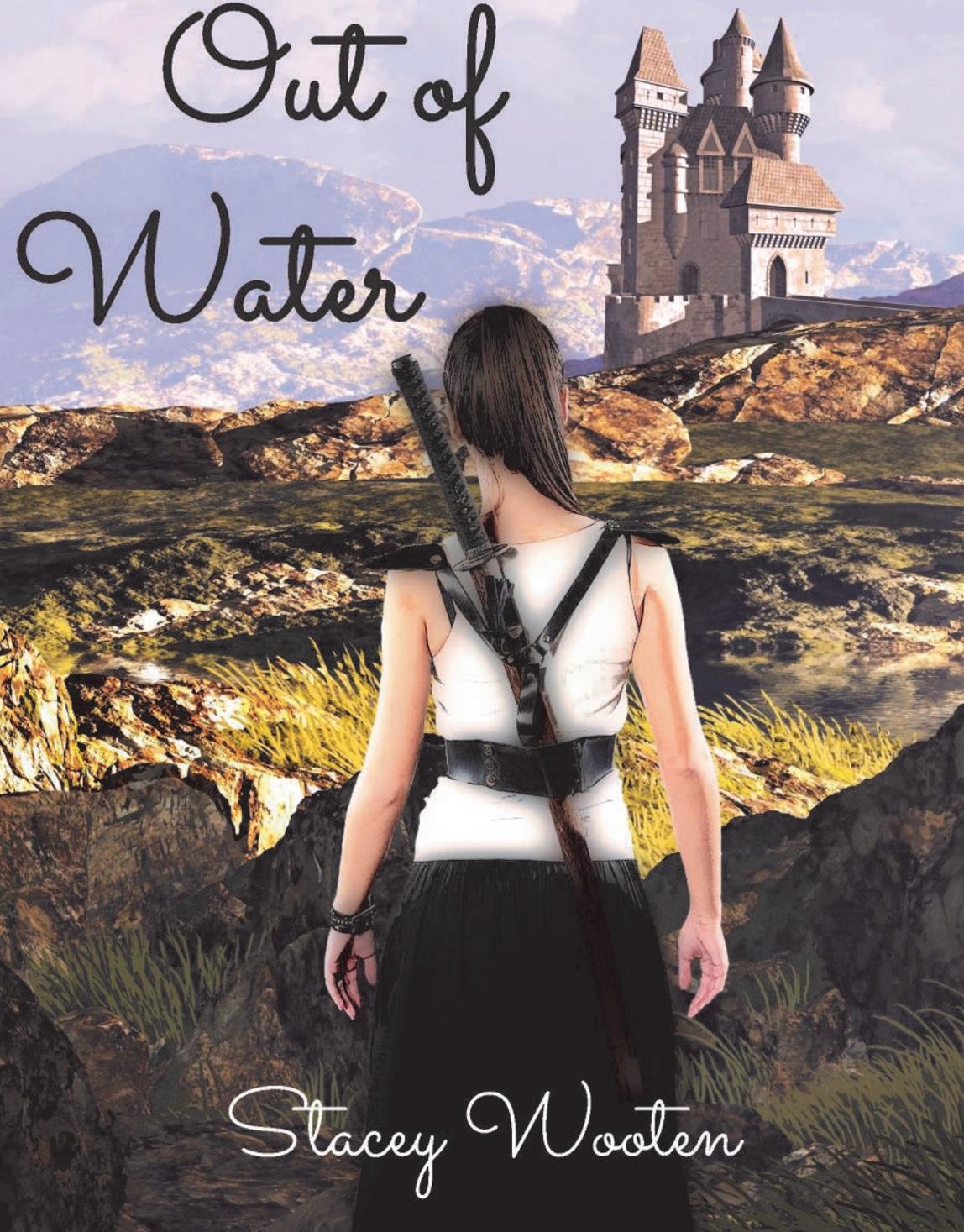


# Nessie Out of Water



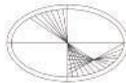
Stacey Wooten



Nessie  
Out  
Of  
Water



Stacey Wooten



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# *Nessie Out of Water*

*Stacey Wooten*

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## *Dedication*

*This book is dedicated my sister, Jaime. If it weren't for you, this book probably wouldn't be a thing, and at any rate, would have way too many long-lost brothers in the plot to be readable. Thank you for those late summer nights listening as I read my stories to you instead of kicking me out of your bedroom.*

*This book is secondly dedicated to food because, without you, I would be nothing.*



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## Chapter 1

A petite Martha Stewart wannabe with monogrammed oven mitts cradled a perfect quiche in my doorway. Her hair was the reason shampoo commercials were invented, as evidenced by its immunity to the infernal humidity that invaded my air-conditioned foyer. Against all odds, her wheat-golden locks managed to stay silky straight before gently curving up to meet her chin. My gaze lingered on the rooster apron she wore over her polka-dot dress, red as candied apples. The hemline stopped below the knee, shadowing conservative heels that inched towards the threshold of my apartment.

“You must have the wrong door,” I offered with a pitying smile.

Her lips curved up in a Cheshire cat grin, jolting my brain into realization. Three things became apparent.

1. Somewhere on her body was a caffeine pump, supplying enough energy to be bouncy around the clock.
2. The lipstick she wore was sold to either a septuagenarian or June Cleaver.
3. She was indeed at the correct address.

*Lord, help me.*

My visitor inhaled deeply and squealed, “Oh, you must be Agnes. What a card!”

I considered shutting the door but figured I should at least be as kind to her as to the toaster salesman that constantly visited the complex. My mother would have said it was the Christian thing to do. Me? These days I was more concerned about catching a double-wide toaster on sale.

Her fingers reached through the portal separating my sanctuary and the outside world, gesturing to the camo tank top and cargos I wore. “Oh Agnes, you must tell me where you got that hilarious outf—”

My fists clenched at the name my mother had bestowed upon me while doped up on high levels of labor drugs. “I go by Nessie, please.”

She laughed. Well, I suppose one could deem those sounds a laugh; it was more akin to a pig grunting. “You jokester! Isn’t that some mythical sea creature? Why on earth would you want to be called that?”

I checked her face for secret wrinkles, chin hairs, or anything that might indicate she was much older than the twenty-five years I’d credited her with,

since the only people who liked my given name shopped at the local Piggly Wiggly for Polydent. Add the facet of outdatedness to memories of childhood bullies taunting me with “Angus,” and it wasn’t hard to figure out why I adopted a nickname. “It really is just Nessie. Now, I assume you were the one who responded to the newspaper ad?”

Mini-Martha chortled again. “Of course, honey. Who else would I be?” I opted not to answer that question and let her continue. “The name is Betty.”

“Let me guess, Crocker?” I snorted, unable to help myself.

Her Botoxed face never showed any signs of creasing, though I could have sworn her fingers flinched. “Huh?” She waved her hand. “Oh, posh. You and your jokes, Agnes.”

For the record, I had never met this woman in my life. Yes, I received a handwritten letter in the mail announcing her arrival to check out the apartment, but I just figured she was a little old-fashioned. I didn’t realize she had stepped out of a black-and-white television rerun.

Betty nudged me out of the way and turned a sharp left towards the kitchen, as if the location was wired into her brain. Her free hand rifled through the drawers with both speed and grace, looking for something.

There is one thing I should mention: I was not a big cook. My kitchen contained a fridge, microwave, and a toaster, purchased from the toaster salesman in a moment of weakness. There were a couple of dusty pans from Goodwill, bought when I made a pact to start cooking my own food every night, but the empty takeout boxes in my trash were witnesses against me. I didn’t go into shock when Ms. Homemaker’s search turned up empty.

“Where are your cooling racks, dear?” she inquired.

Cooling whats? I shrugged. “Don’t think I have any.”

Her face twitched. “Oh. Really, now? Well, I’ll just set this on the counter. It’s probably cooled by now.” Betty began her investigation of the kitchen drawers once more. “And your pie servers, hon, where might those be?”

“Um, none of those either,” I admitted.

A bead of sweat, my first clue that she was indeed human, slid down her forehead. Her hands jittered restlessly at her side. “No pie servers...” she murmured under her breath.

My short-but-sweet Girl Scout training kicked in with peacemaking strategies flooding to my brain—negotiation, redirection, anything to keep this woman from having a complete meltdown on my dusty vinyl floor. “Why don’t we let it cool while you take a tour? I’m sure you’d love to see the apartment.”

Her posture straightened and she whirled around to face me with renewed vigor. “Oh, that would be delightful, Agnes!”

So much for that peacemaking side. “Um...why don’t you take a look around? I’ll...look for a pie server.” Betty beamed at me as if I was her little hostess protégé.

There was no way my small two-bedroom apartment would be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens*. A few kitten-themed motivational posters aside, my decorating motif was an expression of winter: bare. The living room had a futon, a dinged-up coffee table, a dusty bookcase, and an ancient, chunky television. That was it. There were no lovely Thomas Kinkades gracing the walls, no cutesy bumper sticker sayings in the kitchen, and no photographs of me and my nonexistent friends doing fun things like traveling the world or going to amusement parks.

If I had a therapist, she would probably tell me my lack of décor reflected my denial and unwillingness to accept the direction my life had taken. But I didn’t have a therapist, so I just told myself I was cheap and utilitarian. That was good enough for me.

However, I had thoughts that it might not be good enough for Betty, who was pacing the living room, clicking her tongue disapprovingly. She opened her mouth, but a sudden bang against the wall interrupted her. Muffled shouts sounded from the next apartment over.

“Tommy, get your soccer shoes!” resonated through the thin walls.

Betty raised her palm to meet her lips. “Goodness.”

“That’s Felicia from next door. She has four children.” I said nothing more, taking Betty could infer the rest.

“Oh, I adore children, Agnes!” Betty’s eyes glazed over.

Panic set in. What if she never left? I needed a roommate, but not this bad. “Quiche?” I offered and quickly stabbed a butter knife through the pie, hoping a speedy transfer from dish to plate would ensure an equally fast departure of Ms. Betty Crocker.

She walked into the kitchen humming but froze in horror when she registered the butter knife. There couldn’t have been any more terror in her expression if I was chain-sawing a crippled kitten. Her scream startled me, and I dropped the knife, cringing as it clattered against the floor.

“What. Have. You. DONE?” she roared and lunged to snatch the dish from my marble counter, her nostrils flaring.

Betty marched toward the front door, but not before whipping around to shower me with a look of disgust. “Were you raised by wolves! Never use a

butter knife to serve quiche! NEVER!" She paused her angry tirade long enough to grace me with a pitying chin quiver. "How will you ever marry?"

With a haughty sniff, she was gone. Barely registering the waves of humidity, I stared out the rectangle frame long after she stomped down the three flights of stairs. Her words failed to compute in my brain. Utensils? Getting married? What was the connection there?

With a sigh, I gently closed the door and shuffled over to the bathroom to nurse my wounds. A splash of frigid water from the sink shocked me back into reality, and I peered into the mirror.

I wasn't a gorgeous girl. My short pixie cut, dyed so dark a brown the DMV marked my hair color as "black," was always disheveled because of my anxious tendency to ruffle my hair. I lacked the necessary patience for makeup, so my lips usually rested in a pensive line rather than the award-winning smile of a Maybelline girl. Though I had the height of a model, I somehow lacked the fashion and poise to go with it, rendering me clumsy and awkward. Another check in the mirror confirmed my suspicions: the girl looked weary and weathered.

A knock sounded on the front door made my breathing quicken. I stalled in the bathroom, afraid Betty Crocker returned to chastise me. On the other hand, she had the tenacity of a pit bull and making her wait could prove to be more dangerous than avoiding her.

Creeping softly across the carpet, I gathered my courage and yanked open the door, like ripping off a Band-Aid. The toaster salesman on the other side jumped at the sudden movement. He was a familiar sight in my complex, and my heart lifted at seeing his slicked-back hair and kind eyes. Maybe he would understand my pain. My hope lessened when he held up a shiny toaster.

"I already have one," I explained halfheartedly.

He smiled with his lopsided grin. "But they're a low, low price."

I bought another toaster, just because it had been that bad of a day.

## Chapter 2

I went inside and made four pieces of toast for lunch, just to prove I was not the horrible cook Mini-Martha-Stewart insinuated I was. To demonstrate my wise acquisition of a second toaster, I timed how long it took the toast to pop up. Two minutes and thirty-six seconds. It would have been over five minutes if I had only one toaster. The thought relaxed my tense forehead, and I slathered some jelly on the toast, counting it as nutrients.

I ruffled my short hair while munching. The roommate search left me a little bummed out lately. Rent on the two-bedroom apartment was too much to keep paying on my own since my last roommate decided to leave.

Two weeks ago, she knocked on the door to my room while I slurped Ramen and watched cartoons. "Nessie! I need to tell you something!"

Our solemn meeting took place on the futon. Sitting there with long noodles streaming oh-so-attractively down my face, I cringed when she told me, "Nessie, the Northern Bobwhite Quail is calling to me. Can you hear it?" She looked out the window stoically. I paused munching out of respect, though I didn't expect to hear anything. She dramatically outstretched her hands in the air, as if she had been choreographing some weird nature dance to commune with the quail. "Nessie, I must preserve their habitats."

The bird girl moved out two days after her "revelation."

Perhaps it was the name "Nessie," but strange people were drawn to me. At least the bird girl didn't call me "Agnes" or think I would need a huge dowry to find a husband. Better yet, I was able to use butter knives in her presence without fear.

I looked heavenward. *God, you have to help me. I'm struggling here.* The white ceiling offered no response.

God cared about me and my struggles, right? So many Sunday Schools ago, a young Nessie would have blurted "yes" with unwavering confidence. These days, the stacks of bills, monotonous work routine, and empty pantry met me with raised eyebrows until I started to doubt myself.

Was this my life? My only purpose to wake up, go to work, come home, and eat toast? A heaviness not explained by carbs settled in my stomach.

Sighing, I pulled out my laptop and forced down the rest of the toast, unsuccessful at keeping the crumbs out of the keyboard. I winced. Phil, the half-balding tech at ValuComputer, always shook his head at me, sending his pitiful comb-over flopping in all directions. “Do not eat over the keys, Ms. Burgh. This is why your space bar keeps sticking.” At that point, I would hold my hand up high and say, “Nevermore. Scout’s honor.”

Ha. The joke was on him. My troupe leader kicked me out of Girl Scouts for being an ineffective cookie seller, which I blamed on my passive aggressive tendencies and sweet tooth. These combined traits were my fatal flaw in the realm of Girl Scout cookie sales. What could I say? With all those crates of unsold cookies lying around in my room, it was only natural for me to want to drown my little girl sorrows in a box of Thin Mints.

My mother explained the situation to the director, believing she would understand the weakness of my will. The director understood that my mother would pay \$52.87 for the boxes of devoured cookies. You would think that with all that understanding, things would have worked out better. Sadly, it did not, and I was the first child in the county kicked out of Girl Scouts. Who knows? Maybe I was the first person in history.

Regardless, my honor as a scout was tarnished, and Phil should have known better than to chide me for the inevitable. Logging onto my e-mail, I deleted the junk, scanned an advertisement for sweaters, and then saw there was a new message.

*To: Nessiemonster@email.com*

*From: Mysticalunicorn@email.com*

I paused. Cutesy e-mail address with a childish ring to it. Promising.

*Greetings. Your advertisement appeared in my newspaper. I noticed it while meditating in the sunlight this morning. I believe our souls would coexist peacefully in your abode. The winds of fate will bring me to your doorstep tomorrow if that harmonizes with your being. Respond as your heart guides you.*

*Peaceably,*

*Mystical Unicorn*

Oh. That was her name and not a silly e-mail address. My cursor lingered over the delete button, but hesitated when I spotted the rent notice on the

coffee table. She couldn't be worse than the quiche woman. I began to type before I changed my mind.

*Hey Unicorn,  
Sounds radical. Be there or be square.  
Just,  
Nessie*

Send button. Done. Surfing the web brought a new sense of fulfillment. There I was, finding roommates without trying hard. Maybe God was on my side after all. It was then my spacebar started to stick. I could see the crumbs peeking out from underneath the key. Oh, how they taunted me.

§ § §

One stern lecture later, I was out of ValuComputer's parking lot vowing once more to never eat bread products over the spacebar. Yeah, right.

There was still time left in the afternoon to visit King Arthur's Shopalot next door and peruse the shelves out of boredom. Back in my younger days, wandering the aisles of oddities had made my eyes grow big and my jaw drop. These days, I was less impressed and more amused, but the store still had a strange charm to it.

An advertisement on the sliding doors broadcasted the special in bold letters: GOLD PLATED BLOWTORCHES, BUY ONE GET ONE FREE. I made a mental note just in case I should need to set something on fire.

Once inside, the distinct aroma of incense, rubber, and lemons mixed with a tad of unwashed body odor assaulted my nose; it was clear a few choice shoppers thought soap was for decoration only.

Scenes of dragons and thrones graced the walls, a sight that would have been beautiful had the owners not commissioned middle school students for the task. The princess on the wall in front of me was a glorified stick figure holding what I assumed was a harp. Instead of the squeaky shine of white linoleum, fake cobblestone paths paved the way down aisles of lava lamps and maces. A simple stroll through the store was like visiting a tacky museum of randomness. I nodded politely to an old woman checking out the blowtorches.

My eyes drew to the medieval section where Renaissance dresses and imposing thrones were available for purchase. I admit I am a bit of a geek. The enchantment the Middle Ages held over me with all their princesses,

rogues, and swords started when my third-grade crush, Billy Carpenter, dressed up as a knight in shining armor for career day. Looking back, I can only chastise myself for being interested in the one kid whose career aspirations were based on an ancient feudal system and amounted to clanking around in metal armor.

Still, the die was cast, and the era of the Middle Ages would hold my fascination for years to come. My mother had hoped that I would grow out of it. But the older I got, the more mundane my life became, and immersing myself in a book filled with quests and kingdoms became routine. I often reminded her, whenever she sighed in disappointment at my reading selection, there were much worse coping mechanisms.

Passing whoopee cushions, ventriloquist dummies, wigs, and decoy ducks, my gaze caught something shiny. An ornate golden hilt peeked out of a leather scabbard on a shelf, practically begging me to slide the long gleaming sword from its depth. Runes were carefully engraved into the blade. My fingers skated along the symbols, curiously tingling when they touched the metal. The prickling sensation caused me to jerk my hand away at first, but when I picked it up again, the fuzziness coursed through my fingers anew.

*That's strange*, I mused. It had some kind of weird static electricity. Oddly enough, when I returned the sword to its sheath, the tingling stopped. I couldn't shake the feeling I needed the blade. That it was made for me.

Yes, there had been accusations I tended to impulse-buy, such as when I bought a second toaster...earlier that day. Lest you think I lacked reason altogether, I remembered a voice in the back of my head that said, *What in the world do you need a sword for?*

It was at that moment I remembered all of the crime in the world. A girl couldn't be too protected, even if a sword was her weapon of choice. Who knew? Perhaps the purchase would save my life one day. The argument seemed reasonable enough and settled the matter in my mind.

"Lords and ladies of King Arthur's Shopalot," a nasally teenage voice greeted dully over the intercom. "The store shall closeth in ten minutes. Make your way over to yon check out. Kay. Thanks."

The announcement was sufficient motivation for me to haul buggy towards the front of the store, not wanting to be stuck in a long line of creepy people. On my last late-night visit, I was sandwiched between an Elvis impersonator and a twitchy man who talked to me for fifteen minutes on the perils of owning a gerbil; I would do anything to avoid a repeat of that night. Unfortunately, speed was my downfall. Sword in hand, I collided with a man turning out of an aisle, and for a moment all I saw was red. Much to my relief, I realized the

splash of color had not been blood, but rather a billowing red superhero cape my co-collider wore.

“Hey, watch out,” I admonished, though the wreck was both of our faults. “I could have poked your eye out.”

“Is that you?” a familiar voice asked—a familiar voice that sold me a toaster in the middle of an emotional breakdown. In front of me was the man with black, slick-backed hair, shiny dark eyes, and lips that were a little too far to the left.

“Oh, hey...toaster...guy,” I bumbled, slightly embarrassed.

“The name’s Eric.” He grinned lopsidedly and held out his hand. I took notice of his tall, slightly lanky stature. Never before seeing Eric sans toaster, I was distracted by how nice he was on the eyes. The small dose of awkwardness he projected prevented him from being a GQ model anytime soon, but he fit the criteria of tall, dark, and handsome. His down-to-earth ease made the tilting smile seem playful and friendly. *Whoa, there. Focus, Nessie.*

“Nessie,” I offered, and gave him a clumsy high five instead of a handshake. It seemed like the right thing to do while holding a sword.

We stood in silence for a moment.

“So, how’s the new toaster working out?” A dimple creased his cheek.

I shuffled my feet on the faux-cobblestone floor. “Great. For lunch today, I made twice as much toast in half the time.”

“Awesome.”

More silence.

Behind Eric, a man wearing a half-disco, half-cowboy outfit sashayed to the front of the checkout line. Panic rose when he turned around for a second and met my eyes. This one was definitely a talker, and I refused to endure more speeches about anyone’s back hair problems, pet iguana relationship drama, or fears they may have killed Santa Claus. Yes, I met these customers before in line at King Arthur’s Shopalot.

“Um...well it was nice seeing you, Eric, but...uhh...I...uhh...I have to pee.” I bolted away from him towards the front. The last glance I got before darting off was him saluting me like Superman of the army.

I hurried over to the nasally teenage cashier with my spoils of war. Catching my breath, I noticed the disco cowboy distracted by the blowtorches—the line was empty.

Good, I could make my purchase and get out before any weirdos got in line with me. I gave the tingly sword to the cashier, but he was in turtle time. As if moving through molasses, he reached for the sword to scan it. Tapping

my foot impatiently had no effect on his speed, even when I hummed the Jeopardy theme.

His dark emo haircut obscured his left eye, but the right was framed with black eyeliner and lazily glanced from the sword in his hand to my face. “Oh my,” he said, with all the enthusiasm of a comatose person. “Are you over the age of fourteen, milady?”

I snorted, stamping a foot. “Yes, I’m twenty-four.”

He raised a pierced eyebrow. “I’ll need to see some ID.”

Oh, the sarcasm that welled up in me. “Will my Chuck E. Cheese membership card suffice?”

His facial muscles twitched, but no change. I sighed and pulled open my purse, flashing my ID before his eyes. He took on the arduous task of ringing up the sword. An eternity later, he gave me the total.

“That’ll be \$19.46. Oh, no, wait. The time is now 5:33. We’re closed.” He slowly reached up to turn off the register light.

Somehow, my restraint kicked in and prevented me from breaking the teen turtle’s arm. “Wait a minute!” Wrath gathered like a dark storm waiting to pour out into a flood of verbal abuse.

“I’m joking, milady. Ha. Ha.” His face never altered its flat expression.

“I thought you had to pee.”

I yelped in surprise, whipping around to face Eric the toaster salesman, who was apparently just as sneaky as he was tacky. Unfortunately, grace was not my forte when struggling for a response. “I just went...in my pants.”

This time, Eric was the eyebrow raiser.

And my mother wondered why I never had a date on Saturday night.

My emo friend never missed a beat. “Depends are on aisle three.”

“I don’t need—”

He grabbed the intercom, with the most efficiency I’d witnessed in the whole transaction. “Doris, will you grab some Depends for the young woman in line here.”

The pronouncement echoed through the store, and the few remaining shoppers turned to look at the incontinent woman in question. The disco cowboy winked and nodded approvingly. *Shudder*. Suddenly, a package of Depends was in front of me, and I didn’t have the courage to deny them. Paying for the order as quickly as possible, I made a beeline for the exit.

While the sliding doors parted for me to escape, a voice stopped me. “Hold on,” Eric called, his superhero cape fluttering as the afternoon breeze invaded the store. “Let me walk you to your car.”

Unable to take more of the already pitiful evening, I held up the sword. “I’m good. If anyone gets near me, I’ll skewer them.”

An elderly homeless man sat on the outskirts of the parking lot and smiled gratefully when I gave him the package of Depends. Glad he didn’t take the gift as an insult, I got behind the wheel. At least someone had a good day.

§ § §

Later that night I donned my pajamas, ready to be done with the strange day. My fingers flipped the light switch and darkness flooded my bedroom. Flopping down on my pillow, I concentrated on the ceiling. The clock told me it was past time to go to bed, but something stopped me from counting sheep. Bedtime prayers had been a part of my nightly repertoire since childhood, and, as they said, old habits die hard.

The ceiling fan swished overhead. Was that all it was now? An old habit just taking its sweet time to die?

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe anymore, but my grip on life and faith was slipping. Life had become a droll recipe for survival, and the endless cycle of “lather, rinse, repeat” was unbearable. *God, there has to be more to life than this. Don’t let me waste away here, missing the purpose You have for me.* The ceiling fan continued to spin air around the room. *Because You do have a plan, even when it doesn’t make sense.*

My eyes fluttered sleepily in the dark, vaguely making out a strange glow by the closet where I remembered placing my newly-purchased sword. Glow? Must have been reflecting a streetlight from outside the window.

Then again, I couldn’t get that tingling feeling the sword had emanated out of my head. Before I could think, I found myself stepping out of bed and shuffling towards the closet, eyes fixated on the dull glimmer. My knees lowered and I reached out for the illuminated weapon, bracing for the electric sensation when I grasped the hilt. Nothing. The room went dark again, making me wonder if I’d just imagined the whole thing.

A deep sigh escaped my lips and I went back to bed. Was my life so pitiful I had to invent a magic sword just to have some sense of excitement? I snuggled further into the warm covers. No time for hallucinating when I was having life dilemmas.

Rolling over, I closed my eyes. Change was in the air; it had to be.



## Chapter 3

The doorbell rang three times. *Here we go again.* Clenching my eyes and whispering a prayer, I opened the door to Mystical Unicorn's beaming grin. "Three is the number of completion," she stated.

Why did the fates of roommatory dislike me so?

Her hot pink hair cascaded to her waist, where cheetah print capris assaulted the eyes. It was a wonder she wasn't stopped by the fashion police. They would have arrested her for the zebra striped shirt with puffy sleeves, not an article on the "Acceptable Patterns to Wear with Cheetah Print" list. As if this was not enough to display eccentricity, her bare toes wiggled in anticipation on my welcome mat. Hygiene much?

"Don't worry," she assured. "The skins are fake. I would never hurt a real animal. I only try to commune with nature by wearing the patterns of my fellow animal friends."

I pinched my "Puns Not Guns" t-shirt. "I wear...uhh...cotton to commune with plants."

Her smile brightened and she craned her neck to look past me. "Oh, radical! So, this is your abode, Nessie?"

I bit my lip hesitantly. Mystical Unicorn was odd but friendly, and despite her lack of footwear, she appeared to be clean. Furthermore, she didn't berate me for my lack of cookware and pleasantly complimented the living arrangements. Stepping aside, I let her into the house.

"Sorry there aren't many decorations," I apologized, but she shook her head and sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

"I feel simplicity is a major element in meditation. My soul is in harmony in this room because of the pure white walls unmarred by commercialized art."

Okay, time to figure out if she was as creepy as the man down the hall with a bald cat. "I know this kind of sounds weird, but with all this talk of spirits and stuff, you wouldn't be holding séances in the living room or anything, would you?"

She waved her arms. "Oh, no way. I don't mess with any of that. It's just my language, Nessie." Mystical Unicorn smiled, and I returned it. "Actually, I'm more into parallel universes," she added.

Well, then... “Does that require tearing up the furniture or disturbing the neighbors?”

Her brow furrowed in concentration. “It surprisingly has little effect on the worlds in between.”

“Uh-huh,” I offered. “Will you pay half the rent and utilities?”

“Providing financial support is not turbulent to my soul. We can split everything down the middle.” She paused. “Just like a commune!”

“Uh...sure. As long as we keep everything PG,” I stipulated.

Thus went the tale of how a girl named Mystical Unicorn came to live under my roof.

§ § §

6:47 a.m. The muffled blasting of the SpongeBob SquarePants theme song and wrathful shouts of, “Mikey, if you don’t turn that television down right now, I will come over there and...” jolted me from the most wondrous dream concerning cupcakes. When the tireless yelling match next door failed to cease after fifteen minutes, I forced myself out of bed and shuffled towards Felicia’s apartment. Nothing like a kindly worded “Come to Jesus” meeting to start the morning right.

While scooting past the vanity mirror, the reflection of a disheveled, sweaty woman clad in Disney princess pajamas startled me. Snow White’s figure on the material looked back judgmentally.

Oh, those pink footies. My journey to obtain them had been as perilous and complicated as a Tolkien trilogy. Sadly, they didn’t come in adult sizes, which meant I had to ask the snippy store lady for a special order in a youth quadruple extra-large. The image of her raised tattooed eyebrows haunted me, shaming me like an obese child. Well, in a way, I was. Though I was a few donuts away from being trim, Youth XXXXL fit me like a glove.

Still, that searing glance had been the price to pay in order to obtain my fat-kid pajamas with Cinderella, Belle, Ariel, and the rest of the gang. And for what? I was the only one who saw their beautiful faces smiling up at me before climbing into bed. No, now was the time to show the world my darling PJs and let them become green with envy. Sliding into my bunny slippers, I marched to the apartment next door and rang the doorbell.

The door, scuffed from multiple run-ins with small children, opened to a harried blonde in her mid-thirties. Her hair was clipped up in a moment of desperation and spouted every direction at once like a dysfunctional fountain.

I was not alone in my pajama fashion statement; she was wearing ones with a cat pattern. I had seen Felicia at my church a couple of times, always surrounded by a flurry of active children, but never in cat pajamas. There was a first time for everything.

“Oh, hey, Nessie,” she greeted me distractedly and then jerked her head away. “Peter, stop pulling your sister’s hair!” Turning back, Felicia fiddled with her black-rimmed glasses and offered a wan smile. “Did you need something?”

All my indignation at being woken by shouting vanished. Felicia was just a single mom trying to raise her four kids without any physical or psychological casualties. Her deadbeat husband left her after two sets of twins in two years, and though that could be enough to make anyone go crazy, he had no excuse. The two older boys, Mikey and Tommy, were six, while Peter and his fraternal twin, Susan, brought up the rear at four years. Their matching white-blond hair and blue eyes always creeped me out, reminding me of a mob of clone children speckled with dirt and syrup.

A girlish scream and crash sounded from inside the apartment. What was that dilemma I was having about lack of purpose? “Uhh...I was just coming to see if you needed a babysitter.”

The tension in her forehead melted and her mouth parted with a hesitant smile. Looking up and down at my princess pajamas, she rubbed the back of her neck. “Right now?”

I reached up to ruffle my sweaty hair. “Whenever.”

Raising her arm high, Felicia inhaled the armpit aroma. “Well, I don’t remember the last time I had a shower. If you wouldn’t mind sitting with them for just...I don’t know, ten or fifteen minutes...”

“Not a problem,” I assured and walked into her apartment where World War III had apparently taken place between a herd of Barbies, monster trucks, and action figures.

With a stern command aimed at the children to be good, Felicia vanished into another room. Four pairs of beady eyes assessed my weaknesses as I dislocated some stuffed animals and sat down on the couch. Susan leaned close to Peter and attempted to whisper, “She’s wearing my pajamas.”

Punk. That kid could never understand the trauma I faced for those pink footies.

“Why is there a girl with pink hair in your apartment?” a child’s voice blurted from inside a pillow fort constructed in the corner.

Nosy kid. I raised an eyebrow and looked for the boy who owned the voice. “She’s my roommate.”

Mikey's bleach-blond head popped up in between two sheets, compromising the structural integrity of his fort and bringing a mass of blankets and pillows tumbling around him. "Why does she have pink hair?" he inquired, unsatisfied by the many mysteries of Mystical Unicorn.

"She dyed it, I suppose."

Mikey's replica, Tommy—or maybe I had them mixed up—cast aside a monster truck he was using to run over Barbie. "You suppose?" he asked snottily.

That did it. Every scary movie I'd seen as a child returned to memory and infused in my voice. "Yes, that is, unless..." I paused for dramatic effect and all the kids sat down at my feet.

"Unless what?" Peter ventured, taking a seat beside his sister on the couch.

"Unless..." Why was I so bad at making up names? Only seeing a crayon and a G. I. Joe on the floor, I went with my gut. "Unless Joe-Crayon got her."

Eight eyebrows went into the air. "Joe-Crayon?" Susan asked incredulously. She twisted a lock of her almost white hair.

"Yes, Joe-Crayon. Now be quiet and listen. Joe-Crayon has eight arms, three eyes, and ten toes."

After some quick counting, Peter protested. "But I have ten toes, too!"

I frowned. "Well, he has ten toes on one foot and none on the other."

Peter's jaw dropped. "Wow. That is crazy!"

"Anyway," my voice lowered to ghost-story pitch, "Joe-Crayon comes into the homes of little boys and girls through the refrigerator, and he colors their hair different colors while they're sleeping."

"So what?" Mikey had fully emerged from the fort wreckage and was listening with hands on his hips.

I scrunched my face into a ball and shouted my next words with vigor. "And then the werewolves come and eat you!"

They screamed simultaneously, and the shower cut off. "Kids, is everything okay?" Felicia called.

Oops. "We're good," I assured and waited until the water resumed.

"What do werewolves have to do with anything?" Peter said with arms crossed. The show of bravado wasn't quite as effective with his face drained of color.

"Werewolves can only see bright hair, so when they see children with neon green and tangerine-orange curly locks, they know it's time for dinner."

"What about the girl next door?" Susan whispered. "She's hasn't been eaten by a werewolf yet."

I shrugged. "She's really nice. Werewolves don't really like to eat nice people, even if they have bright pink hair."

Susan slugged her brother in the arm. "That's why you gotta not pull my hair! The werewolves are gonna eat you!"

Peter looked sheepishly at the ground. "Sorry, Susan."

The shower stopped for good. Time to wrap up the tale. "Well, you should be nice even without the werewolves," I offered. "You know why?" Four children stared at me intently, and I couldn't help but feel like Mr. Rogers. "Because your mom loves you and gets sad when you all don't get along. So, try to love each other instead of punching someone in the spine. Okay?" They all nodded and gave me their word.

Felicia came into the room wearing fresh clothing and combing wet hair. She glanced at the children sitting peacefully at my feet and turned to me. "Nessie, you're a miracle worker!"

Peter ran up to hug his mother first with the other three children following suit. Gratitude seeped out of her, much like the tears beginning to gather. "What do I owe you?" she asked, quickly wiping at her eyes.

"Oh, nothing," I said, heading for the door. "These kids gave me something I've been lacking for a while."

She cocked her head. "What's that?"

"Perspective."

It was odd. For years, I'd cycled around in a mundane existence, going back and forth to work, never getting to know the people around me further than the mandatory pleasantries required of acquaintances. Yet there I was actually being useful, showing love to my neighbor.

If I didn't know better I would say something shifted in me ever since the tingling touch of that sword in King Arthur's Shopalot the day before. Purpose welled up inside of me, and I opened the door, relishing the winds of change blowing in the breeze.

Standing outside, I watched the morning sun rise up over the world and marveled that maybe God wasn't through with me. After all, if He could use me, groggy and dressed in Youth XXXXL Disney Princess footie pajamas, maybe that meant He wasn't ready to give up yet.



## Chapter 4

Back in the sanctuary of my apartment, I discarded the princess pajamas for a T-shirt, jeans, and boots. With a satisfied sigh, I plopped on the futon, propping my legs out onto the coffee table. A thick, dusty Bible sat on the shelf, neglected for so long I'd forgotten it was there. Since the whole roommate fiasco, I had gotten out of my habit of reading in the morning. It was a day of new starts; why not add that to the list?

Mystical Unicorn emerged groggily from her bedroom and nodded politely before heading to the kitchen. I reached for the Bible, flipping it to where I left a bookmark ages ago.

*"Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9"*

I sighed. My life wasn't really in danger, but fear was still a major motivator in my life—fear of being alone for the rest of my life, fear of living without making a difference in the world, fear of what people thought of me. Discouragement—now that was something I could relate to.

My career was virtually nonexistent. I worked for a portable toilet rental company called *The Emperor's Throne*. I spent my days as a secretary, coordinating deliveries, answering phone calls, doing my nails, and staring off into space. The only real difference I made in the world on a daily basis was providing a place for construction workers to urinate—which I supposed was better than the alternative.

My degree was in Art, which would be wonderful if I lived in the seventies or ancient Greece. However, there were surprisingly few jobs around for an art major, and people in my community would rather buy Thomas Kinkade's snug wintery homes than my paintings of ducklings. The first ninety attempts to sell my masterpieces discouraged me from that career path.

Once I tried to spruce things up at work, just to feel some sense of accomplishment, but the Fates were against me. When I approached my manager, Steven, and cleared my throat, he was munching on a burrito and talking to one of the delivery men—at the same time. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Steven, who looked like Rhett Butler with a bald patch and a unibrow, glanced at me and sighed. “What is it this time, Aggie?”

I shuddered but let it slide. “Okay, you know how some porta-potties are called Port-a-Johns? That’s really sexist. I mean, no woman would want to do her business in something with a man’s name. So, what about a new type of porta-potty? The Port-a-Jane—for women. We could do a completely new line in pink, with indoor plumbing, a baby changing station, and a powder room. It would be a hit!”

Steven’s thick, all-encompassing eyebrow lifted. “So, basically, a women’s restroom on wheels?”

I nodded excitedly.

“Agatha, believe it or not, women are not really that interested in porta-potties—not a target market if you know what I mean.”

A frown spread across my face. “Perhaps that’s because no one’s ever targeted them before.”

“Besides,” Steven continued without acknowledging me, “if we hook up indoor plumbing, it ceases to be portable.”

“What about cordless plumbing?”

His condescending smile made my skin crawl. “It doesn’t work like that. Just keep answering the phones, sweetheart.”

*I’m gonna “sweetheart” your face*, I thought, but calmed down, hearing my mother’s “What would Jesus do?” in the back of my mind. Jesus wouldn’t have threatened His manager. He would have been kind to a butthead like Steven. Furthermore, He hadn’t abandoned me to an empty, discouraging existence, even if—

The smoke alarm pierced my peaceful meditation. I bolted from the futon, heart racing, into the kitchen where my pink haired roommate stood by a smoking toaster. After we silenced the smoke detector, she shrugged her shoulders.

“It caught on fire.”

“Oh,” I replied. It seemed like a better response than, “Duh, I can see that.”

“Solar flares,” she explained.

“Mmhmm.” I tried not to sound completely incredulous.

“It burned out by itself.”

Mystical Unicorn unplugged the toaster and scraped charred bread into her blender. She saw me watching and pointed to the concoction. “It gives carbs.”

Nodding, I began my retreat, but stopped. “Umm, how about we don’t use the toaster until the...uhh...solar power—”

“Solar flares,” she corrected gently.

“Yeah, those. Let’s wait until they’re done.”

She waved her hand. “Of course. I wouldn’t have used it if I had remembered to look at the celestial bodies weather report this morning.”

“Good to know,” I answered and retreated to the safety of my room, shaking my head all the way.

§ § §

Three soft knocks sounded on my door.

“Come in.” I put down the Bible on my Disney princess bedspread (hey, it had to match the PJs) and sat up straighter. Mystical Unicorn entered with two glasses of a green colored liquid.

“There’s enough for two,” she grinned.

The concoction was less than tempting, but politeness kept my nose from wrinkling. “Thanks, that’s really sweet of you. If you want, you can set it on the table over there.”

“Wow, this is quite different from the rest of the apartment,” Mystical Unicorn noted, browsing the walls crowded with my artwork. She placed the glasses on an end table and settled onto a cow-spotted beanbag, playfully poking the strings of a guitar I never learned how to play.

“One room needs to be cozy, I guess.” My arm reached up to tousle my hair, but I caught myself.

She noticed the Bible on my bed. “Pretty sweet reading.”

“Oh, are you a Christian?” My eyebrows resisted the urge to rise.

Mystical Unicorn nodded. “Yeah, I know it’s a little surprising. Most churches don’t really welcome me as a sister. I’m not quite like the other people there.”

Guilt poured over me for judging her so quickly. How long would it take before I realized what was on the outside didn’t reflect the inside? “Well, if those same churches actually practiced what they preached, they might find that He uses the most unsuspecting people.”

She smiled half-heartedly but fixated her attention on the floor as she spoke. “I’m pretty new to the area and I’ve been living with a bunch of hippies, which is why I talk differently. As for my interest in parallel universes, it’s not necessarily unbiblical. God is so infinite—who’s to say that He didn’t make worlds other than this one?”

While I didn’t necessarily agree, there was no value in debating the issue.

With a sigh, Mystical Unicorn stood up from the beanbag and walked towards the door. “Well, guess I should be going before—”

She tripped by the closet and mumbled apologies, stooping down to pick up the offending object. Unicorn emitted a high-pitched gasp and the color drained from her face. She held up my most recent Shopalot purchase. “Is this—is this...” she stammered. Her fingers gently closed around the hilt. “Do you mind?”

“No, go ahead,” I shrugged, confused at her outburst.

With great care, she unsheathed the blade and caressed the runes, mouth agape. “Where did you get this from?” she whispered, her eyes riveted to the sword.

*This is getting really weird.* I reached for the green smoothie and took a sip. Not bad, actually. “King Arthur’s Shopalot. Why? Is it special or something?”

She waved the sword excitedly and took a step towards the bed. “You’re telling me you don’t know what this is?”

I scooted back for safety when the hyperactive woman inched dangerously close with the weapon. “It looks like a sword, but I’m going to guess and say that it’s a tape recorder.”

The attempt at humor had little effect on her. “This is one of the Blades of Remiel.” She paused, waiting for a response, but the excitement was lost on me. “It’s one of the portals to a parallel universe!”

“Oh,” I nodded, unconvinced.

She continued inspecting the blade, unperturbed. “Legend has it the ancient king Remiel sealed up the gate between worlds with this sword. Only when the bearer said the correct words on the blade would the gate be open.”

“Well, that doesn’t help,” I smirked. “I don’t have my Rune-to-English dictionary handy.”

“No! I know what these mean.” Mystical Unicorn carefully slid the sword back in its leather sheath and sat beside me on the bed. “It says ‘Eethi andre canasi,’ which means ‘Enter with Him.’”

“That’s odd.” I frowned. She shook her head, pink hair bouncing.

“Remiel taught the people to fear and love the same God that rules over every world. So, the words mean to pass between worlds with God’s blessing and remember that He is with you.”

“Uh-huh.” It made me wonder if there was a housing agency that sent the crazy roommates directly to me. My fingers massaged my throbbing temple while I searched for the right words to say. “And how did some magical sword

from a parallel universe get here in present day America?" I used my best of-course-I-don't-think-you're-crazy voice.

Mystical Unicorn fell silent, her smile fading. She gingerly set the sword on the bed and walked back to her green smoothie, her voice soft and slow. "I've read a lot about these swords; according to legend, the Blades of Remiel have a way of...showing up."

An uncomfortable quiet filled the room and I picked up the sheath, staring at it sternly. Again the allure, the static electricity, the sudden purpose I'd felt since acquiring the sword... The words emerged haltingly, almost unwillingly, from my mouth. "When you—when you touched the blade," I began, "did you feel...I don't know...a tingling?"

Frowning, Mystical Unicorn cradled her glass. "No, I don't think so. Why do you ask?" The oven timer went off, and Mystical Unicorn perked up. "That's my tofu celery." She downed her smoothie and sighed, casting a longing glance at the sword. The insistent beeping continued. "Guess I should get that. Do you want any?"

I declined, glad for the interruption. "No, thanks. I'll eat my Fruit Loops."

"Oh, really?" She cocked her head. "I didn't see any milk in the fridge."

"Well, we're out. I'm just going to have dry cereal for lunch."

She shrugged and opened the door, leaving me and the mysterious sword in an unyielding staring match. "What's your deal?" I whispered, unsheathing it just enough to touch the blade. The tingling coursed up my arm in what was becoming a familiar sensation.

Parallel universes? Magical swords? I pushed the sword back into the leather case and tossed it onto my pillow. I clearly let my imagination get the best of me; it was time to bury the fairy tales I wished were true and snap back to reality.

But with the soft *click* of Mystical Unicorn closing the door, reality took a turn for the weird.



## Chapter 5

**V**ertigo hit me first when my room spun around in wobbling circles. I gripped the headboard to steady myself. Dizziness...nausea...could it be?  
*My appendix!*

Ever since the third grade when Theodore Strider did a presentation about exploding appendices, complete with graphic photos of operations—the teacher hadn’t checked the projects beforehand—I pointed a finger at that tricky tissue every time I felt pain. Eat too much ice cream and feel nauseous? Exploding appendix! Develop a headache after listening to children’s music for three days straight? It was the darn appendix, I was sure of it.

Too bad I couldn’t remember which side my appendix was on. Releasing the headboard, I stabilized my shaking hands against the wall. There was only one place to consult when facing medical mysteries. I wobbled over to the laptop on my desk, and clicked over to WebMD, but the tingling was different from the sharp pains I would be experiencing if my appendix were going to explode.

A rustling sounded came from my bed as the pages of my open Bible fluttered. The lights flickered around me before cutting off completely. Well, that definitely wasn’t related to my appendix.

“Mystica—” I started to call for my pink haired roommate, but a pulsing light in the darkness distracted me. Turning away from diagrams of the large intestine, I peered through the shadows to my bed where a dull glow, muffled by the leather sheath, reverberated from the Blade of Remiel.

Suddenly, breathing didn’t seem so necessary. The room continued to spin. A force pulled on my limbs like strong magnets sweeping back and forth over my body. I stumbled out of the computer chair. The magnetization directed me to the sword. Somehow, my legs carried me steadily towards the bed, surprisingly stable despite the endless spinning of the room.

I flailed my arms—which, unlike my traitorous legs, were still under my control—for something to latch onto, ultimately clinging to the closet door-knob. My fingers turned bone white with the effort of holding on while my legs tried to pull me away. With a crack, the doorknob broke off in my hand, ricocheting me to the bed. The assumed instigator of all of this mess, the Blade of Remiel, continued to glow on my pillow.

*Pick it up*, a sweet voice whispered. Was the sword some sort of mythological siren drawing me with uncontrollable allure to my doom?

I squeezed my eyes shut. *This is my room, my refuge from the world!* Breathing came in rapid bursts, and my fingers went numb. I knew I was hyperventilating but didn't care. Maybe if I passed out, my brain would reboot and wake up to my normal, non-tingly, wind-free bedroom.

The sound of shattering glass jolted me to attention. Gusts of air flung papers and picture frames off my desk, sending them flying into the middle of the room. Tears, whether from the intensifying breeze or my bewilderment, stung my eyes. I was unable to wipe them away because my arms chose that moment to have a will of their own.

*This is REALLY, REALLY weird*, my brain screamed, watching the scene like a supernatural horror movie. A wave of nausea rolled over me, but I was powerless to stop my fingers, reaching, begging to touch the sword.

When I grabbed the hilt, the electrical shock burned my hand. Dropping the sword, I cradled my palm protectively, noticing that

- 1) I was no longer hyperventilating
- 2) My fingers were glowing.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been disconcerting, but the jolt wiped away all of my nausea and fear. As much as a part of me demanded to stay far from the unearthly weapon, my glowing hand reached down and curled around the hilt again.

Although I heard them just a few moments prior, the words came out effortlessly. "Eethi andre canasi." *Enter with Him*. The mantra curled around my tongue, giving me the strength to endure the pressure of needles against my skin. The words were lost in the rushing wind. My fingers itched to trace the runes, and I saw no reason to deny them. Instantly, the writing turned crimson, and my voice sounded of its own free will.

"Eethi andre canasi," I repeated. The wind reached hurricane speed and, like an angry child, ripped papers and books from shelves tossing them about. My words echoed against the walls, gaining volume at each utterance until they reached an overwhelming crescendo. Fireworks exploded in my brain, melting the colors of my room until only a bright white consumed my vision.

§ § §

A drop of moisture hit my forehead. I reached up to brush it away. "Sire, she's moving," a voice shouted.

My eyes opened to a man dressed in a purple tunic and lime green stockings leaning over me. A silver insignia of a fork and sword was embroidered on the fabric. Sweat dripped off his shoulder-length dark hair, flecked with gray.

I touched the wet spot on my forehead. Gross! Studying the beads of moisture gathered on his brow, a more pressing issue caused my stomach to turn. There was a man in my room! A quick reach for the pepper spray I had stashed inside my nightstand caused me to realize that:

1) My furniture was gone.

2) There was not one man, but many. Just how many people could fit in my room?

Behind their scrutinizing faces was a crisp blue sky, clearer than I had ever seen. Better question. How did the sky fit in my room?

When I shifted positions, a sharp point scraped against my shoulder blade. I reached behind to examine the cause. A rock? That was not what my carpet looked like. Memories flooded in, one after the other. Mystical Unicorn, a glowing sword, foreign words.

“No,” I proclaimed, sitting up on my elbows. “Parallel universes do not exist.” However, the five men, all dressed in the same garb as Señor Sweaty and shooting me paralyzing glares, were living proof against me. They grabbed for the swords at their belts when I pushed myself off the ground, holding my hands up in surrender. Weapons? Matching uniforms? They had to be some kind of guards, but how they got here was the bigger question. “Easy now. You could poke someone’s eye out.”

Intriguing as sitting on the wrong end of pointy blades was, I needed to find my sword and figure out how to get out of this crazy place. Past the soldiers, a lush grassy hill sloped down into what appeared to be a marketplace. Oddly-angled buildings that resembled skinny books jutted out from the ground, and people far off in the distance scurried in and out of them, all wearing the same bright purples and greens of the soldiers. Beyond the scene of a busy village was the outline of...a castle? That couldn’t be right.

Everything was brighter than I was used to; my senses seemed amplified, hyperactive even. I could smell the perspiration dripping off the man beside me, blended with the earthy scent of grass. Every touch, every sight, every sound was clearer than I had ever experienced before.

With my ever-so-keen hearing, my ears registered an impatient cough from the tallest soldier with cropped black hair, a silver pendant around his neck, and a scar running down his cheek. He kept his hand on the sword drawn at his side.

“State your name, homeland, position,” he barked in a deep commanding voice.

As a 5' 7" female, I had never regarded myself as short, but the fierce man loomed over me. I shifted back and forth on my feet. “Uhh...Name: Nessie. Homeland: United States. Position...” How to describe a porta-potty to someone from...shudder...another universe? “I...work...with chamber pots?”

One of his lime-legged companions whispered in his ear—thank you, enhanced senses—“What are these...United States that she speaks of?” He continued to stare at me. “And what manner of clothes are those?”

Another soldier shook his head. “Maybe she found them in a trash heap? All I know is that I do *not* want to find out what a ‘chamber pot’ is.”

My nose wrinkled. “Look, I know I’m not the most stylish person, but jeans are always acceptable to wear.”

“If you choose to be uncooperative,” the tall one barked, “you can spend the night in the dungeon.”

That was not how I envisioned spending my first trip to a parallel universe—because, you know, I had imagined it oh-so-many times. “My apologies, sirs,” I said, adding a smooth curtsy for flourish. “The low altitude was making me woozy.” My eyes winced against a refraction of light—the sun reflected from the Blade of Remiel lying not far outside of the circle of guards. The soldier with the pendant shifted, providing a gap big enough to squeeze through and giving me an idea.

“I’m just so dizzy,” I continued, holding a hand to my head. With a fake stumble towards the opening in the circle, I caught myself and sprinted for the sword, snatching it up by the hilt.

An angry roar erupted from the guards, and a rush of wind blew past my arm as one took a swipe with his sword. I ran down the grassy hill, my body propelled by adrenaline, sword swinging wildly. Children playing on the hillside jumped out of my way, pointing at the crazy foreigner who almost skewered them. “Sorry!” I shouted. The grassy terrain suddenly turned into cobblestone streets. A quick glance over my shoulder told me my pursuers were falling behind, but an angry shout snapped my attention to a man driving a horse carriage headed straight for me. The sound of my high-pitched squeal and his cursing filled the street before he narrowly swerved.

Okay, no more checking on the guards. Sweat dripped from my brow but I focused on weaving in and out of traffic, this time paying attention to the maze of horses and...mopeds? The stress was either making me crazy or this was a much stranger parallel universe than I originally thought.

Crowded streets opened up into the town square, an area hemmed by brilliant flowers and statues of elegantly dressed men and women. Townspeople strolled around, buying and bartering at market stands while children played games of tag. In the middle of the throng was a stage-like platform with a wooden frame—were those gallows? A shiver ran up my sweaty back, but the villagers, cheerfully chatting and milling about, seemed oblivious to its ominous presence.

My shirt clung to the wet patches of perspiration on my skin, and I forced myself to slow to a walk. Running would be out of place in the leisurely environment, and my best bet would be to blend in. Which meant I should probably peel my white-knuckled fingers off the hilt of my sword and hide it somewhere. “But then I’ll be completely defenseless,” I muttered, hesitant to let go of the only link to my world. Deep in my dilemma, I had stopped in front of the glass window of a cobbler’s shop and nearly peed myself when a hand clamped on my shoulder. My scream filled the street, earning me the stares of nearby villagers, but I was already whipping my weapon around to the attacker.

“Woah, there,” the man cautioned, holding his hands up. “You could have stabbed me with that.” He indicated the Blade of Remiel in my hand. In a fluid motion, the stranger swiped the sword from me, examining it with interest. A whistle escaped his lips. “Now, where did you get this?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I have to go,” I panicked, scrambling to grab the hilt, but he held a firm grip on my wrist. “Give it back!” I gritted my teeth, slapping his hand away without success. Even worse, the guards had noticed me in the scuffle and were headed straight for us.

That was it. I would meet my doom in some parallel universe at the fate of men in bright green tights because a champion wrist wrestler captured me. Maybe I should have died of embarrassment and saved them all the trouble. My fluffy-haired kidnapper watched the soldiers approaching and secured the sword onto his belt before the men arrived.

“The lady comes with us!” the tall one panted, drawing his weapon.

“I go wherever you take my wife,” Scruffy directed authoritatively, a possessive hand on my shoulder now.

Wait. What? Was this a weird parallel universe trick? Had I some other-world doppelganger married to this man? A graceful, stylish lady who knew how to cook? Just wait until he found out the truth.

The men lowered their swords hesitantly, the one with the scar last of all. “Your wife, you say?” By now, the cobbler and some of his customers had exited the store to see what all the commotion was.

My “husband” sighed slowly. “She’s...” he paused, winding his finger around his ear. “A few *flurrins* short of a *bolsar*, if you know what I mean. Didn’t know until after marriage cord was tied, but she’s actually quite sweet when she’s taking her herbs.”

The sweaty one nodded. “I thought she was a little off.”

Mr. Scarface looked unconvinced. Time to persuade him. “Honey,” I drooled, twirling my arms fanatically, “are these men here to take me back to Ponyland where I can ride carousels forever and ever?” Disturbing how easy it was for me to pretend to be crazy.

“What is this nonsense about a...carousel?” said one of the men.

Finally, the one with the pendant withdrew his sword. “Alright, she’s fine for now. But if I have another run-in with her,” his voice lowered, “and I have a feeling I shall...” He stepped closer. “She comes with me.”

My “husband” nodded solemnly. “Of course, sires.”

The soldiers marched off. Scruffy and I walked away from the center square and nosy bystanders. “Here,” he whispered when we reached the opening of an alley. Lines of laundry stretched between the buildings above us.

Amidst the trash bins littering the alley, I faced him for the first time. “Thank you so much, sir, for—” I stopped when I saw his face. “Do I know you?”

He grinned. “I would hope so if we’re married.” He winked, and I released a sigh. Good, no doppelganger.

Something about his face was so familiar. Inky eyes...deep voice... “Your hair!”

The smile faded. “Yes, how do you—”

I reached for his curly locks and swiftly yanked. The wig fell into my hands, revealing dark, slicked back hair.

He snatched back the hairpiece and affixed it to his head again, but it was too late. I knew exactly who the man before me was. My rescuer was none other than superhero-cape-wearing Eric, my two-time toaster salesman.

## Chapter 6

**E**ric, what are you doing here?" I hissed before his sweaty palm clamped over my mouth.

"Shhh! Do you want those soldiers to come back for us?" He let go of my mouth to comb his hand through the rumpled wig before affixing it back to his head. "Besides, my name is Bran." He shifted on his feet, clearing his throat. "I don't know anyone named Eric."

I crossed my arms. How could this man look like Eric and yet try to disguise his identity? But a more important question arose. "Your name is Bran? As in...Bran Muffin?" A laugh escaped me.

"And I don't suppose you would tell me what your name is?"

My chuckles stopped. "Nessie," I whispered bashfully.

His mouth opened for a retort but shouting in the streets distracted us both. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me to the town square where villagers had gathered around the commotion. I craned my neck to see over the crowd.

Guards dressed in the same fork-embroidered garb escorted a young woman through the streets. Her radiant red hair shone like fire against the lime green dress she wore. When the snarling soldiers gave her a shove towards the platform in the center of the square, she whipped her head with an angry scowl. She marched forward regally, occasionally turning to survey the crowd. Jaw stern, head high—she was not some guilt-ridden criminal. No sooner had the thought registered than her fierce gaze locked with mine.

I shuddered. Me? What did I have to do with anything? At the notice of Bran's subtle nod, it clicked; rebel lady was giving him the interested look, not me.

Just what crazy mess had I stumbled into?

"C'mon." Bran didn't wait for my response before jerking forward to grab the shoulder of a bystander on the outskirts of the crowd. "What's happening?" he demanded, keeping his other hand firmly around my own.

The man stroked his beard, not tearing his attention from the scene. "Treason. She was caught helping the half-breeds. The soldiers are preparing to execute her."

Bran scratched his head. My arms squirmed to break the connection he

had on me, but my companion—*captor?* *It was hard to tell at this point*—was too busy muttering under his breath to care about the bruises I would be wearing as a bracelet later. Seriously? Did this guy take hand steroids?

“That’s it!” He snapped to attention, pulling me behind him through the crowd. I stumbled, jogging to keep up with his long-legged power walk. Maybe the sweat forming around my wrist would help me escape...

“Where are we going?” I managed to get out, breathless from our break-neck pace weaving in and out of the crowd. “And why must you always hold my arm like you’re a trash compactor?”

He turned back and flashed a grin. “Well, I am going to save her, and if you’re the kind of girl that I hope you are, you’re coming too.”

The square filled with hushed chatter of bystanders; villagers barely registered the rudeness of our jostling when we pushed past them. *Going to save h*—surely I had misheard. “What was that again?”

“We have to keep up the pace if we’re going to follow the plan I’ve cooked up. Let’s walk and talk.”

My breath caught, but from exercise or panic, I couldn’t say. “I work at a place that sells toilets! I don’t know anything about saving people!”

Bran stopped for a few blessed seconds and finally released me, giving me time to rest my hands on my knees and suck in glorious gulps of oxygen. “Look, this is the last pause I’ll allow. I sense that you want to make a difference, don’t ask me how. Some part of you wants to take a chance and come with me.” He leaned in close. “You’re not obligated to come, but if that’s your choice, get going now.”

The sunlight caught on one of the soldier’s swords and glinted in my eyes. I looked up at the sky and remembered pleading with God, begging for my life and faith to be rejuvenated somehow. Was this that moment? *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

Did that include a rescue attempt in a parallel world, God?

In the middle of the throng, soldiers pushed the redhead up the steps of the platform, where others fitted the wooden frame with a rope. A heaviness settled in my chest, and I struggled to breathe. Surely, heroes didn’t have panic attacks; it was better to leave the adventures to the professionals. But a muscular guard on the platform was already tying a noose, and there weren’t any professionals around. The time for indecision was past.

Focusing on calm, even breathing, I held out my open palm. “If I’m going to help you, I’ll need my sword.”

Bran's lips stretched into a wide grin. "That's what I thought." He looked at my jeans, and shook his head. "We're going to need to get you some different clothes."

§ § §

"Here goes nothing," I muttered, tugging a gray riding cloak around my shoulders to keep out the wind blowing through the town square.

Knowing I was not the sharpest crayon in the box, Bran repeated my instructions fifteen times before leaving me with his last piece of advice. "Take account of your surroundings, Nessie. Things can get out of hand in a moment and you need to know your exits."

Not the best advice to give someone in the middle of a crowd. I perched on my tiptoes to look over the mass of curly black hair—apparently 80's hairstyles were alive and thriving in parallel universes—belonging to the woman in front of me. A horde of townspeople pressed together around the wooden platform where the accused stood rigidly, hands balled in fists at her side. Conversations around me were hushed and terse; even the children stopped their games of tag to look on with solemn faces.

Most important was the man cloaked in a monk's habit at the front of the crowd, hands clasped together. Everything was in position.

My stomach clenched, and I reached for the hilt of the sheathed sword at my waist. There was something comforting about its heaviness, especially now I had traded my familiar jeans for the standard uniform of a lime green tunic and purple trousers. While villagers no longer stared at me as if I showed up to a Christmas party in a Halloween costume, I missed my pair of good old Earth denim. Still, it was nice to blend in and be able to listen to the conversations around me.

"Second hanging this month," a man whispered to the curly-haired woman.

The woman clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Why can't they just leave those half-breeds alone? Helping them isn't worth your life, I can tell you that."

"Leander certainly likes watching them die," the man nodded. "Makes you wonder what they ever di—"

The woman shushed him. "Keep your voice down, Harold. You don't want to end up on the other end of that noose, do you?"

What had I dragged myself into, and how did I think I was qualified to be a part of it? Recon Missions 101 was not a class I had taken in college. Managing to balance my checkbook on a weekly basis was hard enough. What if I forgot

something important like the escape route? I peeked at a figure casually brushing two horses on the outskirts of the crowd. Whew. Our getaway mounts—never thought I'd say that—were right where Bran told me they'd be. Eyes closed, I inhaled deeply. No use thinking of everything that could go wrong.

Trumpet fanfare directed the crowd's attention to the herald approaching the platform. "The criminal, Atalanta of Tinner," his shrill voice carried over the hushed whispers, "is hereby guilty of treason against His Royal Highness, King Kermit of Spoons, by fraternization and lending aid to the dangerous half-breeds. Her sentence is death by hanging."

The executioner pushed her towards the noose, but Atalanta jerked her shoulder away, walking freely towards the rope. The tall soldier from earlier with the scar running down his cheek stood next to her, beaming with glee. What could she have possibly done to make him hate her so much?

The executioner placed a possessive hand back on Atalanta's shoulder and reached for the noose when a voice cried out. "Hold! Hold!"

Bran approached the platform, lowering the hood of his monk habit. "I find it ironic that you of all people don't know the laws of this kingdom, Commander Leander," he spat, pointing an accusing finger at the tall man I had recognized.

*Is that really his name?* I chuckled to myself. *Is Doctor Seuss secretly behind all of this?*

Leander scowled. "What is it this time?"

"The same thing that it is every time," Bran retorted. "You're killing innocent citizens."

"Treason," Leander reminded him. "This woman has been convicted of treason. Or do you want criminals against the King to roam around freely? Do you like chaos?"

Bran stepped onto the platform. "Even criminals are granted confessions."

"Oh, yes, yes," Leander waved his arms. "Get on with it, will you?"

That was my cue. I turned to the man on my left who was enthralled with the proceedings. "Sorry," I muttered, and punched him in the side as hard as I could. Before he could react, I kicked the curly-haired woman in front of me in the ankles and elbowed the man behind me. Then I ducked and ran towards the horses, hoping none of them caught a glimpse of me as the actual instigator. It all went down like a John Wayne movie; after the first punch was thrown, everyone got in on the action.

It reminded me of my time as a delinquent second grader. Unfortunately hooked on Mutant Ninja Turtles, I injured seven classmates that year, much

to my poor mother's chagrin. If only she could see me putting my fists—feet and elbows, too—to good use.

While chaos moved through the crowd, I pointed to some far off, unseen villain and began shouting hysterically. "My baby! My baby! That man just took my baby!"

Heads swiveled left and right, villagers looking for the kidnapper in question. "Who would do such a thing?" a woman shouted. Some of the soldiers ran after the invisible perpetrator. Confusion moved through the crowd like the wave in a football stadium.

"You hit me!"

"The woman who's going to be hanged stole a baby!"

"You hit a baby? That's despicable!" More punching, biting, and clawing.

I surveyed my handiwork. *Wow, I did all of that.* Let's just say it wasn't something I wanted to take a picture of and hang on my refrigerator. I ducked as someone threw a punch over my head and continued pushing until, with a final shove, I stumbled out into fresh oxygen.

The man brushing the horses nodded to me, and I dug around in my cloak for a coin. He pocketed the change and tipped his hat before heading down the street. That was the nice thing about bribing people: they didn't ask questions.

Leander's voice rang out over the crowd, adding to the din. "Everyone calm down!" His fingers snapped angrily at his soldiers. "Go break up the fights and find missing babies and whatever else needs doing." The crowd bumbled about while Leander barked orders and roared at the people. "Everyone, be quiet!"

Bran grabbed Atalanta's arm and yank her away from the executioner's grip. He ran behind Leander and pushed, sending him headfirst into the mosh pit below. Soldiers watched with puzzled faces, going back and forth from the escaping prisoner to their fallen leader before finally rushing off in Leander's direction.

On the outskirts of the riotous crowd, I saddled two horses we procured for our exit. Now all to do was—

Bran vaulted onto a horse, his curly wig askew, and hoisted Atalanta up after him. "Let's ride," he gasped breathlessly and kicked his mount into motion.

"Right behind you," I called and tried to copy his motions. *Place foot in the stirrup...swing leg over the saddle...and urge the stallion onward.*

Easy, right? Except I got the faulty horse that apparently didn't respond to commands. "Go, pony," I shouted, digging my heels into its side. No reaction.

"Do something!" I slapped his flank forcefully, this time getting results.

With a start, my mare sprang into action and I...well, I fell onto the hard cobblestone street.

A sharp clang resounded in my head. Everything went blurry and faded to black. The last thing I thought before losing consciousness was, *Wow, that's got to be the stupidest way to end a rescue attempt.*

## Chapter 7

**P**oke. Poke. Poke.

My brain, though foggy, registered the repeated jabs in my ribs. Cold fingers pulled my eyelids back, but I slapped them away. “I’m awake,” I muttered.

Where was I? Sharp pain reverberated in my head, making it hard to remember. Something about falling off a horse... Oh, yes. My glorious rescue attempt. I slowly pushed myself off the hard surface, which upon further investigation was a kitchen table. Definitely not what I expected.

Glass jars, piles of old clothing, and empty boxes cluttered the walkway in what appeared to be a cramped cottage. A tattered chair upholstered in an ugly orange print sat next to a hammock that hung near the fireplace. The walls had no windows, but moonlight flooded through a ceiling made of a transparent glass-like material.

Pale luminescence reflected off two people beside me in the room—an elderly woman stroking her chin with long, bony fingers and a teenage boy—eighteen, nineteen? I was never good at guessing—with blond, floppy hair. The woman stared at me until I looked away uncomfortably.

“Yes, Elbert. She will make a fine wife for you,” the woman decided, smiling like a crocodile. She held out a knobby hand. “I am your future mother-in-law, Ferny.”

An incredulous snort escaped me. Elbert looked like he belonged in a preteen-worshipped boy band, and I had been over that sort of thing for about...oh, let’s see...ten years? Yes, I spent a few months in sixth grade leading a cult of Backstreet Boy fanatics, but we all made mistakes, right?

For instance, my backside was regretting the mistake of falling off a horse. With an oh-so-graceful grunt, I tried moving away from the table but was stopped by a shooting pain behind my forehead. “Uhh...I’m not for...sale...or marriage or whatever,” I muttered, delicately massaging my temples.

“What eloquence and beauty, mother!” Elbert beamed up at me with complete sincerity. Poor guy.

The crone shot me a dirty look. “Nonsense, girl. You have no marriage cord on your wrist. My son will make a suitable husband.”

The teen got on his knees. "I promise I will be the Best. Husband. EVER."

I winced at his shameless display before me, a woman he hadn't met until...well, until my horse threw me onto the street, assuming my crowd-brawling abilities hadn't attracted him first. Biting my lip, I shuffled towards the door, but a bony finger drove into my chest.

"Stay put," the woman growled. She lowered her voice to a grating whisper. "If you break my son's heart, I will break every bone in your body."

Okay, was I the only normal person in this entire galaxy? Who did that? Who picked up some unconscious girl from the road and said, "She'll do?"

My eyes narrowed at the old woman. I was hungry, in pain, and tired; the only thing I wanted was to eat whatever the parallel-universe version of a hamburger was and crawl into a warm, fluffy bed. Even the ugly chair looked appealing compared to the table with its unforgiving hardness.

But Ferny, hands clasped together under her chin, looked more interested in dissecting me than making me comfortable or, more importantly, letting me go.

Forcing a yawn, I rubbed my eyes sleepily. "Your son looks like a fine match, but I simply can't talk about wedding details while I'm this tired." Ferny glared at me suspiciously, saying nothing. A good future mother-in-law would have offered me a more comfortable bed, but the crone just nodded once, handing me an old shirt for a blanket. I retreated to my table/bed and laid down, wincing when my sore muscles made contact with the wood.

Eyes closed, I listened to Ferny and Elbert's conversations about wedding decorations and guest lists before they settled in for the night.

For what seemed like forever, I lay motionless on the table, occasionally peeking under my eyelids. Dim light faded to black and the sound of soft snores reached my ears. Slowly, I propped myself onto my elbows, still aching for some ibuprofen, and surveyed the scene.

Elbert, curly locks cast askew in sleep, snoozed on the hammock. Ferny was sprawled out on the chair drooling over the orange fabric. I tiptoed towards the door, emitting a loud *creak* from the floorboards. My head whipped behind to check on the pair, still peacefully dozing. Good. I leaned over to clear a pile of glass jars and continued my trek. Getting to the door wasn't an issue; arriving there, however, I faced a dilemma.

*Where the heck is the doorknob?* I strained my eyes and caressed the doorframe, taking care to listen for Ferny's breathing. My fingers found a barely noticeable indentation in the wood and traced the pattern softly. Why would someone carve that into the door?

Beneath my touch, the pattern glowed a dim blue and the door slid back into the wall, closing after I stepped through. If I ever met back up with Bran, I would need to ask him about that. My breathing quickened, producing misty clouds into the cool night air. “If...” That was the pivotal word.

Where to go from here? Cobblestone streets spread out like a grid map, running in perfect lines on either side of me. With a quick turn of the head to ensure Ferny hadn’t emerged from her coma, I started briskly down the road. Strings of white lights hung along the roofs of shops, giving a warm glow to the chilly night. Painted in pastel oranges and yellows, the buildings were compacted together like skinny townhomes and advertised wares of bread and clothing in small glass windows.

The scene was devoid of life. More importantly, the streets lacked the gallows and marketplace of the city square, meaning I was lost. I swallowed, trying to ignore the heaviness growing in the pit of my stomach with each step. Nothing looked familiar—not that I’d been in this world long enough for much to be imprinted to my memory. What was I supposed to do now? I turned my eyes heavenward.

*God, You put me here for some purpose, but I’m pretty disoriented right now. Show me wh—*

“Going somewhere?” a grating voice filled the night. I whipped around and faced a crazy-eyed Ferny, framed by a butcher’s shop and coming towards me with a skillet. That image would haunt me for years to come.

When did she get there? “Lady, you have problems!” I blurted.

I know. *Come on, Nessie. Be a woman; it’s just an old lady, for Pete’s sake.*

But, no. Standing under a street light, gray hair frizzing out on all sides, sharp nails digging into the handle of the skillet—she was a not your friendly neighborhood old lady.

Her teeth glinted. “Oh, more than you’ll ever know.” She took a step towards me, sending my pulse off the charts. Considering the skillet situation, when it came around to picking fight-or-flight, I went with flight. My legs pivoted underneath me, and I took off down the cobblestone path.

Through narrowed vision, I focused on the road, avoiding empty produce stands and traffic signs. *Ignore the burning in your muscles, Ness.* I gave myself a pep talk. *To give up means either being kidnapped or skillet-ed. I’m not sure which is worse.*

A burst of wind passed over my back, and my stomach clenched. Was she already that close to me? Calling on all the reserves of my strength and speed, I pushed forward, swerving down a side street by the fish market.

Great, because strong fish odor was exactly what was needed to motivate a nauseated runner.

The flickering streetlights made me squint. I tripped, not once, but twice over carelessly discarded empty trash bins and carts. If I survived, I would make a PSA about keeping the streets tidy in case someone needed to make a mad dash for their life.

However, road obstacles were the least of my problems. My lungs burned and the sore muscles I'd decorated with bruises earlier cried out for rest. Instead of an Olympic sprinter, I resembled a limping antelope that had been in a car wreck. A bright white light stretched out in front of me. Was my time on earth over? Would this be the end?

I lost my balance, stumbling out of the alley into a well-lit street. False alarm. The light was just a street lamp; I wasn't going to die yet. Or at least, not from running.

I pushed myself up with a groan and caught a glimpse of Ferny behind me, her gray hair flopping like a mad scientist, frying pan raised in a threatening salute. One could only wonder how such seemingly frail bones sustained that kind of cardio. It was time to ignore the agony in my muscles and get the heck out of dodge.

The wind whistled past my ears, blending with the sound of my drumming heart and...? Rhythmic clicking echoed off buildings, the sound belonging to a quickly-approaching figure in front of me. The face was too far off to see. A soldier on a warhorse? Was being captured by him better or worse than the psycho matchmaker? The closed shops and wire benches held no spaces to hide from either peril.

*Lord, a little help here?*

The horseman raced down the road with incredible speed, too fast to make out even when it passed under the street lights. On a more pressing note, he was headed straight for me.

Everything happened so quickly. One minute I was huffing and puffing, running away from a crazy lady; the next I was snatched from the street and slung onto a hard, bony surface that felt like...a horse? Yes, a quick whiff concluded that it was indeed a horse, and a moving one at that. Frantically, I clawed at the strong arms that pinned me to the galloping steed. My scratch marks earned me a "Hey, cut it out, will you?" Why did I recognize that voice?

The buildings rushed by in a blur, but I managed to make out a frail woman shaking a skillet at us before turning my attention to my second kidnapper that night.

The rider released the pressure of his arm and pulled me into a sitting position on the mount, a delicious toaster smell wafting from him to my nose. If I wasn't so grateful at being rescued, I might have eaten him.

His soft laughter was like music in the quiet night. "I see you've made friends."

I wilted—due to tiredness, no doubt—and basked in Bran's warmth that shielded me against the cold night full of crazy, skillet-wielding matchmakers. The back of my head rested against his broad shoulders, and I closed my eyes, letting the wind rush by. "How did you find me?"

He shrugged. "Mostly luck. It took me a bit to notice you were missing I was so caught up in the adrenaline. I just assumed you were behind us and didn't think to check. When you weren't there, and your horse was just following us without a rider, I sent Atalanta ahead. I've been going back and forth along the roads, hoping to find some clue of where you'd gone. I was starting to think the soldiers had found you."

"Thank you." I nestled against his chest. Once again, my prayers were answered. Why did God never work in my life like that at home? Or was I just never paying attention?

Bran didn't say anything for a while. Then I heard soft chuckling. "It's not a problem, Nessie. But I am going to tell everyone that I saw you get chased down by an old lady."

I jerked up. "That woman can hardly be classified as human! She has—"

He shushed me. "I was teasing. Just get some rest because we have a lot to talk about when morning comes."

Maybe it was just me, but that sounded ominous; just my kind of anti-bedtime story. I sighed, remembering the rescue. Crazy did not even begin to describe the day it had been. Before nodding off, I continued my habit of bedtime prayers but with a different attitude. *God, help me stay alive tomorrow.*

§ § §

Bright sunlight invaded my thinly-squinted eyes. A stretch tested my ability to deal with pain. From the way I grunted and winced, one would assume my body was made of stiff boards. The only plus to the muscle strain of sleeping on a horse was the comfort of Bran's warm presence behind me. Staying as still as possible, I tried to sneak a peek at him and noticed his shirt was wet... from my drool. *How attractive.* Without appearing fully awake, I tried to wipe the saliva off my face before—

“Sleep well?” he asked, his deep voice vibrating in his chest behind me.

Noticing he'd deemed it safe enough to ditch the wig, I was both comforted and puzzled in the eerily familiar sight of his gelled-back hair. He had to be some kind of toaster salesman twin.

I nodded with the smile that came after just waking up. He returned the grin, but it faded when he gestured around us. “We're here.”

Silence was the only response I could muster at the sight of the dirty homes clustered so close together; they were practically overlapping. Weathered boards hung at odd angles, exposing the dark insides of houses where milky-eyed children peeped out. Sounds of a young girl's wail echoed through the dusty streets, causing the hair on my arms to bristle.

Dressed in black ragged dresses and tunics—was this an emo village—women lined the street while children peeped out from behind skirts, looking on with curiosity. I ventured a small wave, hoping to gain their confidence, but it only made their shy faces disappear into the folds of their mothers' frocks. One young girl with hollow cheeks and red hair reached out a frail hand to tug on her mother's arm.

A gust of wind whipped through the village, twisting scraps of flimsy metal that served as roofs. The wailing child quieted, leaving the raking of the metal shingles the only sound when we urged our horse into the village.

“I just see women and kids. Where are the men?” I whispered to Bran, but he shook his head. What happened to these people? This seemed to be worlds away from the comfort of the city square where clean, sturdy shops displayed fresh-baked goods and tailored clothing. Even Ferny's dump of a house had been warm and structurally intact.

Bran took the horse past a tall oak offering precious shade to a few homes and stopped in front of a shack. It had seen better days. The wooden beams were splintered, sporting stains and discoloration where rot had settled in. Nearby children watched a mouse scurry out of a hole in the baseboards and dash down the street.

Bran was intending to go *into* the house? My stomach growled like something from Jurassic Park. Right...food. Maybe they would have that inside. However, judging from the villagers' gaunt looks and loose dresses, I wasn't so sure.

He slid off the horse with ease, and I was aware of how far away the ground was. Horseback riding was never my specialty, obviously, but Bran was looking up at me expectantly. I smiled, summoned all of the grace and confidence within me, and swung my legs to one side. The sudden momentum

forced me off balance. Houston, we had a problem. Gravity took its course and I fell off the mount flat on my butt. Sprawled out unattractively on the ground, I could hear stifled giggles nearby.

Ha! Signs of life, after all. "I'm all right. I'm all right," I assured everyone as I hoisted myself off the ground, gingerly rubbing my bottom. Bran had his hands over his face, failing to conceal his laughter. He grinned when I playfully punched his arm, gesturing to the open door in front of him.

"Ladies first."

Inside, someone had tried to make the dank, leaky space into a home with sparse furnishings arranged as neatly as the tight room would allow. Like Ferny's house, the walls were devoid of windows. The ceiling was made with the same transparent material, but metal shingles covered patches where holes had formed.

Two straw pallets topped with neatly-folded blankets took up half the area in the one-room dwelling. The other side was occupied by a few buckets of water, rudimentary cooking supplies, and a small blanket that covered the dirt-encrusted floor.

Hand-sewn cushions took the place of chairs and were propped against the wall where three people sat waiting for us. I recognized one as the fiery redhead we rescued the day before. She jumped up to embrace me before I joined the cushion party. See? I was making friends already. A shiver made me pull my cloak closer to keep out the constant draft.

Bran gestured to a middle-aged woman with emerald green hair and firm jaw. She wore a tattered black tunic and a black cord tied around her wrist, which reminded me of Ferny's comment about a marriage cord. Was that what she was talking about? "This is Beryl. She is the governor's wife."

I didn't quite know what to make of the unique hair color, but her wave and motherly smile put me at ease. The next one in line for introduction was Atalanta, whom Bran informed me was Beryl's daughter. My gaze shifted from the older woman's emerald locks to the younger's ruby curls. Perhaps genetics didn't work the same in parallel universes. Brushing my questions aside, I nodded at Atalanta and waited for the final and most out of place person in the room.

Well, perhaps that was a little too extreme; I was the most out of place person in the room seeing I had come from an entirely different universe. Regardless, the man before me was the first male I had seen in the village besides Bran. He was tall, six feet and then some, with long tousled golden hair. I doubted they had gyms in whatever land I had swept myself into, but the man looked as if he had worked out his whole life. His serious face gave way to a smile ever so slightly when he was introduced. "This is Fletcher, Beryl's nephew."

I raised my hand in a high five, but Fletcher left me hanging, staring at my hand like it was going to do a trick. “No, you raise your hand, too,” I explained. He slowly brought his hand up in the mirrored position, and I smacked his palm.

He jerked his hand back, cradling it protectively, and turned to Bran. “She hit me.”

Bran shrugged. “Nessie’s a work in progress. I picked her off the street yesterday.”

I crossed my arms, glad to know that I was Bran’s dump puppy that had followed him home. He offered no further introduction for me. “So, when will I get to meet the governor?” I asked.

No one said anything. Fletcher looked at his feet. “I managed to escape after the edict was passed. I’m the only one who has been able to elude them.”

Edict...elude...what? By Bran’s strained expression, I realized I hit a nerve, and the conversation fizzled into silence. Three pairs of eyes looked at me, while I chewed on my lip and watched Bran for direction. Fletcher tossed his hair behind his shoulder and pointed to me. “What’s her story?”

A white grin came to the mouth of my toaster salesman lookalike. “She’s come to save you all.”

The group focused on me, their faces frozen in hope, intrigue, and disbelief. I, of course, knew what eloquence such events required and punched Bran in the arm. “Well, that would have been kind of nice to know before you told everyone else, don’t you think?”

Everyone let out a collective sigh. Oh, one of *those* heroes.

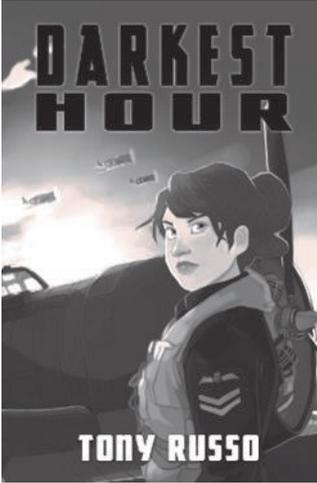
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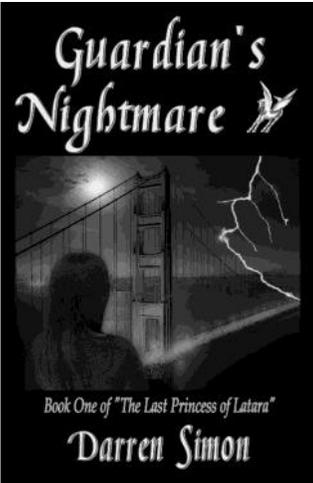
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**Guardian's Nightmare**

*by Darren Simon*

Charlee Smelton is an average thirteen-year-old girl struggling to adapt after her family moves to San Francisco. She thinks her biggest obstacle is facing the bullies who brand her a nerd. She's wrong. Can Charlee find the hero inside her, the hero she must become, to save her friends, family, city, and world from an evil only she can defeat — an evil she allows into this world.

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*Fletcher tossed his hair behind his shoulder and pointed to me.*

*“What’s her story?”*

*A white grin came to the mouth of my toaster salesman lookalike.*

*“She’s come to save you all.”*

*The group focused on me, their faces frozen in hope, intrigue, and disbelief. I, of course, knew what eloquence such events required and punched Bran in the arm.*

*“Well, that would have been kind of nice to know before you told everyone else, don’t you think?”*

*Everyone let out a collective sigh. Oh, one of **those** heroes.*

Awkward situations seem to seek out Nessie, a post-college secretary at a portable toilet rental company, like stalkers of a boy-band sensation. She has dealt with unstable roommates and an ever-present toaster salesman, but this one takes the cake.

Though her humdrum days of eating cereal alone at dinner have convinced Nessie that she has lost her purpose, the tides turn when she stumbles upon a mysterious sword. The sword transports Nessie to the parallel universe of Spoons, a land of castles and kingdoms, but more importantly: adventure.

During this quest, Nessie must outwit a kidnapping matchmaker, face the quips of an incredibly sarcastic companion, befriend a pink-haired hippie, and deal with romantic stirrings brought on by her partner-in-crime, the toaster salesman. There will be daring escapes, secrets unturned, inspirational pondering, and pointed questions on the quality of her cooking as Nessie comes to understand that God’s plan and purpose, though sometimes different than expected, are always best.



*About the Author:* Stacey Wooten is an NC native living in Durham with her husband, daughter, and two very “special” cats. She has her BSW from Campbell University and works at a nonprofit at Duke Hospital. Her pastimes include painting, cooking, eating, and winning cheesecake bets with her husband.



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