathematics.” With that she left the stage. A few moments later, she was replaced by a tall, wiry old man with a long white beard and long white eyebrows that all went down below his knees.

“Good morning, young men and women,” he began. Like Mrs. Weatherby, his voice carried all the way across the courtyard. “My name is Grandmaster Toe. I will now give you a moment to laugh at that, before I continue.” There were a few giggles from the students, but since he had given them permission to laugh at his name it didn't seem daring to do so, and most of the students just smiled.

Grandmaster Toe continued, “in just a few moments we will let you have some lunch and then find your dormitory rooms. First, however, any students who wish to do so may test their competency in unarmed combat, for the purpose of skipping this year's combat class,” he paused to stroke his beard and eyebrows. “Please be advised that you may be injured during this test, but our school infirmary will make sure that your health is restored quickly, so that you may continue your classes. All students wishing to take the test, please follow me to the gymnasium.” With that he hopped down from the stage and walked over to a large double-door leading out of the courtyard. As he approached, the doors swung open on their own, and a few of the students fell into line behind him.

Lisa had a purple belt from “Mr. Jackson's X-treme Karate”, so she joined the line along with Wally. The Ocos and Vinagrette stayed behind, but they all wished her and Wally luck.

11

The gymnasium didn't look like any of the ones that Lisa had been in before. There were no basketball hoops hanging from the ceiling, and the floor was covered in

tightly-woven straw mats instead of the usual polished wood. The walls were all padded, and a row of punching bags hung from the ceiling along one end. Grandmaster Toe waited for all the students to file in, and then at a wave of his hand the doors slammed shut. Lisa looked around at the other students in the gym. Wally was standing next to her, and the petrified wood boy and the monk were on the other side of her. On the other side of Wally stood a girl who Lisa hadn't noticed out in the courtyard. A lifetime of political correctness had taught Lisa that the girl's race was "African-American", but Lisa strongly doubted that this girl was from anywhere near either Africa or America. The girl's hair was braided in tight cornrows, and she was dressed like a male Thanksgiving pilgrim, all in black, with a long frock coat and a tall hat with a big silver buckle. Her coat was also covered in silver buckles, as were her boots, the legs of her pants, and the front of her vest. Slung over her back she wore a backpack like most of the other students, and something long wrapped in black cloth, that Lisa thought from the shape might be a shovel, or a really big spoon.

Grandmaster Toe tossed something that looked like a big blob of jelly out into the middle of the gymnasium floor, and as the students watched the blob grew to the size and shape of a stocky, six-foot-tall man. The blob man stretched his arms and legs, and with each stretch he seemed to grow harder and more opaque.

"This is your target," Grandmaster Toe said. "Do not be afraid to hurt him; he is not alive, but he will fight back. You have thirty seconds to deal fifty jools of damage to him."

Lisa was about to ask what a "jool" was when Grandmaster Toe continued, "If you don't know what a jool is, don't worry about it. Just attack until he falls apart. If you do know what a jool is, be advised that he will not show damage the way monsters normally do."

Lisa had no idea what he meant, but the “just attack until he falls apart” part seemed like it was really all she needed.

“If there are no questions,” Grandmaster Toe paused for questions, but none came up, “we will begin. Starting from this end. What is your name?”

The boy down at the end past Wally and the pilgrim girl came forward. His pants were very baggy, but were cinched up with a wide brown leather belt and didn't sag. He wasn't wearing a shirt, but was wearing a long necklace made of steel beads the size of pool balls. He took off his backpack and the necklace as he stepped forward. “Tomas Ortega, sir.” he said.

“Tomas Ortega, begin!” Grandmaster Toe shouted, and recorded his name in a notebook.

Tomas hopped toward the blob in a fighting stance, his arms pressed tightly against the sides of his head. The blob jiggled, and then swung one of its big, gelatinous arms in a wide arc. Tomas raised his leg and blocked the punch with his shin. He leaned back, a little off balance, but used the momentum of leaning back forward to begin a flurry of punches and kicks that caught the blob off guard. The blob stumbled backwards, and collapsed to the ground, breaking into three separate large pieces when it landed.

“Pass!” Grandmaster Toe shouted. Tomas bowed to him, returned to his place and put his necklace and backpack back on. “Next!”

The pilgrim girl stepped forward, and took off her backpack. As she did, the pieces of the blob oozed back together, and it rose back to its feet, looking the same as it had before the fight began.

“Name?”

“Regretta September, sir.” The pilgrim girl said.

“This is unarmed combat, Regretta,” Grandmaster Toe said, pointing to the bundle on her back.

“I do not intend to use it, sir.” She replied.

“Very well then. Regretta September, Begin!”

Lisa saw a streak of black and silver, and suddenly Regretta was standing behind the blob. The blob turned to face her, but only its legs turned, and its top half toppled and fell off.

“Pass!” Grandmaster Toe shouted.

Regretta walked back to her backpack and sat down. Tomas gave her a thumbs-up, but she ignored him. The blob put itself back together.

“Next!”

Wally took off his backpack and stepped forward. “Walter Quick, sir!” he shouted before Grandmaster Toe had even asked his name.

“Walter Quick, begin!”

Wally hunkered down low like a wrestler and circled clockwise around the blob. The blob swung a wide punch at Wally just like it had done with Tomas, and Wally sprang back, out of its reach. The blob followed up with a straight punch with its other gelatinous fist, and Wally caught the punch in his paws and held tight. His legs swung up and latched on to the blob's arm, and with a quick series of alternating holds, he made his way to the blob's back, with both of its arms in a pin. The blob struggled and twisted to get free as Wally curled up his powerful back legs and started kicking, raking long gouges in the blob's back with his claws. Unable to escape, the blob continued to struggle, until it finally collapsed forward onto the floor. For an extra flourish, Wally leaped high up into the air and drove his feet down into the blob, splashing goo several feet in every direction.

“Pass!” Grandmaster Toe shouted, wiping jelly from his beard. The jelly coagulated, and rolled back toward the rest of the blob, which rose back to its feet and shook itself out. Lisa already had her backpack off, and gave Wally a thumbs-up as he walked back.

“Next!”

“Good luck!” Wally said. Lisa stepped forward.

“Name?”

“Lisa Star, sensei!”

Grandmaster Toe chuckled, “it’s been a long time since anyone’s called me sensei. Lisa Star, begin!”

Lisa took a fighting stance and stepped toward the blob. She had never actually sparred anyone before, but she could get through most of her katas with only a few mistakes and her teachers at X-treme Karate told her she was really good at hitting the pads, and the blob really just seemed to her like one big pad. She took the offensive, leapt forward, and performed an excellent X-treme Karate Thunder Punch, twisting her legs, then her hips, then her torso, and finally her shoulders to throw the force of her entire body into her fist, and struck the blob solidly in the middle of its belly. The blob jiggled, and threw the same wide-arcing punch it had used on Tomas and Wally. She threw her arm in the way to block, just as she did in class when her teachers swung at her with the pads, but the blob’s fist was more solid than the pads, and it knocked her arm out of the way and hit her hard in the shoulder. Like it had with Wally, the blob followed through with a straight punch. Lisa moved her arm to block, but for some reason the shoulder the blob had hit wasn’t moving the right way anymore, and the punch connected, right in the middle of her ribcage.

Lisa heard a crunch, and suddenly felt more pain than she'd ever felt before in her life. She watched in slow-motion as her feet left the ground, and then everything returned to normal speed as she flew backwards and slammed against the padded wall of the gym. She collapsed forward, onto her hands and knees, and coughed. Blood came out of her mouth, and dribbled on the straw-mat floor underneath her. Then everything went black.

12

“Here you are,” a woman's voice said.

The darkness slowly faded and Lisa found herself lying on her back, staring up at a white-tiled ceiling. She turned to look at the speaker, and found a slate-gray face with long, pearly fangs and half a dozen beady red eyes staring back at her. She screamed, and leapt up, but a horrible pain in her chest forced her back down.

“Take it easy, dear,” the monster said, “your ribs are mended, but they'll still be sore for a few days.”

Lisa looked back up at the monster. “Are you going to eat me?” she asked.

The monster frowned, and put both of its pairs of hands on its hips, “Now why do you children ALWAYS think I'm going to eat you? Can't one of you wake up in here, just once, and say 'Oh, good afternoon Miss Mactan! Thank you ever so much for saving my life, or mending my bones, or curing my fever!' Some days I just don't know why I bother.”

“I'm sorry,” Lisa said, “I'm just not used to giant spider-people. Thank you, Miss Mactan, for making me better.”

Miss Mactan smiled, and her giant fangs made her look buck-toothed and goofy, “Well, that's more like it!” she said, “Now let me help you up so you can go have some lunch with your little friends,” Miss Mactan held out her four spindly arms and helped

ease Lisa out of her hospital bed. Lisa groaned a little, but maintained her composure as she swung her legs over the side and sat up. Her shirt was folded up on a chair next to the bed, and her chest was wrapped in thick bandages. She stretched a little to test her muscles and her ribs. Her shoulder still ached horribly where the blob had punched it, and there was only a small range of motion where her ribs didn't give her horrible stabbing pains. As she was stretching she noticed that the bandages around her were actually long sticky strands, and realized that they were probably Miss Mactan's own spidersilk. At the moment Lisa wanted nothing more than to soak in hot water, and it occurred to her that it had been over 36 hours since she'd showered last.

“Can I take a shower with these on?” she asked, pointing to the bandages.

“Certainly,” Miss Mactan replied, “just let me know if they come loose and I can make you some more. There are showers down at the end.”

Miss Mactan handed Lisa a robe. Lisa's backpack was sitting next to the bed, and she got out her dopt kit and a change of clothes, put on the robe, opened the curtains around the bed, and limped, very slowly, toward the showers.

The hot water felt wonderful, the soap smelled like piña colada, and Lisa was a little embarrassed at how much dirt she was washing off, and how dark and muddy the water going down the drain was. She put on fresh clothes, and while she was still extremely sore, she found the shower had done a world of good for her aching bones and muscles. Before Lisa left, Miss Mactan reached into a drawer and pulled out a rope that hung upwards, as if gravity affected it backwards, and wrapped it around Lisa's chest under her shirt and just under her arms, so that it pulled her shoulders up slightly and took pressure off her aching ribs. Lisa stuffed her dirty clothes into her backpack, and thanked Miss Mactan for taking care of her, even going so far as to give the hideous spider-woman a kiss on the cheek.

Out in the hall, Lisa heard the sound of voices, and followed it to the cafeteria. She spotted Wally and Vinagrette sitting together with another girl at one table, and she saw the Oco girls sitting together a few tables away. Before she could make up her mind who to sit with, Vinagrette spotted her and began waving, and she hobbled over.

“How are you feeling?” Wally asked, “I wanted to stay with you, but that spider monster told me I couldn't.”

“Pretty awful,” Lisa croaked. “Miss Mactan's OK, though. She probably just didn't want you to see me without a shirt on.”

Wally looked embarrassed, and Vinagrette piped up. “We found another Beatle!” she said.

The girl sitting with them turned around and stuck out her hand to Lisa. “Hi! I'm Donna. You're Lisa, right? Where are you from? I'm from L.A.”

“Oh, hi,” Lisa said, taking Donna's hand, “I'm from Albuquerque.”

“Oh, OK. My parents drag me to Santa Fe sometimes and we land in Albuquerque when we go. Do you like my jeans?” She swung around on the bench, and Lisa recognized her designer jeans from out in the courtyard.

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “they're nice. How much were they?”

“Well,” Donna said – this was obviously the question she had been hoping for – “When I got there they were \$200, but I'm really good at shopping, so I just kept walking around and around in the same store, until I found them for \$100!”

Lisa understood. Donna must've done something similar to what Lisa had done when she'd found the river by the tree; she'd just walked until she found a world where the pants were half-price. “Why didn't you just keep walking until they were \$20?” Lisa asked.

Donna looked shocked, “I would NEVER wear a \$20 pair of jeans!” she exclaimed.

“Oh,” Lisa said, “well, I'd better get some food,” There was a long buffet set up against the wall, and the smells were making her incredibly hungry. She also had no idea how to fix accidentally insulting Donna.

“I recommend the lamb,” Vinagrette called after her as she left.

Lisa had no idea where to begin with the buffet. It spread over three long tables. There was lamb, with rosemary and peppercorns in a cream sauce. There were blueberry pancakes and waffles with maple syrup. There was Waldorf salad, with apples and grapes and walnuts and marshmallows. There were chicken pot pies, pork pot pies, and beef pot pies. There were lobsters, piles of popcorn shrimp with cocktail sauce, smoked salmon and a cauldron full of clam chowder. There were more varieties of cheeses and sausages than Lisa ever knew existed. There was fried chicken, and cheeseburgers, ten different kinds of pizza, and a hundred different kinds of sushi. The buffet tables ended with a tremendous basket of various whole fruits, and machines that dispensed chocolate milk, five different kinds of juice, and two hundred different kinds of soda.

Lisa loaded a plate with a fried chicken drumstick, a slice of lamb, a big scoop of the Waldorf salad, and filled all the remaining space with cheese and sausage slices before dispensing herself a glass of a mint and coffee flavored soda. There wasn't actually a mint and coffee flavored soda, but there was mint soda and there was coffee soda, and Lisa thought it might make a good combination, and it did. It wasn't until she was on her way back that she noticed the gigantic dessert buffet on the other side of the room, which she didn't even want to think about until she'd finished what she already had. The Oco girls were closer to the lunch buffet than her other friends were, and Tyra flagged her down on her way back. It was just as well, Lisa thought, since she still didn't

really know what to say to Donna. As she sat down she noticed that Tomas, the boy with the giant necklace, was sitting with them.

Tyra was sitting as close as she could to Viktor. “Tomas says you got creamed,” she said.

“It wasn't that bad,” Tomas said, “how are you feeling?”

“A little sore,” Lisa said as she bit into the fried chicken. She had never tasted fried chicken so good. “I feel really pop for being the only one to fail, though.”

“You weren't the only one,” Tomas said, “Eight other guys timed out. Three of 'em just turtled and waited it out. The fact that you went down fighting shows you've got guts.”

That made Lisa feel a little better about it. By the time she had finished eating there was still half a piece of lamb and a scattering of sausages and cheeses on her plate. The Oco girls and Tomas had all gotten dessert, and she'd watched them eat pecan pie and hot fudge sundaes and triple chocolate cheesecake and wished she wasn't so painfully full. The Oco girls mostly talked about Oco actors and musicians and fashions that Lisa and Tomas didn't have any context for, and they'd explain occasionally, although they often disagreed over the explanations, and at one point they made Lisa show off her headphones to Tomas and Viktor.

When lunch was over, Mister Gromon walked into the cafeteria and told the students to follow the red footprints to the first-year dormitories, and the students streamed out along the path, stuffed with food and ready to unpack. The footprints twisted and turned down hallways and up and down stairways, out a door, and into another building, finally stopping in the large common room of the first-year dormitories. Mister Gromon was there when they arrived, to explain the layout to them. Stairs led up on either side of the common room to the building's two towers, one of which was for

girls and the other for boys. Students with no gender, Mister Gromon explained, could choose whichever tower they wished. The common room had four large televisions, with a large library of movies and video games, books and boardgames, a full kitchen should anyone feel the need to cook, and an adjoining indoor pool. Each floor of each tower had six separate bedrooms, although room mergers were available on request, and a communal bathroom. Bridges connected the two towers at every level. Co-ed activities were not discouraged but, and Mister Gromon grew very stern for a moment as he said this, “anyone who wastes his or her time at the Academy on 'lesser pursuits' to the detriment of their performance in class will not be asked back for a second year.” He then dismissed them to find themselves rooms, and asked that they reconvene here in the common room at two o'clock for further instructions.

Lisa settled in on the third floor of the girls' tower, naturally. The Oco girls took three of the other five rooms on that floor, and Vinagrette and Donna took the other two. Their rooms were all identical, with a single-sized bed, a desk and chair, a closet, and a window. Lisa's window looked back toward the school, and Gretchen's window, on the other side of the tower, overlooked the empty field behind the school with the forest beyond. The bathroom wasn't as bad as Lisa had feared; there were individual toilet stalls, and individual shower stalls, each of which had a tiny adjoining dressing room and a door. Lisa unpacked her backpack into her closet, and since she'd already showered in the infirmary she headed down to the common room to see what would happen next.

13

Everyone else was apparently still unpacking and getting cleaned up, which left Lisa alone to inspect the common room. She started by looking over the bookshelves; there was nothing there in English, although she did find one book that looked like it was

written in Japanese. That explained all the masks around the Academy; there must not be a written form of the “first language”, and while the hear-rings could translate any spoken words, they didn't work for reading. The movie collection was pretty extensive, although again Lisa didn't find anything with a title in English, so she only had the pictures on the covers to judge them by. Since the dialog would all be spoken in a movie her hear-ring would be able to translate it, but at the moment she really wasn't in the mood to watch anything. Ditto for the video games, although a lot of them did look interesting enough to play later. She opened up a case of each, though, just out of curiosity, and found that the video games were on cartridges like Earth video games used to be, and that the movies were sealed, transparent flasks of milky blue liquid.

On another shelf she found cases of smaller vials of the same liquid, which she thought were probably the equivalent of CDs if the bigger flasks were like DVDs. None of the cover art looked particularly interesting, except one with a photograph of four angels with black hair and black wings pointing swords toward the camera. There was a round hole on top of the stereo, and there wasn't a stopper on the vial, so she just slid it into the hole. A round button with a swirl pattern on it started blinking on the front of the stereo, and when she pressed it the music started. It was surprisingly good; sort of a cross between trance techno and opera. The lyrics were about a swan flying over a rose garden searching for his true love, and didn't seem to match the rhythm of the music very well. Lisa realized that her hear-ring was probably translating it and took it off. Without the hear-ring the match was perfect, and even though she couldn't understand the lyrics she liked the music enough that it didn't matter.

Lisa stretched out on a couch and listened to the music, happy to have a break after all the craziness that had gotten her here. The huge clock over the entrance was marked with strange symbols, but from the way the hands were pointed Lisa guessed it

was about 12:40, which gave her almost an hour and a half of rest until Mister Gromon returned with “further instructions”. A few other students came down, but nobody bothered her. The fairy boy and girl both came down the stairs from the boys' tower, and went outside. Wally, Viktor, and the petrified wood boy came down and sat quietly in big comfy chairs near Lisa's couch, and it seemed like they were also happy to have a moment's peace. A few other students, including Gretchen and Mina, wandered into the kitchen, and Lisa wondered how they could even think about food so soon after that gigantic lunch. Someone started watching a movie, but the room was arranged in such a way that Lisa could barely hear it, and Lisa's music apparently wasn't bothering them. It was a little after one when Vinagrette came down stairs, singing along to the music that Lisa had put on the stereo. She sat down next to Lisa on the couch, and when the album ended she turned to Lisa and said, “Merf shweg a derbalerp?”

Lisa put her hear-ring back on. “What?”

“Just saying hello,” Vinagrette said.

“Oh, hi.” Lisa said.

Tyra came downstairs and sat on the arm of Viktor's chair. She moved his hand out of the way to do so, and continued to hold onto it after she'd sat down. Gretchen and Mina came out of the kitchen and immediately gravitated toward Tyra. “We're gonna walk around the campus,” Tyra said to Lisa, “you wanna come?”

“Nah, I'm just gonna sit here and digest my lunch for a while,” Lisa said.

“See you at two, then,” Tyra said, pulling Viktor to his feet and leading all the rest of the Ocos out the front door.

“I don't think she likes me,” Vinagrette said after they'd left.

“What makes you say that?” Wally asked.

“She always ignores me. In fact, all the Ocos do except Viktor.”

“Maybe she thinks you're after Viktor,” Lisa suggested.

“Maybe,” Vinagrette said, “or maybe it's because I don't have black hair.”

Lisa shrugged and walked over and hit the play button on the stereo again.

“What's the name of this band?” she asked Vinagrette.

“Angelic Villain.” Vinagrette said.

Lisa plopped back down on the couch, and after a few more minutes of Angelic Villian and a stomach full of food she fell fast asleep.

14

Someone nudged Lisa awake. She heard lots of voices, and looked over the back of the couch. There were four copies of Mr. Gromon, just like when Mrs. Weatherby had split up that morning, and they were reciting peoples names. Lisa looked over to find that it was Wally who had woken her up.

“Has he called me yet?” she asked.

Wally shook his head, “no”.

As far as Lisa could tell Mr. Gromon was calling names in random order, but it was probably alphabetical to whatever language he was speaking.

“Lisa Star”.

Lisa clambered over the back of the couch and walked over to the Mr. Gromon who'd called her. Her chest still hurt a lot, but she felt much better after her nap.

“Lisa Star,” Mr. Gromon said more quietly once Lisa was within conversational distance, “Do you have a schedule book?”

“No,” Lisa replied.

Mr. Gromon stretched out his hand, and plucked a little brown leather-bound notebook out of the air, like a magician pulling a quarter from behind someone's ear. He handed her the book. "And is your watch current?" he asked.

Lisa looked at her watch. It read 12:00:07 PM. She looked at the clock over the door. It read 2:13. She looked back at her watch, and realized that the seconds weren't changing. If it was an analog watch she'd just assumed that it needed to be wound, but since it was digital she realized that it was keeping time back on Beatles Earth, and wouldn't be very useful to her here. "I don't think this watch will work here," she said.

Again Mr. Gromon extended his hand, and plucked a pocketwatch out of the air and handed it to Lisa. It was analog, with the same weird symbols that were on the clock over the door. Lisa really would've preferred a digital wristwatch, but she thought that an analog pocketwatch was also cool in its own right so she didn't complain.

"Your schedule is," Mr. Gromon began, and paused long enough for Lisa to open up her schedule book and find the attached pen, "Monday: Intro to Cosmology. Tuesday: Cutting. Wednesday: Shifting. Thursday: Defensive Ravelling. Friday: Unarmed Combat. Each class begins at nine o'clock and ends at five o'clock, with a two-hour break for lunch at noon. Saturday and Sunday are open for study and recreation. I suggest that you spend the rest of the day familiarizing yourself with campus so that you can find your classes in the morning. You will find a map of the campus in the back of your schedule book where you can note the locations of your classrooms."

Lisa looked up from writing. "What day is it today?"

"Sunday," Mr. Gromon replied, "Good luck with your classes."

That seemed to be the end of their conversation, so Lisa returned to the couch to look over the map before setting out. She had just flipped to the back of the book when Wally sat down next to her, mumbling to himself and clutching his notebook.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“No,” Wally replied. He was rolling his eyes back and forth like he was trying to keep something in his head while he was talking. “My people don’t ‘write’ things, and I have to keep repeating my schedule so I don’t forget it.”

Lisa turned to a blank page in her schedule book. “What’s your schedule?” she asked.

“Monday: Shifting. Tuesday: Cosmology. Wednesday: Mathematics. Thursday: Ravelling. Friday: Cutting.”

Lisa wrote down his list. “OK, now open your schedule and take your pen.” Wally did, and clenched the pen in his fist. He’d obviously never held a writing instrument before, but Lisa didn’t want to discourage him right off the bat by trying to teach him the right way to hold a pen. That could come later. “Does ‘Monday’ mean ‘Moon Day’ on your world, too?”

“Yeah.”

“OK, so draw a crescent moon for Monday.”

He did.

“What would be a good picture for ‘Shifting’?” Lisa asked.

“Maybe a footprint,” Wally said, and drew a little rabbit footprint next to the moon.

“Great!” Lisa said, “Does Tuesday have something special associated with it?”

“Yeah,” Wally said, “Tuesday means ‘Fire Day’.”

“OK, draw a fire, and since Tuesday is ‘Cutting’ draw scissors next to it.”

“Scissors?”

“Um, draw a knife.”

Wally carefully drew a crude picture of a knife next to the fire. They repeated the exercise for every day of the week. They had a hard time coming up with a picture for “cosmology”, but Wally drew a spiderweb and said he’d just remember what it meant. After they were done, Wally thanked her profusely and set off to find all of his classes before dinner. Lisa considered asking to come with him, but they only had one class together, and she had actually been looking forward to spending some time walking around alone.

Lisa went looking for her classes first. She knew from walking to the Academy and from walking from the Academy to the dorms that the Academy itself was a vaguely square, four- or five-story building, with a courtyard in the center. Assuming that the first-year dorms were to the north of the Academy, that meant that the gymnasium had been on the east side of the courtyard, and the registration offices had been on the west. She entered the Academy through the doors on the side facing the first-year dorms, and immediately found the Beginning Mathematics classroom, which was specifically the one she wasn't looking for, just inside from the first-year entrance. The mask on the nearest door told her it was a boys' bathroom, and the next door after that was a girls' bathroom. She thought it would be best to start on the first floor before moving up to the others, so she continued clockwise around the building. This was harder than it first seemed, since there were two concentric hallways around the courtyard, but she made a point to try the inside hallway once she'd finished the outside one. The gymnasium took up most of the first floor on its side, and Lisa was surprised to find that the gymnasium where she'd done her combat testing was only one of two on this floor; the other looked similar, but where the first one had a row of punching bags, the second had rows upon rows of dummies made of straw, wood, stone, and metal. The side of the academy furthest from the first-year dormitories was the side that she had first entered on arriving; the middle section

was occupied by the entry room with the grand sweeping staircase and the mounted trophy heads, and on either side were classrooms. Lisa was happy to find that one of these was “Introduction to Cosmology”, and she opened her notebook to mark it on the map. The map showed much of what she had suspected, that the courtyard lay in the middle of the academy and the four dormitories were all situated around and outside of the academy at opposite corners. Naturally, nothing on the map was labeled, so she traced her path from the first-year dormitories to her current location, only to discover a little red dot on her map, right where she was standing. Curious, she jogged over to the other side of the staircase, and sure enough, the dot followed. She walked back to the door to the Cosmology classroom and marked it on her map with a spiderweb, the symbol that she and Wally had decided to use for Cosmology, right over the dot. She assumed that the gymnasium with the punching bags where she'd tested for Unarmed Combat was probably the Unarmed Combat classroom, so she marked that on her map too. She hadn't considered it until she saw the other three dormitories on the map, but there were apparently four years to a Solstice Academy education.

She continued her circuit, finding several other classrooms that weren't hers (with names like “Outsider Studies” and “Reaching” that made no sense to Lisa at all) and the registration office. Past that, she came around again to the North side of the building, and could look back out the open doorway toward the first-year dorms. Trying the inside hallway of the first floor next, she found that it was primarily home to professors' offices, and ended at either side of the gymnasium. It also emptied into the room with the large staircase at the south end of the Academy along with the outside hallway, and from this side Lisa noticed that there was also another staircase that went down underneath the large staircase going up. The down staircase became thinner the further it went, and about

thirty steps down it became so thin that Lisa couldn't even squeeze her fingers between the walls.

After finishing her perusal of the first floor, Lisa took the large entryway staircase up to the second floor. At first she thought that the layout here was the same as the first floor, with two hallways running parallel around the building, but the further she walked the more confused she became. Hallways turned in ways that she was sure would have overlapped with each other, or that would have taken her completely outside of the building. At one point she looked out a window for reference, and could see nothing but a thick fog, but a window just a few steps away showed her a clear blue sky, and a view of an ocean that she didn't remember seeing on the way in. In one section of hallway, the window on the south side gave her a south-facing view of the courtyard, but the window on the north side gave her a north-facing view of the courtyard. If she put on her glasses and squinted, she could just barely see her own back in the window across the way. Toward the northwest end of the second floor she found the “Defensive Ravelling” classroom, and if it hadn't been for the red dot on her map she'd have had no idea where to mark it. The cafeteria took up most of the north end of the Academy on the second floor, and Lisa made sure to mark that so she could find it the next day. Retracing her footsteps she found the Infirmary right where she remembered it being. According to her map it was right over the gymnasium, which made sense since that's where people were most liable to get hurt. Completing her circuit, and completing her schedule, she found both “Cutting” and “Shifting” in the same large classroom at the southeast end of the second floor. She hadn't seen any stairs leading up to the third floor and beyond, and figured they must be down the other hallway, so with her schedule mapped out she decided to go exploring. Countless twists, turns, short steps up and short steps down later, she found herself right back where she'd started, at the top of the entryway stairs, without

having found any stairs going up further. She presumed that there must be a secret to getting up there, and left it at that, although she decided to make a point of finding out exactly what that secret was, preferably before she was supposed to.

Having concluded her tour of the Academy, she decided to check out the dormitories and the spaces between as well, walking clockwise from the first-year dorms around the grounds. Between the first- and second-year dorms she found a soccer field, and she recognized Tomas and a first-year boy playing soccer with older kids she didn't recognize, and assumed were second-year students. The second-year dormitory looked just like the first-year. There were a group of second-year kids sitting out on the front steps, and Lisa poked her head in the door to confirm that yes, the second-year common room looked just like the first-year one.

“First year, huh?”

Lisa turned around to see a boy and a girl, about a year or two older than she was, sitting on the stone railing along the side of the steps. The boy was wearing a stocking cap, a heavy metal t-shirt for a band Lisa had heard of, and cut-off shorts, and had his arm around the girl. The girl was dressed similarly, although Lisa didn't recognize the band on her shirt, or even the language that the band's name was written in. She had a deep tan, but her waist-length hair and her irises were both milky white, and almost seemed to glow in the sunlight.

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “First year. I'm Lisa.”

“Leda,” the girl said.

“Jay,” said the boy, “where are you from?”

“Beatles Earth.”

“Right on! Strawberry Fields Forever!” Jay shouted, and held out his hand for a high-five. Lisa had no idea what he had just said, but she high-fived him anyway. “I'm

from Copenhagen,” Jay continued, “well, not Copenhagen actually, but just a little ways outside of Copenhagen.”

“In Denmark?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool,” Lisa said.

“You want some pizza?” Jay asked, “somebody from the Neon Oasis brought some really good sausage. If you think pepperoni's good you've gotta try this.”

“Sure!” After her nap and the walk around campus Lisa had finally burned off some of that gigantic lunch. She followed Jay and Leda through the common room into the kitchen, and they gave her a huge slice of pizza and a paper towel. She was a little wary of the fact that the sausage was bright yellow, but she tried it anyway.

“How is it?” Jay asked, “If you say it tastes like chicken I'll kick your ass.”

Lisa laughed, “No, it's like.. I don't know. It's really good though. Thanks!”

“Us Beatles gotta stick together,” Jay said, “I had a really rotten start to my first year, so I wanted to help somebody out this time.”

Lisa found a soda of some sort in the kitchen, and followed Jay and Leda back out to the common room. The room was fairly packed, and there was an anime playing on the TV. Jay and Leda found some room on the couch, and Lisa sat on the floor. All the characters in the anime had faces and markings like tropical fish, and Lisa couldn't tell if that was an artistic decision on the part of the animators, or if that's just what everyone looked like in the world where it was made. She'd been watching it for twenty minutes before she realized that the plot was Shakespeare's Hamlet. She started feeling tired after she finished her slice of pizza, so she turned around to thank Jay and Leda, but found that they were already preoccupied with making out. Not wanting to disturb them, she quietly

got to her feet and left, promising herself that she would thank them the next time she saw them on campus.

The sun was setting by the time she left the second-year dorms, and she wanted to quickly finish her tour and return to her own dorms before it got dark, so she started walking. Between the second- and third-year dorms she found a cluster of tennis courts, and the girls she'd seen running through the entryway with rackets when she'd first arrived were still playing. Lisa figured it had probably been six hours. Beyond the tennis courts stood the third-year dormitories, which looked just like the first and second year dorms only the door didn't face the Academy. After walking around the building, Lisa discovered that the third-year dorms actually didn't have an entrance at all. There was what looked like a hedge maze between the third- and fourth-year dorms, and she decided to save that for another day. After discovering that the third-year dorms had no entrance, she wasn't quite as surprised as she would have otherwise been to find that the fourth-year dorms didn't even have a first floor; it had a common room floor, just like the others, but the entire building hung mysteriously suspended in the air, a good twenty feet above the ground. Walking around the building Lisa was not surprised to discover that it, too, lacked an obvious entrance. She wondered if the third- and fourth-year students needed extra protection from something, or if they were just showing off.

Walking back to her own dormitory, Lisa found a sprawling flower garden on the way, which she gave a cursory glance, and noticed something white, shining at the perimeter of the forest beyond. The sun had just set, and the sky was quickly growing dark, so she couldn't make it out clearly. She started walking toward it, but it moved a little, and she stopped. Keeping her eyes on it so she wouldn't lose it, she took out her glasses and put them on, and confirmed her fears. Just beyond the edge of the Solstice Academy campus stood the creature she had stared at across the river the previous

afternoon, and that would've killed her if Wally hadn't appeared in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. The thing froze, as if it knew that she recognized it, and stared back at her with its eyeless face. Lisa was close enough that she could have run to the first-year dorms if the thing decided to charge at her, and the thing seemed aware of that fact. It raised its hand, and slowly drew one of its blood-red talons across its throat. Lisa shivered to see it make such a "human" gesture, and the monster backed into the forest and disappeared.

Lisa kept her eyes on that spot of the forest, looking back and forth at the surrounding area a few times as well, all the way back to her dorms. In retrospect, it was possible that that was not the same creature that she had met at the river the previous day, but she honestly didn't want to believe that there could be more than one of it.

15

After the long couple of days she'd had, Lisa went to bed early after trying in vain to set the alarm on her new pocketwatch. Fortunately, there was a cacophony of ringing bells from both the academy's clock tower and the clock in the common room at eight in the morning, giving Lisa an hour to shower, find some breakfast, and get to her first class. Someone had burnt toast in the dorm's kitchen, and the smell permeated the common room, so Lisa decided to try the cafeteria for breakfast. The selection there was just as big as it had been for lunch the day before, and after much deliberation Lisa made herself a plate of waffles with lots of butter and maple syrup, and about eight pieces of bacon. There was a coffee percolator next to the soda dispenser, and she made her self a mocha by filling a cup halfway with coffee and the rest of the way with chocolate milk. She was halfway through her waffle when the Oco girls came in together, got themselves food and sat down at her table.

“Are you OK?” Gretchen asked Lisa.

“Yeah, pretty good,” Lisa said with a mouthful of waffle. “Why?”

“You were already asleep by the time we got back, so I thought you might be sick.”

“Nah, I was just worn out after the trip here,” Lisa said, “Where’d you guys go last night?”

“Oh, around the campus and down the mountain a little,” Tyra said, “there’s a little town not too far from here, and we just hung out there for a while.” Viktor and Tomas came into the cafeteria and started walking toward them.

Lisa thought of the creature that had stared at her from the edge of the woods. “Did you see, like, a skinny white monster?”

“Only Mina,” Tomas said.

“Hey!” Mina replied, and punched him in the arm. Tomas wrapped his arms around Mina and gave her a big bear hug, accompanied by a bearish growl. She protested, but Lisa could see that she was enjoying the affection. At the same time, Tyra reached up and grabbed Viktor by the back of the neck and pulled him down and kissed him. Gretchen did her best to ignore them, and Lisa was glad that she hadn’t gone along with them last night since she’d have probably just been a fifth wheel along with Gretchen. She checked her watch; 8:45.

“Eat fast, boys,” Lisa said, breaking the mood, “class in fifteen minutes.”

Viktor gave her a sarcastic salute, and took Tomas to get food.

“Just hung out around town, huh?” Lisa said. Tyra and Mina blushed, and Gretchen rolled her eyes.

Lisa finished her breakfast, said goodbye to her friends, and raced off to her first class, “Intro to Cosmology”. She didn’t know what Cosmology meant, exactly, but she

hoped it didn't have anything to do with "Cosmetology". The room was right where she had marked it on her map, although even running the short distance from the cafeteria to the classroom she'd gotten turned around a couple of times and had to consult her map to point her back in the right direction.

Lisa walked through the door of the Intro to Cosmology classroom to find a bear sitting at the teacher's desk. Normally, her reaction to seeing a bear this close up without a zoo enclosure between them would be to turn and run. This bear, however, was wearing an old sweater with patches at the elbows and big reading glasses, and gently sipping a mug of tea. He looked terribly unhappy, and rather than running away Lisa's first instinct was to give him a big hug and tell him that everything would be OK. The bear looked up at her, and barely managed a smile over his gloom. "Take a seat wherever you'd like," he sighed.

The room was one of the medical-style classrooms Lisa had seen the previous day, with the seats arranged in a half-circle, each row a couple steps up from the row in front of it. Lisa spotted Donna sitting toward the end of the first row, and since she didn't recognize anyone else in the room, she sat down next to her.

"Hey, I didn't see you at breakfast," Lisa said.

"I don't eat breakfast," Donna said, "it slows me down."

"I met a second-year student from Beatles Earth Denmark. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings yesterday," Lisa added.

"Huh? Oh, I'd completely forgotten about it," Donna said, "Don't worry about it."

Tyra and Mina came running through the door just as the bell rang, and found a place a few rows back from Lisa and Donna. The bear stood up when the bell stopped ringing, and despondently shuffled out from behind his desk, still clutching his tea mug in his paw. "Oh, just look at you," he said, "all so young and cute and optimistic, with no

idea what horrible things lie ahead.” He shuffled over to the chalkboard and picked up a piece of chalk. “My name is Mr. Plober”, he said, writing it on the board. To Lisa the writing looked like a bunch of swirls and squiggles with a square in the middle. “And this is ‘Introduction to Cosmology’,” he looked back out into the classroom, “who can tell me what cosmology is?”

Lisa half expected Donna to stand up and blurt out something about make-up. Mr. Plober called on someone in the back, “Yes?” Lisa turned to see a boy with blue skin and a bald head, dressed in ornate silk robes, stand up.

“Cosmology is the metaphysical study of how the universe works,” the boy said.

“Wonderful,” Mr. Plober responded, setting his mug down on his desk so he could clap his massive paws together, “just wonderful,” the bear looked like he was on the verge of tears, but he regained his composure and continued. “This class will study the structure of the cosmos. We will be focusing on the differences and similarities between individual worlds and fragments, and on how they all relate to each other.”

“Each world,” he continued, “has its own cosmology. Most worlds have magic, but a few worlds do not. Some worlds are more heavily influenced by the power of the will than others. Some worlds are home to amazing works of literature, and some don’t even have a written language. For your first project, due at the end of class,” he paused, as the students opened their notebooks and took up their pens, “you will give a thirty-minute presentation on your world to the rest of the class. Important points that should be covered in your presentation include: how your world was created, how magic works in your world, a synopsis of your world’s history, and its current cultures. Students from the same world will be allowed to work together, and you are also encouraged to talk to students from other worlds, to learn what makes your worlds different. I will also answer any questions you have.”

With that he shuffled back around behind his desk, and went back to staring into his tea mug. Donna raised her hand, but he didn't notice. Lisa called out, "Mr. Plober?" and he slowly looked up at Donna.

"Yes?"

"Why is my world called Beatles Earth?"

Mr. Plober looked like he was deep in thought for a moment, then asked the class, "Who here has heard of the band called the Beatles?" Lisa and Donna raised their hands. Lisa looked around, and noticed that they were the only ones. "And who has heard of the band called the Quarrymen?" about half of the rest of the class raised their hands.

"There's your answer," Mr. Plober said, "Many worlds have a band called the Quarrymen, but yours is the only world where the Quarrymen are called the Beatles instead."

"That's it?" Donna asked, "How boring. I was thinking it would be something like the whole world was actually on the back of a giant beetle or something."

Lisa shrugged. "It could be worse. It could be called 'Hoobastank Earth'."

16

Lisa and Donna's presentation went fairly well. Through talking with other students and Mr. Plober, they learned that, although Beatles Earth was one of the few worlds where magic didn't work, it was also the only world with an internet. It was also one of the few worlds, along with Oco Earth, that had predominantly gasoline-powered vehicles, and had the most languages of any of the worlds being presented on (although most of the worlds had long since used magic to break language barriers, with things like hear-rings and the first language). Lisa and Donna's presentation covered the on-going debate over evolution and the big bang versus creationism, and touched on a few of the

world's religions, although they admitted they didn't know the difference between Hinduism and Buddhism. Lisa drew a map of the world on the board. Finally, they finished up with a brief history of the world, glossing over periods of time they didn't know, like everything between the dinosaurs and ancient Egypt, and from the dark ages to the American Revolution. After they were done Mr. Plober told them they'd done "a terrific job", and gave them both big hugs. He smelled like pipe tobacco and honey.

From Tyra and Mina's presentation, Lisa learned that Oco Earth was ruled by the Oco One World Government, which was so successful that its language had replaced almost all others, and was spoken universally around the world. On Oco Earth, there was no crime, no poverty, and no injustice. Like Beatles Earth, almost all of the vehicles on Oco Earth were gasoline powered, but a five-year plan had been instituted to replace them all with hydrogen vehicles. Oco Earth had very little magic, although the government was aware of the existence of the Solstice Academy and, Tyra explained proudly, "sent its best and brightest to be trained as Regulators." Lisa didn't understand what a "Regulator" was, but she assumed she'd probably find out later. At the end of the presentation there was a question and answer section. Lisa raised her hand.

"Why do all the Ocos wear uniforms?" She asked.

Tyra stepped forward, and gave her answer as if she was reciting it out of a book, "Uniforms instill a feeling of equality among the people. Uniforms deter Oco citizens from judging each other based on outward appearances."

At the end of their presentation, the Oco girls also got a big hug and accolades from Mr. Plober.

A couple of cat people gave a presentation on Gaea Reborn, and Lisa remembered that that was also where Wally had come from. From the sound of their report, there were no humans on their world. There had been humans in ancient times, but they were all

wiped out by a plague, and the last human, who they called “The Creator”, had remade many of the world's animals in the humans' image so that they could continue the humans' legacy. The people of Gaea Reborn lived in a technologically weak world, but magic was fairly common there, and they were beginning to unearth and understand many ancient machines and tools that the humans had left behind.

A few of the students had come from complete worlds, like Beatles Earth, and Oco Earth, and Gaea Reborn, but most of the students had come from fragments, which Mr. Plober explained were “incomplete worlds”.

“Just traveling normally across a complete world will take you somewhere else on the same world,” Mr. Plober said, “and if you retrace your steps you'll end up back where you started. If you travel far enough on a fragment, however, you'll end up somewhere completely different, either another fragment or another complete world, and sometimes going back the way you came will take you somewhere else entirely.”

There were a dozen other presentations, and Lisa was amazed at how varied the worlds and fragments were, in their geography, people, and cultures. There were lands with islands that drifted through the sky, and lands where dinosaurs still lived side by side with humans. There was a world where the air was so thick that you could fall a mile and land on your feet without getting hurt, and a fragment where specially-crafted trees and plants grew everything their people needed, from food to clothing to houses. The blue-skinned boy in the ornate robe came from a sorcerer's monastery high in the mountains of a place where gigantic whales floated through the sky and people glided serenely along the ground on the tips of their toes instead of walking. The strangest presentation of all, however, was given by a student who was little more than a swirling ball of purple light, who gave them all horrible headaches and strange hallucinations of a space with no physical form until Mr. Plober cut him off early, and hastily thanked him for his

presentation. Lisa was actually surprised that she hadn't noticed the ball of light before, until after it had finished its presentation it simply dissipated into the air.

Mr. Plober ended the class by telling them all what a wonderful delight it had been to have them all come visit, and he would be overjoyed to see them all next Monday. He gave each of them a big hug on their way out the door, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks, and Lisa wondered if this was the way he was going to be every week.

That night Lisa had dinner in the cafeteria with her new friends, and they all talked about how their classes had gone. Wally and Viktor had taken the “Shifting” class together.

“How'd that go?” Lisa asked between mouthfuls of food.

“OK,” Wally said, “we actually did a hands-on exercise at the end where we walked around the hedge maze until we found a blue carnation.”

Lisa noticed the blue carnation that Wally had pinned to his coat. “Cool. There's another flower garden inside the hedge maze?”

“Well, yes and no,” Wally said, “that's what 'Shifting' is all about; you just keep walking, thinking more and more about what it is your looking for, and eventually there it is in front of you.”

“Oh, OK,” Lisa said, “that's what I was doing when I found the river where we met.”

Wally finished his mouthful of salad, and said, “Well, that explains the monster.”

“What monster?” Gretchen said.

“When I got to the river there was... a monster there, but Wally attacked it and we got away.”

Wally nodded, “The Shifting instructor said not to try shifting on our own without proper training, because 'bad things' might happen. She was really vague about it, but I think the monster we saw was one of those 'bad things'.”

Lisa wanted to tell him that she'd seen the monster again last night, but she had been tired, and she wasn't even sure herself if it had really been there. “How about you, Donna,” she said instead, “you do a lot of shifting when you shop, right? Have you ever seen any monsters?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” Donna said, and that ended the conversation.

After dinner they went back to the first-year dorms' common room and watched a couple of movies. One was about a zeppelin crew searching for a lost city, and Lisa was sure that she'd seen the same plot somewhere before but couldn't quite put her finger on it. Tyra and Viktor were preoccupied and hardly saw any of either movie, and without Tyra's lead to be mean the other two Oco girls were actually cordial to Vinagrette for a change. After the movies they found a puzzle video game, at which Lisa reigned supreme for the next half hour, until a robot boy passing on his way to the kitchen jumped in for a game and mopped the floor with her. The others cheered, and the robot graciously admitted that he did have an unfair advantage. Lisa was surprised at how human he seemed for a robot.

“Hey, what's your name?” Gretchen asked.

“Diro,” the robot replied, and she followed him out into the kitchen.

Two hours later, after they'd all gotten tired of the game, and the next game they found after that, and all gone to bed for the night, Lisa heard Gretchen opening the door to her room across the hall. There was a loud whisper.

“Gretchen!” It was Tyra's voice.

There was a muffled response from Gretchen. They were both speaking in whispers, and Lisa strained to hear what they were saying. At one point Gretchen shouted, “But he isn't! He isn't even ANY kind of person at all! And what about Tomas?”

“Keep your voice down!” Tyra hissed back, and they went back to whispering. A few minutes later Gretchen slammed her door, and Tyra also went back to her room. Lisa fell asleep wondering what that had all been about.

17

Up in the morning, a quick shower and a way-too-big breakfast, and Lisa was off to her “Cutting” class, which she assumed would probably be about the “shortcuts” she was good at finding since the “Shifting” class had been about Donna's specialty. She imagined her dad making one of his horrible puns about “Cutting class”, and realized that she'd inherited some of his sense of humor. With her map in hand she found the classroom again, and could smell peppermint and cinnamon in the air even before she walked through the door.

“Mrs. Gale!” she said, running over and wrapping her arms around the old woman who'd brought her home from New York.

“Lisa, darling!” Mrs. Gale exclaimed, “I'm so happy that you could make it. How was the trip?”

“Pretty good over all,” Lisa said, “there was something I want to talk to you about later, though.”

More students filed in behind Lisa, and she scanned the classroom for familiar faces. The seats were arranged in more of a normal classroom style, with individual student desks in rows. She saw Diro sitting in the second row, and took the seat behind him. The boy and girl with fairy wings were also there, and Lisa wondered if they were

so inseparable that they even had the same schedule. Vinagrette came in and took the seat next to Lisa. The bell rang, and class began.

“Good morning, boys and girls!” Mrs. Gale beamed. It seemed to Lisa like Mrs. Gale was the opposite of Mr. Plober in every possible way. “I’m Mrs. Gale,” Like Mr. Plober did, Mrs. Gale wrote her name on the blackboard, and Lisa was surprised to discover that she could read it. Was Mrs. Gale from Beatles Earth?

“I’d like to go around the room,” Mrs. Gale continued, “and have each of you tell us your name, and where you’re from, and a little bit about yourself.”

Lisa’s suspicions were confirmed, or at least reinforced, when the fairy kids answered in unison. “Poli and Pola,” they said, “from the Unseelie Court.”

“And are you brother and sister?” Mrs. Gale asked.

Poli and Pola looked at each other for a moment, then giggled, “No,” they said.

Lisa learned that Vinagrette was from “lots of places”, and that green was, in fact, her natural hair color. She didn’t catch where Diro said he was from, but smiled to herself when his “something about himself” was “I met someone interesting last night.” Lisa couldn’t think of anything particularly interesting to say about herself, so she just said “I rode a moped last week” and left it at that. She felt kind of lame next to some of the other things that people had said, but she realized that most of the other students had never heard of a moped before, and were probably imagining her riding across the sky on the back of a rainbow-colored dragon or something, which made her feel a little better.

After introductions had been made all around, Mrs. Gale ended it by saying, “Well, thank you all. As for me, I’m Mrs. Gale, I’m from all over, really, and an interesting thing about me is that my best friend used to be a servant boy, but now she’s the queen of an entire kingdom.” At the mention of that, Poli and Pola both said “Oohhhh...” together, as if they’d just realized something important.

The day's lesson covered the basics of “Cutting” which, as Lisa suspected, was the way that she made shortcuts. Most of the information Lisa had already learned through experience. In order to find a shortcut between two places, you think of something that the two places share in common, and focus on that as you're walking. Then, one by one, you focus more on things that the destination has that the origin doesn't, and ignore things that the origin has but the destination doesn't, until you find yourself completely surrounded by the destination, with no sign of the origin. Of course, the shorter the “cut”, the easier it is to make, since places that are close together usually have lots of things in common, and only a few things to add and subtract along the way.

“Cutting,” Mrs. Gale explained, “and Shifting, which is covered in my other class, are the basic building blocks of a greater skill, called 'Wending'. With enough practice you can even learn to wend between worlds, which is what the golden butterflies did when they led you here.”

After lunch, the afternoon was spent at the hedge maze, where Mrs. Gale encouraged the students to cut straight from the entrance to the exit. Lisa was the eighth student to enter the maze, and a few seconds later she was the first student to exit. She tried it a couple more times just for fun, and the third time she came out just behind Poli and Pola. She had never tried cutting over such a small distance before, and found that it was just as easy as the usual cuts she made. She wondered if she could cut through the Academy as easily, and since she and the fairy kids were the only ones out so far she decided to give it a try. Twenty seconds later, the time it would've normally taken her to run halfway around the side of the Academy, she arrived back at the hedge maze with a soda in hand that she'd snagged from the first-year dorms' kitchen. She hadn't even bothered to leave the dorms on her way back; she had just cut straight from the kitchen

door to a classroom door at the south end of the Academy. Vinagrette was also standing near the exit with the fairies, and Lisa offered her a drink of her soda.

“Very impressive, Lisa!” Mrs. Gale said as she emerged from the exit with another student in tow. “Here we are, Crystal,” she said to the student, “would you like to try it again?”

“OK,” Crystal said, “but I’ll need a rest first.” Crystal’s most distinguishing feature was her beautiful blonde hair, which was heavily braided, and was long enough that it would’ve dragged on the ground if it wasn’t magically suspended in the air, slowly waving around like the arms of an octopus. Lisa felt smug to have done better than someone who obviously used magic as part of her everyday life.

“I was especially impressed with the cut from the dorms to the academy,” Mrs. Gale said, turning to Lisa.

“You saw that?” Lisa asked.

“Oh yes, I can see you all right now,” Mrs. Gale said.

Lisa was glad she’d just gotten a soda instead of going to the bathroom or something.

“Would you like to help me?” Mrs. Gale asked, “I’m sure someone with your cutting skills could do a wonderful job of teaching it to the other students.”

“Oh, sure!” Lisa said. She’d just begun to feel guilty for gloating so much about how much better she’d done than anyone else, and going back and helping the other students would be perfect. Soda in hand, she headed back into the hedge maze. Diro was the first student she found. He was scratching his shiny metal head, and looking up at the tops of the hedges. “Having trouble?” she asked.

“Lots of trouble,” Diro said, “My mapping routines are too good for me to trick myself. Did you know that the entrance and the exit to this maze don't actually connect anywhere? They're two separate and independent paths.”

“Really? I had no idea,” Lisa said, and she really didn't, “can you shut the mapping thing off?”

“Not really,” Diro said.

Lisa tried to think of things that helped her find shortcuts. Just walking helped, and letting the things around her just blur together. She was struck with an inspiration and pulled her glasses out of her pocket. “Put these on,” she said.

Diro put her glasses on. The temples bent outward a little, but they'd been through worse and would spring back into shape when they were no longer stretched over his big metal head. “Gah, everything's all blurry,” he said.

“Good,” Lisa said as she took his arm, “Now start walking.”

He did.

“Just don't run into anything, and remember the lesson. Concentrate on the exit, and combine your image of that with what you see in front of you.” They turned a corner. The path widened a little around the corner, but there was no sign of the exit. “The exit has a black stone arch over it,” she suggested, “and the gravel there is black.”

If Diro was right, and the path from the entrance didn't really meet up with the path from the exit at all, then ALL of the gravel on the exit path was probably black, and all the gravel on the entrance path was white.

“Focus on the gravel,” she said, “make it darker.” That seemed to work, and soon they were walking across gray gravel, “great! Keep going,” she said. The gravel continued to darken. They turned a corner, and the gravel was black. “The exit will be around the next corner,” Lisa said. They turned the corner, and indeed it was.

Mrs. Gale saw them coming out of the maze and applauded. “Excellent work, both of you!” she said. Lisa looked around to find that all of the other students had made it out. She looked back at Diro, and he handed her her glasses.

“Thanks,” Lisa said.

“Thank YOU!” said Diro.

Mrs. Gale looked at her watch. “That’s it for today’s class. I’ll see you all in ‘Shifting!’”

Lisa ate a light dinner, and woke up hungry in the middle of the night. When she’d gotten her soda from the dorm kitchen earlier, she’d seen a chocolate meringue pie in the refrigerator, and now it was calling her name. She pulled on some socks and crept downstairs in the XXL t-shirt she wore to sleep in. The pie was right where she remembered it being, and she ate a slice while pacing back and forth in the kitchen, like she did when eating midnight snacks at home. When she was done she turned the kitchen light back down and headed back to bed. Out in the common room she saw two little glitters of light from the stairs up to the boys’ tower. She walked over to get a closer look, and as her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness she realized that they were the glittering eyes of a human form, and jumped back, startled. A headlight on the form’s chest lit dimly, and as it turned its face toward her she recognized it.

“Oh, hey Diro. You startled me,” she said.

“Hi Lisa,” Diro said. His metal face was mostly expressionless, but he looked and sounded depressed all the same. Lisa wondered if it had anything to do with Tyra and Gretchen’s conversation the night before.

“You wanna talk about it?” she asked.

“Not really.”

“OK. Goodnight,” she said. Without thinking, and because it seemed like a nice thing to do, she kissed him on the top of the head, and went back up to bed.

18

The next day Lisa somehow fell back asleep after the eight o'clock bell, and it was five minutes until nine when she woke back up again, showered in thirty seconds flat, threw on some clothes, grabbed a hairbrush and her notebook, and cut straight from her dorm room to Mrs. Gale's classroom. Lisa didn't see Diro today, but she saw Donna, and the bell rang just as she was sitting down in the desk next to her. Just as she had done the day before, Mrs. Gale wrote her name on the board, and then went around the room asking students to tell the class who they were and something interesting about themselves. Donna's “interesting thing” was that she owned over 300 pairs of shoes.

When Lisa's turn came, she said, “My name is Lisa Star, I'm from Albuquerque, Beatles Earth, and yesterday I got to help teach cutting to the other students, and had a lot of fun. Thank you, Mrs. Gale.”

“Well, thank you for helping, Lisa,” Mrs. Gale replied, and continued around the room. When all the students were finished, Mrs. Gale introduced herself, and said “I have a friend who has to replace his head every three months,” for her “interesting thing”. Lisa looked around the room, but this time no-one said anything about it like the fairy kids had the day before.

Mrs. Gale began, as she had in the Cutting class, by explaining that Shifting and Cutting were both subsets of Wending. “Shifting,” she continued, “is a method of wending in which the wender searches for a particular thing, and wends until he or she finds it. Cutting, which is covered in my other class, works much the same way, but leads

the wender to a specific place instead of a specific thing. Combining the two will let you travel between worlds, which will be covered next year.”

The rest of the morning was spent going over the fundamentals of shifting, most of which Lisa had figured out on her own from her walk to the river next to the tree. Since she had skipped breakfast, it was harder for her to concentrate over the growling of her stomach, and she often found herself staring at the clock rather than paying attention to the lesson. Her thoughts kept drifting back to the granola bars and dried mushrooms in her backpack, and she wished she'd thought to bring them with her. At one point Mrs. Gale said something about “bad things” happening, and Lisa remembered that Wally had mentioned that too, but she hadn't been paying attention, and had missed the rest of the sentence. Finally, the bell rang for the lunch break.

“I am SO hungry!” Lisa said to Donna as they stood up, “how can you go without breakfast every morning?”

“I eat big dinners,” Donna said, “and it does take some getting used to. But now I could definitely use some food.”

They walked the whole way to the cafeteria, since Lisa couldn't concentrate well enough to cut. A few yards away Lisa caught the smells of food, and started jogging.

“Wow, you really ARE hungry!” Donna said.

Lisa was already loading her plate with fried chicken and pizza by the time Donna came in, and was already getting seconds by the time Donna sat down. When she finally stopped, Lisa counted, and discovered that she'd eaten three pieces of chicken, two slices of pizza, a cheeseburger, four glasses of chocolate milk, and a hot-fudge sundae. Donna, on the other hand, had had a tossed salad.

“You're gonna be SO sick!” Donna said when Lisa told her how much she'd eaten. Wally and the Oco girls, who had joined them while Lisa was eating, all agreed. Out of

curiosity, Lisa looked for Diro, and spotted him at the other end of the cafeteria, sitting with Vinagrette and the petrified wood boy. Tomas showed up when there were only fifteen minutes left of the lunch break, gave Mina a quick kiss on the cheek, and wolfed down a couple of cheeseburgers which he held in both hands and alternated taking bites from.

“You're also gonna be sick,” Donna told him.

After lunch Mrs. Gale took them back to the hedge maze, and told them to Shift through it until they found a blue carnation, just like Wally's class had done on Monday. The students entered one at a time, and Lisa had only been in the maze a few minutes before her stomach realized how much food she'd crammed into it and started hurting very badly. Lisa quickly cut to the exit of the maze, and found Mrs. Gale waiting just outside.

“Go see Miss Mactan,” Mrs. Gale said, before Lisa had even opened her mouth to talk, “and come back as soon as you're feeling better.”

Lisa thanked her, and jogged off toward the Academy, running as fast as she could without throwing up. Despite the pain she was able to cut through the Academy to the Infirmary quickly. Miss Mactan was just closing the curtains around one of the beds when Lisa came in, clutching her stomach.

“Too much lunch, eh Lisa?” Miss Mactan asked as she walked over to a large medicine cabinet. Lisa hadn't noticed before, but Miss Mactan had two pairs of legs, and she wore red and black striped stockings on all of them. The spider lady took a small bottle down from one of the shelves and handed it to Lisa. It looked exactly like a potion out of one of Lisa's video games. “Drink the whole thing.” Miss Mactan instructed, and Lisa did. It tasted like heavy cream with artificial mint-flavoring and aspartame. Lisa

hated aspartame. She gagged a little halfway through, but managed to finish it, and her stomach ache had disappeared completely a few seconds later.

“How are your ribs?” Miss Mactan asked when Lisa had finished with the potion.

“Good,” Lisa said, “I jogged all the way here and they didn't bother me at all. Thanks, and thanks for the potion, too!”

“Potion!” Miss Mactan laughed, “oh you sweet thing, not everything here is magical. That was just some medicine of my own concoction. I call it a grasshopper. Oh! While you're here,”

Miss Mactan walked over the wall, and walked straight up the wall to her desk, which was up in the corner next to the ceiling, and held in place with thick cables of spiderweb. She opened and closed a couple of drawers before she pulled something out of one and brought it back down to Lisa. “You left this behind when you were here before.”

It was the ring that Mike had given her.

“Oh! Thanks!” Lisa said, “I've been in such a hurry the last couple of days I hadn't even noticed it was missing!” She took it and put it in her pocket. “Well, I should get back to class. Thanks again for the grasshopper, and for taking care of me before.”

On her way out the door she nearly ran into Tomas, who was clutching his stomach. They looked at each other, pointed and laughed, then Tomas saw Miss Mactan and jumped back into a fighting stance.

“Don't worry, Tomas, she's OK.” Lisa said, and turning back toward the spider lady added, “Another grasshopper!” before she ran back out to the hedge maze, stopping in at the bathroom on the way.

Donna was already standing next to Mrs. Gale when Lisa got back to the hedge maze, holding a blue carnation in her hand. Lisa waved to them both as she ran past, and

into the maze. She realized that she was automatically cutting to the end of the maze, and stopped and laughed at herself when she noticed it. She looked at the walls of the hedge maze which were, naturally, made from tall leafy bushes, and began to walk slowly through the maze, focusing on the leaves until tiny buds appeared at the ends of the branches, which gradually turned into little white flowers. A light breeze picked up, and rustled through the tops of the hedges, and she was reminded of the first time she'd shifted, just a few days before, walking around and around the tree until the stream appeared. Her thoughts drifted to the skinny white creature she found there. Every tiny detail of the encounter was burned into Lisa's mind, and as she walked she thought about it more and more. The pale skin, stretched so thin over the monster's bones that it looked like it was about to tear. The horribly long, bloody claws that ended in needle-sharp points. The growling, babbling noise it made, that touched something deep in Lisa's subconscious and send cold chills over her entire body.

As she thought of the noise, she suddenly heard it from just around the next bend in the maze. Lisa stopped in her tracks. The light breeze that had been rustling the tops of the hedges had stopped. The flowers were gone, as were most of the leaves, and the hedges here looked gray and brown, dead and twisted and diseased. Lisa strained her ears and listened for the noise again. There was nothing, but she felt sure that something was waiting for her just around the corner. She turned around, but there was only a dead-end behind her, and there wasn't enough space between her and the end to find a shortcut. She turned back to the corner and slowly crept toward it, keeping her knees bent and her body low to the ground. If the monster leapt at her, she reasoned, she could leap past it at the same time, and maybe get far enough ahead of it to cut to the exit.

Lisa clenched her fists, ready to bolt, took a deep breath, and sidestepped around the corner. Mrs. Gale stood there with her arms crossed, looking very displeased.

“Mrs. Gale!” Lisa cried. Relief washed over her body and she almost passed out as her heartbeat dropped from a million miles per hour back to normal. She staggered forward and Mrs. Gale caught her.

“What in the world were you doing?” Mrs. Gale shouted at her.

Tears welled up in Lisa's eyes, and her nose started running, “I'm sorry! Can I please sit down somewhere?”

Mrs. Gale led her by the hand around a corner to a little garden at the center of the maze. There was a fountain in the shape of an archer, a bed of flowers, and two stone benches. They sat down on one of the benches, and Lisa hugged Mrs. Gale and just cried for a while.

“I keep finding you in trouble, don't I darling?” Mrs. Gale said. Lisa nodded.

When Lisa had finally finished crying, she told Mrs. Gale about shifting to the river and finding the monster, and told her about how she had seen it again at the edge of the forest Sunday night. Lisa had been staring at the flower bed while she was telling her story, and when she finished she looked up at Mrs. Gale. The old lady's eyes were wide open. Lisa could tell she was afraid, but didn't want Lisa to worry.

“Could you show me the monster?” Mrs. Gale said, “Just picture it in your mind.”

Lisa did, just as she'd seen it across the river, ready to pounce on her and making its horrible noise. Mrs. Gale lightly touched her hand to Lisa's cheek, and immediately recoiled. “Oh Lisa, you're so lucky Wally showed up when he did,” she said. There was a long pause as Mrs. Gale thought to herself, then she said, “Lisa, have you had your first 'Defensive Ravelling' class yet?”

Lisa shook her head “no”.

“After this class,” Mrs. Gale continued, “I want you to go to Signor Nerezza's office. He's the man who teaches Defensive Ravelling.” Lisa handed Mrs. Gale her

schedule book and Mrs. Gale marked the office on it for her. “I want you to tell him that I sent you there, and that there is a Stalker after you.”

Lisa's blood ran cold, “After me? What do you mean 'after me'?”

Mrs. Gale sighed, “Let's see, how can I explain this...” she took out her green handkerchief and cleaned her glasses, “you'll learn more about this in Mr. Plober's class, and next year in Outsider Studies. Has Mr. Plober told you about worlds and fragments?”

“Yes,” Lisa said.

“Well, when you cut, you focus on the things that are present in your destination, and ignore things that aren't at the destination, right?”

“Right,” Lisa said.

“And when you shift, you do the same thing, you focus on things related to what you want to find and ignore things that aren't related. The students doing this exercise, for instance, have found their blue carnations in a variety of places. Some of them have found them growing on the walls of the hedge maze, but for others the hedge maze has opened up onto a garden. One student even found his blue carnation up at the top of a tree. Shifting, cutting, and wending between worlds all involve trading one element for another, getting rid of the things that aren't similar and adding things that are.”

Mrs. Gale paused to make sure that Lisa was following along. So far so good.

“This fragment, where the Solstice Academy exists, and almost all of the worlds and fragments that the faculty and students are from, have about the same level of detail, the same amount of stuff. If you wend from here to a world with an orange sky, the blue sky would be replaced by the orange one. However, it's also possible to wend to places with MORE stuff, a world with both an orange sky AND a blue sky, for instance, or a world that's just like Beatles Earth, but also has magic. At the center of the universe, there's a place called the Mess, where every single thing in every single world or

fragment exists simultaneously. No-one has ever wended all the way to the Mess, because no-one has ever been able to keep track of the billions of details in the worlds around it. Most people have given up, a few have tried too hard and gone insane.”

Mrs. Gale paused and took a cinnamon candy from her pocket and put it in her mouth. She offered Lisa one, but she declined.

“You can go the other way, too. In fact, it's easier. The further you get from the Mess, the less details there are. Not far from here, for instance, there are worlds where there's no sky at all, and past that there are worlds with no ground. If you wend far enough out, you eventually get to a place where all the details are gone, and you find yourself floating in colorless, empty space. That place is called the Edge, and beyond the Edge is the Outside.”

“Wait,” Lisa said, “If the Mess is absolutely everything, and the Edge is absolutely nothing, how can there be something further from absolutely everything than absolutely nothing?”

“Have you ever seen a 'sensory deprivation tank', Lisa?”

“No.”

“When you're lying in bed at night, in the dark, with your eyes closed, and with no sounds to disturb you, it's easier to imagine things, right?”

Lisa nodded, “yes”.

“A 'sensory deprivation tank' is a machine – there are many on Beatles Earth – that makes things even darker and even quieter. When you're inside one, you're floating in water, barely touching anything, so you can't even feel things. Just like it's easier to imagine things in the dark and the quiet in your bed, in a sensory deprivation tank, with no sound, no sights, no smells or tastes and almost nothing to touch, your imagination runs wild. People in sensory deprivation tanks have imagined amazing things, in amazing

detail, that they would never be able to imagine otherwise. At the Edge, however, there are even less distractions than in a sensory deprivation tank. There isn't even darkness to see, there isn't even silence to hear, there isn't even the gentle touch of water to feel. There is, quite literally, absolutely nothing at the Edge except imagination, and beyond that is the Outside, where imagination is everything.”

It was all awfully philosophical, but Lisa was managing to follow along, “So, Stalkers come from the Outside?”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Gale said, “Sometimes, when someone goes looking for something recklessly, an Outsider imagines itself into that thing. After the searcher brings it through to his world, the Outsider escapes.”

“Did I bring the Stalker through?” Lisa asked.

“No, darling. Someone else had. Stalkers can't wend on their own, but once they begin to stalk someone they can follow that person wherever she goes. That Stalker was stuck in the fragment where you found him, but he was able to follow you out of it.”

“What happens if he catches me?” Lisa asked.

“He'll kill you,” Mrs. Gale replied, “and find someone else to stalk. Fortunately for the other students, but unfortunately for you, once a Stalker begins to stalk someone, it will ignore everyone else until its prey is dead, as long as they stay out of its way.”

Lisa shuddered, “So, because I was thinking about the Stalker in the hedge maze instead of the blue carnation, I was actually shifting closer to it.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Gale replied, “and that's why I stopped you.”

From the Academy they could hear the bell ringing to announce the end of the class.

“Oh no!” Mrs. Gale shouted, “I forgot all about the rest of the class!” She grabbed Lisa by the hand and half a second later they were walking out the exit of the maze. Mrs.

Gale looked over the students gathered at the exit to make sure they were all there and that they all had blue carnations, and then she dismissed them.

All eyes were on Lisa. She'd just been brought out of the maze – by the hand, no less – by Mrs. Gale, and she didn't even have a blue carnation. Everyone must've thought that she'd totally and completely failed the exercise, and in a way, Lisa thought, she had.

“Remember Signor Nerezza,” Mrs. Gale said to her as she left.

19

Signor Nerezza's office was located in one of the twistier sections of the second floor, and even with her map it took Lisa half an hour to find it. The door looked old and heavy, and didn't even have a window in it like most of the other teachers' offices did. The brass mask next to the door croaked out “Signor Nerezza” when Lisa touched it. She knocked, but there was no reply. She tried the doorknob, and found it unlocked. The door swung inward, and Lisa could see nothing inside but pitch blackness. She stepped through the doorway and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark, but nothing appeared. The air smelled like wood smoke, with a hint of curry.

“Who disturbs my slumber?” A bellowing voice growled from out of the darkness.

“Li... Lisa Star, sir.” Lisa almost never added “sir” or “ma'am” to anything unless she was truly terrified. “Mrs. Gale sent me.”

“Close the door behind you,” the voice rumbled.

She did, and was enveloped in total and utter darkness. She was reminded of what Mrs. Gale had said about the Edge; at the Edge you can't even see darkness.

A pale face coalesced out of the dark. As it was forming it looked terrifyingly demonic, but it solidified into the face of a normal, human man. He looked annoyed, but

not malicious. A black beard covered the face's chin, and trailed off into the darkness. "I do not know you," the face said.

"No," Lisa answered, "this is my first year, and I don't have your class until tomorrow."

"Well then," Signor Nerezza replied, "What can I do for you, Lisa Star?"

"There's a Stalker after me."

Signor Nerezza looked surprised, "Are you quite sure?"

"I'm afraid so," Lisa said, "I told Mrs. Gale about it, and she told me it was a Stalker, and sent me to see you."

A pale hand appeared out of the darkness and scratched Signor Nerezza's beard.

"Have you ever 'ravelled' before, Lisa Star?"

"No, sir."

"Hmmm, then see me after class tomorrow, and we will see what we can do," he said, "in the meantime, do not stray from the campus, and do not under any circumstances venture out alone. Do you understand me, Lisa Star?"

"Yes," Lisa replied.

"Then I will see you tomorrow," the face said, as it receded back into the darkness. The door unlatched and swung open behind Lisa, "oh, and welcome to the Solstice Academy." Signor Nerezza's disembodied voice said as she left.

The door swung shut behind her.

Miss Mactan's grasshopper had taken care of her nausea from lunch, but after the whole "Stalker" business Lisa didn't have much of an appetite. She also didn't want to see her friends after failing the Shifting test, and didn't feel like explaining to them why she had failed, so she just made herself a sandwich in the dorm kitchen and went up to her

room. She dropped off her notebook just inside the door, and went and took a long hot bath.

When she got back to her room, she noticed that there was a blue carnation on her bed. The door had been unlocked, in fact the doors didn't even have locks, and she hadn't noticed the flower when she dropped off her notebook, but then again she hadn't been looking. She walked over and picked it up, and wondered who could've left it for her. Between spending the morning hungry, the afternoon sick and talking to Mrs. Gale, and the shame of coming out of the maze at the end with no carnation, she hadn't really noticed who else was in her class beside Donna, and although Donna was nice it didn't seem like something she'd do. She didn't think that Mrs. Gale had left it either. Lisa looked for a note, but wasn't surprised when she didn't find one. Exhausted from being sick, having her head filled with metaphysical revelations, and a long hot bath, Lisa crawled into bed, and fell asleep with the blue carnation on the pillow next to her, wondering where in the world it had come from.

20

Lisa considered wearing the blue carnation pinned to her shirt the next day, to thank whoever had gotten it for her, but on the other hand she didn't feel right wearing it since she hadn't found it herself, so she left it in her room. She found the ring Mike had given her in the pocket of the pants she'd worn the night before, and set the ring and the flower on the nightstand together, a sort of collection of tokens of affection. When she'd first arrived, she'd been worried that she'd have to find somewhere to do her laundry after she had gone through the few clothes she'd brought with her, but she'd discovered that when she left dirty clothes sitting on the floor, she'd return from class to find them cleaned, pressed, and put away in drawers.

At breakfast, Gretchen and Mina argued over whether it was cute or creepy that Mr. Plober was always giving everyone hugs, and all the rest of them refused to take sides. Lisa wanted to ask Gretchen what had happened with Diro, but even after Gretchen and Mina had “agreed to disagree” and finished their argument it didn't seem like a good time to ask. The night before, the Oco kids had hung out with some of the second-year students while Wally, Donna, and Vinagrette had gone down into the town with some other kids, and now that everyone except her had been to the town Lisa vowed to go along the next time.

Signor Nerezza's classroom was the sparsest classroom that Lisa had ever seen. There were no desks or chairs, and the floor was covered in a fine orange sand, which seemed to please Wally just fine as a place to sit. The walls were bare gray concrete, there were no windows, and the only light came from a large, featureless white half-globe in the middle of the ceiling. Signor Nerezza stood at the head of the class, with no chair, no desk, and no chalkboard. Now that Lisa could see more than his face, she found that he was dressed in a uniform that was remarkably similar to the Oco uniform, black with green trim as opposed to orange trim, and cut a little differently, with a short cape. He also wore a black turban, and his thick black beard flowed down almost to his waist. Mina sat down in the sand next to Lisa, so she asked her, “Is that an Oco uniform?”

“No,” Mina said, “It looks kinda like one though, doesn't it?”

The bell rang.

“My name is Signor Nerezza,” the teacher began. He was pacing slowly back and forth, with his fingers steepled in front of him, looking mostly at the ground but occasionally up at the students, “I won't bother to write it on the wall because none of your would recognize the script. While it is Grandmaster Toe's duty to teach you the ways and uses of chi, it is my responsibility to teach you the power and wonder of mana.”

With that he turned toward the class and spread his hands out in front of him. A tangle of bands of light stretched between his fingers, and then coalesced into a glowing, rainbow-colored butterfly. The butterfly stood out sharply against his black uniform and beard, and it fluttered out over the students heads, disappearing as it reached the other end of the room.

“Who did NOT see that?” Sr. Nerezza asked. No-one raised their hands, “OK, good. I had some robots and another student earlier this week who couldn't. What I just showed you was an example of 'Ravelling'; weaving the mana inside your body into patterns, that can be used to create magical effects. By the end of this class, you'll be able to do this,” he touched the tips of his fingers together in a rapid sequence, and there was a burst of light between his hands, like the flash of a camera, “and by the end of the year you'll be able to use ravelling to defend yourself against a wide range of physical and magical attacks.”

Sr. Nerezza demonstrated the flash trick again, but began this time by scooping up a handful of the orange sand from the floor. As he pulled his steepled fingers apart, the sand swirled in between them, converging into strands that stretched from each of the fingers of his left hand to the corresponding fingers on his right hand. He began by touching his right index finger to his left ring finger, and as he pulled them back apart their strands twisted together. He continued the sequence, creating a “cat's cradle” of sand, and when he was done he clasped his hands together, and when he pulled them back apart the strands were gone.

“Now that the spell is ravelled, I can release it at any time,” Sr. Nerezza said, and with that he clapped his hands together, and the flash lit up the room again. “This is called 'hanging' a spell; when you ravel it and then wait to cast it until you need it. When you first begin ravelling, even as simple a spell as this will make you sick if you hang it

for too long, but as your body builds up a tolerance you will be able to hang more and more powerful spells, for longer and longer periods of time.”

Wally raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“How many spells do you have hung?”

“It is bad form to tell anyone how many spells you have hung, or what spells you have hung,” Sr. Nerezza said, “even your best friends, because you never know who might be listening, and it would give your enemies an advantage over you. Suffice it to say that I have over a dozen spells hung, and all of them far more complex than the Flash.”

The class spent the rest of the morning trying to stretch the strands between their fingers, using the sand from the floor as an indicator, in preparation for learning the Flash spell in the afternoon. Five minutes into the exercise, there was a flash of light from the back of the room, and Lisa turned to see Regretta, the girl with the bundle on her back who had passed the combat test by cutting the blob in half with her bare hands.

“Very impressive,” Sr. Nerezza said, “you appear to have a natural talent for ravelling. What is your name?”

“Regretta September, sir.”

“Regretta, would you please assist me in teaching the technique to the other students?”

Regretta nodded and got to her feet.

“That girl was in my Cutting class,” Mina whispered to Lisa, “she was the first one out of the maze.”

Lisa was still having trouble getting the sand to float between her fingers. She felt like she was doing the exact same things Sr. Nerezza had done, but the sand always just

fell in a pile in front of her. She was about to tell Mina about how well Regretta had done in the combat test, when Regretta stepped in front of her. Lisa looked up at Regretta, and the girl's face was emotionless.

“Give me your hands,” Regretta said.

Lisa hesitantly stretched out her hands, palms forward, toward the creepy girl. Regretta touched her own finger tips against Lisa's, and Lisa felt a huge jolt of static electricity.

“Ow!” Lisa shouted, pulling her hands away. Next to her, Wally tensed, ready to pounce Regretta at a moment's notice.

“Try it now,” Regretta said, and walked away toward another student.

The tips of Lisa's fingers still burned from Regretta's touch. She pressed them together, and when she pulled them apart she felt a little resistance, as if there were magnets in her fingertips that wanted to pull them back together. A tiny dust-devil of the orange sand rose up and traced the strands between Lisa's fingers. Wally relaxed. Lisa stared at the strands for a moment, slowly moving her hands around and watching the sand hold its place in lines between her fingers. She closed her hands into fists, and the sand fell back to the floor. She touched her fingertips together again, and the energy returned.

“Thanks!” Lisa shouted after Regretta. Regretta either didn't hear her or simply failed to acknowledge her.

By the end of the morning, every student was able to create the strands of energy, although Regretta had been the only one to exactly copy what Sr. Nerezza had done and create the Flash. After lunch, Sr. Nerezza showed them the technique again, more slowly, and as he went through the steps Lisa wrote them down in her notebook, numbering the fingers from one for the thumb to five from the pinky, and writing “2-4” for “left index

finger to right ring finger”, and “3-1” for “left middle finger to right thumb”. There were only 23 steps to the spell total, and after she'd written them all down Lisa created the strands, ran through her notes, and accidentally blinded herself for a few seconds by exploding a bright flash of light right in her own face.

“Aw, crap!” Lisa laughed as her vision cleared again. Wally and Mina laughed with her (or perhaps at her) and she even heard a deep chuckle from Sr. Nerezza.

She tried the technique a few more times, remembering to look away as she finished it. “How do I hang it?” she asked Sr. Nerezza as he walked past.

“Right at the end of the ravelling you'll feel a little tug,” Sr. Nerezza said, “like a – how old are you?”

Lisa told him.

Sr. Nerezza paused, “well, like a sneeze. If you can hold onto that tug and not let it go, then you can hang the spell.”

Lisa tried again, and did feel the tug at the end. After a few more tries she was able to hold it, and clasped her hands together. The feeling of the tug remained, however, and it reminded Lisa of trying to hold a chin-up in elementary school P.E., except the strain wasn't in her muscles, but somewhere else entirely that she couldn't quite pinpoint. She wanted to see how long she could hold it, though, and after an hour she had a horrible headache and felt like she was going to throw up. She clapped her hands together and released the Flash. The tug disappeared, and her nausea subsided instantly, but the headache took until the end of the class to finally fade away.

After class Lisa stayed behind to meet with Sr. Nerezza after all the other students had left. When only the two of them were left in the room, Sr. Nerezza waved his hand and the classroom door slammed shut.

“I’ve been giving your situation much thought, Lisa Star,” Sr. Nerezza began, “and I have two solutions for you. The first is this,” he reached into his jacket pocket, and handed Lisa a tiny metal tube that unscrewed at one end. Inside was a clear vial that looked like an old glass thermometer, “to use it, simply snap the vial in half. But use it ONLY as a last resort, because neither you nor the Stalker will like the consequences. The second, and more practical, solution is for me to teach you 'Ninety-Nine Needles'. It is a simple offensive spell, and the first spell that is taught to second-year raveling students.” Sr. Nerezza pulled an apple from his other jacket pocket, and tossed it into the air. He clapped his hands together, as he had when he hung and then released the Flash, and the apple was shredded as it flew through the air. Even after it landed it continued to be bounced around as if it were being attacked by a swarm of invisible bees, until the core came to rest in the sand, with virtually nothing left attached to it. Lisa took out her notebook, and wrote down the ninety-nine steps of Ninety-Nine Needles as Sr. Nerezza ravelled it again. Sr. Nerezza set another apple on the ground, and Lisa ravelled the spell at it. The “tug” that she’d felt with the Flash was far stronger with Ninety-Nine Needles, and knocked her backwards, almost off her feet. The apple was shredded over the course of several seconds, just as it had been by Sr. Nerezza's spell.

“This spell will not kill a Stalker,” Sr. Nerezza told her, “but it will distract him long enough for you to escape. I suggest that you diligently practice hanging the Flash, and the other defensive spells I will teach you in the coming weeks before you attempt to hang something as powerful as Ninety-Nine-Needles.”

He waved his hand again, and the door swung open, “Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to clean up all these little bits of apple or Mr. Gromon will have my head.”

After all the raveling, and especially Ninety-Nine Needles, Lisa was famished, and she went back for thirds at dinner for the first time in her life. Between bites she told Mina and the rest of the Ocos about Regretta's performance in the combat test, and Gretchen added that Regretta had been in her Shifting class, and had been the first student to find a blue carnation. Wally pointed out that Regretta wasn't in the cafeteria with everyone else, and they all realized that, in fact, they had never seen her in the cafeteria, or in the dorm kitchen, for that matter.

“Maybe she doesn't eat food,” Lisa said ominously, and they all laughed.

After dinner Donna and Vinagrette went back to the dorms, and Tomas dragged the rest of them over to the soccer field to play a few games with the second-year students. Tyra and Mina sat on the sidelines and watched and cheered. There was a second-year boy named Mateo who had the same sort of giant necklace as Tomas, and Lisa assumed they were from the same world, especially when they kept yelling nonsensical phrases at each other during the game like “on the goat!”, and “fish toes!”, that were probably references to things on their world. Viktor was surprisingly athletic for someone so skinny, and Lisa was even more surprised at how good Gretchen was at the game, keeping up with even Tomas and Mateo despite her chubbiness. Wally was, of course, good at running very fast and kicking the ball very far, although not necessarily in the right direction. After about twenty minutes of running around on a full stomach after having not played soccer since second grade, Lisa joined Tyra and Mina on the sidelines. Sitting there with them, she noticed that although both of them would cheer for Viktor and Gretchen, only Mina would cheer for Tomas, and neither would cheer for Wally. Lisa would fill in for them, cheering for all of their friends. After the sun set one of the second-year girls ravelled a couple of balls of light, which hovered in the air and lit up

the field. Lisa wanted to leave early, but was still pretty shaken by what Mrs. Gale had told her about the Stalker, so she stuck around the soccer field until the two balls of light had faded out and the players decided to call it a game. Lisa hadn't noticed who won, and at that point she didn't really care.

When they got back to the dorms Lisa went up to her room and went over her notes for Ninety-Nine-Needles. She tried hanging the spell once, just to see how hard it would be, and immediately blacked out. She didn't know how much time had passed when she woke up, but she didn't have the spell hung. She checked her room for damage, to make sure that she hadn't released it accidentally as she blacked out. Nothing was out of place, however, and she decided it was probably a good time to call it a night and go to bed.

The next day Lisa had her last class of the week, "Unarmed Combat" with Grandmaster Toe. The class was huge, and Lisa estimated that about a third of the first-year students were all here, including all of the Oco kids. Wally, Tomas, and all the other students who had tested out of it were not, naturally. Although she had failed the test, Grandmaster Toe told Lisa that her straight punch technique was very good, and used it as an example to teach the rest of the class. He also taught the class a better way to kick than Lisa had learned at X-treme Karate back home in Albuquerque, and taught them the same basic blocking techniques that Lisa already knew. Lisa realized by the end of the class that although she hadn't been good enough to pass the test, she was better at martial arts than any of the other students in the class, which helped heal her bruised ego considerably.

The next day was a Saturday, and Lisa finally went down into the town with Wally, Donna, and Vinagrette. Vinagrette advised Lisa to eat a big breakfast before they left, and Lisa had assumed at the time that it was because they didn't have any money for

lunch. The town was just a short hike away, about a mile along a wide trail that wound through the forest. Since the others had been there before, though, they cut through the forest and made the hike even shorter, pulling Lisa along with them. Lisa wondered if the Stalker was out there in the woods, following along and watching. Although Lisa hadn't been able to memorize Ninety-Nine Needles yet, she had brought along her notebook in her backpack, and felt that she could probably ravel it while Wally kept the Stalker busy, buying them time to cut back to the Academy while the monster was distracted.

The town was called “Anante”, and looked like a quaint little Swiss fairy tale village, complete with little white thatched-roof chalets, and the sounds of accordion music and dancing. Their first stop was at the first building they came to, where other students stood in line at four different doors. There were kids standing in line even older than the second-year students and the few third-year students Lisa had seen around campus, and she realized that this was the first time she'd ever seen any fourth-year students. From the way their dorm floated in the sky, she had assumed that they'd all be strange, mysterious wizards in long dark cloaks and pointy hats that hid their faces, but in actuality they all looked like any of the other students she'd seen, just a little older. At that very moment, a fourth-year student in a long dark cloak and a pointy hat that hid his face walked by, on his way out of the building.

“What are we doing here?” Lisa asked.

“Sorry,” Donna said, “we didn't want to scare you before you got here. Have you ever donated blood?”

Lisa didn't like where this was going. “No,” she answered.

“Well, this is how we get money to spend in town,” Donna said, “It's just like giving blood, only it doesn't hurt.”

“They take mana instead of blood,” Vinagrette added, “that's why I said to eat a big breakfast. When they're done you'll be fifty crowns richer, and hungry just in time for lunch.”

This didn't sound like a good idea. Lisa had always hated shots, and she hated getting blood drawn even more. “Are there needles?” she asked.

“No,” Donna said, “you just have to put your hand on a big crystal ball. Like I said, it doesn't hurt.”

The line had advanced quickly as they talked, and Wally was up next. Lisa watched as he stepped forward to a little window like a bank teller's. Wally put his paw on a cloudy transparent ball next to the window, the teller pushed a button, the ball glowed for a few seconds, and the teller handed Wally a roll of cash. Wally patted Lisa on the shoulder on his way out and said, “no pain”.

Donna and Vinagrette went next, and Lisa carefully watched their faces to see if they grimaced or cried at all, but they didn't. Finally, she stepped up to the window herself and put her hand on the crystal ball. The woman on the other side of the window had a big blue beehive hairdo and red framed glasses that matched her lipstick. She smiled at Lisa, “First time to town, honey?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “do I need to open an account or something?”

“Oh no,” the woman said, “I can just always spot the first-timers. Hey, look at this.”

The woman reached into her breast pocket and pulled out a little crystal cat on the end of a string. She twirled the string in her fingers, and the cat spun around. It made a tinkling sound like a bell as it went.

“Gee, that's great,” Lisa said, trying to humor her. She wished the woman would just get on with sucking out her mana or whatever it was that was going to happen.

“Yeah, isn't it?” the woman said, “all done.” She slid a wad of bills across the counter toward Lisa.

“All done?” Lisa asked.

“Yep,” the woman said, “didn't hurt, did it?”

Lisa looked at the palm of her hand. There was nothing different about it, and she'd been so busy looking at the woman's stupid crystal cat that she hadn't even seen the ball light up.

“Thanks,” Lisa said, and pocketed the money. She met up with her friends out in front of the building.

“Told you,” Donna said, “now let's go get you some new clothes since you've been wearing the same two outfits every day.”

“Only you would've noticed that, Donna!” Vinagrette said.

“Actually, it's three outfits,” Lisa said quietly, “and it was my beloved grandmother's dying wish that I only ever wear her three favorite outfits.”

Donna turned to face Lisa, and her mouth fell open. Donna looked like she was on the verge of tears, and had no idea what to say to make things right.

Lisa cracked a smile, and they both started laughing.

“Oh! You're the worst friend ever!” Donna said, and Lisa stuck out her tongue. Wally and Vinagrette started laughing too, and they walked together down into the town.

22

Lisa bought four new shirts, a couple pairs of pants covered in pockets, and a purple broomstick skirt. She also let Donna talk her into buying a green jumper, even though she had never worn one before in her life. Wally picked up four shirts and four pairs of pants, and Vinagrette finished up with about as many clothes as Lisa. Donna, on

the other hand, blew her entire fifty crowns on fourteen different complete outfits and three pairs of shoes, and had to borrow money from Lisa to eat lunch. They ate at an outdoor restaurant in the middle of a plaza with a moss-covered fountain, and all four girls opted for something that tasted like bratwurst but was shaped like a hamburger, while Wally had a big pile of something that looked to Lisa like potato salad.

They spent the afternoon at a fair at the edge of the town, which had a ferris wheel, a carousel, and other rides and games. Lisa was glad that she'd come down to the town with this group; the Oco kids were probably too “cool” for the fair, and she was glad to be with friends who she could ride on a carousel with without feeling self-conscious. They wandered back to the same restaurant for dinner (which Wally bought for Donna), and listened to a calypso band while they watched the sun set. At the end of the day, Lisa still had twelve crowns and some change, and led her friends on an even shorter cut back to the Academy than the one they'd taken to get to the town.

After the first week of classes, things became fairly routine. Mina dumped Tomas, and Lisa had a sneaking suspicion that Tyra and Gretchen had had more to do with it than anything else. Mr. Plober taught her more about the differences between worlds, and lectured on the things Lisa had been told by Mrs. Gale, about levels of detail, and the Mess and the Edge. Lisa found it interesting that Mr. Plober didn't mention the Outside, though. As she had suspected, virtually every one of his classes ended with big bear hugs, smelling like pipe tobacco and honey. Lisa stayed at the head of the class in Cutting, improving in leaps and bounds and helping out the other students when Mrs. Gale asked. She was progressing at about the same speed as most of the rest of the class in Shifting, despite having failed the first test. Donna seemed to be improving her Shifting at the same pace Lisa was getting better at Cutting, and they often helped each other out with homework and studying. By the end of her second month at Solstice Academy, Lisa had

memorized Ninety-Nine Needles, and could consistently ravel it in under two minutes, although she knew that wouldn't be fast enough in an emergency situation. It was still too strong a spell for her to hang, but she was getting better at hanging weaker spells, and could maintain the Flash or one of the basic defensive spells Sr. Nerezza had taught her class for an entire day before she had to release it. She was making steady progress in Grandmaster Toe's class as well. He had taught them the fundamentals of using "chi", an energy similar to mana but which came from the chest instead of the head.

One morning Lisa walked into the gymnasium to find the blob that she'd had to fight for the combat test standing in the middle of the room. She immediately raised her fists and lowered her stance.

"Good reflexes, Lisa," Grandmaster Toe chuckled as he walked toward the blob, "It will not attack, though."

When all the students had filed in for the day, Grandmaster Toe continued, "Today you will test your might against a stationary opponent. The golem will not fight back. The purpose of the exercise will be to work on focusing your chi into your attacks, and placing those attacks where they will do the most damage."

While the rest of the class practiced their punches and kicks on the punching bags against the wall, Grandmaster Toe called them up one at a time to train on the golem. "You have ten hits," Grandmaster Toe told Lisa, "and they must all be different. Remember your breathing techniques, and remember to focus your attacks behind your opponent but your chi in the middle of the opponent. Begin!"

Lisa studied the golem, but it didn't move to attack her. She slid in and tested it with a quick rabbit punch and leapt back, but the golem didn't counterattack.

"A wasted attack," Toe scolded, "hardly any chi at all in that one."

Confident now that the golem wouldn't fight back, and a little annoyed by Grandmaster Toe's comment, Lisa unloaded on the blob. First a straight punch, twisting her whole body into it and matching her breath perfectly to the flow of chi. The blob rippled, but stood its ground. She followed with a whip kick, a hook, an uppercut, and a series of other attacks that would've laid an opponent out flat back at Mr. Jackson's Xtreme Karate. She finished her ninth attack, and suddenly discovered that she didn't know any more. Every one of the ten attacks was supposed to be different, Grandmaster Toe had said, but Lisa could only remember nine, including the quick jab she'd wasted. She realized that that was the other point of this exercise; improvisation. Grandmaster Toe wanted to see what his students would come up with when they ran out of the moves he'd taught them.

Lisa considered her options, and remembered a fighting video game she'd played a week before with Wally. Her favorite character had a move called "jaws of the tiger" and she paused for a moment to figure out how she could channel her chi in the right ways to make it work.

"Are you finished, Lisa Star?" Grandmaster Toe asked.

At just that moment, Lisa worked it out, and sprang forward, punching the golem with two fists simultaneously, one above and one below, while expelling her breath in a loud "HA!" Her fists connected with the blob, her chi exploded at just the right moment, and the gelatinous golem burst, splattering jelly halfway across the gym behind it. Lisa held the pose for a second, then pulled back to a stand and dropped her hands to her sides. "Was that golem as strong as the one I tested against the first day?"

"It was indeed," Grandmaster Toe said.

“Wahoo!” Lisa cried, and threw her arms around him. He had always looked very frail, but hugging him was like hugging a gnarled, petrified tree. He patted her on the back and she let him go.

“Your offense is improving, Lisa Star, but your defense is still very weak.”

Lisa nodded and promised to work on her blocking, then went back to the punching bags as Grandmaster Toe rebuilt the golem. She was exhilarated at having beaten it, even if it had been standing still.

23

That night Lisa had dinner with the Oco kids and told them about beating the golem. Her two groups of friends had drifted even further apart, and now Lisa sometimes felt that she was having to portion out her time between them, so that she wouldn't lose either group.

“Good job, Lisa!” Mina told her.

“Ultragood!” Viktor added.

“Thanks,” Lisa said. The rest of the table had fallen dead silent.

Tyra had a fork-full of food poised halfway to her mouth, and she slowly set it down as she turned to Viktor. “What did you just say?” she asked.

“I, I said it was ultragood,” Viktor repeated.

Across the table from him, sitting next to Lisa, Mina whispered, “Oh my God...”

“Ultragood.” Tyra repeated, spitting out the word. “Viktor, sweetheart, there's something I want to show you.”

Tyra reached into her pocket, and pulled out something that looked to Lisa like a closed silver pocketwatch and held it out in front of Viktor. She pressed the button, and

the cover popped open. It was facing away from Lisa and toward Viktor, so Lisa couldn't see what was inside.

Viktor shrieked, as if Tyra, his girlfriend, his sweetheart, had just jammed a white hot meat fork into his eye. His face contorted in terror, but he couldn't take his eyes off the silver pocketwatch. Everyone in the entire cafeteria turned to see what was happening. Lisa sat up, but Mina clamped her hand over Lisa's arm. Lisa looked at her, and Mina shook her head, telling Lisa not to interfere. Mina looked terrified herself. Viktor's shriek degraded into a choking noise, like he was suffocating and trying to throw up at the same time. Tyra closed the pocketwatch, and Viktor wrenched his eyes free of it, turned, and fell out of his chair onto the floor. He started retching as Tyra slid her chair back, stood up, and kicked him squarely in the ribs.

“You bastard!” she screamed, “you worthless pop bastard!” she kicked him again. Viktor moaned and lay face-down on the ground in a puddle of the roast chicken he'd been eating a few seconds earlier.

“What the hell is going on?” Lisa asked. Tyra ignored her. Across the cafeteria, Tomas and Mateo had stood up and were on their way over. Lisa ripped her arm out of Mina's hand and rounded the table as they arrived, putting herself between Tyra and Viktor as Tomas and Mateo helped him to his feet and out of the cafeteria.

“You're dead, pop!” Tyra screamed after him, “As soon as we get back, you're a dead man!”

A few minutes later Lisa and the Oco girls were back on their floor of the first-year dorms. Gretchen was in Tyra's room, and from the sound of it Gretchen was mostly trying to convince Tyra to stop breaking things. Tyra went back and forth between screaming and sobbing, often doing both at the same time. Mina was standing outside the closed door, listening and worrying. Lisa invited her into her room, and she went.

“What's going on?” Lisa asked as she closed the door. “Can you please tell me?”

Mina sat down on Lisa's bed, and Lisa turned around the chair at her desk to face her.

“Viktor's a pop,” Mina said.

“So, that just means he's stupid, right?” Lisa replied. The Oco girls used “pop” all the time to describe something stupid, and Lisa had even picked it up and used it herself.

Mina shook her head, “No. The pops are the nobodies. There's the Ocos, right? Like me and Gretchen and Tyra. The Ocos are the good people, the smart people. We live in the cities, we design, we plan, we fight in the army, we run the factories and we elect our leaders. We've conquered every single other nation on the planet, and even a few in nearby fragments.”

“So, what are the pops?” Lisa asked.

“The pops are the leftovers. They're the people who lived in the nations before they became Oco nations. They can't vote, but they also don't have to fight in the army. They work in the factories, they farm the fields, they do the jobs that are beneath the dignity of Ocos.”

“So, they're slaves?”

“No, of course not!” Mina replied, “they get to keep their religions and their cultures. They can take any pop job that they want to, as long as they're productive.”

Lisa was beginning to understand, and it gave her the shivers. “So, how do you know who's who? Viktor looked just like the rest of you.”

“He's not supposed to,” Mina replied, “Pops don't really look like Ocos; their hair is lighter, or their skin is darker. He probably died his hair black, and he probably killed an Oco to get that uniform. The only reason Tyra caught him was because he used a pop

word, 'ultragood'. The penalty for a pop impersonating an Oco is always death. Pops also get the death penalty for wending, so he's really really dead.”

“And what was that thing Tyra showed him?”

Mina reached into her pocket and pulled out the same silver pocketwatch. “It's called a 'murder eye',” she said, and popped it open. Engraved inside, instead of a watch face, was a stylized human eye. It was creepy, but certainly didn't do to Lisa what it had done to Viktor. “Pops are conditioned from birth the fear it,” Mina said, “it keeps us safe from them. I can walk through a pop ghetto in the middle of the night and none of them will touch me because they know I carry this.”

The screaming had subsided in the next room, and now they could just hear Tyra bawling. Lisa was silent. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, and needed some time to think it all over. “Thanks for telling me,” she finally said to Mina. They both got up and went to the door. “I hope Tyra gets better,” she added, and hugged Mina before closing the door behind her.

Tyra was still crying when Lisa fell asleep.

24

By the time Lisa went to breakfast the next morning, she had thought it over, and had come to the conclusion that the Oco girls were not the kind of people she wanted to hang out with, and that she would spend more time with her other friends for a while. It seemed like Mina understood this, but Tyra didn't, and she kept glaring at Lisa across the cafeteria, her eyes red and puffy from crying all night. Lisa didn't see Viktor at breakfast that morning, and she asked Wally how he was doing.

“Not so good,” Wally said, “he's holed up in his room. He was crying a little last night, but when I asked him what was going on he said he didn't want to talk about it.

Can you tell me what happened? We all saw Tyra freak out last night, but nobody knows why.”

Lisa filled them all in on what happened.

“That's messed up,” Donna said, “from the way she was screaming and crying last night I thought that HE had dumper HER.”

“Are we going into town, today?” Vinagrette asked.

“You guys go ahead,” Lisa said, “I've got some ravelling I want to work on.”

Lisa had gotten Ninety-Nine Needles down to a little under two minutes, and she wanted to get it under one. Her friends headed off to town, and she headed back to her room to work on it. On her way up the stairs she passed the Oco girls, and there was an awkward pause as they did their best not to acknowledge each other. From their conversation Lisa gathered they were going to town, which left her with the whole floor all to herself. Nice and quiet. By lunch time she'd gotten the spell down to a minute and a half, but beyond that her hands really couldn't move any faster. After lunch she was too burnt out to try it anymore, so she plopped down in front of the TV in the common room and found a mindless racing video game to play. Gripping the controller also put her hands in a different position and helped work out the knots in her knuckles from “itsy-bitsy-spider-ing” all morning.

“What do you think?” Tomas said behind her. Lisa turned. Mateo was standing next to Tomas, and there was another boy from Tomas world – a fragment called “Rugoso” – standing on the other side of him. Unlike Tomas and Mateo, though, the other boy was blonde, and skinny, and wasn't wearing the traditional giant Rugoso necklace. His eyes were red and puffy, like Tyra's had been that morning.

“Whoa! Hi Viktor!” Lisa said, “I totally didn't recognize you! Did you bleach your hair?”

“No,” Viktor said, “this is my natural color. I was dying it with ink.”

“This boy needs a shirt, though,” Mateo said, “he doesn't have the body to go Rugoso, but nobody we know over here wears a shirt his size,”

That was true, Lisa thought, the Rugoso didn't, Diro didn't, Wally's shirts would be way too big, even the fairy boy had big holes in the back of his clothes for his wings to stick out. She'd seen a few first-year boys who wore normal shirts and were Viktor's size, but she didn't know any of them well enough to ask.

“So, we're gonna take him shopping down in the town,” Tomas said, “you wanna come?”

“You might wanna wait a while, like until tomorrow,” Lisa said, “the Oco girls just left for town and I don't think you'd want to run into them.”

At the mention of the Oco girls Viktor looked like he was about to start crying again.

“What about Jay?” Lisa said, “he's about Viktor's size.”

“Who's Jay?” Mateo asked.

“He's a second-year student, from my world,” Mateo was still obviously drawing a blank, “his girlfriend is... um... I can't remember her name, but she has white hair and eyes.”

“Oh, that Jay!” Mateo said, “yeah, I know him. Maybe you should talk to him, though. We don't get along too well.”

“OK,” Lisa said, turning off her video game, “I really don't know where to find him, though. I only met him once in the second-year common room.”

Mateo ravelled something that Lisa didn't recognize, and his eyes clouded over. He blinked a couple of times, and they came clear. “They're in the flower garden,” he said, “or at least his girlfriend is.”

“Cool, thanks,” Lisa said. She turned to Viktor, “let's go.”

They were silent most of the way to the flower garden, then Lisa finally asked, “Did you really kill somebody for that uniform?”

Viktor rolled his eyes, “No. Is that what they told you? I work in laundry. I just stole it. Actually, it was old and on its way to the furnaces, so I didn't really even steal it.”

“Where is it now?” Lisa asked.

“In my room,” Viktor said, “I'm trying to decide what to do with it. I wanna just throw it out, but if I'm on the run after this school year is over I'm gonna need it.”

They reached the flower garden, and Lisa suddenly felt very embarrassed for bringing a boy with no shirt there. There were couples everywhere, on benches, walking along the paths, sitting on the grass together. Lisa looked at Viktor and was about to make some sort of smarmy comment, but he really didn't look like he was in the mood. She looked back and scanned the garden for Jay and his girlfriend, and caught sight of them about halfway across. “Come on,” she told Viktor, and they started walking.

“Hey Lisa,” Jay said, “why is your boyfriend dressed like a Rugoso?”

“He's not my boyfriend,” Lisa said, maybe a little too quickly, “and he's borrowing clothes from someone else. Viktor, this is Jay,” they shook hands, “and this is...”

“Leda,” Leda said, and she shook his hand too. “What happened to his old clothes?” she asked.

“I, outgrew them,” Viktor said.

“Do you have any old clothes he can have?” Lisa asked.

Jay raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. “I guess I can give you a shirt. Come on.”

Jay and Leda stood up and they all started walking toward the first-year dorms.

Lisa was about to point out that they were going the wrong way when there was a cut, the

Academy spun ninety degrees counter-clockwise, and the first-year dorm was replaced by the second-year dorm.

“Nice cut,” Lisa said. She figured she could probably do the same thing with a little effort, but it was the kind of cut that would never have occurred to her.

“Thanks,” Leda said, as they walked through the door.

Jay warned them about the state of his room on the way up the stairs, but when they got there it wasn't as bad as Lisa had imagined. There were clothes thrown everywhere, and open cans of soda and bags of chips, but Lisa had seen worse.

“My room gets cleaned every day while I'm in class,” Lisa said.

“Jay's does too,” Leda said, “this is all just since last night.”

“Wow,” Lisa said, surveying the room again, “that takes some effort!”

“Tell me about it!” Jay said, “but does Leda here appreciate my genius and hard work?” he smiled at Leda and she kissed him. Lisa again felt uncomfortable standing right next to a shirtless boy.

“OK!” Jay said, pulling open a drawer and tossing a clean black t-shirt at Viktor, “how does this one grab ya?”

Viktor unfolded the shirt. The front design was for a heavy metal band, and featured the Great Pyramids with mummies streaming out of them and a Sphinx with a rotting zombie face. “Thanks”, Viktor said, and put it on.

“Thanks a lot!” Lisa said, and turned to leave.

“Not so fast!” Jay replied. He had picked up one of the bags of chips, and had crammed a handful of them into his mouth, so it came out “nursel fus!”

“What?” Lisa asked.

Jay swallowed, and washed them down with one of the half-empty cans of soda. “Next we have to see Harry.”

When Lisa first met Harry, she presumed that his name must actually be spelled “Hairy”. Jay and Leda had taken Lisa and Viktor in a circle around the third-year dorms, and when they got back to the North side there was an entrance there, just like the entrances to the first and second-year dorms, that hadn't been there before. Sitting on the steps was what Lisa could only describe as a sasquatch; a phone-booth-sized, fur-covered bigfoot in blue jeans and glasses, smoking a pipe and reading a book. This marked the first time Lisa had ever seen anyone read since arriving at the Academy, the first time she'd seen anyone smoke since arriving, and the first time she'd ever seen a sasquatch.

“Harry!” Jay called as they walked toward the entrance.

Harry looked up from his book and grinned wide, “You've come to pay up?”

“What are you talking about?” Jay asked as they neared.

Harry pointed a long furry finger at Viktor, “You've brought me a pop.”

Jay looked at Viktor, then back at Harry, then back at Viktor. “You're really a pop?” Jay asked.

“Yeah,” Viktor said, “if that's a problem...” he started backing away, and it looked like he was worried about getting kicked in the ribs again.

“No,” Harry laughed, “that's not a problem for me. I told Jay about pops and he didn't believe me. Told me he thought all the work on Oco was done by machine. If you ask me, I think he had a crush on an Oco girl before Leda, and refused to admit she had dirty laundry. Isn't that right, Jay?”

“Here's your thirty crowns, you freak of nature!” Jay said, smiling as he handed Harry a wad of bills. “I also need a copy of that shirt,” he said, pointing to Viktor, “which

is why I was coming over here in the first place before I got swindled out of thirty crowns.”

Harry took off his glasses and stared at the shirt Viktor was wearing. “Ten crowns”, he said.

“Ten?” Jay protested.

“It's a nice shirt,” Harry said.

“I'll pay it,” Viktor said, and he handed Harry a ten crown bill.

“Much obliged,” Harry said. He closed his eyes, and waved his arms slowly through the air around him. As he did so, his fingertips started to ripple, and after a few minutes he plucked a black t-shirt out of the air and handed it to Jay. Jay shook it out and inspected it, and then held it out for Viktor and Lisa to see. It was identical to the shirt Viktor was wearing, except it looked brand new, whereas the design on Viktor's had faded a little in places.

“Good as new. Thanks Harry,” Jay turned to Lisa and Viktor, “you kids take care.”

“Thanks!” Viktor called after Jay as he and Leda disappeared around the corner of the third-year dorm.

Lisa looked up at Harry, who'd put his glasses back on, his pipe back in his mouth, and resumed reading, “excuse me,” she said, and Harry looked up, “but if you're able to pull anything out of thin air, why do you ask for money to do it? Couldn't you just pull the money out of thin air too, or anything else you wanted?”

Harry laughed and took his pipe out of his mouth, “That's a good question. What's your name?”

“Lisa.”

“The reason, Lisa, is because I'm a generous person, who likes to do favors for people less fortunate than I. If I did those favors for free, however, people would never stop asking for them, they'd take them for granted, and I'd soon get sick of them. So I charge a little money because when people pay for something they put more value in it than when they get it for free.”

“So, what do you do with the money you collect?” Lisa asked.

Harry crooked a finger and leaned in close. His breath smelled like pipe tobacco, like Mr. Plover's fur, but there wasn't the honey smell on top of it. “I'm saving up for a bicycle”, he whispered.

The mental picture of Harry riding a bicycle sent Lisa into such a laughing fit that she had to sit down on the steps for a while to catch her breath. Finally she got back up again, and gave the sasquatch a hug. “That was awesome,” she said, “thanks again, Harry. See you around!”

On the way back to the first-year dorms Viktor asked her what Harry had said, and she told him. After his ordeal the night before Viktor had the appearance and emotional state of a soiled dishrag that had been wrung nearly in half, but he started giggling nonetheless. When they got back to the first-year common room it was empty.

“I'm gonna get back to working on my ravelling,” Lisa said.

“OK. Thank you so much for this afternoon,” Viktor said, “it's, it really meant a lot to me to know that I still have friends.”

Lisa hugged him goodbye, and Viktor hugged her back. Before he let her go he kissed her on the lips.

They stepped back and smiled at each other, and quietly went up to their rooms.

Try as she might, Lisa couldn't concentrate on her ravelling hard enough to get Ninety-Nine Needles back under a minute and a half, where it had been before lunch.

It was two weeks later, in Grandmaster Toe's class, that Lisa saw Harry again. The students had just returned from lunch, and Grandmaster Toe had created a whole army of the gelatinous golems, one for each student in the class, and he had set them to dodge and block, but not to attack. Lisa had landed a few really good hits on hers, and she felt it was about ready to break, when there was a loud, shrill noise from outside. For a minute, Lisa wondered if a steam train had just pulled into the courtyard, then the doors of the gymnasium burst open, and Harry stumbled in. His left hand was covered in blood, and there was more blood matted into his fur. "Grandmaster Toe!" he screamed, "Outsider!"

Harry collapsed on the straw mat floor in the middle of the gym. Behind him, black smoke poured through the doorway. Lisa wondered if Harry had started a fire in the courtyard, but the smoke from a fire was usually gray, and this smoke was pitch, inky black. The smoke built into a cloud in the doorway, and there was something solid and pale inside it. Whatever it was roared again, and the rumbling, high-pitched sound shook the entire gym, rippling the golems like jelly. The thing moved further into the gym, and Grandmaster Toe shouted a command. The golems, who a moment before had been slowly weaving and bobbing and blocking the students' attacks, all leapt at the smoke simultaneously, and it looked to Lisa like they became harder as well.

The golems disappeared inside the smoke as the cloud grew larger, and there was a whipping noise, like a dozen live, broken power lines thrashing in the street. A shower of golem jelly burst out of the smoke. The smoke cleared a little at the same time, and Lisa saw the outsider. A giant squid, with a body the size of a van and huge leathery bat wings hovered in the air, scanning the room with a dozen filmy eyes. One of the eyes

spotted Harry, and it flew toward him, flapping its bat wings and undulating its tentacles at the same time to propel it through the air. Several of the students started screaming, Lisa included.

Grandmaster Toe swung his arms in a wide circle around him, and when they came back to his sides he was holding a sword, as tall as he was and just as wide, in one hand. He leapt in between Harry and the monster, and with one clean swing sent a plane of light right down the middle of the thing and into the wall behind it. The squid continued to move toward Harry and Grandmaster Toe, but its wings and its tentacles pulled its body in two separate directions, and it split down the middle, flopping on the floor in a huge expulsion of black smoke and green blood. Its eyes jerked around wildly, and one of them spotted Harry again. The tentacles on the half with the eye twitched, and began pushing it toward Harry, squirting out geysers of green blood every time it moved. Toe dropped his sword and ravelled. Lisa counted over three hundred steps to the spell before she lost count; Toe was moving his hands impossibly fast, and finished the spell in two minutes flat.

A white circle appeared between Grandmaster Toe's hands, and as it steadily grew Lisa realized it was actually a three-dimensional hole in the air. The hole continued to grow, and Toe grabbed Harry by the arm and dragged him away from it. An eye on the other half of the monster had seen Harry, and now both sides were lurching toward him, and into the path of the hole. The black smoke was being slowly sucked into the hole as well, and when the hole had grown large enough to cover the monster completely Grandmaster Toe clapped his hands and the hole disappeared, taking the monster and a large round section of the floor with it.

Grandmaster Toe dropped to his knees. "Class dismissed," he panted.

As the other shocked students filed slowly out of the gymnasium, Lisa walked over to see if she could help. Harry was unconscious, and Toe looked like he wasn't far from unconscious himself. "Would you help me carry him to the infirmary?"

Grandmaster Toe said.

"Of course," Lisa replied, and helped the old man to his feet, and then helped pick up Harry. Harry was about as heavy as Lisa expected an eight-foot-tall sasquatch to be.

"Use your chi," Toe said woozily, "it will make it easier."

She breathed deeply, and felt the energy flowing into her arms and legs. It did make it easier to carry Harry, but not by much, and Grandmaster Toe was so worn out that she seemed to be doing most of the work. They went through the doorway from the gym to the hall, and Lisa cut so that the infirmary was just across the hall from them. It wasn't until she was carrying Harry that she noticed he was missing two fingers and a big chunk out of his left hand. As they came in the door of the infirmary Miss Mactan scuttled toward them and helped them carry Harry the rest of the way to a bed.

Grandmaster Toe collapsed in a chair next to the bed, and Miss Mactan took Harry's pulse before she grabbed his arm, opened her mouth wide, and sank a pair of long gray fangs deep into Harry's flesh.

"What are you doing?" Lisa screamed.

Miss Mactan kept Lisa back with the two arms that weren't holding onto Harry as she withdrew her fangs. "I'm paralyzing him", she said, "to stabilize his condition. Don't worry, it won't hurt him, and it will probably save his life."

"Sorry," Lisa said, and sat down at the foot of the bed. As Miss Mactan went to work bandaging up Harry with one pair of arms and inserting a large blood transfusion needle into his chest with the other, Lisa looked at the next bed over. It was covered in a

sheet, but there was something underneath the sheet, and it had dyed the sheet almost completely red with blood.

“What’s that?” Lisa asked.

“That boy was not so lucky,” Miss Mactan said, without looking up from her work. “His classmates brought him in a few minutes ago, but there was nothing that I could do.” Lisa could hear sobbing from the hallway, and realized that her cut from the gym must have kept them from running into the mourners. She heard a girl’s voice out in the hall, and her throat went dry.

“What was his name?” she asked.

“Vigo,” Miss Mactan said, “Vigo Molari.”

For a second Lisa had been afraid that it was Jay, or Viktor. She breathed a sigh of relief, and immediately felt bad about it, because even though this wasn’t one of her friends it was still a person, and a person who meant a lot to a lot of people judging from the crying in the hallway.

About twenty minutes later Harry gasped for air and sat bolt upright. His face twisted in pain, and he howled like a wounded bear. Miss Mactan gave him a shot, and Grandmaster Toe clasped his hands around Harry’s missing fingers. Lisa was not yet to the point in her training where she could normally see the flow of chi in other people, but she could see it in Toe’s hands nonetheless, swirling around Harry’s hand and dulling the pain.

Mrs. Gale ran in, followed close behind by Mrs. Weatherby and Sr. Nerezza. The two old ladies ran to Harry’s bed, and Sr. Nerezza went to Vigo’s. He lifted up the sheet, but he was standing between Lisa and the bed so she couldn’t see what was underneath. Nerezza shook his head and replaced the sheet, and came over to see what he could do for

Harry. Harry was drifting in and out of consciousness, but after a combined effort of raveling by all four teachers he came to long enough to talk.

“What happened, darling?” Mrs. Gale asked.

Harry’s eyes glazed over, and then came clear again, “I was reaching,” he whispered, “reaching something for a girl.”

“What were you reaching?” Nerezza asked.

Lisa concluded that “reaching” was the name of the skill Harry had used to grab a copy of Jay’s shirt out of the air.

“I don’t remember,” Harry said. There was a long pause, then, “no, wait, she said it was ‘the Ring of the Seasons’. I’d never heard of it, but she gave me a hundred crowns, so I gave it a try anyway.”

All four teachers and Miss Mactan bristled noticeably when Harry said “the Ring of the Seasons”.

“Who was the girl?” Sr. Nerezza continued, “who asked you for the Ring of the Seasons?”

Harry strained to remember, and his eyes darted around wildly. He focussed for a moment and said “...gret...”, then his eyes glazed over again. Finally he gave up and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I can’t remember.”

Sr. Nerezza ravelled something, and then cradled Harry’s head in his hands. His heavy brows knit in concentration, then he let Harry go. “It’s been erased,” Sr. Nerezza said when he was done, “whoever the girl was, she erased herself completely from Harry’s memory. She also erased the ring from his memory, mostly, but she must’ve been interrupted by the outsider.”

Sr. Nerezza turned to Grandmaster Toe, “What was it, by the way? A mimic?”

Grandmaster Toe chuckled ominously, “I can kill mimics in my sleep. No, this was not a mimic. It was much bigger, and much stronger, I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

“Never?” Nerezza asked.

“Never,” Toe replied, “you remember those things in the Frozen Desert? This was worse.”

Nerezza looked at Lisa, then back at Grandmaster Toe. “Did you horriform?” he asked.

Grandmaster Toe glared across the bed at Sr. Nerezza. Lisa had never seen him angry before, and for a moment he no longer looked like a frail little old man, but like the product of countless decades or even centuries of martial arts training that he was. “I don’t horriform anymore, Signor Nerezza.”

Sr. Nerezza averted his eyes, and didn’t ask anything more after that.

After performing a series of examinations, Miss Mactan announced that Harry had stabilized, and asked that they all leave so that he could get some rest. Lisa followed Mrs. Gale back to her office, because she felt she knew Mrs. Gale the best and was most likely to be able to get some answers from her.

In contrast to Sr. Nerezza’s black hole of an office, Mrs. Gale’s was very pretty. The walls were covered in photographs and paintings, and the shelves and tabletops were piled high with knick-knacks. There was a big comfy couch along one wall, and Lisa sat down there. Just as she sat down, however, Lisa noticed that she was covered practically from head to toe in Harry’s blood. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” she said, jumping back to her feet.

“Sit back down, darling,” Mrs. Gale replied, “you won’t stain the couch.” Mrs. Gale reached into her pocket and pulled out her green handkerchief again, “you might want to wipe off your face, though.”

Lisa did, and was horrified to find that the handkerchief was almost crimson with blood when she handed it back to Mrs. Gale. Mrs. Gale shook the handkerchief a couple of times, though, and it returned to its normal color, with no sign of ever having been used.

“Mrs. Gale,” Lisa asked, “what’s the ‘Ring of the Seasons’?”

Mrs. Gale shook her head, “It’s something that no first-year student should know about. No student at all, for that matter.”

“But I do know about it now,” Lisa said, “and if it’s something dangerous, which it sure looks like after what happened to Harry, then the more I know about it the safer I’ll be.”

Mrs. Gale chuckled, “Well, when you put it that way.” She opened a drawer on her desk, pulled out two teacups on saucers, and handed one to Lisa. The cups were both already full, and the tea was steaming hot and smelled like peppermint. Mrs. Gale took a sip of hers and continued, “The Ring of the Seasons came from a world very close to the Mess. Like everything close to the Mess, it’s more than just one thing. In fact, it’s many many things, but more than anything else it’s a ring. How it got here isn’t important, but I can tell you that it’s the most detailed object that anyone has ever brought back. The Regulators have been studying it for decades, and have only discovered a tiny fraction of its power.”

“So it’s here? At the Academy?” Lisa asked.

Mrs. Gale sipped her tea. “Perhaps. But if anyone says anything to you about the ring, anything at all, deny any knowledge, get away as soon as you can, and come tell me. The ring is more dangerous than I could possibly explain, and you saw what happened to Harry just because he went looking for it. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Lisa said, then added, “who are the Regulators?”

“The Regulators are people who patrol the Edge, and keep the worlds safe from the outsiders. If enough outsiders get into a world, Lisa, they tear that world apart, destroying things utterly one by one until the world slips down, away from the Mess, past the Edge and into the Outside. You’ve seen a Stalker, the outsider that hunts one person at a time until everyone in a world is dead. Imagine a world with a hundred thousand Stalkers,” Mrs. Gale took another sip of her tea, and stared at a picture over her desk. From where Lisa was sitting, she couldn’t see what it was a picture of.

“I’ve seen it, and I hope beyond hope that you never have to,” Mrs. Gale continued, “Most of the teachers here were Regulators once, and many of the students here will go on to become Regulators after they graduate.”

Lisa was going to ask Mrs. Gale if she had been a Regulator too, but she already knew the answer. “Thank you for telling me all this,” Lisa said as she got up, “I’ll let you know if I hear anything. Right now, though, I need a shower.”

On her way out the door, Lisa looked at the picture frame over Mrs. Gale’s desk that she couldn’t see from where she was sitting. The picture inside was a black and white photograph of Mrs. Gale, looking not a day younger, standing alone in the middle of a white, empty space and smiling.

27

Lisa lay in bed that night trying to figure out who the girl could've been. Harry had said “gret”; Vinagrette? Gretchen? Neither of them seemed likely suspects. It seemed to Lisa like there was another girl she'd met with “gret” in her name, but she couldn't remember who. Of course, it was also possible that the girl had lied about her name, or that “gret” was nothing at all, just a grunt or some sort of expletive Harry had shouted in his delirium and pain.

Lisa had just given up and turned out her light when there was a knock at the door of her room. A full moon lit the room fairly well, so she left the light off but put on her glasses, and opened the door. Vinagrette was standing outside, looking nervous and upset.

“I'm sorry it's so late,” Vinagrette said, “can I come in?”

“Sure,” Lisa said. Vinagrette sat on the bed, and Lisa took the desk chair, just as she had when she talked to Mina. “What's going on?”

“I'm not good at saying things...” Vinagrette trailed off, then blurted out “I kissed Viktor.”

“And?”

“And I know that there was something between you, so I wanted to tell you before someone else did.”

“No,” Lisa said, shaking her head, “there really wasn't anything. He kissed me once, that's all. I don't really think he's my type.”

Vinagrette smiled, and gave Lisa a big hug. Lisa hugged her back, and when she let go Vinagrette held her at arms' length, like Viktor had. For a second Lisa was worried that Vinagrette was going to try to kiss her too, then Vinagrette said, “This probably sounds lame, but you're the best friend I've ever had, Lisa.”

“Thanks,” Lisa said, and Vinagrette let her go.

Vinagrette was partway out the door when she turned around. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked.

“Sure,” Lisa said.

“My last name is Sand. Isn't that awful?”

“I didn't even know you had a last name,” Lisa said, “and it really isn't that bad.” She was about to tell Vinagrette her own real last name, but it had been a long day and

she was really more in the mood to go to sleep as soon as possible than stay up all night swapping secrets. “Goodnight, Vinagrette. Your secret's safe with me, although honestly it's not that bad.”

Vinagrette paused, as if she expected Lisa to say something more, then finally said, “Goodnight, Lisa Star,” and closed the door behind her.

Lisa fell asleep wondering if there really had been something worth pursuing with Viktor, now that it was too late. Probably not. He'd just been dumped, and she'd really been more surprised than impressed by the kiss anyway. There was something he'd said to her about it afterwards, an apology maybe, but at the moment Lisa was too tired to remember it.

Diro was helping Wally with math homework in the common room when Lisa came down the next morning. Wally looked up as she approached them. “I heard you ran into another Outsider yesterday. Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I'm OK,” Lisa said, “It was Harry and Grandmaster Toe who fought with it. I just helped carry Harry up to the infirmary afterwards. He's pretty messed up, but it looks like he'll pull through.”

“Would you like some pancakes?” Diro asked, “I made them myself.”

Lisa looked over Diro's shoulder at the plate of pancakes sitting on the table in front of Wally. They were hard and black, like phonograph records, and covered in something that looked more like motor oil than syrup. She looked up at Wally and he vigorously shook his head “NO”.

“I'd love to,” Lisa said, “but Wally and I are meeting Donna in the cafeteria for breakfast. Remember, Wally?”

Wally gave her a blank look for a second, then caught on, “Oh yeah! I’d forgotten all about that! Thanks for the help, Diro, and the pancakes. Can you help me some more this afternoon?”

“Absolutely!” Diro said, “I’ll save your pancakes for you, in case you get hungry later.”

As they cut from the common room straight to the cafeteria Wally said, “thanks, those things were scary.”

“Don’t mention it,” Lisa replied, “now we’ve both saved each other’s lives.” She smiled at Wally and his stomach growled. The fleshy insides of his ears turned bright red, and Lisa laughed and dragged him off toward the cafeteria.

28

Although Beatles Earth was one of the few worlds with Christmas or Hanukkah, most of the worlds did have some sort of exchange of gifts at about the same time in the middle of the winter, and the few students whose worlds didn’t have such a tradition were happy to exchange gifts anyway.

There were a few specific things that Lisa wanted to buy for her friends, but Harry was still too shaken up by his “Ring of the Seasons” experience to try reaching again, and she didn’t know any of the other third-year students. Jay and Leda were taking the Reaching class, but they were also wary of reaching for anything beyond the simplest things, after what had happened to Harry. The village was prepared for the holidays, however, and Lisa was able to find most of the things she was after, or at least similar items, in the shops there. During her shopping Lisa discovered a cute little café tucked away in a corner, and made a note to bring her friends sometime soon. She had always had an affinity for cafés, probably because she’d spent so little time in them, and this one

had all the right touches; tall shelves full of musty books, chessboards (both western and Chinese, Lisa was pleased to see), a front window stuffed full of delicious-looking pastries, lots of comfy couches, and great espresso. Most girls Lisa's age didn't drink much espresso, but her father drank it every morning. She figured that anything that was good enough for him was good enough for her, and after three straight weeks of drinking it every morning she found that she'd finally grown to like it. She'd been disappointed to discover that, despite having an abundance of everything else, the cafeteria only served regular coffee, and thus she'd been craving a really good cup of coffee ever since her arrival.

On Christmas morning, which happened to land on a Sunday, Lisa came downstairs to find that a huge Christmas tree (or a "Yule tree" as many of the other students kept calling it) had appeared in the middle of the common room. Lisa ran back up to her room to gather up the gifts that she'd wrapped (she'd been amazed and relieved to find scotch tape at one of the shops in town), and stuffed them under the tree along with the ones that other students had already put there. When the weather had started getting cold, she'd bought herself some warm flannel pajamas in town, which she was wearing now, and since many of the other students were also still in pajamas she decided against going back upstairs to change. She'd hoped for some anonymity in the gift-giving, in case someone didn't like their present, but no-one there could read the writing of worlds beyond their own. Even Donna, who was from Lisa's world and spoke the same language, couldn't read Lisa's handwriting.

Lisa gave Donna a pair of reversible wool gloves, that were chartreuse on one side and mauve on the other, which Donna seemed to love. She gave Vinagrette a pair of red earmuffs that looked very cute and Christmassy against her green hair. She got Wally and Viktor each a necklace made of seashells, and she thought Wally's stood out very nicely

against his fur. She had no idea what to buy for Tomas, and finally ended up getting him a yo-yo – which seemed like a good generic gift for a boy – and spent the next hour teaching him how to use it. Finally, because she was feeling magnanimous, she got the Oco girls each a little crystal snowflake prism to hang in their windows, even though she'd hardly spoken a word to them since the night Tyra had broken up with Viktor. They were all very nice and cordial about it, and thanked her for her gifts, but declined her offer to come and sit with her and her other friends. She'd considered getting something for Diro, but she really didn't know him that well even though they had a class together, and since he didn't wear clothes and didn't eat food he was very difficult to shop for. She'd found a cute cat magnet and thought of him, but she was worried that he might be insulted by being treated like a refrigerator, and decided against buying it.

In exchange, Donna gave Lisa a dress that was a little shorter than what Lisa was used to, but which she promised to wear some night when they went down into town for the evening. She had some tights that would match it, and would make the outfit a little less uncomfortable. Viktor and Vinagrette gave her a pair of silver barrettes shaped like dragonflies with emeralds for eyes. Lisa wasn't sure if there was really any chemistry between Viktor and Vinagrette, or if they were just together to spite Tyra, but they did make a cute couple.

Wally, instead of individual gifts and much to Lisa's surprise, baked a giant batch of something that tasted like zucchini bread with pralines and shared it with everyone. Tomas, who'd been doing some additional training with Grandmaster Toe in the evenings and weekends, gave everyone little stone animals that he'd carved with his hands and focused chi. Lisa's was a sleeping hedgehog, which she thought was absolutely adorable. Wally's was a tiger with long rabbit ears, and Tomas told him that he had the calm yet

powerful demeanor of the tiger, which was apparently a great complement among the Rugoso.

After she'd opened all of her presents and stuffed herself full of Wally's bread, she threw on some clothes and took Jay and Leda their gifts. She'd bought Jay another of the shell necklaces, and Leda a pair of earrings that looked like Egyptian hieroglyphics. In exchange, they gave her a silver charm bracelet, with a little silver swan and a letter J attached.

“They're very popular among second-year students this year,” Leda explained, “now that we're learning Reaching, we've each come up with our own personal charm, and reach them to give to friends. I look forward to getting one from you next year.”

Leda rarely spoke, but when she did she seemed so regal that Lisa always felt like she should bow to her whenever she'd finished talking. Lisa gave them both hugs and thanked them for their gifts, and went off to find Harry. Since she'd been to the entrance to the third-year dorms once, and thus knew it existed and what it looked like, she was able to find it again easily. Harry wasn't out front like he had been before, so Lisa cautiously entered in search of him, and found him in the common room, wearing a red and white Santa Claus hat, drinking egg nog out of a tremendous mug, and laughing boisterously at a joke someone had just finished telling. Lisa moved a little closer, and he caught sight of her and motioned her over, and gave her a big hug. She noticed that he was still missing the two fingers from his left hand, and now that skin had grown over the area he was no longer wearing a bandage. She gave him a huge knit wool cap with earflaps, which was just the right size for his head. He thanked her profusely, then pointed to her charm bracelet.

“Is that from Jay and Leda?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Lisa said.

Harry looked stern for a moment, and the common room suddenly became very quiet. He slowly stretched his long, furry right arm straight out, and then snapped it back in. Between his fingers he held a tiny silver pipe, with a hook just the right size to fit on Lisa's charm bracelet. He attached it for her, squeezing the hook closed with his powerful fingertips.

On her way out of the third-year dorms, a girl stepped in Lisa's way. The girl wasn't as tall as Harry, but she was almost as tall as Lisa's dad. She had brilliant red hair, a beautiful floor-length dress, and yellow eyes, slit vertically like a cat's. When she spoke Lisa noticed that her canine teeth were a little bit larger than they should've been.

“Are you the one who carried Harry to the infirmary?” the girl asked.

“Yes,” Lisa said.

The tall girl bent down so that her face was level with Lisa's and smiled. “I wanted to thank you personally for that. This is also the first time since then that Harry has reached. Your friendliness is a powerful force, you know. My name is Kora.”

Lisa shook Kora's hand. “Lisa Star,” she said.

“Not quite,” Kora said with a wink, “but we'll keep that to ourselves. I'd like you to have this.” Kora held out another charm to Lisa. It was flat and round, like a coin, but had a slit cut out of the middle so that it looked like a cat's eye.

“Thank you,” Lisa said. Kora touched the charm to Lisa's bracelet and it stuck there. Lisa looked and discovered that the loop on the charm had been hooked onto the bracelet, although she couldn't find a break in the loop.

“I have something else for you,” Kora said, “that you'll receive a little later. It is not, however, the scarf.”

Lisa didn't understand the last part, but said, “Thank you again, then,” she paused, then added, “I feel like I should get you something too, though. What would you like?”

Kora smiled, “You saved Harry's life. That's more than enough. Merry Solstice, Lisa Star.”

There was another burst of laughter from the common room, and Lisa turned to see Harry, with his mug to his lips, shooting egg nog out of his nostrils as someone told a joke at just the wrong time. Harry had passed on the Santa cap to someone else and was wearing his new hat, laughing, and good naturedly cursing his friends. When Lisa turned back to see Kora's reaction, Kora was gone.

Wally and Tomas were playing video games in the common room when Lisa got back to the first-year dorms, so she showed them her charm bracelet, and made Wally promise to make more of his bread sometime during the following week. She went up to her room to recount her loot from the day, and discovered that she had received another present. A beautiful blue scarf, that felt like chenille and changed its shade as it moved lay on her bed, neatly folded. There were spots on it that remained the same color, and these matched the color of her blue carnation, so she surmised that they had probably both come from the same person. There was no label, and all that Lisa knew for sure was that it wasn't from Kora. She had told Lisa as much, after all.

29

“You are encouraged to travel in groups of two or three,” Mister Gromon was saying, “but no more than that. The snow on these slopes is unstable, and the footsteps of a group traveling together would be enough vibration to set off an avalanche. The fog will keep you from wending your way to the top, but the beacons will keep you from getting lost.” He motioned towards the beacon at the base of the trail. It looked to Lisa a lot like a parking meter, made entirely out of wood, flashing brightly from the area that usually tells you how much time you have left.

“Please wait to depart until the group ahead of you has disappeared into the fog,” he continued, “and I hope to see you all at the top by evening.”

The “first-year hike” had caught Lisa totally by surprise, although she had had plenty of opportunities to learn about it from the postings in the first-year common room. She had been too busy practicing *Ninety-Nine Needles*, however, which she could now ravel in a little over a minute, and hang for almost as long. She had actually just learned of the hike this morning, when the usual wake-up bell rang at eight, and she awoke wondering why it was ringing on a Saturday. The other girls were already ready for the day when she stumbled out of her room and into the shower, and when she had gotten to the common rooms Donna had filled her in.

“You're going hiking in that?” Donna asked.

Lisa was wearing a skirt with leggings, a long-sleeved t-shirt with a flannel overshirt and a pair of combat boots. She was also wearing her headphones and her new blue scarf. She had intended to go down to the cafe, soak up the atmosphere and maybe find someone to play Chinese chess with. “Hiking?” she asked, “what do you mean?”

“Today's the first-year hike,” Donna said, but it was clear that Lisa wasn't getting it, “you know, to Starfall Peak? For the meteor storm?” The expression on Lisa's face remained blank, so Donna marched over to the common room's announcement board, and took down a mask that Lisa had seen there a dozen times but hadn't bothered to touch.

“First-year students are informed,” the mask began, “that there will be a mandatory field trip to Starfall Peak on the second Saturday after the winter solstice. Students will meet in the first-year dorms common room at precisely nine o' clock –“

Lisa looked at her pocketwatch. It was seven minutes until nine. “Oh crap!” she shouted and ran back upstairs. She pulled on a pair of baggy green jeans over her leggings and boots, threw a sweater over her t-shirt and her heavy jacket over that,

dumped everything out of her backpack except the granola bars and stuffed a couple bottles of water into it. She was halfway out the door when she realized she was still wearing her skirt, and as she pulled it off over her jeans she heard it rip, threw it on her bed, and slammed the door. She'd try not to think about the rip, or the fact that she really liked that skirt, until she got back. As she ran down the stairs she could already hear Mr. Gromon's voice telling the students to follow him out to the base of the mountain.

Mr. Gromon had led them out the North end of campus, into the woods, and just a little further on to the base of a snowy mountain, shrouded in fog so thick that Lisa could hardly see ten feet up, let alone the top of the mountain. On the way Wally had given Lisa the last of the zucchini bread for breakfast, for which she was eternally grateful. Mr. Gromon had reached a sack lunch for each of the students who needed to eat, courteously asking each student whether he or she was a vegetarian first. Lisa had inspected her lunch before putting it in her backpack. It included a couple of apples, a ham and cheese sandwich, and some sort of canned drink. Mr. Gromon finished his instructions with "I hope to see you all at the top by evening," and disappeared into the fog. Victor and Vinagrette naturally wanted to go up together, and set off immediately. Once they had disappeared, Wally and Tomas set off as the next group, and behind them went the three Oco girls. The fairy boy and girl went up after them, wearing the same wispy clothing as they had in the summer and not looking a bit cold for it. Lisa and Donna went next. When they reached the first beacon, they could already see the second one a little further up. There was a crude dirt path for them to follow, which was mostly covered in snow, although the footprints of the students who had gone ahead of them were there, including the prints of Wally's huge rabbit feet. The beacons were roughly ten yards apart, and at the fifth beacon Lisa stopped to get the water out of her bag.

"How long is this hike supposed to be, anyway?" she asked between drinks.

“Eight miles,” Donna said.

“Eight miles!?” Lisa's school was three miles from her house, and the mall was two miles. She couldn't remember the last time that she'd walked an entire one mile without cutting, let alone eight.

“Is that far?” Donna asked.

“Very far,” Lisa said, “I guess we'd better get moving.”

Although Lisa had never used a walking stick before, she'd seen a lot of people using them on TV and in movies when going on long hikes. She found a stick a little ways off the path, and although it was bigger than she suspected a walking stick should be for her, it worked very well, and took a lot of the stress off of her feet. Lisa looked at the designer hiking boots that Donna had found in town, and decided they must be significantly more comfortable than Lisa's combat boots. All the same, with her stick, Lisa kept up with Donna just fine, and even took the lead for a bit before Donna found a walking stick of her own and matched Lisa's pace.

At the eleventh beacon, the girls came to a clearing where the ground was level. Some show-off who had left earlier had built a snowman, and even given him stick arms and eyes and a smile made from black stones. Lisa and Donna couldn't find their fellow students' footprints, so they spent a few seconds looking for the next beacon, until Donna found it, flashing in the distance ten yards downhill from their current position.

“Why is the next beacon back downhill?” Donna asked as they walked.

Lisa shrugged, “Maybe it's going around a cliff or something, or maybe the beacons are actually leading us on a cut, like the butterflies did.”

“Oh, OK,” Donna said.

They'd hiked about twenty feet toward the beacon, but it still didn't seem any closer. Lisa was wondering if maybe it just felt like they were going faster because they

were going downhill, when she heard a babbling growl that she'd spend the last six months trying to forget. She stopped in her tracks, and at the sound Donna stopped too.

“What was –“ Donna started, but Lisa cut her off.

“Donna, ravel Iron Shell now.” Lisa had already started ravelling it herself, but Donna continued to just stare blankly into the fog, straining her ears to tell where the sound was coming from. “Donna!” Lisa yelled, and Donna flinched and turned around, “avel Iron Shell, NOW!”

The babble turned into a howl, and the Stalker charged out of the fog just as Lisa finished ravelling. The shell crackled to life around her as the monster leapt into the air, straightening out its body into a javelin crowned by ten razor-sharp, blood red claws. Lisa's shell collapsed under the impact, and she was thrown backwards, tumbling through the snow and landing hard against the base of a tree. She immediately started ravelling Ninety-Nine Needles, although she knew that the Stalker would kill her before she'd finished. It had completely ignored Donna, however, who swung her walking stick hard and broke it in two across the Stalker's face. The monster stumbled back a few steps, but then recoiled and snapped its blood red claw around Donna's head, lifting her off the ground and shaking her hard enough to break her neck. Donna screamed and the Stalker whipped her body against the ground. On the third whip Donna abruptly stopped screaming, just as Lisa finished ravelling Ninety-Nine Needles. She unleashed the entirety of the spell right into the gash that Donna's walking stick had left in the Stalker's face, and the monster howled in pain, dropping Donna to swat at the invisible bees that were covering its face with their stings. Lisa bolted forward, grabbed Donna by the arm, and amazed at her own adrenaline-saturated strength swung her friend up across her shoulder in a fireman's carry and kept running. She had only put about four yards between them and the monster when the spell wore off and the howling stopped, but that

was enough distance to start wending, and a few seconds later she burst out of the trees at the edge of campus, running full tilt toward the Academy with Donna draped unconscious over her shoulder.

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Lisa hadn't realized how much shape she was in after Grandmaster Toe's classes until she arrived in the infirmary and heaved Donna onto a bed. Lisa was completely out of breath, and almost blacked out before she sat down, but she wasn't sick like she had been the first time she'd run away from the Stalker. Donna was breathing, and had a pulse, but just barely on both counts, and Miss Mactan immediately administered her bite to stabilize her. Her neck was broken, along with most of her ribs, and her right arm in three places. Quite a few joints were dislocated too.

“Did she fall?” Miss Mactan asked.

“No,” Lisa said as she caught her breath, “outsider.”

“Another one?” Miss Mactan asked, Lisa looked up, and Miss Mactan looked genuinely terrified, “where?”

“On the mountain.”

Miss Mactan was feverishly weaving webs and wrapping them around Donna with one pair of arms while she ran various instruments over her body with the other. “She's hemorrhaging badly,” Miss Mactan said, “and Grandmaster Toe's already at the peak. You'll have to supplement her chi with your own.”

“I, I don't know how,” Lisa said.

“Well then you'd better learn fast!” Miss Mactan screamed. Her hair bristled and her red eyes bulged when she said it, and she looked to Lisa like the epitome of a mother creature defending her young. Lisa tried. She placed her hands on Donna's forehead and

sternum, feeling for the points of energy that she'd never even looked for in another person. There was nothing for a long time, and then she felt it, very faintly, tugging at her own chi like the mana of ravelling tugged her hands toward each other. She poured her chi into Donna, and gradually the cycle of energy grew stronger until it became a whirlpool, siphoning Lisa's chi into Donna's body. Lisa's muscles began to ache and cramp, but she endured, since she had no idea how much chi Donna would need to stabilize. Lisa felt like her own body was petrifying as the energy was bled out of it into Donna, and finally Miss Mactan put her hand on her shoulder.

“You can stop now, dear. She's stable.”

Lisa looked up at Miss Mactan's smiling face, and then at Donna. Donna's face was black and blue and red, and almost unrecognizable from the swelling and the blood. She looked peaceful all the same, however, and for a moment the slow click of the IV drip in Donna's arm was the only sound. Lisa turned back toward Miss Mactan and hugged her, and for a long time the two of them just stood there, hugging each other and crying.

Eventually Lisa let go of Miss Mactan and put her backpack back on.

“The cafeteria is closed, but I can make us some soup,” Miss Mactan said.

“No thanks,” Lisa replied, “I have to hurry if I'm going to make it to the peak by sunset.”

“You're not going back up, are you? After what happened to Donna?”

Lisa nodded, “It's my Stalker, Miss Mactan. The longer I run from it the longer it'll be there waiting for me.”

Miss Mactan looked genuinely concerned. “I wish there was something I could give you,” she said.

“I already have something,” Lisa said, thinking about the glass vial that Sr. Nerezza had given her at the beginning of the year. Every morning it had gone into her pocket with her watch, and every night it sat under her pillow, near at hand, just in case. She hugged Miss Mactan goodbye and set back out, cutting quickly through the forest to the mountain, and aiming for the snowman someone had built along the path. She thought that the Stalker would probably have moved on, perhaps following her other cut back toward the Academy, but as she walked she ravelled Ninety-Nine Needles just in case. She finished her ravel just as she arrived in the clearing, and she hung the spell while she looked around. The snowman was there, just visible at the edge of the fog, and the beacon leading to the clearing. The other beacon, however, the one that Lisa and Donna had been following when they were attacked, was nowhere to be seen. Lisa put on her glasses and squinted into the fog, but there was no sign of the flashing light. She slowly scanned the fog in every direction, and could see no beacon at all except the one that she'd passed on her way here. The strain from hanging Ninety-Nine Needles built quickly, and once she'd looked around once more and finally convinced herself that the Stalker was nowhere nearby, she released it. Over the countless number of times she'd ravelled the spell she'd become more and more accustomed to its function to the point that she had learned to control it a little even as it was executing, and this time she used it to blast the bark off of a tree in the shape of a neat little star, about the size of her hand. She had finished the spell and was admiring her handiwork when she heard the growling, babbling noise behind her.

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Lisa spun around and dropped into a fighting stance. The Stalker had waited until she had released Ninety-Nine Needles, and she didn't have time to ravel anything else.

She was also incredibly drained from using up her chi keeping Donna alive while Miss Mactan worked. All that she had left to rely on was the vial in her pocket and her martial arts skill, and without chi to back it up she wasn't going to last long. Just as she turned the Stalker lunged, straightening its body into a lance like it had before. Lisa jumped aside at the last split second and kicked the monster in the stomach. The Stalker's claws plunged into the trunk of the tree rather than into Lisa, right in the middle of the star she had carved out of it. She felt something wet on her cheek, and reached up to discover that she hadn't been quite quick enough, and the Stalker's claws had drawn a razor-fine cut across her face, just below her right eye. Her glasses were scratched on that side as well, and she realized that if she hadn't been wearing them she probably wouldn't have a right eye at all. The Stalker continued its forward momentum into the tree, and pressed the soles of its feet against the trunk before springing off in Lisa's direction. She dropped backwards, and kicked with both of her legs, giving the monster more air and sending it tumbling into the clearing. Lisa immediately ravelled Iron Shell as the monster sprang back to its feet and charged at her, but she finished the spell just before it got in striking range, and it halted in its tracks. The air crackled around Lisa with the force of the spell, and the monster watched, curiously. It circled slowly around her, staying outside the perimeter of the shell, assessing its boundaries. Suddenly it lunged at her, and Lisa flinched, but didn't step backwards because that would break the shell. The monster stared at her, and even though its face was smooth and totally featureless except the gash across it from Donna walking stick, it seemed to be smiling. Even its growling babble rose in pitch and tone, until it sounded like laughter. "It knows I can't leave the shell," Lisa thought. She pulled the vial Sr. Nerezza had given her from her pocket, but the monster lunged again and broke the shell, sending itself flying a few yards backwards in the process, and sending the vial flying in the other direction out of Lisa's hand. The Stalker was too close for Lisa

to cut away from, and she didn't have time to go digging through the snow looking for the vial, so she brought up another Iron Shell instead.

The Stalker got to its feet and stretched its arms out to its sides, and when it flexed its claws Lisa could hear the horrible crackling of its knuckles. It dug in the snow for a moment, and Lisa wondered what it was doing until it unearthed a large rock, about the size of a bowling ball and carried it to the edge of the shell. When Lisa realized what the rock was for the monster began to nod frantically, like an insane parrot as its babble rose to a laugh again. The Stalker flung the rock hard and high, and it tumbled up into the sky, in a steep arc that would bring it down right in the middle of the shell. It then stretched its arms far apart, wiggling its bloody claws in anticipation. The split second the rock hit the shell, Lisa knew, the shell would discharge to knock the rock away, and the monster's arms would close around her like scissors, shredding her to pieces. If she ran the shell would break as well, and the Stalker would kill her. She closed her eyes tight, and ravelled Ninety-Nine Needles as fast as she could, knowing that she didn't have nearly enough time to finish it before the rock came down.

She was halfway through the spell when she heard the rock come whistling down through the air, and the pop of it crashing against the shell and deflecting. The pop was immediately followed by the whoosh of the Stalker's claws, and the horrible sickening sound of it slicing her in half. She felt no pain, and was reminded of one of her dad's favorite kung-fu movies, where the villain was chopped in half so fast he didn't realize it, until the top half of his body slid off the bottom half. Maybe she was already dead, she thought, and it had happened so fast that she didn't even feel it.

Lisa opened her eyes, and the first thing that she saw was the Stalker lying in the snow, cut in two halves like the villain in the kung-fu movie. Standing next to it, her eyes wide and her teeth bared, clutching a bloody shovel in her hands, was Regretta

September. The top half of the Stalker twitched, and swung a claw at her, and Regretta stepped back and sheathed her shovel in its holster on her back. She ravelled something Lisa had never seen before, and said “Ashes to ashes.” The monster burst into flames, and writhed and howled as the flesh was stripped from its bones, and even its bones were reduced to ash in a matter of seconds. While Lisa watched, Regretta dug a deep, perfectly square hole in the ground, shoveled the monster's remains into it, and filled it back up. When she was done she wiped the blood and dirt off of the shovel, wrapped it back up, and put it back in its holster on her back. As Regretta worked, Lisa's adrenaline subsided, and the world returned to its normal speed. Lisa found the vial, still in its metal tube, just a few feet away in the snow, right outside the perimeter of the Iron Shell she had ravelled.

“Are you alright?” Regretta asked.

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “thanks.”

“Don't mention it,” Regretta stepped into the middle of the clearing and looked around, then turned back to Lisa. “You haven't seen the next beacon, have you?”

“No,” Lisa said, “I think I was following a fake beacon when the Stalker attacked me the first time.”

“A fake beacon?” Regretta asked.

Lisa had a sudden insight, that seemed at first to be the result of too many video games; the usual level of video game puzzle solving where every strange-looking fireplace is actually a secret door, every strange-looking statue is actually a disguised monster, and every strange-looking snowman... Lisa walked across the clearing to the snowman with the stick arms and black rock eyes and smile, and repeated the ravel that Regretta had just cast. The snowman was enveloped in a column of flame, and when the flame subsided the snowman had melted away, revealing the beacon inside.

“You're a quick learner,” Regretta said.

“Thanks again,” Lisa replied, and stuck out her hand, “I'm Lisa Star.”

Regretta took her hand and shook it, “Lisa Star, I'm Regretta September.”

“It's nice to finally meet you,” Lisa said, “I wanted to talk to you before, but I always got the feeling you thought you were better than the rest of us.”

Regretta blushed, a reaction that Lisa never expected from someone so stoic. “Oh no, not better,” Regretta said, “just more... private.”

Lisa stood next to the beacon, and from it she could see the next one, flashing in the fog further uphill. “I see the next beacon,” she said, “would you mind keeping me company for the rest of the hike?”

“Not at all, Lisa Star,” Regretta said, and they continued their journey, leaving the Stalker in its grave behind them.

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A little after two o'clock they found a huge tree trunk, about twice the size of a couch, and sheared flat at about waist level. They cleared off the snow from a corner and sat down to lunch. Lisa's sandwich was a little smushed from her fight with the Stalker, but it was still perfectly edible, and when she opened her drink can it immediately heated up to the point that she almost dropped it. The contents turned out to be hot chocolate. Regretta opened her lunch bag too, unwrapped her sandwich and looked it over thoroughly before taking a bite.

“It's been a while since I ate food,” Regretta said once she'd swallowed her bite.

“What do you usually eat?” Lisa asked.

Regretta reached into her pocket and handed Lisa something that looked like a clear yellow lemon drop, but felt a little harder. “These,” Regretta said, “try one.”

Lisa put the lemon drop in her mouth, and it quickly softened. It felt and tasted like a jelly bean, although she couldn't quite figure out what the flavor was. When she swallowed it she discovered that it was remarkably filling; if she hadn't worked up such a huge appetite healing Donna and fighting the Stalker it would've been more than enough for a meal. Her body quickly soaked it up and used it to replenish her chi, though, leaving her hungry enough to finish her lunch.

"That was good," Lisa said, "what was it?"

"A jool," Regretta said, "on my world, jools are used for food, money, fuel for machines, and many other things."

"So, everybody just eats jools?" Lisa asked.

"Not all the time. We have a wide variety of cuisines too, but jools are the most convenient. They're small, they don't rot, and one or two is enough food for an entire day, as long as you don't exert yourself too much."

"Cool," Lisa said, "So, why didn't you ever hang out in the common room?"

"It's the way I was raised," Regretta answered, "I'm a Mortan Officiate. We're born and raised to be undertakers. We're taught to be as unobtrusive as possible, because mourners don't want to be distracted from their dead, and other people don't want to be reminded of death by our presence."

"Sounds pretty lonely," Lisa said.

"Not really. We usually have each other, although it's important to maintain a somber and respectful disposition at all times, at least for Officiates. At the Academy I've spent most of my time studying, and reading, and listening to music."

"Oh, that reminds me," Lisa said, and handed her headphones to Regretta, "try this." She pressed play on her mp3 player, and Regretta sat for a while, bobbing her head respectfully to Lisa's music.

“Thanks,” Regretta said as she handed the headphones back, “what makes the music?”

Lisa pulled her mp3 player out of her pocket and showed it to her.

“That’s very small,” Regretta said, “my stereo would not fit in my pocket. Shall we continue hiking?”

“Sure,” Lisa said, and they got up. They continued talking as they walked, and Lisa told Regretta about Beatles Earth, covering most of the same topics she had in her presentation at the beginning of the year in Mr. Plober’s class; the internet, gasoline vehicles, some of the different cultures and religions.

“I’m familiar with many of those religions,” Regretta said.

“Really? Are they practiced by Mortans too?”

“No,” Regretta said, “we have our own religion, but it’s important for Mortans to be familiar with the beliefs and burial rights of all cultures. A wide variety of peoples bring their dead to the City of Tombs, and we never want to be caught unprepared.”

“You live in a graveyard?” Lisa asked.

Regretta smiled, ever so slightly, “In a manner of speaking, yes. The City of Tombs is home to over a million Mortans, and the final resting place of billions. Its houses and graveyards stretch for miles in every direction. It’s spires pierce the sky, and its catacombs burrow deep, deep beneath the earth.” There was a sense of pride and majesty in the way Regretta talked about the city.

Lisa had a mental image of a giant sign in front of the city, with a pair of golden arches and the motto “Billions and billions buried!”, but decided against sharing the thought with Regretta. “So, is everyone there an undertaker?” She asked.

“Not everyone. There are butchers and bakers and cooks and tailors, and everything else that any other city has. The art of undertaking is a fundamental part of

everyone's education, however, and those who choose it as their career are the most respected and skilled undertakers in the world. Skilled undertakers are actually in high demand right now, since more and more of the dead on our world are refusing to stay dead."

"Oh, OK," Lisa nodded, "So that's how you killed the Stalker so easily; Mortan undertakers are also vampire hunters."

"Vampires, among other things," Regretta said, and left it at that.

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They reached the summit just as the sun set, casting the entire snowy mountain top in a brilliant red-orange light that faded to a diffused gray. There was a crumbling old building with an observatory telescope on top of it, and in front of the building was a stone patio with a fountain in the middle. Rather than water, the bowl of the fountain was filled with fire. The rest of the students were gathered around the fire, relaxing from the hike, and as Lisa and Regretta approached Wally saw them and waved.

"Where's Donna?" Wally yelled, when the girls were in yelling range. He got up and walked out to meet them.

Lisa waited to answer until she got closer. "Donna's in the infirmary. We ran into the Stalker on the way up."

Lisa had never mentioned the word "Stalker" to Wally, but he immediately understood what she was talking about, "Oh no! Are you alright?" he asked.

"Donna's in really bad shape, but she'll pull through. I'm OK though, thanks to Regretta. She killed it."

Wally bowed to Regretta. "Walter Quick is indebted to you for saving the life of Lisa Star," he said.

Regretta bowed back, “Regretta September refuses Walter Quick’s debt, and absolves it,” she said.

Wally looked at Lisa, and back at Regretta. Lisa could just barely see tears starting to well up under his eyes, but he wiped them away. “Thank you,” he said to Regretta.

“You’re welcome, Walter Quick,” Regretta answered, and Wally turned and walked back to the plaza.

“What was that about?” Lisa asked.

“It’s a Lagoman ritual,” Regretta said, “he swore a debt to me for saving your life, and I absolved his debt. Mortan’s have no use for debts.”

“Oh, OK,” Lisa said, “it seemed like there was more to it than that.”

“It was a Lagoman soul debt. Until I resolved it I held his entire life in my hands,” Regretta said, then added, “he loves you, you know.”

“No,” Lisa said, “no, I didn’t know.”

“Well,” Regretta said, “you do now.”

For a split second Lisa almost thought that she saw Regretta smirk, but it must’ve been a trick of the fading light.

“It’s a strange feeling to be the bearer of good news for once,” Regretta added.

Lisa had no idea how to react to the news. Wally was sweet, and kind, and intelligent, and cute, but he was also a giant bunny. It would be a different thing entirely if he was just under a spell that made him LOOK like a giant bunny but, unfortunately, he was in fact really a giant bunny. She realized that she’d been suspecting it for a long time, but had refused to think about it because she had no idea how she’d react. Now that she’d finally been confronted with it, however, she still had no idea how to react. He was one of her best friends, but there were obvious compatibility issues. She couldn’t even imagine

trying to kiss him. As she thought over all of this, it occurred to her that he'd probably thought over all of the exact same things, and had come to the same conclusion she was coming to; it couldn't possibly work out. It was relieving, but it was also sad.

By the time Lisa had reached her conclusion, she and Regretta had also reached the patio, and she sat down on a bench next to Wally.

"Thanks for the scarf," she said.

"You're welcome," Wally said.

"And thanks for the flower."

"You're welcome."

Mr. Gromon appeared, as usual, from nowhere in particular, along with a cart filled with box dinners. Lisa's had roast chicken and mashed potatoes with lots of butter, and just as they finished eating Gretchen pointed out the first shooting star to everyone. The star was followed by another, and another, each a different color, and the sky was soon filled with a psychedelic rainbow of falling stars. Some fell straight, some arched across the sky, some even traveled in dizzying spirals before burning out. Lisa sat with her legs straddling the stone bench, and leaned back against Wally. He was warm, and very soft, and he put his arms around her cautiously and gently. After about an hour he rested his head on her shoulder, and they sat there together, watching the most amazing light show that Lisa had ever seen, and completely oblivious to anyone around them.

When it was all over they cut back down the mountain to the Academy. Lisa and Wally, Vinagrette and Viktor and Tomas all went straightaway to the infirmary to see Donna, who still hadn't regained consciousness. Miss Mactan told them that Donna was recovering, and they each took turns holding her hand and giving her their best wishes. Afterwards, Wally walked Lisa back to her room. She kissed him goodbye on the cheek,

then lingered for a moment, and their lips met. It was awkward, but not as awkward as Lisa had expected.

34

Since the night on Starfall Peak, Lisa and Wally had decided to take things a little slower. Lisa knew that they had feelings for each other, but Lisa also knew that they were both afraid of where those feelings might lead, and there were certain inevitable problems that neither of them wanted to think about. They still hung out as much as they had before, and cuddled on the couch while watching movies with their friends, but by spring they had only kissed twice since that night.

With the Stalker gone, Lisa no longer had any pressing need for Ninety-Nine Needles, but since she'd spent so much time learning to ravel she had gotten used to it and found she enjoyed it. Regretta had offered to teach her some more advanced techniques, and a few weeks later Lisa decided to take her up on it. Regretta invited Lisa up to her room to work, which was on the top floor of the dorms. It was just as spotless and tidy as Lisa had imagined it would be; virtually the only decorations in the room were an old phonograph-style record player with a big flared cone on top, and a poster above the bed.

“Hey,” Lisa said, looking at the poster, “that's Jimi Hendrix.”

He was dressed like Regretta, all in black with silver buckles, and wore the same pilgrim-style hat over his afro, but it was definitely Jimi Hendrix. He was even holding a left-handed electric guitar. Lisa doubted that any girls her age knew as much as she did about Jimi Hendrix; her grandfather had been a bit of an obsessive.

“No,” Regretta said, “that's Nick Nightshade. He was the first Mortan rock musician, and became incredibly popular all over my world.”

“Mortans have rock music?” Lisa asked, “It seems kind of contradictory to the whole stoic attitude.”

“Well, we didn't until Nick,” Regretta said as she cranked a handle on the side of the record player, “and officially, Mortan society disapproves of him. Secretly, though, I think everyone's proud of him, and practically everyone has at least one of his albums.” Regretta dropped the needle onto the record, and Lisa took off her hear-ring so she could hear the music in its native language. Nick Nightshade was singing in the first language, though, so it didn't matter. The general tone was pretty goth, and Lisa didn't recognize the song, but it was definitely Jimi Hendrix's voice, and Jimi Hendrix's guitar.

“Most people don't write lyrics in the first language,” Regretta said over the music, “but Nick had a gift for getting it to match with the music. That's one of the reasons he's so popular.” The song finished and Regretta picked the needle up off the record. “What do you want to work on first?” she asked.

“Basics,” Lisa replied, “Beyond the stuff we're learning in Sr. Nerezza's class, all I know is Ninety-Nine Needles and that fire spell I picked up from you. Actually, I don't even remember the fire spell any more.”

“It's called 'Ashes to Ashes',” Regretta said, “and I'll teach it to you again. What's Ninety-Nine Needles?”

“Do you have something you don't mind getting ruined?” Lisa asked.

Regretta dug through her backpack and pulled out one of the apples they were given at the start of the Starfall Peak hike. It was shrunken and wrinkly, and Lisa wondered why Regretta hadn't thrown it out. “Is this too small?” Regretta asked.

“No, just right.” Lisa ravelled Ninety-Nine Needles, and carved a little smiley face in the apple before blowing it to bits.

“Interesting,” Regretta said when she'd finished, “I've never seen a spell before that uses an inverse Jupiter. Who else knows you can ravel this?”

“Just Signor Nerezza, and probably Mrs. Gale,” Lisa said. “It's not really a secret, I just haven't bothered telling anyone about it.”

“Then you should make it a secret,” Regretta said. “Remember what Sr. Nerezza said on the first day of class about never telling anyone what spells you have hung? A spell this advanced, for a first-year student from a world with no magic like Beatles Earth is an extremely powerful advantage. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Lisa nodded, “What's an inverse Jupiter?”

“It's the same as a Jupiter,” Regretta said, and she ravelled something for ten steps and then let it go, “but in reverse.”

Lisa looked at her blankly.

“You mean you don't know the signs?” Regretta asked, “how do you remember spells?”

Lisa showed Regretta the three pages of her notebook where she'd written down Ninety-Nine Needles, one step at a time. Regretta made a little snort noise, and then started laughing, for the first time since the beginning of the school year, and from the looks of things, possibly for the first time in her life. Every time her laughter started to fade, she'd make another snort noise, and that would get her started again. After a few seconds Lisa started laughing too.

“I, don't even know, what's funny!” Lisa gasped out between giggles, which just made them both laugh even more.

After a few minutes they finally both laughed themselves out, which was good because Lisa felt like she was about to pass out from lack of air.

“I'm sorry!” Regretta said, “that was so rude of me!”

“Don't worry about it,” Lisa said, “I think we both really needed that.”

Regretta gave Lisa a big smile and nodded. “Alright, now that we've finally recovered, let me teach you about signs. Signs are a shorthand for raveling, named after the planets and constellations. The Flash, for instance, goes 'Neptune, Gemini, Virgo, Gemini'.” She ravelled the Flash as she said the names, pausing in her raveling after each one, and releasing the flash when she finished.

Lisa flipped back through her notebook to where she'd written down the steps for the flash, and grouped the steps together into signs with curly brackets. They spent the rest of the afternoon working their way through all of the signs and listening to Nick Nightshade records, eating jools to keep their energy up. They were both a little slap-happy from laughing so much and studying so hard by a little after midnight when Lisa checked her pocketwatch. “OK,” she said, “this time I really have to go, since we have to get up in eight hours.”

“Alright,” Regretta said, “but we should definitely do this again some time.”

“Definitely,” Lisa said. She was going to hug Regretta goodbye, but instead Regretta bowed deeply, and Lisa bowed back. They both started giggling again, and Lisa dashed out the door before it got any worse. “Bye!” she said, waving.

“Bye!” Regretta waved back, and shut the door.

Lisa went bounding down the stairs to her own floor, but stopped just around the corner when she heard voices in the hallway. It sounded like a private moment, and she didn't want to be eavesdropping, but she also thought it would be rude to interrupt.

“You can stay if you want to,” Vinagrette said.

“I know,” Viktor replied. There was a kissing noise, “but not yet. Goodnight, Vinagrette. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Viktor, there's something I've been wanting to ask you,” Vinagrette said.

“Yes?”

“What's your real name?”

“Viktor is my real name,” he replied.

“No, I mean your real last name,” she said.

“Oh, it's Markay. What's yours?”

“I don't have one. Goodnight, Viktor Markay, I'll see you in the morning.”

“And goodnight to you, Vinagrette I-don't-have-one.” they both giggled, and Lisa could hear Vinagrette chase him out on to the bridge between the girls' and boys' towers before she came back in and closed her door. With the hallway clear, Lisa snuck past and into her own room, and fell asleep with Nick Nightshade songs stuck in her head.

35

A few weeks later Lisa came out of Mr. Plober's classroom at the end of class to find Miss Mactan waiting in the hall. Lisa was surprised to see her outside of the infirmary, and it took her a second to recognize the spider lady, despite her distinctive appearance.

“Lisa, dear,” Miss Mactan said, “I thought you should be the first to know. Donna's woken up.”

“Really?” Lisa said, “That's wonderful! Can I see her?”

“Of course you can,” Miss Mactan said, and led her back to the infirmary.

Donna was sitting up in bed. Her face and neck were covered in dark purple bruises and long rows of stitches, and her eyes were still nearly swollen shut. She looked absolutely awful, but she was conscious, and that was a huge improvement. Lisa ran over to her friend and hugged her, as gently as she could, but Donna still gave a little gasp, followed by “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow.”

“I'm so sorry!” Lisa said, pulling away, “How do you feel?”

“You know, I've been anticipating that question ever since I woke up,” Donna said, her speech slurred a little by her swollen face, “but I still haven't come up with a snappy answer yet. Awful. I feel really really awful.”

“Thank you for saving my life, Donna.”

“Well,” Donna said, “Miss Mactan told me you saved my life too, so I guess we're even.” She paused for a moment, then added, “Is that thing still out there?”

“It's dead,” Lisa said.

“You killed it?”

“Regretta did.”

“The girl with the, like, pilgrim hat? The quiet scary one?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “She's actually pretty cool. We've gotten to be good friends.”

“Well, that's good to hear,” Donna said, trailing off.

Lisa giggled, “You know, with that slur, you sound like some kind of grizzled old veteran boxer or something.”

“Gee, thanks,” Donna said sarcastically, “maybe there's a certain wisdom that only comes from getting beaten nearly to death and knocked unconscious for a while. How long have I been out, anyway?”

“About eight weeks,” Lisa said.

“Eight weeks!” Donna sat up and Lisa could hear an audible crunch, “OW! I think that was my spine again.”

Lisa touched her hands to Donna's forehead and sternum and gave her a surge of chi. After a few seconds it seemed like the pain had subsided and she stroked Donna's hair while Donna whimpered.

“I wish you could've been there with us at the top, Donna,” Lisa said, “It was so beautiful. I can't wait until you get to see it next year.”

Tears rolled down Donna's cheeks, and Lisa sat on the side of the bed and held her hand. She stayed there, holding Donna's hand and stroking her hair, until Donna fell asleep, then walked without cutting back to the first-year dorms, feeling melancholy but happy that her friend had pulled through, and enjoying the cold night air on her face. She made herself a sandwich for dinner in the kitchen, and when she came back out Tomas, Wally, Viktor and Vinagrette were playing video games.

“Donna's awake,” Lisa said. They all turned toward her with smiles on their faces.

“Alright!” Tomas shouted, “is it too late to go see her tonight?”

“I don't think she wants you to see her yet, Tomas,” Lisa said.

“Why not?” Tomas looked hurt.

“I don't think she wants you to see her when she's not looking as beautiful as possible,” Lisa said, then added, “Get it?” because Tomas obviously didn't.

Tomas stared at her for a few seconds, and then the lightbulb went on “Oooohh! I DO get it. I could send her something though, couldn't I?”

“That would be a wonderful idea,” Lisa said.

The next day, Donna seemed to be in much higher spirits when Lisa gave her the box Tomas had asked her to deliver.

“Tomas? The boy with no shirt?” Donna said when Lisa handed it to her.

“Yep.”

Donna could barely move her arms, but Lisa thought it would be insulting to help her. After a long effort, she got the box open, and pulled a necklace out of it. It was a fine gold chain, dotted with sapphires, emeralds, and a pair of diamonds. “Oh wow!” Donna said. It was very beautiful, and also looked very expensive.

“Lisa,” Donna said somberly, “could you please tell Tomas that there's a big wet kiss waiting for him as soon as I get out?”

Lisa passed on the news, word for word. Tomas' grinned, his face all the way down his bare chest turned bright red from embarrassment, and he ran upstairs to his room.

It was a full month before Donna was out of the infirmary, and even after that she was on crutches for weeks and weeks. Lisa and her friends had saved up over two-thousand crowns for her, and when she had finally hobbled out of the infirmary on crutches they took her on a whirlwind eighteen-hour shopping spree through town. Tomas carried her on his back through most of it, because she wanted to go faster than she could move on crutches. They ended up late that night in the first-year common room, sorting through Donna's gigantic piles of brand new stuff, talking, laughing, and eventually all falling asleep on the common room couches. Even Regretta fell asleep, and Lisa woke back up at one point, wrapped in Wally's arms, to find Regretta snoring loudly with the brim of her hat pulled down over her eyes.

36

Two months before the end of the school year, the teachers gave their classes study guides for the final exam. After all the work Lisa had done both on her own and with Regretta, the study guide for Defensive Ravelling was ridiculously simple, and something she could do in her sleep. She was still ahead of the rest of the class in Cutting, and found that there was nothing on the study guide that she really needed to review before the test. In Unarmed Combat and Shifting she was at the top of the class, and would only need a quick review the night before the test. In fact, looking over the study guides for almost all of her classes, she was amazed at how prepared she was, and how

well she was doing in her classes, considering that she had barely managed enough interest in the subjects for a low B average in school back in Albuquerque.

Intro to Cosmology, however, was somewhere she was going to need a lot of work. She could not give five examples of different styles of magic, what their advantages and disadvantages were in relation to each other, and in what kinds of worlds each was likely to arise. She could not recount any of the outlying fragments or worlds the Oco had conquered, let alone in what order. She could not name or draw a map of the Gemstone Islands, she couldn't tell a bantrix zerak from a hrenac, and she could only name five of the eighty-seven sfirot of the concave eye (although she didn't know for the life of her what a "sfirot" was, or the "concave eye" for that matter). She was an A-plus student in everything else, but in Mr. Plober's class Lisa felt she was failing. The rest of her friends were having trouble in other subjects, except Regretta, who seemed to be good at everything, but was happy to help the rest of them. Therefore, Lisa and her friends all made a habit for the last two months of the school year of studying together in the common room for a couple of hours every weekday evening, and for several hours at the cafe in town on the weekends.

Of course, they were never terribly organized about it, and a few of them would always be straining over their notebooks while the others played video games on the weekdays, and Lisa ended up spending a lot more time at the cafe debating philosophy with random strangers and teaching her friends Chinese chess than she actually spent studying Cosmology. They all managed to absorb some of the material anyway, and after a hair-raising twenty-four hour last-minute cram session with nothing but jools to eat, Lisa found herself at the end of the Intro to Cosmology final exam, staring at her notebook, and wracking her brain for a fifth type of magic. Mr. Plober had told the students all of the questions for the test, which they had written down, and as the students

had answered all of the questions they had come to the head of the class and told the bear their answers. There was a strange silver orb on Mr. Plober's desk, that he'd set there after he recited the questions, and it seemed to be keeping the rest of the class from hearing his conversations with the other students as they came up and gave their answers.

All of the rest of the students had filed up, one by one, telling Mr. Plober their answers and getting a great big bear hug in reward, and now only Lisa was left, alone in the classroom with Mr. Plober. She had sort of stumbled her way through the rest of the test, but was completely stuck on the question that asked her to list five different types of magic, their advantages and disadvantages. She'd filled in "Ravelling", "Wending", and "Reaching" right away, and after an hour had added "Chi" to the list. The last of the five was totally eluding her however, and she wished she could split up "Cutting" and "Shifting" into separate magics, but knew they were both really part of "Wending". Fortunately, it was an open-notes test, or Lisa would've never made it even as far as she was, but nowhere in her notes could she find a fifth type of magic. With only ten minutes left before the end of the test, she flipped one more time through pages she had been over a hundred times already, and found a note she hadn't noticed before.

"Nomomancy," it said, "the lost magic of names. Long out of practice, used by ancient cultures. Commanded incredible power, but required the caster to know the 'true name' of his target."

Lisa didn't remember ever hearing about Nomomancy in Mr. Plober's class, and the strangest part of all was that it wasn't even written in her handwriting. At the end, so tiny it could have been a period if Lisa hadn't been scrutinizing the writing so closely, was a stylized cat's eye, a circle with a line down the middle. Lisa silently thanked Kora, wherever she was and however she'd done it, and walked to the front of the class to give her answers.

“I’m so very proud of you, Lisa!” Mr Plober blubbered, tears streaming down his big furry cheeks as he squeezed Lisa so hard she couldn’t breathe, “I was so worried for so long, but you did it! You pulled through!”

After she’d escaped Mr. Plober’s tobacco and honey scented clutches, she found the rest of her friends, and learned that they’d all passed their first day of final exams as well.

“At one point I think I wended into a closet,” Donna told her about the Cutting final exam, “but I was able to backtrack and barely made it through on time. It was totally crazy, but I won’t ruin the surprise for you.” She was wearing a beautiful yellow gown that Lisa had never seen her in before, and was absolutely dripping with gold and jewels.

37

Lisa and Vinagrette had their Cutting final exam the next day. Once everyone had arrived, Mrs. Gale led them between worlds to a land where practically everything was yellow. The sky was blue, and something green twinkled in the distance far to the East, but the houses were yellow, the dirt roads were yellow, the windmills, the clothes on the strange little people who lived there, the leaves and the fruits on the trees, and even the majestic castle that loomed over the South end of the city were all various shades of yellow.

“The Cutting final is a timed, blind checkpoint race,” Mrs. Gale told the students when they’d arrived, “At each of the eight checkpoints you’ll be given a key and directions to the next checkpoint, and at the last checkpoint you’ll find a door with eight locks. I’ll release you in one-minute intervals, and you’ll have exactly four hours from the time that you’re released to reach the last checkpoint. Do your best, good luck, and I’ll see you all at the finish-line.”

Lisa was the twelfth student to be released, and Mrs. Gale pointed her toward the same distant yellow windmill where she'd pointed each of the other students. Not knowing how long the race would normally take, Lisa started off at a jog, keeping close to the side of the first house she passed, and as she turned the corner of the house the windmill was right there in front of her, just a few feet away. Yellow pocketwatches hung like fruit on a tree next to the windmill, and a little man sitting on a tree stump whittling waved at her as she approached.

“You're the third one,” the man said, and fished a tiny key out of his pocket, like the key used to wind an old clock. “Here you go. Your next stop is Farmer Wiljon's house. He lives somewhere over there.” The little man motioned with his hand, but the area he motioned over covered a huge expanse of yellow fields far in the distance to the West.

“Thank you,” Lisa said, and headed off in the completely opposite direction. Like she had learned to do with the third-year dorms, she walked around the windmill a few times, and each time around it looked less like a windmill and more like a farmhouse. She came around one more time to find a little woman in a yellow sundress and bonnet hanging up her yellow laundry on a clothesline.

“Excuse me,” Lisa said, “but I'm looking for Farmer Wiljon.”

The woman pointed to a house far down the dusty road, “That's his place there, little lady,” she said.

Lisa thanked the woman and took another turn around the woman's house, ending up standing next to a wrinkled little old man sitting in a yellow rocking chair and smoking a yellow corn cob pipe. The fact that everything was yellow here was making it very easy to find shortcuts.

The little man looked up, and lifted a keyring heavy with keys from his lap, “Good morning miss,” he said, still clenching his pipe in his teeth, “you’ll be needin’ one of these.” He pulled a key off the keyring and handed it to Lisa. It was an old brass house key, the kind that had a metal tube for the shaft before they started being made flat with grooves along the shaft.

“Your next stop is there,” Farmer Wiljon said, pointing to the castle.

“Just the castle?” Lisa asked.

“Here,” Farmer Winjon said, and handed Lisa a collapsible spyglass he pulled from under his chair, “that window right there, with the winged monkey carved around the window frame.”

Lisa put on her glasses and looked through the spyglass and saw what he was pointing to. “Thanks,” she said, and continued on her way. She’d spotted a yellow tree growing up right next to the window, and there was a nice sturdy tree with low-hanging branches in Farmer Wiljon’s yard, so she climbed Wiljon’s tree, focusing her chi to help her hands and feet cling to the branches, and by the time she reached the top she was within reach of the window. Inside, a little woman was working on a needlepoint, using nothing but various shades of yellow. Lisa jumped in through the window, and startled the woman half to death.

“I declare!” the woman gasped, “I expected everyone to come in through the door!”

“Sorry,” Lisa said, “how many have come through so far?”

“You’re the first one, deary,” the woman replied, and handed Lisa the next key. It was the size of a sewing needle, and she’d strung a length of thread through its eye so Lisa wouldn’t lose it.

“Thanks,” Lisa said, “and take care.” The woman turned her needlepoint so that she'd be facing toward both the door and the window.

“Your next stop is the castle's kitchen,” she said, without giving Lisa any indication of what direction it was in. It didn't matter though. Kitchens were easy to find; all Lisa had to do was follow her nose, and she could already faintly smell the delicious aromas of cooking. A couple turns later she was standing in the castle's kitchen.

Steam rose from immense yellowed-copper pots, and little cooks in tall yellow hats bustled back and forth, cutting up yellow vegetables, and chopping up meat (the meat, Lisa was relieved to see, was its normal color, and not yellow). A gruff old cook with a tremendous blonde moustache sidled up to Lisa, and handed her a large key that looked like it had been carved out of a wooden spoon.

“What're you cooking?” Lisa asked.

“Why, your victory meal, of course!” The cook said with a wink. “your next stop is the deepest shaft of the deepest mine in the kingdom.”

Lisa thanked him, and found the mine without even leaving the castle. She was given a key carved from a single piece of amber, and sent to a watchtower at the far western edge of the kingdom. The watchtower guard gave her the biggest key of all, a five-foot tall flagpole with a large yellow flag, the edge of which was uneven like the teeth of a key. After one more stop back at Wiljon's farm, and another stop deep in the forest to the northeast, Lisa was back in the castle, standing before a tremendous door covered in eight various-sized keyholes. She used the keys from smallest to largest, starting with the needle key, then the clock key, then the amber key, the house key Farmer Wiljon had given her the first time, and the carrot key he had given her the second time, the wooden spoon key she had gotten from the kitchen, and a heavy stone

key she'd found in the forest, finishing with the flagpole, which she was surprised to find unlocked its lock just as well as the others had.

There was a deep rumble, and the keys were all sucked completely into their locks. The tremendous door split in half, and swung slowly open with a thunderous grinding creak. Lisa walked through, and the door slammed shut behind her, ready for the next student. A soft yellow carpet stretched across the yellow stone floor, starting at the door and ending at the golden throne of a king dressed in silver and bronze armor. Mrs. Gale sat in a smaller throne to his left, and another smaller throne sat empty to his right. The yellow stone walls were covered in huge, beautiful, yellow and green tapestries, and an incredible golden chandelier hung from the ceiling, supporting at least a hundred blazing candles, each the size of Lisa's arm, although they were unnecessary with the sunlight streaming in through the throne room's large windows and skylights. Along each side of the carpet stood a row of buglers in yellow tabernacles with their trumpets at the ready. Across the carpet, just at Lisa's feet, was a black and white checkered band, and she stepped across it.

The king stood, and as he started talking Lisa realized that he wasn't wearing a suit of armor, he WAS a suit of armor, or more accurately, he was made entirely out of metal.

“Congratulations! uh...” the king leaned toward Mrs. Gale, who whispered into his metal ear, “Congratulations, Lisa Star! You are the first graduate of Mrs. Gale's Cutting class for this year!”

The buglers raised their trumpets to their lips in unison, and blew a celebratory fanfare.

“Come forward and receive your diploma!”

Lisa strode forward across the carpet, and dropped to one knee in front of the king, bowing deeply just as she'd seen in a dozen different movies and TV shows.

“Oho! What manners this one has!” The king shouted, “Rise, Lisa Star, and congratulations!”

The king held out his metal hand and Lisa shook it. There wasn't anything robotic about him, Lisa decided, so his metal body must be driven entirely by magic. Mrs. Gale handed Lisa a rolled-up piece of paper, told her how proud she was, and gave her a big hug.

“Quite a way from Albuquerque now, aren't we, Lisa?” Mrs. Gale said with a wink. She motioned Lisa over to her side where she could stand and greet the other students as they arrived. A few minutes later, the door swung back open and the whole process was repeated for Vinagrette. This time, however, the king had had the forethought to ask Mrs. Gale the student's name before he began speaking. The other students gradually filed in, receiving the same accolades from the king and the same diploma from Mrs. Gale, and even Diro made it, blazing through the door on rollerskates that Lisa had never noticed before were built into his feet, crossing the finish line just a few seconds before his time was up.

“Your handsomest student yet,” the king joked to Mrs. Gale, “and not a moment too soon!”

When all of the students had arrived, the king and Mrs. Gale congratulated them all again, and then the king said, “Luncheon will be served in an hour. In the meantime, the royal handmaids will show you to your rooms where you may freshen up.”

As the handmaids were leading the students to their rooms, the king pulled Diro aside and said, “My royal smiths are the finest in all the land. If you'd like they can

disassemble you completely, polish each piece and put you back together, better than ever.”

“The polishing sounds nice,” Diro replied, “but I'd really rather not be disassembled.”

“Suit yourself,” the king said, and clapped his hands with a sound like a cymbal-clap to summon the smiths.

Lisa's room was gigantic. The bed alone was twice the size of her dorm room back at the Academy, and the bathtub was the size of a small swimming pool. There were nine different beautiful yellow gowns laid out on the bed, each one embroidered with dozens of tiny jewels. A small printed card sitting with them read “These are yours to keep” in English. An identical card sat on a table nearby, in front of a yellow wooden box with “Lisa Star” written across the top. She opened it to find more jewelry than she'd ever know what to do with, and quickly closed it again before she ended up spending the whole afternoon going through it all. She was only a little dirty from the race, particularly her journey through the sooty mine, but she had no idea when the next time would be that she'd have an opportunity to bathe in a tub the size of a swimming pool, so she stripped down and jumped in. The water was the perfect temperature, and there were two dozen different soaps and shampoos to choose from. She stayed in and swam around until her fingers got so wrinkly that they felt numb, and then got out, toweled off, and put on what she considered the most beautiful of the yellow gowns. She chose eight different rings, two necklaces, and four bracelets from the jewelry box, deciding at the last minute to also add a pair of modest emerald stud earrings to replace the fake topaz studs she'd been wearing for the last three years. She also found a huge array of perfume atomizers, arranged like the liquor bottles at a bar, and gave herself a few sprays of one that smelled like vanilla before heading out of her room, totally decked out and ready for lunch.

The luncheon was just as spectacular as Lisa's room had been. Served on golden plates with golden goblets and silver silverware, inlaid with jewels. There was chicken in apple cream sauce, mutton with mint jelly, and burgundy gump, which tasted like the moistest beef Lisa had ever eaten. There were garlic mashed potatoes, and maple carrots, and asparagus with hollandaise sauce. To drink there was ginger beer, and a wide variety of sodas and juices. There were sorbets for dessert, and a strange little cloud that hovered just above Lisa's plate and tasted like cotton candy. As they ate, the king told them about the history of the castle.

“This entire land used to be ruled by a horrible witch,” he said, “until Mrs. Gale melted her and the Winkies elected me as their new king.”

A dozen different things that had seemed vaguely familiar to Lisa all suddenly crystallized together in her brain, and she slapped the table. “Dorothy Gale from Kansas!” Lisa shouted.

Mrs. Gale smiled, and the king laughed so hard that he nearly fell out of his chair. “What did I tell you, Dorothy?” he said as he caught his breath, “at least one of them, every single year!” this started him laughing even harder, and tears streamed down his metal cheeks.

“Take it easy, Nick,” Mrs. Gale scolded, “or you're liable to rust up.”

38

After lunch Mrs. Gale took the students back to the Academy, and Lisa spent the rest of the afternoon looking through her new jewelry. For the Shifting final exam the next day, Mrs. Gale took them for a similar race through the blue land of the Munchkins in the East. Donna was the first to arrive in the Scarecrow King's throne room, and Lisa

came in third. The luncheon was just as extravagant, and Lisa and Donna returned to the first-year dorms with nine blue gowns and another box of jewelry apiece.

For the Defensive Ravelling final exam, Sr. Nerezza ravelled a variety of harmful but non-lethal spells at the students that they had to deflect, which Lisa passed effortlessly after all her work on her own and with Regretta. At the end of the final exam, Lisa handed Sr. Nerezza back the vial, unopened. “Turns out I didn't need it after all,” she said.

“Perhaps that's for the best,” Sr. Nerezza replied, “In retrospect I was not thinking with your best intentions in mind when I gave it to you.”

“So, what's in it?” Lisa asked.

“Pray you never have to find out.” Sr. Nerezza said.

Lisa thought of the Stalker, and the flying squid-thing that had attacked Harry, and decided not to question him any further.

The Unarmed Combat final exam was the exact same test that Lisa had failed at the beginning of the school year, which pitted the students against a golem that fought back. As he had at the beginning of the year, Grandmaster Toe informed the students that the golem would be destroyed when it had been dealt fifty jools of damage. Lisa hadn't understood that part before, but now that she'd learned about jools from Regretta she realized that they were used as a measure of energy along with food and fuel and money. One jool of damage would therefore be equal to the amount of energy a person got from eating one jool.

Lisa had been dreading a rematch with the golem all year, but after her final encounter with the Stalker it wasn't nearly as much of a challenge, or as frightening, as she'd expected. With her new command of chi and the moves that Grandmaster Toe had taught her over the course of the year, she easily dodged and deflected all of the golems

attacks, casually removing both of its gelatinous arms and legs with precision attacks before she blew the rest of it to pieces with her “Jaws of the Tiger” move. Grandmaster Toe was extremely pleased with her progress.

During the last week of Lisa's first year at the Academy, Monday and Tuesday were both taken up with graduation ceremonies, where each student was called by name and given a diploma covering all of the classes from that year. Lisa noticed that Mr. Gromon had called Viktor using his fake last name, “Vertov”, instead of the real name that she had overheard him telling Vinagrette. At the end of the ceremonies, Mr. Gromon thanked all of the students for coming, and congratulated them all on their achievements.

“The rest of the week is free.” he announced, “Be advised that the Solstice Academy will close at midnight on Saturday, and thus all students are advised to return to their home worlds by Friday night. If any students require storage of belongings over the break, please visit me in the registration office to make arrangements.”

Lisa realized that she'd have a hard time explaining eighteen priceless gowns and two huge boxes of jewelry to her parents, so she reluctantly decided to put them in storage until she returned. Most of her friends had made the same decision, except for Regretta, who had declined to bring any of the gowns or jewelry back to the Academy with her at all. On Wednesday afternoon they all went to the registration office together, and borrowed a couple of large carts that they loaded down with their stuff and brought back to Mr. Gromon. Fortunately, the carts traveled on insect legs instead of wheels, so it wasn't nearly as hard to get them up and down the dorm tower stairs as Lisa had expected.

They met Mr. Gromon in the Academy's entryway, and he lead them around the back of the wide staircase that led up to the second floor. Lisa remembered this strange stairway that led down underneath the Academy from when she went exploring the day

she arrived. The walls gradually closed in the further down you went, until they squeezed in so tight that not even a finger could fit through them. After the training she'd had in Mrs. Gale's classes, however, Lisa realized that with the right combination of cutting and shifting, she could slip through that crack, and that's precisely what Mr. Gromon did as he led them down the stairs, carts in tow, the crack widening more and more the closer they got to it, until it was more than wide enough for the carts to fit through, and they found themselves in the damp stone tunnels that ran underneath the Solstice Academy. Mr. Gromon continued on down a series of hallways and twists and turns, until they arrived in a long hallway with featureless doors spaced along its length on both sides, stretching into the darkness. Mr. Gromon stopped in front of one of the doors.

“Place your hand on the door, please,” Mr. Gromon said to Lisa, and she did. The door slid open from the ground up, and a light flickered on inside, revealing an empty space about half the size of Lisa's dorm room. The floor was dry, and the humidity seemed perfectly balanced, and Lisa unloaded her possessions from the cart into the room. The door slid shut behind her as she came back out, and on Mr. Gromon's instruction she pressed her hand to it again to lock it. The procedure was repeated at a different door for each of her friends, and afterwards Mr. Gromon led them all back up to the entry room. “There now,” he said as they filed up the stairs, “it will all be waiting for you when you return next year. Just let us know in the registration office if you have any trouble finding your way back to it.”

Lisa and her friends spent the rest of Wednesday and all of Thursday in town, soaking up as much time together as they could before they had to return home. The trees in the town were blooming in a multitude of colors, and in places they looked like fireworks, frozen in time and anchored to the ground by their trunks. Donna got in a full day of last-minute shopping, and when Lisa asked how she was going to explain all the

new stuff to her parents Donna replied, “Lisa, if I was gone for an hour and didn't bring back piles of new clothes, THEN my parents would start to worry.” They hung out in the cafe Thursday night, reminiscing about the past year, and didn't leave until long after midnight. When Lisa finally went to bed that night she had a strange dream. She was back in the courtyard with all the rest of the students at graduation, and Mr. Gromon was calling out their names, one at a time, but he was doing it so fast that nobody had enough time to get their diploma before he called the next name. He was talking so fast that his voice was sped-up and higher-pitched too, and sounded almost like a girl's voice.

39

The first-year dorm was surprisingly quiet for all the hustle and bustle of everyone having to leave by the end of the day, and Lisa wondered if she was the first one awake. She packed all of the clothes she'd brought with her back into her backpack, along with the winter clothes she liked too much to put in storage, and the blue scarf that Wally had given her. The blue carnation had long since dried out, and Lisa ground up the petals and spread them around the room as air freshener. She took her headphones off the bedside table and put them on, and found the plastic ring that Mike had given her back in Albuquerque underneath, which she slipped into her pocket. She remembered her dopt kit at the last minute, and tossed it into her backpack on top of everything else before heading out the door.

Lisa walked across the hall and knocked on Donna's door to see how she was doing, and see if she needed any help packing the tons of stuff she was dragging back home. She might even walk with Donna if she needed help carrying her stuff; L.A. wasn't far from Albuquerque, after all, relatively speaking. There was no response, so she knocked harder. Still no answer. The dorm room doors didn't have any locks, and Lisa

opened the door and poked her head in. "Donna?" she called. There was still no answer. Lisa tip-toed in, wondering if maybe Donna was still asleep. The bed was empty. Messy, but empty. Lisa left Donna's room and checked the floor's bathroom. It was empty too. She checked Vinagrette's room, and Vinagrette wasn't there either. Nor were any of the Oco girls. For a minute Lisa wondered if she'd somehow slept through all of Friday and everyone had left without saying goodbye. She checked her pocketwatch, which had a tiny window that noted the day of the week, and it showed the weird wavy symbol that she'd learned meant Friday. Worried, Lisa jogged up the stairs to the top floor, and checked Regretta's room. She wasn't in.

A strange, cold fear crept over Lisa as she ran down to the first-year common room to verify that it too had nobody in it. She ran out the front door, and cut straight to the second-year dorms; the common room there was empty too. Lisa strained her ears to listen for any sound at all from the rooms in the towers above, but there was nothing. She didn't bother with the third and fourth-year dorms before heading to the Academy, searching both the first and second floors in vain for a single living soul. Even Sr. Nerezza's office was devoid of the strange living darkness that had been there before, and only a simple wooden desk and chair stood in its place. It wasn't until Lisa was coming back down the entryway stairs from the second floor to the first that she heard a thump, far away and barely noticeable, from the tunnels underneath the Academy. She walked around behind the stairs she'd just come down, and continued further down the staircase to the tunnels. She didn't wend quite as well as Mr. Gromon had, but the walls at least moved far enough apart for her that she was able to squeeze through after taking off her backpack and leaving it on the stairs.

There was still no sign of life in the tunnels, and no sign of where the thump had come from, so Lisa started walking, slowly, listening carefully for anything at all. She

had no idea what she was looking for or where to find it, so she kept from wending, just following the tunnels wherever they led, and choosing pretty much at random whenever she came to a fork. She passed the area where she and her friends had stored their stuff, and touched her hand to the door to her storage to make sure. It slid open, revealing everything just as she'd left it, then after a moment it slid shut and she touched it again to lock it before continuing on down the hall. Lisa was surprised to find stairs leading even further down into the tunnels, but the biggest surprise of all came at the end of a long spiral staircase that led deep into the ground.

Lisa emerged at the bottom of the staircase into a large, octagonal, sunlit room. Four of the eight walls, on opposite sides from each other, had large glass windows in them, and looking out the first window she came to Lisa found that she was looking down on the first-year dorm, from a height of at least eight stories, even though she was sure that none of the Academy's towers were nearly that tall. She checked the other windows, and sure enough, there was the second-year dorm to the East, the faceless third-year dorm to the South, and the mysterious, floating fourth-year dorm to the West. She came away from the window and looked around the room. The walls between the windows were covered in bookshelves stuffed full of books and strange antiques and artifacts, except the bare wall that was blocked by the spiral staircase Lisa had come down. In the middle of the room, on a cushion on a pedestal, was a ring. But it wasn't a ring, it was a maple leaf, fiery orange and newly-fallen. No, not a leaf at all. It was a crystalline snowflake, like the ones that Lisa had given the Oco girls for Christmas. But it wasn't that either. It was a delicate pink flower with a yellow center, droplets of dew still fresh on its petals. But no, those weren't petals at all, they were the rays of a beautiful golden sun, cast in bronze, glowing a fiery orange, like a newly-fallen maple leaf, cold

and fragile like a crystalline snowflake, wet with morning dew on its delicate pink petals

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Lisa forced her eyes away from it, and as her mind shook trying to piece it all together, she realized exactly what the thing was. It was all of those things, and it was more. She'd found the Ring of the Seasons, and she hadn't even been looking for it. But maybe it had been looking for her, she thought. Lisa knew that time worked differently at the Solstice Academy than it did in her world, and that a year spent at the Academy would only be an hour back home. Maybe something had gone wrong, and whatever regulated that time had broken, and the Ring of the Seasons wanted to make it right. But why was she unaffected? Out of all the students here at the Academy, why had the ring chosen her? Yes, she was the best in her class at Cutting, and she was above average at everything else except Cosmology, but there were surely second or third or fourth year students who could leave her in the dust on every count. "Maybe everyone's come unstuck," Lisa thought, "maybe every single student and faculty member is walking alone through their own Solstice Academy, being called by the ring to make things right." Lisa remembered her strange dream from the night before, and concluded that the courtyard would be the most central location in the entire Academy. If the Ring of the Seasons couldn't fix things from where it was, hidden in this strange tower deep underground and in the sky, then surely the courtyard would be the best place to take it. Lisa concluded that the ring had brought her to it, and if she took it to the courtyard it could set things right again. Unfortunately, that conclusion was completely wrong.

Keeping her eyes averted, Lisa reached out and took the Ring of the Seasons from its pedestal. It felt like many things, all at once, but more than anything else it felt like a ring. She shoved it into her pocket and headed back up the spiral staircase. She cut back through the tunnels under the Academy, and quickly arrived at the stairs leading back up

to the first floor. Coming from the bottom up the walls didn't close in, and halfway up the stairs she picked up her backpack in mid-run as she sprinted for the glass doors leading out to the courtyard, straight ahead.

“Lisa!” the voice came from her left just as she reached the top of the stairs. She stopped and turned to see Vinagrette running toward her. “I'm so glad to see you! Where is everybody?”

“I think they're trapped,” Lisa said, “I found the Ring of the Seasons and I have to take it to the courtyard.”

“The Ring of the Seasons?” Vinagrette asked. Lisa remembered that it was a secret, and was about to explain it when Vinagrette added, “Give it to me.”

Lisa paused for a second to make sure she'd heard Vinagrette correctly, and by the time she thought to defend herself it was too late. Vinagrette clapped her hands together as if she was releasing a ravel, and Lisa was hit by a bus. It wasn't actually a bus, of course, but that was the only thing that Lisa could imagine moving so fast and hitting her with so much force. She cartwheeled through the air, and smashed up against a wall, just inches from being impaled on the antlers of a mounted deer head. Her backpack had been between her and the wall, and had cushioned the impact, otherwise she surely would've been killed. As it was, she only felt that her right hip and maybe also her right shoulder had been dislocated, and nothing seemed broken. She tried to get up, but her entire body suddenly spasmed as if she'd been struck by lightning, and she screamed and collapsed back to the floor. Her muscles burned afterward, and she curled into a ball from the pain.

“Good morning, Lisa Star,” Vinagrette said as she walked toward her, “or whatever your real name is.”

Lisa's teeth were too tightly clenched to speak, and she couldn't think of anything to say anyway.

“Those tunnels kept sending me in circles whenever I tried to wend to the ring, but since you didn't shift they took you right to it, didn't they?” Lisa didn't respond. Vinagrette laughed, but it was nothing like the tinkling, joyous laughter Lisa had heard from her before. “What a stupid defense. But you've brought me the Ring of the Seasons anyway, haven't you?”

Vinagrette walked over to Lisa and searched through her pockets. Lisa's muscles had been recovering quickly, but she still wasn't strong enough to effectively resist being searched, so she decided to pretend she was still hurting too much to move at all instead. Vinagrette found what she was looking for and backed away. “Hmph,” she said, “I was expecting something a little more impressive.”

Lisa craned her head again to see Vinagrette slide the ring Mike had given Lisa onto her finger. The five dollar, clear plastic ring from the mall, not the Ring of the Seasons. Lisa's muscles were relaxing, but not fast enough to resist Vinagrette when she learned she had the wrong ring and came back to search again. Lisa could wiggle her fingers, and could just barely touch them together, so she started raveling Ninety-Nine Needles. “Why?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“Why?” Vinagrette said, looking up from the ring on her finger, “My world was destroyed by the outsiders, but with the Ring of the Seasons I can rebuild it, better than it ever was before. That's why.”

“Why not just move somewhere else?” Lisa asked.

Vinagrette laughed again, and this time it was barely more than a snarl, “You saw the way the Oco girls treated me. That's the way people have always treated me. I'm always the stranger, the foreigner, the outcast, and I'm sick of it. The ring can make me empress of my own domain, where everyone else will be the foreigners, and I can make – literally make – all the friends I want.”

"I'm already your friend, Vinagrette," Lisa said, "and Donna, and Wally, and Tomas –"

Vinagrette released a hung spell, and Lisa's body spasmed and burned again. She screamed, her hands contracted into fists, and she lost her ravelling of Ninety-Nine Needles just a few steps from the end.

Vinagrette sneered. "Don't insult my intelligence, Lisa. You're always laughing behind my back, and just trying to gain my trust so you can hurt me. That's what you people always do. But this time I get the last laugh. None of you expected that, did you?"

Lisa wanted to assure her that they really truly were her friends, and there was nothing underhanded about it, but she knew from the crazed look in Vinagrette's eyes that nothing she could say would convince her. The pain subsided, Lisa's muscles slowly uncramped, and she started ravelling Ninety-Nine Needles over again. "No," Lisa said, "I don't think any of us expected that. So you were the one who asked Harry to reach for the ring?"

"Of course," Vinagrette said, "and erased my tracks afterwards."

Erased her tracks then, and in the snow. "The snowman?" Lisa asked.

"And the Stalker," Vinagrette replied, "on a path that I knew several students would take to the Academy. One of them would escape, of course, but the Stalker would follow that student and, in the best-case scenario, would kill him here, then find another student to hunt, and another. You know, Lisa, it would've made my job a lot easier if that Stalker had at least killed one or two or a dozen of you. I knew 'Lisa Star' wasn't your real name. I always know when someone's lying to me. But I eventually got everyone else's real name, even dear Viktor's, and you're not much of a challenge all on your own, now are you?"

"Where are they?" Lisa asked.

“Oh they're around,” Vinagrette answered, “and if I hadn't found the Ring of the Seasons they'd all come back in just under an hour. But now that you've found it for me they can stay gone. I can take the Academy apart at my leisure and use the pieces to rebuild my world. And when it's all gone, then they can all come back, back to a big empty nothing teaming with the outsiders I'll just happen to have scattered here and there.”

Vinagrette cracked her knuckles and started raveling something. Lisa recognized the signs, but didn't recognize the spell. Jupiter, Jupiter, inverse Sagittarius, Gemini... “Have I thanked you yet for finding me the ring, Lisa?” she said as she ravelled, “I'm so sorry. Let me thank you. I've been forcing myself to be so sweet and gracious for this past year that now that I'm finally letting go all my manners have completely evaporated. So, thank you, Lisa. And as a token of my thanks, you're going to be the very first person to see the new power the ring has given me.”

Vinagrette finished raveling her spell, and with her eyes fixed on Lisa she intoned, “Hoek swa, arum koor, melium torca!” Her beautiful green hair bristled as she spoke the words, her eyes widened, and her lips twisted upwards into a vicious smile in anticipation of the destruction her spell would cause.

Nothing happened.

Vinagrette's twisted smile deflated into a frown, and she looked down at the five-dollar plastic ring on her finger just as Lisa released Ninety-Nine Needles. Vinagrette screamed and clawed at her own eyes, trying to stop the dozens of points of pain assailing her all at once as she reeled backwards away from Lisa. Lisa slipped the Ring of the Seasons onto her finger and immediately started raveling whatever it was Vinagrette had just tried. Jupiter, Jupiter, inverse Sagittarius, Gemini... Lisa fought against her cramped muscles for speed, struggling through twenty more signs as Ninety-Nine Needles ran its

course. The pain stopped, and Vinagrette staggered forward just as Lisa finished raveling. Vinagrette dropped her hands, and her right eye was gone completely, nothing but a bloody hole in its place.

“You're a dead girl, Lisa Star!” She screamed, and ran across the entryway toward Lisa, “I was going to give you a quick death, but now my outsiders will eat your flesh and bones for years, and I'll make sure you feel every second of it!”

Lisa had no idea what she'd just ravelled, but keeping her eyes on Vinagrette she repeated the incantation, “Hoek swa, arum koor, melium torca!”

There was a brilliant flash of light, brighter than a dozen suns, and even though Lisa shut her eyes she could still see the light through her eyelids. She turned her face away, and when she turned back Lisa saw that Vinagrette was frozen in mid-step, her face twisted in hatred, her hands twisted into claws reaching out for Lisa. The color wasn't right, and for a moment Lisa thought that her eyes were still adjusting from the flash. She looked around and realized that everything else was normal, and looked back at Vinagrette. Vinagrette's dress, her skin, the five-dollar plastic ring on her finger, even her beautiful green hair were all an equal, neutral shade of gray, the gray of fireplace ash, and as Lisa watched Vinagrette tumbled sideways from her precarious mid-run pose, toppling rigidly like a statue, and shattered into a cloud of gray ash and dust when she hit the ground.

Lisa sat up, and rose to her feet after she'd pumped enough chi through her body to relax her muscles and stop shaking. She stood staring at the ashes that had been one of her best friends, one of her best friends that she'd just killed, one of her best friends who'd gone completely psycho, and had apparently really been completely psycho all along. She just stood there staring for what felt like hours, until she heard a cough off to her left. She

automatically took a fighting stance as she turned, but found only Mr. Gromon standing there.

“I believe you have something of ours,” Mr. Gromon said.

Lisa took off the Ring of the Seasons and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Mr. Gromon said as he took it from her and put it in his pocket, “for that, and also for this.” he turned and looked at the pool of ash that had been Vinagrette. “I’m sorry it had to happen,” he added, “but the Academy will never forget it, and owes you a great debt.”

“Lisa Star refuses the Solstice Academy's debt, and absolves it,” she said, and Mr. Gromon smiled. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and trudged back to the first-year dorms to see her friends, who were doubtless all just waking up, and wondering how they'd managed to sleep in so late.

40

Lisa had started crying by the time she got back to the dorm, and Wally was waiting in the common room when she arrived. She ran and threw her arms around him, and he wrapped his arms around her, and she continued to cry, pressing her face into the warm soft fur above the collar of his shirt. Lisa realized that Wally probably thought she was crying because she'd miss him, and all the rest of their friends, and after a moment she actually was crying for that reason too. When she'd stopped sobbing, but tears were still trickling down her cheeks, Wally said, “There aren't any Lagomen on your world, are there?”

Lisa shook her head against his chest. “No,” she said, “and there aren't any humans on your world either, are there?”

“No,” Wally said.

Lisa heard footsteps on the girls' tower stairs, and pulled away from Wally a little.

“Hey,” Viktor said as he came down the stairs, “have you guys seen Vinagrette?”

“No,” Wally said.

“No,” Lisa said, “no, I haven't.”

Viktor shrugged and jogged out the door toward the Academy. Lisa looked back to Wally, and pressed her face against his chest again as Donna clunked down the stairs with three large suitcases.

“Do you need help with that?” Lisa said, wiping her eyes with the front of her shirt.

“Nah, I got it,” Donna said. It looked like some sort of horribly ungraceful juggling act, as Donna dragged two suitcases behind her for a few feet, and then went back for the third.

“Are you sure?” Lisa asked.

“Well, since you're being so persistent, I guess I could use a little help,” Donna replied.

As Wally and Lisa helped Donna get her luggage down the rest of the stairs and into the common room, the Oco girls came down, with identical black and orange tote bags over their arms.

“See you next year, Lisa,” Tyra said.

“Yeah, see you next year,” Lisa said, “take care.” And with that they were gone, back to a world that Lisa never wanted to visit.

Regretta came down behind them, and Donna spotted Tomas coming down from the boys' tower and flagged him down. Lisa, Donna, and Wally were exchanging goodbye hugs with Tomas, while Regretta politely refrained, when Viktor came running back into the common room. He looked frantic, and Lisa's heart stopped for a second.

“Mr. Gromon says Vinagrette's already left!” Viktor said, and Lisa's heart started beating again.

“Really?” Donna said, “I just talked to her last night, and it seemed like she was looking forward to today more than any of us.”

“That's what Mr. Gromon said,” Viktor replied, “she left just a little before most of us got up.” He clenched his fists and screamed through his teeth in frustration. He punched the stone arch around the entryway, and a large chunk of it broke free.

“Good chi control”, Lisa thought, but didn't dare say it out loud.

“What did I do wrong?” Viktor yelled, “Damn it! Damn it Damn it Damn it! She was going to take me with her, so I wouldn't have to go back to Oco.” He collapsed on the floor with his head in his hands and started crying.

“I'm sorry,” Lisa said, although Viktor couldn't possibly know how sorry she really was.

“Viktor Vertov!” Regretta said sternly, barking out his name like a drill sergeant or a police officer. Viktor immediately dropped his hands from his face and sat straight up. “You're coming with me. Get your stuff.”

Viktor looked up at Regretta and blinked, “Really? Would I fit in?”

Regretta looked around at her new friends and smirked. “All of you would fit in on my world.”

Viktor ran back up to his room to get his bags.

“So,” Donna said, turning to Tomas, “see ya.”

“Yeah,” Tomas said, “see ya.”

She walked over and kissed him, leaving her hand on his cheek after she'd pulled her lips away from his. “Shall we?” she said, turning to Lisa.

“Yeah,” Lisa said. She turned back toward Wally and smiled, and gave him another hug. “Take care,” she told him, and then, wondering if it was the right thing to say, she added, “I love you.”

“You too,” Wally said, smiling, “See you next year.”

Lisa waved goodbye to all the rest of her friends, and grabbed the handle on one of Donna's bags. “This thing weighs a ton!” she said.

“That's the lightest one!” Donna replied, and they headed out.

Lisa had said goodbye to her teachers the day before, and Harry and Jay and Leda. Jay had given her his address. “Just in case you wanna escape to Denmark for a day,” he said.

The journey home went by much faster than the journey to the Academy had, despite the lack of a golden butterfly leading the way. Lisa and Donna talked and laughed and went over all of the things they had done this year and all of the things they were going to do the next year as they pulled Donna's luggage across gravel paths, cobblestone roads, and asphalt highways. “Here we are,” Donna said, and Lisa looked up to discover that they were standing in front of a house covered in ivy, with a palm tree growing in the front yard.

“I'll see you around,” Lisa said.

“Yeah!” Donna replied, “We're close enough that we can hang out during the ‘real’ year.”

Lisa hugged her goodbye, and it wasn't until she started walking home that she realized just how close they were, or how good she'd gotten at cutting. She was back in Albuquerque before she'd even gotten to the end of the block, and another block further she found her house. Out of curiosity, Lisa tried ravelling the Flash. She could just barely feel the mana pulling at her fingers, but when she finished the spell there was nothing.

She shrugged to herself and opened the door. Her mom was sitting in the front room reading when she came in.

“How was your walk?” Lisa's mom asked.

“Pretty good.” Lisa said.

“Where'd you go?”

“Oh, you know, around.”