

**THE GREY: EMERGING IDENTITY OF THE FEMALE ANDROGYNOUS
HERO**

by

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ABSTRACT

Theorists who study the formulation of the hero have identified that the appearance of the hero varies depending on the time and place they are needed. Yet, the function of hero archetypes, such as Joseph Campbell's monomyth, have reinforced traditional Caucasian masculine male mythic ideologies in young-adult fiction. Reconfiguring the idea of the hero to question its masculine bias and include a female androgynous heroic paradigm will expand the limited classification of "hero" as the hero is encouraged to hone both her masculinity and femininity. This project focuses on a hero with both an androgynous personality and an Indigenous heritage. These aspects of my project push back against the gender and cultural norms often associated with heroic journeys in Western culture. Throughout this thesis, I formulate a more accepting form of identity by mapping an encompassing version of the hero's journey that pushes the boundaries of classic "heroism" but still utilizes the familiar and effective pattern of the heroic journey of the self by comfortably living in the what I am titling "grey space". By illustrating the fluidity of identity, young readers can relate to a heroic character who encompasses more than the traditional role outlined by Campbell.

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Research: Formulating Identity

Young-adult fiction has been a prominent and effective tool of engagement with young adults who are beginning to understand social constructs and formulate their own ideas of identity. Despite the many definitions for different types of identity, such as ethnicity and gender, there arises a need for what I am calling “grey space,” where an individual can flourish and integration is key. Grey space, the space where multiple identities define the individual, frees the individual to formulate a new identity. In young-adult fiction, I argue, grey space identity models the possibility of a new state of being in which non-conformity replaces the singular formation of identity. Throughout this thesis, I explore this grey space of identity in two forms: gender and ethnicity. I focus on an androgynous character who struggles to integrate both the feminine and masculine characteristics of her personality and to define herself in a space where her ethnicity is a mixture of German and Indigenous cultures. By examining the function of grey space in relation to heroic archetypes, I hope to delineate a space of non-conformity where one may conclude a lack in the diversity of heroes who exist in this grey space of intermediacy, and how existing heroic archetypes influence their audience.

Texts such as Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* have reinforced the traditional masculine male signified concept of the “hero” which has served as a popular structure in much young-adult literature. Despite this popularity, I argue that Campbell’s text is limiting in its definition of heroic characters. My project focuses on an Indigenous female androgynous hero who does not conform to the traditional Caucasian masculine norms which I draw on from my own experiences of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry to explore what

it might mean to develop a sense of identity as grey space. In keeping with the idea of unsettling grey space, I focus on a female character with an evolving androgynous personality whose journey involves the acceptance of the non-singularity of her personal identity. Throughout this project, I define gender according to J.T. Spence and R.L. Helmreich's definitions of feminine as expressive and masculine as instrumental. I would also like to note that my descriptions of masculine and feminine are not gender limited and that they are merely social constructs that can be applied to any individual, hence my focus on androgyny and the description of androgyny as the integration of femininity and masculinity. The feminine, defined as "expressive", is illustrated in my character's fictional identity through her caring nature and desire to connect with others while her masculine "instrumental" attributes become more prevalent later in the fictional work when the heroic character begins to utilize both her feminine and masculine traits. The purpose of this thesis is to broaden the heroic archetype and not disregard the importance and significance of the traditional Caucasian masculine male heroic archetype in order to encompass other heroic archetypes under the term "hero".

Research Problem: The Monomyth's Lack of Diversity

The hero's journey is a structure in popular literature; yet, as an evolving understanding of gender limitations are publicized, its universalizing tendencies may be more restrictive than originally intended. My own framework, in the form of a creative writing piece, uses Campbell's monomythic structure (as it has proven to be a popular outline in fiction) but presents the hero with an identity to which young present-day readers can relate. I pose a heroic character who is not only learning her place in society and improving her communication skills, but is also discovering her sacred duty as well as developing her resilience. Ross cites religious studies

scholar Mircea Eliade who claims that the monomyth does not end once the hero enters the “return” phase (the last stage of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth). Rather, they must integrate this transformative experience before they can fully complete their monomythic journey. By focusing on the process of integration, my creative thesis draws on and repurposes Campbell’s monomyth, in light of feminist and other critiques, connecting them to alternative conceptualizations of heroism drawn from scholarship of YA fiction and media. I argue that despite the monomyth’s attempts at universality, Glenda Hambly’s “The Not so Universal Hero’s Journey” correctly identifies the limits of Campbell’s supposed diverse hero by outlining its limitations. I also draw on Margery Hourihan’s *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* who examines the effect of Campbell’s monomyth on literature aimed at a young audience to consider how such limited heroes affect impressionable readers. There is also the controversy around the term “shero” which utilizes Sarah Nicholson’s “The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell”, who claims that “shero” seems sub heroic in comparison to “hero”. It also acknowledges and debates Maria Tatar’s *The Heroine with 1001 Faces* and Jamie Onciul-Omelus’s “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” as “*Shero*”: *Re-Defining the Mythological Hero*, where they argue the need for such a term.

Tatar, as well as Gail Carriger’s *The Heroine’s Journey: For Readers, Writers and Fans of Pop Culture*, have been particularly central to not only the debate in defining a female heroic character but also the critiques of Campbell’s monomyth by drawing attention to the limitations placed onto the heroine by Campbell. Tatar notes Campbell’s description of women as the ones who bear the knowledge to be discovered, whereas the hero is the one who discovers it. “In other words,” Tatar summarizes “women never need to leave the house” (Tatar 1). She also notes that Campbell’s consistency of portraying men as partaking in the journey while women are anchored

to the final location or goal, often limits them to the domestic space. Carriger's also underlines the damaging effects of these binary journeys:

western society has intimately associated hero and masculine with what it means to be a man (and therefore what men are supposed to be and want in life) and simultaneously associated heroine and feminine with what it means to be a woman (and therefore what women are supposed to be and want in life). Then our society has decided that the first is morally better and ethically superior to the second. (Carriger 137)

Carriger emphasizes how these concepts can lead to misconceptions about gender, and insists the hero and heroine's journeys are merely frameworks for a person's story and not guidelines for one's biological sex. Carriger's text illustrates that although the monomythic structure of the hero and heroine's journeys are similar, their goals and focuses differ. For instance, the hero views success as "*isolation leads to victory*" (46), "Needing help is bad", and "goals and victory are invested in conquest and solo achievement" as the "greatest moments of strength and personal growth will inevitably occur in *isolation*" (48). On the other hand, the feminine heroine journey "*acts to save others*" (93) and with an emphasis on community building. Carriger is quick to mention that although a hero undergoes a masculine journey and a heroine undergoes a feminine journey, the type of journey is not defined by the hero/heroine's gender. For instance, a woman can undergo a masculine heroic journey as it is not her gender that defines her journey but the type of journey she takes. As such, Carriger defines a hero's journey as "self-sufficiency, loneliness coping strategies, sacred duty, solo responsibility, and fortitude" (Carriger 174), whereas "learning one's place in society, belonging, forming friendship groups and experiencing love, developing better communication skills, and discovering leadership abilities" (Carriger 174) are associated with a heroine's journey.

Challenges to predominantly male representation of the hero began to emerge in Second-wave feminist responses to popular culture of the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly in literature and media aimed at young adult audiences. Jamie Oniciul-Omelus, for example, coins the concept of “shero” in her analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as she argues that “youth and femininity are rarely, if ever, linked to heroic acts; by being young, strong, feminine and heroic, Buffy challenges the dominance of masculinity and maturity in regards to the hero character” (Oniciul-Omelus 2). In many popular young-adult fantasy novels a character’s masculinity is essential to their monomythic journey, not their femininity as the character’s masculine traits are what leads them to be heroic. The characters who often rely on their feministic traits are just protagonists, not heroes. Caitlin Anne Campbell notes that “A female protagonist is by no means the same as a female hero” (Caitlin Anne Campbell 1); although a female character may play a key role in the story, she suggests, it does not make her heroic. So despite her presence in a heroic tale, a female character is often limited to that of a protagonist rather than the hero. Buffy’s heroic nature only disrupts the characterization of the traditional feminine female as a supporting role; it does not, however, disrupt these polar-opposite understandings of gender roles.

In the influential collection “What Makes a Hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of Heroism”, Frisk discusses how a hero’s appearance will depend on the time and place they are needed. Feministic critiques of the monomyth have focused on the gender-imbalance of heroic tales as well as their emphasis on the character’s masculinity opposed to their femininity. Glenda Hambly, for example, points out that Campbell’s take on certain mythologies differs greatly from anthropologists who study the same myths. She suggests that Campbell applies these myths to his own paradigm, rather than examining these myths from outside of his parameters and that his way of understanding the myth through the lens of his own perspective as a white male ends

by universalizing these stories without taking into account their historical and cultural context, therefore, simplifying their meaning. Similarly, Sarah Nicholson observes that while Campbell does refer to many woman-based heroic stories, such as discussing the heroic journey of the female hero Inanna as “Yet after presenting Inanna’s story, he continues to examine the hero’s initiation under the title ‘Woman as the Temptress’, defaulting to the vantage point of the male hero” (Nicholson 188). As a result, Nicholson points out that the man is often the central heroic figure while the woman is classified as the Other: temptress, goddess or mother:

At the heart of initiation, woman as hero is lost (Segal, 2004: 14). It is Woman who serves as the ‘crisis at the nadir’ of the male hero’s journey (Campbell, 1949: 109).

Campbell writes that in mythic symbology Woman represents ‘the totality of what can be known for the hero’ (Campbell, 1949: 116). Nicholson (187)

Campbell’s universalization of the experience of the male hero can have particular implications for younger audiences whose identities are outside the scope of the white male masculine hero. Margery Hourihan notes that the habitual pattern of the heroic narrative featuring a “white, male, British, American or European” often ends with the marginalization of female characters (Hourihan 9). Hourihan observes that this limited structure leads to an entangled understanding with how young people view the world. By expanding the term “hero” to include female characters it becomes more diverse, encompassing various heroic stories. However, it also raises concern that by doing so would suggest that the monomyth is universal which, due to the de-valuing of female characters in Western culture, it is not. Campbell’s initial publication of a universal heroic journey lead to an influential, albeit limited, hero that reflected the popularized values of Western culture’s Caucasian male hero. However, as Western culture continues to grow, so does its hero. The hero needs to reflect the values of the time and place they reside and,

in doing so, there arises the need for a female Indigenous androgynous hero who embodies the evolving understanding of gender and ethnicity in contemporary Western culture. Although his monomyth is supposed to be based on a multitude of different cultures and the overlapping similarities within them, many popular realizations of the monomyth have been adapted to fit into the monomythic structure (rather than vice versa) because Campbell's structuralist approach flattens historical context. Due to evolving understandings of gender and ethnicity in the present moment there arises a need for a heroic character who encompasses my own definition of the "grey space" of these multiple aspects of identity.

The structure of the monomyth, despite its popularity, is a masculine journey of transformation. Regardless of a female character's ability to undergo a masculine journey, as stated above, the journey's outline is still problematic. Therefore, an androgynous heroic journey would hone both the elements of a hero's journey and a heroine's journey to fulfill the effectiveness of the popular monomythic journey, without branding the journey as a "heroine's journey" just because the journey attributes feminine heroine journey elements. If a "shero" character may be deemed as "sub-heroic" in comparison to the hero because "hero" does not utilize the feminine traits of the heroic character, then the "hero" should have the capacity to encompass a more androgynous application of the feminine and masculine. Susan L. Ross notes the transformative experience can be labeled as a traditional masculine initiation of looking outwards, whereas the integrative experience is a feminine initiation of looking inwards. Ross discusses Campbell's own recounting of the monomyth and how both the integrative heroine's journey and the transformative hero's journey can be combined into what she describes as a figure-eight pattern of integrating the transformative experience.

There arises debate, however, over whether to combine the hero and heroine's journeys as Maria Tatar criticizes this universality of placing heroes and heroines under one umbrella term stating that "Heroes and heroines have deeply deployed strategies for earning merit" and despite the gender-fluidity that is present in much of our current culture "that fact makes it all the more important to understand the culturally scripted performances and inflexible binary codes enacted in myths" (Tatar 8). "While writing *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he [Joseph Campbell] wanted to include 'female heroes,' but discovered that he had to go to fairy tales to find them" which Tatar argues, "In fairy tales, we have not just the perspective of women but also their voices" (Tatar 11). Tatar notes the importance of these voices in their cultural and historical contexts as by comparing the heroine with the hero Tatar states that "Campbell's heroes, drawn from myth and religion, embark on adventures and return with healing elixirs. The heroines of fairy tales are more modest in their ambitions. They pursue justice without weapons in hand, telling stories to broadcast misdeeds and to bring outlaws to justice" (Tatar 14).

Outline of Framework

Despite the complications surrounding Campbell's definition of the hero, I argue that the name "hero" should be expanded to encapsulate a multitude of heroes, rather than the disputable "shero" term. Indeed, I would agree, "shero" term does not allow for the dismantling of gender roles but almost seems to enforce them as the female hero would need a new term just because she is female. I am also in agreement with Nicholson who criticizes the term "heroine", much like Onciul-Omelus's "shero", as both terms seem to demonstrate a sense of Otherness in comparison to "hero". Instead, a hero is needed who combines the strengths of both the heroine's journey and the hero's journey into an integration of these masculine and feminine journeys. I argue that the current construction of hero, according to Campbell, is deficient in its ability to cater to both feminine and masculine journeys. As Carriger describes, the hero's journey is masculine whereas the heroine's journey is feminine. However, these journeys are not limited to the individual's gender but are dependent on whether the individual embarks on a feminine heroine's journey or a masculine hero's journey. I instead wish to propose a heroic journey that embodies both the hero and heroine's journeys. In reference to Ross, I plan to focus on combining the heroine integrative experience with the hero's transformative experience by integrating the transformative experience of the journeys. As Ross states:

The journey begins with an ascent where the initiate seeks union with the transcendent to conceive a new self [transformative hero's journey]...Upon return the initiate wishes to bestow the boon to society only to find that doing so is an unrelenting challenge and so begins a steady descent into her inner depths where she encounters the dissolution of the outdated self [integrative heroine's journey]. The eventual birth of a new self marks a transition out of darkness moving psychically upwards and socially outwards towards

incorporation of the transformative peak and integration. In the end, the initiate arrives in the center, the place where the entire journey began. (Ross 13)

The entire process of integrating the transformative experience results in a figure-eight pattern, as opposed to Campbell's monomythic circular cycle. Thus the blending of the feminine and masculine is necessary for the completion of the full journey, resulting in a new formulation of the hero's journey.

In examining the limitations placed on not only gender in accordance with the monomyth, but also the hero's ethnicity, I focus my work on a hero outside of the popular Western norm of the white masculine male hero. Instead, the hero's identity is that of an androgynous Indigenous female who struggles with how she chooses to define her cultural identity. Due to Chris Anderson's work, *"Métis": Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*, where he focuses on the complications of referring to people of mixed European and Indigenous heritage as Métis, I do not refer to my heroic protagonist as Métis, but rather Indigenous. In terms of my discussion on Indigenous identity, I acknowledge this cultural heritage from a personal standpoint as I, myself, come from a mixed Indigenous and European family. Despite my familial connections to my Iroquois and Cree ancestors, I do recognize that, physically, I appear predominantly Caucasian. I also recognize the waning spiritual connection I have to my Indigenous heritage due to the racialized stigmas that were predominant during my grandfather's upbringing, fracturing my connection to this culture. This has ultimately resulted in a grey space in which I must respect the line between accepting my Indigenous ancestry and overstepping when it comes to connecting with this part of my heritage. My thesis analyses this duality of identity between my protagonist's own ancestral heritage. My protagonist balances the relationship between her Germanic heritage, for which she can connect to physically through

close relatives, and her Indigenous heritage for which she has little physical and cultural connection to. In the creative work, I discuss her cultural heritage in small intervals throughout the work in order to draw out this tension beyond what I have presented as the story is left unfinished at the end. Additionally, her struggles with understanding her heritage act as a key feature in her heroic journey as it begins her journey by igniting The Call phase of Campbell's monomyth. I use a relationship with her Indigenous aunt, whom she is unfamiliar with, as a way for her to realize this estrangement with her culture and recognize her need to rebuild it, much like their relationship. Like so many elements of my creative thesis, my protagonist explores this undefined grey space in order to define her own identity. Much like my own ancestry, my protagonist struggles with her connection to her Indigenous heritage. However, by reconnecting with her Indigenous family and learning to embrace this grey space of identity, she eventually formulates a new identity.

Because of her androgyny, my heroic protagonist cannot be pigeon-holed into the stereotypical binaries of her sex that are often reaffirmed in Campbell's monomythic journey. In the fiction piece of my thesis, my heroic protagonist struggles to adhere to just her feminine characteristics. Although her more expressive characteristics, such as community building amongst her peers, proves useful she suppresses her masculine expressive characteristics, such as fighting skills and fulfilling her own heroic journey, which hinders her. There is even a moment in the text where another character criticizes the heroic protagonist by the way she talks as she attempts to act hyper-feminine to appease him. He notes how this behavior of adhering to a more feminine binary seems forced and unnatural. Tatar states in her text that there are "powerful gendered plots in our culture": men's courage and women's charm (Tatar 25). Tatar characterizes "charm" as ranging from "agreeable grace to powerful magic" (Tatar 25).

Therefore, my own creative heroic protagonist uses her charm, a powerful magic, as well as courage to emerge the hero. Sedney also examines the importance of integrative androgyny as stated that the:

individual moves beyond stereotypic masculine and stereotypic feminine behavior in separate situations to a blending of masculinity and femininity in a single action.

Assertiveness is tempered with warmth, independence with compassion, confrontation with supportiveness, not only in the long run but also in a single situation. (Sedney 129)

Sedney then discusses a situationist approach to integrative androgyny where individuals are presented with a situation and their reactions are analyzed. During this experiment, individuals were tasked with coded responses to a kitten. Despite the expectation of feminine sex-typed females to be more responsive in “nurturing”, they actually posed to be the opposite. Sedney suggests one theory for this response was that the individual needed the “integration of feminine nurturance and masculine assertiveness” (Sedney 133). She illustrates a blending of traditional gender roles as they alone only seem to constrain individuals by limiting them to social gender norms. These gender roles help inflict loss of self-esteem when an individual is faced with a task that is outside their gender norm. Sedney describes androgyny itself as “a balance of socially-defined traits, a lack of adherence to socially-defined norms, and endorsement of feminine and masculine identity” (Sedney 127). This “lack of adherence to socially-defined” gender norms is a key reason for my choice of an androgynous hero as it allows the hero to forgo the limitations and categorizations of the masculine hero’s journey (as described by Carriger). By examining a female character with an evolving androgynous personality, I study the disruption of the traditional male masculine heroic journey while exploring the limitations of gender roles upon the hero. Such limitations include suppressing one’s feminine or masculine characteristics in

order to fit into a singular gender. Within my creative text, the hero encounters a pet, defined as a “Bagimba”, which is a creature that morphs into any animal depending on the situation. Similar to the kitten experiment as described above, this creature represents the necessity of adaptability, depending on the situation. The Bagimba, like integrative androgyny, is not limited to just one form (or gender) but acclimates depending on the situation. As such, the heroic protagonist of my creative work learns to reflect that of her Bagimba and utilize all aspects of herself: both masculine and feminine. By examining gender as binary and encouraging young-adult readers to view it as such it limits them by promoting a restricted access to a person’s characteristics. Campbell’s monomythic journey is initially described as a “masculine realm of action and war and the world into which he must integrate, as opposed to the origin world which is feminine and deeply personal” (Ross 5-6). Ross mentions how the integration cycle leads to an eventual transformative one. One co-researcher of Ross’s (unnamed) said:

Because, a lot of what I’ve been thinking about the feminine for the last couple of weeks, has been this idea of androgyny and how the embodiment of both masculine and feminine seems to be a much more highly evolved state. It seems like being able to integrate the best of both parts and finding a good balance to that. It pushes you in your evolution as a human being. (Ross 16)

I focus on the dismantling the “hero’s” journey, that has many underlying male-centered tones, by encompassing more “heroine” based tones for an androgynous heroic character that aims to balance the social traits of femininity and masculinity in order to push back against socially encoded norms of gender to format a more productive hero. By specifically analyzing the female androgynous character, the hero role can be liberated from its gender constraints.

To construct my androgynous female hero, I draw on other androgynous female heroes within the young-adult genre. Through the exploration of the characters of Katniss Everdeen, from Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* book series, and Beatrice "Tris" Prior, from Veronica Roth's *Divergent* novel series, I examined these texts as models for the emerging androgynous female hero. Caitlin Anne Campbell discusses Roberta Steepling Trites's theorization that a successful feminist children's novel "will feature a protagonist who recognizes her or his agency and, voice and embraces a more androgynous expression of gender" (Trites 24). Katniss, from *The Hunger Games*, harnesses her more "instrumental" characteristics, as defined as masculine by J.T. Spence and R. L. Helmreich, such as her fighting skills, to help her succeed in the Hunger Games, an annual death-match against other teenagers. However, it is also through her more "expressive" feminine traits, such as volunteering to take her sister's place in the Hunger Games, that also dubs her a hero. Katniss survives the Hunger Games through both her fighting skills (masculine traits) and by befriending the young child Rue (feminine traits), which earns her favour amongst the viewers of the Hunger Games. Katniss's eventual representation as the rebel Mockingjay, a symbol of hope, illustrates her androgynous personality as the Mockingjay bird is hybridity of two different species of bird surviving in a harsh environment. Beatrice "Tris", from *Divergent*, is another teenage female heroic character who hones her androgynous personality to emerge the hero. Tris lives in the futuristic city of Chicago where people are divided into one of five factions based on their personality traits. Tris discovers that she is Divergent, meaning she does not belong to just one faction. Divergents are deemed a threat to the faction system, such as those who veer from traditional gender norms. Tris is born to the Abnegation faction, defined as a more feminized "expressive" faction, but joins the Dauntless faction, an "instrumental" masculine faction. After joining the Dauntless faction, they are attacked by a form of mind

control. However, as a Divergent, Tris is resistant and her androgynous characteristics reject the mind control of gender norms. It is through both characters' androgynous personalities that aid them in their heroic journeys and transform them into heroes. In using Carriger's definitions of hero/heroine journey, I decided to focus on a journey that applies the integration of the two. In doing so, the hero begins with a feminine heroine journey as "heroine succeeds by building a network. For her, the very definition of success therefore is unity" (121 Carrigan). The hero of my creative work finds herself in need of a community after her familial ties become severed. However, through the events of the story, she comes to realize that her journey does not need to rely on just the community of others, but also a reliance on herself (heroic journey). It is through this community building that my heroic protagonist places her trust in someone who does not truly care for her and betrays her. Afterwards, she realizes that although building a network of friends is necessary, she needs to be able to depend on herself as well. She comes to understand her own personal need for this sense of an isolated victory in terms of androgynous integration of the feminine and masculine journeys. Like Katniss and Tris, I reflect some semblances of their androgynous heroic journeys, despite a more focalized examination of the grey space of both gender and culture. I build off of their journeys as they establish the integration of two types of journeys (hero and heroine) in order to push back against gender norms that are present in their societies as a reflection of Western culture.

When centralizing on one's identity, a character's familial heritage is key. Like her androgynous personality, my character's own ethnicity is an amalgamation of both her Indigenous and European ancestry, which draws from a reflection of my own Indigenous and Germanic heritage. Despite centering on an androgynous Indigenous protagonist, I do not focus on a two-spirit person. Marie Laing, author of *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*,

discusses how the need to contextualize the term two-spirit is defined differently depending on the individual. In doing so, I decided to examine the personal experiences of Indigenous peoples who identify as two-spirit. For Ma-Nee Chacaby, Ojibwe-Cree writer and activist from Canada, two-spirit is the feeling of two sides living inside of her: a male and a female side. She discusses the struggles of her journey as a two-spirit person as well as the historical significance and leadership two-spirit pose in Indigenous communities. Although I am exploring Indigenous androgyny, I am not centering on an Indigenous person who views herself as having two spirits, both male and female, but rather a female character who embraces her femininity without denying her masculinity. I also decided to focus away from two-spirit identity as it is outside of my own personal experience and I felt it had the potential to be appropriation. My concentration lies on a female Indigenous protagonist who, due to her lack of representation in mainstream heroic literature and how her womanhood does not deny all aspects of her personality, includes both her masculine and feminine qualities.

Lynette James, "Children of Change, Not Doom: Indigenous Futurist Heroines in YA", illustrates the importance of Indigenous storytelling in the young-adult science fiction genre, beyond that of entertainment value. She ascribes the reasoning for stories conveys not only culture and tradition, but also life lessons to be learned by using "common sf [science fiction] or YA [young adult] genre tropes such as the hero(ine)'s quest or the protagonist's coming-of-age" (James 156). James discusses the use of the hero/heroine's journey as a common form of young-adult fiction as it acts as a way of connecting with a wider audience in hopes of formulating an understanding of the deeper meanings of the text. Despite my own work engaging a hero with mixed Indigenous and Germanic heritage, this grey space of mixed cultural identity is not uncommon in Western culture, and therefore, could pose as a flexible exploration of identity

amongst a young-adult audience. James describes the theme of women's bodies and how, instead of focusing on the sexualization of the female characters, "these heroines discuss their external appearance primarily in moments of physical or psychic injury and vulnerability" (James 162). James also examines the ineffectiveness of judging a person's physicality by what is deemed to be conventionally attractive through her quotation by Joseph Bruchac who analyzes such convention as part of Western culture. Bruchac also suggests how such judgements will also lead to little knowledge on a person's true character and can often be misleading. As so, my own protagonist is rarely concerned with her or other women's physicality as her concentration is on the state of her body, not its sexual appeal. By writing from the narrative perspective of not only a woman author, but also a woman protagonist, the sexualization of women within this text is non-existent. My creative thesis focuses on the unravelling of the traditionally masculine Caucasian male heroic archetype by narrating from a third-person point-of-view of a young female androgynous Indigenous heroic character.

Just like other heroic tales, such as Katniss and Tris, my own female hero experiences a struggle before, as Joseph Campbell would describe it, "the Call to Adventure". This "Call" is the catalyst for the journey, as it is what motivates or encourages the hero to leave the comfort of their home. In my own work, the "Call" is the hero's struggle with identity. By engaging with identity to act as the "Call" the hero's entire journey is built upon their own need for self-discovery in terms of gender and cultural identity. Before the hero undergoes "the Call" they feel a sort of displacement within their own life: Katniss struggles to feed her family, and Tris feels as though she does not belong in her assigned faction. My own hero wrestles with her identity as her only close familial connection, her German grandmother, is severed and she must adapt to living with her other unfamiliar family, a distant Indigenous aunt. "The Call" is then reflected at

the end of the creative work as the hero begins to accept the duality of her ethnicity and how she chooses to identify. Her choice of how she identifies is made irrelevant by leaving her decision as unknown to the reader, rather, it is the fact that she has made a choice that allows her to emerge the hero and accept herself for whomever she chooses to be. Joseph Campbell explained that the heroic journey must “bring out again that which you went to recover, the unutilized potential in yourself” (Ross 4). To succeed in her heroic journey my character must uncover who she is in order to form her own identity.

Conclusion

Despite this dismantling of Campbell’s hero, I also do not underestimate the impact of the monomythic structure in its popularity and effectiveness in communicating with young readers. The focus of my thesis is not to disregard the traditional masculine hero or feminine heroine, but rather to represent a more accepting form of identity through an encompassing portrayal of the hero’s journey for young-adult readers. A hero who pushes the boundaries of classic “heroism” but still utilizes the familiar and effective pattern of the heroic journey of the self by living in the grey, pushes the boundaries by resisting gender norms present in much popular-fiction for young adults. I still use this monomythic structure, but attempt to do so without Othering my female heroic protagonist by writing from a third-person point-of-view. As the emerging female hero, my androgynous heroic protagonist struggles with her identity as a hero in terms of both her familial history as well as her expected gender-based behavior. Although the presence of ethnicity within the creative text is minimal, this was an intentional framework to illustrate growth beyond that of the current text and to end the creative work with an ambivalent understanding of how she chooses to identify with her heritage as it is a personal

choice that varies by individual. By embracing an androgynous personality, the hero can integrate both her masculine and feminine characteristics in order to free her from the limitations of the gender constructs of Campbell's monomyth. By integrating the transformative experience, the hero can go beyond that of just the monomythic hero's journey by embracing a second step of integration of what Ross describes as a figure-eight pattern of integrative transformation. Despite providing a similar format to Campbell's journey, this dismantling of Campbell's monomyth is not in the monomythic outline itself, but in the treatment and motivation of the hero. According to Carriger, the hero's journey is masculine whereas the heroine's journey is feminine, however, even Carriger notes that there are limitations with each. Therefore, I decided to not limit my protagonist to either a feminine heroine journey or a masculine heroic journey as her own journey is a unification of the two, much like her ethnicity and personality. Instead, I repurposed the monomythic heroic journey, as it has proven to be a popular form of storytelling in Western culture, while using Ross's figure-eight expansion of the heroic journey that seems to incorporate both the heroic journey of transformation and the heroine's journey of integration. In doing so, I use this figure-eight pattern that embraces the duality of the explicitly coded masculine and feminine journeys. Campbell even "contradicts his theory by suggesting that the monomyth finishes when (and if) the initiate, who has returned home [end of transformative cycle], integrates by successfully finding a way to share the boon [unutilized potential]" (Ross 1): the completed heroic journey is androgynous as it emphasizes on integrating (feminine initiation) the transformative experience (masculine initiation). This androgynous journey is reflected in my heroic protagonist's exploration of the unification of her two cultures by embarking on her own solitary journey (masculine hero's journey) where she also must fulfill this lack of community (heroine's journey). Like her androgynous personality and androgynous

heroic journey she realizes the advantages of this fluidity and learns to embrace it. By focusing on the female androgynous heroic character in YA fiction, young readers are provided a new model of heroism to visualize as they begin to form their ideas of social and cultural norms. I would also like to note the importance of the exploration of the male androgynous hero, but in this thesis, I just explore the androgynous female hero. My goal is not to disregard the traditional male masculine hero or the voice of the feminine heroine's journey, or to create a new term, "shero" for the female hero, but to encapsulate a heroic archetype that embraces the integrative transformation of all aspects of the journey (both masculine and feminine), besides that of just Campbell's original hero, under "hero". I hope that by developing a young-adult fictional heroic story featuring an Indigenous androgynous female hero I will aid in further discussion of identity and gender amongst the young-adult audience.

CREATIVE WORK: THE GREY

Chapter 1

An anxious lump crept up the back of her throat echoing from her stomach. Electricity tingled up her fingers to her spine. Having reached the back of her neck it felt as though someone had struck her with a weighty object, jarring her into consciousness. Emeri opened her eyes and groaned aloud. The forest floor felt alien to Emeri as she struggled to accept that her own imagination would have formed this! Withered trees hunched over from age and the brush was so thick Emeri could not help but feel as though she was being watched. The wind rustled the trees as shimmering leaves fell from their limbs; branches swayed back and forth in an ominous fashion. Patches of violet grass covered the ground, reminding her of that awful carpet she once found on the side of the road. Much like that carpet, these also probably held fleas. Flowers she

had never seen before peppered the forest floor but their coloring seemed unusual and out of place. The petals were eerily perfect, as if painted to look like an artistic version of a flower. Maybe if this was real (and she was six) she might actually enjoy herself. But it wasn't and she didn't.

Pink leaves floated down from the tree above her. Well, “floated” wasn’t quite right. They plummeted to the forest floor. A few hit her head and she quickly moved out of the way. “Ow,” she said angrily as she glared at the tree. She suddenly felt that tugging sensation again. She closed her eyes tight, fighting the pull, then it suddenly stopped.

She was laying on her back, staring up at her ceiling fan. Emeri sighed aloud and sat upwards. This all started a few months ago. At first she thought she just needed to relax. She assumed the stress of her heavy course work was the problem. Her aunt said that she put too much pressure on herself, like it was an easy fix. She knew nothing. The dreams were sporadic at first, occurring once every week or two. For the past week, however, they had become a nightly occurrence. Emeri awoke every morning an exhausted and nervous wreck. She drank four cups of coffee a day just to keep her eyes open. This only seemed to amplify the dreams.

Emeri grumbled, throwing her sheets off of her and climbing out of bed. She rubbed her eyes and looked around her room. Books piled high on her desk, including her notebooks filled charts and diagrams from her classes. She had no idea what she was doing. She had spent nearly a year in university and still had not declared a major. She was floating. Aimless.

“Get a job,” her aunt had told her, “that might help you figure it out.”

Unfortunately, Emeri was having a difficult time getting started. She would fill in every answer but by the end of each application there would be the same question. The same

unanswerable question. Emeri would stare and glare at the question. It was as if it was trying to test her, see if she knew who she truly was. She didn't. When her aunt would ask her how the applications were going, Emeri would shrug and admit to being stuck on a few questions.

"What is it?" her aunt would ask, "maybe I can help?"

Emeri mumbled, "It asks: Do you identify as an Indigenous person?"

"Well," her aunt would laugh, "I think that's pretty obvious."

Was it? She didn't know. Did she? Technically, yes. But it felt weird to say it because she knew very little about that side of her family. And that was it. Part of her family was Indigenous, but did that mean she was as well? Did she look Indigenous? Or did her German heritage make her too white? She thought back to her Oma's analogy, something about a house.

It still sat there open on her computer. The job application. The box left unchecked.

Emeri collapsed back into bed, thrashing around for a minute, before finally settling. She turned onto her side and held her breath. Resting directly in front of her face was a pink leaf. She stood up in her bed, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the leaf.

How did it get in my bed?

Trying to calm her quickly beating heart, she snatched up the leaf, crawled out of bed, and ran down the hall into the kitchen. On the top shelf, just above the fridge, were her aunt's mason jars. She grabbed one, popped the leaf inside and screwed the lid on top. She set it on the counter and glared at the jar. She was tired, confused, and feeling anxious.

"Nope," she said aloud. "There's probably a totally reasonable explanation." Although the word '*probably*' echoed in the back of her mind. This needed to be addressed in the morning,

once she'd had enough sleep. Or enough coffee. Emeri brought the mason jar into her bedroom, placed it on her overly-cluttered desk and crawled back into bed. She settled under her sheets, allowing the warmth to envelop and lull her to sleep. She opened her eyes and sat up in her bed. It felt as though the leaf was watching her. As nutty as that sounded, she felt an unease having it there. She swore. Crawling out of bed, again, she headed back down the hall with the jar and placed it firmly on the kitchen counter. After walking back to her bed, covering herself in her pearl duvet and feeling settled once again she began to doze. Not even five minutes had passed when she let out an exasperated sigh and opened her eyes.

I have to pee.

The next morning, Emeri woke up late. Stretching her arms above her head, she smiled. It was that serene moment of calm in the morning. That moment where nothing needs to be done and everything is how it should be. Unfortunately, that moment was broken by the sudden realization of reality and all the worries and concerns from the day before came rushing in. Emeri suddenly recalled the events that had unfolded last night: the crazy dream and the stupid leaf.

She hopped out of bed and, recalling how cold the Prince George fall season can be, threw on a hoodie and a pair of wooly socks before dashing down the hall. When she reached the kitchen she saw that her mason jar, along with her strange leaf, was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. She realized it must have been a dream. A useless, silly little dream. Emeri chuckled to herself for believing that it was all real. She skipped over to the fridge to grab some

breakfast. She had just started on her second bowl of cereal, when her aunt called her cell. She reached for the phone, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand before answering.

“Hello?” she said, digging into another bite of her cereal.

“Hi Sweetie, would you mind taking a picture of the grocery list I left behind and texting it to me?”

“Sure,” she said picking up her cereal bowl and moving it to the sink. She found her aunt’s grocery list and took a picture with her phone.

“I’m going to be a little late tonight,” she began. “Work stuff,” she added.

“Uh-huh,” Emeri mumbled.

It was a total lie. She was seeing that Paul guy again. Emeri had caught them making-out outside of her aunt’s office a few weeks ago. Aunty Linn liked to keep her home life separate from her dating life, but Emeri wasn’t fooled. Once or twice she caught Aunty Linn coming home in the early hours of the morning from one of her “work events.” Emeri played along with the obvious facade because Aunty Linn was there for her whenever she needed, so she let the lies slide.

“Did you hand in that job application yet?”

Emeri gave an exasperated sigh, “No, not yet.”

“I saw you haven’t quite finished filling it out,” her aunt said hesitantly, “you know, if you’d like to talk –”

“Nope. I’m good thanks.” They both went quiet for a minute.

“Oh, by the way, I moved your mason jar outside,” her aunt asked, changing the subject, “Is it for school?” she asked.

Emeri stood still.

“Emeri?” her aunt asked concerned.

No. Emeri held the phone away from her ear, her aunt’s voice echoing on the other end.

It wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t a dream.

“Emeri! Can you hear me?”

Emeri jumped and the phone fell from her hand. She quickly swooped down and picked it up, putting the phone to her face.

“Oh hey, sorry. Something just caught my attention outside,” she lied.

“What?” asked her aunt, the skepticism clear in her voice. There was a pause.

“A bird,” she lied. Another pause.

“A bird?” Aunt Linn asked unconvinced.

“It was a big bird.”

“Ok, well...I love you.”

“Yup,” Emeri said. She winced. She felt uncomfortable when her aunt said things like that. What was she supposed to say? *“I love you too?”* Aunt Linn was fine, but she wasn’t her Oma. Oma would always say *“Ich liebe dich.”* Not that Emeri spoke much German, but it was still difficult not to hear it every day. Aunt Linn didn’t know any German. Aunt Linn was her father’s sister, while Oma was her mother’s mother. Emeri knew of Aunt Linn growing up, but

she wasn't someone that Emeri knew well. After Oma's passing, Aunty Linn was forced to become a parent to Emeri almost overnight. Oma had looked after Emeri for the past fifteen years, since her parent's accident. Now it was Aunty Linn's turn and Emeri always felt like such a burden to her. She knew Aunty Linn didn't want to parent a teenager and Emeri didn't want to live with someone she barely knew. But Aunty Linn was her only known family, so they were stuck with each other.

Emeri hung up the phone, shook herself from her thoughts before hurrying over to the patio's sliding doors, and opened them with a surprising amount of force while scanning for the jar. She spotted it in the right-hand corner of their small patio and snatched it up. Inside, sat the little pink leaf.

Chapter 2

Sitting on the chestnut leather living room sofa, Emeri stared at the pink leaf inside her mason jar. The small living room looked as if it could be in one of those modern lifestyle magazines. Although the room was esthetically pleasing, like the rest of the two-bedroom apartment, it felt cold. The walls were either white or a light grey, a metal lamp sat in the corner of the living room near the opening to the patio, and a glass coffee table sat in the middle of the room. Emeri's bedroom used to be her aunt's office. The grey walls were decorated with abstract paintings and plastic plants. Aunty Linn offered to help Emeri paint it and make it her own, but Emeri declined. The whole act felt too permanent.

Emeri had spent the better part of an hour Googling "pink leaves." About a half an hour in, the leaf had moved. Emeri modified her search to "pink creatures" and that lead her to sites

she would have preferred not to have known about. When she couldn't find anything that said it was poisonous, Emeri decided she would examine it closer for herself. She slowly opened the lid, careful to not startle whatever it was, and placed the lid next to the jar. Nothing. Emeri picked up the jar and examined the leaf from underneath. Again, nothing. She took a deep breath, opened her right palm and emptied the leaf into her hand. It was a little heavier than Emeri was expecting. But besides its weight, Emeri couldn't see anything unusual about it. She cocked her head to the side, brought it closer to her face, and narrowed her eyes. Suddenly, three tiny eyes appeared on the top of the leaf and peered back at her. Emeri reeled her head back. Before she could utter a sound, the leaf bit onto her finger and started sucking.

Looking back on this moment, Emeri would not recall the ear-piercing scream she gave, nor would she remember her flailing limbs as she desperately tried to rid the leaf from her hand. All she would remember was that the leaf (correction: creature) would not let go. It took Emeri a good two minutes before her panic had subsided. By that point she was on the other end of the apartment, laying on her aunt's plush white chair, with her hand outstretched as far from the rest of her body as possible. After Emeri had her breathing under control, she began attempting to remove the little sucker from her hand. She used pliers, she used fire, she even used salt (assuming it was related to the slug family), but nothing worked.

Ok. So she had an animal problem. Where does one go for that? Emeri quickly searched for the nearest veterinarian in town. She found a Dr. Vinny the Veterinarian, who was only a bus ride away.

Good enough.

She ran into her room, dressed in a pair of jeans before shuffling through her winter hats and gloves. She pulled out a pair of checkered gloves which she slipped over the hand that was still possessed by the creature. After lacing up a pair of sneakers and grabbing her keys, Emeri raced out of her apartment building and headed for the bus stop. While walking down the sidewalk, Emeri noticed large groups of teens as they made their way to the local fast-food restaurants for their lunch break. Auntie Linn's apartment was part of an older outlet mall, only a few blocks away from a local high school. The outlet mall, like the apartment building, was clearly dated. But it was a clear local staple with a laundromat, deli, thrift store, small grocery store, and a handful of fast-food places that had emerged in recent years. Emeri's personal favourite had always been Wendy's. She remembered eating there with her Oma when she was small. When Emeri moved in with her aunt, they had decided to make it their Saturday afternoon lunch place. It was always a quiet lunch, but Emeri appreciated the familiarity of it and enjoyed it nonetheless. Emeri faked a smile when walking past the students, trying her best to conceal her hand. Once on the bus, she continued Googling how she might remove a slug-like creature from her hand. A young man sat next to her and nodded. She nodded back, recognizing him from her university. She tucked her hand under her sweater and felt the creature wriggle its little body. She froze.

"Hey," the young man sitting next to her said. "Haven't I seen you around at campus?"

Emeri turned to him and smiled until her cheeks hurt, "Oh yeah, how are you?"

He said something about being on his way to campus and some boring biology assignment. Honestly, Emeri was not paying attention. Although her eyes were on him, her mind was on the wriggly creature that was not enjoying being trapped in her glove.

“And you?” he asked looking at her inquisitively.

“And me what?” Emeri asked. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Are you going to campus?”

“No. The vet.”

He furrowed his brow, “Uh, then where’s your pet?”

“It’s at the vet. Picking him up.”

“Oh ok. What was wrong with him?”

“Slugs.” She could have kicked herself for that. Her mind was so preoccupied with the slug-like creature on her hand it was all she could think of. The young man curled his upper lip at the thought.

When she arrived at Dr. Vinny’s she realized that she did not appear to actually have an animal with her. The receptionist looked up at her.

“May I help you?” she asked. Her smile was warm, but she had spinach in her teeth and her glasses were all smudged. Emeri just stared at her, looking just above the rim of her glasses.

“Uh, yes. I need help. With my pet,” she said.

The lady looked behind Emeri, “Where is it?”

“In the car,” she stuttered, “he doesn’t like crowds.” Emeri glanced around, noticing there wasn’t actually anyone in here. The lady looked at her in confusion. “...and vets!” she exclaimed, “...especially these big open waiting rooms.” The lady looked at Emeri in a way that suggested she thought she was delusional.

“What kind of animal is your—” she began, but was interrupted by the phone. “Excuse me,” she said as she picked up the phone. Emeri turned around, glancing about the sparsely decorated clinic. There were a few potted plants in the corner and a picture of a man, who she assumed to be Dr. Vinny, holding an armful of puppies. The picture hung above a small window that peered onto a busy street as cars whipped by. Emeri cocked her head as she thought she saw something move closer to the window.

“...ok. And thank you,” the receptionist said as she hung up the phone. “Sorry about that. You can go right on in. It’s door number six on your left. The vet will be with you shortly.”

Emeri sat patiently in the small clinical room as she waited for Dr. Vinny to arrive. She played with her hair a bit, realizing at that moment she hadn’t even brushed it this morning (or her teeth). She shuffled her shoes while humming the chorus of “Tiny Dancer” by Elton John. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door and an older gentleman entered. Emeri guessed he was in his forties. His eyes were grey and the lines on his face made him look weary. However, there was this youthful and trusting glow he had that made her feel immediately more comfortable. Unfortunately, this was not Dr. Vinny.

“Hello,” he said firmly, “I’m Dr. Vinny’s colleague, Dr. Samuel Werly. I heard you’re having some trouble with your pet?”

“Yes,” Emeri replied, “he’s...uh...a bit shy though.”

“Well then, let’s see him.” Emeri removed her glove to reveal the pink creature still sucking away at her hand. “He’s gotten big,” Dr. Werly stated with an almost half-smile. Emeri looked down at her hand to find the little blood-sucker had grown even more; he now covered

the entirety of her palm! She was speechless. There were no words. She had completely lost any sense of calm. This thing was eating her hand! “I have just the thing to rid you of your Bagimba,” he said calmly as he pulled out a binder from a nearby satchel. Emeri hadn’t even notice him bring it in.

“Wait.” she said, “My what?” Emeri squeaked.

“Your Bagimba,” the doctor stated matter-of-factly. “Does it hurt?”

“So, you know what this is?”

“Hmmm,” Dr. Werly said distractedly. He continued to search through his binder.

Emeri thought for a moment and was surprised to realize that the creature was not actually hurting her. She had been so preoccupied with the fact that the little monster was basically consuming her whole hand, that she never noticed that she wasn’t in any pain. She then shifted her attention to this “doctor” and furrowed her eyebrows. How did he know what it was? Did this happen often? If so, why had she never heard of anything like it before? Emeri’s heart began to race as she eyed the door. As soon as she was free from this thing, she was going to bolt.

“It’s almost finished its infantile stage so we’ve lucked out there,” he said as he began perusing through one of the papers he found.

“Lucky?” Emeri asked surprised, “Exactly how is any of this lucky?” she asked gesturing to her hand. “And why is it purple?” she asked nervously, noticing the creature’s change in colour.

“I already told you, its finishing its infantile stage,” he replied, a bit annoyed and distracted. “Where is it?” he said talking to himself as he looked through the pages in his hands.

“So when it’s done it’ll just let go?” Emeri asked hopefully.

Then this whole nightmare will be over.

“Not exactly,” he said, still looking.

“Alright enough!” Emeri yelled, catching the doctor’s attention, “Look, I’m really scared, ok? I’ve just had a heck of a morning. I’ve been having the craziest dreams lately, that are now partially real because a creature from said dream is now eating my hand...” she said as she began to hyperventilate, “and to make matters worse, I am majorly caffeine deprived!”

“You need to calm down,” he said in a steady voice.

“Do NOT tell me to calm down!” Emeri shouted.

Who did he think he was? He was telling her nothing and keeping her completely in the dark. How would he feel if a leaf from his dreams had decided to consume his hand? She doubted he would be calm. Her breathing was still increasing and her heart was pounding in her chest. She looked around the room and realized she felt like she was going to pass out! But there was a voice in her head. Some small part of her telling her that she was only making her situation worse by panicking. The voice was like a tiny light she could barely see. She concentrated on it and drew it in. She focused on her breathing, counting to five, and noticed that her heart rate was beginning to slow down. “I’m ok,” she said.

The doctor nodded and went back to searching through his binder. It only took another minute before he found what he was looking for. He pointed a finger at the line he needed,

mumbled a few unintelligible phrases and went back to Emeri. He ran his hand down the side of the creature. As he did so, Emeri felt a rumble through her hand. She could have sworn the creature was purring. He stopped his hand on the right side of its head, around where she suspected its ear would have been, and pressed firmly. She immediately felt the grip loosen and it rolled off of her hand. The doctor caught the creature as it became limp and set it on the cool metal counter. Its colour had changed again, this time to a muted black. As she stared at the creature she suddenly heard an odd popping sound. She looked closer and realized that there were four bumps forming beneath it. This thing was sprouting legs! She turned around and shivered. This was not helping her keep down her breakfast. When she turned back around she couldn't believe what she was seeing. The creature was gone and replaced by a black Labrador! Emeri just stared at the creature...dog...thing. It hopped off the counter and approached Emeri before sniffing her hand and licking it.

“Did you have a dog?” the doctor asked.

“What?” Emeri asked.

“Do you or did you ever have a black Labrador?” he repeated sternly.

“When I was a little kid,” she replied. She was still staring at the ‘dog’.

“Bagimbas tend to take the form of something familiar in order to establish a bond with their Holder,” he explained.

“Sorry, their what?”

Suddenly, the door burst open.

“Samuel,” she heard from the doorway.

She turned her head to see this guy. This extremely attractive guy. He had broad shoulders, wavy dark hair, green eyes with an intense stare that made her stomach feel queasy. She realized she was staring. She turned her head back towards Samuel, hoping to hide the fact that her cheeks were on fire. The dog currently rubbing up against her hand proved to be a great distraction.

“You knew,” Samuel replied, glaring at him. “Who told you? Peter? Of course it was Peter.” Samuel stood straight up and forcefully threw his hand down on the surface of the counter. There was a loud bang that made Emeri jump and sent the dog scurrying behind her. “You should have told me as soon as it had started happening,” Samuel said through clenched teeth. His voice was low, but there was a force behind it that sent a chill through Emeri. She knew instantly that this man, if he wanted to, could be dangerous.

“I wanted to check it out before notifying--” the young man began. But again, he was interrupted. Samuel flew across the room, yanked him by his collar and pinned him roughly against the door frame.

“You are part of my division,” Samuel said sternly, looking the young man straight in the eyes, “anything you see is reported directly to me. Is that clear, Erin?”

“Clear,” Erin said bluntly, holding Samuel’s gaze. The two men didn’t move for an intense, and slightly awkward, moment. Emeri moved towards the door.

“Well, you know, this has been great,” she began, “well, not really, but interesting... really interesting,” she stuttered. “I have to go, so I’ll just sneak behind you.” She awkwardly pushed behind Samuel to exit the office. She felt uncomfortable trying to leave, but Emeri wanted no part of whatever was going on here. She needed to go to the hospital and get a tetanus

shot. As she was leaving, she felt a tug and then a slight prick. She turned to see Samuel, having released Erin, holding onto her elbow. In his other hand, there was a device that looked like a tiny gun. She then noticed the little needle on the tip of the gun and, to her horror, realized that he had just injected her with something.

“Are you serious?...” she began as her legs became jelly and folded underneath her. She collapsed and expected a painful impact with the floor. However, she looked up to see that Erin had caught her. He lowered her gently to the ground, resting her head on his knees.

“You’ll be okay,” he said softly. He said something else but she couldn’t quite make out what it was. His face began to move and change shape. Looking at him made her dizzy. She could make out the outline other figures moving towards her. They were saying something, but it was as if she was being engulfed into her own little dome. The lights began to dim and then, like a light switch being flicked off, the whole world went dark and quiet.

Chapter 3

Emeri awoke to the feeling of a fifty-pound bag on her chest. She opened her eyes to find the lab laying across her chest and stomach. The dog’s wet nose nuzzled against her chin while its jet black eyes peered at her expectantly. “Um, h-h-hello,” Emeri stuttered. “Off?” She didn’t know this animal. Earlier it had been sucking the blood from her hand. What if it decided to eat her face? The dog gave Emeri a slobbery lick across her mouth before jumping off of the couch she was resting on.

Omg. Ew.

Emeri wiped the slobbery wet kiss from her mouth before glancing around and gathering her bearings. She looked to be in an abandoned home; she was resting on a couch in the living room that opened into the kitchen. The room was sparse besides the couch, an armchair and a few chairs surrounding the island in the middle of the kitchen. Emeri noticed some dirty plates, blankets, and jackets strewn about. Someone was living here. Emeri slowly crawled off of the couch and inched towards a hallway that she hoped would lead to a door. The dog crawled back onto the couch and stared at her. Suddenly, there was a loud bang! It sounded like a front door slamming shut. Emeri quickly dove into the kitchen and hid behind the island counter. She heard footsteps enter the room and held her breath.

“Oh great, just great!” she heard someone say. It was a man.

“Where is she?” asked another voice. This one belonged to a woman. Emeri glanced towards the living room and noticed that the dog was still staring in her direction.

Stop. Stop it! Look the other way!

Emeri waved her hands at the dog, trying desperately to make it stop staring at her. Upon retrospect, her antics were probably only enticing it further.

Shoo! Go away!

It just looked at her. Frustrated, Emeri flipped it the bird. The dog barked. Emeri glared.

You little...

A man’s head suddenly appeared in front of Emeri’s face.

“There you are!” he said. Emeri screamed. The man’s face contorted and he let out a loud yelp. Emeri glanced behind him and saw that the dog had grabbed him by the seat of his pants

and was shaking him viciously. “Get it off! Get it off!” was all the man could say. The woman who was with him took out a gun and aimed it at the dog. She was dressed all in black, except for her arms which were covered in tattoos. She had dark eyes, purple lipstick, and an intense stare that immediately made Emeri doubt picking a fight. Before Purple Lipstick Girl could fire, something that looked like a black tentacle protruded from the dog’s body. It hit Purple Lipstick Girl with a powerful blow and sent her flying across the room. More footsteps could be heard as Emeri turned and saw Samuel, Erin and another man she didn’t recognize. The dog let go of the man, rushing to Emeri. It stood with its back her, planted its feet firmly, and growled. Emeri was dumbstruck. This thing was protecting her. While the man and Purple Lipstick Girl recovered, Samuel and his compatriots slowly approached Emeri and her new companion.

“Listen,” said Samuel, “I just want to talk.”

“I’m good.” Emeri said. The dog growled as Samuel took a step closer.

Good dog.

Erin came up from behind Samuel. He bent down and smiled. “It’s ok,” he said, “we’re not going to hurt you.” There was something about him that made Emeri feel more reassured. She looked over to the dog and noticed it had stopped growling. Erin reached out and gave it a pat. “Good girl,” he said and dog’s tail began to wave. Emeri slowly stood, still keeping the dog between herself and Erin.

“Do you always kidnap people, or am I just lucky that way?”

Erin laughed. It was a warm hearty laugh and Emeri felt her shoulders relax. “I guess you’re just lucky,” Erin said stepping forward and reaching out his hand. “We haven’t properly met, I’m Erin.”

“Emeri.” His handshake was firm, but gentle. Emeri could feel her palms starting to sweat and pulled her hand back immediately. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “So, what do you want?”

“We first need to start with you,” Samuel said as he approached her. “We noticed your unusual predicament a few months ago. Our systems detected a foreign body in Odiosis.”

“Odiosis?”

“It’s this dimension. There’s more than one so...that’s a thing.” The boy who had just spoke up looked like he was still in high school. He had a small frame and similar features to Purple Lipstick Girl. Emeri stared at him dumbfounded.

“Yeah,” he said, seemingly reading her thoughts, “that was my first reaction, too. Name’s Peter, by the way.”

“Having trouble there, cupcake?” asked a voice. Emeri turned her head to see someone sitting on the sofa with his legs propped up; it was the man the dog had bitten earlier.

Cupcake?

Emeri wasn’t quite sure who he was, but she was pretty sure that she wasn’t going to like Cupcake Guy. What did they mean by they were all from this other world?

As if reading her mind, Erin began to explain. “Over the past thousand years,” the divide between your dimension and ours has been crumbling.”

“Crumbling how?”

“There’s a force that divides our two worlds-”

“We call it the Divide,” interrupted Peter.

“Peter, shove it,” said Erin.

“Sorry.”

Erin continued, “Each dimension exists on the same plane, but cannot interact with each other. That’s because of the Divide. Over time, the Divide has weakened, causing our worlds to collide.”

“Collide like...”

“Emergence of the unexplainable: spotting creatures and beings that couldn’t possibly exist. There are areas where the Divide is weak and beings from each world can cross over. We call these areas Rifts. At the CoExistence, we monitor those who cross over from our world into yours.”

“But not the other way around?”

“Beings from your world don’t usually survive that long.”

Well, that’s ominous.

“So what does this have to do with me?” Emeri asked.

“You’ve been travelling there quite frequently lately.”

“Pretty sure I’d know if I was crossing dimensions. Not something you tend to forget.”

“You’re probably not doing it consciously,” Peter explained. “We think you might be a Shift and going there in your sleep. It’s basically being able to shift between worlds at will. I guess the name is pretty self-explanatory,” he said with a shrug.

It wasn't exactly "willingly."

"There's only a handful of others who can do what you can," Samuel said, looking to the man on the couch. He was distracted, throwing a ball with one hand and catching it with the other. "Reiner can show you how to use it."

"Uh, what?" Emeri asked.

"Yeah, what?" Reiner stopped throwing the ball and stared at the group. "I didn't sign up for that."

"You were volunteered," Samuel said, still looking at Emeri. "We need someone to train her. Our numbers are running low and we need as much help as we can get." Reiner let out a sigh and went back to throwing his ball.

Emeri looked at Samuel and forced a smile, "Look, you all seem nice enough and what you're doing sounds super important...so I really don't think you should include me. I usually mess things up and would only ruin whatever your trying to accomplish here."

Erin piped up, "Our mission is to keep the balance between your world and ours. We try and make sure that people from both of our worlds are safe and no one gets hurt." He smiled at her again. Emeri blushed.

Oh boy.

"Ok," Samuel interrupted, glaring at Erin, "everyone get back to your assigned tasks. Emeri, let's talk," his voice was firm and commanding. Samuel lead her down the hallway to what looked to be a home office. He closed the door behind them and faced her. The intensity from his stare was gone and his voice softened, "Listen," he began, "you're in danger now.

Whenever a body from another dimension enters the other, the energy becomes disruptive. Peter was able to find you, but he's not the only one who can. People know about you and what you can do. It was pure luck that we were able to find you first. If you don't come with us, someone could hurt you or try and use you to travel between dimensions. It's your choice to come with us, but if you don't, I cannot protect you or your aunt."

"How do you know about my aunt?" Emeri asked suspiciously.

"We know everything about you."

Well, isn't that just creepy.

"Once you sign on as a member of my team, Division 56, your family is under the protection of the CoExistence. We will look out for your aunt and keep her protected."

Emeri wasn't exactly close with her aunt, but she was the only family she had left. She glared at Samuel. He wasn't giving her a choice. He was giving her an ultimatum. If she said no, both her and her aunt would be in serious danger.

"Do we have a deal?" Samuel asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Emeri shrugged. Did she have a choice?

Emeri quickly began to understand the workings of their operation: Samuel was their division leader with Reiner as his second-in-command. Reiner was like Emeri, a Shift, as he could shift between dimensions at will. Emeri learned from Erin that without people like Reiner and herself, divisions would have to venture to these Rifts which were apparently located in places difficult to access. When she asked what kind of places, Erin hinted about a famous

Scottish lake with a dangerous not-so-mythological creature. Emeri shivered at the thought of ever swimming there. The woman Emeri had met earlier, Jeanie, and her brother, Peter, were part of a previous division before settling with Division 56. When Emeri asked what happened to their old division, Erin said it was not important. Emeri then glanced at Jeanie, who furrowed her brows at Emeri. Emeri then turned back in her seat and focused on the Bagimba resting on her lap. It had recently transformed into an orange Tabby and purred as Emeri starched it behind the ears. Emeri had to keep reminding herself that no matter how convincing it looked, it was not a cat. The thought gave her shivers every time she thought about it. Emeri had also learned from Erin that there were originally quite a few divisions to begin with, but many of them had become disbanded due to a lack of numbers.

“Why would people just leave their division?” Emeri asked Erin.

“They wouldn’t,” said a voice behind her.

Emeri turned in her seat to see Jeanie staring at her from the back of the van. Emeri was in the passenger’s seat, Jeanie sat in the back, and Erin was driving; the rest of the group were following close behind in a small white truck. Jeanie’s expression told Emeri everything she needed to know; this was a dangerous profession. Jeanie turned her head and stared out the window. Her lip began to curl and Emeri felt as though she hit a nerve.

They travelled for a few more hours until they arrived in Hope. Emeri helped the group unpack their things from the car; she reached into the van that was piled with books, bags and unfamiliar equipment. When she saw what looked to be a laptop case resting precariously on the pile she gripped it by the handle and pulled. Emeri’s arm was jerked as the case plummeted to the floor. It had to have weighed a hundred pounds! Emeri heard a yell and turned her head to

see Peter running towards her. He looked at the case and glared at her. “Seriously? Do you know how long it would take to get another one?”

“I’m sorry,” Emeri began, “I didn’t think it would be so heavy...”

“Then you ask!” he said in an accusatory manner.

“Hey, I said I’m sorry,” she snapped back.

“Is your ‘sorry’ going to fix my computer?” he jeered.

Emeri was at a loss for words. She was embarrassed, but also angry. It’s not like she dropped it on purpose! “Sorry for trying to help!” she yelled at him and stormed off. She was already feeling out of place without someone yelling at her; she decided a walk would help her cool off. The Bagimba followed closely behind. It now looked like a black Labrador again. She wandered through the small downtown area and examining the window displays of the various shops. She looked down at herself and frowned. Samuel told her it would be dangerous to go back to her aunt’s apartment for clothes so she was still wearing the same jeans and sweatshirt for the last two days. She had a little bit of cash on her and decided she had enough time to buy at least a change of clothes. After about twenty minutes, Emeri emerged from the store in a new light-weight pink jacket, a navy-blue t-shirt and black leggings. She collected her old clothes and carried them out in a small new backpack. On her way back to the motel she also stopped by the pet store and bought a little something for the Bagimba. She then made her way back to the motel where they were staying and knocked on the room’s door. Erin opened the door, looked down at her and smiled. But it was not a friendly smile, it was a smile filled with amusement.

“Well, aren’t you just...pink.”

“I like the colour.”

“I can see that,” he said, still smirking.

Emeri entered the room and noticed it was quite spacious. There were two queen sized beds side by side and a small kitchen with a couch. Emeri dropped her backpack on the ground and looked up to see everyone staring at her.

“Nice jacket,” Jeanie said. The rest of the room exploded with laughter. Emeri blushed. Had she known it was going to be taunted, she would have opted for the black. Emeri also noticed Samuel and Reiner were missing.

“Where’s Samuel?” she asked. Not entirely caring about Reiner’s whereabouts.

“Not sure,” replied Jeanie. “Something for the CoExistence. It’s not for us to ask.” Jeanie then informed Emeri that she was to meet Reiner in the field behind the motel to begin her training. Emeri sighed, changed back into her older jacket in order to avoid risk of undergoing even more torment and made her way over to the field.

The field was surrounded by a dense enclosure of trees just behind the motel. Emeri figured whatever this Shifting thing was, it needed to be away from prying eyes. When Emeri arrived, she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Reiner was standing in front of a grey haze. The haze began to take shape and formed an oval, changing color in the process as streams of purple circulated within it. Reiner stared at the oval, his forehead furrowed in concentration. Emeri leaned against a tree in amazement. She was so enamored in what she was seeing that she didn’t noticed the black spider crawling towards her hand. As soon as she felt its hairy little legs brush against her skin, she looked down and gave an ear-piercing shriek. Startled, Reiner looked away from what he was doing and the haze disappeared.

“Really?” Reiner asked, looking to Emeri.

“There was a spider...” she responded in a low voice. She had developed a new phobia about things touching her hand, for good reason. Reiner rolled his eyes.

“So, you’re going to teach me how to...wait, what’s it called?”

Reiner gave an audible sigh. “Shift,” he said.

For the next two hours Reiner attempted to teach Emeri how to Shift. She was supposed to focus and feel the energy from the other side waft over her. But as Emeri had never been to the other side, she didn’t know this energy or how to imagine it. This only made both of them more frustrated.

“The energy is literally right in front of you. All you have to do is take it,” Reiner instructed.

Emeri stared at him blankly before looking at the air in front of her, “I don’t see it.”

Reiner laughed. “It’s not something you can see,” he explained, “it’s something you feel. You just know it’s there.”

Emeri cocked her head to the side and squinted at Erin, “You realize that makes no sense right?”

“Ok. What about gravity. Do you see gravity?”

“No,” Emeri replied, “but if I climbed up that tree and fell, I’d sure feel it.”

Reiner scrunched his face and rubbed his brow in frustration. This obviously was not going well.

“How long did it take you to Shift for the first time?” Emeri inquired, trying to change the subject.

“About a year.”

That made Emeri feel a little better.

“...I think I was eight.”

Maybe not.

Reiner looked to Emeri, and realizing her disappointment, quickly backtracked. “But, I’d been practicing for years prior.”

“Like since you were six?” Emeri smirked. This was not making her feel better.

There was a pause.

“Five, actually.” They both erupted into laughter. It was not even that funny. But they were both so exhausted and frustrated that laughing seemed to be the only thing to do.

“I suck at this.”

“Yeah. You kinda do.”

Emeri frowned. Why was he making fun of her? Reiner looked at her quizzically.

“What?”

Emeri just looked at him, “What ‘what’?” she asked. Although she knew why he was asking. As much as she would have preferred to let his comment go, it still bothered her.

“Ok then,” Reiner said with a sigh. He then began to gather his things.

“Where are you going?”

“I think we’re done for today,” he said as he headed back towards the motel.

Emeri stood in the field frozen with anger and embarrassment. She felt justified for her feelings and yet, she doubted if she had overreacted. She did not know what to do. So she continued to stand.

“Hey.”

Emeri turned her head to see Erin walk towards her. “Oh, hi,” Emeri said tucking her hair behind her left ear. She still felt uneasy after her disagreement with Reiner.

Erin tilted his head and looked at her, “You ok?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a forced smile.

“Yeah, you’re definitely not fine.”

Emeri let out a sigh. “I think everybody hates me.”

Erin chuckled. “Ok, why do you think that?”

“Because! Like, first I broke Peter’s computer, then Reiner and I had a fight, and I think Jeanie just hates me.”

“Ok,” Erin stated matter-of-factly, “First of all, the computer’s completely fine and second, Reiner’s a terrible teacher.” That made Emeri chuckle. “There’s no way you could’ve known about the computer or how to Shift, it was your first day. Also, Jeanie always acts like that.”

Emeri smiled.

“None of it is your fault.” Emeri felt a weight lift off her shoulders. Just having Erin reassure her made her realize that she was overthinking this. She just needed time to adjust.

“I see your Bagimba’s patiently waiting.”

Emeri looked over to the edge of the tree line to see that the black Labrador was indeed patiently waiting. She had completely forgot it was still following her. Emeri called it over and gave it a pat, its tail wagged happily.

“So, have you finally named your Bagimba?”

Emeri shrugged, “I never really thought about it.”

“Well, think about it.”

Emeri leaned back and stared at the dog for a minute before smiling and saying, “Ed.”

“Ed?”

“Ed.”

“I’m pretty sure this is a female.”

“And?”

Erin laughed, “Alright, Ed it is. See? Now you’ve made two friends.”

“Two?” Emeri asked with a laugh, “who have I exactly won over?”

“Me.”

That made Emeri blush again. Erin sat down beside her and nudged her with his elbow playfully.

Erin played with the grass, pulling it out and tossing it behind his shoulder. “I keep forgetting the kind of vegetation they have here,” he said thoughtfully.

“Come here often?” Emeri asked jokingly.

“I actually used to live here.”

Emeri starred at him intently, “Really? I’m sorry I’m just surprised. Aren’t you from...”

“Mirum? Yes. Born there. But a couple of years ago Samuel had me transferred here to Odiosis.”

Emeri scrunched up her face, “Why?”

“He said something about it best suited my abilities.”

“What kind of abilities?”

“That’s a discussion for another time,” he said with a wink.

Emeri giggled. She was not sure why. It really was not very funny.

“Did you miss Mirum?” she said, changing the subject.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, I get it. It’s hard being away from your home.”

“Don’t be. I gave me a chance to really appreciate what life was like as a human.”

Emeri looked away. She couldn’t quite tell if he meant that as a compliment or not. “I don’t think I’ll ever learn to Shift,” Emeri said, changing topics.

“You’ve done it before,” Erin replied, “heck, you’ve done it in your sleep!”

Emeri laughed, “Yeah, but not on purpose!”

“Then that’s your problem!” Erin exclaimed, “you’re thinking too much. Listen, I’m not a Shift. But I’ve learned some things, and if you’d let me, I’d like to help.”

Emeri turned to him, “Go for it.”

“I heard Reiner talking to you earlier. He kept saying how you have to feel the energy from the other side.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what it feels like,” Emeri explained.

“But you do! It’s all around you!” Emeri scrunched up her face in confusion. “The energy from our world is the same in yours. It’s just a more concentrated form. The energy that governs your world is like a diluted form of the energy that governs mine.”

“How you do know this?”

“Hey, I’m not here just ‘cause of my good looks,” he said with a wink. Emeri rolled her eyes, but couldn’t keep herself from smiling. “You need to feel the energy around you and pull it in, I think then you might be able to generate a door.”

“Door?”

“It’s what we call those freaky grey holes Reiner manifests. It’s like a temporary Rift. Door is simpler. Try it!”

“Like, now?”

“Why not?” Emeri closed her eyes. She slowly breathed in and out, counting to five and steadying her heart. She listened to the wind, smelled the freshly cut grass, and felt Erin’s warm

breath in the chilly air. “You know it’s there because you can feel it! Here,” he said taking her hand. Emeri felt her cheeks go warm and took to a deep breath to calm her quickly beating heart. Erin raised her arm and then let go. Emeri kept her arm raised.

“What’s this supposed to do?”

“Feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The energy! The weight of your arm under the forceful pull to the ground?”

“I guess. I mean, my arm is starting to feel kind of heavy.”

“Right. That’s what I mean. Use your body as a tool to feel that pull of energy from Mirum. It’s trying to get through. Think of your body like an electrical conductor allowing the energy to flow from one area to the next.”

Emeri thought on this for a minute.

“Take a deep breath,” he said. Emeri obeyed. “Feel the energy around you: your heartbeat, the air, the ground underneath you. Think about where it is coming from and pull from the source.”

Emeri concentrated. She began to notice an airy feeling wrapping around her arms, it vibrated from the ground and swept around her. It felt like arms reaching out and grabbing hold of everything, Emeri pulled at the energy. Then she felt it. That familiar tingling sensation. It flowed through her and seemed to drift out from her arms. She opened her eyes. Standing right before her was a swirling purple mass. Emeri could not quite see what was on the other side, but she could feel the power pulling her towards it. The door was half her height in both length and

width and looked like a purple stream swirling towards someplace new. Light dazzled along the outer rims of the door and when Emeri momentarily lost focus, the door's borders quickly shrunk by a couple of inches. Erin, who had let go of her hands, was standing next to her in amazement. Even Emeri had to admit how impressed she was with herself. She turned to Erin and smiled. Unfortunately, by doing so she lost all concentration and the door fizzled out. Emeri just stared blankly at the empty space before her, amazed at what had just happened.

She turned to Erin and hugged him. "I can't believe I did it!"

"I can," he said. He looked her in the eyes. Emeri's heart fluttered and, for the first time since this crazy adventure had begun, she felt safe. Maybe it was Erin.

Erin had decided that Emeri had been through enough that day and they both headed back towards the motel. When they arrived at the room Emeri could see that Samuel had returned. He was hunched over a map with Reiner studious as they talked in hushed tones.

"Back so soon?" Samuel asked without looking up. Emeri was surprised by his response. She had been out there practicing for hours.

"I guess that's all the time it takes for me to shift," she said grinning ear to ear. Emeri could feel her excitement threatening to break free. She was so proud of herself and she knew Samuel would be too.

"Really?" Samuel asked. His attention turning to Emeri and Erin. Erin had his arm wrapped around Emeri's shoulder and upon a slight glare from Samuel, quickly removed his hand.

"Really," Emeri said, still grinning at Samuel, "I think I'm a natural."

“Well, we’ll see,” he said before turning his attention back to Reiner and his papers.

Emeri felt like she had just been slapped in the face. That was it? Nothing? Not even a “good job”? Emeri had exhausted herself and he had nothing to say? Erin began to turn his back and leave when Emeri spoke, “Wait. That’s it?”

Samuel looked up again from his paperwork. “What’s it?” he asked, seemingly annoyed.

“Uh, I just did something incredibly impressive. I literally opened another dimension and you can’t even give me a pat on the back?”

Samuel sighed, put down his reading glasses and walked over towards Emeri. He then placed his hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye, “Congratulations,” he said, “on doing the basic necessities of this profession.” He then turned around and walked back to the desk.

Emeri just stood there dumbstruck. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. Then without saying a word, she turned and walked outside, slamming the door behind her. It may have not been the most professional exit, but it felt justified nonetheless. Emeri clutched the railing of the outdoor hallway that ran around the length of the building. The motel was old and withered, with old red paint peeling on the door of the rooms. The sign itself was also starting to fade: “Camelot Inn”. She clenched the rails tight and forced herself not to cry. Feeling the coolness of the railing beneath her palms, she raised her hands to her cheeks, hoping to sooth the redness that threatened to expose her embarrassment. Erin stood next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t.” He quickly pulled his hand away. “Sorry,” she whispered, “I think I just need to be alone right now.”

“I get it,” he replied, “but you have to understand, Samuel talks to everyone like that. Don’t take it personally. He’s a jerk.”

Emeri chuckled. “He is,” she said whipping away a tear, “a massive jerk.” Erin’s hands rested on the bars next to hers. Emeri clasped her hand onto his. They stood there like that for a while. There was a slight fall breeze in the air that smelled of withered leaves and pine. The sun that seemed to never set in the summertime was almost gone and out of view. Only the light blue shades of its remembrance were visible amongst the distant silhouettes of trees. The stars began to show themselves as the sky above her grew dark. Emeri breathed a sigh of relief. This was her favourite time of day: the moment between dusk and night. It was a grey space where the disappointments of the day could be forgotten and the limitations promised for tomorrow were endless.

Chapter 4

There was that tingling sensation again. It began in her fingers and moved to the back of her skull before her body hit with a burst of energy that flowed around her. She opened her eyes, realizing she was on her back. She felt dizzy and nauseous, trying to right herself and her push up into her hands and knees. She turned her head to see that the others were in relatively the same condition. They had just stepped through Emeri’s first shift from Odiosis to Mirum, and it had been anything but smooth.

“I think I’m going to hurl,” said Peter as he leaned against a wall.

Reiner was originally supposed to do it, but Samuel insisted on Emeri practicing. The whole team had argued against it, including Emeri.

“Do you want us to die?” Jeanie complained.

“Seriously, I can do it,” Reiner protested.

But Samuel was firm, “Emeri will be our Shift for this mission. If I wanted your opinions, I would have asked for them.” That quieted the rest of the group. Emeri raised her hand. Jeanie snickered while Samuel rolled his eyes, “Yes, Emeri?”

“Um, why exactly are we going to Mirum? What mission?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Sort of,” she replied.

“Exactly. I ‘sort of’ trust you too. Until I know for sure, you’ll be given only the information you need to know. Understood?”

Emeri nodded.

She had recently discovered that the reason they had travelled to Hope was that it was apparently a hot spot for odd occurrences of the unexplainable. That morning they had risen early, just before sunrise. They had gathered by the edge of the Fraser River underneath the bridge leading out of town. Samuel nodded to Emeri to begin. She glanced back at Erin who gave her a smile of encouragement. She also looked at Reiner who stared at her with his arms crossed. She had wondered if he disapproved of their being another Shift in the group. She planted her feet and took a deep breath. She concentrated on the quiet stillness of the morning. She could hear the chirps of birds in the cool autumn air. Wind rushed by and sent a chill down her spine as the river washed along the rocky shore. She could almost feel the energy of the river as it was whipping by. She smiled as she began to feel a rumbling below her feet and course up

through her until it reached her fingertips. She opened her eyes and her smile fell. The door was only about a foot wide.

“So you made us a doggy-door portal. Great,” Reiner commented.

Emeri glared at the door and took a deep breath. She breathed in and tried forcing more energy through her body. She grunted as she strained to widen the door.

“Ok,” Samuel said, “that’s enough. Reiner you’re up.”

“No,” Emeri said firmly, “I can do this.”

Samuel turned to her and glared, “And I said that’s enough. Move aside.”

“No.”

“That’s an order.”

Emeri ignored him. She drew more power from the ground, wind, river and anything else she could find a connection to. She could feel sweat trickling down the side of her face as she willed the door to open wider. She could hear Samuel shouting at her but could not make out what it was. She was too focused. Too deep. The door gradually increased in size as Samuel barked orders at everyone to go through. Reiner was the first to enter. As he approached the door, his whole body suddenly disappeared and he was gone. One at a time everyone filed in until it was only Samuel and Emeri left on the beach. Samuel approached the door and instructed her to take his hand, which she did as he yanked her through. The light within the door was blinding Emeri felt as though she was being tossed through space, spinning this way and that. She closed her eyes to stop the dizzying feeling but that did not seem to help. Panic began to

creep at the back of Emeri's throat. Maybe she did something wrong. Maybe it was not supposed to happen this way. Suddenly, she realized she had stopped moving and everything was quiet.

After moving to her hands and knees, Emeri glanced around her, noticing that the dark wooden shelves piled high with withered books. The books themselves were in poor condition and the pages were torn and falling out of the binding. Despite the building's grand height, the space itself was quite narrow. Emeri steadied herself and looked above her; she raised her hands instinctively. There were bookshelves lining the ceiling! However, for some strange reason, the books stayed in place. It was as if gravity didn't affect them.

"Great job, Ri," Reiner said sarcastically looking to Emeri. "I think I left my lunch back on Odiosis."

Emeri did an internal eye roll. She just jumped DIMENSIONS for the first time and he was complaining about her technique? She crossed her arms, and was pretty sure she looked like a pouty two-year-old. Erin crossed over to her and put his arm around her.

"You did fine," he said with a smile. "I only feel slightly nauseous," he said with a wink. Emeri shoved him and gave a little laugh. Samuel steadied himself and also looked a little green; Emeri didn't think anything ever phased him. Erin promised her it would be smoother next time. However, given how she was feeling, she did not want there to be a next time. Even Ed looked a little nauseous.

"Where are we?"

"Mirum," Peter stated matter-of-factly.

“Ok, yes I know that part. But exactly where?”

“Silva,” replied Samuel, “it’s a large village surrounded by smaller villages on the outskirts of the forest.”

Emeri looked around to see these Silvans. But the building was empty.

“So.... where is everyone?”

“The building’s closed today. Technically, we’re trespassing.”

Suddenly a boisterous voice boomed from around the corner. Emeri jumped back in astonishment. She was not entirely what she was expecting, but the person who appeared before was beyond what she had imagined. He was tall and bearded, but his eyes were golden and glowed in the darkly lit space. His skin was the color of deep purple and when he laughed, he reminded her of a jolly Santa Clause. He spoke to Samuel in a dialect Emeri was unfamiliar with. He then looked to Emeri, smiling wide and took her hand. He said something to her and waited for a reply.

“Um...I’m sorry. What?” was all Emeri could muster.

“Ah,” he replied, “English it is then. I’m Gerrand, this is my library. I have collected countless books on both my world and yours.”

Emeri looked around in amazement. “You collected all of these?”

“Everyone has a story to tell,” he said with a smile. “And what might your name be?”

“Emeri.”

“Emeri. Lovely name. I hear you also have the gift to Shift.”

“Sort of.”

“Well, you got everyone here in one piece. I think that says a lot.” The man’s kindness immediately seemed to soothe her. He went around to the rest of the group, shaking their hands. He then grabbed Samuel around the shoulder like they were childhood friends and whispered something into his ear. Emeri could not quite make out what they were saying, but she noticed Samuel’s brows furrow in concentration.

“Very good then,” Samuel replied.

The group collected themselves and exited through the stained-glass double-doors. Emeri let out a gasp. It was so vibrant: bright blue, pink and purple clothes draped over hooks in stalls that lined a market stuffed with people. The air was sweet and its scent wafted over the noise of people calling to each other, trying to be heard over the hundreds of other voices that echoed throughout the market. Then she noticed the people. They were taller than she was, much taller. Everyone’s eyes seemed to gleam in the braising sun. Emeri found herself constantly looking upwards as people pushed by. One individual did catch her attention, however. She was standing less than twenty feet away from Emeri, half-hidden by a market stall that seemed to be selling what looked like purple oranges. She was just staring at Emeri. Her eyes were bright yellow, reflecting the daylight which gleamed off her tanned skin. She was dressed in these bright intricate patterns of blue and pink that made Emeri feel self-conscious of her own attire. She tilted her head at Emeri. Emeri turned her head away. She had realized that she had been staring.

“Hello,” she heard someone say in a sing-song voice.

Emeri turned to see the person approach her and the rest of the group.

“Eldra,” Samuel said smiling, and shook their hand.

Wait, did Samuel just smile?

“It’s so good to see you,” Eldra said, still smiling, “how was your journey?”

“Successful thank you,” he replied. Emeri turned her attention back to Eldra to notice that she was looking directly at her, and had moved uncomfortably close.

“Hello,” Eldra said smiling again. Emeri didn’t like having this person invade her personal bubble.

“Hi,” Emeri said, taking a step back and holding out her hand. Eldra looked at her hand, grabbed it, and flipped it over to look at her palm. “Uh,” was all Emeri could muster.

Eldra traced the lines on Emeri’s hand and spoke as she did so, “you will live a long and healthy life, if unforeseen circumstances don’t interfere.” She stared blankly at Emeri for an uncomfortable minute, before breaking the trance and smiling again. “Oh, and we shall be great friends!” She wrapped Emeri into a hug and squeezed.

“What is going on?” Emeri wheezed, attempting to breathe through Eldra’s intense grip.

“Silvans can see things others cannot,” Samuel informed her.

“Well, I’m no sorceress,” Eldra giggled, letting go of Emeri. “I can just sense things, like when I know someone is going to be an important part of my life.” She was still smiling. It was freaking Emeri out. Emeri forcibly detached herself from her and stepped back. She still didn’t like her invading her personal space. Eldra unnerved Emeri. It was as if she were trying to peel back one of her layers; the comfortable layers that Emeri had spent years forming.

“You will follow me,” Eldra said, taking Emeri’s hand. Emeri did not know how to respond and so she let Eldra guide her. Eldra lead them away from the business of the town and

back to her village. They travelled for about an hour through the forest as Eldra described to Emeri all about her friends and family in the village. According to Eldra, they were one in the same. Friends were family. Emeri smiled as she talked, but was only half-paying attention. She was too mesmerized by the various vegetation surrounding her. Never in her life had she even imagined the vivid colors of the purple and turquoise tree-tops. Or the oddly shaped flowers and bushes. Chimes echoed throughout the forest that sounded something like a bird, but not quite.

“But be careful,” Eldra said, looking to Emeri.

“What?” Emeri responded. She realized that she had not been paying attention.

“The forest. It’s enchanting, but dangerous if you do not know it well. You will die.”

“Oh, that’s comforting,” Emeri replied sarcastically.

“No. It is not. It is dangerous.”

Erin leaned over to Emeri and whispered, “Silvans tend to be blunt and rarely use sarcastic speech.”

Emeri nodded. That was going to be difficult for her.

Eldra’s home was located in a clearing in the middle of the forest. Emeri was surprised by how comforting it felt. Tent-like structures peppered the clearing with various wooden canopies that held seating and tables. Eldra explained to Emeri that this was where people would cook and eat together.

“So I’m guessing not a lot of people here eat mac and cheese in their bedroom alone watching Netflix?” Emeri joked.

Eldra turned her head and starred at Emeri quizzically. Emeri noticed that the rest of her division had done the same. Emeri caught a glimpse of Jeanie as she rolled her eyes. Edlra then lead the group to an area reserved for them to sleep. There was nothing there accept canvas and framing. In the middle of the small unoccupied area was a small stone fire pit.

“Oh,” Emeri said, “camping! I can do that!”

“You have camped before, right?” inquired Peter.

“Oh, yeah. I used to do it all the time!”

“Great, something you can do,” Jeanie said as she set down her backpack. Maybe the afternoon heat was getting to Emeri. Perhaps it was Jeanie’s constant attempts to ridicule her. It could have been everyone’s, except Erin, attempt to make her feel stupid. Maybe she was just hungry. Emeri did not know exactly which one of the above scenarios had caused to say what she said next. Maybe it was all of them.

“Would you quit it?” she exploded.

Jeanie looked to Emeri, surprise clear on her face. “What?”

“Seriously,” Emeri continued. “Would you just give it a rest already? I get it. I’m the newbie. I’m the one who doesn’t know anything. I say the wrong things. I ask the wrong questions. But I could do without the verbal commentary from you.” Emeri had realized everyone around her had grown still and quiet. Let them stare, she thought. She was done. She didn’t need these people. She didn’t need any friends. She had Erin. And Ed.

“This is where you will be staying,” Eldra interrupted in a sing-song cheer. If you need help setting up, please ask.” Eldra then looked to Emeri. “Put your stuff down and come with me.”

Emeri did as she was told and looked to Erin. He shrugged and so Emeri went with Eldra while Ed followed closely behind. Emeri did not care where they were going. She just needed to breathe. They wandered past the village to a small stream nearby, hidden just on the borders of the forest. They followed the stream to a small clearing where Eldra encouraged Emeri to take a seat. The clearing was enclosed by the forest and for the first time in days, Emeri felt like she was finally away from prying eyes.

“Better?” Eldra inquired.

“Much.” They both sat there in silence for a few moments. But the silence was comfortable. There was no need to fill a void because there was none. They were both just merely enjoying the peace and quiet. Emeri closed her eyes and took a deep breath in. Her sense of calm was quickly interrupted at the sound of branches cracking.

“So this is where you sneak off to?” asked a voice. Emeri recognized that voice. It was Reiner. She let out a sigh and turned to face him. He was holding a pile of wood that Emeri assumed was for a fire later.

“Hi,” Emeri said, trying to sound friendly. She feared it was unconvincing and was ready for another nasty glare from him, when she realized that he was smiling. But he wasn’t smiling at her. He was looking at Eldra. She glanced over at Eldra and noticed that she was doing the same. There was a long pause before Reiner looked to Emeri as if noticing her for the first time.

“Firewood,” was all he said to her, raising the wood in his hands.

“Never would have guessed,” Emeri replied. Reiner sighed at her before turning around and retreating back to the village.

“Why would you have not guessed?” inquired Eldra, “I thought it was quite obvious. What else did you think he was doing with it?”

“Sorry, Eldra. It was sarcasm.”

“Ah, right. It’s that thing you do where you think you are being funny.”

Emeri was stunned for a moment by her bluntness. “So, you and Reiner...” she continued, quickly changing the subject.

“Yes?”

“...are friends?”

“More than that.”

“Seriously?” Emeri began, “you’re so nice, and he’s so...” She didn’t know exactly what to say as to not offend Eldra.

“So...what?” asked Eldra, looking genuinely confused.

“Never mind.” She was familiar with the phrase ‘opposites attract’, she just didn’t realize how opposite.

“I just looked into his eyes and I knew,” Eldra smiled, “that we were destined to be a part of each other’s future.”

“Well, ok then,” said Emeri. She didn’t know Eldra all that well. Whatever Eldra did with whomever, was none of Emeri’s business. Even if it was Reiner. Eldra didn’t look convinced.

“I do not understand,” Eldra said, cocking her head to the side, “What do you mean by this?”

“Um, well, I’m happy for you, I guess,” she said with a shrug.

“You lie again,” they said quizzically, “you are not happy if I am happy.”

“You’re right,” said Emeri, “I don’t like Reiner. He’s rude and only thinks of himself.”

“Reminds me of someone else I know,” Eldra said looking at Emeri.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I’m sorry if I wasn’t clear. You can be rude and selfish.”

“Ouch.”

“Are you hurt?” Eldra asked, genuinely concerned.

“Well, my feelings are,” Emeri mumbled.

“Why?”

“You just called me rude and selfish.”

“And you’re not?”

“No!”

“Well, you tend to insult your teammates and have seemingly made no friends as far as I can see.”

“Hey, I am friends with Erin.”

“Yes, I can see that.” Emeri cocked her head to the side and stared at Eldra. She was not entirely sure what Eldra had meant by that.

Emeri turned and glared at Eldra, “Well, then why do you talk to me if I’m *so rude*?”

“Because we can all be rude and selfish.”

“Well, you’re being rude right now.”

“Yes, but I am aware of it. Besides, you need a friend right now.”

Emeri scoffed. Eldra put their arm around Emeri and hugged her. Emeri wanted to tell her not to touch her. She wanted to brush Eldra off of her and storm out of there. But as much she hated to admit it, Eldra was right. She had been picking fights with everyone since she arrived and Emeri did need a friend right now. This new world terrified her and only Erin made her feel safe. She looked down at her hands and went quiet. They both sat there in silence.

Emeri wandered through the village, glancing at the various tent-like structures of small shops and homes. The tents themselves were made out of intricate cloth that gave the whole village an air of wonder. She kept her head down, but let her eyes wonder over the various beings scattered around her. Everyone seemed to ignore her, despite the fact that she looked quite different from the rest with their various skin tones of light brown, pastel pink, light green and dark ocean-blue, complimenting their golden eyes. Every so often Emeri would find herself making eye-contact with a stranger before quickly averting her eyes. This only fueled her anger towards Eldra’s comments about Emeri’s seeming lack of openness to Mirum. She suddenly felt overwhelmed by the crowds of strangers and, despite being outdoors, struggled to catch her breath. Emeri dove through the crowd, pushing people aside as she quietly mumbled “sorry” under her breath. It was as she said this that she wondered how many people spoke English and

knew what she was saying. After breaking from the business of the village Emeri bent over, resting her hands on her knees. Ed came up behind her and licked her face. Emeri smiled at her. She counted as she took five deep breaths. After doing this three times, Emeri composed herself and turned her head back to the village: it was vibrant and crowded, reminding her of the spring afternoon when she was eight.

It had been a warm spring day and Oma had decided to pick Emeri up from school earlier than usual. She had told her it was a surprise. Emeri loved Oma's surprises. They got into Oma's old beaten down Jeep that she always claimed ran on love. They listened in the car to her Oma's favourite singer on the drive: Elton John. As Oma hummed along to "Tiny Dancer" she looked to Emeri and said how much she loved his music because she had always admired his courage to be who he was and blaze his own path in life. When they arrived at their destination, Emeri looked to her Oma with excitement.

"What is this place?"

"You'll see, my love," she said with a wink.

They wandered through what looked to be a market. Emeri noticed people had many different baking and crafts on their tables. Emeri and her Oma explored the different paintings and woodcarvings of the patrons and Emeri even had the chance to try the most delicious fried dough she had ever tasted. The lady who made it, took it out of the fryer and then rolled it in cinnamon and sugar before handing it to Emeri. Her Oma later told it was called Bannock. They continued wondering throughout the market and even had the chance to listen to a live drumming session. Emeri stood there with her mouth agape, bits of cinnamon covering her face. The rhythm of the drumming seemed to calm her and she closed her eyes as the voices of the

performers echoed throughout the market. On their way home, Emeri looked to her Oma and asked if they could visit again next week.

“Of course, my love,” she replied.

“The food was different from our food. But I liked it.”

“It is your food, too. It’s part of your culture.”

“But I thought you were part of my culture.”

“Oh I am, my love. But you have more than one culture.”

“Then why don’t you teach me more about it?”

“That’s why I brought you there. To learn. You see, I am learning about your other culture just like you are. So I can’t really teach you something that isn’t mine to teach. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of.”

“Ok, how about this. Think of a house. I am invited as a guest to this house. They have me over for dinner. But, even though I’m allowed in the house, does that mean I can start barking orders and pretending like it’s my kitchen?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not your house.”

“Exactly. But, if Oma is a really nice guest, maybe she’ll get invited over again. Maybe, she’ll even be allowed to help cook. But the thing is, no matter how many times Oma is invited over, it will never be my house. I am always just a guest.”

Emeri nodded.

“But guess what? How about we go back next week and be really friendly guests?”

“I’d like that.”

Emeri wandered back towards her campsite and discovered from Peter that Erin had left.

“Did you know where he went?”

“Definitely. Because he really respects me and tells me everything,” he replied sarcastically.

Emeri was a bit hurt by that. She understood that she was not privy to everything that was happening, but it felt like he just abandoned her. Emeri thought it odd how much she already missed him. She felt uneasy being alone and decided to try and help around camp. Despite not seeming to connect with her division, they were the only people she knew. Emeri strolled over to Reiner who was hunched over, beside a tent.

“Whatcha doing?” Emeri asked in a sing-song high octave, trying her best to sound peppy and easy-going. That would show Eldra.

Reiner tuned and looked at her with a smirk and raised eyebrow, “Has someone been drinking some mushroom tea?”

Emeri glared at him. “I’m trying to be ‘friendly’,” she said, using her hands to air-quote around the word ‘friendly’.

“Ah,” replied Reiner as he raised his eyebrows, “that’s what you’re doing?” He said with a snicker as he turned back to his tent.

“What?” Emeri asked, offended. She was just trying to be nice.

“No,” Reiner replied, “you’re trying to be fake.”

“Excuse me?”

“That voice, it’s not you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I’ve tried. But you’re right, I don’t know you.”

“You’ve tried?” Emeri raised her voice and gave out a laugh.

“Yes, but you always seem to be with Erin. He seems to like the voice.” He looked in her direction with a small eyebrow raise before returning to his work.

“Whatever,” Emeri said. As soon as the comment left her mouth she felt ridiculous.

‘Whatever’? Honestly, who said that anymore? What was she going to do? Storm out and slam her bedroom door before throwing a tantrum? She wasn’t a child, but she seemed to be acting like one. She tried to change the subject and inquired, in her own voice, what Reiner was doing.

“Setting up my tent. I could use some help.”

Emeri helped Reiner stake down the tent before inserting the poles into the sleeves and raising it. Emeri had accidentally hit her hand at one point in which Reiner snickered. Ironically, he later hit his own thumb in which Emeri brought him a cool cloth to bring down the swelling. After setting up Reiner's tent, they set one up for Peter and Jeanie. Emeri was not thrilled that her tent partner would be Reiner but she was discovering that she might be able to put up with him.

As she was finishing setting up her tent, Emeri felt a small tap on her right shoulder. She turned to see Eldra smiling at her. Eldra's smile was infectious and Emeri could already feel her anger towards Eldra disappear. Reiner smiled at Eldra before leaving to find Samuel.

"I see you've been making friends," Eldra said with a wink. Emeri rolled her eyes, but also found herself smiling. They strolled past the field of tent houses. Eldra pulled Emeri towards her and held her tight. They stood like that for a minute.

When Eldra finally let go Emeri just looked at her. "What was that for?"

"Sometimes people just need a hug."

They stood in silence for a few minutes when Eldra asked. "Friend, how are you doing?"

"I'm...fine," said Emeri with a smile. Eldra looked at her quizzically.

"Friend, why do you lie?" they asked confused.

"I'm not lying," said Emeri firmly.

"There it is again!" said Eldra astonished, "Why don't you speak your truth?"

"I don't know," said Emeri hesitantly, "I guess I just don't really know you yet."

“I understand,” replied Eldra, “this world is much different from yours, and you struggle with befriending your compatriots. Some of them are not exactly easy to converse with,” she said with a wink.

“I am guessing you must have a ton of friends.”

“No. Not many people like me.”

Emeri looked at Eldra dumbfounded, “But, you’re so nice!”

“But too honest, even for a Silvan. I bother people.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Well, you don’t have many friends.”

“And why are you sorry about that? It is not your fault.”

“Right, but I feel sorry for you. Like, don’t you want more friends.”

“Not really. If it’s not true friendship, then what is the point? I’d rather have two true friends than thirty who merely pretend to be my friend only to make themselves feel better.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Do you have a lot of friends?”

“No, not really. I recently moved in with my aunt after my Oma died. I kind of lost contact with my friends from my old city.”

“What is Oma?”

“It means grandmother.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I have all my grandmothers. If you want, we can share?”

Emeri could not help but laugh. “Thank you Eldra, that’s a very sweet offer.”

After talking with Eldra for another hour, Emeri wandered back to her camp. It was late and Emeri found someone had laid out food for her by the fire. She was not entirely sure what it was, a type of meat she assumed, but she ate it nonetheless. After finishing her meal, Emeri noticed the rest of the village was quiet and all of the fires were out. She crept quietly towards her tent, pulling back the opening. She jumped when she found Reiner sleeping in her tent, forgetting that he was her tent-mate. She gave out a sigh and climbed inside, trying her best not to wake him. She did not need Reiner to have something else to complain about with her. She glanced around for a blanket. There was none. She let out another sigh and curled her arms around herself. She began to shake slightly. Suddenly, she felt something drape over her, the blanket was warm and her body stopped shivering. She glanced over her shoulder to see Reiner. His eyes were closed and Emeri could see he had given her his blanket. She furrowed her brows in confusion.

As if reading her mind, and without opening his eyes, Reiner said, “Your shivering was keeping me awake.”

Emeri turned back around and pulled the blanket tightly around her, thankful for the warmth. As if on cue, Ed pounced inside the tent, in form of a Bernese Mountain dog. Ed circled

a few times before plopping herself right between Reiner and Emeri. One of Emeri's legs were pinned and she was slowly beginning to lose feeling. Emeri heard an audible sigh from Reiner.

"Literally, any other shape would be great," he said through a mouthful of fur.

Emeri turned her head to Ed, "Perhaps a small cat?"

As if on cue, Ed's body began to shrink and morph until she was a small black cat, curled up behind Emeri's legs. Emeri gave her a pat before pulling the covers around her body and falling fast asleep.

Chapter 5

Emeri woke suddenly with a buzzing in her ear. She thought at first it was a mosquito (if they had mosquitos here) but decided it was more like a low murmur. It was almost as if a million little voices were filling up her head. She sat up and pulled her knees to her chest, listening to the little voices.

The forest.

The voices kept repeating the same two words over and over. Emeri looked down at Reiner, wondering if she should wake him. She decided against it as she was not even convinced that she wasn't losing her mind. She pulled her boots back over her socks and grabbed her jacket before slipping out of the tent. Ed, of course, followed. The moons were high overhead as they illuminated the village enough for her to see. There were two moons in the sky tonight, one a little smaller than the other.

The forest.

Emeri obeyed the voice's instructions and made her way out of the village. She had never been this far away from the village by herself before. She wondered here with Eldra, but even that was during the day. As if on cue, Emeri could see Eldra standing in the distance, staring up at the sky.

"Eldra?"

"Friend!" Eldra said with a smile.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, sometimes I like to wonder around at night while everyone else is asleep. Its peaceful at this time. Why are you awake?"

"I heard a voice."

"It could have been Reiner. He talks in his sleep."

"No. It was not Reiner. I swear it sounded like the voice was in my head. Like it was coming from me but I didn't know what I was going to say next."

"Was it friendly?"

"What?"

"The voice. Was it friendly?"

"Oh, um, I don't know."

"Because I wouldn't want to follow an unfriendly voice in my head." Emeri just stared at Eldra quizzically for a moment. She could never seem to be able to read Eldra.

"But I think I should follow it."

“Ok then. Where to?” Emeri felt a sigh of relief. She did not want to ask Eldra to come, so she was grateful that she volunteered. Emeri did not know exactly how Eldra knew that she needed her, but she was sure glad that she was here. They both ventured into the forest, hand-in-hand. Having Eldra by her side made Emeri feel a slightly braver. The moons above provided enough illumination for their path through the trees. The further away from the village they were, the colder the air seemed to be. Emeri found herself starting to shiver. Suddenly she stopped.

“What is it, friend?” Eldra inquired.

“This is wrong,” Emeri began, “we shouldn’t be doing this.” She turned around to look at Eldra and noticed that she, too, looked unnerved. “Don’t you feel it? It feels evil.”

Eldra nodded in agreement. “Unfriendly voice,” she said.

She suddenly felt a prickling at the base of her neck. That same feeling, she had when she knew she was being watched. She slowly turned her head and glared into the pitch black forest. She froze. She could see warm breath that was being illuminated by the moon in the cold night air. Slowly, something lurked from the darkness of the forest. It was three times her size, covered in dark fur with piercing black eyes; it was a bear. It slowly approached towards Emeri, its feet thudding with every step. The bear’s nostrils flared and Emeri could see its breath in the chilly fall air. As it loomed closer, Emeri didn’t move. She couldn’t move. This wasn’t just a bear wandering about. This bear seemed to have a mission, and it was headed straight for her. But there was something about the bear’s eyes. Something unwavering and threatening, and yet, familiar. Then it charged.

“Run!” she heard a voice yell to her right. It was Eldra, she was running straight at the bear with a knife in their hand. She hurled their body at the bear, but the creature avoided their

attack. It let out a loud roar of frustration and nipped at Eldra. Eldra threw her body to the ground, barely avoiding the bear's gnashing teeth. Emeri stumbled away from the creature but tripped on the forest floor. She saw Ed also lunge at the bear in the form of a cougar. They both struggled until the bear grabbed Ed by her neck with its teeth, swinging her in the direction of Emeri. Ed landed with a thump and looked to Emeri. Ed struggled to right herself and Emeri had guessed she'd be injured. Emeri scrambled to her feet when she suddenly found herself being forcefully yanked off the ground. The bear had grabbed her with its teeth by the back of her jacket and was dragging her further into the forest. Emeri kicked and screamed but the bear seemed undisturbed. Emeri felt helpless and panic began to set in. Remembering something she learned on the nature channel as a small child she balled her hand into a fist, stretched her arm upwards, and hit the bear forcefully on its nose. The bear roared in pain, and in doing so, dropped Emeri from its grasp. At this point, Eldra had risen to their feet and stabbed her knife into the bear's side, while it was still distracted. It wailed from the pain and swatted at Eldra. Unfortunately, this time Eldra was caught off guard. The bear swung its paw at Eldra, hitting her with a thud and propelling her into a nearby tree. Emeri could hear the breaking of bones as Eldra collided with the tree. After that, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Emeri was sure she was screaming, but she could not seem to hear herself. She ran to Eldra's side, careful not to move her. Eldra's light pink hair covered her face, but Emeri could not find the courage to brush it away for she knew what she would see. She heard yelling and turned to see Reiner and Samuel. They both leaped at the bear, weapons in hand. The bear growled and then roared in frustration before retreating back into the forest. Emeri placed her hand on Eldra's chest; Eldra was no longer breathing. Emeri heard a thump and turned her head to find Reiner, having dropped to his knees, staring at Eldra.

He looked to Emeri who just shook her head and began to cry. Reiner stood, turned, and walked away.

Back at her camp, Emeri shivered. Someone had lead her back to her tent and wrapped a blanket around her. She thinks it was Jeanie. Samuel bent down and handed her a cup of something warm. She drank the beverage absentmindedly and continued to stare off into the distant darkness of the forest. Ed, as the cougar, curled at her feet. Emeri turned her head as the squealing of young children in play rushed past. Despite the noises around her, Emeri felt alone, like there was this bubble surrounding her, preventing anything from coming inside. Or perhaps from her getting out. She felt a lump in her throat, but not out of sadness. She just wanted to scream, to yell, to throw everything into the fire and watch it burn. It was as if nothing had happened here. Eldra was just simply gone. No one seemed to noticed. No one seemed to care. The darkness just seemed to draw her in. Suddenly, she felt like she was being watched. She looked up to find Reiner sitting across the fire, just staring at her. Neither of them spoke for a long while.

“I really would prefer to be alone right now,” Emeri mumbled.

“You realize you were not the only one affected by Edlra’s death, right?” Reiner said accusatory.

Emeri pulled her blanket tighter around herself, wishing he would leave.

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

There was another pause.

“You loved her didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said without looking up from the fire.

“I don’t know what else to say besides ‘I’m sorry’.”

“Please don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because then what am I supposed to say? ‘Thank you’? ‘It’s fine’? Because I don’t want to thank you and it’s not fine.”

“I get what you mean. I lost something too. My Oma. I still don’t know what to say when people tell me ‘I’m sorry for your loss’.”

“How about ‘Yeah, it sucks’?”

Emeri could not help let out a small laugh, “Yeah, it does suck.”

“Eldra really liked you.”

Emeri felt her shoulders drop, “Yeah, but she liked everybody.”

“No,” Reiner said, “not really. She was kind to everybody, but there’s a difference between caring for someone and just being kind.”

“Well, maybe if she had better taste in friends she’d still be alive.”

Emeri felt Reiner turn his head to look at her and glared, “Don’t say that ever again.”

Emeri turned her head to look at him. His brow was furrowed and she could swear he was holding back tears. “That’s not fair to Eldra.”

Emeri turned back to look at the fire. She felt her cheeks burn.

“...or to you.”

Emeri’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, still glaring at the fire.

“The only one who is blaming you for Eldra’s death is you. And that’s not fair. Now stop throwing a pity-party for yourself.”

“Thanks,” Emeri mumbled. She thought everyone was blaming her. And why wouldn’t they? It was her fault.

“Besides,” Reiner said, “you’re too much of a cupcake to ever cause anyone harm.”

Emeri couldn’t help herself from smiling, “Look who’s the cupcake now.”

Reiner let out a soft chuckle.

“Maybe,” Reiner said hesitantly, “if someone like that can put up with people like us, then maybe we can put up with each other.” Emeri turned and looked at him. She gave a half smile.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Chapter 6

Emeri dreamed of Eldra that night. In the dream, Eldra stood between Emeri and the bear, and right as it was charging at them, Eldra turned to Emeri and smiled. That’s when Emeri woke

up. She had thrown herself forward and it took a minute for her to unclench her hands and jaw. She took a deep breath and stepped outside of the tent. Three days. That's how long it had been since Eldra's death. Three days. There had been a wake, where everyone of the village praised Eldra for their generosity and kind nature. Emeri did not attend. Instead, she made her way to the stream Eldra had taken her to her first day there. She felt closer to her there.

Emeri made her way out of the tent as the sun began to rise, she could see the smoke from a few fires starting in the distance as the villagers began their day. Emeri stretched before lacing up her sneakers and embarking on a run. She looped around the village three times, never venturing near the forest's edge. Her chest burned and her lungs ached. She felt like she was breathing fire. She could feel a blister starting on her feet but she pushed forward. She needed to be stronger. Tougher. She couldn't let what happened to Eldra happen again.

Suddenly, she felt a presence beside her, Emeri turned her head and let out a scream. Erin had begun jogging beside her. She stopped and threw her arms around him. He laughed and picked her up, holding her close. Emeri nuzzled her face into the side of his neck.

"Whoa," Erin said patting her on her back, "you smell bad."

Emeri let out a laugh. It felt good to laugh. Erin pushed her away so that he was looking right into her eyes. "I heard. I'm sorry about Eldra."

Emeri nodded. What was she supposed to say? Thank you? It's fine? Because it wasn't. It wasn't fine. He drew her into him again.

"Where did you go?" Emeri asked wiping away a tear, mostly to change the subject.

"On a special task for Samuel. Sorry, Samuel said I couldn't tell you."

She nodded. Samuel never seemed to trust her with anything.

“Hey,” he said, “where’s my smile?”

Emeri didn’t really feel like smiling, but she did it anyway, for him. He pulled her back into him. “Hey,” he said, whispering into her ear, “I need your help.” Emeri looked at him quizzically. “Something’s happening to Odiosis.”

“What do you mean?”

“An imbalance,” he said, still in a low whisper. “The imbalance between our worlds is growing.”

“How? Why?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, it wasn’t a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’.”

“What can I do about it? Why not bring it to Samuel?”

“Because Samuel’s in denial. The whole division is! I’ve been trying to tell everyone what’s happening, to open their eyes! But no one will listen!” He was getting agitated at this point. He looked Emeri in the eyes and his voice softened, “but you can fix it.”

“Me?!” Why on Earth (or Odiosis) would he think she could help?

“Because you’re a Shift. You can open a door. The problem is, the energy flow is too strong on one end, and we need to open a giant permanent Rift in order to even out the energy. Think of it this way, right now, the energy is too great on one side so eventually it’s going to

overflow. This is happening either way. There's no controlling it. However, if we are able to let out a little bit at a time, then we can decide how this energy is controlled."

"So you want me to open a door...permanently?"

"That's the idea."

"But how do you know that I can? I mean, the last time I tried, I almost made everyone lose their lunch."

"Trust me. I know. I've been around a handful of Shifts before and your energy is beyond anything I've seen. Even Reiner."

"Would Reiner help?"

"No. I've tried to talk to him. But he's with Samuel. They all are. You can't tell them any of this. Please, Emeri. You can't trust them."

Erin grabbed both of her hands and held them in his. "It's the only way I can protect you." Emeri's heart pounded in her chest. This was wrong. But with Erin by her side, it felt right. Emeri nodded. Ed turned back into a lab and followed them both. Erin smiled and kissed her forehead, leading her through the dark and deserted forest, holding her hand the entire time. She stopped a few times, feeling uneasy but Erin just looked back at her, squeezed her hand, and she felt safe again. It reminded her of her Oma. She would lead Emeri down to the supermarket, or the grocery store, holding into her hand. She would squeeze her hand trying to get her attention and Oma would squeeze back, letting her know she understood. Emeri felt that same form of comfort and safety with Erin.

Erin reached into a satchel he had been carrying. Emeri hadn't even noticed it before this point. He pulled out what looked to be a map. It looked familiar, yet Emeri couldn't seem to place it. Erin laid it flat on the grassy earth and smoothed out the edges. He then dug back into his bag to retrieve what looked to be a small circular mirror. He held the device overtop of the map and as he did, speckles of purple began materializing in the air. He moved it over the map towards the what looked to be a stream and a forest. Emeri believed this was where they were situated. As he neared the stream, the speckles tripled and began pouring out of the device. Erin grinned.

"What is this?" Emeri inquired.

"It's a map of the forest. This," he said gesturing to the device in his hand, "is a Specter. It shows us where on the map where the energy flow is strong. Where it might be easier for you to make a Rift."

Emeri nodded. But, secretly, she wanted to throw up. How could Erin have so much confidence in her? She would fail. She knew she would fail. Without the rest of their division there, Emeri felt out of place. She honestly didn't care whether Samuel was a part of this, but she secretly hoped Peter would have understood. Maybe even Reiner.

They made their way over to the stream and Emeri used all of her energy to not burst into tears. This was Eldra's stream. Emeri blinked her eyes and cleared her throat to squelched the tears that threatened to surface. She looked to Erin who was distracted with the map. He noticed she was looking and turned his head to smile at her. She smiled back.

"You ready?"

"No," she said with a light laugh.

“You’re ready,” he said. His confidence in her was unwavering. She appreciated that.

Emeri widened her stance and rested her hands at her sides. She took a deep breath to quiet her rapid heartbeat. She then shifted her attention to the sound of the stream. It was smooth, calming, as it flowed across various rocks and pebbles. The water flowed right through the land, the ground Emeri was standing upon. She could feel it underneath her. Its energy was strong, unbending. Emeri pulled at that power until she could feel it echo up her legs through her whole body until it reached the very tips of her fingers. She accepted the energy, understanding that she was merely a tool for it rather than its maker. She raised her arms and let the energy go. It coursed through her as she felt it move through her. She opened her eyes to see a lavender Rift appear before her. She looked over to Erin who stood slack-jaw with awe and amazement. She felt amazing. Strong. Confident. In control. However, she was also feeling drained. She knew she would not be able to hold this for long. Ed began barking loudly.

Erin yelled to her, encouraging her to keep going. “Just a few seconds more! After that, the Rift will hold.”

Emeri furrowed her brows and clenched her teeth. The energy was becoming too much, painful even. Erin kept shouting at her to keep pushing. She let out a yell as the energy flowing through felt like it was burning her from the inside out. She couldn’t seem to take it anymore and closed herself off to it. The energy ceased and suddenly everything went quiet.

Emeri awoke to laughter and the smell of smoke. She opened her eyes to see flames and people sitting around a fire. One of them was Erin. She sat up slowly, feeling dizzy and nauseous. Ed was curled right next to her feet. She sat upwards and Emeri gave her a pat. Her

whole body ached like she had been in a boxing ring and lost. She moved her jaw around which tinged with pain from clenching. She also tasted blood and felt around her mouth for the source. She believed she had bit her tongue. She took the blanket that was laid out on top of her and wrapped it around her shoulders. Erin turned around and saw her, he smiled wide and motioned her towards him.

“Hey sleepy-head,” he said, making room for her on the log he was sitting on, “how’re you feeling?”

“Great. Can’t you tell? I look like this every morning.” Erin let out a boisterous laugh and so did the rest of the group around the fire: Jeanie and Peter. Emeri furrowed her brows as from what Erin had told her, the rest of her division had been excluded from this mission. Emeri leaned into Erin and whispered softly in his ear. “Why are Jeanie and Petr here? You never told me they were involved.”

“I was just trying to protect you,” he whispered back. “The less you know the better.”

“Protect me from who?” Emeri inquired. Erin ignored her question.

He then patted Emeri’s shoulder, “Good effort there. That did not look easy.”

“It wasn’t,” she replied curtly. His tone annoyed her. Her efforts? She just opened a permanent dimension into another realm! He was treating her like she had just won a participation trophy for just showing up. She felt irritated and sore. He was the one who had talked her into this and he seemed absolutely fine. Why wasn’t he the one who felt blue to the bone?

Erin sipped something hot out of a mug and looked to Emeri. “Oh, sorry. Want some?” he asked gesturing to the drink in his hand. Emeri shook her head. She felt too beaten to eat or drink anything.

“Alright. Whatever.” Erin shrugged and walked over to Peter who sat across from her engrossed in the map resting in front of him. Emeri could not exactly place what it was but Erin’s attitude was starting to greatly annoy her. There was something about his eyes. Or maybe it was his smile. Something about his face seemed ‘off’. He was less dreamy than he seemed a couple of hours ago. Maybe it was the way he held himself. There was a new demeanor about him that rubbed her the wrong way. It was as if he did not seem to care about her at all.

“What are you looking at?” Emeri inquired to both Peter and Erin, trying to lighten the mood.

“A map.” Peter seemed almost annoyed with the question.

“Ok. I can see it’s a map. A map of what?” she urged.

Peter glanced at Erin and raised his eyebrows before looking to Emeri. “A map of Mirum,” he said slowly. That made Emeri’s blood boil.

“Why are you talking to me like I’m an idiot?” Her body ached. Erin was acting odd and now Peter was treating her like a toddler. “Both of you are acting as if we’re not even friends.”

Peter glanced at Emeri with a look of amusement, “Exactly, when were we ever friends?”

That hurt. Emeri could almost feel a red handprint etched into her cheek. She looked around for support from Erin who just looked to be amused by the whole situation. He seemed to be agreeing with Peter. Emeri then noticed Jeanie, who was quieter than normal, leaning against

a tree, cutting an apple with a pocket knife, as she seemingly half-listened to the conversation around her.

“So,” Peter began, glancing at Emeri before turning his attention to Erin, “when do we begin?”

“Begin what?” Emeri asked looking to Erin. He smiled. But not the warm comforting smile she had begun to fall in love with. This was a cold smile. It sent shivers down her spine.

He looked at Emeri and stated nonchalantly, “the Emergence of course.”

“The Emergence of what?” Emeri asked, her heart staring to beat faster. What wasn’t he telling her?

“The Emergence of the Collide, duh,” Peter said with a sneer. Emeri glared at Peter and this new attitude of his. It was seriously beginning to annoy her. Or, perhaps, she was just discovering who Peter truly was.

Emeri stared at Erin, “I thought we were helping people. Stopping the energy flow from overwhelming Odiosis?” Her voice was calm, cautious. However, she greatly worried that she may have been led astray.

Peter let out a laugh, “Really, you believed that? Man, that’s a good one.” He spoke addressing Erin.

“Yeah,” Erin laughed, “kind of had to think of that one on the spot.” He said as he scratched his eyebrow. “Guess she’ll believe anything.”

Ed began to growl.

Emeri now felt the burn of another red mark on her face. She felt like she was almost outside of her own body. Like she was no longer connected to it. Everything around her must be a dream. A messed-up dream about her own insecurities of being with someone so sweet like Erin. But this time it was not a dream. This was reality. The boy she liked was really a two-faced backstabber and so was his friend. She had been played.

“Why?” Emeri said, almost a whisper. “Why would you lie to me like that?” Of course she knew the answer. She was a means to an end. An easy target. She wanted someone to care for her so badly that when Erin showed up, she did not question it. He was perfect. Too perfect.

“I thought it was obvious,” Erin said with a grin. He then shrugged his shoulders and approached Emeri. “Do you know the actual reason for the Guard? Of course not. Not really. We exist to maintain the balance between our two worlds. That’s the reason we were created in the first place. Humans were weak. But guess what? They’re not so weak anymore, are they? Nope. Now they have machines to fight their battles for them....”

He continued on like that for a while. He said how humans were too strong now. How people had forgotten how to “survive” in a world where they were not in control of their environment. Apparently, humans would have no idea what it takes to survive in Odiasis. Then he rambled on some more about how he was better than humans. How they need to be taken down a peg. Essentially, he was an egotistical sociopath.

Emeri stared blankly Erin. “You’re crazy.”

“Ouch, why would you ask something like that?” he said with a grin.

“Oh, it wasn’t a question.”

Erin shrugged. “Maybe. But my time living on Odiosis taught me that people are too focused on being noticed. Too focused on ‘finding themselves’. They forget the necessity of survival and how rare it can be. By opening the Rift, the magic will flow from Mirum into Odiosis...” Then began another tirade. He blathered on about “perfect harmony” once the dimensions were connected and then some more egotistical babble about how he’ll now be god-like in comparison.

Emeri’s heart hurt. But she was also angry. She let him manipulate her. She stared at him for what felt like ten minutes. She was waiting for the moment he would laugh at her telling her he was just playing a cruel joke. She would hit him. Call him names. But he would win her back again because he was charming. But there was no laugh. And the longer the moments passed, the more Emeri realized that he was serious. And delusional.

Emeri turned her head towards Peter and Jeanie, “you can’t seriously be as nutty as him.”

Peter shrugged, “His taste is, I’ll admit, a little self-obsessed. But I’m tired of living in a world where my abilities are next to nothing. I can put myself in people’s heads, make them think anything I want. But here, there are too many beings who are immune to my abilities. Imagine what I’d be in a world full of people I can manipulate?” Sweet backstabbing Peter. Emeri never became close with him, but she never thought he would have so much disdain for her.

“Why Peter? Why would you do this to your division? To me?” she asked him bluntly.

Peter turned and furrowed his eyebrows. “You think much too highly about yourself. Silly little girl. Despite what Samuel and the rest of the division may think, the world doesn’t evolve around you.”

Emeri glared at him and her cheeks turned red. It sure felt personal. She turned to Jeanie but Jeanie looked away.

Peter continued. "You are just a means to an end for me. For us. To Erin and I you were merely collateral." Emeri stared at Erin, distain flowing through her. She looked in his eyes and was about to say something when it hit like a ton of bricks. The bear. Erin's eyes. The voices. Eldra's death. It was all Peter and Erin. Emeri let out a scream and lunged at Erin. He grabbed at her wrists but not before she kicked him in the shin and he went down. Ed lunged at Erin, biting his right leg. Erin shrieked. Emeri felt a hand on her shoulder, Peter's hand. She then grabbed his middle finger and pushed upwards. He screamed. She let go and dashed towards the stream, hearing footsteps behind her. She ran, focusing on her breathing and began to pull at the energy beneath her feet. She was sore and exhausted but knew that they were right behind her. She glanced back and her heart jumped into her throat. The bear was back and it was charging straight for her. Erin leapt at her heels as he roared and bared his teeth. Emeri mustered all the energy she could and pulled at the ground, the trees, anything and everything she could see and feel. She started to feel little zaps as her feet touched the ground and focused on the energy. Before long it was cascading up her legs and out through her hands. The little door was small, but it might be just enough for her to fit through. Unfortunately, Erin was too close, she wouldn't make it. Suddenly, another bear dove at Erin, throwing him off-balance. Emeri stopped and turned to see the two bears claw at each other. Erin barred his teeth, but took a step back. Emeri glanced at the other bear, and realized that it was Ed. Emeri yelled at her to hurry. But by this point, Erin at begun to recover and charged Ed once again. Then, out of nowhere, Jeanie threw herself onto Erin and began to attack. Ed turned towards Emeri, morphed into a tiny house cat, and jumped into Emeri's arms before Emeri dove at the opening of the portal. She glanced back,

looking at Jeanie as she fought with Erin. Emeri could have sworn Jeanie nodded at her. Then suddenly her vision blurred and the world became fuzzy and bright.

Chapter 7

Emeri heard nothing. Nothing. She slowly opened one eye and then the other. She was lying flat on her back staring at a ceiling. Her ceiling. She felt rumbling on her chest to see Ed, looking at her sleepily. Without thinking of it Emeri was back in her own room. She sat up and her elbows and looked around. Everything was how she had left it. Her books crowded her desk, and her six empty cups of tea scattered around her room. Emeri moved off of her bed and looked down at herself. Her pants had holes in the knees, which were direly scratched up. And she was utterly filthy. She rushed to her bathroom sink and looked at herself in the mirror. She let out a gasp and took a step back. She didn't even recognize the girl in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face was bruised and scratched and there was something alien about how the way she looked at Emeri. It was an expression Emeri had never seen on that face before. Emeri leaned over the sink and scrubbed her face clean. After changing into a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt she rummaged the fridge and drank three glasses of water. She also made a small plate for Ed. She wandered back into her room and collapsed on the bed. Ed, of course, followed her. She wanted to cry. She wanted to cry so badly. But she couldn't. There was too much to do other than to cry. The world that she knew and loved was about to be overrun with creatures and magic that it couldn't handle. And on a purely selfish note, her heart hurt. Emeri was so convinced that Erin was someone special. He was someone who understood her. Who might have loved her. But she was wrong. She was so wrong. And stupid. Why would he have thought that way about her? Why did she deserve to be loved? She felt defeated and rolled onto her side. And then there was

Peter. What he said really seemed to bother her. *Silly little girl*. She had been trying so hard and yet she was still seen as weak.

She looked at Ed who was, once again, sitting on her chest purring. Emeri glanced around the room, staring at old pictures of her and her Oma. Emeri smiled and gently pet her. Her closet door was open and she could see a few of her shirts hanging up. One was an old rugby jersey from high school. Emeri looked at it fondly. It was from a simpler time in her life. The sweater next to it was a light pink hoody she had bought years back with her Oma. The pink sweater reminded her of Erin's teasing back in Hope. Emeri rolled onto her side while tears streamed down her cheeks. Why did she let him in like that? Why did she let him betray her? Why did he have to mock her? She liked pink. Emeri thought for a moment. She sat up and stared at her closet. She liked pink. She liked pink! She also liked rugby. She like many things! And none of it, even her love of pink, stopped her from doing all that she did. She had formed connections with the rest of her division in one of her most difficult times. But she did it. She did it. Not Erin. Not Peter. She did. *Silly little girl*. The words echoed in Emeri's head. *Silly. Little. Girl*. Emeri smiled. Her smile widened until she couldn't contain it anymore and she let out a laugh. Emeri let out another laugh and another until she no longer had control over herself. She was hunched over, gasping for air. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed this hard! She wiped away tears from her eyes and looked at Ed who sat laying on her bed, looking a little confused like Emeri was going crazy. Maybe she was. But she was finally starting to see things clearly.

She sat up in her bed, "Silly little girl, huh? Yeah I'm silly – I'm actually a little crazy, to be honest – but that silliness is what gives me these amazing and seeming unachievable ideas. And yeah I'm little – but I can still hold my own," she paused looking to Ed. "And yeah, I'm a

girl: a powerful girl with abilities and a mind like Erin and Peter only wished they could have. I'm a silly little girl. And they'd better be afraid."

Emeri began to realize that the feeling of security she had been feeling since this whole adventure had begun was not because of Erin. It was her. Emeri was finally realizing that Erin was never the solution to her problems but a mere coincidence alongside her own journey. She had to stop doubting herself, and trust in her own choices. She sat up in bed and ran to her closet for a pair of sneakers. She was not going to stand idly by and cry on her bed. Emeri shot out of bed and ran over to the computer on her desk. She clicked a few buttons and smiled. She then threw on her favourite baby pink pull-over hoodie and laced up her sneakers, facing her back to her bedroom door. She reached her hands out, letting the energy and love that surrounded her to flow through her fingertips. The energy swirled around her and Emeri opened her eyes to a full-length door. She took a deep breath and stepped towards it. But as she did so, she heard a small squeaky voice.

"Emeri?" Emeri turned around to see her aunt standing in the doorway looking past her into the portal.

"Oh my gosh Aunty Lynn!" Emeri ran towards her aunt and hugged her tight. Her aunt hugged her back, slightly distracted by the glowing lavender portal in her niece's bedroom. Emeri leaned in and kissed her aunt on the cheek.

"I have to go to help this world from being overrun by other-dimensional beings. But I'll definitely call you when I can."

"Wait. What?" her aunt said in an octave higher than her usual tone.

Ed jumped into Emeri's arms as she walked towards the portal and turned to her aunt.

"By the way, I handed in my job application." Despite her confusion, her aunt smiled at her.

"I love you," Emeri said before disappearing into the magical void.

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