

Have You Ever Seen the Sun Rise

by

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To the stranger I didn't know, the friend I won't forget.

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Abstract

As advanced social animals, humans have adapted with the times to satisfy their social needs. The development and progression of the Internet and social media has connected people all over the world. People can socialize and share their lives online with countless others. With this new direction of social satisfaction, social development has changed. Children and teenagers now have easy access to social media, and they spend a lot of time attached to a screen instead of interacting with reality in front of them. Social media has exposed flaws and has exploited strengths of individuals to selectively tune their social behavior. The focus of this creative project is to explore different types of intimacies that individuals may have through their lifetime and how an online environment has created a controversial form of intimacy known as online intimacy.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	14
Chapter 3.....	25
Chapter 3.5.....	36
Chapter 4.....	49
Chapter 5.....	60
Chapter 6.....	70
Closing Remarks.....	77
Bibliography	80

Chapter 1

Moon/Lake

I wait in agony for Joe to log on. Noobs, casuals, and elitists had the in-game chat buzzing about the return of the ongoing event a glass memory. I personally organized times and made preparations with my guild to at least do “The Battle for Shattered Castle” during the first week of the event. The ten-man raid blended the gameplay mechanics of high difficulty raids with the accessibility and playability of low difficulty ones. A great introduction to the type of challenges found in high difficulty raids. This event raid wouldn’t completely pwn mid-tier raiders. Low-tier raiders, on the other hand, were wiped off within a matter of minutes. Many of my guildmates were ill-equipped to endure the boss encounters, unskilled to understand and to execute the necessary mechanics, and unwilling to learn from their repeated mistakes. Not this time: we were prepared to dominate this raid. After almost a year of group grinding for the top-tier gear, hours of practice with similar mid-tier raids, and innumerable rage-quits, we had significantly boosted our abilities enough to face “The Battle for Shattered Castle.”

Or at least I was ready to dominate. Joe seemed to be taking his sweet time getting on. I do have a limit on how far my patience goes, and he can completely stretch it sometimes. It wouldn’t feel right if I left Joe out, though. Today is only the first day of its return. I shouldn’t get too worked up about it since there are additional times scheduled later this week and the next week. Wrestling practice took up most of his time after school, and it should be over by now. Meaning he’s either eating or getting home. If he’s eating, his mom will probably drag him out to walk around the neighborhood later, adding another hour of wait time. Or worse, he’ll fall asleep after getting home after the walk. Maybe he’ll even use the bathroom for an hour for who knows what.

I really want to wear the new cosmetic armor skins because they fit perfectly with my class. It's hard to accessorize and to fashion in videogames. There are at least two types of gamer in the world: ones who care about how they fashion and the ones who don't care about how they fashion. As the former, I think—

The doorbell rang twice in a few seconds. Now, who could that be? I rose out of my beat-up black office chair to make a beeline for the front door. When I reached the foyer, I ducked down out of sight from the thinly-covered side window. I peeked at an angle to see the dark figures lurking out there without giving away my presence. With only the street lights faintly illuminating the front of the house, I discerned at least one person. The doorbell rang once more. A series of rhythmic knocks in an odd combination that played off each other followed this time.

I twisted the deadbolt on the inner door to unlock it, and then I started to unlock the outer door until I saw a crazy-eyed Faris attached to it like a gecko. Faris struggled to remain attached when Paul nonchalantly peeled him off. They both stood there with stupid smiles that extended from ear to ear. Unamused, I kept the door closed to prevent their mischief from intruding. Giving them my home address seemed to have been a dire miscalculation.

“Whaddya want?”

“It's party time! Get dressed and c'mon!” Faris yelled, flashing the “rock on” gesture with both hands.

“Or is your videogame keeping you entertained?” Paul asked, poorly impersonating Russel Crowe.

My phone displayed 8:03 pm. Joe's probably going to choose homework over playing *ERA* since he hasn't logged in yet. I also shouldn't be staying out late tonight. There's no telling how long this party is going to last. What time my “friends” are going to be done with it. My

parents wouldn't like knowing I went to a party on a school night. When was the last time I really cared about what they had to say or how they felt? My mom parties whenever she wants to. My father is always grumpy regardless of what I do. It's not like anything exciting is happening right now. Joe probably won't log on tonight, so there goes my raid.

“Gimme a minute. I'll get dressed and tell my parents I'll be out studying.”

I apologetically excused myself from the first raid session. The guild officers currently online were capable of coordinating tonight's itinerary in my absence. With a half-truthful explanation to my parents, I left the house to join Paul, Faris, Robbie, and Erica for the party at Luna Lago, a small rural town close to the mountains with a “famous” round lake. We made it to the house party within an hour since the fog slowed us down. A well-lit and shaking two-story house sat atop a medium sized hill. One could almost mistake it for a lighthouse if it wasn't situated in a dense forest. Exiting the car, we followed a looping dirt trail through plots of deciduous trees, and it steadily increased in steepness toward the top. A few people hung out on the front steps with booze-filled plastic cups in their hands. One greeted me as “Dexterity” on my way up the stairs. I flashed a peace sign twice at him in return.

Opening the front door set free the rap music booming inside the house. We strolled through the hallway to see that several rooms were hot spots of activity. The living room appeared to be the main center of music and bad dancing. A laptop hooked up to an old, and quite expensive, stereo system controlled the party's shuffling playlist of rap and pop song remixes. None of the songs that had played were to my liking. Most repeated the easy sing-along chorus or maintained a simple percussion. A female classmate of Erica's soon snatched her away to help entertain some baseball players. They seemed to be interested in gawking at pretty faces more than drinking.

Next, we peered into the dining room to see a table with dozens of plastic cups for beer pong, a poor and easy excuse to get drunk without making yourself look like an alcoholic. A drawn-out match between two obviously wasted girls stalled the fun for other partiers. I noticed Paul's gaze was fixed on one of the girls who had alcohol spilt on her shirt. She didn't notice him since the decent size crowd of people cheered the girls on to finish the game. On our way to the next site, I wave at a group of guys who call me "Dexagram."

Paul, Robbie, and I wandered into the kitchen to peruse the selection of drinks and food. The kitchen counter had lines of alcohol ranging from beers to hard liquors. Most of the brands were the overly advertised ones or cheap, tasteless ones. Robbie began talking with one of the people managing the distribution of alcohol. They spoke in hushed voices even though the sound of the music masked their conversation. He discretely handed a small plastic bag to Robbie, who later ducked out of the kitchen to find someplace else. Bags of chips, a few dips, sausage balls, and meat and cheese platters were spread around the island table. A mountain of empty pizza boxes was stashed away in the corner. About seven pizzas were still left untouched on top of the stove. A fair amount remaining in case I wanted to grab something later.

Faris had snuck out of the group to participate in the gambling games happening in the spare room. Tables had been arranged into a U-shape that separated the players from the dealers. Poker and blackjack were the games of choice to satisfy the vice of the minority of the partiers. His luck was taking off after he played a flush. Maybe he was counting the cards. The "house" had enough cards for two concurrent games, so people were standing around the clump of gamblers chit-chatting. Money wasn't the only currency being exchanged. Some of the players fiddled and fumbled with their phones on a loss instead of handing over bills. Looks of surprise and contentment came to the faces of the winners when they opened up their phones. One of the

winners looked up at me in joy at his reward. He yelled out “Dexilicious,” and he showed me his special prizes of the night.

The upstairs was off limits except for bathroom use. Paul and I remained paired together when we reentered the living room to see how Erica was doing with her boy situation. They seemed to have taken an interest in Erica, who was uncomfortably laughing at their jokes, over her classmate. Paul moved into save Erica from potential trouble. I watched him approached the guy until someone grabbed my shoulder from behind. I came face-to-face with the worst possible person in the room.

“Poin-Dexter! OMG, what’re you doing here?”

“Hi, Nancy. I got dragged here.”

“Uh huh, need a drink to unwind?” She sloshed her drink in a hypnotic circle.

“No, thanks. I don’t drink.”

“At least dance with me for a while then,” she flaunted while undressing me with her eyes.

“How about a raincheck on that.”

Nancy is always looking for cheap thrills in her own malicious way. Her collection of boys was one of her crowning achievements amongst her social circle. I realized Paul had settled a possible dispute between Erica and the guy since he vanished during my brief conversation. No doubt in my mind that he went off to impress beer pong girl with his chivalrous act. I weaved through the traffic of people coming into the living room to return to the gambling den. The players were more rambunctious than the rest of the house. Still it gave the illusion of quietness due to the low density of people in the room. I wanted to play a game or two, but I wasn’t willing to match my money to the low stakes the others were placing. Neither did I have a suitable

collection of alternative currency for them. I didn't have any for that matter. Faris's luck ran dry on my return. His pile of bills had shrunk to one sad Abe Lincoln. I didn't want to see his collection either. Some things shouldn't be seen in public. Somethings can't be unseen either. I would like to avoid looking in the private details of my peers without their permission.

Disgruntled at his loss, he walked to a nearby by wall to bang his head against it.

The stench of weed circulated in the air from some room in the house. People began shuffling around to avoid the foul odor while some were drawn toward it on the small chance they'll get their fix. This new development set me off on a pursuit for a tranquil location. No place inside the house was safe from the smell that found its way into every room. It drove me to the only somewhat peaceful and somewhat noiseless place, the deck in the backyard. The quiet moon hung in the night sky with small waves of clouds blanketing the dim stars. The coolness outside made everything feel much slower and much quieter. I could still hear the loud party inside, but it didn't sound fast paced anymore. I thought a handful of people would be outside as well, chatting it up with drinks in hand, and they would be doing who-knows-what—or whom. Underneath a secluded, forlorn tree that bore no fruit, I whipped out my Drone phone from my back pocket to connect to a greater world, an ever-growing network beyond the physical realm, in order to escape.

The internet has always been a great medium, and at its early age it was just untapped potential. No longer is it an exclusive network of servers for academic use, but it is now an immense net that conglomerates bits from all over the globe. These bits make up a multitude of amazing systems, and these systems make up even greater systems, one of them being the social media platform known as You-niverse with its expansive grip of power over the other social media platforms. It owed its unlikely, and questionable, success to giant mergers and the

reinventions of a lot of popular social media features, and it conveniently harbored them on one site/hub app with a very user-friendly interface to navigate through to get to those desired features.

I watched the sub-apps orbit around the center of You-niverse. Some of the sub-apps I never touch like Echo, a limited-word “messenger,” and Cluster, a photo only “blog.” They’re not interesting forms of social media. Echo restricts the amount of characters used in a message, and Cluster is mainly full of “adventurers/explorers” who bombard their followers with glamorized photos. The specialization of those features is redundant. It’s not innovation. Threads, on the other hand, links up people with similar interests to one convenient online center that houses multiple forums called Satellites. Each Satellite has its own community of people who are interested or invested in their chosen subject, and the ease of use and connectivity allows these fresher discussion boards to stay alive. You-niverse’s latest sub-app, Distant Stars, sought to change the face of social media. The disappearing chat log and the random chat matcher are the main selling points to potential users. A person could comfortably chat with anyone in a private, self-deleting chat room. That actually sounded appealing right now. I opened up the Distant Stars app, and I typed in a screen name.

Connected

ROOK-D4: Hey, how’s it going?

MANGOCAT: Hey, not too bad

MANGOCAT: wbu?

ROOK-D4: I’m fine. Any reason why you’re doing “not too bad?”

MANGOCAT: i rather be somewhere else

ROOK-D4: Why’s that?

MANGOCAT: i’m at a party rn, but i don’t want to be here rn

ROOK-D4: Really? Lol, same here. My friend dragged me along.

MANGOCAT: Same too lol.

ROOK-D4: So....

ROOK-D4: Have you ever seen the sun rise?

MANGOCAT: Um, yeah?

ROOK-D4: I mean, have you ever made the effort to wake up before the sun rises, to see it rise?

MANGOCAT: Maybe, like once. I’m not much of a morning person.

MANGOCAT: Sorry, i got to go. My friend is in a pinch right now. Bye.

I pocketed my phone. I began to wander around the deck in circles. My usual soft treading was replaced with a rapid pace. Each step made the boards creak and bend. That was a girl I was chatting with, right? With a screen name like that, probably. Could she be here? That's a pretty farfetched idea. With a name like "Distant Stars," I assume it would connect people that are unlikely to meet, but in close proximity to each other? Doubtful. Could I even find her with the little information I have? She is at a party with friends. One of the friends is, supposedly, in distress. Her friend's distress could be anything. It could be alcohol poisoning, guy problems, or a cat fight.

Looking up at the quiet moon, it had risen higher in the sky, but it remained in my sights despite its change in location. I snapped my fingers to form a finger gun to shoot at it. Bang. It didn't explode. The moon will always remain a moon wherever it goes, and everyone looks up at the same moon. An earthnoid would see one side bathed in light while the other side is entombed in an eternal darkness. Does the dark side of the moon ever face the earth? One day it will when gravity ceases to weigh it down. Gripping the doorknob, I scanned the groups of people to see how the party had progressed in my absence. Everything was still in the condition I had left it. I closed my eyes. I breathed in one last time. I exhaled. What do I have to lose? Let me see if I can find her.

I flung the door wide open, and the music and hot air rushed me. Kicking back the door in place, I looked between the living room and the dining room for any signs of someone in distress. By each wall, conversation groups had formed since people had settled down from their wild dancing. No one seemed to be in distress in any of the groups. I spotted Erica thoroughly enjoying herself now without the baseball players and her classmate troubling her. I maneuvered through two groups to reach her to check on how she was feeling. Two other girls and a guy

stood around a messy haired Erica. They warmly greeted me to their small circle. Erica tilted her cup in my direction to offer up her alcohol. I lowered her drink in refusal. My refusal to drink brought forth a frowning and sad eyed Erica. With a pat on her shoulder, I left her to enjoy the rest of her drunk night.

I slipped through more crowds of people to enter the dining room. Beer pong had bested both amateur girls, who sat up against the wall, and another match was going on between two guys this time. Paul sat next to the spilt alcohol girl, who had no interest in talking with Paul, but she could do nothing in her altered state of mind to shoo him away without making a scene. I scanned the room to see if anyone had eyes on her aside from Paul. No other girls were focused on the three of them. Exiting the dining room, I dared not to go upstairs. I was prepared for a handful of situations on this search. I was not prepared to stumble on people fumbling in the dark.

With my head peeking into the gambling den, I saw that the observers were on edge about the current game, which had a large size pot of cash at stake. A few of the players struggled to keep their poker faces. One player had four of a kind in his hand. If that guy didn't win, there would sure be a riot in here over the loss. Probably for the best that Faris lost earlier. I sauntered over to the kitchen to fill an emptiness I knew I could satisfy. Empty bags of chips and dips were scattered on the island table. The plastic platters were tossed on top of the pizza box mountain. Meal-type food lay mostly untouched. Sodas and waters were running low. Alcohol was still stocked to keep the partiers satisfied. I scarfed down the easiest things to eat by hand one after another, and I chugged down two bottles of water. Tossing the bottles into the trash can, my eyes wandered to the shaking ceiling. Everything seemed to be in motion except myself. I felt motionless in contrast to the actions happening in the background.

My thrown-together plan for finding a stranger went up in flames faster than the fall of Rome. That's plain creepy. Finding someone you don't know. A shiver went down my spine on that thought. The air became noticeably hotter of all a sudden, and the rank weed smell lingered in odd places, still drifting with the chilled individuals. The music pummeled against my eardrums. People were yelling and screaming over the music, and rubbing my temples had no effect on my oncoming headache. I made a beeline to the cool outside for that sirenic silence. Opening the door this time caused it to crackle loudly. A night figure had taken up residence on one of the wooden benches outside of the tree's leafless canopy. It stared off into the dark forest without a care in the world until my arrival disrupted its lazy rest. The house lights dissolved the lovely silhouette to expose a young girl, who had turned to inspect the disturbance.

It had to be her of all people. Nancy gave a friendly wave at me as I closed the door behind me, to unsuccessfully keep the loud noise and blaring music at bay. Not the mysterious girl I was looking for, but I sat down beside her anyway. She didn't appear wasted or tipsy to me, but then again, I don't drink. I was doubtful because of the very "compelling" guys that were hanging around her, yet this time she was by herself instead of embedded in a group of horny guys. There must be a blue moon out tonight. Nope, waning crescent. With an inquisitive look on her face, she embraced me while I attempted not to struggle too violently from her dirty paws.

"You look sad. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, my face always looks like this."

"Liar, tell me, or I'll hold you here longer."

She tightened her hold on me.

"I was looking for a girl that I was talking with, but she's disappeared."

"Oh, I'm sorry Dex. Were you trying to get with her?"

She quickly released me before anyone saw us, and we just looked toward the dark forest in front of us. Normally, Nancy spoke in a derogatory manner with me, but for this moment, she actually felt genuine. Her words weren't carried by that preppy girl tone she usually uses around guys, and instead her words flowed, almost floating even, delicately through the air. A lightness I've never noticed that her intrusive and abusive behavior concealed. Maybe she did have the heart of saint somewhere in that ever-growing black hole in her cardiothoracic cavity . . . or an ulterior motive. Most likely it was the latter of the two. Very out of character, especially since she has been harassing me for years.

“No, just some small talk to pass the time.”

“Really? You seem hurt.”

“Can you drop it, please?”

“Fine. Are you looking for a date?”

“Not really. Why would I want to date someone?”

“Well, if you need help, you can always come to me for advice.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

Silence finally descended between the two of us, as it should be, and then the blaring music from the house overtook it. Hurt is such a trivial word to describe an intangible feeling. What does it mean to be hurt? More importantly, was I hurt? More disappointed than hurt, I was dissatisfied with the fruits, or lack thereof, of my labor. I had nothing to show except my physical disappointment. Sending myself on a fool's errand was my folly of the night, but did I really feel disappointed with it? As the saying goes, “Don't go chasing waterfalls.” Or was it “Don't go chasing rainbows?” Either way, the impossible fantasy had faded and with it the delight of the search. All was normal in the world. With an abrupt cut, the noise changed to

something softer, but it was still that mainstream sound that everyone else enjoyed. Some guy probably wanted a special moment with his girlfriend. Better make it count, bud. I know I can't. Or can I?

“Wanna dance, Nancy?” I stood up and faced her with my hand out.

“I thought you would never ask.”

A smirk clearly formed as she rose up from the cold bench, accepting my outstretched hand while she placed her other hand upon my shoulder and I carefully wrapped my other hand around her back. We shuffled in a small circle, our small refuge, with our eyes locked on to each other, and her trademark smirk transformed to a small smile. Our bodies drew closer each time we went around in a circle, our holds on each other less firm and more tender. Our synchronized shuffle flowed better with each round, and finally, our holds on each other changed to account for our bodies touching.

My hands hugged the small of her back while her arms embraced the top of my torso. Cheek to cheek, I retreated a few inches for space. One of my hands abandoned her lower back to brush her hair away from her lips, and then I repositioned it behind her neck. She looked to me with inviting eyes, aware of what I was doing. I leaned in. She closed her eyes, her embrace assisting me for the perfect moment.

I covered her mouth. Bewildered. Astonished. Surprised. Taken-a-back. Priceless. The way her face adjusted to match the emotions she felt after I denied her was simply priceless. I stuck my tongue out to seal the deed. I made a goofy face to humiliate her even more. Letting go of each other, we resumed our normal stances. I couldn't hide my wide grin.

“Did you honestly believe I was gonna kiss you?”

“Oh, Poin-Dexter—such a play boy. How will I ever win you over?”

With an exaggerated eye roll, I turned back to look at the dark forest and my grin gradually faded with my declining satisfaction. She gave me a playful shoulder punch while looking back to the house. An emotional silence once again filled the space between us. My ears perked up to the new noise echoing inside. The heavy bass from the music had almost masked the sound. Glass shattered. What sounded like raging thunder rang out in a series. Yelling and screaming replaced the terrible party music. Nancy and I came to the conclusion that a scrap was going on inside. Someone must have lost the jackpot at a card game. With that same old smirk on her face, she seized my hand. She dragged me to a set of stairs that lead back down the base of the hill. Non-compliance wasn't an option here.

During the ride home, we passed the "famous" round lake with the moon's reflection gliding across lake like a swan. The soft rays of light dancing on the calm water enhanced the gracefulness of its flight. The moon on the lake and the moon in the sky weren't the same moon. The one in the sky was simply a silhouette on a dreary backdrop while the one on the splendid lake was its true self. If gravity hadn't locked it away, its real beauty would fly freely across the night sky. With eyes closed, I swore I heard a sweet song rippling on the water's surface.

Chapter 2

Landscape, Portrait, Self/ie

After walking through the entire mall for three hours, Zoey invited Charlie, Liz, and me back to her house. We all relaxed in Zoey's room. This was my first time being in her room despite being in her house numerous times. Liz sat in a folding chair by Zoey's desk, where a grey laptop rested along with notebooks, blank canvas, and an assortment of art supplies. Charlie and Zoey sat in her bed that was pushed up into the corner. I sat on the carpet with her cat, Princess, next to her bookshelf. We talked about the new shows that debuted in current anime season. How terrible and uncreative some were and how cheesy and over-the-top others were. Liz had strong opinions about some of the current shows and she already had fan theories on certain things in them. I mostly stayed out of the conversation since I only watched one or two shows a season. Charlie wasn't into anime and manga as Liz and Zoey were, but she had seen some. The conversation took a turn when Charlie interjected with a bit of gossip about one of the softball players. Zoey and Liz took the bait, and soon they were talking about school instead.

I looked at her bookshelf filled with various books, manga, and DVDs. Her small book collection was made up of assigned school readings. Her manga collection was organized in reverse alphabetical-chronological order. Most of them were the popular series that every manga fan read like *Death Note* and *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Half of the DVDs were 2D animated Japanese movies while the other half were Disney movies. These weren't organized in the same fashion as her manga.

My phone buzzed. A text message from Joe popped up on my lock screen. Odd, he usually doesn't send me a message. I walked out of Zoey's room to find a quiet place to text him back. The hallway wouldn't work since I could still hear them gossiping. I avoided the bathroom

in case any of them needed it. Downstairs would work except for the fact that Zoey's mom might ask me questions. Eventually, I decided to lock myself up in her brother's room. When I entered his room, I smelled the residual weed odor entrenched in the carpet and his bedsheets. He didn't even hide his bong well enough. It stuck out from underneath the bed skirt. I pushed it under the bed to conceal it completely. I cracked open his window to let the outside air in. No way am I going home with that nasty weed smell on my clothes. Leaning on the windowsill, I unlocked my phone to respond to Joe.

JOE MAVERICK: I got a date tonight with Veronica tomorrow

DEX GRAM: What? Dude, you never told me you were talking with her

JOE MAVERICK: It gets better, she wants it to be a double date. You up for it?

DEX GRAM: Do I get to bring my own date? Or is she bringing her own friend?

JOE MAVERICK: Either or. So, ask someone but if you don't get someone, she'll bring a friend

DEX GRAM: I'll see if any of my girl-friends are free

JOE MAVERICK: You're not going to bring someone you're interested in?

DEX GRAM: Not when you're around. I want to impress, not depress

JOE MAVERICK: I'm bringing you to make me look good. Be there, bro.

My hand started twitching. My heart began to thump hard and fast. I ran through a mental list of girls I could ask out, crossing off those that would say "no" and making asterisks on those that would say "maybe." None of them would say "yes." All the girls I knew were either taken or just fanning over me for the fun of it. None of those girls were honest about their opinions of me. I went through the list over and over again. I reevaluated the girls that would say "maybe." Nothing I thought of changed my mind over how I thought they would respond.

I spotted a knocked over pill bottle on the floor. I grabbed it. Twisting the cap and turning the bottle, I inspected the pills inside and the bottle itself for any identifiers. The bottle had no labels. The cap seemed to be worn from a lot of capping and uncapping. I pulled out one of the round pills. The markings on it were unknown to me, so I snapped of a photo. A quick image search brought up the name "oxycodone" and similar images of the pill. I pocketed my phone and hid the pill bottle under the bed.

I kept the pill in my hand, staring at the white disk. I held a concentrated piece of pure bliss. My heart still thumped hard. My head still felt scrambled from exhausting myself over whom to ask. I wanted to pace around the room, but I didn't need to do that. I could almost sense the oxycodone pill eyeing me. I closed my eyes. I brought the pill to my mouth. The door flung open suddenly. I opened my eyes. My heart sank deeply. My eyes widened. My brain scrambled more wires. Zoey stood in the doorway, looking at me with the pill almost in my mouth. She stepped into the room. My heart crushed itself. I watched her walk over to her brother's closet to pick a few shirts out of there. She closed the door on her way out. She didn't say a word to me.

My heart rebounded. The hard thumping slowed down to its previous state before she entered the room. My brain became less crossed. I retrieved the pill bottle to place the oxy back in there, and then I left the room. I heard Charlie and Liz's voices coming from downstairs. The pizza must have arrived. Before going down to join them, I looked into Zoey's room. She had finished storing her brother's long sleeve shirts into her dresser. I knocked on the door. She turned to me.

"Hey, Zoey." She ignored me.

"Zoey..."

She showed me a pill bottle that she fished out of a drawer. I took it from her, and I read the label: buspirone. It was her prescribed anti-anxiety medication that she took. This would have been a better choice than the oxy to calm my nerves. My face flushed red. My chest felt like someone ripped it open. I felt guilty and embarrassed for attempting to down that pill now. I looked up to Zoey, who now had a concerned expression. Declining her offer, I handed back her medication, and I closed her hand. The image of her worried face was the only drug I needed.

*

It was 9:00 pm now. Liz's parents demanded that she come home. Charlie had some homework she had to get, so she decided to leave with Liz. I wanted to play *ERA* tonight. Instead I decided to spend the remainder of the night with Zoey. There wasn't going to be enough time for me to really enjoy playing it anyway. We said goodbye to Liz and Charlie at the front door, and then we returned to her room. Zoey wanted to watch a movie since it was late. We didn't need to put much energy into that. She browsed through her movie collection. I hopped up on her bed. Her cat followed me up there to rest in my lap.

It wasn't every day that I got to hang out with Zoey alone. Zoey was always with Charlie or Liz, or both, during school time or when they went out. The last time the two of us were alone together was months ago when I invited her out to see a concert. I didn't ask her out anymore after that day because Charlie thought we went out on date. It also didn't help that Charlie had a crush on me during that time. She and I never had a personal talk about it. She never approached me about the subject nor did I approach her. An awkward air shadowed us afterwards. Later on, I stopped hanging out with them entirely. I felt bad about the situation, but I didn't have any feelings for Charlie.

"Have you seen *Grave of the Fireflies*?" Zoey waved the DVD case.

"No, not yet. I heard it's a good movie but sad."

"You wanna watch it?"

"Your parents won't be mad that you have a guy staying late?"

"My mom's fine with you. You could spend the night if you want to. We got—"

"Zoey!" A loud masculine voice boomed from downstairs.

Leaving the DVD case on top of her bedsheets, Zoey excused herself to answer her dad's unwanted call. I waited five minutes for her to return. She didn't come back up. I waited five

more minutes. The door remained closed. Pretty kitty Princess remained curled up in my lap. Sighing, I reached for my phone to open up Threads. I went from Satellite to Satellite. Nothing of interest was posted in all of my favorites. Only discussions centered around shitposts and the usual reposts had activity while other readers ignored meaningful and/or outlier posts. I exited Threads, and then I opened up the Distant Stars app. With the conversation history pulled up, I selected the username that I had chatted with yesterday, and the app gave me options: reconnect, block, report, and add. My thumb tapped the “reconnect” button. The screen faded to black. A little yellow circle swirled in the middle of my screen.

Reconnected

ROOK-D4: Hey, so did everything turn out fine with your friend?

MANGOCAT: Oh, hi.

MANGOCAT: A guy was harassing her, and we had to get him to leave her alone.

ROOK-D4: I bet that took a while.

MANGOCAT: It did, but he left.

ROOK-D4: Are you okay?

MANGOCAT: Yeah, he didn't hurt me or anything. Thanks for asking.

. . .

ROOK-D4: A massive fight broke out at my party. I jetted out when that happened.

MANGOCAT: Oh, wow. Are you ok?

ROOK-D4: I'm fine. I wasn't involved in it.

ROOK-D4: I would like to think I can handle myself in that sort of situation.

MANGOCAT: Why's that?

ROOK-D4: I practice Judo, so I think I'm pretty good at I defending myself lol.

MANGOCAT: How long have you been taking Judo?

ROOK-D4: About 7 years, little less than half of my life.

MANGOCAT: You're like a black belt?

ROOK-D4: Not quite. Getting to be a black belt takes a very long time in Judo.

ROOK-D4: It's a very laborious process and the examinations for belt ranks are strict compared to other martial arts like karate.

ROOK-D4: Karate and Tae-Kwon-Do are usually the “easier” martial arts to be trained in and to advance in.

MANGOCAT: i didn't know that. Judo sounds hard.

ROOK-D4: Ya, I'm not that fragile, but I feel like crap after being thrown on the mat after a while. X__X

MANGOCAT: I'm too fragile for martial arts.

MANGOCAT: So you're in high school right?

ROOK-D4: Uh huh, I'm a sophomore.

MANGOCAT: Really? Same.

ROOK-D4: XD that's ironic.

ROOK-D4: I didn't really think I would get paired up with someone my age on here.

MANGOCAT: Yeah, i expected to be talking with older peeps.

ROOK-D4: You live in the USA?

MANGOCAT: Yea. South Carolina, you?

ROOK-D4: South Carolina.

MANGOCAT:

MANGOCAT: Lol i'm afraid to ask what city you live in.

ROOK-D4: I live in Stony Heights

MANGOCAT: Same!

ROOK-D4: I feel like you're lying @_@

MANGOCAT: i'm not. What school?

ROOK-D4: Haddock high

MANGOCAT: Same!

MANGOCAT: O_O Omg, this isn't real. Do i know you?

MANGOCAT: i thought Distant Stars was supposed to be random and paired peeps far away from each other.

ROOK-D4: First of all, we need to write letters to You-niverse to complain about how distant we're not from each other and how this is not random.

ROOK-D4: Second, I'm pretty sure I would know you. I know everyone at this school.

MANGOCAT: Apparently not, lol, who are you?

ROOK-D4: That's one of life's greatest questions that we all must answer one day.

MANGOCAT: -_-

ROOK-D4: The one

ROOK-D4: The only

ROOK-D4: The man

ROOK-D4: The legend!

ROOK-D4: Dex A. Gram! Don't ask what the A stands for bc I'm not telling.

MANGOCAT: Mariam J. Lester

ROOK-D4: You were in Mrs. Boffe's 5th period math class at Haddock middle.

ROOK-D4: Wait, lol you were the quiet girl that was always reading books in there.

MANGOCAT: Lol weren't you guy that drove Mrs. Boffe crazy because you always had your own way of doing math?

ROOK-D4: Ya, y'know I almost talked to you one day because I saw you reading *Loamhedge*.

MANGOCAT: You're a fan of Redwall?

ROOK-D4: Does a rat have six claws?

MANGOCAT: When he's the villain.

MANGOCAT: This is surreal.

ROOK-D4: Ikr.

MANGOCAT: Are you religious?

ROOK-D4: Not entirely, I'm a Deist.

ROOK-D4: You? And why?

MANGOCAT: i'm a Baptist

MANGOCAT: i don't know this feel so weird. Like it's been set up.

MANGOCAT: And Deist? What's that?

ROOK-D4: Y'know what they say, life is stranger than fiction.

ROOK-D4: A Deist is someone believes in an absent God and rejects institutional religions.

ROOK-D4: And that also means rejecting holy texts and the revelations that the prophets received.

ROOK-D4: Believing God exist solely bc of existence and use of logic and reason, therefore God exists.

MANGOCAT: That's different. i've never heard of a deist before

MANGOCAT: What made you become one?

ROOK-D4: I read part of Age of Reason by Thomas Payne, and the ideas clicked with me.

MANGOCAT: Huh, like what?

ROOK-D4: Well, faith doesn't really exist, our understanding of logic and reason ties us to God

MANGOCAT: Never heard of that idea. How do you explain God's interventions then

ROOK-D4: We don't. Stuff like that isn't reliable since it's from secondhand sources.

MANGOCAT: But isn't the reason why you trust in logic and reason based on trusting a man's word?

ROOK-D4: True, but we have to come to our own understanding of how logic and reason work, we're not guided like Christians are.

MANGOCAT: Then do you see guidance as being bad then?

ROOK-D4: No, ppl can get guidance, but the individual alone must go through their "trials" to reach understanding.

MANGOCAT: i sorta understand. Sins are only the responsibility of one person alone. You can't expect someone to solve your problem.

ROOK-D4: Exactly, so each person must find out through logic and reason to become more aware.

MANGOCAT: Similar to how peeps reach salvation through their own trials

MANGOCAT: How do you explain the creation of the universe then?

ROOK-D4: I don't really do. I think it's been here all this time.

MANGOCAT: That's something difficult to wrap my head around.

MANGOCAT: i better finish my hw and get to bed

ROOK-D4: Maybe we can chat some other time? Lol and maybe about other stuff.

ROOK-D4: I know religion is sort of sensitive topic with ppl. Not really the best starting point.

MANGOCAT: Lol yea, maybe something else

MANGOCAT: Bye, good night

ROOK-D4: Deuces, sleep well.

Disconnected

I opened up the main You-niverse app to add Mariam to my friends list. Typing up her name, I scrolled through a few names with non-matching information until I found a profile that matched her information with several mutual "friends." I immediately sent a friend request. A few seconds later she approved my friend request, giving me more access to her online information. Searching through a fair number of vaguely familiar names on her friends list, very few of our friends overlapped. She had more creative and musically talented friends than preppy and jock friends like I did. The friends that did overlap had no particular connection to me except for one friend, Zoey Bloomfield. They were tagged together in a handful of pictures. Every one

of them related to church youth group activities from the Baptist church that they both attended. They appeared to be acquaintances more than friends.

Snooping through her post history and more pictures, I deemed that at least four girls were her close friends based on a broad range of evidence. Girls always have a group of best-friends, so I couldn't identify which one of the girls might be her closest friend. Their online interactions seemed typical of any teenager. Goofy posts about their interests and silly pictures of them and of things overshadowed any serious posts or pictures. Nothing really stood out except that Mariam interacted the least out of all of them. I went through each of her friend's post history and pictures. All of them confirmed my suspicion that Mariam would be involved and appeared the least. Their interests in K-Pop and reading and writing fanfiction were possible reasons that Mariam appeared to be the weakest link. In all fairness, those were pretty niche interests. They are not for everyone, especially K-Pop.

I closed out of the app. My eyes grew heavier. I pinched myself in different places to send tiny signals of pain to my brain. Princess left me to curl up on a dresser now. Zoey was gone for a good bit of time. I fought the sleepiness that slowly crept up on me. I straightened up to avoid the comfortable pillow trap. After nearly falling asleep for the third time, Zoey returned to her room with a sour expression. I faintly heard yelling coming from downstairs during the conversation with Mariam. I opened my mouth to ask her what happened, but she gestured across her throat, motioning me to keep quiet. She landed face down on a pillow, groaning into it.

Assuming our movie "date" was still happening, I brought the laptop over from her desk, and I inserted the DVD into the CD-DVD drive. She continued to lie face down. The main screen came up, and I selected "Japanese audio" and "English subtitles." I hit the "play" button

on the screen to start the movie. She still didn't move. I wasn't sure if she was trying to hide her face from me. When the characters began to speak, Zoey crawled up to the head of the bed frame to position comfortably for the movie. Her eyes lacked redness. She wasn't crying. Maybe she was just fed up with her dad. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, and then I pulled her in close to me. She looked at me. I looked at her. She returned her attention to the screen without minding what I had done.

Sometime during the movie, I remembered that I needed a date for tomorrow. I detached myself from the movie to look at Zoey. She seemed engaged with the movie, but she also seemed distracted. Her right hand repeatedly rubbed the tip of her ponytail. My eyes returned to the movie. I dismissed the thought. We aren't like that, so how would that make sense? Although, there was no risk involved since we're not like that. I looked back at her.

"Hey, Zoey, you wanna go out on a date? Not like a date-date, my friend has a double date set for tomorrow, and I need a plus one."

"Dex, you're not doing yourself a favor if you ask me out. Especially since we're not like that."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

"Besides, isn't there someone you would honestly want to ask out?"

"There is this one girl. I'm not sure how she would feel about it."

"Just ask her out then. You won't know until you try."

Silence fell between us. I retracted my arm from her shoulder to switch the position of my pillow. I pressed it against my chest now. My arms wrapped tightly around it. We went back to watching the movie. She didn't say another word about it after that. My eyes wandered back and forth between the drama unfolding on the screen and her blank expression. Only one of them

held my attention more than the other. For a while, Zoey didn't notice my stare. Looking away to see what happened in the movie, she snaked her arm behind my shoulder, and then she pulled me in a bit closer. Her face was still turned away from mine. I realized I wore the same blank expression when she faced me with a puzzled look. Briefly, we both smiled to acknowledge the reflection we saw of ourselves in the other person. She let go of me after that, but we leaned on each other for the rest of the movie.

Seita washed the dishes, that he brought from the shelter, in a stream next to the mining shaft. On a stump, Setsuko sat patiently for her brother to get done. At the start of night, one blinking firefly drifted into their area. It lingered in place before disappearing out of sight. Two fireflies were now visible. Sestuko looked up at them, but she paid no mind. She had seen fireflies a dozen times before in her short life. They lingered like the last one, and then they both vanished. Five more came and went. Nine more showed up and left. Setsuko's smile widened with the number of bugs appearing. Soon multiple fireflies floated around Seita and Setsuko. Their bioluminescence flashed in and out like drifting sparks for a brief time. Her eyes bounced from fading shine to growing shine. Her experience with the fireflies felt different now. The mere presence of the glowing bugs had hypnotized Setsuko.

The characters dashed off in opposite directions, eager to capture their only source of light for the night. They clapped them up one by one into their woven picnic basket, forming a giant mass of green light. It seeped out from the slits, unable to be contained. Seita carried the basket back to the mine. He heard the childish giggles of his little sister trailing behind him. Crawling under the bug net over their beds, Sestuko jumped up and down repeatedly. Seita placed the basket between them. His hand held back the swarm of light ready to be freed. He uncovered the basket, and a ball of light spiraled out. The fireflies dispersed soon after receiving their freedom, a short-lived liberation. Some of them clung to the bug net while others zoomed around in the space provided.

Seita and Sestuko lay on their backs. The dying light of the fireflies was the last thing they saw before they fell asleep.

Chapter 3

It Takes 85 Centi/meters

The final bell of the day rang. My classmates shuffled out of their seats and into the hallway. Loud chatter echoed through the halls from the now freed teenagers. I waited all day. . . . I put it off until the last minute to ask her out. I hastily maneuvered with and against the traffic of people in the hallway. The flow of the two-way river never seemed more hazardous. One false step and I could have been swept away with the current. I separated myself from the flow, and I descended to the first floor to merge into the English and Foreign Language hallway traffic. Forcing my way to the side, I could see everyone's faces better now that I escaped. I weaved between the students standing off to the side and those who were leaving the school. I didn't see her face. No one remotely resembled her, and I already had made it halfway to the end. Where could she be? Could she have left from the side door?

I slowed down my walk. I looked over the leaving students to inspect the students loitering by the classroom doors. My eyes swept from wall to wall looking for her. There she was. A brunette girl, just shy of five feet, stood right outside of Mrs. Ridgeway's classroom, talking and laughing with her friends. My budding smile faded. My heart pounded faster. My legs grew heavy, unable to budge. I couldn't even move my legs from the hip. I wanted to move. Usually, my body would want to move under these circumstances. I leaned my back against the wall. I reached for my phone, my only hope. I swiped left, right, up, and down. I tapped the screen once. I frantically thumbed the blank screen. This was all I could do. A few more minutes elapsed, and the river of students dissolved. I glanced up from my phone to see that her group of friends had dissolved. She walked in my direction. I looked back down at my phone to play it cool. When she entered part of my vision, I looked up. She smiled. I smiled back.

“Hey, Dex!”

“Hey, Fatina!”

She didn't stop. She continued to walk down the hallway, unaware of my intent to ask her out. I stared at the waving hair. My legs still couldn't move. I opened my mouth to call her back. Nothing came out. I choked on the air in my throat. I gritted my teeth hard. She didn't look back. No one else came to talk to her. She left the hallway without any more resistance, and then I let out a deep sigh. I wanted to bang my head against the locker right next to me. The faded blue metal called out to me. I could hear the knocking sounds in my head. Maybe, that would help me forget what didn't happen here. The heaviness to my legs disappeared, regaining the ability to move. Except I chose not to move. I closed my eyes for a few seconds. I let out the hot air that built up inside of me. The hotness that had built up in my face was still trapped inside of me. Opening my eyes, I noticed Nancy out of the corner of my eye. She had her hair tied back, and she wore her volleyball uniform.

“Nancy, would you happen to be free tonight?” She stopped and turned around to me.

“Sorry, I'm going out on a date after practice. Why?”

“I...uh...wanted to ask you out on a date, but you're already taken I see.”

“What happened to not wanting to date?” She took a step closer to me, and she placed her hand on my shoulder. Her usual smile formed.

“I need a plus one for tonight because it's going to be a double date. I just choked on asking a girl.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, Dex.” She retracted her hand. Her eyes now looked away from me

“Yeah, I am too.”

“There's always next time. I know you can do it.”

She blew a kiss and walked away. No students were in sight. All the teachers were either in their room or left for the day. The hallway remained silent. Distant and faint sounds of a janitor's cart rumbled from other parts of the school. I sat down on the ground, and I leaned my back up against the wall.

DEX GRAM: I'm going to need Veronica's friend...

JOE MAVERICK: The old Gram charm didn't work out?

DEX GRAM: I don't want to talk about it...

*

JOE MAVERICK: Veronica's friend will come. Meet us at bowling alley around 7:00 pm.

I swiped away the message. Pushing back my keyboard, I laid down my Algebra II textbook. I wrote out the problems on paper with my right hand, and I punched buttons on the calculator with my left. The first few ones were easy until they added more steps. My phone buzzed. Without looking, I cleared the notification from the drop bar. It was probably another text from Joe. I continued to work through the set of problems. My phone buzzed again. I unlocked my phone to switch the "vibration" mode to "silent" mode, but I stopped when I saw that it was Mariam. She "nudged" me, and she had sent a message. There weren't many problems left. Also, I needed to kill time since 7:00 pm was still a couple of hours away.

MARIAM LESTER: Hi, Dex, how are you?

DEX GRAM: Hey, Mariam, I'm good. How about you?

MARIAM LESTER: I'm well.

MARIAM LESTER: What've you been up to?

DEX GRAM: Preparing for a double date tonight

DEX GRAM: Don't really want to go

MARIAM LESTER: A double date? Ooo

DEX GRAM: Not a girl from my fan club, so I'm not too optimistic about it

MARIAM LESTER: Fan club?

DEX GRAM: The endearing name I call the ppl I don't really know but they know me

MARIAM LESTER: Speaking of fan club, i asked some peeps in 1 of my classes about you.

DEX GRAM: I hope they said something good.

MARIAM LESTER: They did

MARIAM LESTER: Why does your fan club call you so many different names?

DEX GRAM: I really don't know. It just kinda happened.

DEX GRAM: Do you have a nickname that your friends call you?

MARIAM LESTER: No, none like yours

DEX GRAM: What's your favorite animal?

MARIAM LESTER: Uh, an ocelot, why?

DEX GRAM: I now dub thee "Ocelot!" Go forth and revel with your new name! XD

MARIAM LESTER: Oh, what about you? What's your favorite animal?

DEX GRAM: Jackalope

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Bwahaha, i'm crying rn. That's hilarious

DEX GRAM: What's so funny? =/

MARIAM LESTER: i didn't think a guy would like such a cute animal ^_^

DEX GRAM: (^_^;)

MARIAM LESTER: i'm sry, i don't mean to be mean, it's cool really.

MARIAM LESTER: Wait a sec...

MARIAM LESTER: Jackalopes aren't real...but they're so cute though....

MARIAM LESTER: Why do you like jackalopes?

DEX GRAM: Why do like ocelots?

MARIAM LESTER: because they're cute little housecat sized leopards.

MARIAM LESTER: How can you say no to a face like that =^..^=

DEX GRAM: bc they look majestic

MARIAM LESTER: touché, touché

DEX GRAM: lk they're not real, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the thought of them.

MARIAM LESTER: I can see why you're a catch with the girls around school ^_^

MARIAM LESTER: That girl should be happy that she's going out on a date with you

DEX GRAM: I need a bigger stick to beat them away with.

DEX GRAM: ~~Don't really care for her honestly~~

DEX GRAM: ~~Do you have a bf?~~

DEX GRAM: Wbu? Have you ever gone on a date with a guy?

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: What me? Hahaha, no

MARIAM LESTER: Wbu? How many dates does tonight make?

DEX GRAM: I wouldn't even consider it a date. So, 0

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: It's okay. Some girl will be lucky enough to be with you

MARIAM LESTER: i'm not looking for a relationship

DEX GRAM: Why's that?

MARIAM LESTER: idk really

MARIAM LESTER: A relationship for me would be a distraction

MARIAM LESTER: i'm not looking for that type of commitment when i can barely commit to myself haha

MARIAM LESTER: Are you looking for a relationship?

DEX GRAM: ~~Maybe, only because I think it would be good for me...~~

DEX GRAM: ~~I don't know....~~

DEX GRAM: No, I'm not either. I just don't get it.

DEX GRAM: Especially one in high school

DEX GRAM: most of the ppl look like they're together to just have fun

MARIAM LESTER: i wouldn't insinuate something like that but I will agree

MARIAM LESTER: Maybe you just haven't met the right type of girl

DEX GRAM: Maybe you just haven't met the right type of guy.

MARIAM LESTER: Hahaha

MARIAM LESTER: What type of girls do you like?

DEX GRAM: Well, you see, I like girls that I randomly met online and happen to go the same school as I do.

MARIAM LESTER: Haha, seriously

DEX GRAM: Only if you answer what type of guys you like.

MARIAM LESTER: Fine

DEX GRAM: You better not tell anyone this.

MARIAM LESTER: Your secret is safe with me

DEX GRAM: Kinda short ditzy chicks, I don't care much about physical features, if y'know what I mean

DEX GRAM: But a pretty face is a nice too.

DEX GRAM: A good personality is important.

MARIAM LESTER: Wow, ditzy girls? Really?

MARIAM LESTER: Also, TMI, you could've kept the latter part to yourself...

DEX GRAM: ~~Judgy much?~~

DEX GRAM: Your turn now

MARIAM LESTER: Well, would you look at the time....

DEX GRAM: You can't do this to me, y'know my weakness Q_Q

MARIAM LESTER: idk, haven't gave it much thought...

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Tall, handsome, muscles

DEX GRAM: ~~Can you say basic?~~

DEX GRAM: Uh huh, go on.

MARIAM LESTER: That's it, i don't really find any of the guys i know attractive

DEX GRAM: What guy do you find attractive then?

MARIAM LESTER: Jensen Ackles on Supernatural...

DEX GRAM: Get out of here! What is it with girls and Supernatural?

MARIAM LESTER: The two leads....

MARIAM LESTER: Oh, it's not weird to like an actor

MARIAM LESTER: Like you don't have a crush on an actress

DEX GRAM: Maggie Lawson on Psych

DEX GRAM: She's not ditzy or short, she has a really pretty face.

MARIAM LESTER: Now that I mentioned it, do you have a crush on someone at school?

DEX GRAM: ~~No....~~

DEX GRAM: Yes....

MARIAM LESTER: Didn't you say you're not looking relationship?

DEX GRAM: Doesn't mean I can't have a crush...it's natural. Just not Supernatural

MARIAM LESTER: -_-

MARIAM LESTER: Is she a short ditzy girl with a pretty face and a good personality lol

DEX GRAM: Not ditzy, she is short, personality idk, but she does have a pretty face

DEX GRAM: And no, I'm not telling you.

DEX GRAM: I've said too much already

MARIAM LESTER: Fair enough

DEX GRAM: Do you have a crush on someone at school?

MARIAM LESTER: Well, you see, there's this guy that I randomly met online and happens to go to the same school as I do

DEX GRAM: Very funny, c'mon, I shared some personal stuff with you.
MARIAM LESTER: No, no one at all. Sry to disappoint you.
DEX GRAM: I kinda doubt you
MARIAM LESTER: Ask anyone ik and they'll tell you i don't
DEX GRAM: Uh huh, w/e.
DEX GRAM: What about a guy that likes you? Do you know?
MARIAM LESTER: Oh gosh, my friend, the one who was being harassed
MARIAM LESTER: Has this crush on this guy in her math class, but he doesn't like her
MARIAM LESTER: Then there is this guy that has a crush on her in her chemistry class
MARIAM LESTER: But she doesn't like him, so she's been trying to get him to like me
DEX GRAM: Sounds complicated, but you don't like him so how does that work out?
MARIAM LESTER: Yea ik, so poor guy would have his heart broken twice
MARIAM LESTER: She says she has this plan to get rid of him but i'm not sure it'll work out
DEX GRAM: Especially since you're not gonna play ball with her
DEX GRAM: Lol, maybe, I could help you.
MARIAM LESTER: How?
DEX GRAM: Hear me out: a triple date.
DEX GRAM: Your friend brings her crush, I bring a random girl for the guy crushing on her, and you bring him.
DEX GRAM: Then she can break his heart but then she doesn't dump him on you since I'm there and I can throw a girl at him.
MARIAM LESTER: Now that's overcomplicated. Poor girl too.
MARIAM LESTER: Who could you find that would agree to do something like that?
DEX GRAM: I couldn't. I would need to find a girl and then
DEX GRAM: I would just make myself look worse compared to the other guy.
MARIAM LESTER: Why do I get paired up with you?
DEX GRAM: Cuz Dean Winchester ain't available so you're stuck with me.
DEX GRAM: Bc we would be on the same page and it wouldn't matter since it's all pretend.
MARIAM LESTER: I'll keep that in mind in case things escalate that far.
DEX GRAM: I gotta go, it's almost time.
MARIAM LESTER: Have fun, ;)
DEX GRAM: Oh, dear. Later
MARIAM LESTER: Bye

I closed out of the app, and I shut off my computer. I decided to keep the same clothes I wore during the school day as the clothes for the date. No point in trying to impress a girl I have no interest in. Maybe I could've asked Mariam. Would she have said yes?

*

It was 7:17 pm when Joe and I arrived at the bowling alley. Veronica and her friend waited inside on the benches. We all exchanged greetings and introductions. Joe matched up with Veronica, and I paired up with her friend, Karla. We all paid the "All you can bowl" price at

the counter, and we got our bowling shoes. We didn't have a clue how long we were going to stay, but the night was young. We made our way to one of the lanes on the right side of the room. We slipped on our shoes. We picked out several bowling balls from the rack to use. The game started out slow. Veronica and Karla weren't really bowling. They mostly flung or lobbed their bowling balls down the lane, which would later find the gutter as soon as they made contact. The girls were more focused on talking with us than bowling. Joe and Veronica talked about random things. His bowling ability wasn't good right now since she distracted him from the game. I didn't talk to Karla that much. She didn't want to talk to me either.

My score was close to Joe's score during the first half of the game. After a while, my score went above his. When his turn came, his bowling ball struck all of the pins down. Karla went up next, and she flung the bowling ball. I bounced my leg up-and-down, waiting for my turn to come. She finished with seven pins left standing. Not even a few seconds into my turn, I knocked all of mine down. Joe and I exchanged looks. We knew this was going to happen. The bowling date devolved into a competition. Each time one of us scored well, the other would try to best it. With our focus on our match, Veronica and Karla stopped talking with us. They stood behind us, skipping their turns to let us bowl. I scored just shy of beating Joe, and he offered a high-five to Veronica, who didn't accept it. The girls stood with their arms crossed.

“Are you guys like gay?” Veronica asked.

“What?” I questioned.

“We ain't gay,” Joe answered.

“Well, you two look like you're more into each other than us,” Karla stated.

We watched them leave us at the bowling lane. Veronica and Karla never once looked back at us. Their rigid posture and their tight walking showed their disappointment. Joe and I

sighed. We removed our bowling shoes, and we swapped to our regular shoes. We didn't have to say a word to each other. We knew what the other was thinking. We walked to the counter to return the shoes when I spotted Nancy and a guy bowling at the second to last lane. Joe proceeded to return his shoes, but I stood there observing Nancy's ongoing date.

Her date moved livelier than she did with his exaggerated arm movement and his odd walk. His attitude didn't make up for that fact that he just got a gutter ball. I couldn't clearly see Nancy's face from where I stood. No doubt in my mind she had dead eyes and lacked a smile. I glanced back at Joe, who noticed my prying eyes. I sent him off with shoulder pat, and he exited the bowling alley. I asked the employee at the counter if I could join Nancy and her date's bowling lane. I wasn't going to waste the money I paid for "All you can bowl" because of one hiccup. He didn't see a reason why I couldn't, so he allowed me to join them.

I ambled over to them, keeping notes on how to approach them. Her date attempted to touch Nancy every so often. He would reach for her shoulder, her back, and arm. Each time she slapped his hand away. He perceived her poor reception as a signal of playing hard-to-get. Nancy went up to bowl this time, and her date slapped her butt on her way up. She paused for a second. I feared that she would hurl the bowling ball at him. She ignored his sexual advancement to bowl. When she finished her turn, she recognized me several feet away. I smiled. She smiled back. Her date went up to bowl. I moved in for the kill.

His ball travelled down the lane, and it knocked down all of the pins. He turned to Nancy to brag about his achievement. His grinning face sank into frown when he saw with me with Nancy. We pretended to not notice him. Our faces were close enough that our noses were almost touching. We exaggerated our smiles. We giggled like one of us told a great joke except the only joke was this guy. I had my arm around her shoulder, and I twirled her hair. She had one arm

wrapped around my lower back, and she had her hand on my chest. He marched up to us, huffing and puffing.

“What are you doing?!”

“I think a better question is: who are you not doing?” I suggested.

“Not me!” Nancy chimed in.

He swung wide to hit me in the face. I pushed Nancy away with my arm that was around her while I swept and grabbed his fist with my free hand. I smashed his fist to make his hand open. I twisted his wrist. I applied pressure to the back of his hand. He fell forward a bit in an odd position. I quickly circled behind him, still controlling his hand, and then I barred his arm behind his back. I kicked the back of both knees. I leaned into his unbalanced body to bring him down. He face-planted on the slick hardwood floor. I sat on top of him with my knees pinching his sides. I leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“I think you should leave.”

He struggled to get out of the hold. I pressed my knees harder into his sides, and I cranked his barred arm up more. He tapped out, but I held the pressure for a few more seconds to make sure he got the message. I stood up before letting go of him. He picked himself off the ground, visibly irritated with the situation. He looked at me with teeth bared. I smiled. People were staring at us. They didn't know what happened. Only that someone hit the ground. He stomped off. His pride broken for the night. I dusted myself off for no apparent reason other than looking like I accomplished something in the tiny scrap.

“Thanks for getting rid of that guy.”

“Maybe you should pick better guys to avoid this situation.”

“I got you, didn't I?”

She grinned. I lightly hip-checked her. We proceeded to bowl together. Nancy cleared the scoreboard to start a new game. We playfully pushed and shoved each other. We cracked jokes in-between turns. Near the end of the game, our scores were neck and neck. This was my time to seize victory. I stretched my back. I whipped my bowling hand. I slid the bowling ball into place on my hand. I positioned myself for the perfect shot on the last pin. I stuck my tongue at Nancy. She pouted. I inhaled a deep breath. I exhaled slowly. I advanced toward the line to make the shot. I hesitated in the middle of completing my form. How long would these feelings of excitement and satisfaction actually last?

The bowling ball fell out of my hand onto the lane, and then it crawled diagonally to the left side gutter. I watched it roll past the last unharmed pin standing up. The sweep bar brushed it down. Nancy cheered, gloated, and laughed her ass off behind since she had won by a few points. I stared at the pinsetter setting down a dozen pins for the next game. I massaged the middle of my palm and my wrist with my thumb. Nancy skipped up to me, jabbing me with her elbow and making funny faces to celebrate her victory. She stopped when she saw that I wasn't responding to any of it. She wrapped one arm around me.

“Are you okay, Dex?”

“My hand hurts. I'm going home. See you later.”

I gently pushed her arm off me. I walked back toward the table to take off my shoes. Nancy remained quiet. She tried to process what was going on with me. She knew that gears were turning in my head, but she didn't know why they were. I tossed the snacks and drinks into the trash can. She came to the table to take off her shoes as well. I approached Nancy to give her a quick hug before leaving, but I stopped myself. She looked up at me with her shoes in hand. She didn't notice my arms going back to my side. We returned them to the counter, and then we

walked out of the bowling alley. She waved me goodbye. I kept my hands in my pockets. I simply nodded at her.

Before returning home, I stopped at the newly made park. There wasn't much to look at since it was the night time. Ducks were asleep. No fishes were living in the ponds. Night time joggers were absent. The lampposts lit up the pathways that looped around the entire man-made park. I strolled on one path until I reached a bridge over a small waterway. I lifted myself up on the stone railing, and then I walked one foot in front of the other and with both arms outstretched like a tightrope walker. Hopping off the stone railing, I spun around in circles dizzily. I crashed down on the grass, and the blue stars that were sprinkled in my vision began to disappear.

Numerous stars twinkled in the night sky. In ancient times, people looked toward the stars for guidance. People gazed outward to find themselves inward. They connected them to make constellations. They named them to solidify meaning to their stories. To count the stars is to count the times. For every star holds a story to be told. Although no star has ever held the most important story, the ones of the trees. Connecting trees makes them a forest. From afar they are one. From up close, one is all. To count the trees is to count lives. Each one bearing the burdens of past lives. Each one carrying the will of the new lives. The breath that they exhale gives and sustains life. For every tree passes on a legacy to be discovered. Numerous trees rooted on this green earth. Only if the ancient people knew that the path to discovery was 85 centimeters, not 146,000,000 kilometers.

Chapter 3.5

Of Connections/Connptions/Companions

DEX GRAM: Hey, Ocelot, how's going?

MARIAM LESTER: Oh, you were serious about that?

MARIAM LESTER: i guess the name does fit me well

MARIAM LESTER: It's going well. Wbu?

DEX GRAM: Being cool as always (•_•) (•_•)>-■-■ (-■_■) yeahh!!!!

MARIAM LESTER: Omg lol

DEX GRAM: My impersonation of Toby McGuire's Peter Parker.

MARIAM LESTER: Who's who now?

DEX GRAM: The guy who played Spiderman in the 2000s Spiderman trilogy.

DEX GRAM: Not the new one

MARIAM LESTER: Oh, that actor

DEX GRAM: What was the last movie you saw that you liked?

MARIAM LESTER: Inception

MARIAM LESTER: That was a mind-boggling movie

MARIAM LESTER: What was the last movie you saw that you liked

DEX GRAM: Real Steel

DEX GRAM: I'm a sucker for a boxing film, the most American thing ever

DEX GRAM: I went in thinking of it as a joke of Rock 'em-Sock 'em Robots but in a movie format

DEX GRAM: Pretty good film

DEX GRAM: Do you prefer to read books over seeing a movie?

MARIAM LESTER: occasionally, i like to go out to see a movie with friends

MARIAM LESTER: But yea, i like to read a nice book when i have the chance

MARIAM LESTER: or when i had the chance, not anymore now with all this school work

DEX GRAM: Ya, I feel like I have no time to read anymore.

DEX GRAM: What genre(s) do you like to read?

MARIAM LESTER: Mostly fantasy books

MARIAM LESTER: My favorites are Chronicles of Narnia, Lord of the Rings, and Harry Potter

MARIAM LESTER: What genre(s) do you like to read?

DEX GRAM: Mostly, military/political/spy thrillers and some certain genres in manga

MARIAM LESTER: Manga? That's not "cool" ^_^

MARIAM LESTER: i didn't expect, Mr. Popular, to be interested in manga

DEX GRAM: I only read very select manga.

DEX GRAM: I'm into anime too and

DEX GRAM: Wait, what's that supposed to mean?

MARIAM LESTER: Nothing at all really, some of my friends like to read manga

MARIAM LESTER: i have read a bit and watched some anime

MARIAM LESTER: It's just uncommon that's all, not many peeps would admit to it

DEX GRAM: I didn't expect someone like you to have read manga either

DEX GRAM: Usually, ppl that are into manga and anime are people with problems

DEX GRAM: Anyway, my favorites are the Jack Ryan series, Bourne series and John le Carré's novels

MARIAM LESTER: No James Bond?

DEX GRAM: Kinda overrated, and not realistic compared to these ones

DEX GRAM: Well, except for the Bourne series

MARIAM LESTER: Why do you like those types of thrillers?

DEX GRAM: I really like the complexity of espionage, military and politics in good literature.

DEX GRAM: Espionage is very intense when spies and espionage agencies have to try outwit each other

DEX GRAM: in “I know that you know that I know” situation or someone is left in the dark

DEX GRAM: Someone is being used or someone has to pull off a significant feat

DEX GRAM: Reading about military action is the best kind of action

DEX GRAM: Organized, disciplined and high risk with dangerous outcomes

DEX GRAM: Have you ever read a battle scene with a submarine or a ship?

DEX GRAM: It’s very dramatic and suspenseful

DEX GRAM: Like in The Hunt for Red October when the Russians have to keep their nuclear sub hidden from the passing US sub and when later the Red October has to engage in combat with another sub.

DEX GRAM: I can’t really explain it well, but the dynamics of the crew and how they are able to navigate through the depths while trying to fight another sub is amazing. It requires everyone to be on their game in order for all of them to survive.

DEX GRAM: And politics is always better and more exciting in a fictional world.

MARIAM LESTER: Maybe i might have to read one of those books sometime

DEX GRAM: So why fantasy?

MARIAM LESTER: i haven’t really thought about that

MARIAM LESTER: Maybe it’s because normal people in fantasy possess more power

MARIAM LESTER: In LotR, I really enjoy that the regular people play a huge role in the grand drama of the story

MARIAM LESTER: an epic struggle of good and evil with good people that choose to be less powerful

MARIAM LESTER: since they know that power in the hands of one person corrupts, in this case the power of the One Ring

MARIAM LESTER: the refusal of such a magnificent power is very inspiring and humbling

MARIAM LESTER: They show that they don’t need power of that magnitude to achieve what they can do together

MARIAM LESTER: Like Faramir, for example, is the perfect representation of human integrity

MARIAM LESTER: He understands that the power of the One Ring is terrible and he doesn’t give into temptation like the others do

MARIAM LESTER: Sauron was only one person against many and that was his downfall along with his lust for power

MARIAM LESTER: It’s a very Christian themed story lol

MARIAM LESTER: Those are the things that stick out to me that are similar to the teachings of Christ

MARIAM LESTER: We must live honest lives that benefit each other and do our best to right the evils of the world

MARIAM LESTER: Also looking at the relationship between Sam and Frodo

MARIAM LESTER: Sry, i have to go

DEX GRAM: Oh, ok, that’s fine

MARIAM LESTER: i was getting to a good part too

DEX GRAM: We can pick up next time

MARIAM LESTER: Yeah, bye

DEX GRAM: Deuces

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DEX GRAM: Do you have any special plans for our upcoming break?

MARIAM LESTER: No, not really

MARIAM LESTER: My friends do but unfortunately i'm going to be stuck at home

MARIAM LESTER: My parents don't want me going out so much....

DEX GRAM: Bummer =\

MARIAM LESTER: Wbu? Do you have special plans?

DEX GRAM: I do, I did lol

DEX GRAM: My best friend and I were supposed to be on a game together at the start, but his dad's gonna take him away on an annual men's retreat

MARIAM LESTER: Lol men's retreat?

DEX GRAM: Ya, men doing menly things in a cabin in the woods.

DEX GRAM: I expect him to come back with a beard and scars from chopping too much wood.

MARIAM LESTER: Lol

MARIAM LESTER: Videogames, right?

DEX GRAM: Ya, mostly RPGs, sometimes MMORPGs

MARIAM LESTER: ?

MARIAM LESTER: The only game I ever played was Mario

MARIAM LESTER: What are RPGs and MMORPGs?

DEX GRAM: Well, my non-gamer friend, RPG stands for (R)ole-(P)laying (G)ame

DEX GRAM: While MMORPG stands for (M)assively (M)ultiplayer (O)nline (R)ole-(P)laying (G)ame

DEX GRAM: RPGs are games where you can be someone else, someone you're not

DEX GRAM: Like a knight, a soldier, a god, y'know anyone

DEX GRAM: They can be set in any type of setting such as medieval, futuristic, modern and fantasy. Stuff like that

DEX GRAM: Most of the times you can create your own character in the game that you play as

DEX GRAM: Sometimes make up a backstory to your character, physical features, class, profession/job, race and the like

DEX GRAM: One of my favorite games is a fantasy RPG called *Crimson Legacy 3: Prismatic*

DEX GRAM: My main character, Draekon, that I like to play as is a psychic battle-mage known as a seeker in the game's lore

DEX GRAM: The gameplay is very complex when it comes to combat and non-combat situations

DEX GRAM: the politics are interesting since there are multiple factions and nations that you can join and swear allegiance to

DEX GRAM: the world is so amazingly built even though it's a sequel game, the graphics are beautiful

DEX GRAM: there's so many interesting quests with many interesting choices

DEX GRAM: And I have completely lost you, haven't I?

MARIAM LESTER: Yea....

MARIAM LESTER: It sounds like you have a lot of fun

DEX GRAM: Gaming is a very niche hobby.

MARIAM LESTER: Most guys like to play videogames

MARIAM LESTER: Why do you play videogames?

DEX GRAM: Why do I play?

DEX GRAM: Well, I can forget who I am for some time and I can be someone else

DEX GRAM: in another world, in another life.

DEX GRAM: It's fun for me to take on different roles that I can't or couldn't usually take on IRL

DEX GRAM: only in video games

MARIAM LESTER: Like being a bad guy?

DEX GRAM: Ya, like being a bad guy. Don't take that as meaning I like to kill ppl.

DEX GRAM: I can just explore different ways of thinking. It's philosophical, and almost poetic in a way.

MARIAM LESTER: So, it's fun because you don't have to be you?

DEX GRAM: ~~Ya, bc sometimes I don't want to be me some days~~

DEX GRAM: Right, that's why it's fun.

DEX GRAM: I liberate myself from this reality and cross into another one.

DEX GRAM: I lose myself to gain another self

MARIAM LESTER: Do you have any other hobbies like that? That make you "lose" yourself?

DEX GRAM: Well, it's not exactly the same, but I like to build plastic model kits

MARIAM LESTER: What?

DEX GRAM: Y'know what model trains and cars are?

MARIAM LESTER: Yea, stuff that kids and old peeps like to build and to play with

DEX GRAM: This is also a niche hobby too since it's from Japan.

DEX GRAM: I build these model kits called "Gunpla" from a popular Japanese franchise called *Mobile Suit Gundam*.

DEX GRAM: Mobile Suits are kinda like robots, but that's a long rabbit hole for another time

DEX GRAM: Basically, I like to put together robots in my free time, and it takes a really long time to build some.

DEX GRAM: My longest build took 73 hours

MARIAM LESTER: Wow

DEX GRAM: Ya, but I like that it takes a long time to make. I like the process.

DEX GRAM: I like trimming down the plastic nubs on each piece that come from snipping them off the tray and slowly piecing them together until I get like an arm or a leg.

DEX GRAM: Eventually, I get half of a body, then the whole thing.

DEX GRAM: I love it bc I can get so wrapped up the building process that I just forget where I am and what's happening around me.

DEX GRAM: Although sometimes I cut myself by accident and then that pulls me out.

MARIAM LESTER: What you cut yourself? A dangerous hobby you have...

DEX GRAM: I work with a sharp hobby knife. Sometimes I really do put blood, sweat, and tears into building.

DEX GRAM: I found out I really enjoy working with my hands, and that's something I rarely get to do.

DEX GRAM: But I can do it with Gunpla.

DEX GRAM: Also, I can try to be creative too. Painting and kit-bashing means I can make up a lot of stuff.

MARIAM LESTER: Wow, i don't have anything like that as a hobby

MARIAM LESTER: i feel embarrassed now lol

DEX GRAM: Lol usually, I'm the one embarrassed since videogame is kinda common but plastic model kits are far out there in the USA

MARIAM LESTER: i don't think i want to share my hobbies now haha

DEX GRAM: Tell me, it doesn't matter, they probably make more sense than mine lol

MARIAM LESTER: You're gonna think it's lame and silly

DEX GRAM: Funny, ppl tell me that playing games is lame and what I build is silly

DEX GRAM: It's your hobbies, own it.

MARIAM LESTER: I like to run and I like to bake
MARIAM LESTER: I'm on the track & field team and cross country actually
DEX GRAM: ~~My mortal enemies!~~
DEX GRAM: Whoa, that must keep you busy.
MARIAM LESTER: Cross country has kept me busy and staying up late at night with hw
MARIAM LESTER: It's going to sound cheesy, but i like running for the Runner's High
MARIAM LESTER: It feels great when i'm running through the race, enduring the distance
MARIAM LESTER: Emptying my mind in order to focus on my goal
MARIAM LESTER: Maybe it's like how you feel when you build your kits
MARIAM LESTER: i get lost in my own little world as i go through a physical motion
MARIAM LESTER: but my mental self is projected somewhere else
MARIAM LESTER: to a different place far removed from reality
MARIAM LESTER: It's almost a spiritual experience for me
MARIAM LESTER: Like how Jesus fought off temptation when traversing the desert
MARIAM LESTER: My body might want to give up on me, it might want to fight against me
MARIAM LESTER: But i feel so in control and so free
MARIAM LESTER: Baking on the other hand is sort of sad
MARIAM LESTER: i like to bake to keep my mind off things
MARIAM LESTER: It's a nice distraction from life when i'm kneading dough and watching the oven
MARIAM LESTER: i bake a lot when i'm sad or when i'm happy
MARIAM LESTER: Channel my emotions in a more constructive way
DEX GRAM: A more delicious way, yum
MARIAM LESTER: Lol, yea, a more delicious, self-satisfying way
MARIAM LESTER: Cookies, pastries, cakes, breads, anything as long as the stand mixer still works
MARIAM LESTER: and the kitchen still has enough space for my goodies
MARIAM LESTER: I can forget things and just bake and bake and bake
DEX GRAM: Maybe you could bake something for me someday
MARIAM LESTER: And maybe you could build something for me someday
DEX GRAM: It's just really nice sometimes to forget everything in the world
DEX GRAM: and to detach yourself from reality
DEX GRAM: Like drifting off in space
MARIAM LESTER: i wouldn't go that far lol
MARIAM LESTER: Gracefully drowning/floating in a pool is what i would compare it too
*

DEX GRAM: I tried asking a girl out on a date since I'm free during Fall break
DEX GRAM: Choked hard...
DEX GRAM: Really hard...
MARIAM LESTER: i'm sry. i'm sure you'll do better next time
MARIAM LESTER: Wait, i thought you said you didn't get it?
MARIAM LESTER: What changed?
DEX GRAM: idk...something changed
DEX GRAM: I guess I wanted to try to go out on a real date at least once
MARIAM LESTER: Mr. Popular can't get a date, that's a surprise
DEX GRAM: You're not helping...
MARIAM LESTER: Sry...didn't mean it like that....
DEX GRAM: I'm just missing so much, like who am I?

DEX GRAM: What do I have that other guys don't?

MARIAM LESTER: A fan club

DEX GRAM: Stuff that will help me get a girl, not drive her away bc I want to add her to my "harem"

MARIAM LESTER: Okay, okay, let's see what do girls like...

MARIAM LESTER: What do girls like?

DEX GRAM: You're a girl! Why don't y'know? Q_Q

MARIAM LESTER: i don't go out on dates

MARIAM LESTER: Ooo, I got one!

MARIAM LESTER: You have to be special

DEX GRAM: Special...

MARIAM LESTER: Presentable. All girls like it when a man is very approachable, i think

DEX GRAM: Aren't those two different things?

MARIAM LESTER: Quiet, i'm still thinking

MARIAM LESTER: Attractive, duh

DEX GRAM: Not gonna debate that

MARIAM LESTER: Worthy. All girls want to feel like they're not wasting their time.

MARIAM LESTER: Most of all, confident

DEX GRAM: Confident...like the Winchesters, right?

MARIAM LESTER: Exactly like the Winchesters

DEX GRAM: Ya, let me go find my Chevy Impala, recruit my brother into demon fighting and get a revolver and I'm good to go

DEX GRAM: Great idea

MARIAM LESTER: Girls love demon slaying boys

DEX GRAM: Might as well be a vampire too while I'm at it...join our local vampire cult

MARIAM LESTER: Really, just repeat it to yourself and it makes sense.

DEX GRAM: Demon slaying vampire that drives an Impala and has a revolver that can kill anything

MARIAM LESTER: The other things

MARIAM LESTER: Special, presentable, attractive, worthy, confident

DEX GRAM: Special, presentable, attractive, worthy, confident

MARIAM LESTER: Now repeat it with "i'm" in front of those when you want to approach a girl.

MARIAM LESTER: Practice

DEX GRAM: I'm special, I'm presentable, I'm attractive, I'm worthy, and I'm confident

MARIAM LESTER: Ooo ooo, you need an inspirational name

MARIAM LESTER: A name that ppl can chant

DEX GRAM: I don't think any of my nicknames are chant worthy

DEX GRAM: They all sound nerdy or too wordy

MARIAM LESTER: Hmmm

MARIAM LESTER: I got it

MARIAM LESTER: You can do it, Jackalope King

DEX GRAM: Jackalope king? Are you serious?

MARIAM LESTER: You are a majestic beast above all beasts.

MARIAM LESTER: A king amongst kings

MARIAM LESTER: You are the Jackalope King

DEX GRAM: Now I get it...all girls love to play matchmaker...the world makes sense now

MARIAM LESTER: Say it

DEX GRAM: No

MARIAM LESTER: Say it or you won't be confident when the time comes

DEX GRAM: I'm the Jackalope King

MARIAM LESTER: Again

DEX GRAM: I'm the Jackalope King

MARIAM LESTER: Nouveau

DEX GRAM: Soy el Rey de Jackalope

MARIAM LESTER: My dear Jackalope King, I believe you're ready to go on the hunt for a worthy Jackalope Queen

DEX GRAM: I don't feel any different

MARIAM LESTER: It'll come to you, don't worry

MARIAM LESTER: Speaking of matchmaking, my friend finally got that guy to stop crushing on her.

DEX GRAM: Oh, so no triple date?

MARIAM LESTER: We can save that for another time, Jackalope King

DEX GRAM: Y'know bbq'd Ocelot sounds good right about now.

MARIAM LESTER: =0..0=

MARIAM LESTER: Yea, he approached her a few days ago and she broke his heart....

DEX GRAM: Ouch, man down, o7

DEX GRAM: I have to take a moment of silence for my fallen brother...

. . .

DEX GRAM: Gracias Dios

DEX GRAM: I think I might know the guy too.

MARIAM LESTER: Really? Your fan club connections?

DEX GRAM: No, we went to elementary school together before he got sent off to military school

DEX GRAM: Dude with short brown hair, kinda built but not really that built, very smart kid, chess master?

MARIAM LESTER: Wow, yea, that's him.

MARIAM LESTER: How did you find out?

DEX GRAM: He posted like a few hrs ago on You-niverse about it.

MARIAM LESTER: Oh

DEX GRAM: Ya

DEX GRAM: Wbu? Have you changed?

MARIAM LESTER: Me? Hahaha no

MARIAM LESTER: But there is this one guy in my Chemistry class that has been creeping me out

DEX GRAM: How's so? Do I need to come beat him up?

MARIAM LESTER: Haha, no, you don't need to make a scene for me

MARIAM LESTER: Thanks though

MARIAM LESTER: He's always talking to me about random stuff, hw, things going on at school

DEX GRAM: ~~So, he's just being a normal person~~

DEX GRAM: Continue

MARIAM LESTER: He's been talking to me non-stop for the last few weeks and it's been bothering me

MARIAM LESTER: He makes me feel very uncomfortable

DEX GRAM: ~~And I thought I was bad socially~~

DEX GRAM: Have you tried getting rid of him?

DEX GRAM: Y'know crush your crush?

MARIAM LESTER: Idk

MARIAM LESTER: i don' think i can do it

MARIAM LESTER: i never had to do it myself

MARIAM LESTER: Usually they would just leave me alone after a while

MARIAM LESTER: But he's really persistent

DEX GRAM: What's stopping you?

MARIAM LESTER: i'm really nervous about it, but i don't want to be mean either

DEX GRAM: Sometimes you have to be "mean" to have it your way

MARIAM LESTER: i want to let him down easy, but idk how to do it

DEX GRAM: Sometimes things like this aren't easy, you just gotta do it

MARIAM LESTER: Look who's not being helpful now

DEX GRAM: I'm just saying, I rather a girl shoot me down straight than be condescending like I can't handle it

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: You have a point but still...

DEX GRAM: W/e

DEX GRAM: I'm sure you'll figure it out, you're a smart girl after all.

MARIAM LESTER: Haha, maybe

DEX GRAM: If you need me, I can be there for you when you do it

DEX GRAM: In case if you're afraid of him and you think he might take it badly

MARIAM LESTER: Okay, i'll consider it. Thanks

DEX GRAM: I'm sry. Ik it's not the advice you wanted to hear.

DEX GRAM: I'm not good with this stuff either

MARIAM LESTER: It's okay...

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Was it your crush that you tried to ask out?

DEX GRAM: Mhm...

DEX GRAM: I was very rigid in my delivery

DEX GRAM: I came up to her, asked her, she said she would be busy, then I was like "ok, bye" and left

DEX GRAM: X_X

DEX GRAM: Didn't even try to make a conversation or anything

DEX GRAM: I just went in with the intent to ask her out

DEX GRAM: Not sure if I want to try again

MARIAM LESTER: You should

MARIAM LESTER: She didn't exactly tell you "no" the first time

MARIAM LESTER: She said she was busy

DEX GRAM: Ya, but what if she's busy again?

DEX GRAM: and again and again and again?

DEX GRAM: I rather not waste my time getting rejected so much bc someone is busy

MARIAM LESTER: Does she even like you? Not like an infatuation, but does she like you as a person?

DEX GRAM: I guess, but I've never known her to be a rude person

MARIAM LESTER: Is she always happy to see you?

DEX GRAM: Ya

MARIAM LESTER: Smile?

DEX GRAM: Ya

MARIAM LESTER: Does she say "hi" "hey" or "hello"

DEX GRAM: "Hey"

DEX GRAM: Let's not try to get my hopes up with how she greets me relates to how she likes me.

MARIAM LESTER: You've never made her jealous or mad?

DEX GRAM: Well, there was this one other short girl that liked to talk to me

DEX GRAM: that was in Freshman yr, and my crush saw that

DEX GRAM: Not sure if she got jealous bc I talk with other short girls, that's speculation

MARIAM LESTER: Well, i think you got another shot

MARIAM LESTER: Practice what we talked about and i'm sure everything will be fine

MARIAM LESTER: If not you can move on to another girl

MARIAM LESTER: If that's what you want

DEX GRAM: Well, gee thanks, Mariam!

DEX GRAM: Why don't you try asking out a guy and get shot down over and over?

DEX GRAM: People might "like" me but that doesn't mean they actually want to be around me.

DEX GRAM: ~~It's not like I want to be around them either, so I guess I get what I deserve~~

DEX GRAM: I'm so sorry...

DEX GRAM: I'm not mad at you, Mariam

DEX GRAM: or her for that matter....

DEX GRAM: I'm more frustrated with myself about things

DEX GRAM: I think that's enough chatting for me for tonight

MARIAM LESTER: i'm sry

MARIAM LESTER: i didn't mean to push the subject like that

MARIAM LESTER: i wanted to help you....

DEX GRAM: It's alright, it's not your fault.

DEX GRAM: ~~I'm just not a good person to be around~~

*

MARIAM LESTER: Are you going to go to the school's musical next month?

DEX GRAM: No, i'm not really a fan of musicals lol

DEX GRAM: And aren't they doing some weird musical version of Swan Lake?

MARIAM LESTER: i'm hesitant to see it without Tchaikovsky's score

MARIAM LESTER: But you've seen Disney movies and enjoyed those right?

DEX GRAM: Ya, but those musicals are different.

DEX GRAM: Like how does it make sense when two gangs just break out in dance and song to fight each other.

DEX GRAM: Or when ppl sing during a battle? Music scenes just mess up the drama and the tension.

DEX GRAM: Although I did enjoy the Sound of Music and The Phantom of the Opera.

DEX GRAM: I prefer music that's on the heavier side, not so much Pop, Rap, and Hip Hop.

DEX GRAM: Like Rock and some of its subgenres

MARIAM LESTER: What bands do you listen to then?

DEX GRAM: Anberlin, Copeland, MAE, Radiohead, Sigur Ros, Jimmy Eat World, My Chemical Romance, Sum 41, Blink 182, All American Rejects

DEX GRAM: Do you want me to keep going?

DEX GRAM: They're all some form of Rock

MARIAM LESTER: i've only heard of a few of them

MARIAM LESTER: i sort of stuck on classical since i'm a violinst and a pianist

MARIAM LESTER: For classical there are Chopin, Wagner, Verdi, Vivaldi, Schubert, Strauss

DEX GRAM: Ya, I have no idea who any of those ppl are.

MARIAM LESTER: If you're a classical musician, then you've heard of all of them and are drilled so hard on their pieces

MARIAM LESTER: Music lessons from years past still haunt me.... especially with Chopin

MARIAM LESTER: Don't feel embarrassed, you probably know Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, right?

DEX GRAM: Ya

MARIAM LESTER: What's your favorite song from your favorite band?

DEX GRAM: Well, my favorite song is "Dismantle. Repair" by Anberlin.

DEX GRAM: I like the acoustic version too

DEX GRAM: But I know you're Christian, so I think you might like Fin* by them.

DEX GRAM: And what's your favorite musical piece (?) from your favorite composer?

MARIAM LESTER: It's not my favorite, but it's more modern

MARIAM LESTER: "Perfection" by Clint Mansell based on Tchaikovsky's score for *Swan Lake*

DEX GRAM: You're only suggesting it because I mentioned *Swan Lake*, aren't you?

MARIAM LESTER: Yes....*Black Swan* was a great interpretation of the original ballet and Mansell did a wonderful job on composing the score

MARIAM LESTER: After we both get done listening to the other's favorite song, why don't we talk about them?

DEX GRAM: I feel like I'm at a disadvantage bc I don't understand how to describe classical music

MARIAM LESTER: You don't have to use the musical terminology if you don't know it

MARIAM LESTER: Explain to me what comes into your head when you've listened it

DEX GRAM: Alright, thanks.

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: i'm rdy to discuss

DEX GRAM: Gimme a moment, near the end

. . .

DEX GRAM: Ok, I'm rdy too

DEX GRAM: You go first since you have to help me with this piece.

MARIAM LESTER: Okay

MARIAM LESTER: First, it's a love song

MARIAM LESTER: about a young couple that is transitioning out of the first phase of the relationship

MARIAM LESTER: and it's from POV of the man who's experiencing the changes in the relationship

MARIAM LESTER: he had doubts about the relationship bc of how she affects him

MARIAM LESTER: so he's fearful of the change that's coming and the change that's happening

MARIAM LESTER: but he's come to accept the change as she has exceptional understanding of him

MARIAM LESTER: since she's able to deconstruct who he is and put him back together

MARIAM LESTER: so she knows the in's-and-out's of him

MARIAM LESTER: and he's willing to put forth the effort to show her the same

MARIAM LESTER: as he is willing to be vulnerable with her

MARIAM LESTER: i think i have it good so far, but then it changes later in the song

MARIAM LESTER: "Save me from myself, Help me save me from myself"

MARIAM LESTER: brings a different meaning to the chorus: "Hands, like secrets, Are the hardest thing to keep from you, Lines and phrases, like knives, Your words can cut me through"

MARIAM LESTER: Before it was about how she knows him very well and understands him

MARIAM LESTER: so it was how she was able to make him vulnerable, make him open up

MARIAM LESTER: But now it seems that he fails to understand something about himself

MARIAM LESTER: something that she can only see and something that he denies/rejects or doesn't know

MARIAM LESTER: so he places faith in her understanding of him to piece him together

MARIAM LESTER: and to also fix the part of him that negatively impacts him

MARIAM LESTER: Her words are very impactful to him and he takes great criticism from them

MARIAM LESTER: Maybe even obsessive over them because of this line "It's not that I hang on every word, I hang myself on what you repeat"

MARIAM LESTER: Overall, it is about a man's committed decision to change for the one he loves

MARIAM LESTER: but also, a plea to be changed by the one he loves

MARIAM LESTER: and words can be very influential

DEX GRAM: Whoa, couldn't have said it better myself lol

DEX GRAM: Although I took "It's not that I hang on every word, I hang myself on what you repeat"

DEX GRAM: to mean, he takes it all to heart bc of her importance to him

DEX GRAM: and that the importance of her words can shape him

MARIAM LESTER: i can see that

DEX GRAM: You did very well *claps*

MARIAM LESTER: i try to *bow*

MARIAM LESTER: Now it's your turn

DEX GRAM: Oh, well, let's see

DEX GRAM: It's a song about internal struggle between ego and true self

DEX GRAM: There's this ongoing tension between elevating oneself based on ego and maintaining satisfaction based on true self

DEX GRAM: No matter where you place yourself, there's always a higher place to aim for

DEX GRAM: that's why there's conflict in finding in the middle ground between the two

DEX GRAM: A choice must be made to go higher or remain in a state of stagnation

DEX GRAM: Going higher leads to more chaos but there is comfort later. In contrast, staying in comfort gives way to dissatisfaction as well.

DEX GRAM: Like how the music grows in intensity, signaling the uphill battle

DEX GRAM: later it calms down and starts again over

DEX GRAM: It's a vicious cycle that has no way out

DEX GRAM: I guess that's why the song is called Perfection

DEX GRAM: It's a constant act that requires limitless effort to achieve but is unachievable.

MARIAM LESTER: i think you hit the dot

DEX GRAM: I don't feel like I did.

DEX GRAM: Shouldn't I have used words like rhythm and tempo or something?

MARIAM LESTER: You did fine

MARIAM LESTER: So why is "Dismantle.Repair" is your favorite song?

DEX GRAM: I think it's very romantic for someone to trust someone else enough

DEX GRAM: to be vulnerable with them.

MARIAM LESTER: Do you think the song resonates with you on a deeper level?

DEX GRAM: Whaddaya mean by that?

MARIAM LESTER: i mean does the song tell you something about yourself that you don't notice/recognize?

DEX GRAM: maybe, I put too much emphasis on what ppl have to say about me

DEX GRAM: and concern myself too much on those ppl that say things about me

DEX GRAM: That maybe even though I don't understand relationships

DEX GRAM: as a social creature, I still have this want of being vulnerable with someone
DEX GRAM: Pretty generic though right?
DEX GRAM: And how long have you been playing violin and piano?
MARIAM LESTER: Since i was 4 yrs old, 12 yrs
MARIAM LESTER: i'm better at the piano than the violin though lol
MARIAM LESTER: My parents sort of forced me to play musical instruments
MARIAM LESTER: to round out my background and make me interesting haha
DEX GRAM: Intelligent, athletic, musically talented, pretty (no hetero)
DEX GRAM: You've got a lot going for you despite your battle with your own "perfection"
MARIAM LESTER: Haha
MARIAM LESTER: Music is my life, i do enjoy playing despite how i got into it
MARIAM LESTER: i'm not sure how i would feel if i stopped playing music
MARIAM LESTER: Maybe i would feel like i lost a part of me
MARIAM LESTER: Have you ever lost a part of you?
MARIAM LESTER: Or have something about you that you would feel sad to lose?
DEX GRAM: ~~I'd hate to lose my memories, but I wish I could forget some of them~~
DEX GRAM: It would be Judo for sure.
DEX GRAM: I've been doing it for a long time and I would be very pained if my parents stopped paying for it
DEX GRAM: I've gotten so used to going on a routine basis and practicing/performing the moves
DEX GRAM: It would crush me if I had to stop like if I lost a limb or something
MARIAM LESTER: They're like an extension of ourselves
DEX GRAM: Like our own hobbies but more special
MARIAM LESTER: You can always start a different hobby
DEX GRAM: but you can never fully recover a piece of you that you lost
MARIAM LESTER: Music to me is more than entertainment or something to put on a piece of paper
MARIAM LESTER: Being a musician is a lifestyle that i choose to live
DEX GRAM: Judo means more to me than gaming and building kits
DEX GRAM: It's just so integrated in my life style that it is a part of who I am
MARIAM LESTER: Then dealing with that loss would be so painful to me
MARIAM LESTER: because i would always know that i did lose something dear to me
MARIAM LESTER: i wouldn't even know how to move on from that loss rn...
MARIAM LESTER: i sort of wish i could forget about that type of loss
DEX GRAM: ~~Memories are always bitter after a while, no matter what they were originally about~~
DEX GRAM: ~~Forgetting about it would be even more painful since you wouldn't learn from the loss of it~~
DEX GRAM: Ya...I can't comprehend it
.
.
.
DEX GRAM: Are you ok, Mariam?
MARIAM LESTER: Sry, i'm crying rn haha
MARIAM LESTER: My contacts are burning my eyes now too
DEX GRAM: Ouch...
DEX GRAM: It's ok.
DEX GRAM: ~~I'm crying too~~
DEX GRAM: I'm crying too
.
.
.

MARIAM LESTER: i think i'm going to shower and go to bed early

MARIAM LESTER: It's been a long time since i've slept well and school reopens tomorrow

DEX GRAM: Ok

MARIAM LESTER: It's been nice chatting with you over the break

MARIAM LESTER: You really made it seem longer than it really was lol

DEX GRAM: Lol, ya, I really enjoyed it too.

MARIAM LESTER: Bye

DEX GRAM: Deuces

Chapter 4

Gram's/Märchen

I. Operator/Please Hold

How long will I wait for her? I firmly secured my pillow against my chest to combat this hollow feeling inside me. My heart was at the epicenter of this eruption. A feeling that progressively flowed to every inch of my body. Each beat unleashed an unrelenting wave. Each wave strengthened by my heart's futile attempt to confine it, only to be set loose again. The clashing of the waves etched into every fiber of my being. Only the insatiable consumption that chased the waves could bring an end to this living nightmare. A dark chill that was capable of freezing the currents drowning me, a mere respite that did more harm than good.

The hollowness would not go away. The stagnant water would break free once more. The churning waves would reform. The torrent would continue. It would only recede to its originator, an inseparable organ that could love tenderly and hate callously. There was no escape from its destructive grasp. What it claimed was forever malformed. Not even surgery could mend the damage that has been done. Scars would resonate a crippling melody. They were cursed with a hollowness that would lie in wait for the next opportunity to strike.

A castle that is only capable of defending against itself is no castle. It is a prison. Its delusional king, the most important inmate, plays the role of the haughty court jester. For the only fool is himself and his wonderful audience is himself. His confounded entertainment is his ruin, his greatest lamentation. The poisonous medicine he ingests to calm himself. He wears otherworldly chains that constrict far worse than sin itself. Atop his head, a guilty crown sits ornamented with the worst of his mistakes. The greatest one hovers haphazardly above his head. When it falls, so does the king. His blood paints the stone-cold walls meant to protect him. His

blood soaks the carpets meant to caress his feet. His blood is meaningless since he failed to live.
In the moment before his death, he tries to justify that the burden he carried meant something.

II. Too Late/Too Soon

During intermission, several rows of attendees shuffled out to stretch their legs, to talk with their friends, and to use the restroom. Stage preparations for the next act were already in motion judging from the noise behind the curtains. Some cast members were dressing for their next parts. Others were helping with make-up and props if I had to guess. The effort they put into the musical tonight was unlike the previous performances because tonight was the final showing of the musical version of *Swan Lake*. After the final showing, the senior students would be recognized for their talent and their time at the school before heading off. Many families and friends came to support their dear friends and rising stars.

This night was different for me because tonight was my last chance to catch Mariam outside of school hours. I would see Mariam at a distance during our lunch break, but I couldn't walk up to her since her friends were always with her. The past few days I attended each daily showing of the musical that she had expressed interest in attending. Every time I sat in the furthest row in the right-hand corner of the auditorium, a suitable position that allowed me to broadly view the whole room.

Another difference was that Charlie was with me. She came to see Zoey perform, and she found me by chance. Her presence made it difficult for me to scan the room. I waited until Charlie left to unlock my phone. On my screen appeared a picture of Mariam that I studied. I took mental notes of what hair styles she wore, the use of make-up, facial features, and her body type. It was hard to keep a mental image of her in my head since I'd never been face to face with her. The picture faded with the screen. I scanned the audience for girls similar to how she might look. The time limit was thin to find her. Many people were walking in and out of the auditorium, and Charlie would be back any second. Several girls had the same hairstyle. A few

had the some of the same facial features. A few of them matched her body type. She wasn't any of them.

Charlie returned from her restroom break. I had no success whatsoever. Maybe I would have time after the show to examine the crowds of people. The lights faded. Hushes rippled through the audience. The curtains drew back to reveal the transformed stage, a palace fit for royalty. The opening scene of Act III began with Prince Siegfried greeting the guests arriving for the gala. A soft remix of Swan Lake, No. 15 set the atmosphere for them. They paraded throughout the hall to take their places for the upcoming scenes. I spotted Zoey and her partner as the last to arrive, and they took their place near the back of the stage. She wore a red Russian dress with a golden floral-like pattern that adorned the sides and sleeves. Her hair was in a semi-braided ponytail style. I couldn't see her face well from the back of the auditorium, but she looked stunning.

With the background music switching for the next scene, the guests reorganized for the group dance scene with the dwarves and the guests. Each pair took turns crossing the floor. Each pair sang their part. The audience listened to the harmonized singing resounding from the stage. They were fixated on the cast to guide them through the experience. I only heard Zoey. I only saw her dancing. A certain kind of emptiness swapped seats with the people sitting in the auditorium. I no longer sat in the back because a clear image of her replaced that somewhat out of focused shape of her. That image would only be possible if I had sat right in the front row. Her smiling face carried her solo. The skirt of her dress floated above the floor as if she glided across it. I saw no simplified modern ballet moves. Each step was a prayer. Each form was a miracle. None of those dance moves could contain the brilliance shining from her soul. Zoey's mezzo soprano voice hit all the notes regardless if they were out of her range. It didn't matter to me if

her singing was good or bad. It didn't matter to me if her dancing was good or bad. How could you be wrong if you're the only person doing it? By the time she exited the stage, I soon realized the six princesses and Prince Siegfried scene had ended moments ago. She never stopped singing and dancing for me even when they all stood off to the side.

All of the cast members cleared the stage for Odile and Siegfried's emotionally conflicting song and ballet duet of the false lovers. The desire, the love, and the tension captivated the audience. Everyone witnessed the tragedy of love unfold on stage. The seduction of Siegfried and the courting of Odile clashed not only in the words they sang, but in the way that they danced. Odile moved mostly unrestricted for a follower with Siegfried, undermining his role as the leader. A thunderous applause erupted from the crowd when the duet concluded. A spectacular performance that played on the heartstrings of romantics who suffered the same fate. The cast members returned on stage for the proposal scene between the two. After that scene ended, Zoey's role came to an end.

The rest of the musical played out well, and the seniors gathered on stage to celebrate their final performance. Tugging on Charlie's cardigan, I pointed to the auditorium's exit. We walked out to the courtyard to access the backstage. Several friends of the cast had the same idea. Laughter and talking filled the air that moments ago was filled with cries of sadness from the tragedy. Everyone was spread out into their own cliques. Charlie and I spotted Zoey collecting her things from a cubby. We navigated through the blobs of people to reach her, and we whisked her away to the quietness on the outside.

Charlie brought out a make-up wipe from her small handbag since Zoey was trying to remove her make-up from her face. Charlie helped Zoey wipe her make-up off. I tied Zoey's hair into her usual bun, and then I gently inserted her flower into a loose part of her hair. The removal

of her make-up seemed to me like taking off an intricate mask. Charlie spent a lot of time focused on cleaning up the eye shadow and mascara while Zoey dealt with the bronzer. I had never seen her in make-up until today. It obscured a type of glow that radiated from her. Running her hand through her hair, she felt the flower I planted above her ear, and she gave me a smile. I smiled back.

“So, Zoey, did you know Dex likes you?” Or not.

“That’s not true.”

Charlie’s phone rang. She stepped away from us to answer the caller. I looked at Zoey expecting her to answer.

“Like I said before, Dex. You’re a nice guy, but I don’t feel that way about you.”

“Likewise.”

“I know, but maybe you shouldn’t hide how you feel about her.” Her eyes broke away from mine to look off in a different direction.

“What do you mean?” I looked in the direction of her glance. No one was there.

“Never mind, forget I said that.”

III. Sk8er/gurl

With Nancy's arm wrapped around mine, the loud pop music hit us as we entered the roller blading center together, and everything about the place seemed unchanged with the exception of the up-to-date playlist for the kids. The DJ booth was still in its place next to the entrance, the ticket shop had the same candy and toys stocked, the same crappy pizza that came with the brand was still being served, and the old arcade machines were still being played by the kids who couldn't skate or who wanted to get "bling" from the ticket shop. I had strong feelings against the choice of music being played at the moment since kids under 10 should not be listening to songs about alcohol or drugs, but then again, wasn't that the same kind of music that was played when I was a kid here?

Earlier in the day, I had asked Nancy out on a date in front of her "friends," and all eyes were on her when that happened. Firstly, they were all surprised that I asked someone out on a date in front of group of people, and secondly, they were astonished that I asked Nancy of all people. Nancy's established reputation of drawing guys in was gossip among outsiders, yet among her "friends," it was akin to a melodrama. Boat loads of guys had asked her out on dates before, but those were the guys who were easily tempted by her charm. Although Nancy was a pro at maintaining her grand façade around people, I left her speechless. The others took it as a sign of nervousness in responding. Have I fallen for her after all these years? She couldn't definitely tell. The air of confidence that she typically carried was nowhere to be found in this moment. With a puzzled face, she fumbled in her attempt to find words to destroy my inquiry. Her friends giggled at her "shyness." After class, all of her friends left to get to their next class. Nancy, on the other hand, stayed behind to confront me. She could tell I carried myself more

confidently and more honestly from the last time I asked her out. Those two factors alone had made it convincing to her that I was serious.

Only one or two adults were skating in the rink with their kids. Some of the energetic kids were causing a ruckus for skaters, haphazardly weaving in and out of people's pathways. Some of the non-participating kids fell down because of their loss of balance or because of colliding with the troublemakers. Inexperienced skaters were hugging the walls in their growing attempt to skate without assistance, or they were sadly rolling their skates on the rink while sitting down on the elevated floor.

We made our way to the roller blade rental station to outfit ourselves, and to me, it felt like getting back on a bike. I moved around to adjust myself to my new movement, but Nancy was still grounded as she had trouble standing up. With both hands out to her, I lifted her up and stabilized her to stand on her own, but she continued to wobble a bit with every move she made. Insisting that I hold her hand while we skated, I cautiously introduced us to the roller rink to get the night rolling with as few casualties as possible. We skated at a moderately slow pace to avoid collisions and loss of balance. There really wasn't much for us to do aside from holding hands, talking about school related events or subjects, and gossiping about classmates. Occasionally I would break out into bad singing depending on what pop, rap, or hip-hop song came on over the sound system. Nancy found that outrageously hilarious how I mock-sing instead of actually sing.

For the most part, it was a subpar date with casual conversations instead of personal, meaningful conversations. Granted, this was my first time on a date with a girl that I barely knew anything about outside of what I know from school. With some confidence, I probed her for some more personal information. She surprisingly answered me honestly. We went back and forth with details about our lives, but I abruptly abandoned her for a moment to spice up the

night. Arriving at the DJ booth, I requested that he play “Love Somebody” by Maroon 5 as the next song, and I returned to inform Nancy to listen closely to the next song on the playlist. The current song faded to silence in order for the DJ to announce that I had dedicated the upcoming song to Nancy. Her face flushed bright red from the unexpected attention that the DJ and I created. Ooo’s and aww’s came from some of people around us while the little kids laughed and teased us. She playfully pushed me away in an attempt to diffuse the attention gained, but more people began to observe us.

As soon as the song began, I started to lip-synch the lyrics while carefully circling around Nancy like the start of a bird mating ritual. I gently ran my hand from one of her shoulder to the other with each pass. After a few more passes, I lowered it to the small of her back. Her interested eyes gradually undressed me with each pass. She intentionally kept shying away from each advancement in order to coax me to step up my performance. She circled around me. Each rotation made her black mini dress sway. She extended out one of her hands for me to take, teasing me with each retraction to draw me in closer. A series of extending and retracting our offered hands out to each other ensued for a minute, but I interlocked our hands during a turn around the rink. Finally, I guided her to the corner of the rink opposite of the entrance.

With her face still cherry red from embarrassment because of my on-the-spot performance, I had her up against the wall with one hand supporting my balance. The other was wrapped around her waist. Her hands rested behind my neck in order to pull me in closer. My yearning eyes chased her coy eyes, avoiding a moment of connection between us. The moment our eyes locked I leaned into kiss her. In the small-time frame of locking eyes, she realized the way I looked at her differed from all the times before this moment. Instantly, she covered my lips with her hand before I could connect mine with hers. Opening my eyes, her eyes were frozen

with a feeling similar to the one on the night of the house party while mine maintained a feeling that I chose not to control.

“Dex, is there something wrong?”

“Yeah, we’re not kissing right now.”

“This isn’t like you.”

“And this isn’t like you to not want someone. But we can fix that.”

“Enough, Dex,” Nancy demanded. “Take me home.”

“Fine, whatever.”

She left me alone at the corner. I punched the wall, audible to those who happened to be within 10 feet of me. The music blaring in the background masked the noise well enough that no one else noticed. A slight depression was left in the wall. I slowly skated toward the roller blade rental station. Nancy had already taken her skates off, and she was making her way to my car in the parking lot. From a night of amusement to a night of disappointment in a matter of seconds, this night was unsalvageable. It most certainly left a bad taste in her mouth. Songs from my Radiohead CD filled the silence between the two of us. A long uneventful drive unlike the one that had taken place last time on a cold, rainy night. When I reached her house, I exited the car to open the passenger side door for her, but she had decided long ago to show herself out. With my arms outstretched wanting a hug, she declined to reciprocate the gesture in favor of lightly grabbing the lower part of my face, and then slapping it. She entered her house. The porch lights extinguished. Not once did she turn around to acknowledge my presence. I stared into the newly-formed darkness that once held a lit image of her, and the darkness dared to stare back at me.

IV. Sleep/Walker

DEX GRAM: Hey, Ocelet, how are you?

MARIAM LESTER: Lawl, ocelot?

MARIAM LESTER: Hate to break it to you, but I'm not Mariam.

MARIAM LESTER: And that's a cute play name. Maybe I should call her that sometime.

DEX GRAM: Then who are you?

MARIAM LESTER: Her sister. Mariam forgot to sign out of the family computer.

MARIAM LESTER: You're the online dude that she chats with right?

DEX GRAM: Ya, y'know about me?

MARIAM LESTER: Not really, AFAIK she doesn't talk about you.

MARIAM LESTER: You're always chatting with her when I need the PC.

MARIAM LESTER: Are you two like bf and gf?

DEX GRAM: No! We're not like that. We're just friends.

MARIAM LESTER: Hmm, like online friends? Or real friends?

DEX GRAM: Why does that matter to you?

MARIAM LESTER: You're the only guy I know that she chats/talks with.

MARIAM LESTER: Do you two even hang out IRL?

DEX GRAM: No...

MARIAM LESTER: Didn't think so.

MARIAM LESTER: Love to talk more, but I got stuff to do.

Chapter 5

The Pseudo/mancer

The same sun hung overhead like it always did. The same birds sang in the trees like they always did. The same roads remained free of highwaymen and bandits like they always did. The fields were alive with the flowers they always were. But riding through Gal'Rique's countryside wasn't the same without Odelia by my side. She was always there until she wasn't. She combed those fields for beautiful wildflowers instead of socializing with county people we met. She listened to the birds chirping at dawn and at dusk. She even got good at imitating the local songbirds. I had stopped midway to my destination to assemble a bouquet and to listen those same birds like she did. Her carefree habits seemed to have rubbed off on me. Many small colorful flowers were living communally while the dull ones stood alone. The birds were singing and dancing in vigorous manner. Each flower I picked and each bird I listened to painted an image of her frolicking. Her weeklong journey to the capital seemed to have gone on longer than I expected. I blamed the ending of the harvest season for making it feel so. The nip in the air foretold the coming of the cold season that would befall the land, and that would hamper her return trip if the weather turned harsh. Sometimes, harshness could bring joy.

A great cold had taken over the city of Marentak when I encountered Odelia for the first time. The empty streets had rows of houses with doors locked tight and windows closed to contain what warmth they could muster. I wandered in search of an inn with a vacant room, or at least a heated space to loiter in. Taverns were packed from wall to wall with patrons who paid very little for food and drinks in order to escape. Any inns I had passed were at full capacity. No one welcomed me into their home because they saw the mark of a seeker clearly branded on my face. I could roam the land freely, yet I still faced prejudice from people who failed to understand my magic. With no

luck in finding shelter in the city, I resigned myself to search the outskirts of the city for a farmer with a barn to rest in.

It was on the outskirts where a young orphan girl had swiped my coin pouch. Cornering her wasn't easy. She leapt, climbed, and ran through multiple obstacles to lose me. When I finally detained her, my hand was coated in a thick layer of filth, and I could smell an awful odor had attached itself to her. The way she looked was beneath a human. She was a ragged urban creature acting on flashes of impulse to preserve herself in a world that dealt her a cruel hand. Her life hinged on using that money to whisk herself away from the dreadfully cold night. She had no one. She had nothing. All I could leave her with was the illusion of warmth. Touching her mind, a false warmth spread throughout her body. The cold would gradually consume her, but this would make her rest easy. I continued my search for a person with a barn, and she followed closely behind me. I wondered if she was trying to steal my coin pouch again. It then dawned on me that my act of "kindness" might have touched the poor lost soul.

The more I looked at her, the more I realized how similar we were. The mark I wore was eerily similar to the dirt on her. They were reminders of our place in a society that had cast us out. We strays who were doing our best to survive in a cold world. Fighting an uphill battle to reach a better echelon that we could comfortably settle in. Despite our similarities, we were still different from each other. She could wash away the dirt that stained her. She could forge her life by her will. She could die by her own terms even. I couldn't do any of those. I didn't have the type of power she had. No matter how many times I would wash myself clean of dirt, it would always come back. My life was in the hands of the ignorant masses that feared my kind. My death will be because of correctable misunderstanding. One thing my powers could solve was uplifting her life. All she needed was a little support to get her going. She could escape a fate I was destined to. That was a long time ago in a different life, in a different time. She broke out of those chains that held her

down, and I found a warmth that I thought a cold world could never have. We both discovered a simple life. My only wish was that it would have stayed simple.

The appearance of Prismatica interrupted the peace the kingdoms had made after years of warring. The kingdoms had gathered a large group of individuals to lay siege and to invade the Crimson God's fortress. Right before its destruction, it released an old horror that had ravaged the continent for multiple eras, the Crimson Plague, a divine magical illness that lacked a cure. By the grace of the Gods, they had purified the world once before. They weren't here this time to do it again. Madness took hold of those who heard the legends of its effect. This was the beginning of the Second Crimson Legacy, an event that might drive humanity to extinction. Countless lives were lost in the beginning of the outbreak. Borders were closed to the migration of people, and thus trading between kingdoms had collapsed. Multiple quarantine sites and massive barricades were erected to combat this illness. This situation had escalated beyond the control of many sovereigns. The lower-class citizens rioted for protection while the nobles sat on their hands. How fair is it for the lowborn to suffer together while the highborn could endure it in the comfort of isolation?

I knew what needed to be done. It was now my duty as count to secure the wellbeing of my people. These people might detest my status, but without my help, their fate would be sealed like the other counties. Truthfully, I never believed that our actions against the Crimson God would cause this catastrophe. It was my hand that unleashed the Crimson Plague along with the other brave champions. I had traded one evil for another, and I paid the ultimate price. A terrible burden that I carry with me each day that I have ventured out. I have the power to cut down the tendrils of the Crimson Plague. This power alone I reserved for my people.

Coming out of the forest, the fading orange-blue sky was the first to greet. My destination was in clear sight, the southern outermost village in the county. It was the final place on my route today for an inspection of the Crimson Plague. Everything seemed to be in order until I saw a small

gathering of villagers embroiled in a dispute. My horse trotted up to the developing mob, and I dismounted in an attempt to dissipate the tension.

“What seems to be the problem, my good men and women?”

“A boy has fallen ill, my count. We believe he has the Crimson Plague” a farmer answered.

“He should be put down!” an old hag yelled

“There’s no telling when the evil magic will flow out of him and into us!”

The bickering grew louder with each exchange. They began to push and shove each other, to assert their dominance on the matter.

“Quiet!” Silence rippled through the crowd, quelling the fear for a moment.

“Please, my count, is there anything you can do to help the boy?”

“I’ll tend to the boy. Where is he?”

A man, presumably his father, gestured for me to follow him. He led me to a leaning shack next to one of the farmlands. I placed my hand on his shoulder to hold him back from entering. The saddened father stepped back from the door. Entering alone, I spotted the boy lying on a bed of straw in a corner, and I approached him to examine his body better. His eyes were opened wide. His body was stiff and hot. I picked up one of his arms to inspect his veins, which pulsated a glowing red through his body. I lifted his shirt up to find a gathering red core, the size of a clenched fist, forming around his heart. This was only the early stage of the Crimson Plague. If it were to progress from here, his skin would darken and his sanity would wilt. The late stage of the Crimson Plague would cause a certain kind of madness that would drive the ill to kill.

This close up to an infected person, the Crimson Plague had already flowed into my body. Except I wouldn’t suffer from it. I laid one hand on the mass of divine magic corrupting the boy, and I concentrated my own magic in my veins to extract it. Slowly, the rivers of red faded to blue. The red lake on his chest was sucked up into my being. His eyes closed. His body relaxed. He was

cured. I balled the dangerous magic to the center of my body, where a shard of Prismatica was hidden. There the Crimson Plague returned to its primary vector of infection. My possession of a piece of Prismatica was my weapon against the Crimson Plague. It could restore the unstable magic in great quantities, but I lacked the knowledge on how long and how much I could store. What I did know was that I could tap into that power for my own use. It gave me power beyond my current abilities, a power so great that I couldn't control it without the shard being attached to me. My hand remained on the boy's chest, and I cast one of my seeker spells on him. I wiped out his memory of contracting the illness and possibly my presence. I walked out of the shack; the father sat anxiously on a stump. He jumped up to hear what I had to say about his son. I said nothing. I grabbed his arm, and I wiped out his memory too. He couldn't know that I was here and that his boy was ever sick. No one could know that I could "cure" the Crimson Plague from people. I had to wipe out the memories of everyone in the village.

On my way back to the village, I saw columns of smokes on the horizon. I sprinted closer to the origin of the smoke, and it was the village itself burning down. A group of armor-clad men stood in the spot where the angry villagers were. A messy mound of corpses was located beside them. They killed all the villagers. When I reached the mound, a man in an orange tunic turned to face me. It had the Visari coat of arms proudly adorned on it, one of the families under King Devasti, the ruler of our kingdom.

"Count Gal'Rique, what have you done here?"

"I've done nothing. This is your crime, swine."

"Not from what I hear." He smiled smugly. "By order of his majesty, King Devasti, you are under arrest for conspiring with the Crimson God."

The king knew. He somehow figured out that I was in possession of a shard of Prismatica. I couldn't kill these men or else the king would send more people after me. They would slaughter my

whole county just to get this damned shard. I couldn't let them do that. Not after all I had done. I willingly submitted to Visari's men, and they bound my hands. One of them pulled out a strange contraption from a wagon they came in. He clamped it down on my head without hesitation. I could no longer feel the world around me. My senses failed to receive the sensations they were used to picking up. I attempted to extend my mind beyond the contraption. I felt nothing. My mind couldn't go anywhere else. The blasted contraption deprived me of the magical abilities of a seeker. They threw me into a wagon. The smell of burning flesh and wood soon faded. Their destination was the capitol, where my trial in front of the king would be held.

*

For the whole journey, they locked my mind, starved me, and beat me. Things a pseudomancer deserved to be given they said. They kept calling me pseudomancer instead of seeker to the very end. On the day of the trial, two castle guards were in charge of bringing me before the king and containing me. The contraption felt like it was my own skin now. They knew I couldn't do anything with it on. They forced me down on my knees in front of the court and the king. They wanted to humiliate me more. This was all theater. A display of power to curb anyone that dared defy the king. My fate had been decided long before I appeared before the court. The world will always be ruled in fear. The world will always be ruled by corruption

“Draekon Mélanme, 7th Count Gal'Rique, Master seeker and Conqueror of Prismatica, you are found guilty of conspiring with the Crimson God and are hereby stripped of your title as Count of Gal'Rique. Your assets, properties and fortunes will now be in the possession of the sovereign for your crime against the domain of man. Your achievements within the Kingdom of Arcorne I will be redacted from our history. Anyone deemed a relation of yours will be executed for being a co-conspirator. Finally, your punishment is a public execution in the capitol. This will be carried out immediately.”

Heavy chains clanged from behind me. The two guards adjusted me around to face the line of prisoners that were just brought out to the courtyard. All four of them, three males and one female, had grain bags over their heads, and their damaged, bare skin exposed to the elements. The chains were clamped on to their wrists, ankles, and neck. Multiple lash wounds layered their bodies with dark red blood leaking out. The lead guard towing them attached the chain to a nearby pillar while the lagging guard forced them on their knees. More guards came out to restrain them from struggling. Soon their damaged faces were revealed one by one in the baking sun. They were my companions. My friends that followed me into perilous battles and into Prismaticca itself. My friends that supported my usurpation of the 6th Count Gal'Rique to restore order to the county. My friends stood with me through thick and thin. Three others were missing from the line. That meant Baron Visari hadn't rounded up my entire party. Odelia wasn't among them either.

King Devasti gestured for one of his court knights to come to him. A young man in chain mail responded to his request, and he leaned to listen to the whispers. With a nod of acknowledgement, the executioner-knight approached my defeated companions with his sword drawn out. Fearful, they averted their eyes from their executioner, but that didn't stop what was to come. He decapitated every single one. Their bodies remained in place like a magnificent sculpture on display in the gallery, and their lifeless heads bounced toward me. Blood flowed out freely from the headless bodies, staining the grasses red. Another knight with a war hammer entered the courtyard. The executioner-knight extended his hand for the war hammer, and the entering knight handed it over without uttering a word. The executioner-knight looked down on Evar's head, and then he pounded the skull over and over. He shaped Evar's head into a chunk of ore. Blood splattered all over the floor. His eyes popped out of his sockets. Bits of brain now stuck to the executioner's armor. This was only the first mutilation. More would follow if I didn't act. More of my companions would fall victim to this injustice.

I concentrated deeply to reach the shard embedded in me, and the magical energy resonated to my call. Magic flowed through my veins despite the anti-magic contraption they placed on me. It could only trap my natural magic. It couldn't trap this divine magic that coursed through me. The guards didn't notice the surge of magic. The mutilations of my friends fascinated them, regardless of their stance on it. I pierced the hearts of the guard in an instant with two conjured swords. I ripped off the accursed contraption and chains that bound me. All the king's men around me were now aware of my escape, and they moved to encircle me before I could run.

“S'va Flúre!” I chanted.

A circular wave of energy erupted from my being, launching those around me into the air. Their bodies crashed down with a heavy thud. The king's personal guards immediately formed a box formation to protect him. I wildly swung my head left and right to find an escape route. An unguarded hallway was to my left. More guards started to pour in from the right side of the room. Most were equipped to handle melee combat. A few of them looked to be spellcasters or ranged fighters. I scrambled to my left to evade them. The clanging of armor followed me with the sound bouncing off the stone walls. The shouting of commands and spells echoed as well. Bolts of fire and ice soared through air. I couldn't see behind me, so I zig-zagged haphazardly to dodge. To counter them, I summoned illusions of myself that would absorb the magical attacks. They rotated around me to confuse my pursuers in order to split their efforts. If one illusion went down, another one would take its place.

Up ahead, a hooded figure came into view, and it stood in the middle of the hall. The candle lights weren't bright enough to illuminate its face. It quickly drew back an arrow and let it loose directly at me. I waved my hand to magically deflect the arrow before it reached me. This time I rotated with my illusions since this attacker had identified me in my hay stack. It drew back another arrow and another, firing in rapid succession. The volley flew straight at me, not my illusions. It had

to be the traitor. No one else could tell the difference between the illusions and me if they hadn't seen me use it numerous times. With anger building up inside me, I freed part of the divine magic to misshape the world around me. Each footstep began to curve and to spiral the hallway in every direction. The unreal images disorientated my pursuers for a moment. That was all the time I needed. I focused all of my raw emotions, my own power, and the power of the shard into one spell that could end the traitor's life.

With a flick of my mind, the mental snap struck the traitor like a flash of lightning. The force I unleashed pushed the hood back to reveal a soft faced girl. Odelia. Her lifeless body dropped to the ground. I sprinted harder. The hallway blurred into one mass. The light dimmed to almost complete darkness. Draekon landed on his hands in front of her corpse. He flipped it over to see her face with eyes forever locked in disbelief. Running his fingers through her delicate hair, he cradled her head. Tears streamed down his face that dotted her frozen expression. He babbled incoherently, reaching for words and losing words to say. All he could muster was an agonizing scream.

Draekon had killed her. He killed his dear "sister," who betrayed him after all they'd been through. The longer he held her—the more he stared into her—the less sane he became. His pursuers were nearly upon him. His senses began to fail him. Reality seemed to be distorted like the illusions he created. His barrier of illusions was phasing in and out of existence. They couldn't protect him if his mental state kept deteriorating. He had to let go of her; she betrayed him. He couldn't let her go; he loved her. How could he let go of her here? What would happen to her body? Would she be buried? Would she get a prayer? Would Draekon betray her? Would they discard her body in a pile of corpses? Would they dump her body in the filthy streets to decompose? Would she return to the place that she tried so hard to escape from? She loved him.

He couldn't let that happen. She had to be buried. She had to be buried in those fields . . . those fields . . . fields . . . of . . . wild . . . flowers. . .

My phone buzzed. The lock screen lit up with a text message notification. It was from Mariam. The screen darkened. The notification light flashed blue. My hand was trembled. The more it hovered above the phone, the more it seemed to shake uncontrollably. I tried to ball it up into a fist. My fingers wouldn't stay together. I tried trapping my shaking hand with my other hand. They just both shook, unable to close. They were burning. My heart felt like it was going to explode out of my chest. My lungs collapsed I couldn't breathe. A second message came through. I felt the same strange feeling, from when Mariam didn't respond, break out in my body. I took a huge gulp of air. I held it in my lungs. I exhaled deeply. I reached for my phone. I hit the on button. I punched in my pin. I tapped the message notification, and it brought up the You-niverse messenger.

MARIAM LESTER: Jackelope King, i'm so sorry about the stuff that my sister messaged you

MARIAM LESTER: Dex, are you there?

DEX GRAM: Hey, Mariam

MARIAM LESTER: Hi, Dex

Chapter 6

Divide by Ze/ro

MARIAM LESTER: We haven't messaged each other for a while lol.
MARIAM LESTER: How have you been?
DEX GRAM: Not well, something's been bothering me
DEX GRAM: Are we friends?
MARIAM LESTER: Haha, of course we're friends, Dex
DEX GRAM: Are we?
MARIAM LESTER: We are? i don't know what you mean
MARIAM LESTER: Is this about what my sister said to you?
MARIAM LESTER: She isn't a mean person, she's looking out for me
DEX GRAM: Mmhmm
MARIAM LESTER: Do you not think we're friends?
DEX GRAM: I'm not sure now
MARIAM LESTER: We chat a lot, we've shared personal stuff about each other
MARIAM LESTER: the way we chat is way more than when i talk with my friends
MARIAM LESTER: the ones i see, i mean
DEX GRAM: But that's all we do, we just chat
DEX GRAM: We don't do anything else.
MARIAM LESTER: We can hang out IRL
MARIAM LESTER: You can ask me lol
MARIAM LESTER: Are you mad at me, Dex?
DEX GRAM: I'm not mad, I'm confused, that's all.
MARIAM LESTER: Why are you confused?
DEX GRAM: idk
DEX GRAM: I've always had this feeling like you don't want to meet me
DEX GRAM: And you want to keep our "friendship" like this, online
DEX GRAM: Am I some kinda secret that you keep from your friends?
MARIAM LESTER: well...
MARIAM LESTER: Yes, i've never mentioned your name to them
MARIAM LESTER: but that's only because they would tease me for texting a guy
MARIAM LESTER: Do you keep me a secret from your friends?
DEX GRAM: Yes, because I don't want ppl to spread gossip
DEX GRAM: Ppl already think Zoey and I are dating, but we're just friends.
MARIAM LESTER: Then i don't think it was fair of you to bring that up
DEX GRAM: Ya, you're right, I'm sorry.
DEX GRAM: But why should that matter if we know we're friends?
DEX GRAM: Why should we care what they say about us?
MARIAM LESTER: Same to you, who do you care so much about gossip about yourself?
DEX GRAM: I hate hearing things about myself, especially if they're false.
MARIAM LESTER: i can't handle the teasing
DEX GRAM: Then why can't we be actual friends?
DEX GRAM: Why do I feel like we pretend to be friends?
DEX GRAM: I feel like you're hiding something from me.

MARIAM LESTER: i feel like you're hiding something from me too
MARIAM LESTER: We both know now that we've hidden each other from peeps we've known
MARIAM LESTER: So what else are you hiding?
DEX GRAM: You first
MARIAM LESTER: No, you go
DEX GRAM: Excuse me?
MARIAM LESTER: You think i don't notice you taking a long time to type out some stuff?
MARIAM LESTER: ik that you delete things before sending something else
DEX GRAM: And you avoid answering some of the questions I send
DEX GRAM: and fail to acknowledge some of the things I say
MARIAM LESTER: What are you're really trying to say, Dex?
MARIAM LESTER: i don't understand why you're so confused
DEX GRAM: and I told you idk why
MARIAM LESTER: Yes, you do
MARIAM LESTER: You probably do know
MARIAM LESTER: i can't help you if you don't tell me the truth
DEX GRAM: I want you to tell me the truth as well.
DEX GRAM: Y'know what
DEX GRAM: Let's stop going in circles
DEX GRAM: I'll say it if you promise to say it.
MARIAM LESTER: Okay, i promise to say my piece
MARIAM LESTER: On 3?
DEX GRAM: On 3
MARIAM LESTER: 1
DEX GRAM: 2
MARIAM LESTER: 3
DEX GRAM: You make me anxious.
MARIAM LESTER: You make me anxious
DEX GRAM: Why do I make you anxious?
MARIAM LESTER: Why do i make you anxious?
DEX GRAM: I don't have many friends, ok
DEX GRAM: I have barely any at all.
DEX GRAM: I'm terrible at making and keeping friends.
DEX GRAM: And I hate this weird "popularity" I have with the ppl at school
DEX GRAM: It makes me feel even worse
DEX GRAM: It makes me feel more alone, more distant, more empty
DEX GRAM: Bc none of those ppl are my friends at all.
DEX GRAM: So, it hurts to be around other ppl
DEX GRAM: Bc I know they're not my friends and never will be my friends
DEX GRAM: That's why I don't trust ppl
DEX GRAM: bc why trust ppl if they're there to use you?
DEX GRAM: So I undervalue them
DEX GRAM: and that hurts, knowing that I have to make a conscious decision to distrust ppl
DEX GRAM: bc they don't care at all, no matter what they say or do
DEX GRAM: I don't know how to feel about those ppl
DEX GRAM: Bc if I value what they say and do, I start to overvalue them
DEX GRAM: So I expect little out of others until I feel different otherwise
DEX GRAM: but then as soon as I start to expect more, it happens

DEX GRAM: My trust with them falls through and I'm there trying to pick up the broken pieces of myself

DEX GRAM: It's just a vicious cycle of hope and dejection with every single person

DEX GRAM: It's so damn draining, over and over again

DEX GRAM: And I feel like a dumbass, an idiot, so damn stupid for even thinking something will be better

DEX GRAM: Bc being vulnerable with other ppl only ends with me suffering badly

DEX GRAM: bc as much as I'm afraid to lose an intimate connection, I still have a need for it

DEX GRAM: And that's what makes it painful, bc there's so much tension between keeping myself safe

DEX GRAM: and trying to save me from myself

DEX GRAM: It was all a coincidence that we met on Distant Stars

DEX GRAM: I thought that if I tried to at least make a friend online it would get better

DEX GRAM: I wouldn't undervalue or overvalue someone

DEX GRAM: They would just be like someone in a videogame

DEX GRAM: I would know their value

DEX GRAM: I let you know me, see me

DEX GRAM: And that's why I have doubt in our friendship, Mariam

DEX GRAM: I don't want to be hurt

DEX GRAM: I don't want to be hurt by someone that I've been vulnerable with

DEX GRAM: I want to this to be more than anything

DEX GRAM: But I can't accept it when I have so much doubt, so much anxiety about how you feel about me

DEX GRAM: Because I expect so much out of you that it hurts me to think that you will reject me

DEX GRAM: Because I value you too much that it will only hurt me

DEX GRAM: I'm afraid to lose you after so much has happened

DEX GRAM: I'm afraid you're gonna reject me like everyone else,

DEX GRAM: you're gonna abandon me like everyone else

DEX GRAM: Then everything we've talked about, every single good thing

DEX GRAM: It's all gonna be meaningless, it'll all just be painful to remember

DEX GRAM: So I think as long as we don't ever meet, I won't ever get hurt

DEX GRAM: But that hurts me too bc I won't ever get to meet you

DEX GRAM: And then I'm just gonna wonder where I went wrong and what's wrong with me

MARIAM LESTER: Stop, Dex, enough...

DEX GRAM: †

MARIAM LESTER: Please stop

MARIAM LESTER: You're hurting me

MARIAM LESTER: Is that why you play games? Because no one can reject you if they're not real?

MARIAM LESTER: Because you always know their value? Because you always have control?

DEX GRAM: Yes

MARIAM LESTER: i

MARIAM LESTER: i do reject you

MARIAM LESTER: Not because i want to reject you

MARIAM LESTER: but because i have to reject you

MARIAM LESTER: i don't have many friends either

MARIAM LESTER: Being in social situations gives me a lot of anxiety

MARIAM LESTER: And that makes it hard for me to make friends and to keep friends too

MARIAM LESTER: It's because ppl expect a lot from me

MARIAM LESTER: My parents expect a lot out of me since they did well with my sister
MARIAM LESTER: She's like me but better
MARIAM LESTER: She's always better than me
MARIAM LESTER: Ppl at school know me as her sister and then they expect the same out of me
MARIAM LESTER: They expect me to be good at sports, to be good at music, to be good at school
MARIAM LESTER: It's always "your sister does it better" "your sister wouldn't do that" "your sister isn't like that"
MARIAM LESTER: It's never "that's good enough" "you did your best" "well done"
MARIAM LESTER: Ppl always want more out of me and i hate that, they always expect more
MARIAM LESTER: So i used to try and meet those expectations but it was never enough for ppl
MARIAM LESTER: So many ppl were disappointed in me for not surpassing my sister in every way
MARIAM LESTER: Parents, classmates, teachers
MARIAM LESTER: It was hard growing with that burden to carry
MARIAM LESTER: At first i would try my best, but then praise turned to insults every time
MARIAM LESTER: i couldn't get away from it, my name was always attached to my sister's
MARIAM LESTER: i was always embarrassed, i was always sad
MARIAM LESTER: The criticism was too much for me to handle
MARIAM LESTER: Socializing with ppl became hard because in the back of my mind
MARIAM LESTER: i'm always wondering what do they expect from me? What do they really expect from me?
MARIAM LESTER: I always feel inferior when they reveal their expectations about me
MARIAM LESTER: It became so difficult for me that i stopped doing the things ppl expected but
MARIAM LESTER: it only got worse, not better
MARIAM LESTER: Eventually, ppl stopped talking with me and it got a little bit better
MARIAM LESTER: however, i couldn't hide away from it but i could run away from it
MARIAM LESTER: But the farther i ran the lonelier i became, the more distant i was, the more depressed i was
MARIAM LESTER: how could i be friends with ppl if i couldn't even look them in the eye
MARIAM LESTER: even the friends i do have expect little from me because i give them little to expect
MARIAM LESTER: i have no one else to be intimate with other than one best friend
MARIAM LESTER: and how could i be intimate with someone if i was always severely anxious?
MARIAM LESTER: Then you came out of nowhere, completely unexpected
MARIAM LESTER: Chatting with you at first was extremely difficult for me, i was so nervous
MARIAM LESTER: Then after a while it got easier and i felt less nervous
MARIAM LESTER: Chatting with you felt like running and baking, everything around me didn't matter as much
MARIAM LESTER: i never felt like you expected a lot out of me...
MARIAM LESTER: Until i tried to help you with your crush situation
MARIAM LESTER: and later when we talked about music
MARIAM LESTER: i couldn't shake off the thoughts in my head like i was failing you somehow
MARIAM LESTER: i couldn't give you the best advice
MARIAM LESTER: i couldn't teach you how to describe classical music properly
MARIAM LESTER: i felt like i failed to meet expectations that you had for me...and i was right
MARIAM LESTER: i thought so much about how i failed you that i had a mental breakdown
MARIAM LESTER: That's why i didn't text you back for a long time

MARIAM LESTER: because i felt after what happened i would always fail to meet some "imagined" expectations that i assume you would have of me

MARIAM LESTER: Then if i ever met you in person, you would expect me to be the same person online

MARIAM LESTER: But i'm not

DEX GRAM: Please stop, Mariam...

DEX GRAM: Now, you're hurting me

DEX GRAM: Don't you even dare think that you failed me right now

DEX GRAM: because you didn't

DEX GRAM: I'm so sorry that I had to put you through this

MARIAM LESTER: i'm sorry too

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Are we friends, Dex?

DEX GRAM: I'm willing to accept all of the pains, the expectations, that come with friendship if you will

MARIAM LESTER: i'm willing to accept all of the pains, the values, that come with friendship if you will

DEX GRAM: For you

MARIAM LESTER: For you

MARIAM LESTER: I do accept

DEX GRAM: I do accept

DEX GRAM: We sound like such clowns rn lol

MARIAM LESTER: Lol ik, this is so cheesy...

DEX GRAM: It's only cheesy bc we were so serious a few minutes ago

MARIAM LESTER: You're the one acting like you're some anime character lol

MARIAM LESTER: Who says what you said? "i'm willing to...." ^_^

DEX GRAM: You said it too XD

DEX GRAM: You probably acted like you were being sworn into some secret fellowship

. . .

DEX GRAM: Mariam

MARIAM LESTER: Dex

DEX GRAM: I see you

MARIAM LESTER: I see you too

MARIAM LESTER: We're sort of the same, you and I, don't you agree?

DEX GRAM: Ya, in a way

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Are you crying?

DEX GRAM: Yes...are you?

MARIAM LESTER: Yes...

MARIAM LESTER: If no one has ever told you, it's okay for guys to cry

MARIAM LESTER: You shouldn't be ashamed of it

DEX GRAM: If no one has ever told you, you're fine the way you are

DEX GRAM: You shouldn't be ashamed of it

. . .

DEX GRAM: Let's hang out for a change.

MARIAM LESTER: You sure you want to? After all of this lol?

DEX GRAM: Why not?

MARIAM LESTER: When?

DEX GRAM: Is tomorrow, ok?

MARIAM LESTER: That's very soon

MARIAM LESTER: Let me check my calendar

. . .

MARIAM LESTER: Tomorrow works for me, what do you want to do?

DEX GRAM: Weather looks nice for tomorrow

DEX GRAM: Are you ok with hiking?

MARIAM LESTER: Yea, sounds fun. What time?

DEX GRAM: Around noon at the state trail on the outskirts of Stony Heights

MARIAM LESTER: Works for me

MARIAM LESTER: Let me finish some hw tonight and that'll free me up for tomorrow, okay?

DEX GRAM: Ok, sounds good.

MARIAM LESTER: Maybe, we might find a jackalope lol

DEX GRAM: Maybe lol

MARIAM LESTER: Cya, Jackalope King, good night

DEX GRAM: Later, Ocelot, sleep well

*

The yellow woods near the mountains never seemed so still before. The branches adorned with fragile leaves were unwavering. No wind had blown yet to disturb the peace here. In a cool, shaded spot, I sat on a stone below the stairs leading to the parking lot. The state trail lacked any real waiting and resting areas. This would be my only chance to rest before the hike started. Mariam would be here soon. It was almost noon. I didn't need my phone to tell me that. The sun neared the peak of its travel path, so the light shone almost directly down here. A car engine soon dispersed the sounds of nature. A car door slam followed the dying of the engine. The sounds of nature gradually returned. I looked up at the stairs to see who arrived.

"Dex, hi."

With the bright sun behind her, the rays of light obscured her figure from my eyes, but as she descended the dirty wooden stairs, the shadows slowly diffused to the nearby environment to reveal a young, slender girl. A baseball-style cap sheltered her soft-textured hair. Her loose ponytail flowed freely from the back. I could slightly see the make-up on her face. She wore a faded blue long-sleeved shirt with the name of a local Baptist church, and she wore black-colored sport leggings that were neatly tucked into her hiking boots. She wore a thin smile as she

gracefully walked toward me, but soon the smile turned goofy as she tried to keep down a laugh from coming. Her gentle, rounded face was now in front of me, and a sudden onset of shyness overwhelmed her as she broke out in nervous laughter. An unpleasant sensation soon accompanied the awful noise in my chest, but both disappeared when I spoke.

“Hi, Mariam...”

The yellow woods divided in two. One side bathed in the light of the day that emitted a warmness. One that could soothe the soul of a traveler. The other side painted in shadows of the canopy that kept a coolness. One that could rest the soul of a wanderer. When the autumn wind blew, the shadows scattered the light bleeding through canopies, and the still shadows of the day joined the dancing light. They coalesced into a dimness that no longer separated the warmness and the coolness. The lack of warmness did not give rise to coolness, and the lack of coolness did not give rise to warmness. The lack of both gave rise to a different sensation. One that could elevate the soul in search of what lies beyond. The in-between state washed away any differences that existed. Between two worlds, we stood on the edge of both. The space between them connected us and split us. Between two tomorrows, we stood on the other side of the day. The sun would rise between a yesterday and a tomorrow, and the sun would set for only one of those days.

Closing Remarks

Writing this story has been quite the experience. I have learned a lot about myself during this whole process. I have never taken a creative writing class before, and Dr. Arroyo has been the only creative writing professor that I have talked with about my creative writing ability. There are several things that have stuck out to me about the writing process and how I work.

For starters, I can only write during the night time, which is very inconvenient. Every time I would sit down and write in the morning, I couldn't write anything. I had trouble focusing on what I want to accomplish. For some reason when I wrote at night, I wrote well and I was focused. This may have been because it's quiet at night in my house. During the day, birds are chirping, my dog is wanting to go play outside, and people are moving around the house. At night, everything is still. Another point of importance is that I could have started early when I decided I was writing a creative thesis, but the story still hadn't taken shape back then.

No matter how much I planned and thought about what I was going to write, they were simply plans and thoughts to entertain myself until the time came to write. These don't always go as planned. My plans about what I was going to write about restricted part of my creative process. I wanted to write about one thing, but my plan said I should be writing about another. I introduce a different element into the story, and I derail another element in the process. I finally realized that my plans and thoughts were simply plans and thoughts. Writing the content mattered more than they.

Meeting with my advisor, Mr. Burlison, made a difference in how I wrote. We had conversations that didn't seem to relate to the topic of the types of intimacy and online interaction. They all connected up neatly though. Every conversation wasn't pointless because parts of every conversation were embedded into the story. He gave me a different perspective to approach my writing, and a different perspective can help greatly when writing a story.

When I first started writing, I kept to my plans, but later on I dumped my plans entirely to focus on what I felt like writing. This greatly improved my mood and my ability to write. I was so bogged down by my plans that I lost focus of what I wanted to write. One great example that carried half of the story was the inclusion of Nancy more throughout the story. At first, she was a character used as a simple contrast with the protagonist. It was when I was writing the scene with Nancy and Dex dancing that I realized she had so much more to offer to the story. Whenever I wrote about Nancy and Dex, I had a fire burning in me. I could write what I wanted about them easier than everything else in the story. This stemmed from the significance of her character, which is toxic intimacy. She was the closest thing to fantasy. I used her to help shape out Dex. Her presence on the pages brought me into the story. At the same time, I felt bad about writing Nancy that way since she wasn't supposed to be a character that the reader should connect with. People do terrible things for entertainment, and no one should be in a relationship that hurts one individual and benefits the other.

The biggest trouble with the writing process was that I lacked a creative writing background. I had no experience outside of personal writing or academic writing. When I presented my drafts to both of my advisors, they didn't immediately shoot it down. They talked with me through the feedback and they had suggestions on what I could improve on. Never once did they say my work was terrible as much as they wanted to say it. That attitude alone made a world of difference when I wrote. I wasn't weighed down by thoughts of how bad my writing was. I was being carried by how much improvement I could make on my writing. The biggest compliment I received from Dr. Arroyo was that I actually had a nicely written scene. Going in with little experience was a huge obstacle I had to battle. Knowing that I had the potential to shape a story meant a lot to me.

Another part of the writing process that worked out later was the reflective ending. I have a problem with writing stories, and that problem is I can't start or end a story. I can write the middle part of the story though. Connecting the chapters to each was a problem, and the meaning behind each chapter became an issue when the chapters felt episodic. They failed to flow into each other. They were standalone pieces that were loosely connected. My first attempt to write what he wanted fell flat. I couldn't write the way he wanted me to. His example showed that I could use what I wrote to bring out what I'm presenting. When I wrote the revised ending for chapter 1, I figured out that I had a lot of fun writing in a symbolic and/or metaphorical way. Although I used a simile for the ending of chapter 1, the point still stands that I had to pull myself away from the story itself in order to shape the endings. Each ending was crafted to evoke different mental images and ideas that presented the purpose of the chapter in a not so obvious way. I began to like the way I ended each chapter. They felt unique in the way they represented the purpose of the chapter. I enjoyed my little twist because I felt like it was my work.

A lesson I learned from writing this story is that intimacy is more than the idea itself. Each person is different from someone else. A first impression or a blank statement shouldn't define a person. For example, calling someone *friend* is a general term, and the term is understood at a basic level. The problem with using *friend* is that it does not truly capture what exists between both parties. Trying to figure out what type of intimacy exists does not offer much, and it is misleading to try to understand the type of intimacy; it is the person being engaged that should be understood. These characters in the story are more than the people they are based off of and they are more than tools to convey what types of intimacy exist in this world. Relationship can't be accurately defined by words alone. People in this world want to be understood as the individual they are instead of being confined to a label. This I believe.

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