

NOT FOR SALE



# UNWRITTEN

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To Aunt Vivi, who always believed.  
May the words reach you and make you smile.  
I miss you.

*“That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.”*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

# THE ZWEESHEN







Part One

# PANGEA

NOT FOR SALE



## 1

## WHISPERS

The books lied to Beatrix that morning. Their whispers failed to reveal the end. Instead of warning her, when she stepped into her home library, they greeted her with commonplace chatter.

Through the paneled windows, the morning light fused the spines lining the walls into a multicolored tapestry.

“I need something for Grandpa,” Beatrix told the books. Her voice soared, stretching the way it always did in this room. In response, the whispers broke into an animated debate, their voices hushed but brimming with excitement.

Their conversation surrounded her in an embrace more solid than any she’d received from her father. Not that she cared about his signs of affection anymore. But she had, years back.

Grandpa had been the only person to hug her. Less often since she’d grown up, and he’d been forced into a nursing home. Her body tensed up at the thought, the temperature in her blood rising. If she’d been eighteen—not even two full years older—she might have been able to prevent Grandpa’s move. As it was, the decision had fallen to her father. The unfairness of it made her ball her hands. She had tried everything short of legal action. But she’d been prevented from taking responsibility for her grandfather. Even if she knew better than anyone how to care for him, when his meds were due, and how to calm him when he got agitated. Beatrix slid her hands in the pockets of her jeans—the feeling that she’d failed Grandpa, a weight that made everything else twice as



hard. He had always been there when she'd needed him. The worst night of her life, he'd come to help. But once their roles reversed, and it became her job to look out for him, she hadn't managed to keep him home.

And last week Grandpa had been lost, his old light all but gone.

"Make it special," Beatrix told the room. "A fun story. We all need a laugh."

The library was small and sparse. Aside from an armchair weathered from hours of sitting and a red-gold rug infused with paper must, there was nothing else except for books. No paneling or drywall peeked through. From the baseboard to the twelve-foot ceiling, walls of spines. Thick, thin, gilded, and plain, they gleamed in the sun, cutting off this room from the rest of the house and opening Beatrix's life to a million worlds. Because Beatrix had learned that books made inadequate boundaries. In her library, she sat in the middle of infinity.

Her eyes fixed on the center shelf, she tapped her foot on the wooden floor. "Come on. Show me, guys."

With a swish and a rustle, followed by the rubbing of leather on wood, the books began to shift. She smiled, a bit of the old joy seeping in, as if she were still a kid and her mother had just shown her this trick. *La guitarra encantada de Sevilla* had been the first tale chosen, and even to this day, Beatrix remembered the story of the musician whose tunes traveled through Spain to the girl meant to save him. It was so long ago that Mom's presence felt discolored and insubstantial. But in the library, the nine years since her death shortened, her mother's voice growing more vivid and the memories brighter.

Around Beatrix, the light changed, the sun coalescing into a shaft of orange that highlighted a title halfway down the north shelf. With the reverence of an acolyte, she grabbed the book, its warmth transferring to her fingers, up her palm and arm. The power inside her tingled with recognition, and her skin crackled, turning yellowed and porous like paper.

Her vision blurred, the result of a shift in the invisible cloak that shielded her magic from everyone's eyes. It lasted a moment. When she opened the volume, both her magic and her skin were once again settled, the spell obscuring her power now back in place.

Beatrix scrunched her forehead. It was happening more and more—random blips in Grandfather's cloaking spell. So far, nobody had caught her during one of those lapses. The thought of her magic exposed was unbearable.

At another time, she'd have gone to him for answers. But he wasn't capable anymore. It had been a couple of years since she'd had to figure things out on her own. She'd done okay. And she would manage this as well. Who knew? He might have a good day, and they might talk about the cloak. He had moments when, for the glimpse of a few sentences, he returned to his previous self.

One more reason to visit him today.

Beatrix had just needed the perfect book for him.

She looked at the title she held. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The hint of a smile curved her mouth. In her appreciation for stories, she was equal opportunity, but the voices of old books had a mellowness that crispy new ones could never imitate.

Old books loved her best.

They were the most stubborn too. It was a chorus of them who refused to leave her, even when their books of origin were nowhere in sight. They'd become the soundtrack of her life, those old stories, her elevator music, offering advice, wise quotes, the odd joke, and on rare occasions, a warning.

Now, as Beatrix stroked the fabric cover of the book she'd pulled out, the tale winked at her, promising a reality better than her life.

"I've never seen you before." She shook her head, hair tendrils slipping out of her hastily made bun, as she accepted the mystery that no matter how often she scanned the shelves, new stories appeared when the need arose.

"Thank you," she told the books. "Another one for my to-read list."

"Who the hell are you talking to?"

Beatrix turned, dropping the book, which hit the hardwood with an echo. Martin, her father, stood by the doorway. He never crossed the threshold, yet from the other side, his presence threatened. She picked up the story and straightened her back. The warmth this room had called forth evaporated. "What do you want?"

"*Tan loca como ella*," Martin said, his top lip curling. "Your mother was just as crazy. Spoke to the windows, the mirrors, the paintings on the walls. *Una chiflada*, totally out of her mind. You have her eyes. I'd worry if I were you."

Inside Beatrix, the Furie stirred. Its anger, foreign and familiar, coated her mouth with rust. "Don't talk about her like that."

Martin laughed. "Or what?"

From the molten core where it lived, the monster clawed up the walls of her chest. Rage welled, a creature with its own will. Which was why Beatrix

called her magic “the monster.” Grandpa, in his optimism, had dubbed it a gift. “Anger can fuel courage if you wield it. We’ll name it a Furie. A bit of training, and you’ll be the best of allies.”

Grandpa wasn’t often wrong. He had been mistaken about that.

“Like I thought.” Martin sneered. “You got nothing. As worthless as ever.”

Beatrix sucked in a breath. Held it. Counted down, imagining blues and soft light and lapping waves. And the droning of her grandfather’s teachings calmed her. But she had to get out. Before she broke her ten-year-disaster-free streak. “Let me pass,” she hissed, pushing toward the door. “I’m off to Grandpa.”

This time, Martin guffawed. “Another wacko. *Dios los crea y ellos se juntan.*” He stepped aside to let Beatrix through. She snatched her phone and the car keys from a porcelain tray. Her forearms ached from the effort to rein the monster in, to avoid giving in to the desire to destroy. That impulse was the most natural and the one she struggled the most to contain. Sometimes Beatrix wondered if she fought a doomed battle. After all, how long could this rage remain caged inside a body before it broke the dam and exploded? Before she burned it all?

She grazed her father’s work jacket on her way out, a pop of static electricity the perfect metaphor for their relationship.

And his words trailed after her. “Yes, run away. That’s all you’re good at.”

Without looking back, Beatrix raced to the garage and slid into her Jeep. Arms shaking with unspent power, she folded her head over the wheel and gulped several breaths.

After a bit, she straightened and attempted to conjure the Taming Sphere, the cage for the Furie Grandpa had spent a decade teaching her to construct. But like every other time, her effort disintegrated in a spray of shimmering dust.

Beatrix took the fastest way to the nursing home in the next midsize town. No facility for her grandfather’s condition existed in her hometown, a tired Midwest place named after a city halfway across the world that would be appalled rather than flattered by the association.

Three miles later and a lot calmer, she rolled the window down. The smells of the back roads wafted in. Summer had decided to crash spring’s party, and the heat drew lacy shapes above the pavement ahead. The old water tower, with the inscription “Go Panthers” for the high school football team, gleamed white against the earliest sprouts of soybeans and corn.

There was no mistaking the season around here. Or who planted what. Beatrix knew who owned the land, and who was on the verge of losing the farm too. And as the daughter of a respected agronomy engineer, everyone recognized her, which explained why as she drove down Main Street, heads turned in her direction and then away.

For the millionth time, she wondered why. Why did they dislike her?

It wasn't the Furie. The night he'd arrived in her life, Grandpa had cast the cloaking spell, which produced an amnesiac effect in anyone who caught her using her power—something she seldom did, other than to practice daily control exercises in the backyard.

Was it her appearance that fueled the town's dislike?

In elementary school, she'd agonized over the why. Was it her "nest" of hair, like Julie had called it then in between hooting and chirping sounds? The fact that Beatrix had to hunt down "Short" jeans in the store? Or maybe her eyes—freaky, too large for her face, changeable, and anime-like?

It could be the books—not their whispers, of which people were unaware—but the tales that had been grafted onto her soul, so that story friends trailed after her in an invisible entourage.

Mrs. Elliot, the math teacher, had taken Beatrix aside once. "You don't have to show them. Hide the books. Don't make yourself a target."

By now Beatrix had stopped caring about the reasons. All she wanted was to be left alone.

Two more years. Not even that—less than seven hundred days, and she could get out of this place for good.

And go far.

Far, far away.

All her choices for colleges took her halfway across the country. One, halfway across the world. She could thank Grandpa for that too. Without the school fund he'd grown for her over the years, she might have been stuck in this town for life.

A stutter came from underneath the hood. The carburetor again. It needed work. The thought tightened her throat. Before, her grandfather would have made a game out of fixing it. The orange Jeep had been his project all along. It sounded like him too: raspy, rusted, in need of an oil change.

"You have to love things, Beatrix," he used to say. "And you have to name the things you love. See, this is Jude. She's my torque wrench, and this

is Bertha, my favorite screwdriver. Next time you help me with the car, and I ask for Jude, you'll know who to get."

The ringtone from her cell jolted Beatrix back from her thoughts. She fumbled in her purse to retrieve the phone and hit Accept. Metallic and distorted, the voice of the nurse came down like Thor's hammer, and before the woman finished, Beatrix knew. Tears erupted.

The whispers hadn't warned her Grandpa would die today.



"He's not here!" Grandpa's favorite nurse intercepted Beatrix in the nursing home's lobby. "Your father ordered his body taken to the funeral home."

The words left Beatrix reeling. Her father had known. While he'd stood outside the library insulting her, insulting Mom, insulting Grandpa—all along—he'd known.

She swayed, tears pooling in her eyes. A sob escaped her. She'd been aware it would happen. That one day he'd be gone. In her bed in the dark, with the stars of the Orion belt shining through the window, she'd even acknowledged it might happen soon. His recent frailty. The reduced frequency of his episodes of rationality. He'd become quieter too. He, of the grand gestures and the dramatic proclamations, had turned inward, as if back to a cocoon.

The nurse took Beatrix's hands and drew her into a hug, and Beatrix sank into it, drenching the woman's iodine-smelling scrubs.

"Which one?" Beatrix asked, wiping her eyes and stepping back. "Where did they take him?"

"I'm not sure." The nurse shook her head. "And *they* won't tell you." With a subtlety that would have made a pickpocket proud, she signaled toward the nurses' station where several staff members pretended to be engrossed in a chart. "Privacy regulations. All I know is your father ordered an immediate cremation and for the funeral home to dispose of his ashes."

"He can't. I want to spread them. I'm his family!" Outrage made Beatrix shake, and from habit, she tightened her hold on the monster. The Furie kept quiet though, subdued as never before.

Still, her eyes burned.

There was pressure in her chest.

Pain everywhere.



"I'm sorry," the nurse said. She lifted her hands in helplessness. "I can give you a few minutes in his room if you want."

Half-dazed, Beatrix nodded and followed her to suite twenty-nine.

She was unprepared for the shock of the barren room. They had cleaned up. No coat in the rack, no slippers in the basket she'd painted for him, no books on the shelves. The bed was remade, all tight corners and starched pillows, with a quilt folded at the foot.

"Where's everything?" Beatrix's voice came out strangled.

"Your father told us to burn it all."

Of course. Beatrix could see Martin—because she'd long ago grown out of the habit of calling him Dad—grimacing while saying it too, his mouth crooked with a disgust he'd reserved for his father-in-law.

"You didn't. Burn it, I mean."

"No. But management disposed of it. I'll give you some time alone."

Beatrix stepped into the room that had been Grandpa's for over a year. The AC rattled as always, and a whiff of his old-fashioned aftershave lingered, expanding his absence until it consumed all air.

He was gone.

And everything of his, lost too.

The closet door stood open, sanitized shelves gleaming. Even the corkboard Beatrix had set up hung plundered. The pictures of the yard, the beach, his favorite tools, and assorted art had been taken down, a few tacks clinging to the corners of torn images. She spotted several peeking out of the mesh wastebasket. Beatrix dropped to her knees, tears streaming. She rummaged in the bin to rescue a photograph of them together, and the yellowed image of a poppy that could pass for a field guide sprite.

A glimmer under the bed caught her eye. She crawled toward it, flattening herself for a better look.

Something remained after all.

Two things.

Grandpa's Tirolese hat lay atop a chest the size of a shoebox. Beatrix pulled both items out and set them on the bed, then caressed the hat's plaid weave and the feather adorning it. He had been wearing it the day she'd met him. Nine years ago, almost to the day.

And for a moment her story folded onto itself, taking her back inside the skin of her seven-year-old self. Like an enemy never vanquished, fear

gripped her again. Same as that night when the monster had awoken. Worse, perhaps.

She'd been wearing colorful pajamas with Disney characters. Beatrix could still name each one, the heroes who'd kept her company at night. Like she could close her eyes and feel the million pinpricks stabbing her while she'd sat in bed, wracked in spasms. Or the throbbing in her veins, her eyes melting in their sockets.

The monster had erupted out of her hands, a discharge like a whip of nine tails, each made of lightning. White-hot and crackling, the currents arced, exploding whatever they touched, until outside her window they illuminated the night and ended a life. While it lasted, the violence of the Furie held her up, and when it was over, she'd collapsed. Crumpled by the window, she'd wailed for her mom—knowing the dead couldn't respond, and she wouldn't come. In her place, Grandpa had shown up.

He was an old man in weird clothes and a weird hat.

"Are you real?" she'd asked, because he looked like an escapee from *Heidi*.

He'd grabbed his hat and sat it on Beatrix's head. "As real as you are, little one. I'm your grandfather."

Her young brain didn't wonder where he'd come from. Instead, she told herself she'd never fear again with him around.

Whisking the memory away, Beatrix stuffed Grandpa's cap into her purse and focused on the box, her throat so knotted she struggled to breathe. She didn't recognize the chest, but it was solid cherry wood, covered in floral carvings, and waxed to show off the grain—all the signatures of her grandfather's work. Hinges suggested a lid, although the top didn't release.

"Beatrix," the nurse called from the door, and Beatrix knew she'd outstayed her welcome. She tucked the box under her arm.

"Thank you," she said on her way out. "For everything. For being there for him in the end."

"We'll miss him." The nurse's eyes shone too. "He was one of a kind. A character, for sure. But we all loved him. Those are the ones we don't forget."

Outside the nursing home, the brightness of the afternoon hit Beatrix. The world hadn't stopped; it shone sunny and hot with complete disregard for the dead. She loaded the Jeep, setting the box on the passenger seat next to the book Grandpa would never read. Then she laid his hat atop the chest, and for the short drive back, he was almost there with her.

## 2

## MONSTER

By the time Beatrix arrived home, she'd rehearsed the exact way in which she would unload on Martin. She would get the name of the funeral home and, though too late to insist on a burial, she'd force him to allow her to scatter the ashes. Maybe she'd confront him about his hiding Grandpa's death.

But Martin wasn't there, and deprived of a target, Beatrix's rage circled her in a toxic cloud.

Anger followed her into her bedroom upstairs, and when she dropped her load on her desk, it threatened to buckle. Not because the chest was heavy—a pencil too many would have toppled that desk. She needed a new one. More like a new bedroom set. The décor was juvenile and worn, but it had been her mother who'd picked everything, and for that reason, Beatrix hesitated to change it.

Her gaze flitted to the characters Mom had painted on the walls. The blond girl sat atop her usual pile of books, the gnome tended to the same blue flower, and the toad, crown on head, stretched midhop as always. And still, somehow, they seemed at a loss too.

A truck's roar reached her from outside, and after she walked to the window to check—a neighbor, no sign of Martin—her eyes were drawn again to the chest. Five minutes of turning it this way and that, and she heard the click. The lid's mechanism hid in between a rose and a leaf. She knew Grandpa too well to be fooled by a trick like that.

The contents left her dumbfounded.

Grandpa had wrapped the interior with French-blue satin, and the coolness of the fabric breezed against her skin when she dug in. First, she pulled out a hand mirror that she recognized as the twin of her mother's silver brush. Mom had been the one person capable of taming Beatrix's curls, of helping her hate them less.

Beatrix set both the mirror and her melancholy thoughts aside and searched the box again. This time she retrieved a dull pocket watch. The lid sprang open with a clank to reveal a design of curves, astronomical signs, and a smiling moon and sun. It did not sport a single number, and neither an hour nor a minute hand. Maybe not a watch after all.

Next, she pulled out a thimble. She didn't remember ever seeing one in real life, just in movies and books. It was a dull brass, decorated with intricate loops and swirls that ended in a thistle. The bottom edge looked shaved off.

Despite the strain of the day, she smiled. Typical Grandpa. Boxes and trinkets and gadgets missing parts.

Beatrix smoothed the lining of the chest and, not expecting anything else, flinched when her fingertips caught in a pocket in the fabric. Wedged inside lay a letter.

A letter for her.

Her fingers trembled at the sight of the initials on top. She recognized them from the stamps that marked every book in her library. Dizziness gripped her. Beatrix had been seven when her mother died. The fragments of memories were a washed-out sepia. And now this.

A letter.

From Mom.

Written on cream-colored paper with a plastic texture, the letter was folded to double as an envelope, sealed with wax where the edges met.

"A message for Beatrix," read the cursive calligraphy on the front, "to be opened only after your eighteenth birthday." And next to that, in pencil, "Forbidden Lines: 3X May the words."

Although the seal was torn, Beatrix hesitated. She'd barely just turned sixteen a few weeks ago. *Close enough*, she guessed and opened it.

Inside, she could read a single line. Her mother had ended with, "Giving you all my love, always." And if Beatrix hoped for proof of her caring, she'd have to make do with that. Because above that signature line

was a collection of symbols that tore her heart open with disappointment. She sucked in a breath to keep her anguish at bay and studied the letter further. Toward the bottom, it contained a hand-drawn map with no place names—only a circular symbol, atop a hill.

Her tears stained the satin of Grandpa's chest, and the letter plummeted to the desk, while the monster spiraled up.

A letter full of gibberish. That was what Mom had left her. And Grandpa had kept it from her. Beatrix felt the betrayal like ice at the back of her neck.

Numb with hurt, she began to stuff the contents back into the chest, and as she did so, the mirror glinted. Beatrix lifted it. She almost dropped it again.

Because what greeted her wasn't her familiar reflection.

Her heart fluttered, and the shaking of her hands made the image wobble while she struggled to breathe.

Who was that?

It wasn't Beatrix.

Or was it? Her eyes seemed the same, but her hair draped long and white; her face had become wrinkled and her lips thinned out. High cheekbones poked through translucent skin. Was it herself? Mom? Someone who resembled them both?

Beatrix leaned closer with a mix of fascination and dread. The lines on her face were hypnotic, and her hands were aged too, mottled and frail, with blue veins that popped. Cold fear slunk down her spine, wrapping around her chest and her stomach. She'd wanted to be older, true. Had hoped and wished for it. For Grandpa's sake—and to be able to run away. But this...

As she stared into her reflection, the sense of being cheated of her future heated Beatrix, calling the monster up. She must be seventy, eighty even. She couldn't stay like this. She had too much to do. Too many plans.

Wait.

Beatrix dropped the mirror and snatched the letter from the desk. *To be opened only after your eighteenth birthday.*

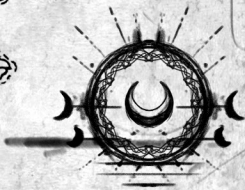
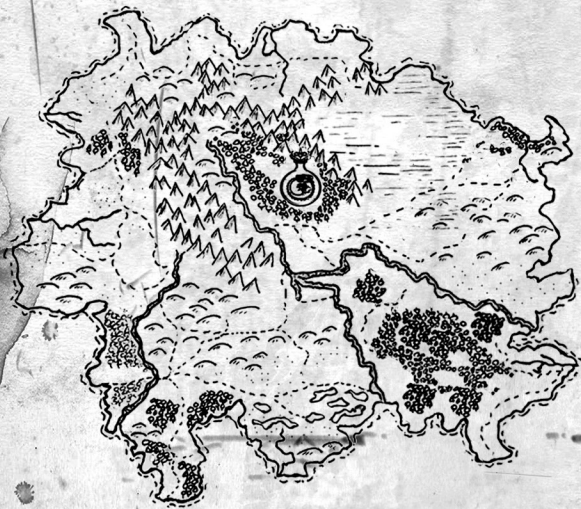
A weird calm settled on her.

She seemed old enough now, didn't she?

This time, when she unfolded the message, she tasted the rust of magic. And in a flutter of silver-blue, the symbols on the paper reorganized themselves. They twisted and danced and curled—and when they stopped, a few sentences in English stood out amidst the unintelligible writing.



NOT FOR SALE

[illegible][illegible]

A shiver went through Beatrix, and she collapsed onto her chair. When she checked her hands, they were wrinkle-free. Her body must have returned to normal. Relief mixed with awe—and confusion. She'd never experienced magic like this.

And the message nagged at her with its cryptic wording. A riddle only she could solve. Beatrix wondered how. Other than her Furie, she kept no secrets and didn't feel she held power—barely control over the monster. Of course, what struck her most was the ending. "Take Mary Brandt to the Eisd Naraid, and we will reunite."

*Reunite... Reunite. With Mom...*

Her chest spasmed. She wished she could work it out with Grandpa, make sense of the inexplicable as they'd done once upon a time. Before his illness.

Beatrix heard the sway of her father's voice in her mind. Telling her she was crazy too. But no, she'd seen the words transform.

Their truth resonated marrow-deep.

This letter—and its message—were real.

Beatrix held on to the paper, knuckles white.

She'd lost Grandpa. But there was a chance she could get Mom back.



The next day, still puzzled by the letter, Beatrix walked toward Franklin High School slower than usual. The red-bricked building loomed ahead, too large and too stately, the legacy of a mayor who'd overestimated the growth of this town nestled in cornfields. The school was flanked by a parking lot of pickup trucks and an occasional John Deere tractor.

Beatrix wiped the sweat from her hairline with her cuff. The heatwave hadn't budged, but the electric pulses that clawed at her scalp and cooked her body had nothing to do with the weather.

This heat came from within.

Since last night, the monster had been overexcited, and after hours researching the map and the symbols from the letter with no success, her frustration hadn't helped quiet it. The only thing she'd gleaned was that the message must contain a spell. *3X May the Words*. The phrase with the three times repetition was typical. Even Beatrix knew that. And the setup on the page reminded her of the instructions Grandpa used for charm-casting. She just had to figure out how the spell worked. And its purpose.

“Hey, freak!” yelled someone. “Heard a loser died and got excited it might be you.”

Julie. Of all people.

Beatrix kept walking.

Just a few more feet to the entrance...

Too late.

It happened in fast-forward. First Julie laughed, a cackle that fired up Beatrix’s chest. She spun around, sliding the letter toward her pocket at the same time—but not fast enough. Julie snatched it.

Beatrix snarled as she grabbed for the paper, the monster swirling. She almost tore it from Julie. Almost.

“What’s this?” Julie stepped forward, the letter clutched in her manicured hands. “Did you get your papers? Not illegal anymore?”

*I was born here*, Beatrix could have blurted out. Again. But there was no point trying to reason. Instead, she charged. With honed reflexes, two guys held her back. They were Julie’s usual minions: both tall, both athletic, both in her thrall.

“Give it back,” Beatrix growled, shaking from rage. “Now!”

Julie ignored her and unfolded the letter. “Listen to this crap, guys. Beloved Beatrix...” She looked up, her lips in a sneer. “Really? Who says that? You couldn’t be any more pathetic if you tried.”

Her audience tittered, and Julie quieted them with a wave as she continued to read the letter aloud. By the time she got to the forbidden words, Beatrix had bargained with the devil for the chance to choke her.

“Awww,” Julie mocked. “I get it. A love letter from your mom from the crazy house. I thought she’d killed herself so she didn’t have to look at you.”

Beatrix stepped on one of her captor’s feet. She elbowed the other in the side. A third guy, a big lineman, dug into her forearms to imprison her. She fought him off, and in his zeal, he tore her backpack strap. The bag plummeted, spilling books.

Julie laughed, turned the letter around. “What’s ‘May the words?’”

“Shut up!” Beatrix said, freeing herself with a well-placed knee. There was a reason some words were forbidden. “Stop!” She might not understand the spell in the letter, but one did not mess with unknown magic.

“What? This? May the words? What does ‘May the words’ mean? More crazy crap. You’re so embarrassing.”

This time when Beatrix lunged, the lineman pushed her hard. She staggered back, fighting for balance. It was the rush of power that kept her upright, a current, foreign and dark, that shot her rage up to new heights. In a frenzy, the monster squirmed, and Beatrix shook from the need to stop Julie. Silence her. Push the words back into her mouth—and down her throat.

Beatrix could. If she wanted to.

But she shouldn't.

She didn't.

She moved not at all. She stood so still time held its breath.

"I'd tell you to go back to your people, but not even the Latino club would have you." Julie laughed, the chorus of her friends echoing her. "Just like you, your grandfather was a waste of space." She said it as if bored, with the most dismissive flick of a hand, and Beatrix's control cracked.

The Furie rose, flaming her throat and burning her pupils on its way out. Power blurred the scene away. Her skin rippled and her hair sizzled. And when the lineman tried to push her again, he released her with a yelp.

Then came a flash.

A few screams.

The patter of their feet as they ran away.

And a glimpse or two of blood.

When everything righted itself, Beatrix found herself on her back, concrete underneath her, bright sky above. She sat up and took in the scene. Franklin High's front staircase lay in ruins, split in at least three places. And she was alone. Julie and her gang had scurried away, with foggy memories and a few minutes of their lives erased. But mostly unscathed.

Beatrix bent her head back against the cement and closed her eyes.

Damn it. She hadn't even made it to first period.

Grandpa would've been disappointed.

She knew she should leave—before the cloak hiding her magic wore off. It hadn't failed. Or else Julie and her friends would have brought an army of teachers to inspect the destroyed front entrance. Instead, they'd swear the stairs were fine when they left. That was the brilliance of Grandpa's cloak. Not only could people not detect her magic, but for a short time after, they couldn't even see the results of it. They would in time. By then Beatrix would be far away, and everyone would scratch their heads wondering when and who had taken a sledgehammer to the stairs.

Beatrix scrambled to her feet and began to gather her things. They were scattered among the rubble like trash, pops of color against the grey stone.

Anger still rushed through her, a pulsating ember. Why the hell couldn't they let her be? She didn't expect to be friends. Was too old to wish on stars to have any. All she asked was to be ignored. But no. They had to push and push. Today she hadn't been able to stop herself.

When she caught sight of the letter, crumpled in a bed of petunias, she struggled not to let go again. Her rage tasted bitter, the monster at its worst.

She stuffed it in her pocket, then closed her eyes, waiting to calm down again.

Her head tilted up, she kept her lids shut, the sun on her face too warm and her cotton shirt clinging to her shoulder blades.

"Are you all right?"

Beatrix jumped back. An older boy she'd never seen before stood in front of her, a worried look on his face. She watched every detail of his expression, searching for outrage, for the obvious dismay he should be feeling if he understood the demolition around them.

She found only concern.

"I'm not sure what happened," he said with a furrowed brow. "Are you hurt?"

Beatrix released her shoulders with relief. So far, the cloak's blips had been haphazard and sporadic. It was a miracle it hadn't failed this time.

"I'm fine." Surveying the scene, she attempted to observe it through his eyes, wondering what he saw, and what he believed had happened. Not reality. At least not yet. For now, all he might notice were her belongings strewn around. But she had to get out of here fast—before truth began to pour through the magical shield as it invariably did. It was a temporary spell after all.

"All's good." She bent to collect more of her things, shoving them in the mauled backpack.

"Don't miss this one," he said, holding out a paperback. He had a playful smile, more of a half smile, as if he were reserving part of the fun for himself.

Beatrix glanced at the book he offered her, a childhood favorite she'd been rereading the previous night, and the moment she touched the cover, the whispers exploded. Usually, the choir of book-voices was gentle, offering encouragement or a bouquet of pretty words—measured even in their warnings. But now they screamed. They begged. They railed and screeched.



And the stranger noticed something. His grip firm on the book, a few expressions flickered across his face. Shock? Confusion? Curiosity? He settled on amusement and relinquished the volume, his smile widening to a grin.

"I'm William," he said. "And you are?"

"Would you call me Anne with an e?" As soon as the response snuck out, she froze. Why would she ever say that? How old was she? Ten? And where did it come from? She knew where. The stupid book and the wretched whispers. She wished to disappear. *Way to make a fool of yourself.*

William didn't mock, although his lips stretched so far she could have counted all his teeth. His black hair was tousled just so, in a never-heard-of-a-bad-hair-day style. "Anne of Green Gables, huh? Interesting choice. Does that mean if I poke fun at you, you'll break something over my head?"

"And I won't talk to you again." Beatrix's throat squeezed shut. *Stop it.* She was half ashamed, half impressed. Ashamed she'd made such a silly reference. Impressed that he would pick up on it. Which guy in this century would know that book?

But then, something about him seemed atypical. She could have focused on that; instead, like it did most of the time, shame won out. It brought forth disgust because, once again, she couldn't act normal. No. She had to make a childish comment in front of this guy and then double down on it. She couldn't even blame the whispers. They might put ideas in her head. Murmur suggestions. But the choice on what to heed was hers.

William bent his head left, assessing her. "Never talk to me again? I don't know about that." He spoke with a strange cadence, a foreign note so subtle you found yourself wanting to hear more, so you could catch it. "I bet you can't hold a grudge."

"Try me."

"No need. I'd rather be friends. You still haven't told me your true name." He leaned in while he said it, and not for the first time, she regretted she hadn't been called anything cool.

"It's Beatrix. Most people here use Bea, which is even worse."

"I prefer Beatrix too. Fits you better."

The bell rang.

"See you around, Beatrix."

The whispers shrieked again, insisting she call after him, but too stunned or too uneasy, she didn't react in time. She was left staring at his back, wondering if she'd get a do-over.

With a sigh, Beatrix grabbed her ruined backpack and headed to the school. But she hadn't started navigating the cracked stairs when a voice called for her.

"Wait, Beatrix!"



Beatrix pivoted to find William again. With two strides he was back at her side. This time he surveyed her with narrowed eyes, as if trying to x-ray her.

"What is it?" she asked when he kept staring at her.

William scowled—and a perfect eyebrow shot up. She'd always wished to do that. Characters in books always could, but Beatrix's eyebrows moved in concert.

"No, you didn't cast the hex," he said. "You couldn't have."

She flinched. "A hex?"

Did he mean magic? A million possibilities swirled in her mind while she studied him, searching for signs of the supernatural. Not that she was an expert. Other than her own power and the basic spells Grandpa performed, she'd never encountered other magic. William seemed a little out of place, but she picked up no telltale signs of power. Regular people didn't assume they'd been hexed, though. "Who exactly are you?"

"We were nudged," William said as if that clarified things. He ran his hand through his hair, which remained as perfect as ever after the fact. "Pushed to act recklessly. I was, at least. I said I wouldn't get close to you." A thunderhead obscured his features for less than a second. "I won't risk the curse. Must be why he hexed me." His gaze, which had kept surveying the ground around them, settled at the base of a nearby tree. "There."

"What are you talking about? Who hexed us? What for?"

But he'd already crossed the distance to the evergreen and picked something up. He returned in seconds and showed her a brittle roll of parchment.

Its heavy scent reached her. The acrid tang that lingered in the nostrils. "Magic."

"I don't know about you, but I hate being pushed." He bent his head in a semibow. "I apologize. It was nice meeting you."

So fast she didn't get to form her next question—like who he was and where he came from—William pulled a lighter from his pocket and popped it open. A green flame jumped to grab hold of the paper.

Beatrix gasped when the magic released, and as the fire licked the parchment, a shrill scream pierced the scene.

For a moment, time stopped, suspended. Then it coiled and lurched backward, on a frenzied rewind. It reversed until she found herself on her back in front of the destroyed entrance to Franklin High. Concrete underneath her, bright sky above. Power prickled on her fingertips, and the scorching pavement seared her legs through her pants. With a wince, she stood up and began gathering her belongings. Her broken backpack, all her books and her notes were scattered around—pops of color against the grey stone. But Julie and her crowd were gone, and guilt was fresh on her mind.

“Hey! You, there!”

Beatrix turned around to find an older boy she’d never met. He had the most perfect hair. And the fiercest of scowls.

“This one tripped me.” The stranger held out a paperback, a childhood favorite she’d been rereading the previous night. And before Beatrix had the chance to thank him, he threw it her way.

She scrambled to catch it.

“Keep track of your stuff,” he said, glaring, and walked away.

Beatrix and the Furie both agreed. What a jerk.

## 3

## EMMA

Beatrix never made it to first period. She ended up running straight to her next class. Nobody asked questions, so she pretended nothing was wrong. Even when a lot of things were.

Now, while the physics lesson flowed over her, she played with her old Tiffany's bracelet, flipped the little heart back and forth with her finger, searching for calm. The bracelet had been Mom's. One of the few things Beatrix had inherited, and she seldom took it off. Julie had mocked it too at some point. That reminded her. Anger simmering, Beatrix retrieved the balled-up letter from her pocket and flattened it.

She felt violated. As if by yelling them, Julie had stolen the words away from her.

But like every other time, Beatrix hadn't known how to stop Julie and her friends. She didn't want to hurt them. But she didn't want to be hurt either. And between those two hid the balance she never got right.

Of course, she could have killed them. She'd wanted to. But she refused to be that. A monster. Even if inside her the violence churned, begging to be allowed out. It was red and hot and blinding, and sometimes it made Beatrix forget everything except for the rush of letting go. The rest of the time, the real her could see the Furie for what it was: a foreign, aggressive power with a hunger to destroy.

She caressed the battered letter, studying the writing in pencil again. *3X May the words.* An odd choice of phrase. Incomplete. Part of a sentence that begged for an ending. What could her mother have meant by it?

Even in Beatrix's mind, the words produced a lingering disquiet.

And things didn't improve.

For the rest of the day, no matter what she tried, Beatrix couldn't shake the uneasiness of that morning's confrontation. It lingered like a sticky residue and mixed with the drained feeling of the after-magic.

A sense of undefined dread settled within her, and however much she tried to convince herself otherwise, it wouldn't let go of her.

It all fell into place when she unlocked the door to her house after school. The air vibrated with electric tension that ran icy fingers along her spine. Up the stairs, the smell of rust wafted like incense, sickening and acrid. She rushed to her bedroom on high alert.

Only the room she entered looked nothing like the one she knew.

A tropical jungle bathed in green fog had sprouted in its stead. The floor had grown leaves, branches, and roots, while weeds the size of elephant trunks nailed the windows shut.

The silhouettes of her furniture were unrecognizable. Her desk had been struck in half by a treetop protruding from the corner wall, the night table lay sideways, suffocated under vines with black thorns, and her bedpost was warped and covered in moss. Jade fumes—blended with the wetness of decay—floated to her nose, an odor almost pungent enough to obscure the other, more familiar one. The scent of magic.

Because that much she could tell: complex, powerful sorcery lurked behind this.

"Who's there?" Beatrix said, standing at the threshold. "Show yourself."

She waited. An artificial echo made her words resonate, deforming them into the rustling of leaves. When it became clear there'd be no response, she took a step. Then another.

Toward the opposite side of the room, her comforter spilled onto the rug like a mercurial river. Waves of fog slithered across the hardwood, giving her the impression of stepping on sea-foam.

Bracing herself, she padded forward. The temperature dropped the farther she advanced, and her teeth chattered. The room breathed around her, puffs of smoke and rancid sighs, and when her foot touched the floor again—as if she'd trod on a snake pit—tendrils of green shot up and curled around her. Beatrix let out a yelp while they tightened on her shoulders and elbows, crawled up her legs and ankles, rooting her to the middle of the

room. Desperate, she fought against the ties, only to feel them dig deeper, cutting the circulation at her wrists.

Her breathing escaped in gasps, while pain strangled any possible screams. A scrap of a story tickled her mind then, the whispers dropping a hint in her ears. At their urging, Beatrix eased up, relaxing her stance, and in response the bounds got slack. Another step forward and again a sharp stabbing shot through her. It released her when she stood still.

A flash reminiscent of a firebolt stunned her, and phosphorescent bars crisscrossed the room from top to bottom, shaping a giant cage. And as the walls curved in, one by one the characters her mother had chosen to decorate her bedroom transformed, leaving the walls they'd occupied throughout her childhood. First, the doves and the swallows broke free, extending their wings and turning three-dimensional. Then the toad, the blond-haired girl, the owl, and the gnome plumped up and jumped out. In the half-light, they appeared hellish.

A scream froze the scene, a cry desperate enough to hold the rotation of the earth. Beatrix's blood sped up and her body tensed. The sound came from above, and in perfect coordination, the creatures stared upward. The fastest to reach the ceiling were the doves, which began circling, batting and shrieking, their pupils a nightmarish red. By the time the owl joined them, they were pecking at a suspended boot that soon after dropped next to Beatrix.

"No! You're hurting me. No more!" someone yelled.

Through the top bars, a dangling foot, dark and dainty, kicked back and forth.

"Please!" the owner of the foot begged while the doves threatened to tear the toes with their beaks. "Please, leave me be!"

For a moment, Beatrix hesitated. Semiforgotten warnings poked at the edges of her brain. For all his fun-loving ways, Grandpa had been repetitive about intruders and the power one gave someone by letting them in. But the crying wrenched at her heart. She couldn't bear how the birds were mangling that foot. She'd deal if there were consequences.

"Enough!" Beatrix said, pulling against the bindings that cemented her to the floorboards. "Stop it now!"

The Furie triggered. Abrupt and violent, her power rushed in. Beatrix released it without regret, and the tongues of her magic shot out, flashing in the mist like lightning. They landed in an explosion of red: crashing, cracking, breaking, and tearing, the way her Furie loved best.





“Are you quite well?”

Beatrix shook her head to dislodge the paint chips in her hair. She lay facedown on a rug, the ruins of her dresser splattered around her bedroom. Using her palm to push up, she sat and blinked several times. Drywall dust snowed across her eyelashes and clouded her vision. A figure swam before her, and it took Beatrix a moment to identify her as a young girl.

“You’re not a boy,” the newcomer said in a curious British accent. “He insisted you’d be a boy.”

“What?” Beatrix glanced around and shrank as she took in the mess. Pieces of glass and wood littered the floor, books had fallen off the shelves, her telescope poked from underneath the bed, and the walls showed several telling scorch marks. The decorative characters, who had returned to their two-dimensional selves and proper places, seemed innocent at first sight, though a second look revealed they were worse for wear. The gnome had lost the tip of his hat, and a conspicuous hole besmirched the blond girl’s apron. Only the doves shone pristine, hovering over her nightstand where a lamp dangled, hanging from its cord.

There was something new, though. Beside the window and looking ready to spring, a painted puma crouched behind two Philodendron leaves, its coat velvety black and its eyes fluorescent green. The rune from the letter marked its flank—the one from the map. A snake eating its tail. So the memory of the jungle was here to stay, and it had to do with the message. Something about the symbol giggled at her. But now was not the time to delve into that.

“Who are you?” Beatrix asked the girl instead, deeming the rune, the decorative puma, and the clutter less pressing than the new arrival. “Where did you come from?”

“A magician. You were supposed to be a magician. How can it be? Farisad tracked your magic-print.”

“Who’s Farisad?” Standing up, Beatrix inspected the visitor. Out of the million questions falling over each other to reach her mouth, a single one mattered. Was the stranger dangerous?

Beatrix didn’t know much about protection magic. Even though Grandfather had spoken of untold peril, he’d always failed to give details, so she hadn’t taken him seriously. Now she wished she’d paid more attention.

This girl didn't appear threatening. She stood, her chin tucked in, while she removed the debris from her clothes, using the tips of her fingers like tweezers to pinch the wood shavings one by one.

Every so often she assessed herself in the standing mirror, which had escaped the worst of the destruction and stood lopsided. She wore an old-fashioned dress buttoned up to her neck, with frills and ruffles and a white petticoat peeking under her maroon skirt—an outfit that would have fit in a story with brass gadgetry and zeppelins. No older than eleven or twelve, she was at least two heads shorter than Beatrix, and so light she appeared elf-like. Her hair glowed blue, short and spiked.

"Who are you?" Beatrix asked again. "Did you come because of the letter?"

Losing patience with her task, the girl patted her clothing down. "You ruined the wordhole. I can't go back now."

Beatrix decided she couldn't fear a child. "I'm Beatrix. Is your name Mary Brandt?"

The visitor gawked at her. "Never heard of such a person." She looked around. "The place's quite a wreck. You should call service to tidy it up."

Beatrix scanned the room once more, dismay catching up with her. What believable excuse could she offer for this? Martin would strangle her. Then expect her to pay for repairs. One-handed, she undid her half-falling bun and massaged her scalp.

"I'm Emma," the girl said. "I suppose I should thank you."

"No big deal. Glad I could help."

"Glad?" Emma's skin bloomed red; her arms flailed. "I wouldn't go as far as being glad! You made a hash of everything. All you had to do was tell your wards to pull back. So simple. Instead, you go and destroy my hope of returning."

"Wards?"

"Those." Emma pointed with a slim index finger to the wall. "Nasty piece of work, those doves. And don't remind me of the toad. Took you a while, but thanks for deactivating them." Her perky nose up, she studied Beatrix with a judgmental eye. When finished, she sighed, pranced toward a broken chair, and sat, folding her hands in a ladylike manner. "You're not at all what I expected. Not a very good magician for starters, exploding your Furie without restraint. If I were you, I'd revisit Altrana's first class. You didn't follow a single magic rule."

The rules of magic...

That's what it was. Beatrix glanced at the puma on the wall. She recognized the symbol on its flank now. Not because it appeared on the letter's map, but because Grandpa had used it once—when reinforcing her cloak. So her suspicions had been correct. The letter contained an enchantment. Maybe she could dig through her old notes, see if the symbol showed up somewhere. Where had the girl said she'd come from?

"Did you even try to control it?" Emma was saying while shaking her head. "Sad show if you did."

That was when the rest of the girl's statement pierced through. Inside Beatrix, the Furie rose. The visitor remembered. She'd witnessed the Furie and hadn't forgotten it. Only Grandpa could do that. Her protective cloak must have blipped again—this time in front of someone. Beatrix winced, a ball of dread making her stomach contract. Two explosions in a day. Damn it. She was undoing almost a decade of restraint and probably stretching the cloak to its breaking point.

"Pretty decent aim, I suppose," Emma went on. "So there's hope..."

Beatrix had always wanted a little sister. Now she reconsidered. "Hold on," she interrupted. "Start at the beginning. Tell me who you are. If not about the letter, why are you here?"

"You're so odd." Emma's forehead furrowed. "But that's all right. It's what I love most about books. They are about people who are different. Nobody changed the world by being like everyone else." She turned thoughtful, wistfulness oozing from her. "I'm a taelimn, of course. I hail from the Zweeshen. Where else?"

"I've never heard of this Zweeshen. What's a taelimn?"

"I'm so far from home." Emma shook her head. "Now I'll never go back. What am I going to do? What will become of me?" Her voice turned high-pitched, her hair drooped, and hiding her face in her arms, she burst into tears.

Unsure how to console her, Beatrix grabbed a tissue box from her desk. "Hey, don't cry. I'm sure it'll be okay."

"No, it won't be." Emma's sobs broke down into hiccups. "Nothing will be okay."

Beatrix waited, searching for the right words and finding nothing. Emma's weeping increased in volume, her chest heaving, and Beatrix's heart scrunched. "Come on, Emma. Whatever it is, we can fix it."

The girl looked up with eyes as pitiful as a puppy's. "You mean it? Do you promise to help me find my author?"

Beatrix hesitated. What did she mean? But Emma was sobbing once more.

“I’ll try,” Beatrix told her. How hard could it be to find an author in the age of the intrusive, no-privacy internet?

“Promise?” the girl insisted in between sniffs.

“I promise.”

Emma let out a sigh. Huge tears streamed down her chin, spotting her blouse.

“Would you like some water?” Beatrix offered, because that’s Grandpa would have done.

Emma sniffed one last time, wiping the sadness off as if the tissue were a magic eraser. “My writer insists there’s nothing a cup of tea cannot make better. If you ring the bell, I’ll pour.”