

# **Eliza**

By Heather Westropp

A Note to Readers:

This is *Eliza*, a novel I started writing in 2011 and have finally decided to shelve, at least for the time being, in late 2016. I spent a lot of time on this project, and I had plans to publish this as my first novel. God had other plans for my life, at least in this season, which is why I finally chose to put it away and focus on other things. One day, I may pick it up again—only time will tell. For now, please enjoy what's already written, and be aware that it is an unedited product! Thank you for your support!

## Chapter 1

Mila sat on a smooth wooden chair at her kitchen table, eating a delicious dinner of buttery green beans, potatoes, and fish. The fire in her furnace glowed and crackled, filling the cottage with the comforting smell of burning wood. The forest around her was alive with the typical sounds of twilight. Mila could hear the wild calls of birds and monkeys as they made their way through the trees, gathering in their groups to sleep for the night. The noises were relaxing to her, one of the aspects of living in a tree that she enjoyed most.

On this particular evening, she was enjoying an unusual treat of fresh raw tuna. She had splurged and bought it for herself at the market that afternoon, because she was in a good mood that day; it was the first day of the New Year, after all, and a delicious meal was one of her favorite ways to celebrate. Now, she was enjoying the tender fish at a leisurely pace.

Juliet sat perched on the back of a chair across from her, pecking at a slice of banana in her bowl. Mila had bought the bowl at the houseware shop in town, and had built a stand for it into the chair herself so that Juliet could eat dinner with her. She loved the small, brightly colored bird's company more than she enjoyed the company of almost any other person she knew. She didn't make much noise, and she always kept a careful watch over Mila, ready to move when she moved. Mila

felt a bond between herself and the little bird that was different than any bond between two people, and she especially loved the affection that came with it.

She loved when the little bird sat perched on her shoulder or on the end of her tail, allowing her to carry her everywhere. And to her, there was nothing better than a bird kiss—Juliet’s beak gently nuzzling her cheek and nibbling at her whiskers. If she was lucky, she might even get a little lick from the bird’s small, gray tongue.

Mila knew that, as with most animals, birds groomed their companions to show love and to nurture, and Mila liked the idea of Juliet trying to take care of her despite the fact that in reality, the roles were reversed. It was nice to have somebody to take care of her, somebody to baby her now that she was all grown up and the world expected her to act like it. Even though she had been on her own as an adult for three years already, part of her still felt like a child inside, and it was nice to feel like she still had somebody to take care of her.

After finishing her meal, Mila got up and dumped her dishes into a large wooden bowl that sat on the counter. She carried it to a spigot that protruded from the wall and pumped water into the wash basin until it was full of cool, clean water. Then she carried the basin back to the counter and set it down, reaching for the lemon half she kept in the cold box and squeezing some of the juice into the wash basin. After replacing the lemon and adding some soap into the basin, she started to scrub the dishes. She washed them methodically, enjoying the cool water soaking into the

fur on her paws, letting her mind wander to thoughts of the day.

She loved Sundays because they were a welcome break from the busy world outside. She didn't have to work on Sundays of course, because like everybody else in the world theoretically did, she reserved that day for meditation and honoring the Goddess. It was strange for her to think of Eliza in such a distant manner, though. Setting aside a day to honor her was like setting aside a day to honor your best friend. It wasn't that she thought it was dumb, or that Eliza was undeserving, but just that she knew her so well that it felt odd to worship her from afar. She would much rather tell her how amazing she was in person.

Fortunately, she knew that Eliza could and would show up whenever she called, so it wasn't as if she couldn't see her on Sundays. Yet Mila usually let Eliza do other things on these days instead of visiting her— she thought it was nice, even for a Goddess, to have a day off.

So on Sundays, Mila usually spent the day relaxing and organizing her thoughts. Even though she loved her job at the Aviary, she didn't always have time to just sit and think during the week. After all, taking care of hundreds of exotic birds was no easy task.

She remembered fondly the day that she was hired at the Aviary, how she had excitedly told her parents, her sister, and her best friend about her great achievement. Landing the bird care assistant position at the Aviary was one of the most satisfying

accomplishments that she had ever made. This was a job that was close to her heart, and her dream career was to be the Overseer of Bird Care. Because of this job, she had her foot in the door.

Her passion for birds, and macaws in particular, was one that had first developed when she was a child. The first time that she saw macaws in the wild was a memory forever engrained in her mind. It was before she knew Eliza, and she was still on the fence about the whole “personal relationship with the Goddess” thing. Honestly, it sounded just a little bit weird. But that was before she knew.

She was out in the jungle with her friends, just hanging out and doing some recreational tree-running as usual, when she saw them. She had been climbing and jumping through the trees so quickly it felt like flying. Her claws gripped the trees and she propelled herself upwards, releasing her grip in the same second, only to dig them in again and climb higher still.

Suddenly, she found herself in the canopy; she had only been in the canopy once before with her sister, Kara. It was when she was still very young and her sister took her everywhere. Kara wanted to show her one of her favorite quiet spots in the jungle and took her to the canopy on a beautiful, sunny day. That was one of the times she felt the closest to her big sister.

But this day was different—it was just her, all alone, in the top of the jungle. Her friends had lost track of her a while back, but she didn’t mind. Tree-running was

just as fun alone as it was with friends. When she realized how high she had climbed, she was filled with exhilaration and a sense of complete freedom. That was when she saw the macaws.

There was a flock of twenty of the beautiful birds, just sitting up in the trees and munching on fruit and nuts. It was the first time Mila had ever laid eyes on them. The macaws' brilliant red, blue, and green feathers were a beautiful reflection of the feathers covering Eliza's body and wings.

Eliza chose to take on the physical appearance of a macaw woman— her body was shaped like a woman's but she had wings that sprouted from her back and spanned yards when fully spread, and feathers covered most of her body like an elegant dress. Her arms, legs, neck, and head were bare of feathers, and the skin on these parts a smooth, pale tan color, distinguishing her clearly from the fur-covered Felisaans who worshipped her. Her face was framed by a thick, flowing mane of fiery red hair, and she had a large, sparkling golden beak above her luscious pink lips. Her light brown eyes were surrounded by smoky dark lashes and a colorful mask of feathers. She was one of a kind, and she was beautiful. But more than that, she was joyful, just, and claimed to truly love each and every inhabitant of Roq.

Mila had seen Eliza in the city many times before, and at a few governing meetings that required her assistance. Most of the time, though, Eliza was seen only by those who knew her personally. Nevertheless, seeing the macaws in the jungle

reminded her instantly of the Goddess.

Seeing them in their natural habitat was a rare occurrence for most Felisaans, and it was supposedly a sign of good luck and blessings from the Goddess. When Mila saw them, something inside of her clicked. She suddenly knew that everything people said about Eliza was true. She really was the loving, gentle, and caring Goddess that other people claimed she was. That day, Mila decided that she was going to meet Eliza for herself.

Back in her kitchen, Mila had finished the dishes and was wiping down the smooth wood of the counter with a wet cloth rag before moving on to clean the table. She remembered the day that she met Eliza with fondness and excitement. It was the start of the closest friendship she had ever had or would ever have. As she continued to tidy up her kitchen, she replayed her first meeting with Eliza in her mind.

Up in the canopy, after her discovery of the macaws, she had made the decision. She was unsure of what to do exactly, but she remembered the message that the Goddess gave to the people every year at the Goddess Day ceremony. “Remember, my children, I love you all very much and I want to meet you. If you ever need me for any reason, all you have to do is call.”

So, feeling a bit awkward, Mila spoke aloud to the air. “Goddess? I... I want to meet you.” Within seconds, a warm, sweet breeze enveloped her in a gentle hug. The next second, the red-feathered woman was there before her, sitting cross-legged



on a tree branch with her wings folded gracefully around her. The corners of her delicate lips moved up into a smile and she said in a voice like warm honey, “Hello, Mila. I’ve been waiting for so long to meet you. Please, call me Eliza.”

After that, it was as if Mila had known her for her entire life. Their friendship was the one thing in life that Mila knew she could always rely on, and because of the fact that Eliza was the Goddess, she could literally visit Mila at a moment’s notice. She could be with each and every person in the world at the same time if necessary, which still confused Mila as much as it brought comfort. There was truly nothing Eliza couldn’t do, and though Mila found that hard to wrap her head around most of the time, she did enjoy the fact that her best friend was so reliable.

Thinking of Eliza always brought a smile to Mila’s face. But her mind returned firmly to the present now that the cleaning was finished, and she debated between going out with friends for the night or spending her time relaxing in her hut with Juliet, reading a book.

She decided to continue with the relaxation of the day and stay at home for the night. She was just settling into her comfy, brown chair in the small nook between her kitchen and her bathroom, with her latest favorite book in hand, when there was a scratch at the door. Mila looked up in confusion. Her tiny lovebird chirped and jumped from the back of the chair to Mila’s soft tail as she got up and walked to the door.

When she opened it, she found the familiar face of Jacko, one of the city messengers. He was a Links, a race known for their small and lean bodies and pointy, black-tipped ears. He was also well known as one of the fastest Felisaans in the region. Because of this, he was an excellent candidate for the city messenger job. He could deliver a message to every citizen in the city of Shaku in just two hours, which was quite a feat considering the dense foliage and the fact that there were over 200 families living in the city. He stood in the doorway, just barely panting, and greeted Mila with a friendly smile.

“Hey Mila, how are you?”

“I’m fine, you? What’s going on?” she asked him politely. She was worried though. It was extremely unusual to receive messages at night, let alone on a Sunday. It must have been an emergency if they called Jacko in on his day off.

“I’m doing alright, thanks for asking. Don’t be alarmed, it’s probably just some freaked out citizen overreacting, but somebody requested an emergency session.” He pulled something from his pocket. It was a rolled up piece of brown, fibrous paper. He unrolled it swiftly.

“Here’s the message: ‘Citizens, there will be an urgent governing meeting tomorrow at 7 due to the recent attacks on the cities of Danyo and Ocalla. We will discuss what we know so far about these attacks and determine our course of action.’” Jacko read the words carefully from the paper and then rolled it back up

quickly and slipped it back into his pocket. Then he gave Mila another friendly smile.

“Try not to worry, okay? I’ll see you tomorrow.” He gave her a nod and then leapt off the branch, on to the next house.

“Okay, thanks. Bye Jacko,” she called as he sailed away through the branches.

She closed the door carefully and walked back to her chair, slumping down into it with a sigh. She had heard of the recent attack on the desert city of Danyo, and heard rumors that the citizens from that region were fighting back, but she hadn’t fully believed it until now.

The concepts of “attackers” and “fighting” were like foreign concepts to her, impossible to grasp. She tried to imagine the people in that city defending themselves against these mysterious “attackers” by clawing, pouncing, and perhaps even biting. It was hard for her to picture this though; she had never actually seen an aggressive physical fight in her entire life. She had never known or heard of a Felisaan behaving violently, not anywhere in the whole of Roq in her entire 18 years of life. As she knew well from her parents’ stories and from her history classes, her world had been in peace for hundreds of years.

But now she had to face the facts. Apparently, there had been another attack recently, this time on the city of Ocalla. It was a quaint, quiet city built along the coast and a great place to enjoy some quiet relaxation in the sunshine. Mila felt a wave of sadness as she thought of an attack on the peaceful city.

She felt her fear and panic start to build as she realized that this could be an end to the times of peace that her world had enjoyed for so long. It was also incredibly frightening to think about the fact that nobody even knew who they were being attacked by, or why. Was there somehow an undiscovered, violent race of Felisaans out there that was just now emerging? How could that be? Mila rose and started to pace in the small space of her hut.

There was very little description of them because nobody from Danyo had been heard from since the attack a few days ago. The surrounding cities had sent in emergency aid and search parties as soon as something amiss was noticed, but had only come up empty handed. Not only was the city silent, with no people to be found, but there was no destruction either. It was apparently like a ghost town there, and the attackers had all but vanished into thin air.

Of course, these were all just rumors that spread by word of mouth, and no official meetings had been held yet to discuss the facts. Mila was glad that the next day, she would know the truth about what was going on. In the meantime, she kept calm by remembering that Eliza was out there and would protect her.

Unfortunately, Mila knew that her day of rest was truly over now that this news had been delivered. It was a rude awakening from her peaceful state, and soon enough it would be time to go back into the grind of the week. She had a feeling that this week would likely prove to be one of the most chaotic in her lifetime thus far.

With a tired sigh, she pulled herself out of the comforting embrace of the chair and went to clean Juliet's perch for bed.

After finishing her chores, Mila went to the bathing area in the corner of her house to get ready for bed. She brushed her teeth methodically and then sleepily stepped under the shower spigot to wash up, pumping the wooden lever a few times so that warm water splashed over her. As she soaped up her fur, the sweet scent of her coconut shampoo reminded her painfully of the pleasant beach city that was now in peril.

After her shower, she brushed and smoothed out her fur from head to toe and changed into her baggy pajama shorts and top. She did all of this with a calm, thoughtful steadiness, trying to keep the recent frightening news out of her mind. Her bedtime routine was always the same, and it was a kind of therapy for her; it helped her re-center herself after long days at work and the Institute, and when she was stressed out it brought her the comfort of familiarity. Tonight, however, it seemed to be little help to the anxiety that was swelling within her.

She went to her sleeping area and found Juliet, who was sitting in her favorite spot on the bed post. She held her finger out for the gentle lovebird, who hopped onto it cheerfully, unaware of the problems in her master's world. Mila carried her to the large perch near the entryway and gently deposited her feathered friend onto a branch.

“Goodnight my love,” she called quietly, and Juliet twittered her response.

Mila tucked herself into bed and as she lay there, she thought about the governing meeting in the morning. She wasn't particularly fond of the meetings, due to the fact that literally everybody in the city would be there; Mila wasn't very comfortable with large crowds. Her shyness was at its highest when surrounded by so many people, and she usually just sat quietly in the corner, politely listening and silently voting when necessary.

Yet Mila knew that the governing meetings were important. They gave her a voice, figuratively, in the way her city ran. Everybody in Shaku had their opinion represented in all matters, and the same went for all of the other cities in her world. Mila knew that this system was one of the reasons her world remained so peaceful. Voting was a right and a responsibility that Mila did not take lightly, and like almost everybody else on Roq, she always showed up to her city's governing meetings. This particular meeting, she knew, would be very important as a source of information about the attacks.

As the responsibilities of the next day swirled in her mind, Mila tried to relax and laid waiting for sleep to claim her. Twenty minutes later, she finally whispered goodnight to Eliza, who she knew would hear her even from around the globe, and fell into a much-needed night's sleep.

## Chapter 2

The next morning Mila woke up feeling refreshed, but worry still nagged at the corners of her mind. As usual, the sun was waking up at the same time as her. In fact, much of the city woke up around 5:00 as well, since the morning block started at 7:00. Those who were not early birds usually chose to work the midday and evening blocks instead, but Mila was not one of them. She didn't mind getting up early in the slightest; in fact, she enjoyed the quiet peacefulness of the early mornings.

She got out of bed and went to kiss Juliet good morning on the head. She shoveled her breakfast of oats, mashed banana, and milk into her mouth, and went to the bathing area to get ready. After she was freshened up and dressed in her usual light cotton shorts and top, she grabbed her bag and slung it onto her back. She reminded Juliet to be good while she was gone and breezed out the door.

Mila leapt off of the porch and landed gracefully on a branch lower down. Her house was in one of the residential trees on the outer rim on the city. She liked the quiet calmness of her neighborhood, and it was a convenient location for her because the Aviary was also on the outside of Shaku, not too far from her home. Today, however, Mila had other business to attend to.

She climbed, jumped, and flew through the trees, quickly making her way into the more populated areas of the city, where the branches were thickest and there

were more bridges and huts built into the trees. Before long she was in a bustling part of town, weaving around other Shakuanns on their way to the Meeting Hall. Only five minutes after leaving her house, she reached the Main Apartment Tree. It was one of the largest trees in the jungle, and had fifty residences built into it. The apartments were tiny, but most Felisaans who lived there didn't mind the lack of space. Homes were just a place to eat, sleep, groom, and store a few personal belongings.

Mila climbed past the brown, plant covered huts on the lower levels and finally reached her destination. Scratching gently on the door, she called, "Kinsy, I'm here. Ready to go?"

Seconds later, the door burst open and a white ball of fur flew out, soaring past Mila and bouncing off the branch behind her to land on her back. The surprise attack caused her to stumble and fall off the branch. She fell down through the branches until she finally was able to catch herself on one and heave herself up onto it with her strong arms and legs, all while the heavy attacker clung onto her back. It was a good thing she had claws.

"Was that really necessary?" she panted. "You do this to me at least once a week."

Laughing, the hyper girl climbed off of Mila's back and gave her a hug. "Sorry, but if I do this every week then shouldn't you be used to it by now?" she



winked. “And anyway, I couldn’t help it. I’m way too excited about today!” Her sky blue eyes sparkled and she grinned like a happy toddler.

“Oh, so I guess that means you’re still going to work? I wasn’t sure if your orientation would be moved to later, because of the meeting.”

“Actually,” Kinsy said in her usual bubbly voice, “They sent an extra message with Jacko to tell me that I could still go in after the meeting today. They said that since it’s my first day, I would only have a half shift anyway, so the last hour of the morning block is actually perfect. I can’t wait! They’re going to teach me the basic procedures and help me get a feel for the place,” she said, beaming.

“That’s great! I’m so excited for you. I know you’ve been dreaming of this job since we were in Basic. And I’m really happy that you got it. I’m sure your first day will go great,” she said, smiling, and gave Kinsy’s shoulder a squeeze.

Kinsy smiled back, but then a flicker of suspicion crossed her face. She waited expectantly for her best friend to say something, and Mila deflated a bit, realizing that Kinsy saw right through her happy mask to the worry underneath.

“What’s eatin’ you?” Kinsy asked gently.

Mila shifted her weight from one leg to the other. “It’s just that... the governing meeting today.” she sighed. “I’m kind of freaking out about everything. What’s going on out there... it’s crazy. I don’t know what to think,” Mila said quietly.

“Hey. Don’t worry, okay?” Kinsy crooned, reaching out a gentle paw to her friend’s shoulder. “Whatever it is, we can deal with it. We’re in this together. Plus, Eliza will take care of us. It’s going to be okay Miles.” She smiled encouragingly and reached out to lace her furry fingers through Mila’s.

Mila returned a weak smile and then took a step back, looking Kinsy up and down from a distance. Like her, Kinsy was a Kat. The thing about Kats was that they didn’t really have any unifying physical features. They were smaller, like the Linkses, but beside that one thing in common, they were all over the map.

For instance, Kinsy was pure, spotless white with breathtaking blue eyes, long and luxurious fur, and a thick, fluffy tail. Mila, on the other hand, had short, soft orange fur with lighter cream-colored stripes, a thinner, rounded tail that was about five inches shorter than average, and clover green eyes. They looked nothing alike, even though they shared the same race. That was the thing about Kats; the title was kind of a catch all for those who weren’t anything else. But most Kats were proud of their diversity and their heritage, and they were proud to be a race known for their resilience, courage, and compassion for others. Mila and Kinsy were no exception.

Today, Kinsy was wearing one of her typical outfits: a sparkly pink skirt over short black leggings and a purple t-shirt with a butterfly on it. Or at least, this t-shirt used to have a butterfly on it; it was one of Kinsy’s favorite shirts and Mila had seen

it plenty of times, but today the butterfly was conspicuously missing. Mila pulled Kinsy's paw, forcing her to turn to the side. She barked out a laugh.

“Wow you really *must* be excited about your first day! Kins, your shirt is on backwards.”

Kinsy's eyes widened and she looked down, surprised. “Oh snap! Be right back!” She spun around and ran back inside, throwing the door shut behind her. A few moments later, she emerged with her shirt on the right way, with a small purse slung across her body.

“I almost forgot my bag, too,” she said sheepishly. Mila rolled her eyes, obviously more amused than annoyed, and Kinsy closed the front door to her apartment. Then the two girls took off through the jungle, smiling and chatting happily as they headed for the largest tree that marked the center of Shaku, where the governing meeting would take place.

Ten minutes later, Kinsy and Mila walked into the Meeting Hall and found seats near the back. A cluster of the most recent Basic education graduates were gathered close to them. The 10-year-olds were clearly nervous about participating in their first governing meeting. As Junior Citizens, they were finally allowed to sit apart from their parents, and most kids of that age were eager to explore their newfound independence. She fondly remembered when she and Kinsy were in their

position just 8 years ago, hiding in the back of the room with their classmates. Mila gave them an encouraging smile before taking her seat.

About half of the city was there already and the large circular room was filling up quickly. A group of White Tygers who were her age walked in together and Mila recognized a few of them from her neighborhood. They were always friendly to her, though they had a tendency to socialize mainly amongst themselves. Everybody knew that White Tygers weren't really a different race; they were just Tygers with unusual recessive genes that caused them to be born white. But Mila did sort of understand why they always seemed to group together, especially given the fact that they stood out so much. Sometimes it was just nice to have friends who were different in the same way as you.

The meeting leader sat at a round table in the center of the room and tapped a small wooden drum several times, signaling the start of the meeting. The room quickly quieted down and the leader welcomed them. Next to him, on either side, was a translator who repeated everything he said in sign language. They faced opposite directions, enabling everyone in the crowd to see at least one of them clearly. Since every citizen learned sign language as part of their Basic education, it was the easiest way to make sure that everybody in the room could "hear" what was being said.

“Good morning, my fellow Felisaans. Thank you for allowing me to lead you today in this governing meeting. We’ll just jump right in and start the discussion. As you all know, there have been two so-called ‘attacks’ on our beloved cities of Danyo and Ocalla within the last week. Unfortunately, there is very little information so far about the specifics of the incidents. We sent in emergency aid as soon as we noticed that something was wrong, but the cities were both abandoned when the teams arrived.”

The leader spoke in a clear voice that was tinged with concern. Mila knew him not only as the Governing Meeting Leader, but as a family friend. His name was Mako Conabu, and he was a middle-aged Lian with streaks of gray in his otherwise dark, rusty brown mane. Mila knew from the times he had visited her father at home that he was a kind, polite, and collected man who had a calming effect on people. That was probably why he’d been elected as Meeting Leader. They needed somebody in this position who could keep the citizens organized and maintain harmony.

He continued, “We immediately sent in an Emergency Response Team to try to find some clues as to what happened. Leron, would you like to share your official report?”

Leron was a massive Leopurd with muscular arms and a broad, toned chest. When Mako addressed him, he was sitting on a bench near the center, next to a silky

Snow Leopard with a sleeping baby in her arms. Mila recognized the woman as Lizzy, his wife, and guessed that the baby was his daughter Enette. Being in such a small community ensured that everyone knew, or at least recognized, almost everybody else.

Leron stood quickly and walked to the center of the room. His deep voice projected with little effort on his part as he gave his report.

“Leron Jackson,” he said, identifying himself to the room. “Two days ago, I travelled with my small team to Ocalla. There was no sign of anybody in the city. Fortunately, none of the constructions or homes seemed to be damaged. After hours of searching and finding nothing, we finally gave up.

“The next day, we went to Danyo to see if we could find anything there. After searching for hours, we discovered a wooden doorway, built into the ground. It was hidden in the middle of some brush at the outskirts of the town, and almost impossible to find. We were lucky that we stumbled upon it. Inside the door, there was a stairway leading down into the earth. We followed it down for quite a ways until finally, it ended at a strange door made of stone— clearly a bunker of some sort. Unfortunately, the door did not have any handle and wouldn’t open. Since there was nothing more we could do, we slid a note under the door, hoping that the Danyonians were hiding there and would read it.

“The note explained that we are searching for them and that we are eager to help them in any way that we can. We are hopeful that the citizens have taken refuge underground and that we will soon hear from them.” As soon as Leron finished speaking, a quiet buzz of conversation started in the room. Mila and Kinsy just glanced at each other and waited for more information.

Mako nodded quickly to Leron, who returned to his seat, and then regained the crowd’s attention with a wave of his paw.

“Thank you, Leron, for sharing your report. Now, we can only hope that the victims in both of these cities have hidden for their own safety, and will soon emerge once it is clear that the cities are safe again. Unfortunately, however, we cannot be sure that the cities *are* safe. We do not have any information about the attackers—who they are, what they wanted, or where they went. With that, I would like to now open the floor for any witnesses to come forward and describe what they saw.”

After a pause, a young Panthre stood up and everybody looked to him expectantly. He was sleek and black with green eyes similar to Mila’s. She recognized him immediately as one of her older classmates in school. His name was Finn and he had a reputation for always being the first one to raise his hand in learning sessions; he was friendly to everybody and well-liked. He began speaking in his usual confident voice.

“Finn Cooper,” he announced his name before continuing, as was customary. “I saw the attackers. It was from a distance, but I still caught a few glimpses. I was going to Ocala for the day to visit my family, and I was nearing the city when I heard the noise. People were yelling and screaming. As I got closer, I hid in trees on the edge of the city. That’s when I saw it— it was complete chaos. People were running everywhere, away from the... attackers.” His voice cracked over the word “attackers” and he swallowed before continuing.

“I was confused when I saw them. I don’t really understand *what* I saw, to be honest. Strange people were running through the city, and there were loud, harsh noises coming from their mouths. I think they were yelling, but in another language. They were grabbing at the citizens, trying to capture them and tie them up with ropes. They were even throwing nets over people, treating them like wild animals. But the citizens were fighting back. They pounced and clawed at the strange people, and helped their captured friends escape. Mostly, it seemed like they were trying to run away,” he finished.

There were murmurs from the crowd as Mako looked at Finn with curiosity.

“Well, what did they look like? The attackers, I mean. Can you describe them?” he asked.

Finn looked down at his feet in an uncharacteristically nervous gesture.



“Well... they were like us, but different. They seemed much more primitive, I would say. They wore these raggedy, brown, strips of cloth to cover themselves, but only where absolutely necessary. Most of their skin was exposed. They had no fur, just bare skin, a pale tan color like Eliza’s, but dirty and covered with scratches. They had long hair on their heads, also like Eliza,” he said, gesturing with his paws to the top and back of his own fur-covered head, “The weirdest part was that they didn’t have tails that I could see, and their faces were much different. They were mostly flat with thin, pointy noses, and their ears were weird, too. They were these flat, rounded things that grew from the sides of their heads,” he said, thoughtfully running a paw over one of his own pointed ears.

“It was hard to get a good look from so far away, but from what I could tell, I have never seen anything like these people before.” He hesitated for a moment before going on. “I know this sounds crazy but... these creatures were definitely not Felisaans.” He finished speaking and the room sat in silence for a moment, many citizens staring at him with mouths hanging open in disbelief.

It took a minute for Mako to speak. When he finally found his voice, Finn was still standing there, now with a defiant look on his face.

“Now, Finn...” he began, carefully, “Are you sure that’s what you saw? Surely you can understand why your description of the... attackers... might be

difficult for us to believe?” He gazed into Finn’s young face with a mixed look of pity and concern.

“What? You... you think I’m making this up?” he asked angrily. “My parents and little sisters live there! You think I would joke about something like this?” But his voice softened as he continued. “Look, I know that it’s hard to believe. It was hard for me to believe when I saw it, but that *is* what I saw,” he insisted.

The response was silence, shocked and empty, as everybody slowly realized that he was not kidding. It was easy to see the pain in his eyes when he mentioned his parents. He truly was worried about them and though he was could not explain what he saw, he was certain that he saw it. Mako spoke into the silence.

“Alright, well... Let’s move on from the description of the attackers. Finn, what did you do after you saw what was happening?”

At this, Finn dropped his head sadly and spoke quietly. “I left. I wanted to go for help, and I was scared. I thought it was the best thing,” he said, guilt heavy on his face.

“Alright, Finn. Thank you for your input. It is truly valuable in helping us figure out what is going on. And I believe you were right— going for help was probably the best thing you could have done at that moment. In fact, wasn’t it you who first alerted the neighboring cities about the attack?”

“Yes, I ran as fast as I could to the next town and told the officials there.”

“Well then you did the right thing, Finn. Thank you for your courage in reporting what you saw. Does anybody else have information to share?”

Nobody spoke as Finn quietly took his seat.

“Okay then. What we know for sure is that some kind of attack has occurred on two of our cities. We know that they have either abandoned their cities or have been taken from them, and that there is no physical destruction or evidence left behind. This seems to infer that the attackers were only interested in the people, not anything else in the cities. We also know that in Danyo, there is some kind of underground structure, which we can only hope may be a sort of emergency shelter, but we are waiting and praying for a reply to the note that we left there to find out for sure. We think we know that the attackers are not Felisaan at all, because they look much different than us, and that they are dangerous.” He summarized the information gathered so far, ensuring that every person present understood the situation.

“Now, we must determine our course of action. Does anybody have any suggestions?”

The room was quiet. Then, finally, somebody stood and spoke.

He was a Kat, with orange fur and cream-colored stripes. His tail was about five inches shorter than average, and his eyes were green like the color of clovers.

Mila stifled a gasp as her father stood and started to speak.

“Ezra Jenkins speaking. I think that there is only one thing we can do here. We need to find these attackers, and show them that they’re picking on the wrong people. We need to defend our fellow Felisaans. I say we fight back!” he boomed, rousing noises from the crowd ranging from shocked cries of confusion, angry shouts of annoyance, and loud rumbles of agreement.

Mila sat with her mouth gaping open, and stared at her father as if he were an alien. She hadn’t gotten her shyness from just anywhere, and this kind of outburst in front of the entire city was the last thing she ever expected to hear from her quiet, reserved, and sensitive dad. She had a feeling that this would be the first of many surprising and concerning turns of events in the near future.

The crowd was truly in chaos for a few moments, and Mako struggled to quiet the room. He was not prepared to deal with such situations— governing meetings in the past had always been civilized and orderly affairs. But then again, there had not been any big disasters like this in a very long time. Mila sat quietly observing and considering the situation. Finally, the roar quieted to a gentle hum and Mako began to speak.

“Citizens, please calm down. We are in no position to ‘fight’ or start some kind of battle against these attackers. Not only are we unsure of who or what they are, we also have no idea what they want or how to communicate with them. Although that cry for battle was... inspiring,” he said carefully, “it is most definitely

premature. Besides, I'm sure we are all aware that there has not been a war in over 700 years, and that starting one would require a 75% vote of approval and that first we would need to draw up a war contract, explaining the specific terms of the war. This is a very serious decision to make, and if it was to be done, we would need to call another meeting dedicated to that purpose. So, that all being said, does anyone have any suggestions for an immediate course of action?"

Mila's father sat back down with a huff and was his quiet old self again. Many of the citizens eyed him suspiciously, but soon Mila's attention was snapped back to the meeting by a female Tyger who stood gracefully and spoke. "Lily Lockwood," she announced. "I believe that the best thing to do would be to assemble another search team to investigate the situation and search for citizens of the victimized cities more thoroughly. We cannot do anything further until we understand what has happened." After a pause to assess the reactions in the room, she continued.

"The team could be made up of volunteers from the medical, research, and emergency response fields, as well as any able-bodied volunteers. I feel that it is well within reason to excuse these volunteers from their work here in Shaku while they search for the important answers we need. It would be a wise use of our resources." She finished and smoothly swooped back into her seat.

"That sounds like a very practical plan to me," Mako responded. "Shall we take a vote?"

Nods and grumbles of agreement echoed from the crowd.

“Alright then. As a class-one issue, this will be decided by a simple majority vote. Does anybody object?” He said this out of formality, despite the fact that everybody in the room was well aware of the way voting worked. Like all Shakuans, Mila had known these rules like the back of her paw since she was 10; the five years of Basic education that she went through before that were dedicated to instilling a thorough understanding of the government system into the minds of all citizens. Nobody objected, and the vote was taken.

The vote decided that a team would be assembled, as the Tyger woman, Lily, had suggested. The specific details of the plan were discussed and settled, and it was decided that Lily would organize and lead the project. After that, volunteers were asked to come forward. A number of doctors, nurses, emergency responders, and researchers, including Leron, volunteered to help out. With the addition of about ten other able-bodied citizens, the search team was complete. Mila noticed Finn attempt to volunteer before being told firmly by Mako that only full-adults would be allowed to participate. Clearly frustrated, he walked back to his seat to gather his things while the rest of the volunteers converged in the middle of the room excitedly. A few seats away, Mila heard him vaguely muttering something about “just two months.” Finally, the meeting was convened with a warning of caution from Mako.

Mila and Kinsy left the Meeting Hall and shared a brief goodbye hug before

they went their separate ways. Mila wished Kinsy good luck on her first day of her new job as the fluffy white Kat scampered off to work, and they agreed to meet up at the usual spot for school.

Instead of going straight to work, she decided to make a quick detour at home. She would be excused from her morning block shift today anyway because of the meeting, so there was plenty of time for her to take a break before heading to the Institute. It was a good thing, because Mila desperately wanted to talk to Eliza in person, and she preferred speaking with her in the privacy of her home.

Mila had a lot of questions for Eliza. She just hoped that the Goddess would be willing to answer them.

### Chapter 3

She swept into her house in a tornado of fur and anxiety, and quickly shut the door, as if shutting the door to her home would also shut the door to the trouble that lurked in the corners of her world. Unfortunately, her worries could not be shut off that easily.

She paced back and forth in the small house for several minutes before absent mindedly walking to Juliet's perch and lifting her tail to the bird's breast, allowing her to hop on. Juliet chirped gleefully at the unexpected early return of her master and hopped off of the perch and onto her owner's soft tail.

Mila hardly noticed Juliet, however, as deeply engrossed as she was in her own muddled thoughts. She continued her pacing relentlessly for several more minutes before finally deciding to summon Eliza.

As soon as the thought had formed, the familiar flurry of red feathers filled the room. The swirl of colors quickly subsided as Eliza appeared before her, wearing her usual mischievous grin. Her eyes were like warm chocolate pools, reflecting her endless wisdom and kindness. She greeted Mila with a voice as gentle as a warm breeze.

"Hello, my darling Mila. I can see that you are full of worry today. What happened?"

Mila quickly turned away, before the Goddess could see her eyes filling with



tears. The shock of having her feelings known so quickly and intimately was as always, difficult to adjust to. To have a person walk through her emotional walls as if they didn't even exist only made her want to shield herself more.

“Nothing.” Her voice came out shaky and weak, despite her best efforts.

“Daughter, why do you hide your face from me? Do you forget who created emotions in the first place? Please, do not be ashamed of your tears.” She lifted her hand to Mila's face and stroked her cheek gently, her creamy skin glowing with radiant light. She brought the tip of her wing to Mila's eye, drying her tears with a silky soft feather.

Comforted by the loving touch of her Goddess, Mila felt slightly better. Still, she could not form the words that she needed to tell Eliza what had happened, and somehow the thought of hearing her own voice in that moment made her nervous. So instead, she allowed her thoughts to flow freely from her mind to Eliza's.

*The world has turned upside down. I just got back from a governing meeting, and I found out that something terrible happened. There have been attacks, Eliza. Danyo and Ocalla are completely cleared out, and the people are missing. We don't even know who or what the attackers are. And to top it all off, there was a call to battle, by my Dad no less! Nothing is normal anymore. I'm so scared, Eliza.* Fat tears slid down her face, leaving soaked streaks of wet fur on her cheeks.

Eliza pulled the young Kat into her arms and wrapped her wings around them

in a protective shield. She gently stroked the orange and pale yellow fur on the back of Mila's head, her touch more comforting than even Mila's own mother's had been when Mila was a small girl. Her thoughts whispered into Mila's head like a soothing balm.

*I know, my child. I am sorry that you feel sorrow and confusion. I'm right here. Take comfort in my presence.* She paused for several moments, allowing Mila's quiet sobs to fill the silence. Finally, she continued.

*Do you trust me, Mila? Do you trust that I know what is best for you? Do you trust that I am in control?* A small, certain nod marked Mila's response.

*Then there is nothing to fear, daughter. I love you. You are my precious child. I will not let any harm come to you.*

"Really?" Mila asked hopefully, looking up at Eliza's face. "You'll protect us? Nobody will get hurt?"

"Ah, Mila," she sighed. "I wish it was that simple. But I am afraid that life is not that easy."

With that, the fragile hope quickly drained from her demeanor. "Well then I don't get it," Mila pouted. "How can you say that 'no harm will come to me' if you won't even protect me?"

"There is something that you must try to understand, Mila. I cannot promise that you and everyone you love will not be hurt. You live in a world of danger and

risk. It is a world of potential joy and beauty and love, as well, but the pain exists alongside those things. As long as you live in this world, I cannot promise to protect you from everything. I can only promise that the people who love me will not be harmed in any lasting way.” She paused to gauge Mila’s understanding before continuing to explain.

“Mila, Your body is not the essence of who you are. I cannot guarantee that it will be protected. I can promise you, however, that the souls of those who choose me will always be safe. Though your body may be broken, your soul will last forever with me. Do you understand?”

“Kind of...” Mila hesitated. “So I might die a terrible and painful death sometime very soon, that’s what you’re saying?” She said with a nervous laugh, trying for dark humor, but Eliza’s serious tone was unshakeable.

“Yes, that is true,” Eliza answered plainly. Mila’s nervous smile was instantly wiped away, replaced by blank shock.

“I know that you have become attached to this world,” Eliza continued. “I know that physical pain and death are scary prospects for you. But I would like to remind you that in the end, this world cannot last and neither can your physical body. I will protect the part of you that really matters, the part of you that will live forever. I hope that can bring you a measure of comfort.”

Sensing that Mila needed a moment to process this, Eliza sat down gracefully

on the floor, folding her bare legs underneath her feather-covered hips. Mila stood for a moment gathering her thoughts before joining the Goddess on the floor. Her movements were clumsy and chaotic compared the beautiful bird-woman's quiet grace.

“Thank you Eliza. I understand what you mean about life being risky and I can see why you would let it stay that way. I mean, we can never have true joy if we don't know what it's like to suffer— I get that. And I'm grateful that nothing bad can ever happen to my soul, of course. But at the same time...” she hesitated. “At the same time, the thought of losing somebody I love, and people getting hurt, and the physical pain that I might have to go through...” she trailed off, the pain clear in her eyes. “Well, it's just terrifying.” She finished with a shudder.

Eliza looked at her carefully, sympathy filling her features. “My sweet girl, I understand exactly how you feel. Fear can be a terrible and a powerful thing, and in a perfect world, I would take it away completely.” She gently brushed a feather down Mila's cheek. “For now, just know this— I promise you that I will never let anything to happen to you that is too much for you to handle. Please remember that I have your best interest in mind. I love you so very much and I am always by your side.”

Mila looked into her Goddess's warm, brown eyes and she could see the love reflected in them. Pushing her fears and anxiety aside, she reminded herself that Eliza was worthy of her trust. She felt herself relax and a sense of peace started

spreading through her body, though a small tug of worry still gnawed quietly in a back corner of her mind. Nevertheless, she felt much better than she had before Eliza had arrived.

Sensing her change of mood, Juliet twittered quietly next to her ear. She had remained silent and stoic on her master's shoulder up until that point. Now, Eliza brought her attention to the small green bird, the corners of her mouth lifting into a smile. She brought her hand closer to Mila's shoulder and Juliet promptly hopped on. Eliza drew her hand close to her face and kissed the bird delicately on her tiny beak. Juliet chirped with delight.

After returning the small creature to her rightful owner, Eliza stood up gracefully.

"It is time for you to go to the Institute," she smiled knowingly.

"Right," Mila agreed after glancing quickly at the sundial against the far wall of the room. It sat under a long, thin, open section in the ceiling, which allowed sunlight to pour down on it and indicate the time. "My first learning session starts in half an hour. I'm going to go meet up with Kinsy before that."

"Ah, my daughter Kinsy. Such a vibrant girl. I just spoke with her earlier this morning in fact. She was so excited to start her new job at the Care Center." The love in her voice was almost tangible.

"Yeah, she was definitely eager to get started," Mila laughed, remembering

the backwards t-shirt. “She’s going to be great with the Kittins, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. I am sure she will be simply amazing at her job, just as you are amazing at caring for my precious creatures.” She ruffled Mila’s fur lovingly.

Mila grinned. “There’s nothing I’d rather do than care for those beautiful birds. Plus, they remind me of you,” she winked.

Eliza beamed and leaned forward to kiss the top of Mila’s head, lifting several inches off the floor. “Well, my child, I will be on my way then. I love you!”

“I love you too,” she said, and with that, Eliza spun on the spot and vanished. Mila looked out her window and saw the breathtaking sight of the Goddess flying through the air, skillfully dodging the branches and vines of the surrounding forest. She lifted higher and higher on graceful wings until she disappeared out of view, up past the canopy and into the clouds.

Mila watched her, awed and slightly jealous. Eliza was so graceful and beautiful and perfect, and Mila felt plain and awkward in comparison. Yet she knew that Eliza saw the beauty in her, and with that knowledge, she felt a wave of confidence flow over her. It always amazed her that Eliza could care about her so deeply. Somehow, she’d been lucky enough to find her her best friend in the all-powerful Goddess of the universe.

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Later, after meeting Kinsy at the Institute, the girls shared a relaxing climb

through the surrounding forest together before their learning sessions. Being in the third year of their Secondary Education, the girls were taking classes in the areas of their chosen careers. Since Mila was going into bird care and Kinsy was going into kittin care, they didn't share any common learning sessions. Because of this, they tried to spend time together before and after their sessions at the Institute.

When it was time to return to the Institute, they climbed back through the trees and then said goodbye, exchanging warm hugs, and heading off to their respective learning sessions. Like most Kats at their age, both girls were enthusiastic about their time spent at the Institute. They were being taught skills and knowledge for their dream jobs, and every day spent learning brought them closer to working full-time, an exciting prospect for all of the students.

Mila spent the midday block, from 10:00 to 12:00, in "Bird Health, Level 3," a learning session she found interesting and a bit challenging at times. Her goal was to become Overseer of the Aviary, which would involve more management duties than healthcare duties, but it was still important for everyone working at the Aviary to have adequate knowledge in all of the areas of work. So Mila paid close attention to the instructor and tried her best with the practice applications.

The session flew by, and Mila rushed to the courtyard to share lunch with Kinsy. They grabbed grilled tuna fillets from the hotbox and filled small bowls with a creamy tomato soup that was the Monday special. The food smelled delicious, and

Mila could feel her stomach dancing in anticipation.

As they found a table in the shade and sat down, Mila noticed that Kinsy was unusually quiet. For a Kat who usually talked, giggled, and made other sound effects almost nonstop, this was very strange behavior.

“Hey Kins, is everything alright? You seem pretty quiet.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she mumbled. Then, after a pause, “I’m just kind of confused about something that happened in session...”

“What is it?” Mila asked, concerned. “Maybe I can help.”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s not about the lesson,” she said. Then a smile spread across her face. “We were learning a new craft for the younger kittins, and it was something I’m already pretty good at because I do it with Peanut all the time,” she said with a laugh. Peanut, her two year old brother, was not usually very good at following directions when it came to crafts. He almost always ended up with some kind of sticky mess stuck all over his fur. Mila laughed too, at the thought of Peanut and his messes. The humor faded quickly, though.

“It’s something my instructor said to me,” Kinsy began again. “She pulled me aside after the session and she told me...” she hesitated. Mila waited patiently.

“She told me that my supervisor at work sent in a message about me during class. It must have been while we were doing the practice application, because I didn’t even notice her leave the room to take a message. But apparently the Care



Center sent a messenger asking my instructor to speak to me about something I said to one of the kittins. I guess it was something about Eliza, because my instructor just told me that I needed to refrain from talking about Her with the kittins. She said that it might ‘offend’ some parents,” she explained, a confused frown on her face.

For a moment, Mila didn’t know what to say. She was just as surprised as Kinsy must have been when her instructor told her. Finally, she asked, “Well, what did you say to the kittins that prompted this whole thing? Do you remember?”

“Not really,” she replied. “The only thing I can think of is that I told one five year old girl that her dress was beautiful, and that it reminded me of Eliza. It was a cute little dress with a swirling pattern of red, blue, green, and gold.” she explained, then frowned. “I had no idea that there could be anything wrong with what I said. It was just a harmless compliment,” Kinsy exhaled in frustration. Mila reached a paw over to lay it on top of Kinsy’s.

“I’m really surprised that they had a problem with that. I’ve never heard of this kind of thing happening before... people having to watch what they say about the Goddess. I don’t know why it would matter that you said her name,” she shrugged. “But I bet Eliza knows. Maybe we should ask Her about it?” she suggested.

Kinsy’s face instantly brightened. “You’re right. I’m sure Eliza knows what this is all about. Let’s—” but she didn’t need to finish her sentence, because suddenly

the branches near them began to sway in the wind, and a swirl of leaves danced around them. One moment they were sitting side by side at the picnic table, and the next there was a warm, feathery body wedged between them.

“Hello ladies!” Eliza laughed.

“Eliza!” Mila and Kinsy shouted in unison, trapping their Goddess in a sandwich hug.

“My sweet, sweet daughters. I know that I just saw you both this morning, but I already missed you!” she exclaimed, giving each of the girls a squeeze. “And yet, I understand that you have not called me here for the same reason,” she said with a wry smile. “Do you have a question for me?”

“You know that I always miss you, Liz. But I’m really getting better at that thing that you taught me, you know, the thing where I can feel your presence even when you’re not with me?”

Mila glanced at her friend in confusion. *What’s she talking about?* She decided to ask her about it later. At the same time, she thought that she saw a flash of sadness pass over the Goddess’s face, but a moment later it was gone. She decided that she must have imagined it.

“Yes, my child. You are getting quite good at it indeed,” she smiled proudly. After a pause, she asked again, “So what question did you have for me, then?”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot!” Kinsy threw her palm into her forehead and rolled

her eyes at herself. Then she quickly became serious, “I was just wondering... why would somebody be offended by me mentioning you? This morning, I told a little girl at the Kittin Care Center that her dress reminded me of you. I didn’t think anything of it, but then later my instructor called me aside to tell me that I needed to refrain talking about you at the center. I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal.”

“Ahh, I see,” Eliza said thoughtfully. “Well, you are right to be concerned my dear. It concerns me as well. The problem is that for some reason, more and more Felisaans these days are choosing not to get to know me. There are many reasons for this, one of them being that many people have negative preconceptions about me. They don’t like who they think I am, so they never give me a chance to show them the truth.” The sorrow was plain on her face as she explained.

“The kittin who wore the colorful dress today is named is Nicky, and she’s the daughter of a man and a woman who are very far from me. When they picked her up from kittin care—she’s a half-day attendee—she told her parents right away what Miss Kinsy said about her dress. Nicky was so proud of her compliment! But her parents were not pleased at all. They did not like the comparison between me and their daughter, nor did they appreciate the ‘corruption’ of their child’s mind by you putting my name in it. They complained to your supervisor, who was then obligated to call your instructor and ask her to explain the situation to you. Of course, your instructor had no problem with that at all, because like little Nicky’s parents,

she is very far from me as well.” Eliza’s frustration reflected in the glow of her skin, which was now turning a deep red.

Mila and Kinsy were silent. They were both utterly unfamiliar with this side of the Goddess. Neither of them had ever considered that some people were “anti-Eliza” or how Eliza might feel about that.

“Well...” Kinsy finally spoke up, “Isn’t there anything you can do about it? I mean, you *are* all powerful. Can’t you just use your powers to convince people to like you?”

Eliza smiled kindly at the suggestion, but the smile was tainted by sorrow.

“If only it were that simple,” she said. “Of course, I *could* do that, do something to convince these people that I am worthy of their friendship. But then how would I ever know if their love was genuine or not? I would always have to question whether they loved me because of what I could offer them, or because they really wanted to know me.”

The girls contemplated this for a few moments.

“Well, I guess that does make sense,” Mila said, “but it still sucks. I mean, I wish there was some way that you could get through to those people.”

“Seriously,” Kinsy added, “You’re the best part of my life. I wouldn’t want anybody to have to miss out on this,” she smiled earnestly, wrapping an arm around Eliza and squeezing her in a one-armed hug.

“I’m glad to hear that, Kinsy,” Eliza replied, squeezing back. “And actually, there is something *you two* can do.”

“Really? What?” Mila asked. Kinsy looked up at her eagerly.

“Simple. You, my children, can keep on loving me and being yourselves. You can continue to be examples.”

“Wait... That’s it?” Kinsy asked. “That’s all we can do? But Eliza, we’ve already been doing that and there are still people who don’t like you.”

“This is true,” Eliza admitted. “But as much as it pains me, this is the way I have chosen. I will not force people to know me when they clearly have no interest. My only hope is that with time, you and all of my other children— my ambassadors in this world— can change the minds of some of these people. As for the rest of them, well, I respect their choice to live without me.” Her smile was sad, but sincere. Both girls nodded, thinking.

Then Kinsy asked, “Okay, but what about what happened this morning? What’s the best thing for me to do in situations like that?”

“Good question,” Eliza replied. “It is important that you should not have to avoid saying my name or talking about me, but you also do not want to be rude or inconsiderate towards others. So how about this; do not worry about censoring yourself when it comes to talking about me, and if (and when) people complain, just be kind and apologize for offending them. And be sincere! You do not have to stop

being yourself, but you should try to do it in the kindest possible way. Do you understand?”

“Hmm. Yeah, I think I can do that.” Kinsy looked pleased now that she had a Goddess-approved plan of action.

“Alright, well then if that is all you needed, I will send you off to your next learning sessions. Have a great day girls! I love you,” Eliza said, rising from the table.

“We love you too! And thank you for helping us, Goddess. But... lunchtime isn't over yet,” Kinsy poked Eliza playfully in the leg.

“Oh of course, how silly of me,” she laughed. “Well then, enjoy the rest of your lunch break. I will see you both sometime soon,” she said, blowing kisses. Mila caught the Goddess direct a covert wink in her direction before gracefully taking off into the sky and disappearing into the trees.

The moment she was out of sight, the deep boom of the Institute drum sounded to indicate the end of lunch.

Mila just shook her head and laughed at the surprised, and then knowing look on Kinsy's face.

Apparently, she hadn't yet internalized the fact that Eliza really did know everything.

## Chapter 4

By the end of the week, Mila was exhausted. In fact, she was exhausted by the end of Monday. After attending the governing meeting in the morning, hearing the bad news, having an emotional breakdown, going to the Institute, having to deal with Kinsy's minor crisis, finishing her last learning session of the day, going home, doing her chores, and getting ready for the next day... she was ready to turn in for the week.

But that was only Monday, and as the rest of the week crawled by she was back to her typical schedule of working the morning shift before going to the Institute for her two learning sessions each day. As a typical Secondary education student, her work day was eight hours between her job at the Aviary and her sessions at the Institute. Fortunately, Kinsy's schedule was the same, as were the schedules of most Felisaans their age, so the girls were usually able to spend most of their afternoons together.

This week was a different story, though. After the emotionally exhausting events from the beginning of the week, Mila had no energy for tree-running or hanging out with her friends in the evenings. Instead, she spent her time sitting quietly at home with Eliza and Juliet, chatting and reading. Kinsy didn't seem to be too hurt by Mila's distance, though. She seemed to be developing a new friendship with Finn, and they hung out together almost every night that week.

Finally, Saturday rolled around and Mila was relieved to have no learning sessions that day. As interesting as she found her studies most of the time, she much preferred the hands-on work that she did at the Aviary. So naturally, Saturdays were usually her favorite day of the week— she worked full shifts, from 7:00 to 15:00, almost every Saturday.

On this particular day, she pulled herself out of bed at 5 as usual and started getting ready for work. Her mind was even more jittery today than it had been for most of the week. Two days ago, the Investigative Team had returned from their trip to Danyo and Ocalla, but no news had been announced yet. Mila was surprised that it was taking so long for them to call another Governing Meeting. As the days passed, her fear about what they might have found (or worse, not found) grew larger. She was spending a lot of time with Eliza lately.

This morning, Eliza was already waiting for her at the kitchen table. Mila was not the least bit surprised to see her there— she had practically been a permanent fixture in her home over the last week, whenever she wasn't at the Institute or working.

“Good morning, my beautiful daughter,” she crooned.

“Good morning, my amazing Goddess,” Mila replied, a broad smile on her whiskered face. She crossed the room to give her a hug, and then lifted Eliza's smooth hand to her lips, planting a gentle kiss there.



“You know...” she said quietly, “I really appreciate you being here for me so much this week. I’m not sure how I’d keep my sanity without you. It’s been a stressful time.”

“It is my greatest joy to be with you, Mila. As long as you call, I will always answer.” She glowed with gentle radiance as she smiled sincerely at Mila.

“Thanks, Liz. You really are amazing, you know that?”

“So I have been told,” she grinned mischievously. “Well, you had better get ready! You have very important work to do today, caring for my precious creatures. I shall see you later, my child. Have a wonderful time at the Aviary!” Mila nodded and blew her a kiss as she vanished from the room.

~

Almost two hours later, she was rushing through the tree branches on her way to work. She arrived right on time and swung open the front door to the office, walking into a generously sized room lined with desks. There was a quiet buzz in the office, as people were arriving to work. Mila strode up to the receptionist’s desk in the center of the room.

“Good morning, Ginnifer. How’s your day been so far?”

The fluffy gray and white Kat behind the desk spoke in a cheerful voice. “Good morning! My day has been fine, thank you. Clocking in, then?” Mila nodded, and Ginnifer thumbed through a packet of tan, fibrous paper, finding the employee

schedule and making a mark on it with a blue macaw quill. “You’re good to go!” she declared. “It’s the Macaw section for you today.”

“My favorite. Thanks. See you later!” Mila padded to the back corner of the office and entered the staff lounge. She grabbed her thin cotton overcoat and pulled it around her shoulders, glancing down at her name printed in thick blue ink on her chest. She left the lounge and pushed through the back door into the huge net-enclosed habitat outside.

She breathed in a great lungful of fresh forest air, and then jumped up to embed her claws into an overhanging branch, swinging her body up onto it with ease. She climbed her way through the branches to the canopy and looked up into the vast sky. The only barrier between her and the great expanse of blue was a thickly woven net, held up by wooden beams that connected to the trees and formed an intricately built enclosure.

The Macaw section was the largest part of the Aviary. It housed a couple hundred of the red and blue beauties, and was the area in which Mila spent most of her time.

She made her rounds, gathering the empty wooden food bowls from the trees and stroking the friendly macaws on their beaks as she passed. Finally, her arms were full of the carved bowls. Balancing carefully on her feet, she slowly hopped her way back down to the ground.

She filled bowls with bird seed from a big woven sack that was kept in the shed. Then, she opened the cold box and pulled out a huge bowl of chopped up fruit that had been prepared by the night crew. She spread handfuls of the colorful fresh fruit into the food bowls and then licked her paws clean before carrying the wobbling stack of full bowls out of the shed.

It took her almost two hours to carry the bowls back up to the canopy one by one, carefully so as to not spill the food. She stopped for short breaks to scratch some of the birds on their necks and stroke their feathers. After she had finished feeding them, she walked around the forest floor with a heavy basket of water, rinsing and refilling the carved stone birth baths as needed. This task took another hour, since the basket could only hold so much water and she had to return several times to the spigot next to the shed to refill it.

By the time she had finished, it was almost 10:00 and many of the employees were returning from their morning breaks. Mila spent another fifteen minutes sweeping out the supply shed and checking the water in the cold box.

The cold box consisted of a large, smoothly waxed wooden box and a smaller similar box inside. The space between the boxes was filled with cool water, which flowed into the large box through a spigot that protruded from a hole carved into the back. The spigot was connected to the cold water aqueduct system, which came down from the icy mountain city of Montar. All residences and most modern

constructions in Shaku had cold water hook ups, which enabled the use of cold boxes. In other cities, like Danyo, the aqueduct systems were less developed because of the lack of hills. They had other ways of satisfying their needs, of course, mainly using wells for cold water and the rivers for other water needs. Ocalla had a fascinating technique of funneling the cold ocean water underground to their residences for use in cold boxes.

Mila checked the water in the supply shed's cold box every morning. Her job as a bird care assistant was to keep the birds fed and watered, to maintain their habitat, and to care for the birds themselves with minor veterinary and grooming needs. But Mila was the kind of person who usually did much more than she was asked for, because that was how much she valued her job. Cleaning out the shed and maintaining the cold box were not part of her job description, but she did them anyway when she had extra time.

Now, she peered into the space between the large and small boxes of the cold box and dipped a finger into the water to check the temperature. It felt icy cool as usual, and the water level looked normal, which meant that the drain wasn't clogged. Assured that all was well, she left the shed just as the official break-time was announced over by the pounding of a drum. *Perfect, now I can take my break in peace and quiet*, Mila thought, as the office slowly filled with employees returning to their jobs. Mila stepped back into the now-empty staff lounge and went to make

herself a cup of tea.

~

Later that day, Mila climbed through the trees on her way home as the sun was setting on the horizon. She had taken her time getting cleaned up after her shift and then stayed to chat with Kiley for quite a while, so it was now 15:30.

*Kinsy should be done with her shift by now too...* she thought.

Quickly running a mental scan through her body and brain, she decided that she had enough energy to finally catch up with her best friend tonight. After all, she could rest all day tomorrow if she wanted to. Diverting from her original course, she set off towards Kinsy's apartment instead.

As she leapt and climbed her way through the thick branches and leaves, she heard voices ahead. Slowing to a stealthy crawl, she drew nearer with her ears on high alert. There were no houses nearby, and it was unusual to find people just hanging out in the middle of the trees. Her curiosity, and perhaps the tiniest trace of paranoia, got the better of her; she lurked closer to the voices and listened hard.

"I just don't know what to believe, that's all. I'm not saying she's *necessarily* behind it, I'm just saying that there seems to be a connection there. You have to admit that, at least. I mean, they looked a lot like her!" The voice sounded vaguely familiar. It was young and male, but Mila couldn't place it exactly.

"How could you even say that?" a furious female voice retorted. "Do you even

hear yourself? This is Eliza we're talking about. You have met her, haven't you?" she asked, heavily sarcastic. Mila recognized her voice instantly—it was Kinsy. She had to restrain her immediate impulse to reveal herself. She wanted to know more about what they were talking about...

After a pause, Kinsy continued in a slightly subdued tone. "Look, Finn. I know that you're saying that they look sort of like her, and I do believe you. But so what? It's obviously just coincidental. I mean, what else could it be?"

"Well... I was sort of thinking that maybe... she had, you know, children. And that maybe they are the attackers."

"But—" Kinsy tried to interrupt, but Finn spoke over her.

"I'm not saying that she told them to attack us! I'm just saying that maybe they went behind her back. Maybe she's not telling you anything about it because she doesn't want you to know that they're her kids."

There was a thick silence for several long seconds, then Kinsy started cracking up.

"Come *on* Finn! You know that's just ridiculous. Eliza doesn't have children besides us. And if she did, they would be perfect just like her. Plus, just because she doesn't tell me everything doesn't mean that she's involved in something sinister. She just knows better than I do about what I should know and when. I can accept that, Finn, because I know her and I know that she could never do anything wrong.

Don't you know that?" she asked gently.

Finn let out a deep sigh. "You're right. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just so desperate for answers that I'd convince myself of anything that seems to make some sense of it. But you're right, that doesn't make sense at all." There was a stirring in the branches near where the voices were coming from. Mila crept closer to try to get a glimpse. She peered through the leaves and saw the two sitting on a branch facing away from her, Kinsy's arm draped around Finn's shoulder.

"It's going to be okay, believe me. Eliza is in control of the situation. Maybe it would help if you talked to her more," Kinsy suggested.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I have been a little distant lately... it's just so hard for me to talk about, you know? I mean, I have no idea where my parents are or if they're okay. And Eliza always brings out my emotions so much... I don't really feel like crying right now," he chuckled half-heartedly and leaned his head on Kinsy's shoulder.

Feeling like she'd seen quite enough, and not wanting to invade her best friend's privacy any further, Mila slid quietly away. As she made her way back to her house, thoughts about the overheard conversation swirled in her head.

Finn had a point. His description made the attackers sounds very similar to Eliza in appearance— except for the feathers, of course. Did Eliza have secret children that nobody knew about? But Mila laughed internally at the thought as soon

as it had formed. Kinsy was right; that was a ridiculous suggestion. But then, who *were* the attackers, and where did they come from? She had none of the answers.

She arrived at home a few minutes later and called on Eliza mentally as she walked in the door. No sooner had the door shut behind her than the Goddess appeared, sitting comfortably on the brown overstuffed chair in the living area.

Mila couldn't help but smile at the Goddess's simultaneously cute and commanding persona. "Hello, Eliza," she said lightly.

"Hello, daughter," Eliza responded in her typical sing-song voice. But she quickly grew serious as she asked, "You had a question for me, didn't you?"

"Yes, actually, I had a few," she hesitated.

"Maybe I can save you some time... No, I do not have a mob of violent spawn that I am hiding from you. The attackers on your world are no children of mine, I promise you that." Her eyes twinkled mysteriously, but there was sadness in her face as well.

Mila looked over at the Goddess, her expression flickering between defensive and embarrassed before finally landing on lightly amused. "Alright, you caught me. I had a moment of doubt. But I realized how silly the thought was pretty quickly, and I know now that it couldn't be true." She paused to give Eliza a crooked smile.

"But that still leaves me with one question. Who are the attackers? And where *did* they come from?"



“Well, first of all that was *two* questions,” she teased, “But that is beside the point. The thing is, darling, the time is not yet right for you to know these details.”

Mila looked disappointed. The Goddess stood and floated quickly across the room to stand in front of her. She reached out a wing and stroked the girl’s furry cheek gently.

“I know that this is not what you wanted to hear,” she spoke quietly, “but I promise that the time for you to know more will be soon. You just have to trust my wisdom on this, okay? You know I love you and I want the best for you. This is all just part of that.” Her eyes were kind and compassionate.

Mila looked at her for a few moments with a blank expression before allowing a small, accepting smile to color her face. “Alright, fair enough. I love you too, Eliza.”

They shared a few moments of comfortable silence before Mila spoke again.

“Hey, I think I’m going to see if Kinsy can hang out after all. I haven’t really hung out with her much this week. Thanks for coming to see me, though. I’ll see you again soon, okay?”

Eliza nodded, the typical smile playing over her lips, and floated up into the air, spinning slowly at first and then faster until she was a blurry rainbow of color. Then, she disappeared with a whoosh of wind. Her call of “I love you” echoed through the house for a moment.

“I love you too,” Mila spoke to the emptiness.

Five minutes later, she was outside Kinsy’s door. She scratched firmly several times and waited for her friend. The door opened wide a few moments later and Kinsy was standing in front of her, her hair and light blue shirt slightly disheveled. She looked surprised to see Mila.

“Hey Miles! What are you doing here? Is everything ok?” Her voice was friendly, and somewhat concerned.

“Yeah, of course! I just wanted to see if, you know... you wanted to hang out?” She asked uncertainly, starting to question her decision to come there without making plans ahead of time. She couldn’t help feeling as if she had interrupted something.

“Oh, umm... Well of course I want to hang out with you, Miles. It’s just that, well,” she paused, “I have company,” she giggled and then flung the door open further to reveal Finn walking towards the door. He smiled easily.

“Hey Mila! How are you?”

“Oh!” Mila exclaimed, blushing, and then recovered quickly. “Hey Finn! I’m fine, thanks, and you?”

“I’m doing *very* well myself, thank you,” he said, draping an arm casually around Kinsy’s shoulder. “To what do we owe the pleasure?” he grinned crookedly.

Mila’s eyes widened slightly as she took in Finn’s markedly affectionate

behavior towards Kinsy. “Umm...” she began, trying to find the right words. “Well I was just coming by to see if Kinsy wanted to hang out, but I don’t want to interrupt anything,” she blushed, staring at her feet.

Kinsy and Finn both laughed and started to speak at the same time.

“It’s fine—”

“Don’t worry—”

They both burst out laughing again, and Mila grinned, amused.

“So... if you don’t mind me asking,” she began, “I was just wondering... are you two dating then?” She smiled cautiously to indicate her approval of the idea.

The two looked into each others’ faces for a moment before looking back at Mila. Kinsy nodded vigorously and giggled, while Finn laughed and then explained, “Yeah, well as you probably know, Kins and I share a lot of classes because we’re both on the same career path. We’ve been spending a lot of time together recently, and today I finally asked her to make it official,” he smiled wryly.

“He asked me to be his girlfriend just about half an hour ago. I said yes of course,” she said, beaming.

“Wow, that’s awesome! You guys are great together,” Mila returned Kinsy’s huge smile. Then, looking around as if she had just realized where she was, she said, “Oh! I should leave you two alone to celebrate! So sorry, I’ll just be going now.” She turned to go but Kinsy’s paw shot out to grab her shoulder.

“Don’t be silly, Miles! Finn and I spend plenty of time alone together. And we weren’t doing what you *think* we were doing,” she said, rolling her eyes and shoving Finn playfully. Mila was momentarily mute, surprised and embarrassed as she was by Kinsy’s bluntness.

“Oh, I didn’t think...” she trailed off, feeling her cheeks burn.

“Relax,” Kinsy giggled. “We were just having a tickle-fight. Seriously, the two of us are practically children in adult bodies here.” She and Finn burst out in giggles again. Mila found herself laughing with them. Finally, Kinsy was able to contain herself and her voice took on a serious note.

“And anyway, Finn and I want to do things right. We’re waiting until we’re married to take things to the next level.” She raised her eyebrows suggestively at the words “next level,” but Mila had a feeling that despite her nonchalant attitude, she was finally blushing under her thick white fur.

“That’s right,” Finn spoke up, boldly. “I really care about Kinsy, and I want to take care of her. We’re protecting each other by waiting.” Surprisingly, he didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed as he spoke. Mila’s respect for him instantly doubled.

“So anyway,” Kinsy put in, “What do you say we all go out for some tree-running? We can go to the lake and take a night swim,” she suggested. Finn nodded heartily in agreement

“Well... if you insist.” Mila beamed, and the three of them went into the

apartment to get ready.

~

Several hours later, Mila padded into her house and went straight to the bathing area, peeling off her wet clothes. She stood under the shower spigot and pumped the wooden lever, rinsing the lake water out of her fur. It had been a fun and exhausting evening playing with her friends in the forest and swimming in the lake. A smile was plastered on her face as she thought again about her best friend's big news. How nice it was to see Kinsy end up with someone as kind and full of joy as she was herself. She sincerely hoped the relationship would work out.

Mila thought that there was nothing quite like young love to make a person's view of the world a little bit brighter. She fell asleep that night without a single unhappy thought about the attacks.

~

She woke up the next morning and decided to take advantage of the day off and visit her parents. To her delight, Kara was there visiting too and the time sped by quickly as she enjoyed a leisurely day with her family. They played board games in the living room and sipped hot tea for hours, before sitting down to dinner together and enjoying a long conversation the meandered everywhere from Mila's latest adventures at the Aviary to the fact that Kara had been promoted. She was now a professional singer at the Theatre, and had a performance every Saturday night. Of

course, Mila was thrilled and she promised to come see her sister's next performance.

~

Before she knew it, Monday had rolled around and worried as she was, Mila felt an odd sense of calm knowing that a Governing Meeting would have to be called soon. They could only postpone it for so long, or so she figured.

*"Soon, everything will be sorted out,"* she thought happily as she climbed home after school.

It wasn't for a few weeks that she discovered how truly wrong she was.

## Chapter 5

The days crawled by as Mila waited. She waited for news, for a plan, for a hint about what to do—for anything at all, really. It felt like she was stuck in place while time continued dragging on, and her fear was building like a small room filling with gas, ready to ignite at any moment.

She was desperate to somehow protect her loved ones from the mysterious danger that was surely coming. She needed to keep them safe. What would happen to her kind, gentle parents, her sweet and perhaps a bit naïve best friend, and her fragile Juliet? What about all of her fellow Felisaans and their pristine way of life? Her worry was like a heavy boulder in her heart, but Mila knew she was just one, small, shy little girl. She couldn't possibly protect herself against the violent attackers, let alone protect others.

By the time another week had passed and Sunday rolled around, she was at a complete loss. She began feeling suspicious of the Investigative Team and Mako, the Meeting Leader, and everybody else involved who were clearly choosing to leave the citizens of Shaku in the dark. Her morale was at its lowest and she had no clue about what to do. Of course, her instant solution at times like those was to ask Eliza for help. She had been holding off on talking to Eliza about her fears lately, but now they had finally filled her to the breaking point. It was time to spill.

As soon as she uttered her name, the Goddess appeared before her. Like usual, she sat cross-legged on the floor, but this time with a kind, yet mischievous grin on her face. Mila was a bit annoyed at this display of carefree childishness in a time like this, but she would never tell her Goddess that.

“Eliza, you’ve got to help me out here,” she began carefully. “I’m going crazy! We haven’t heard any new information about the attacks, and the search team has already gone and returned over a week ago. We’re all just waiting for a Governing Meeting to be called or something to happen, and I feel like a sitting duck. What if we’re attacked next? I don’t have the slightest idea of what to do in that kind of situation.” She dragged her paw roughly through her fur.

“My dear child, have some faith! Do you remember what I told you before? I promise you that everything will all turn out alright in the end. I know that does not help you feel completely better, but you just have to trust me. Believe it or not, I am in control of the situation.” As usual, Eliza spoke in a voice that was filled with wisdom and strongly contrasted her carefree disposition. Sitting on the floor with a calm smile on her face, she looked like she had not a care in the world, let alone control over what happened in it. Yet Mila knew that she was right. There was nothing that the Goddess could not do. Despite the ironic way that she sometimes presented herself, Eliza was definitely in control.



Mila took a deep breath and felt just a fraction of the tension in her shoulders release when she exhaled. “Couldn’t you at least tell me something? Give me a little heads up? Please, Eliza, I’m asking you as a friend.” She looked across at Eliza beseechingly.

Eliza looked thoughtful for a moment. “Tuesday,” she said finally.

“Tuesday?” Mila repeated, carefully. “What about Tuesday?”

“You will discover who the attackers are on Tuesday,” Eliza said calmly, and cryptically.

“You mean Tuesday as in two days from now? We’re going to find out who these people are?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Mila said slowly, “and how exactly is that going to happen?” she paused. “Wait a minute... please tell me that we’re not going to be,” she choked “*attacked*, in two days.” Her chest felt suddenly tight, as if a huge weight were crushing down on her lungs.

“No, no, that is not what I meant. You will not be attacked on Tuesday, but you will discover who the attackers are. That is all I that can tell you for now.” Eliza looked at her seriously.

“Okay, well I guess that’s something.” Mila offered a small, grateful smile. “Thank you, Eliza.” She reached out her hand to grab Eliza’s and gave it a squeeze.

The Goddess's hand squeezed back, and then a mischievous smile crept onto her flawless face.

“For now, perhaps a bit of distraction may do you good.” she suggested. “You know, since it is Sunday and you do not have work or school today, I was thinking that perhaps we could spend the day together.”

“Of course I'd love that, Liz,” Mila began, “It's just that I feel bad for even having called on you today in the first place. I don't like taking up your time on Sundays. I figure you need to relax sometimes just like the rest of us,” she explained, guiltily.

Eliza laughed out loud. Her laugh was like delicate chimes clinking in a warm breeze.

“Mila, child, you can be so silly sometimes! You know that I do not need to rest, and my time is unlimited. I am the all-powerful Goddess, remember?” she said with a wink. Mila's still looked uncertain.

“Come on!” Eliza laughed, “Let us go play outside. I would love to do some tree-running! I may not have a tail or claws like you, but my wings give me an edge,” she said, playfully flicking her wing in the orange cat's direction. Mila grinned.

“Well alright, if you insist. But just as a warning, I am a *very* talented athlete. So don't feel bad when I leave you in the dust,” she teased.

At that, Eliza laughed and spun out the window. Mila had to scramble out the

door in an attempt to catch up, but was soon leaping through the trees alongside the Goddess. Their laughter echoed through the air as they disappeared into the forest.

~

After a long, fun-filled day of tree-running and lounging in the canopy with the macaws, Mila and Eliza said their goodbyes and parted for the night. Mila went back to her house and spent the rest of the evening with Juliet.

When she went to bed that night, she felt more at peace than she had since the first rumors of the attacks started to circulate. For just a day, she had finally been able to forget all of her fears and worries and relax into a peaceful calm state of mind. That night, she dreamed about her family and friends all gathered together in her small house, smiling and laughing because everything was right in the world.

Her happy dreams couldn't last forever, though.

In the middle of the night, her mind took a turn for the worse and a nightmare interrupted her peaceful night's sleep.

*She was walking along the forest floor, and it was nighttime. The terrain was unfamiliar; Felisaans rarely ever walked in the forest, not when they could travel by tree so much more quickly. Yet there she was, slowly making her way over the spongy ground. The darkness there in the bottom of the forest was thick and heavy. It was fortunate that Felisaans had such good night vision, or else she would never have*

*been able to find her way.*

*The dark tree trunks rose up all around her like looming monsters, and the leaves rustled despite the fact that the air was still as ever. Mila shivered, though the night was comfortably warm.*

*As if she had no control over her body, her legs continued to walk at a slow but steady pace. She heard a twig snap behind her, but was unable to swivel her head around to find out what had caused it. She felt a presence behind her, and wondered whether her mind was playing tricks on her. The more she questioned it, the more she was certain that somebody or something was walking just inches behind her. She thought that she felt hot breath on her neck.*

*Suddenly, though Mila still had no control of her movements, her body spun around. Her vision swirled and then focused on the empty space behind her. So, there had been nothing following her after all. She breathed out a sigh of relief and then her body turned back around, to continue walking.*

*But instead of continuing walking, it froze as Mila screamed in terror. Standing in front of her was a huge, black, monstrous creature. It looked vaguely like Eliza, but even in the similarities it was a sick parody of the Goddess. Where Eliza's body was covered in silky smooth, brightly colored feathers, this monster had greasy, dull black feathers in ugly patches. Where Eliza's neck and face were a smooth and pale tan, the monster had angry red, diseased-looking bald flesh. While*

*Eliza's beak was beautiful, shiny and golden, this monster had a long, cracked, grey, and wickedly curved beak that looked more like a weapon than a nose. Finally, and worst of all, where Eliza's arms and legs were covered in pale, smooth flesh, the creature before Mila had scaly stick-like limbs, just like a real bird except that they ended in great, ugly claws with tips as long and sharp as sickles. It wriggled them at her menacingly as she gaped in horror, and she could hear a strange cacophony of low moans, clicks, and muted shrieks coming from its open beak.*

*Her body was frozen, and she struggled to move as the monster reached its grotesque claw towards her face. Great black, bony wings unfurled from its back as it loomed closer to Mila. They were ragged things that Mila could not picture ever being useful for flying, and as she stared in horror at them she thought she saw something moving in the feathers. Looking closer, she realized what it was; writhing black maggots clung to patches of cracked, exposed skin where the feathers had seemingly been torn out. She shouted in disgust and gagged.*

*The monster drew its wings closer, forming a cage around her already frozen body, and a thin, forked tongue the color of blood flicked out from its slit of a mouth. There was nothing that Mila could do but scream in terror as the beast's face came closer and closer...*

Mila eyes shot open and her body unfroze. Her fur was soaked in cold sweat and her blankets had been tossed onto the floor. Juliet had apparently climbed down

from her perch and made her way over to check on her master, because she now sat on the wooden bed frame above Mila's head, peering down into her face.

Mila shrieked before realizing that the face looming above hers was small, green, and rather adorable, not at all the awful face she had just seen in her nightmare.

"Oh my sweet Goddess! Juliet, you scared the katnip out of me!" she panted.

Then a voice spoke from a few feet away. "You called?" Eliza asked.

"Aagh!" Mila cried in surprise, sitting bolt upright in bed. "Eliza! You surprised me," she said sheepishly.

"My apologies, dear" the Goddess responded kindly. Then, after a pause, she asked knowingly, "You did not mean to call me, did you?" There was a gleam in her big brown eyes.

Mila laughed breathlessly. "No, I'm sorry, I didn't. But I'm actually glad that you're here. I just had an *awful* nightmare..."

Eliza came to sit on the end of her bed, laying a delicate hand on Mila's knee. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

An image formed briefly in Mila's mind of the monstrous creature she had just dreamed about, but she pushed it away quickly.

"Ahh, I see. You have met Kraw," Eliza said sadly, and somewhat angrily.

"Excuse me?" Mila asked, bewildered. "Who the heck is Kraw?"

Eliza looked at her sadly and explained. “Kraw is... a person. Well, *person* is a bit of a loose term in this case. But he is a being, not a Felisaan like you or an animal like Juliet, but more like me. Except that he is nothing like me; in fact, he is my opposite. Does that make any sense?”

Mila shook her head slowly. Her eyes focused in concentration, but confusion was still reflected in her features.

“Kraw is the source of all evil. He is evil itself, embodied in physical form,” Eliza explained.

“Right... That would explain how disgusting he was,” Mila muttered with a shiver. “But how could we have met in a dream?”

“Dreams are one way that supernatural beings, like me and, unfortunately, Kraw, can appear to and speak to people. I speak to my children through dreams only on rare occasions, sometimes to send a message or just to provide comfort, but Kraw prefers to use nightmares and communicates this way quite often. From the look of the nightmare you just had, I would say that he was trying to introduce himself to you tonight.” There was a spark of anger in the way she said this.

“Well that’s just great,” Mila sighed, exasperated. “So he can just come and ‘visit’ me anytime he likes, then?”

“No, actually,” Eliza said with a comforting smile. “Now that you know he exists, you have a choice. You see, even though Kraw is a powerful being, I am

much stronger than he is. And anybody who chooses me has my strength on their side. If he tries to get to you, all you have to do is tell him to leave. You can use my name if you'd like—he absolutely abhors it, and it'll send him running for the hills.” She smiled bitterly.

“Oh... Well okay then. That's a relief,” Mila said. “I never want to see that nasty guy again. He was the most horrible thing I've ever laid eyes on.” She shuddered again briefly.

“I'm glad to hear that, Mila. Now, are you going to be alright for the rest of the night, darling? I can stay with you if you would like,” she offered.

Mila smiled gratefully but waved the suggestion away. “Nah, I think I'll be fine now. I've got your name on my side,” she said calmly. Already, her eyes were growing heavier again. She yawned deeply and sunk down into her soft mattress. “I've got to get some more shut-eye before tomorrow,” she mumbled, already falling asleep.

“Good idea,” Eliza brushed a feather lightly over Mila's cheek before rising to leave. “Goodnight my daughter. Sleep well, and I will see you very soon,” she sung, disappearing into the night. Even as she went, her voice whispered close to Mila's ear, “I love you.”

*I love you too*, Mila thought back. Then, she turned over in bed, snuggling deeper into her blankets, and let her mind fade into darkness. Soon, she was in a



deep sleep that was—thankfully—dreamless.

## Chapter 6

The next day came quickly, since Mila had only slept soundly for about half of the night. She woke up as the sunrise shined through her window, and stretched lazily on her bed. Rolling over so that she was lying on her belly, she arched her back up to the sky for several seconds before sinking it down low so that her nose was in the air and her belly brushed against the sheets. She collapsed back onto her stomach and then rolled off of the bed, landing deftly on all fours and then rising to stand.

She walked over to the kitchen area, calling “good morning” to Juliet, who had apparently made her way back to her perch in the night. Mila reached her arm out for the bird to hop on as she passed, and then started to prepare her breakfast. It was several seconds before she felt the eyes on her back. Somebody was in her house, sitting at the kitchen table and watching her; she was sure of it.

She tightened her grip on the sharp stone shard she had been using to chop up a banana and spun around on the spot, letting out a yell of terror as her suspicions were confirmed and she discovered a figure sitting in the chair nearest her. She felt awkward and uncertain holding out the stone shard like a weapon, but the attacker in her house didn’t have to know that.

But before she could make a move, her eyes caught up with her brain and she realized who it was that was watching her. Eliza looked at Mila with eyebrows raised

above the mask of feathers that framed her eyes. Mila stared back at the Goddess with realization and surprise dawning on her face.

“Good morning?” Eliza asked uncertainly.

“Oh! Eliza... G-g-good morning!” She choked out, glancing quickly to the stone shard in her paw before hastily tossing it back onto the counter behind her.

“Is everything alright, dear? You seem a bit... edgy.”

“Oh, yes of course, everything’s fine. I just didn’t realize it was you.” She paused before continuing. “I thought a stranger had come into my house and was watching me...” she explained quickly, clearly embarrassed.

“Well, that definitely is an interesting suspicion. Are you expecting to be burglarized sometime soon?”

Mila laughed uncomfortably. “No, of course not. It’s just that... well, as you know, I’ve been a little bit paranoid lately. And of course, meeting ‘The Source of All Evil’ last night isn’t helping things. I guess I’m just feeling a little jumpy.” She looked up guiltily at the Goddess. “I’m sorry I almost attacked you with a shard,” she added with an embarrassed chuckle.

“It is no problem at all, darling. But are you sure that you are alright?” Her brown eyes were full of concern.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she sighed heavily. “I’m sure I’ll feel better after I get some more information tomorrow.”

“I’m sure you will,” Eliza said warmly. Then she looked thoughtfully at Mila for a few moments. “I think the time has come for me to share something with you, my child. I came here this morning without being asked because I need to talk to you about something,” she spoke seriously. “Something important. It is about us being together all of the time.” For a moment, Mila thought she saw a look of terrible sadness flash across the Goddess’s face, but then she blinked and the expression was gone. Eliza’s face was the picture of serenity. Mila shook her head as if to clear away her confusion. *That nightmare last night must have affected my sleep more than I realized*, she thought.

“Okay...” she said hesitantly, sitting down at the table across from her Goddess. “What is it?”

Eliza stared thoughtfully back at Mila for several long moments before speaking. “Mila, do you remember a few weeks ago, when Kinsy was upset because of the parent who complained about her at work?”

“Yes, of course,” Mila said, confused about what this had to do with anything.

“Well, when I came to school to talk to her about it, she mentioned something that you did not understand. I saw the confusion on your face when she said it. She said that she was getting better at feeling my presence even when I am not with her. Do you remember that?”

Mila remembered the strange comment instantly. *What in the world had Kinsy*

*been talking about?* She realized that she'd forgotten to ask her about it later, and now she was eager for an answer.

“Yeah, what was that all about?” Mila asked.

Eliza smiled sadly back at her. So there was something wrong, after all, Mila realized. Deep in her stomach, a weight dropped like a stone. “For the past few months, I have been teaching Kinsy a new way to be with me. In fact, I have been teaching a few others as well. I chose these particular sons and daughters of mine to start teaching this skill to because of certain traits that they have. Kinsy was chosen because of her pure-heartedness and her faith. She is so certain of me at all times. She was the right person for this job,” Eliza explained.

“What job?” Mila asked.

“I have been teaching these children of mine how to be with me in spirit, how to talk to me even when I am not with them physically. This is called prayer. I am teaching them how to pray because I will need them to teach others, later.” Eliza's beautiful face was creased in sadness as she spoke, but Mila still did not understand.

“Okay... but why? As cool as this ‘prayer’ thing sounds, I don't really see why it's necessary. Personally, I'd much rather talk to you in person. And why would anybody ever need to teach somebody else how to do it?” Mila stared at Eliza.

“That is actually what I wanted to talk to you about, daughter. You see, there is going to come a time in the future when,” she paused, sighing slightly, “I will not

be able to be with you this way.” She gestured at the space between them.

Mila stared at her blankly for several long moments.

“What?” she asked quietly and after a pause, “What do you mean, you won’t be able to be with me? Why not? What does that even mean?” Panic filled her voice. Then she half sobbed out, “You’re leaving me?”

Eliza reached out a hand towards Mila’s, but she swatted it away.

The Goddess looked hurt for a moment, but then her expression hardened into anger.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Mila huffed. “Why are you doing this to me?” There were angry tears in her eyes.

Eliza stood abruptly and rose several inches off of the ground. As she did, a faint white glow appeared around her silhouette. The color started to change and then her whole body was glowing dark, angry red. She was still the most beautiful thing Mila had ever seen, but now her face was a mixture of anger and sadness. When she spoke, her voice filled the room.

“Mila. You forget who I am. I may be your friend and also your mother, but that does not change the fact that I am your Goddess, first and foremost. Do you have no trust in me at all? Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me?” Her face was set.

Mila shrank under Eliza’s power and didn’t speak. After a few moments, the

Goddess's glow faded and she floated softly back to the ground. She stood there for a moment and let some of the hardness leave her expression. Mila glanced up at her quickly and then continued staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry, Eliza." Mila said quietly.

Eliza strode to where Mila sat and crouched down, coming to eye level with her and laying a hand on her shoulder. "You are forgiven, daughter. You are always forgiven."

Still staring at the floor, Mila said adamantly, "I do trust you, I promise. I just got scared. I still don't understand what you mean." Finally, she looked up. Eliza was looking at her calmly. "Can you please try to explain it to me again?"

"Of course. What you need to know, Mila, is that sometime soon I am going to leave this world. The time is not yet right for you to know more about why, but I promise you will learn the reasons in time. For now, just know that I will no longer dwell on Roq in this form. Instead, I will send my spirit to live amongst my children here. More precisely, my spirit will be sent live *in* my children. As my daughter, you can be certain that I will be with you all of the time because my spirit will be within you."

"Hmm. Okay..." Mila started uncertainly "So you won't be here physically. But it will actually be better in a way, won't it? I mean, technically, you'll be with me all of the time."

“Yes, that is true. The only difficult part is learning how to feel my spirit’s presence. You see, even though I have promised you that my spirit will live inside you, I know that you will still question it at times. This is because sometimes, when a person cannot see something, they find it very difficult to believe in it. And if you are not attuned to my spirit then it will be as if I am not there. You will not be able to feel me if you shut me out,” Eliza said, emphasizing the last sentence.

“Oh. Well... is it difficult? To feel you, I mean?” Mila asked, more concerned now.

“It is not *difficult* necessarily, but I would call it a learned skill. You see, you will not be able to hear my voice audibly the way you do now.”

Desperation filled Mila’s face. “So I won’t be able to see you *or* hear you?”

“Unfortunately, no. At least not in the same way that you do now. But that is why I wanted to talk to you today, darling. I am going to teach you what I have been teaching Kinsy. I am going to show you how to pray— to feel my spirit, so that when it is time for me to go you will be prepared.” Mila started to speak but Eliza held up a hand and continued quickly.

“Before you say anything, there is one more thing I need you to understand. I have chosen you specially to teach this skill to, just as I chose Kinsy and the others. And with that honor comes responsibility; Mila, you are going to have to teach others about this when I am gone. You are one of seven people I have chosen to personally



train, and you will join the others in spreading my message after I have gone.” Although her words were clearly not a request, they were still kind. Mila even thought she heard a note of pride in her voice. Eliza was apparently proud of something great that she planned for Mila to do. Or, as Mila dreaded, she was proud of something great that her daughter would never be able to do.

Mila looked sadly down at her paws. “I’m sorry, Goddess, but if that’s what you want me to do than maybe you should choose somebody else instead. I’m really sorry, but I can’t do that. I can barely even *talk* in front of people I don’t know well—how am I supposed to teach them? I’m not right for this job.” She looked guiltily up at Eliza, but was surprised to see an amused smile on her lips.

“Mila, my sweet girl. That is exactly why I have chosen you. Your sincerity and your humble heart are perfect for what I need you to do. And as far as the timidity goes, well... you have to trust me when I say that there is some ferocity in you yet to show itself.” She laughed lightly as if at a private joke before continuing. “Trust me, Mila. You are the perfect person for the job.” Her confident smile was so radiant that it made Mila feel slightly sick with worry. What would happen if she failed her Goddess?

“Stop worrying so much, darling! You are not going to fail me. I will be right there with you, helping and guiding you. Everything will work out fine. I give you my word.” She smiled, but looked serious about what she said. Mila decided to let

it go for now, and focus on the task at hand.

“Alright...” she said tentatively. “So when do we start?”

## Chapter 7

Mila sat on the cool, wooden floor of her house and took several slow, deep breaths. She let her mind relax and tried to forget her surroundings. Her muscles tensed and untensed one by one, releasing some of her built up stress and leaving her body feeling light and tranquil.

*Eliza*, she thought. She imagined the Goddess sitting calmly in front of her, ready to listen. *I just wanted to tell you...* she took another calming breath.

*That this is ridiculous.* She opened her eyes and cracked a smile.

“I feel like I’m talking to myself,” she laughed. Eliza popped into the room and looked down at her solemnly. Mila quickly stopped laughing.

She paused to collect her thoughts, and then explained. “Look, Eliza. I know that this is important and I’m sorry that I’m having such a hard time with it. It’s just that I feel ridiculous talking to you when you’re not actually here.”

“Mila, how many times must I tell you?” Eliza exclaimed. “I *am* actually here. You simply cannot *see* me.” She looked at Mila beseechingly. “Let me put it this way. When you call on me, you usually do so by speaking my name out loud or thinking about me, correct?”

“Right,” Mila agreed.

“And even though I am not actually standing in front of you, you never worry that I cannot hear you, do you?”

“Well, no. Of course not. You’ve never *not* come when I called you.”

“Exactly. I have always come. And that is because I can hear you when you speak to me no matter where you are. If you think about it, this exercise is really no different. You know that I can hear you when you call me, and you can be just as certain that I can hear you when you are talking to me this way.”

“I guess you’re right,” Mila agreed. “I think it’s just going to take some getting used to.”

“Of course, darling. Do not worry, you *will* begin to get the hang of it soon.” Her wing lovingly brushed behind Mila’s ear. “That is enough for today, though. I want you to spend some time thinking about what we have discussed, and be prepared to practice more next time, alright?”

“Alright, will do.” Mila nodded.

With that, Eliza swooped gracefully into the air and disappeared with a poof. As always, her call of “I love you” echoed like beautiful music through Mila’s living room. *I love you too!* Mila thought enthusiastically, knowing of course that Eliza would hear her. *See? I’m already learning,* Mila thought and grinned.

It was Tuesday evening and Mila had had a typically busy day. Knowing that something big was going to happen today had kept her extra alert, but at the same time, she hadn’t stressed about it too much. She knew that whatever was coming, it wasn’t a new attack but it *was* going to bring her more information about who was

behind them. She hadn't even bothered pressing Eliza for more information during their short meeting, instead contenting herself with the knowledge that she only had to be patient for the rest of the day, at most. After Eliza left, she decided to venture out and socialize for the evening. It had been far too long since she'd had any quality time with Kinsy.

Ever since they started dating, Kinsy and Finn had been spending a lot of time together. Of course, Mila was happy for them; she had never seen Kinsy as happy as she was with Finn. Still, she missed her best friend and she could admit that she was just a *tiny* bit jealous of how much of her time he was getting. Tonight, she was determined that she would get her turn.

Mila got ready and left the house, calling goodbye to Juliet as she shut the door. Then she took off through the trees towards her friend's house, the cool wind tickling her fur as she went.

She was nearing the main apartment tree when it happened. Out of nowhere, a loud blaring sound rang out in the forest.

Taken off guard, Mila slipped from the thick branch she had just landed on and fell clumsily down through the trees, the sharp branches catching in her fur and scraping her skin as she went. After falling for what seemed like several slow-motion minutes, her body unfroze and she caught herself deftly on a sturdy, low-hanging branch. She was only about ten feet off the ground.

She pressed her body flat onto the branch, wrapping her limbs around it and hugging it tightly. Her senses were on high alert as she scanned the trees around her. She looked down and saw the forest floor, empty as usual. Above her, a system of bridges and platforms were built into the trees. She had fallen quite far in her panic. *What was that noise?* She thought. She had never heard a sound like it before.

Suddenly, rustling noises filled the forest as people streamed out of buildings and through the trees above Mila. There were murmurs of surprise and uncertainty as they went, and she caught a few snippets of people's conversations.

"...first emergency alarm I've heard in over 20 years!" one woman exclaimed to her husband, the words flying by Mila's ears like birds as the couple raced gracefully through the trees. They were headed towards the center of the city.

"Probably just a practice drill," an elderly man muttered to his companion. He was walking across one of the bridges, the path reserved for the slower citizens of her city. She was able to catch more of his words as he passed above her. "It's about time, really. There hasn't been a drill in ages." The man walking with him mumbled in agreement as the two continued through the forest.

Behind them, a mother crooned to her crying toddler. "It's okay, sweetie, everything's fine." She tugged at his paw, trying to coax him along. He wouldn't stop crying, though, and after a moment she scooped him up and slung him into a

fabric pouch on her back, jumping off of the bridge and into the trees to travel faster towards the Meeting Hall.

Mila loosened her grip on the branch and began climbing steadily up into the higher branches. After climbing up about 20 feet, she finally reached the expanse of platforms and bridges that marked the most heavily-trafficked area of the forest.

With a gasp, she took in the scene. Elderly citizens and families with young children filled the wooden walkways; 10 feet up, the more athletic people climbed and jumped swiftly through the branches. She had never seen so many people out at the same time. They were all headed in the same direction, towards the center of the city.

Mila joined the throngs of people climbing in the trees and looked around frantically for a familiar face as she went. Suddenly, a blur of fluffy white fur flew past her. *Kinsy!* She was practically attached to Finn, a sleek black shadow who was pulling her quickly through the forest.

“Kinsy! Finn!” Mila yelled.

They stopped suddenly and twisted around in response to her voice. “Mila!” Kinsy exclaimed, doubling back through the heavy traffic to reach her friend. Finn followed, still glued to her side.

When she reached her, Mila saw that the panic she felt inside was mirrored in her best friend’s eyes. Finn, on the other hand, had a stony, determined expression

on his face. He glanced around as the girls embraced, as if checking for danger, and then nodded briefly at Mila.

“What’s going on?” Mila asked, looking back and forth at the two of them.

“I have no idea. Finn said that it’s an emergency alarm... It calls people to the Meeting Hall for safety when something bad happens.”

“That’s right,” Finn nodded. “My parents told me about it one time. Apparently, when they were kids they used to have emergency drills regularly. They would sound this alarm and they would all drop whatever they were doing and go to the Meeting Hall,” he explained. “I guess they decided we didn’t need to practice it anymore after so many decades of nothing bad happening...” he mused.

Mila felt slightly annoyed at this. Wasn’t it the government’s job to protect its citizens? One would think that they would at least *warn* people before using an alarm system that a whole generation had never even heard of before.

“Well great,” she huffed. “What kind of ‘emergencies’ exactly do they use this alarm for?”

Finn shook his head. “I’m not really sure... my parents didn’t talk about it that much. If I had to guess, I’d say natural disasters,” he said.

“What about war? Do you think they ever used it when the city was being attacked?” Kinsy asked quickly. For a split second, Mila felt panic rising in her chest. Her mind reeled as she considered the possibility. Were her worst fears finally



coming true? Was her city under attack at this very moment? She felt her heart skip a beat as the thought crossed her mind. She spun her head around in all directions, scanning for danger.

Then she remembered.

Eliza had promised that there wouldn't be an attack today.

They were safe. *Aren't we?* A shadow of doubt crossed over Mila's mind.

*What if Eliza was wrong? Or worse, what if she'd lied?*

She shook her head quickly, clearing away the ridiculous thoughts.

"I'm sure it's nothing like that, Kins. Let's just get to the Meeting Hall and figure out what's going on, okay?" She gave Kinsy's paw a comforting squeeze, and then Finn was pulling Kinsy, with Mila in tow, back in the direction of the Hall.

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When they arrived, the entrance to the Hall was clogged with people. Finn, Kinsy, and Mila joined the crowd, and slowly made their way into the building. The Hall seemed much fuller than usual, probably because everybody was arriving at the same time. The panic and chaos that seemed to fill the air did not help the situation.

Mila and her friends found three empty seats and sat down. Then she quickly scanned the crowd until she spotted her parents, sitting down near the center of the room. They were on the same side of the room as Mila, so their backs were to her.

She looked around some more until she spotted her sister. She was sitting in the middle row of seats directly across from her, on the other side of the room. She was also looking worriedly around the room, her green eyes scanning the crowds nervously. Mila waved her arms in an attempt to get her attention. Finally, she noticed her and waved back, smiling with relief.

“Tell our parents I’m here,” Mila mouthed, pointing down the rows of seats towards them. Kara looked confused for a moment before spotting her parents and then nodded in understanding. Then she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle— her parents immediately looked up at the familiar sound of Kara’s wolf whistle. When they spotted her, she was waving and pointing behind them, at Mila. They turned in their seats and saw their youngest daughter. Her dad’s arm was wrapped tightly around her mom’s chocolaty brown shoulder. They smiled in relief and waved at her before Mila turned her attention back to the busy hall.

The room was humming with conversation and confusion. Security officers, whom Mila had never seen in uniform before, were mixed among the crowd. They walked in and out of the hall, escorting needy citizens to the few empty seats remaining. These were mostly the elderly citizens who were too frail to attend the normal governing meetings.

One of the security officers, a man whom Mila recognized as one of the educators from the Institute of Basic Education, was walking along the back of the

room and pulling down long benches that had been folded into the wall. She had never realized that there were extra seats there before.

Looking around, she recognized another security officer as Lizzy Jackson—the wife of Leron, the Leopurd who gave his report at the last governing meeting. Lizzy was still carrying her infant daughter, Enette, but this time in a sling that held the baby close to her mother while she worked. Lizzy was escorting a graying Lian woman with a cane to a now available spot on the fold-down bench. The woman thanked Lizzy, who patted her arm gently before turning and walking back into the crowd to help more people.

Mila was surprised at how many security officers were there. In Shaku, there had not been a need for a full-time security force for decades, so all of the officers were volunteers who trained outside of their regular, full-time jobs. They were given an extra day off every week to dedicate to their training, which had always seemed strange to Mila considering that there was never really any need for their services in the first place. Now, she was grateful for their presence and comforted by the knowledge that they all knew what they were doing.

“I hope this thing starts soon,” Kinsy said, looking around anxiously.

Finn wrapped his arm around her and started gently rubbing her shoulder. “I’d certainly like to know what’s going on,” he agreed.

It was another ten minutes before they found out. After the entire city was assembled, and the security officers who had been sent out to check for stragglers had returned, the meeting was finally called to order.

Mako was once again sitting at the small table in the center of the room, the sign-language translators on each side of him. He only had to tap the wooden drum a few times before the room was silent. Apparently, everybody was eager to find out what was going on.

“Welcome, everybody, and thank you for your patience as we’ve been working through this chaotic situation together,” he began. “You have been called here tonight by an emergency alarm because we have discovered some new information about the attackers on our neighboring cities. Currently, we believe that the city is in no immediate danger,” he announced, and there was a collective sigh of relief from the audience. “But the Office of Security decided that it would be best to call everybody to a central location as a precaution,” he paused.

“You see, we have captured one of the attackers,” he said.

Gasps and cries of shock rang out all around. A buzz of conversation and shouted questions filled the room.

Mako held up his arms and waited for the noise to die down.

“Citizens, please remain calm. I understand that this is shocking information, but it would be best if we could maintain some form of order. Now, as we speak,

this captured attacker is being interrogated in our city's underground Bunker." The audience erupted in noise again.

One of the sign-language translators leaned over and whispered something into Mako's ear. His mouth formed a surprised "O" and he held up his arms again until it was quiet.

"My apologies, I forgot that some of our citizens are not familiar with our emergency system. Our city, along with every other city on Roq, is equipped with a sizeable underground Bunker— a structure to provide shelter in times of danger. Ours has not been used, even for practice drills, in over 50 years." He paused to let everybody process that information, and then continued patiently.

"As you may remember, we discovered a bunker in Danyo several weeks ago, after the city was abandoned. This was not the city's official designated emergency Bunker, however; when we searched in the official Bunker, it was empty. The structure that we found hidden was something else entirely— it is not reported on any of the city's official maps, and we still don't know what exactly it is. It appears to be some kind of 'unofficial' bunker." he explained in a clear voice.

Mila looked at Kinsy with wide, confused eyes. Why hadn't Mako shared this information at the meeting two weeks ago? And who else knew about the bunkers? Why did everyone seem to act just as clueless about it as she had been? Kinsy looked

back at her and shrugged, equally perplexed. They looked down at Mako, standing in the center of the room, and wondered.

“But back to the matter at hand,” he continued. “As I was saying, the attacker that we captured is being held in a secure cell within our city’s emergency Bunker. I apologize for the delay in calling this Meeting, however we have had great difficulty gathering any information from our captured attacker. The Office of Security and our team of investigators are questioning...” he paused, searching for the right word. “It... as we speak.” He ran a paw through his fluffy, graying mane.

“Now, I do not want to incite panic. However, the Office of Security feels that the safest option for us is to move into the emergency Bunker until we can be certain that there are not more attackers in or near our city. However, before we take a vote to confirm this decision, I’d like to open the floor to anybody who has questions, concerns, or suggestions,” he said, looking around expectantly. Surprisingly, only one paw rose into the air.

Mako pointed to a young woman in the middle of the audience. She stood and everybody turned to listen.

“Kara!” Mila whispered.

Mila’s sister looked like a combination of her dad and mom; whereas Mila was a perfect replica of her father with his orange and cream stripes, Kara’s fur had

more of their mother's brown tones. Her face had a kind look to it, and her voice was smooth and pleasant when she spoke.

“Kara Jenkins. I would like to suggest that we take into consideration the option of questioning this attacker as a community,” she said diplomatically. There were murmurs from the crowd at this suggestion. “What I mean is that as citizens of this city we all have the joint responsibility of governing and making decisions, which includes getting involved in the messy situations. I understand why the Office of Security took it upon themselves to interrogate the captured attacker, however I feel that it would be better for all of us to participate in this process,” she finished calmly.

Mako looked surprised and uncertain. “I suppose that you have a point there,” he admitted. “However, I have to share my deep concerns about this option. It could be quite dangerous to bring such a creature into the Hall without knowing much of anything about it. I would be hesitant to expose our entire community to such a threat, especially with all of our young children present. And yet, you are correct in your assertion that the community has a right to participate more closely in this process. Perhaps there is some middle ground we can find to ensure a higher level of security while still allowing more citizens to help with the interrogation,” he mused. “Any suggestions?” He looked around hopefully for a few long moments, and then pointed to a raised paw several rows behind Mila.

A Kat whom she had never seen before stood. He appeared to be around her age, and he had gray fur with black stripes. His eyes were a yellowish green color and the colors seemed to swim, turning liquid when they caught the light. As soon as Mila's gaze landed on him, her breath seemed to freeze in her lungs. She didn't know why, but something about him sent a wave of shock through her. Before she could make sense of the strange new sensation, he started talking.

"I think there is an easy solution. We can simply allow those who wish to stay to do so, and those who do not wish to stay can return to their homes or the emergency Bunker, depending on how we vote. Those with children who do not wish for them to stay can either leave with them, or send them to safety with a group of volunteer caretakers. That way everybody has the opportunity to participate," he finished smoothly. Mila wondered why he hadn't announced his name before speaking, but everybody seemed too worked up to mention it.

Mako looked thoughtful for a moment before agreeing, "Yes, that sounds like a reasonable compromise. Does anybody object?" The room was quiet, and the mysterious Kat sat down, disappearing into the audience. "Alright then, let's put this matter to a vote. Shall we move into the emergency Bunker until we can be more certain that the city is secure, or shall we remain in our homes? Remember, if we vote to move into the Bunker than we *all* must do so; we cannot seal the Bunker unless all of our citizens are inside of it, and it offers no better security than our



homes do without being sealed. As a class-two issue, this will be decided by a two-thirds majority vote. Does anybody object?" Again, the room was quiet.

Mako continued, "Alright then, all in favor of moving into the Bunker?"

Paws shot up all over the room. Mila, Kinsy, and Finn all voted yes, but she couldn't tell if there were enough votes to decide it. The paws stayed up for a minute while the vote counters counted them, scratching marks on their brown pads of paper. They were all volunteers, appointed by Eliza, who were under very serious oaths. It was one of the few ways in which Eliza actively participated in the government.

Finally, all of the votes from each section of the hall were in and combined to get the final number. One of the vote counters handed a slip of paper to Mako, who stood up and announced, "It has been decided that we will be moving into the Bunker." There were nods of approval, as well as some grunts of disapproval, from the audience.

"And now, I'd like to invite anybody who does not wish to participate in the interrogation of the captured attacker to leave the Hall. Those of you willing to take care of the children of those parents who wish to stay, please line up along the back wall so parents can locate you. Security officers will escort all departing citizens to the Bunker."

For the next ten minutes the room was full of movement, but in a much more calm fashion than when the alarm had first gone off. Mila and her friends decided to stay for the interrogation. She kept glancing behind her, trying to catch a glimpse of the stranger who had spoken earlier. She could still feel the unexpected dizziness in her head that came over her when she'd looked at him and heard his voice. She couldn't find him in the crowd, though, and eventually gave up, swiveling back around in her seat.

Looking around, she noticed several security officers gathered around Mako in the center of the room, and after a few moments they broke away and moved towards the doors.

Finn noticed Mila's gaze. "I bet they're going to tell the people at the Bunker to bring the prisoner." Mila nodded but shuddered inwardly at the use of the word "prisoner." It was a word that she'd only ever heard in history class.

Finally, after about half an hour of waiting, the room was much less full and quiet with anticipation. Then the doors at the back of the room swung open, and a sizeable team of security officers marched in.

In the center of the group, shackled and restrained in several heavy-looking chains, was the strangest creature Mila had ever seen.

## Chapter 8

*So much bare skin!* That was the first thing that Mila registered as she stared down at the strange creature in the center of the Meeting Hall. She had never seen so much bare, hairless, and featherless skin on one creature in her life.

The only part of this creature's body that wasn't bare was on its head, where a thin layer of greasy hair was growing out and down to its shoulders. It was wearing a raggedy brown cloth to cover the area between its legs in front and back. It looked like a strange skirt.

Mila assumed that the creature was male, since his chest was completely flat and uncovered. He let out a few angry-sounding grunts as the security officers pushed him down into a chair, which had been dragged in front of the small table where Mako sat. Everybody in the room stared, many of them with mouths hanging open. People on the other side of the room started shuffling closer to get a better look.

Mako cleared his throat and spoke. "Citizens, before you is one of the creatures who attacked our neighboring cities. Our search team discovered him hiding alone in one of the abandoned houses in Ocalla. Obviously, he matches the description that..." he looked down at his notes, "Mr. Finnigan Cooper provided for us at our last meeting."

At the sound of his full-name, which was rarely used, Finn stiffened and then shifting in his seat uncomfortably. Kinsy's eyes widened and she jabbed him lightly

with her elbow. “Finnigan?” she whispered with a giggle. “Your full name is Finnigan?” Mila glanced over and saw that he was holding a serious expression on his face with a great deal of effort. She bit her lip to keep from laughing. Completely unaware of the embarrassment he’d caused, Mako continued talking.

“Unfortunately, we have thus far been unable to communicate effectively with him. It is unclear whether he even speaks the same language as us.”

A buzz ran through the room. Felassian had been the only language in use for the past several hundred years on Roq. Before the years of peace, however there were many languages in use, created by different societies to distinguish and separate themselves from the others. Although the language system on Roq was eventually unified into the system it was today, some of these old, dead languages were still studied by scholars and historians. Still, none of them were used in day-to-day life and it was bewildering to think that this creature may somehow have never learned to speak Felassian.

“With that being said, I will now open the floor to anyone who wishes to question our...” he trailed off, then cleared his throat. “Visitor,” he finished simply.

Several paws went into the air, including Kara’s.

“Miss Kara Jenkins,” Mako pointed to her. “Since it was your suggestion to question the attacker as a community, why don’t you start us off?”

She nodded politely and stood. “May I approach the visitor?”

“If you wish,” Mako replied, “however, I suggest that for your own safety you keep a reasonable distance between him and yourself.” He motioned towards the guards, who stepped closer to the prisoner.

Kara walked swiftly down the stairs towards the center of the room. She stopped when she reached the floor, still about 15 feet away from the creature in the chair. Every eye in the room was glued on her.

For as long as Mila could remember, Kara had always had this power over people. There was just something about her that made people want to stop and watch. She was beautiful, but it was more than that. Everything about her was graceful and captivating: the way she moved, the sound of her voice, her angelic face, and her strong personality. This ability to capture attention was one of the reasons that she was so successful as a performer; she was the first singer under age 25 to be promoted to professional singer in over ten years. But no matter how successful or beautiful Kara was, she was still known best for her kindness and humility. And of course, to Mila, she would always just be her big sister.

Today, Kara was dressed in an elegant, yet simple dress. It was black, silky smooth, and hugged her in all the right places without being too revealing. Even in a delicate dress, though, she was ready to get down to business. She stepped closer to the prisoner and then knelt carefully on the floor in front of him, so that she could

look up into his face. The room was filled with a hum as people curiously watched and commented.

“What’s she doing?” Kinsy asked, crinkling her nose. “Why is she looking at him so closely?”

“It’s a Kara thing,” Mila explained quietly. “She’s trying to get into his head. Trying to make a connection. This is how she always used to get the truth out of me when I was younger, like when I would sneak a cookie before dinner or whatever. She’d get down on my level, establish my trust. As soon as I wasn’t scared of her anymore, I would tell her everything.” She smiled, remembering.

Down on the floor, Kara was still staring intently into the strange creature’s face. “Hi,” she finally said. “I’m Kara.” She offered a smile.

The creature stared back at her for a moment before opening his mouth. Then he spoke, a few short words pouring out of his mouth in an unidentifiable language.

“I don’t understand,” Kara said, shaking her head. “Do you speak Felassian?” He stared at her blankly. “Fe-la-ssi-an,” she repeated slowly. “No?” she shook her head, questioningly.

He spoke again in his strange language, a string of words that nobody could understand. Then, “Fe-la-ssi-an, no?” he said. It was unclear whether he knew what he was saying or whether he was just repeating sounds.

“This is no use,” Kara said, standing up. “He doesn’t understand us.”

“Yes, I think we can all agree on that,” Mako nodded, his forehead creased. “Unfortunately, I don’t see any way to get information out of him at this point. Does anybody have any suggestions?” He looked around hopefully.

Kara walked back to her seat quietly, and nobody spoke.

“Well then,” Mako said grimly, “We have no choice but to return this attacker to his cell and hope for another source of information soon. I regret that this meeting has been so unfruitful, but clearly, there is nothing more we can do.” He nodded at the security officers and they pulled the prisoner to his feet. He grunted at them and muttered something under his breath in his strange language.

Mako spoke over the sound. “For tonight, we will all move to the safety of the Bunker, which is where we will remain until—”

“Wait!” somebody suddenly shouted.

Every head in the room snapped in the direction of the voice. Ginnifer, Mila’s friend from the aviary, stood there nervously.

“Ginnifer Hudson,” she said in a shaky voice. “I can understand him.” The words tumbled out like a confession.

“I beg your pardon?” Mako asked, confused. “You can understand this creature? But he isn’t even speaking Felassian.”

“Yes,” Ginnifer hesitated. “I know. I can’t explain it... but I can understand everything he says. To me, it’s as if he *is* speaking Felassian. I was so confused at

first because nobody else seemed to understand him. Then I realized, it was just me,” she said, fidgeting with her paws.

“What in the name of a thousand crazed monkeys!” Kinsy whispered furiously. “How can she understand him? He’s speaking gibberish!”

Mila cracked a smile at Kinsy’s muted outburst, but shook her head. “I don’t know, but I believe her. I mean look at her... she’s a nervous wreck. Plus, she’s my friend. I don’t think she’d make something like this up.” The room was full of murmurs.

“Okay,” Mako finally said, uncertainly. “Well, then please, be our guest.” He gestured towards the prisoner. Ginnifer swallowed and made her way down to the floor. The security officers pushed him back down into the chair. Ginnifer reached the bottom step, stopped, and looked up at him with hesitation. Finally, she spoke quietly.

The words that came out of her mouth seemed nonsensical, but sounded similar to the way that the prisoner had spoken earlier. His head snapped up and he stared at her in shock. He said something and Ginnifer responded.

“Well wholly flying turtles,” Kinsy muttered, her mouth hanging open.

*She really understands*, Mila realized in awe. *She’s communicating with him!*  
After a few moments, Ginnifer looked up at the crowd.



“He said...” she began, “that he’s never seen anything like us before. Until about a month ago, during the attacks.”

The prisoner said something else and Ginnifer turned to listen.

“He says that exactly nineteen days ago, he was brought here from somewhere far away. He was in a large group of other people—” she broke off suddenly to say something to the creature. He responded and her brow furrowed.

“He says that his people are called... hh-eeeww-muns,” She pronounced the word carefully, uncertainly. “This one is named Arth.” She continued speaking to him in the strange foreign language.

“Arth says that he and the other... humans... with him were the second group to come to Roq. He knew a man in the first group, which is how he found out about the program. They came through some kind of portal...” she took a few steps closer to the human and cocked her head, firing more questions at him. Before he could answer, Mako interrupted.

“Wait a minute,” he said, “he said that they were the second group to *come to Roq*? As in...” he trailed off. Clearing his throat, he continued, “Does he mean to say that he’s from a different world?”

Ginnifer bit her lip, and asked something to the man. He answered quickly, and her eyes widened. “He says that he comes from a planet called Earth.”

“A planet? Called Earth?” Mako repeated carefully. “And what exactly is a planet?”

Ginnifer asked Arth the question and he answered animatedly, gesturing with his hands. “A planet is their word for the physical body of a world. There are other worlds out there,” she gestured vaguely into the distance, “and they also exist on planets. These planets can be seen by looking into the sky with special instruments. This is something that the humans on Earth have been studying for centuries.” Her voice was full of amazement.

“And how, exactly, would one travel from one planet to another? We’ve never even heard of such a thing, and never before have we been disturbed by the inhabitants of another world.” Doubt was heavy on his face.

Ginnifer spoke to Arth for a few moments again before explaining. “According to Arth, the people on his planet used to travel into ‘outer space,’ a word that they use for the far reaches of the sky. They would travel to other planets and to their moon. But this technology was destroyed many years ago, in a time of war on their planet. Today, traveling to other planets is not supposed to be possible for them,” she paused, looking at Arth. He muttered a few sentences to her, furrowing his eyebrows.

“He doesn’t know how to explain how he came here. He says it was like ‘magic,’” she said simply. “That’s their word for anything supernatural. Apparently,

most people on his planet believe that supernatural beings and events do not exist in reality.”

*That's odd*, Mila thought. To her, the supernatural was a normal part of everyday life. Eliza's powers were a part of her world like anything else, and she'd never considered that other worlds could exist, let alone other worlds without the supernatural.

Ginnifer continued to converse with the human while the room filled with whispers. Then she went on, “Arth says that he was brought here by a strange man. He never actually met him, and everybody just called him ‘The Boss.’ He’s in charge of a large organization called K-Corp. This organization offered him money to be part of a special project. A friend of his had worked on a project with them before, and he helped Arth get on the list. He was never given any information about it, though, until the day before he was supposed to start working.”

Arth shook his head, fear filling his eyes as he spoke. Ginnifer translated, “That day, a man who worked for K-Corp came to his house and told him to come with him. They traveled to a strange building in a city he’d never been to before. There were many other people there, hundreds of men, and more of them kept arriving. All of them were poor, just like Arth. He says that where he comes from, there are many poor people who barely have enough to survive. They aren’t given

food or shelter or clothing. Most of them are uneducated and have no jobs,” she frowned.

Mila and Kinsy exchanged grim glances. *What kind of society is this planet Earth? How could a world become so terrible?*

“But anyway, after Arth arrived, many more people came. Finally, the man in charge of the group gave them some basic instructions. There were other men who worked for K-Corp there, too, about a dozen guards with weapons. They started to threaten the volunteers. They were told to go through a doorway, which would take them to a place they’d never been before. They were supposed capture all of the animals that they found there. When they returned, they would be paid for their participation. They were given nets and ropes to use.” Ginnifer’s face grew concerned, and Mila felt an uneasy sensation blossoming in her gut.

“Then, the man opened the door, which he called a ‘portal,’ and they were ordered to run through, one by one. As soon as the door opened, a blinding white light appeared behind it and nobody could see what was inside. The guards forced the people to run through and when it was Arth’s turn, he followed them.” Ginnifer paused and spoke quickly to Arth, gathering more information.

“As soon as he stepped into the doorway, he was instantly transported here, to our world. He appeared in a city in the desert—that must’ve been Danyo. But the city was abandoned, completely empty. After all of the volunteers came through, the

guards followed. The man in charge told them to walk, pointing them in the right direction. Arth says that they walked for the rest of the day, through the desert and then through a valley, before they arrived in a second city by the beach,” Ginnifer said. “Ocalla.”

She paused. “That’s when he saw us for the first time— Felisaans.” She looked up at Mako, fear growing on her face.

“Please, go on,” he prompted gently. She turned back to Arth and spoke to him again.

“As soon as they arrived, the humans started to capture Felisaans. Arth says that he felt frozen; he could see that we were people, not animals. He saw the humans pulling families apart, taking children from their parents and tying them up, throwing nets over the parents,” her voice cracked. Some people in the crowd shouted out in distress. Arth continued to speak, and she translated. “People were screaming. He spun around, searching for a clear path away from the city, desperate to get back. But there were people everywhere, and the guards were watching them all from a distance. He knew that he would never escape unnoticed. Instead, he ran to the nearest house he could find, searching for a place to hide. There was a family inside. He tried to tell them to hide, but they couldn’t understand him. They screamed and ran from the house, straight into the nets of the humans outside.” Ginnifer’s lip trembled. “After that, he stayed inside the house. After a while, everybody in the

city was captured and the humans started to march them back in the direction that they'd come from."

"And what happened after that?" Mako asked patiently.

Ginnifer listened as Arth continued his story then turned around to face the audience. "He was frightened, so he stayed in the house for a long time. A few hours, he thinks. Eventually, he went outside and tried to walk back to the empty city where he'd first appeared— Danyo. But he got lost and decided to turn back. He's been staying in Ocalla ever since, living in the abandoned houses."

Mako frowned. "Well why hasn't he tried to find his way back again? Doesn't he want to return to his own world?"

Ginnifer translated the question to Arth, and his face fell. He spoke quietly for a few moments. Ginnifer's expression shifted from surprise, to confusion, to sadness as she listened.

"He says that he did want to go home... that he has a family back on Earth. A wife and three children. But he was afraid to go back to the city. His friend who worked on the project before him warned him about the importance of following directions. He didn't know what 'The Boss' would do to him if he tried to come back at that point. There was another reason, too," Ginnifer frowned. "He feels very guilty about it, but he was sort of happy there in Ocalla. There was plenty of food left in

the houses for him to eat, and it was so quiet and peaceful, so unlike the place where he lived on Earth. He wanted to stay there, just for a little while,” she explained.

“Ah, I see,” Mako said slowly, pausing to think. “Is there anything else that this human would like to share with us?”

Ginnifer asked Arth, and he shook his head, saying something quietly.

“No, that’s all he knows,” she said.

“Alright, then,” he paused. “We’ve been given a great deal of information at once, and I feel it best that we take some time to consider all that we’ve learned. We will have another meeting tomorrow evening in the Bunker’s Meeting Hall to discuss the next steps. Does anybody have anything to add?”

The room filled with quiet chatter. Then, somebody called out, “What about the human? What are we going to do with him?”

Mako looked thoughtful. “Ah, good question,” he said. “I feel that the prisoner should be returned to his cell in the Bunker for the time being. We cannot be positive that he can be trusted yet, and this seems like the safest course of action,” he said. Then he added, “Does anybody object?”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then, Ginnifer cleared her throat nervously. “Actually, yes,” she said. “I object. I would feel quite comfortable declaring Arth harmless.” Her voice shook slightly. “He’s a victim just like us— I feel it would be

inappropriate to keep him locked up like some kind of criminal.” Her voice was quiet but firm. All over the room, people started whispering.

“I see,” Mako said carefully. “Well then, of course, we shall vote on the matter. As a class one issue, it will be decided—”

“Excuse me,” Ginnifer interrupted, “I’m sorry, but I feel this issue is certainly more risky than class one! We’re considering imprisoning a person who we have little reason to believe is dangerous,” she said, indignant. Then, more calmly, “Look, even if I’m wrong, the issue should still be taken more seriously. In fact, especially if I’m wrong. We could be risking the safety of every person in the city. Not,” she quickly inserted, “that we have any reason to believe that to be true. But still, I will admit that it *is* a possibility. Either way, it’s a serious issue. I petition to vote on this as a class *two* issue.”

“Very well,” Mako said, a barely noticeable edge of annoyance sneaking into his voice. “We will require an additional four petitions in order to finalize this woman’s suggestion.” He spoke to the room, conspicuously avoiding Ginnifer’s eyes.

“I second the petition,” said a male voice. Mila’s head snapped to the right. It was the same Kat from earlier who’d had such a strange effect on her. She somehow hadn’t noticed that he was now sitting only four seats away from her.



“I second the petition as well,” somebody said, but Mila’s attention was still focused on the gray and black stranger. As if sensing her stare, he turned his head and glanced in her direction. Their eyes met and locked for a split second. Mila saw the swirling greens and yellows in his eyes and let out a small gasp. For a moment, she thought she saw the corner of his mouth lift slightly, but then he turned away. She forced her gaze away from him, staring straight ahead.

Kinsy nudged her with an elbow, a question in her eyes. She nodded towards the gray Kat. “Do you know him?” she mouthed.

Mila shook her head, forcing a casual expression. Another person spoke, and Kinsy shifted her attention towards the voice.

“I second the petition,” a female voice said.

“And I finalize it,” somebody else said quickly after.

Mako’s face seemed to harden for a moment, but then he smiled politely. “Alright then, the issue will be voted as a class two issue, which requires a two-thirds majority vote to pass. If the vote comes out with less than two thirds on either side, then we will have to call in our mediator.”

*Eliza*, Mila thought. It was exceedingly rare, but whenever an agreement could not be made in governing meetings, calling in Eliza to mediate was the last resort. She was fair, neutral, and wise, which made her the best judge for issues that were at a standstill.

“Without further delay, let us vote. All in favor of returning the human to his cell in the Bunker for the time being, until more information can be gathered?”

For a moment, Mila thought that nobody would vote. Then, slowly, paws started going into the air. Kinsy and Finn voted, but Mila kept her paw down for Ginnifer’s sake, trusting her friend’s judgment. Still, more and more paws went up until it was clear that the issue was decided. The vote counters marked them down and did the math anyway. Mako was handed a slip of paper.

“It has been decided that the prisoner will remain in his cell,” he said, his expression serious. Ginnifer’s shoulders dropped in disappointment, but she nodded politely before finally returning to her seat. Mila noticed her watching the human as she sat. He seemed to be watching her as well.

“With that, I declare this session over. Let us all proceed to the Bunker so that we can all be sealed safely inside. I will see all of you at the meeting tomorrow evening.” Several security officers moved closer to Arth as they waited for the room to clear out before escorting him back to his cell.

Everybody else started to stand and walk towards the exit. Mila took a quick look around, searching for the gray Kat, but he’d already managed to disappear into the crowd. Kinsy and Finn stood up and Mila followed their lead, out of the Meeting Hall and into the cool night air. Security officers stood along the path, guiding the citizens to the Bunker where they would be safe.

## Chapter 9

The three friends walked in silence along the path, each immersed in his or her own thoughts. After a while, Mila glanced up and noticed Ginnifer walking alone at the back of the group.

“Hey guys, I’m going to talk to someone for a few minutes. Meet you at the Bunker?”

“Sure, sounds good,” Kinsy smiled. “Don’t get lost,” she said with a wink.

Finn put his hand on her elbow and gently led her away, while Mila started to weave her way back through the crowd.

“Hey,” she said when she reached Ginnifer.

“Hey Mila,” she said softly. “How’re you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. Look, I just wanted to tell you that I think what you did back there, speaking up and translating for us, well, it was really brave. I mean, if it wasn’t for you, we still wouldn’t know anything about the attackers. So thanks,” she gave Ginnifer’s shoulder a squeeze.

Ginnifer looked at her with a sad smile. “Yeah, of course. It was nothing, really.”

“Nothing?” Mila said, surprised. “Gin, what you did was not nothing. It was amazing!” she paused. “It was *really* amazing...” she said slowly. “So amazing that I have to wonder— how did you do it?”

Ginnifer shrugged and looked down at her paws. “I dunno, Mila. I just did.”

Mila studied her face. “Really? There’s nothing at all that you can think of? Nothing that might explain how you did it? Maybe it was something you ate,” she joked, playfully poking her friend in the arm.

A small smile played at Ginnifer’s lips for a moment, but then it was gone.

“Nah, I don’t think that was it,” she said. She looked carefully at Mila, as if trying to decide something. “But there is one thing I can think of,” she finally said.

“Really? Well what is it?” Mila asked, excited.

“This morning, Eliza came to visit me. I didn’t call her, she just came. And she told me that she had something for me— a gift,” she hesitated.

“What kind of gift?” Mila asked, intrigued.

“She didn’t say. She just said that I would know it when I saw it. Then she told me to relax and close my eyes. She put a hand on my forehead, and for a few seconds I swear it felt like I was flying. Then it was over and I opened my eyes. She was just standing there with that knowing smile on her face. She told me to use my gift wisely and that she’d see me later. And that was it.” Ginnifer shrugged.

“Wow,” Mila said. “That is definitely... mysterious.” She grinned. “Well I guess now you know what the gift was. You can understand the humans.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she smiled, but her eyes were far away.

“Well anyway, thanks again for speaking up. You did us all a service, really,” Mila said warmly. “And hey, I’m sorry that your proposal to let the human go didn’t pass.”

Ginnifer shrugged, but looked disappointed. “It’s no big deal,” she said. “Arth will be alright. As soon as we do some more investigating and everybody is convinced that his story is true, they’ll let him out.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right,” Mila agreed. “Well, I’m going to go catch up with Kinsy. I’ll catch you later?”

“Sure, see you later Mila.”

Mila turned and climbed swiftly through the trees, following the flow of people towards the Bunker.

~

It took Mila just over twenty minutes to reach the Bunker. It was at the very edge of the city, past the Aviary, and the heavy traffic made the distance seem even longer. She knew she had finally arrived when she saw a security officer waiting in the branches just ahead, directing the stream of citizens towards the platforms below.

“Down there,” she said, pointing.

Mila looked down and saw that people were jumping onto the platforms from the trees, and then leaping back off into the branches below. She followed.

When she reached the lowest hanging branches, she stopped to watch where the others were going. Her eyes popped open in disbelief. A line of people had formed on the forest floor. One by one, they were disappearing... into a bush. It wasn't a large bush, and at first Mila could not understand how they were all fitting inside. Then she realized that they were dropping down into the ground as they stepped in.

Driven by curiosity, she joined the others in line. When she reached the front, she discovered a stone staircase leading down into the earth. The entrance was underneath a wooden hatch that had been concealed by plants. A security officer stood and held the hatch open, gesturing for Mila to step inside.

She cautiously started walking down the stairs. There were torches hanging from the walls every fifteen feet or so, but the cavern was still heavy with shadows. Fortunately, she didn't have to face the creepy passageway alone. She recognized the people in front of her as a group of fellow students, and behind her, she heard familiar voices. She turned her head and smiled, happily surprised.

"Mr. and Mrs. Watson!" she exclaimed, slowing down to walk with them.

"Mila! How very nice to see you," replied the woman. She was a fluffy white Kat with a hint of brown on her nose and ears. "I'm surprised you're not with Kinsy!"

“I know,” Mila laughed, “We were at the meeting together but she went ahead with Finn.”

“Oh, of course, how could I forget? Our little Kinsy is *dating* now.” She laughed and bumped shoulders with her husband.

“Right, well,” he said gruffly. “What do you think of Finn?” He looked at Mila seriously.

“Oh, believe me, you have nothing to worry about. He’s a really good man. Very respectful, hard-working, and in my opinion, perfectly suited for Kinsy. They’re two peas in a pod!” she enthused.

“Alright, fair enough,” he said with a wry smile. “But you keep an eye on him, okay? Make sure he doesn’t hurt my daughter. Because if he does, we know what’ll happen. Don’t we Peanut?” He reached over to tickle his son, who was hanging onto his mother’s back.

“Yeah, yeah!” he said. “If Finny hurt Kinsy, Daddy go rawrrrr!!!” He did his best version of a ferocious face, and Mila couldn’t help but laugh.

“Very funny, Cal, but we all know that you’re really a big softy,” said Mrs. Watson. He grinned at her.

“That may be so, but where my kids are concerned, you know I’d do anything to protect them.”

“Of course you would,” Mila said. “How could you not when you have such great kids?” She ruffled Peanut’s fur playfully.

“So, Mila, how are things with you? Are there any special young men in your life?” Mrs. Watson asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, no,” Mila blushed. “Nothing like that right now. I’ve been a little bit distracted with all of this craziness, you know?” She gestured at the shadowy stone walls around her.

“Certainly, I can’t blame you for that. Of course, it hasn’t seemed to stop Kinsy from falling in love, now has it? I suppose that danger has a strange way of pushing people together sometimes,” Mrs. Watson mused. “Maybe life will surprise you soon with someone special of your own,” she teased.

Mila laughed lightly, although she strongly doubted it. Even though many of her peers had started dating as early as age ten, Mila still had never had a boyfriend. At 18 years old, she was a bit of an oddity. Fortunately, most people in Shaku tended to mind their own business when it came to personal matters like that, so she’d never really been teased about it. Still, the fact that she’d never even had a real interest in romance, let alone a romantic partner of any kind, was one of her most embarrassing secrets. She’d always just chalked it up to her being so shy, and she tried to stay optimistic. She was sure that one day, she would find a person who she’d want to start a relationship with, and who hopefully would want to start one with her too.



Mila continued to chat with Kinsy's family as they walked deeper and deeper into the ground. Finally, they reached the end of the stairway. There was a short, flat passageway and then a doorway—the “door” was a thick, gray, slab of stone that had been pushed aside. Mila walked through and found herself in another hallway. The ceilings were higher here, which gave it a more open feeling. Finally, the hallway opened up into a larger room.

A row of narrow tables were lined up front and center, and behind them sat about a dozen citizens wearing matching vests. They were made of orange fabric and the words “emergency worker” were written across the front. Small wooden signs hung from the tables, labeled “A & B,” “C & D,” “E & F,” and so on.

Another woman with an emergency worker vest stood near the entrance to the room.

“Please proceed to the table with the first letter of your last name,” she said to Mila and the other people near her. Mila walked over to the “J” table.

A kind-looking Tyger sat behind the table. “Mr. Hadley,” she said fondly.

“Why if it isn't Mila Jenkins! How are you these days?” His eyes crinkled when he smiled, reminding Mila of all the days she'd spent with him so many years ago. He had been her educator at the Institution of Basic Education, from the day she turned five until the day she turned ten and graduated as a Junior Citizen.

“I'm doing fine, thank you. What about you?”

“Oh, just fine as well, thanks. Here is your welcome kit,” he said, pulling a brown satchel out from under the table. “In it, you will find some basic necessities for your personal use and a packet of instructions for your stay here in the Bunker.”

“Thanks,” she said, tucking the bag under her arm.

“You are quite welcome, young lady,” he said, turning his attention to a packet of papers on the table. He flipped through them quickly, and Mila saw that they were a list of names. “Ah, yes, it appears that your father, mother, and sister have all been checked in already. You will be staying in Section D, Room 16. Your sister, Kara, will be in the room with you. Your parents are in Section C, Room 13, if you’d like to visit them.” He made a mark next to Mila’s name. “To get to your room, go through this door behind me,” he pointed, “and take a right. Keep going and follow the signs to Living Quarters Section D.”

“Okay, thank you. Have a nice night!” she said, then made her way around the table and towards the door.

Behind the door was a hallway leading to the right and left. She could see that both paths curved inward, as if forming a giant circle. In front of her was another door, marked “Meeting Hall & Cafeteria.” She went to the right and followed the pathway.

As she went around the curve, more doors kept appearing on her left, all of them marked “Meeting Hall & Cafeteria.” *That must be the center of the circle,* she

thought. On her right, there were signs posted on the wall; the first one said “Living Quarters Section E, Rooms 1 & 2.” Next to the sign was a short hallway perpendicular to the one she was in. A few feet away, the next sign read “Living Quarters Section E, Rooms 3 & 4,” and then there was another hallway. The pattern continued as she walked, until finally, after rooms 19 and 20, she saw a sign that made her pause.

“Armory & Training Center,” it said. *Armory? Isn't that a room where people keep weapons? And what kind of training would they do here?* She stood there for a moment. The hallway was empty, though she could hear voices not too far away. Finally, her curiosity got the best of her and she reached for the door, pushing it open slowly.

“Whoa...” she said quietly as she stepped inside. The room was relatively large and open, and her voice echoed off of the high ceiling and cold stone walls. At the far end of the room, there were weapons hanging from nets on the walls. Spears with sharp stone tips, axes with heavy-looking gray heads, and bows with sheaves of arrows hung by the dozen. Against the wall was a wooden bin, filled to the top with thick wooden clubs.

“Excuse me, miss, but this room is not open to public access right now,” said a voice at the other side of the room, startling Mila.

“Oh, jeez, I’m sorry,” she stuttered, spinning around to face him. He was a security officer, a man she recognized as one of the shop owners in town.

“It’s no problem, I’m sure that you were just curious. This room will be open tomorrow, when the trainers are here.”

“Okay,” Mila said, “Sorry, again.” She waved awkwardly and then turned and went back through the door and into the hallway.

*That was strange*, she thought, as she continued back down the hall. She soon reached section D, but heard Kara’s beautiful singing voice before she saw the sign for her room. After a few more long strides, she turned down another short hallway and found room 16. Pushing aside the heavy cloth hanging in the doorway, she came into a small, dimly lit cavern. Like the rest of the bunker, the living space was carved out of the gray stone walls, and lit with torchlight. The room was small enough to be lit relatively well with only one torch, which was hanging from the back wall. Two sets of wooden bunk beds were against the right and left walls, and two medium sized cubbies were squeezed between the beds and the entry way on each side. Sitting on the bottom bunk on the right side of the room was Kara. Her eyes were closed and she was singing quietly. Mila recognized the song as a lullaby that her parents used to sing to them when they were babies.

Mila put her pack of belongings down in the cubby next to the one Kara had claimed, and cleared her throat. Kara's eyes opened in surprise, and then smiled when she saw her sister.

"Hey kiddo," she said. "I guess we're going to be living together again, at least for a little while." She stood and the girls embraced for a long moment. "How are you doing, Miles?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said easily. "I'm just happy knowing that we're all here, safe and sound." Her smile was genuine, but subdued.

"Yeah, me too," Kara agreed, then looked around. "The room is a little cozy, but at least it's clean and comfortable. These beds aren't bad at all," she said, sitting down heavily on hers so that she bounced a little.

"So I guess that means you're claiming this one?" Mila gestured to where she was sitting. "That's fine with me, I think I prefer the top bunk anyway." She used the side of the bed to climb up, an easy task for someone accustomed to climbing trees on a daily basis. The mattress was made of a woven cloth, stuffed with soft and supportive material, most likely cotton and other plant fibers. She stretched out on the comfy mattress and yawned deeply. "It's been a long day," she mumbled.

"It sure has," Kara agreed. Then she looked thoughtful. "Hey, do you know who our other roommates are? Mr. Hadley only told me where you and our parents were staying."

Mila thought for a moment. “You’re right. I think they only give information about one’s own family... but we must have other roommates, this room was designed to fit four people. I wonder who they are?”

Just then, the curtain in the doorway was pushed open and a younger man walked in. The young Lian who stood in the doorway had a scraggly mane that was still growing in, and wore loose shorts and a worn t-shirt. He froze for a moment, then looked embarrassed. “Oh goodness, I’m sorry. I must’ve misread the sign,” he said quickly, then walked back out of the room. Kara and Mila exchanged amused glances. A moment later, the same young man walked back in. “Or, apparently not,” he said. “I’m supposed to be in D16 as well.” He looked around awkwardly. “So... did you know that the rooms were going to be co-ed?” He said, trying to fill the silence.

Kara laughed lightly. “No, I didn’t really think about it I guess. But it’s really not that surprising. Only kittens and junior citizens get separated by gender for organized events, really. We’re all adults here, I’m sure we’ll be fine,” she smiled at him, trying to ease his discomfort.

“Ah, yes, of course,” he said, then bit his lip. “I guess I’m still getting used to this whole ‘adult’ thing. I just turned 15 last month,” he explained.

“Ohhhh,” Kara said, “that makes sense then. Well, don’t worry about it. You’ll start feeling like an adult before you know it,” she said with a wink. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Marvin.” He smiled and tried to look confident.

“Well, Marvin, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Kara, Kara Jenkins. The silent Kat watching you from the top bunk is my sister, Mila.”

Mila blushed beneath her fur and gave Kara a pointed look. Her sister always did enjoy poking fun at her quiet and shy demeanor. “Hi Marvin,” she said in friendly voice. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He smiled back at them for a moment, before a look of surprise suddenly appeared on his face. “Wait a minute...” he said, “You’re Kara Jenkins? Like, *the* Kara Jenkins?”

It was Kara’s turn to blush. “I’m guessing you’ve heard some of my music before?” she asked modestly.

“Yes, of course I have! I love you!” he said exuberantly, then realizing what he’d said, he cleared his throat and tried to put on a straight face. “I mean, your music, that is. I love your music. You have a wonderful voice.” He paused, clearly uncomfortable. “What I mean to say is, congratulations on your success,” he finished abruptly and then turned away, busying himself with arranging his belongings in one of the empty cubbies. The girls didn’t see his embarrassed expression as he tried to

conceal his infatuation with Kara, but based on his strange behavior, they could guess as much.

Kara gave Mila a knowing smile, then lay down on her bed to relax. Several long, silent minutes passed before finally, the curtain moved again and the group met their fourth roommate.

“Hey guys,” he greeted them eagerly.

“Jacko!” Mila and Kara shouted in unison. “What a surprise,” Kara beamed, closing the distance between them and pulling him in for a quick hug. “You’re our roommate?”

“Apparently so! This is D16, right?” he smiled.

“That’s right,” Mila affirmed, leaping gracefully down from the bed to contribute her own welcoming hug.

Jacko greeted both girls warmly. As a city messenger, he was both popular and fairly familiar with everyone in the city. He was also friendly and charismatic, prerequisites for somebody whose job it was to talk to so many people every day. Since he was close to Kara’s age, they’d been in a few classes together back in Secondary Education. He let an extra moment pass before releasing her from the embrace. After giving Mila a friendly hug, he glanced at the fourth person in the room. “Well if it isn’t Marvin Jerlo,” he grinned.

“Hey Jacko,” Marvin replied. “How are you?”



“I’m doing fine, thank you. And yourself?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” he paused. “To be honest, I’m kind of relieved that I’m not the only boy in a room full of girls,” he chuckled nervously. The girls smiled benevolently and exchanged knowing glances.

“Don’t worry, Marvin. Girls won’t make you nervous forever. One day, you may even date one.” Jacko playfully nudged the younger man’s shoulder. Marvin blushed deeply and turned back to his cubby to try to hide it. The older adults all grinned mischievously at each other. They’d all been in that awkward stage between becoming an adult and feeling like one themselves once, and they knew that the best way to get past it was to learn to be comfortable in one’s own skin. Part of getting there was learning to laugh at oneself.

“Well, since you all beat me here it looks like I’ve been assigned this top bunk over here,” Jacko said.

Marvin glanced up at the bed, then back down at the one he’d selected. “Actually, I’m alright with either bed if you have a preference. I don’t care either way. Would you prefer the bottom bunk?” he offered.

Jacko shrugged. “If you really don’t care, then sure. I like being close to the floor, so I can get up and go at a moment’s notice,” he grinned and hopped lightly from foot to foot, as if preparing to take off running at any moment. Then he stopped

and glanced appreciatively at Kara. “Plus, if I’m down here then I have a better view of this beautiful woman,” he teased.

Marvin frowned slightly. He hadn’t thought of that... but what did it matter anyway? Kara was way out of his league, and much older than him besides. *Oh well*, he thought. “Okay then, I’ll take the top.”

After everyone was settled into their respective spaces of the room, they decided to go down to the cafeteria to see if dinner was being served. Although the sun had set over an hour ago, and it felt even later because they were in the dark underground, none of them had eaten before the emergency alarm had gone off. The hungry group of four left the room together, but disbanded when Marvin hurried away toward the cafeteria and Kara and Jacko lingered back, walking slowly and chatting.

In the cafeteria, Mila was happy to find many citizens already gathered with steaming plates of food. She searched the tables until she found Kinsy, sitting with Finn and interestingly enough, Ginnifer. Mila was friends with the two girls, but she’d never known them to spend time with each other except when she was with them. She quickly walked over to join them.

“Mila,” Kinsy smiled “I was wondering when you’d show up. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Sorry, I was meeting my roommates and I didn’t realize there would be dinner! I’m sure glad there is though, because I’m half-starved. Where’d you get the food?”

“Over there,” Finn pointed to the back wall of the circular room.

Mila nodded gratefully, then walked to the buffet tables with one thought on her mind; filling her grumbling stomach. Suddenly she felt somebody watching her and she slowed down, glancing casually around the large room. The moment her eyes landed on the familiarly unfamiliar Kat from the meeting, she froze.

She felt strange electric sensations running up and down her limbs as their eyes met. The color in his yellow-green eyes seemed to swirl, just as it had the last time. She felt strangely drawn to him, and had to stop herself from taking a step in his direction. *What is going on? She wondered. I don’t even know this guy. Why would I want to go talk to him?* Forcibly, she broke her gaze and started walking towards the food again. Strangely, her stomach didn’t feel as empty now as it had moments before.

After putting a few small things on her plate, Mila turned back to join her friends at their table. Though she tried not to, she couldn’t help but glance in the mysterious Kat’s direction. She almost tripped on her own feet when she realized he wasn’t where she’s just seen him moments before. He was gone! She searched the

room for him, but could not find him. Bewildered, she returned to her seat and stared at her food, deep in her own thoughts.

It took her a moment to realize that Ginnifer had asked her a question.

“Um, hello? Anybody in there?” Kinsy waved her paw in front of Mila’s face.

“Huh, what?” she asked, flustered.

Ginnifer laughed lightly. “I was just asking you who your roommates are,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. My sister, Kara, is one of my roommates. The others are Jacko and this younger guy named Marvin Jerlo.”

“Interesting,” said Ginnifer. “I think my theory was right, then. It seems like we’re organized into rooms by our age group, and then alphabetically by last name. We’re all in the ‘single adults’ category, Section D, it seems” she explained. “I’m rooming with Riley Edwards, and Tom and Amy Gerber, the twin siblings who turned 15 last summer.” The others nodded in recognition.

“Marvin just turned 15 as well. He’s the Lian who moved here from Ocala when he was five,” Mila noted.

“That’s always a fun age,” chuckled Finn. “Especially for the guys, it seems. They never know what to do with themselves.”

“I’d definitely second that,” Mila said. “Marvin seems like a sweet guy, but he was a bit awkward when we met him. Plus, he seems to have a crush on Kara, which only makes things more embarrassing” she said with a grin.

“Well, can you really blame him? Kara’s like a superstar now! Way cooler than that shy little sister of hers,” she teased, then reached a paw across the table to grasp Mila’s. “Only kidding, girly. You know I love you, and *we* think you’re the coolest.”

“Speaking of the coolest,” said Jacko, startling the group of friends. He’d appeared suddenly at their table, and was now leaning casually on it with his elbows. “I just wanted to stop by to say hi. Oh, and to do my job, which is to deliver the following message: the next governing meeting to discuss our city’s next steps will be tomorrow at 17:00, in this room. I’ll see you guys there,” he said with a wink, and then he spun away to deliver the message to the next table.

“Hmm... Is it just me, or does Jacko seem in a better mood than he usually is?” Mila asked.

“I’d say so,” said Kinsy. “Hey, I wonder if he’s found himself a girlfriend!”

“Mila, didn’t you say that he’s rooming with you and your sister?” Finn asked with a touch of humor, as if the thought hadn’t already crossed everyone’s mind. It was popular knowledge that Jacko had been flirting shamelessly with Kara for years.

“Why yes, Finnigan, I did say that.” Mila responded, careful to pronounce his name clearly. He glared at her, but the look was full of playfulness, not malice. “Seriously though, do you guys really think they’re going to get together? I mean, she is two years older than him.”

Kinsy looked at her with a serious expression. “No, Mila, I don’t think they’re going to get together,” she said, before letting a smile creep onto her face. “Because I think they already are!” she giggled. “And honestly, what’s two years? They’re both full-adult citizens. It’s not like your sister’s dating a 19 year old,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Mila replied. “I just want the best for my sister. But you know, Jacko is a pretty good guy. She could do a lot worse,” she admitted.

“Well, speaking of full-adult citizens,” Ginnifer chimed in, “I think it’s time for you kitties to go to bed, and let the real grownups like me do some fully-adult things. You know, like drink coffee and talk about the best way to raise children,” she said in a fake pretentious voice. The others laughed and rolled their eyes.

“If you want to stay up, little miss full-adult, then you be my guest!” Kinsy joked. “Personally, I’m exhausted. I think it really is bed time for this little kitty,” she said with a wink. Mila and Finn quickly agreed, and said goodbye to Ginnifer before heading back to the living quarters. As Mila walked away, she glanced back to see the fluffy gray and white Kat slipping quietly out the other side door. Too

exhausted to let her curiosity lead her, she shrugged it off and followed her friends to section D.

After saying goodbye to Kinsy and Finn, Mila went to her room. Marvin was the only one there, and she greeted him quietly before climbing into her bed and falling fast asleep.

## Chapter 10

The next day, Mila woke up disoriented in the dark underground cave. What time was it? She had absolutely no idea, and the feeling was more than a little uncomfortable. She rolled over in her bed and rubbed her eyes, looking around the small room. When she looked down, she noticed that Jacko's bed was empty, but not made. There was a Marvin-sized lump in the bunk bed across from her, to her relief. At least she wasn't the only one still in bed, which gave her a hint about the time. Then she pulled herself to the edge of her mattress and craned her head over the edge to check Kara's bed.

To her great surprise, there were not one, but two people in the bed beneath her. She squinted to see in the dim light, and realized with a shock that it was Kara and Jacko, snuggling contentedly. *Well, I guess that answers that question,* she thought. For as long as she could remember, Kara had never had any boyfriends. Sure, she'd been out on dates every now and then, but Mila had never seen her in an actual relationship. And though it was shocking at first to see her sharing a bed with Jacko, the thought of her big sister finding a man to love brought a warm smile to her face. *She deserves to be happy,* she thought.

Now that she was awake, Mila decided to go and see if anyone else was up, and perhaps attempt to find a sundial. *Wait a minute,* she realized. *Sundials only work where there's sun... How the heck are we supposed to know what time it is*



*down here?* A constricted, claustrophobic feeling started to creep up on her, and she decided to take the first step towards the outside world by getting out of her tiny room. She jumped down from her bed, landing with a barely audible thump, and quickly grabbed her pack before pushing aside the drape and stepping into the cool hallway. She looked both ways and saw a small sign with a toilet on it pointing to the right. That was when she realized just how badly she needed to relieve herself.

She quickly walked down the hall, and was relieved to find the women's bathroom at the end. When she went inside, she was even happier to find that there were quite a few people there already, using the facilities to freshen up.

"Excuse me," she approached one of the girls she knew. "Do you know what time it is?"

The girl turned to her and said that it was around 10:00. Mila was surprised at how late she's slept, and hurried to get ready for the day.

~

Later, Mila decided to explore the Bunker more thoroughly. She wanted to find a quiet place where she could talk to Eliza with relative privacy. She decided to start by actually looking at the map she'd been given and reading some of the informational material in her welcome kit.

Back in her room, she sat on the bed and unwrapped the satchel that Mr. Hadley had given her. Inside she found several pieces of parchment. The first one she examined was a map, quite simply drawn, in black ink with no colors. Since all documents such as this had to be hand drawn, and one had to be made for each of the over 400 citizens of Shaku, they were usually done with as little detail as possible. She saw that her original idea about the layout of the bunker was correct.

It was essentially a big circle, with the center taken up by the Meeting Hall/Cafeteria, and a circular hallway bordering it. The third and final ring of the circle consisted of the Living Quarters and several other rooms, including the Armory/Training Center, the Recreational Room, and a large entry way at the front where they'd entered the Bunker. She noticed an additional room protruding off of the side of the Meeting Hall/Cafeteria, which was the Kitchen. Last, she saw that another rectangular room branched off from the Recreational Room, and was labeled "Light Room." She wondered what a Light Room was, and decided that she would find out as soon as she could.

Next, she turned her attention to the other pieces of parchment from her packet. One was little more than a small scrap, and had her name and room number on it. Another was a schedule. According to it, breakfast was served from 7:00 to 9:00 each morning, lunch was served from 12:00 to 14:00, and dinner was from 16:00 to 18:00. In between meals, the other facilities were open to specific sections

of people at specific times. For section D, Mila's section, the Armory/Training Center was open from 14:00 to 15:00, and the Rec. Room was open from 15:00 to 16:00. The Light Room was open in the morning, from 10:00 to 11:00. There was a note below the schedule stating that the allotted times for the community rooms would be strictly enforced, to ensure that all community members had the opportunity to enjoy the facilities. She also noticed that at mealtimes and from 18:00 to 20:00, all citizens had access to those three rooms.

After checking out the schedule, Mila furrowed her brow. *Alright, so this is the schedule, she thought, but how am I supposed to know what time it is so I can follow it?* She picked up the last piece of parchment, entitled "Other Important Information." There, she found the answer to her question; in the Light Room, there was a sundial, and it would be used to keep track of the time. Every half an hour, several of the Meeting Hall Staff Members would walk around the Bunker and flip the wooden tiles on special devices called Time Keepers. These were made of thin wooden plaques tied together with rope, which could be arranged to proclaim any time of the day, in half an hour increments. The Time Keepers were hanging on the walls in the hallway, one for each section of Living Quarters, and there was also one in each of the community rooms, including the Meeting Hall/Cafeteria, the Armory/Training Room, and the Rec. Room.

Mila continued to read and learned a few other important things. While none of the activities available to the citizens were mandatory, it was highly recommended that all citizens visit the Light Room at least a few times per week. Being in such a dark environment could be bad for one's mental health, and regular exposure to light was essential to maintain a happy, functional society in such close quarters. The main purpose of the Armory/Training Center was to provide a place for citizens to exercise, since the rooms in the Living Quarters were not very large and the Rec. Room was filled with games and other group and individual activities. Lastly, she was reminded that the Bunker had been sealed and any unauthorized access to the outside was strictly forbidden, for the citizens' own protection.

Mila put the papers aside and looked into her bag again. She was happy to see two changes of clothes plus a set of pajamas, a toothbrush, and a brush for her fur. Suddenly, she realized something was missing and stood up abruptly with a gasp. "Juliet!" she shouted, then slapped a hand over her mouth. Marvin was still asleep in his bed, and he stirred for a moment, but her outburst didn't wake him.

How could she have forgotten about her little bird? On that note, how could the entire city have forgotten about their pets? *I'm not the only one with a pet*, Mila thought. *Why did nobody think about this?* She started to panic, realizing that nobody had been there to take care of her friend last night, and she was probably

very frightened by now. She had to get out of the Bunker and get to Juliet. But how? *Access to the outside is strictly forbidden*, she thought angrily. *We'll see about that*. She stormed out of the room and down the hallway.

As she drew closer to the entryway, she started to slow down, not exactly sure where she was going. Then she saw a Security Officer up ahead. She walked up to him quickly, forgetting her usual shyness.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I need to get out of the Bunker. My bird, Juliet, is all alone at my house and she needs me.” She spoke with as much authority as she could muster, while still forcing a polite smile.

The Security Officer looked surprised. “I’m sorry dear, but access to the outside is strictly forbidden, for your own safety,” she said firmly.

“I understand, but I don’t care about my own safety right now. I care about Juliet’s safety, and right now, she is out there unprotected,” Mila felt an edge of anger creeping into her voice.

“Unfortunately, the Bunker must remain sealed for the safety of the entire population. There is nothing we can do,” the Officer asserted.

Mila gave her a hard look. “Okay, but what about all of the pets out there? We can’t just leave them to fend for themselves. Some of them are in cages, they’ll starve to death.” She looked at the woman beseechingly.

“Once again, I apologize, but there is nothing to be done. The Bunker must remain sealed,” the woman repeated.

*Is she even hearing what I'm saying?* Mila thought in frustration. She was about to say more, to try to wear the woman down, but she bit her tongue and took a deep breath instead. She let a long moment pass. “Alright,” she said lightly, “I understand. I’m sorry for bothering you,” she smiled sweetly before turning away and letting a scowl color her face. *I will get out of here, one way or another,* she thought. *Juliet will not starve to death, or die of dehydration.*

When she got back to her room, she stormed in furiously and flung herself onto her bed, screaming into her pillow. She didn’t think she’d ever been so angry in her life. She’d never been in a situation like this before, and she felt so helpless. How could anybody be so callous to the needs of another living creature? Surely she should be allowed out of the Bunker to retrieve her pet. Who was that woman to say that she couldn’t? She pounded her pillow in frustration.

“Uhh... hi,” said a voice from across the small room. Mila’s head spun around, her eyes popping out in surprise. It was Marvin. She hadn’t seen him sitting on his bed when she came in. “Is everything okay?” he asked uncertainly.

Mila felt her face burning in embarrassment. Of course, the first time she ever had an outburst like that, there had to be someone in the room to see it. She took a moment to collect herself, then started to speak in a forcefully cheerful

voice before realizing that was ridiculous and deflating. “No,” she said finally, “not really.” She didn’t trust herself to say more just yet.

“Yeah, I kind of figured,” Marvin said sympathetically. “Umm... Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

Mila looked at him for a moment. He seemed like he was genuinely trying to be friendly. “Well,” she began, “a few minutes ago I realized that my bird Juliet is still outside of the Bunker. I can’t believe it took me this long to think about it, but we never had a chance to return to our homes after the emergency alarm went off. We don’t have any of our own things, and we don’t have our pets. We didn’t even get a chance to let them out of their cages or make sure they have extra food and water. We just left them there, completely helpless,” she said miserably.

“I went to see if I could get out of the Bunker or talk to somebody about it and this Security Officer just kept saying there was nothing I could do. ‘The Bunker must remain sealed,’ is all she kept saying. What am I supposed to do with that? I need to get out, to get to Juliet. Not to mention all of the other pets in the city who need care,” she said imploringly.

Mila didn’t notice at first that Marvin seemed to freeze with horror as soon as she started to explain. She looked up at him and was surprised to see his stricken look. “Marvin?” she asked in concern, “Are you okay?”

“Tilly,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry?” Mila looked confused.

“My snake, Tilly!” he said. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of this either. Tilly is still in the city! She won’t need to eat for another week, but by that time she’ll be out of water too.” He paused, consumed with worry. “What are we going to do, Mila?”

She looked at his desperate expression and thought for a moment. There had to be something they could do.

“Of course!” she said suddenly, “It’s so simple. We just have to bring it up at the Governing Meeting tonight. We can come up with a solution as a community. Surely there are enough people with pets that we can all agree that something has to be done,” she said with certainty. “We’ll just have to arrange a trip outside the Bunker to retrieve our pets,” she said, thinking aloud.

Marvin looked at her hopefully. “Do you really think the community will allow it? I mean, you really never know how the vote is going to go,” he said with a pause. “But no, I think you’re right. People will see how important this is,” he agreed.

Mila nodded encouragingly. “I’m sure everything will be fine, Marvin,” she smiled. The two sat in silence for a few moments, each thinking about the Governing Meeting and the hope of being reunited with their beloved pets. After a while, the silence became uncomfortable and Mila searched for a smooth exit.



“Alright well, I’m going to go explore a bit. Hopefully I can get my mind off of this whole thing until the Meeting tonight.” She hopped down from her bunk.

“I’ll see you later,” she said.

“Okay, bye,” he replied softly as she left the room.

~

Mila strolled aimlessly through the halls for a few minutes before deciding on a course of action. She found the nearest Time Tracker and discovered that it was 11:30. In half an hour or less, it would be lunch time. That was good news, since she’d missed breakfast. Plus, the Rec. Room and Light Room would be open during lunch, so she could go check them out after she ate. She still wanted to find a quiet place to talk to Eliza alone, and that seemed like as good a place to start as any. But she still had some time to kill before noon.

She wandered for a few moments, lost in her thoughts, before almost running into Ginnifer. She seemed glad to see her, and said that she had something she wanted to show her. Mila’s curiosity was piqued, and she gladly followed her friend back down the hall. When they reached the door to the Armory, Ginnifer paused and glanced at Mila with uncertainty.

“You can keep a secret, right?” she asked.

Mila blinked in surprise. “A secret? What kind of secret?”

“You’ll find out in a minute, but first I need you to promise you won’t tell anyone about this. I’m not really supposed to tell anyone either, but I sort of have a, well, privileged position, so I don’t think they’ll do anything.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” Mila asked in bewilderment. “And what do you mean you’re not supposed to tell anyone? You’re kind of freaking me out, Gin.”

“Oh, calm down, Mila,” she huffed. “Look, it’s really not that big a deal. Trust me, nothing weird is going on here,” she paused. “Well, on second thought, something weird *may* be going on, but it’s not dangerous or anything,” she said quickly, then shook her head. “Just tell me you’ll keep this a secret, and everything will make sense very soon,” she smiled encouragingly.

“Alright, alright,” Mila rolled her eyes. “I promise.”

Ginnifer grasped Mila’s arm firmly and looked at her appraisingly. “I’m serious, Mila. You cannot tell anyone about this. Do you understand?”

Mila stared back at her and saw the grave look in her eyes. *This is officially the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had*, she thought. “Ok, Gin. I understand. I won’t tell anyone about this, I promise.”

The fluffy gray Kat let go of her arm and turned to the door, pushing it open and motioning for Mila to follow her. As they entered, a security guard near the door held up a hand.

“I’m sorry, the Armory is reserved for citizens staying in Section C for the hour,” he said, already moving to usher them out politely yet firmly.

“Wait,” Ginnifer said, in a semi-hushed voice, “my name is Ginnifer Hudson. I have special permission to access the restricted area here.” The guard’s expression became friendlier at this, but then he glanced uncertainly at Mila.

“She’s with me,” Ginnifer assured him. The guard nodded minutely.

“Of course,” he said “Please allow me to check the list, to ensure security.” He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small piece of parchment, which appeared to have several names scribbled on it. “Great, please go on ahead,” he said, waving them on.

Ginnifer bowed her head in thanks, then headed for the far left corner. Mila noticed with surprise that there was a small door built into the wall there, which she hadn’t noticed until they were quite close to it. Ginnifer opened the door and gestured for Mila to enter. She shot her friend an uncertain look before stooping to half-walk, half-crawl through the tiny doorway. Ginnifer followed behind her and shut the door quickly.

The room they had entered wasn’t really a room at all, but a very small foyer. It was dimly lit, and it took Mila’s eyes a few moments to adjust. “Excuse me, Miss,” a voice said. “This area is restricted.” Mila looked around, squinting, and saw that the voice had come from a man, the same security officer that Mila

had seen in the Armory the other day. He looked at Mila expectantly, but then his eyes passed over her and he saw Ginnifer. “Ah, my apologies Miss Hudson.” He looked inquisitively at Mila. “And who’s this?”

Mila started to speak, but Ginnifer beat her to it. “A friend,” she said quickly. “I need her assistance.”

“Her assistance?” he asked warily.

“Yes,” Ginnifer simply replied. She pursed her lips and smiled sweetly.

The guard seemed to hesitate, then finally said, “Very well then.” He watched the girls as they walked briskly across the cold stone floor, then went to the small door where they’d entered and put a heavy-looking piece of wood across it, to block it from opening. Mila watched him with curiosity, and a bit of trepidation, wondering why they were being locked in.

They reached the back of the tiny room and stopped in front of a wooden bench, which had been pushed up against the wall. Ginnifer looked at Mila over her shoulder and winked. Then she knelt down and grasped the third narrow plank of wood that made up the seat, running her paw along it from one side of the bench to the other. Next, she reached underneath and wrapped her paw around the back left leg, turning it clockwise until it clicked three times. Finally, she stood and knocked firmly on the wall, four times in quick succession, then twice more slowly, and then after a moment’s pause, a final knock.

The wall was made up of large gray stones, pieced together and cemented in with some type of hardened clay. Mila thought about it, and realized that most of the small rooms she'd seen in the Bunker had walls of this style, while the outer walls were made up of solid, smooth stone. It seemed likely that the Bunker had been built inside of a naturally occurring underground cave of some kind, and then divided up into rooms with manmade walls of stone and clay.

In the Armory, Mila also noticed that a panel of wood ran along all four walls at about chest height, and it had weapons and other equipment hanging from it in many places. This room had a similar wooden trim, and the wooden section of the wall above the bench was where Ginnifer had knocked. Suddenly, the section of stones in the wall in front of them started to move. Mila blinked hard and saw that there was a clearly door-shaped section of the wall moving away. Within a few moments, a doorway had been opened within the wall, and Mila could see a dark corridor leading away behind it. She looked at Ginnifer with wide eyes.

Ginnifer just smiled, stepping lightly onto the bench and then leaping gracefully over it. "Well are you coming or not?" she asked with an impish grin.

Mila nodded mutely and followed her friend into the hole in the wall. Once they were inside, the door started to grind shut and Mila spun around in panic. She sighed in relief when she saw the friendly face of a security guard, as he pushed the

stony door back into place. Knowing that there was a person behind the seemingly magical door was comforting.

Then, she followed her friend down the hallway for a few paces. There were torches hanging from the walls, but not nearly enough to light up the space very well. Mila squinted into the darkness ahead, but all she saw was black.

She stared at the back of the Kat in front of her as they walked down the path, almost running into her when Ginnifer stopped and turned around. “There are stairs going down just ahead,” she explained. “So watch your step. Grab a torch on your left.” Following her friend’s lead, Mila picked up a wooden torch from a small pile on the floor and lit it with one already burning on the wall.

As Mila stepped down onto the first stair, she saw with amazement that the passageway had opened up into a huge cavernous space. She couldn’t tell exactly how big it was because of the lack of light, but she could feel the openness around her. She whistled quietly and heard it echo back a moment later, which gave her some indication of just how large the cave was. The girls continued walking down, and Mila was glad to feel the wooden guard rails on either side of her.

Soon, Ginnifer stopped again to warn her of a switchback just ahead. They continued walking down into the deep recesses of the earth. After a while, Mila was glad to see more lights up ahead. The stairs ended and the two walked down

another hallway until they reached their destination. As they drew closer, Mila could make out a strange structure up ahead. It looked like a giant cage.

Finally, Ginnifer stopped and turned to look at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain more before, but I thought it might be better to show you. This,” she gestured towards the cage-like structure, “is where they are keeping Arth.”

Mila’s eyes widened in realization. *Of course*, she thought. *Mako said he’s being kept in a cell in the Bunker. And yet, there is no ‘cell’ on the map. I guess somebody decided it was safest to keep the location hidden.* Then her brow furrowed. “But who decided all of this? We’re supposed to vote on everything as a community,” Mila said. “On that note, why were we never told about the Bunkers in the first place? All of a sudden it’s like there are tons of secrets in Shaku.”

Ginnifer looked at her carefully. “Things aren’t always as they appear,” she said ambiguously. “There are many more secrets in our world than you might think. But now is not the time to talk about them. Right now, we’re here to see Arth.” She gestured to the cell and stepped closer.

“Arth, it’s me,” she called. Mila thought she detected a note of shyness in her friend’s voice.

Then, Arth came forward out of the shadows and Mila couldn’t help but gasp in surprise. He looked so much better than when she’d seen him the first time!

“I’ve been helping him clean himself up,” Ginnfer explained. “When he was found, he hadn’t had a decent shower in weeks.”

Mila looked confused. “Well why didn’t he use one of the showers in Ocalla?”

“It’s a little bit hard to explain,” Ginnifer frowned. “First, he didn’t really know how to use our things because everything works differently on Earth. But the bigger issue I think was that he was depressed.”

“Depressed? What does that mean?” Mila asked.

“On Earth, humans have many diseases and illnesses, and they don’t always get healed right away. Most people cannot afford to see a doctor or buy medicine, so they just stay sick. Also, a lot of people don’t understand that they are sick, especially when they have mental illnesses.” Ginnifer looked sad.

“Mental illnesses?” Mila questioned. “I’ve heard of those before. A few people have been healed from them in the last few years, but they’re a relatively new phenomenon. Are you saying that it’s common to have a mental illness on Earth?” Her features were colored with surprise and concern.

“Yes, very,” Ginnifer answered. “And most of the time, they aren’t diagnosed or healed. Arth said that things used to be better, at least where he lives, many years ago, but even then there was a great deal of sickness. His planet sounds like a very hard place,” she said softly.



Mila paused to think. “So what does it mean to be depressed then? Is that a mental illness on Earth?”

“Yes. Humans often suffer from depression. It’s essentially a feeling of deep sadness that doesn’t go away for a long time, and it often affects a person’s ability to cope with day-to-day life. Arth admitted that he thought he was depressed, especially after he came to Roq. He said he didn’t have the motivation to take care of himself. He ate whatever he could find, but not nearly enough to stay healthy, and he didn’t bother to take a shower or change his clothes,” she said sadly.

“Wow,” Mila said with a sigh. “That’s terrible.” Then she asked, “How did you get him to tell you all of that?”

Ginnifer smiled slightly. “I’ve been down here with him almost nonstop since after the meeting yesterday. We’ve talked about many things.”

Mila smiled back. She was glad that at least someone in Shaku was being kind to the human. He so clearly needed it. “So you convinced him to take a shower and put on some new clothes?” she tried to look at Arth unobtrusively. He was sitting on a bench near the bars of his cell, watching them in interest. His hair was no longer greasy, and was pulled back into a neat ponytail. He was wearing clean, dark blue pants and a shirt to match. It was cotton clothing, typical for citizens of Shaku. His skin, where it was showing, looked clean.

“Yes. He needed somebody to encourage him to take care of himself, I think. It probably doesn’t hurt to have a friend who cares, either,” she looked at him kindly, then started speaking to him in his language. She gestured to Mila, saying her name. He smiled at her uncertainly. She waved at him and put on her most encouraging, friendly face before looking at Ginnifer.

“This is all really interesting,” she said sincerely. “But if you don’t mind me asking, was there a reason you decided to bring me down here and tell me all this?”

“To be honest, I’m not really sure. I was given access to him because, being the only one who can communicate with him, the security team thought I might be able to get more information. And, well, I’ve been getting to know him pretty well, and guess I wanted to share that with somebody.” She looked thoughtful. “I just want *somebody* to believe it when I say that Arth is not a bad guy. He’s really not, Mila. He’s a victim of terrible injustice and a very hard life. He never wanted to hurt anybody.” She looked at her friend with troubled eyes that begged her to understand.

Was she right? Mila wondered. If everything that Arth said was true, then nobody could deny that he had been living a very difficult life. If he was telling the truth, then he really didn’t know what he was going to be forced to do when he came to Roq. And according to him, he didn’t really participate in the attack anyway. But was he a good guy? Could he be trusted? The Felisaans knew nothing

about Earth or humans besides what Arth told them. What if he was making everything up? There was no way to know for sure.

Looking at Ginnifer's dire expression, she knew one thing was certain. The Kat believed him, completely. Not only that, but she cared for him. There was a friendship being built between a Felisaan and a human. Whether Arth was telling the truth or not, Ginnifer had decided to her per trust in him, and she believed that he was good. Mila wanted to believe it too.

"I think you may be right, Gin." She put a paw on the other girl's shoulder. "And I want to believe you, that Arth is not a bad guy."

Ginnifer gave her a half smile, putting her paw over Mila's. "Thank you. I appreciate that," she said.

The girls stayed outside Arth's cell for a while longer after that. Ginnifer encouraged Mila to ask questions if she wanted to, and she helped translate so Mila and Arth could talk to each other. By the time the pair decided to leave, Mila and Arth were beginning to feel more comfortable with each other, and a timid trust was developing between them. With her help, yet another new friendship was being formed between two species from different planets.

## Chapter 11

By the time Mila and Ginnifer made their way back up to the Armory, it was nearly 14:00 and they had to rush off to catch the end of lunchtime. When they reached the cafeteria, Ginnifer saw another friend and excused herself to visit with her. Mila looked around, but didn't see Kinsy or Finn anywhere. However she did see her Kara sitting at a table near the buffet, with Jacko by her side, and decided to join them after filling a plate with food.

“So,” she said, sliding her tray onto the table and scooting her chair in. “I noticed some cuddling going on this morning. Care to explain?” she smiled wryly.

Her sister rolled her eyes. “Well, it seems fairly obvious doesn't it?” she teased. “I finally gave in to Jacko's incessant flirtations, and agreed to go on a date with him. As you can see, it went well,” she turned and gave his cheek a quick peck. “We're a couple now,” she smiled. Jacko looked pleased with himself.

“Aww, that's great you guys. You make a cute couple,” Mila offered. Then she turned to Jacko and put on a fake-parental voice. “Just remember, no funny business, mister. Keep it pure,” she winked. A look of shock crossed Jacko's face, and Kara looked appalled at her sister's implications. “Mila!” she choked in embarrassment.

But Mila started giggling then, and both Jack and Kara joined her after a moment. It was almost unheard of for people to take physical intimacy to the next

level in dating relationships—that special bond was nearly always reserved for marriage, simply because Felisaans all had a deep respect for the power and sanctity of sex. Hugging, hand-holding, cuddling, and kissing were all common, but to suggest that somebody was casually intimate or being promiscuous was a great insult in their society. Since Mila was so close to her sister, and she was clearly kidding, no offense was taken.

“I see how it is,” Kara poked Mila’s arm. “We’re teasing each other, then, are we?” A mischievous smile appeared on her lips, and Mila knew that she was in for it. “You know, just because you don’t want to be tempted to ‘lose your purity’ doesn’t mean you can’t date at all, sis. I mean, surely by age 18 you’ve had *some* interest in romance?”

Mila blushed deeply and turned her face away. “Oh, shush,” she mumbled. “I’ll date when I’m good and ready, thank you.”

Kara wrapped an arm around her and gave a squeeze. “I know, Miles. Only teasing,” she said gently. “Although I do worry sometimes. But you know, I was the same way. I’ve never dated much—I was waiting for the right person,” she smiled happily at Jacko. “I know you’ll put yourself out there when the time is right and you’re ready,” she told her sister.

After a respectful pause, letting the girls have their sisterly moment, Jacko smoothly changed the topic and the conversation flowed easily after that. They

enjoyed their lunch together and then all decided to go check out the Armory while their time slot was open.

The first two times that Mila had been in the Armory, she hadn't had much of an opportunity to look around. This time, she took her time examining her surroundings with a wary expression on her face. The weapons that hung on the walls and filled several open wooden crates were intimidating to Mila, being that weapons were so rarely used or even seen in the world outside. There was simply no need for them. Yet this room was full of them, and Mila couldn't help but worry about why that might be.

She spent a few moments wandering around, gingerly touching a few of the weapons on display, and watching several small groups of people nearby practicing what appeared to be combat moves. A strong-looking Cheeta approached her and introduced himself as one of the Combat Trainers, who would be available to instruct citizens in the art of self-defense. He invited her to join the small group he'd begun teaching, but she politely declined. She felt uncomfortable with the idea of violence in any form, and decided she wouldn't be spending much time in the Training Center if she could help it. After a few more minutes, she headed back to her room with the hope of finding it empty and having a few moments to speak with Eliza.

To her surprise, Eliza was already sitting on the bed when she opened the door. Nobody else was in the room, so it was clear that Eliza had been waiting for her.

“Oh, Eliza, I’m so glad you’re here! I can’t believe all that’s happened since I saw you last.” Mila walked over to give her Goddess a hug. “Obviously, we’ve moved down here where it’s safe, but now I have other big problems to worry about. We’ve abandoned all of our pets in the city, and the bunker has been sealed which apparently means we cannot leave for any reason, even to take care of our fellow creatures! I’m worried sick over Juliet, and there’s nothing I can do until the meeting tonight. Besides that, there’s also this weird Kat that I’ve been seeing around and I always get the strangest feeling when I do. I don’t know who he is, but I haven’t had the opportunity, let alone a good reason, to talk to him. It’s bizarre, and I really don’t know what to do about that, if anything,” she ranted.

“And then there’s Ginnifer with her new friend Arth, who’s a *human* by the way, and I simply don’t know what to make of that or if I should trust what he’s telling us about humans and Earth and all that. Plus my sister Kara is dating Jacko now, which is actually a good thing because they both seem really happy together, but it’s just another thing that’s changing and it’s all so overwhelming,” she finished with a huff.

Eliza pushed her gently away, but kept her hands on the fluffy Kat's shoulders, so she could look into her face. Her expression was knowing and calm, while Mila's was disgruntled.

"Do you feel better now that you've said everything on your mind?" she asked. Mila sighed and shrugged.

"A little, I guess," she replied. Then she let the tension fade from her face and posture. "Actually, I feel much better. I just need to figure out a way to get to Juliet, and then I'll be fine," she said. "And I *will* find a way. I have to, for Juliet." Her face was determined.

"I have no doubt about that, love," Eliza smiled. "And I support your cause completely. All of my creatures are valuable, not just the ones who make the decisions. Protecting Felisaan life is the highest priority, of course, but sacrificing animals unnecessarily by leaving them to die is absolutely wrong. I will make a way for you to take the actions necessary to save them," she promised.

"Thank you, Eliza. I don't know what I'd do without you," she hugged her again before letting go and moving to sit next to her on the bed. "I'm going to start by bringing it up at the meeting tonight, and go from there. If necessary, I'll find a way to sneak out of the Bunker, if that's what it takes."

"I'm afraid that *is* what it's going to take," Eliza confided. "But still, it's important that you bring up the issue at the meeting anyway, and try to convince



the citizens to do something about it. They must have a chance to make the right choice, though I know they will choose wrong,” she said sadly.

Mila stared at her in amazement. It wasn't often that Eliza shared insight into the future with her, or spoke of such mysterious and serious matters.

“But let's not dwell on that, anyhow. The reason I came here tonight, besides to help comfort and settle you, was to tell you something important. As you know, I've chosen seven people, including you, to train in the art of prayer and to prepare as my messengers for after I've left Roq. Now is the time for me to reveal the others to you, and for all of you to begin meeting together.”

Mila's eyes brightened in curiosity and excitement. She was eager to find out who the others were.

“Each of the seven has been chosen because of who they are in their heart, and each of you has a spiritual gift that will be useful to you in your mission. As you know, Kinsy is one of the chosen. She was actually the first one I called on, and I chose her because of her pure heart. She has the spiritual gift of faith,” she smiled proudly.

“You, Mila, were the last one I called on, the final and irreplaceable piece of the puzzle. I chose you because of your trustworthiness. You have the spiritual gift of prophecy,” she told her.

Mila's mouth fell open. "Prophecy?" she choked. "As in, telling the future?" Eliza smiled back at her calmly.

"Yes, essentially. It is a gift that I supply, as I do with all of my gifts. In the case of a gift like Kinsy's, the gift of faith, it's simply part of who I made her to be. With a gift such as prophecy, I take a more active role. The insights that you receive about the future will be more like messages from me about what's ahead, after I've gone. We'll practice before I leave, just as we will continue practicing prayer." Mila nodded in understanding. "There is a part of your gift that's innate, however, a part that I wrote into your design," Eliza explained. "That part of your gift does not depend on me sending a message of the future. It's more of a feeling you might get about something or someone that will become significant to you, as if part of your mind remembers that thing or person from the future."

Mila paused for a moment to take all of that in. "Wow," she said, "okay. So I'm a prophet, then." She grinned. "That's kind of cool."

"It's a gift that will serve you well in your mission," Eliza said simply. "Now, as for the other five chosen ones, you will be meeting them tonight. I've arranged for all of you to go to the Light Room tonight at 19:30. When you arrive, so should the others, and you will be able to begin getting to know each other better. Remember, you are to be a team, and a very close one, if you hope to fulfill

your roles as my ambassadors. I know that you all will do wonderfully,” she said with love.

“Alright, tonight at 19:30 in the Light Room,” Mila nodded. “I’ll be there. It doesn’t sound like you’re planning to join us, though.”

“No, I’d like for you all to meet first before I begin training you together. Consider it a practice run for when I’m actually gone,” she said with a hint of sadness.

Mila smiled sadly back at her, but nodded in understanding.

After that, the two of them sat chatting about other things for a while until 15:00, when Mila said that she wanted to go check out the Rec. Room and try to meet up with her friends before dinner. Eliza gave her a hug goodbye and then vanished in her typical swirl of color and wind.

When she reached the Rec. Room, Mila was greeted by a security guard at the door, who waved her in. Somehow, the guards all seemed to know who was in what section, and thus who was allowed to use each of the rooms at different times of the day. Mila thought that they must have impressive memorization skills to remember that many people.

She looked around the room and quickly spotted her friends, Kinsy and Finn, setting up a board game at a table nearby. She joined them, and they spent the hour together before heading to the cafeteria for dinner.

After they'd eaten, the cafeteria began to fill with more people gathering for the governing meeting. By 17:00, the room was full and Mako had taken his place at the center. A hush fell over the crowd as the meeting began.

“Welcome, citizens,” Mako called out across the room, “I hope you all have been adjusting well to your new temporary living arrangement. I'd like to start out this meeting by announcing that no new information has been gathered so far about the situation at hand. We still do not know where our fellow citizens from Danyo or Ocala have been taken, and we know very little about the humans, other than what the one we captured has told us,” he explained. “Obviously, we can only put so much trust in the words of one person, who isn't even the same species as us.”

Mila was momentarily taken aback by this last comment. It almost sounded as if Mako thought that the humans were some kind of inferior being. She glanced over at Ginnifer, who sat a few tables over, and saw that she was definitely bristling as well.

“As such, we must consider our next steps carefully. Does anybody have any suggestions, comments, or thoughts that they'd like to share?”

Immediately, several hands went up. Mila added hers nervously, wanting to bring up the issue of the pets who were left behind. Mako called on them one by one to speak.

Lily Lockwood, the White Tyger who had spoken up at the first Governing Meeting about the attacks, made a suggestion to send out another Investigative Team to search Danyo and Ocalla.

Cal Watson, Kinsy's father, added his suggestion to bring the human, Arth, along on the Investigation. He believed that Arth might be able to bring them to the Portal, and they could discover much more valuable information that way.

Leron Jackson, one of the Investigative Reporters who went on the original search, suggested that all citizens be required to participate in training for basic fighting techniques. Instruction was already being offered in the Training Center for those who wished to learn, but he felt that the training should be mandatory so that each and every citizen would at least know the basics of self-defense.

Mila felt uneasy at Leron's suggestion. She didn't want to participate in anything to do with fighting, and she didn't like the idea of being forced to. She didn't have much time to dwell on her concerns, however, since Mako called on her next to speak.

"Hello everyone," she began timidly before clearing her throat and raising her voice, "I wanted to bring to everybody's attention a very important issue that I believe we've overlooked." She tried to force more confidence into her voice. "We've abandoned our pets in the city, and many of them are trapped in cages or enclosures without access to food and water. I realize that the bunker has been

sealed for our safety, but I believe that the lives of our beloved animals are important enough to allow at least a small group of people to go out and release them, provide them with extra food and water, and so on. They at least deserve a fair chance at survival,” she said, and now her voice had turned pleading. “Please, I can’t bear the thought of my bird Juliet suffering all alone. Something has to be done.” A rumble of agreement seemed to pass through the room, but when Mila looked around she thought that she saw more faces with expressions of disapproval than approval. Still, there were many who looked stricken and worried, and Mila guessed that they too were concerned for the lives of their pets.

“Thank you all for sharing your thoughts,” Mako said. “Let us vote on the proposed actions. Given our current lockdown status, all issues will be voted on as Class Two Issues. Does anybody object?” Nobody spoke. “Very well. First, shall we send out another Investigative Team to search, with Arth’s help, for the portal supposedly located in Danyo, as well as for any new signs of life in both Danyo and Ocalla? Everybody in favor, please raise your paws.” The vote was an obvious yes. “Wonderful. Those interested in joining the team may apply at the end of the meeting. Once again, only full-adult citizens will be eligible,” he reminded.

Finn sighed in annoyance, and Kinsy looked at him sympathetically. Mila felt annoyed at the rule as well, but she had expected as much.

“Next, shall we make combat training mandatory for all able-bodied citizens?” Mako looked dismayed at the thought.

Mila looked around hastily, and was relieved to see that while many paws did go up, it was nowhere near two-thirds of the group. She wouldn't be forced to participate in fighting classes after all.

“The people have spoken, and this action has been rejected,” Mako confirmed. “Finally, shall we allow a group to exit the Bunker for the purpose of aiding the pets in the city?” Mako asked.

Mila raised her paw and looked around again, nervously. Many other paws went up, and she noticed Marvin raising his as high as he could while glancing around the room frantically. Still, the moment seemed to stand still as Mila realized that no more paws were going up, and there weren't enough to pass the vote. Even though Eliza had warned her that the people wouldn't listen, she still felt the painful blow of seeing so many of her fellow citizens making such a selfish choice.

“The people have spoken, and this action has been rejected,” Mako repeated. “No group will be allowed out of the sealed bunker except for the Investigative Team.” His voice had a tone of finality to it. Marvin let out a small cry of frustration, and Mila tried to catch his eye to reassure him. He looked over and she mouthed the words “It will be okay.” He looked uncertain, but nodded.

“Before we end this meeting, does anybody else have anything to say?”

Mako looked around the room, which remained quiet. “The Investigative Team will leave tonight, since the trip to Danyo can take up to a day. Does anybody object?” Again, the room stayed quiet. “Thank you all for attending. This meeting is now adjourned.”

Mila made her way over to Marvin as the crowd began to disperse and people moved to exit the Cafeteria.

“Hey,” she said kindly when she’d reached him, “don’t worry, we’re going to save our pets. I have an idea, but I can’t talk about it here. Let’s meet up in our room later, and I’ll tell you then, okay?” Marvin agreed and joined the line to exit.

Mila went back to rejoin Kinsy and Finn, who were still sitting at their table. Finn looked upset, and Kinsy was hugging him and trying to reassure him. Mila remembered that Finn, who had moved to Shaku when he turned 15 and became an Adult Citizen, still had family living in Ocalla. She felt his pain over not knowing what had happened to them or if he would even ever see them again. She offered her sympathy and a gentle pat on his arm.

“Hey, Mila,” Ginnifer hurried over. “I wonder if you could do me a favor. I have to go with the Investigative Team tonight to translate for Arth. But there was this other thing I’m supposed to do tonight, and obviously now I won’t be able to.



It's kind of a secret, but I don't know what else to do. Would you mind bringing a message to some people for me tonight?"

Mila looked at her friend carefully, wondering. "Wait... does this have anything to do with Eliza?" she asked, trying not to give too much away.

Ginnifer's eyes widened. "Yeah, actually, it does. How did you know?" She grinned slightly. "Could you be... Are you supposed to be doing something tonight too? Something that Eliza asked you to do?"

Mila full-on smiled now. "You!" she whisper-shouted, trying to keep her excitement down. "You're one of Eliza's seven chosen ones, aren't you? I can't believe this, so am I!"

"I knew it," said Ginnifer. "I just knew she would choose you. Well, that just makes this all that much easier. I need you to tell the others that I'm one of the chosen, but I couldn't make it tonight. I'll have to wait to meet the others until I get back. Do you know who any of them are?"

"All I know is that Kinsy is one too," she glanced over at her friend, who was still speaking quietly to her boyfriend.

"Hmm, wise choice on that, Eliza," Ginnifer said warmly. "Kinsy's a good one." Just then, a slight breeze blew through the white and gray Kat's fur and she smiled to herself.

“Hey, did you just... umm... pray?” Mila asked, surprised. Ginnifer nodded. “I’ve barely begun practicing, and I still find it a bit awkward. But you just made that look so natural! It’s just like talking to somebody who’s invisible, isn’t it? The tricky part is remembering that she’s always with us. That’s awesome you’re so good at it already.”

Ginnifer beamed. “Thanks,” she said, “Eliza said it’s one of my gifts. Obviously, you already know my other one—although I did learn that what I can do with Arth has a name—it’s called the gift of Translation.”

“Wow, you have two gifts?” Mila asked in amazement.

“Yeah, Eliza told me that some of the chosen ones have more than one. She wouldn’t tell me much more than that, though,” she looked ruefully up toward the ceiling. “She said I’d have to find out the rest with time.” Suddenly, the Kat heard her name being called by Mako at the center of the room. “Oh, I’ve got to go,” she told Mila hurriedly. “Please tell the others I’m looking forward to meeting them. I’ll see you when I get back!” With that, she hurried over to join the group of volunteers gathering around the Meeting Leader.

Mila turned back to Kinsy and Finn, who were just getting up to leave. The three of them said their goodbyes before splitting off to go to their individual rooms.

When Mila reached her room, she found Marvin sitting on his bed looking anxious. He jumped up as soon as she came in, and started asking her about her plan. Mila told him that she knew they needed to get out of the Bunker and save the animals, even if it was against the rules. He agreed with her, but he had no idea how they could accomplish such a thing.

“We’re going to have to sneak out,” Mila admitted. “I just need a little bit more time to figure out how to do that. I have some ideas...” she said vaguely. “Let me talk to some people and I’ll tell you what I’ve come up with later tonight.”

“Okay,” Marvin agreed. “I should be awake pretty late tonight,” he said, avoiding her eyes. “If I’m not here when you figure it all out, wait up for me, okay?”

“Sure,” Mila replied. *Poor guy, she thought, he’s obviously feeling really down about this whole thing. I’ve got to figure something out, not just for my sake and for the animals’, but for his.* She felt strangely protective of the younger Lian, though she’d only met him the day before. He was like an instant little brother.

The two of them stayed in the room after that, each absorbed in their own activities. Mila read a book, which she’d borrowed from the tiny library in the Rec. Room, while Marvin sat journaling on his bed. Kara and Jacko came in later and sat together, chatting quietly.

Finally, after what felt like a long enough time, Mila left the room to check the time and use the restroom. She saw that it was 19:00, which meant she had half an hour or less to get to the Light Room. After using the restroom, she set off walking in that direction. Soon, she heard footsteps in the hall behind her and glanced over her shoulder to see Marvin.

“Hey, where are you going at this hour?” she asked playfully. “I hope you’re not looking for me,” she added. “I told you I’d let you know when I figured things out.”

“No, I wasn’t looking for you,” he promised. “I just have something I need to do. It’s, uhh... sort of personal,” he explained vaguely.

Mila stopped walking for a moment, looking at him thoughtfully, before continuing on. *Could it be? Is Marvin another of the chosen ones?*

“I see,” she said. “Well, I’m heading to the Light Room myself. May I ask where you’re going, Marvin?”

At this, he stopped in his tracks and looked at her with surprise. “I’m going to the Light Room too,” he said slowly.

Mila laughed lightly. “It’s okay, you don’t have to keep it a secret anymore. I’m one of the chosen,” she told him. He looked frightened for a moment, but then relief rolled over him.

“Oh! Wow, that’s great! I know Eliza doesn’t want us telling people about our group yet, so I was afraid of saying too much. I haven’t met anyone else from the group, I wasn’t even sure it was real! As much as I trust Eliza, I have to admit the thought crossed my mind that she was playing some kind of practical joke on me. I mean, this whole ‘secret society’ thing is pretty wild, isn’t it?” he laughed, and continued walking. “It’s so good to finally talk to another person who’s a part of this,” he confessed.

“It is, isn’t it?” Mila smiled back. The two of them walked in silence for several minutes until they finally reached their destination.

“Well, here we are,” Mila said solemnly, as they reached the door to the Light Room. “Let’s see who else has been chosen.”

## Chapter 12

Mila pushed the door open and waited for her eyes to adjust. It was a dark, cave-like room with stone benches around the perimeter and rows of wooden lounge chairs in the middle. Near the back was a strange contraption involving what appeared to be a crank and many lengths of rope which led up to the ceiling. Mila's eyes followed the line upward and gasped. The ceiling opened up to the sky! Mila drank in the sight of the stars and clouds high above, made even more beautiful by the fact that she was underground, and hadn't expected to see the sky anytime soon.

Remembering why she'd come, she looked back down and searched the room for others. Marvin had already approached the only other person in the room, Kinsy, and was introducing himself.

"Hey, Kins," Mila greeted her best friend. "I see you've met my roommate and fellow 'chosen one,' Marvin. Speaking of which, did Eliza tell you that I was in the group too? She told me that you were," she explained.

"No, actually, but I'm so happy you are!" Kinsy beamed, "She said there was a surprise for me, and I'm guessing she meant you! This is going to be so great, us working together to help our Goddess. Plus, now I don't have to try to keep it a secret from you! That's been really hard," she laughed. "I'm just lucky

that Eliza said I could tell Finn about it. I don't think I'd be able to keep this from him.”

The three of them chatted for a few minutes and waited for the others to show up. Mila told them about Ginnifer and her gifts as well.

“So that makes four,” Marvin commented. “We're just waiting for three others, then.” Suddenly he froze, and a look of deep concentration came over him. Mila looked at Kinsy in confusion, but the other girl just shrugged and waited. “Oh,” Marvin finally said. “No, actually, we're just waiting for one more. The last two aren't going to be joining us tonight. One of them doesn't live in Shaku, and we won't meet her until later. The other isn't ready to join us quite yet,” he said matter-of-factly. Then he looked confused again. “I'm not sure how I know that,” he said, “but I do,”

Mila was speechless, but a look of realization dawned on Kinsy's face.

“It must be your gift,” she said. “Has Eliza talked to you about your spiritual gift yet? I have the gift of faith, but Eliza said there's also one more that she hasn't revealed yet.”

“Ahh, it all makes sense now!” Marvin replied. “She told me I had the gift of understanding, and that I would know what that meant soon. I thought it was funny because I totally *didn't* understand. But now I get it. The knowledge just popped

into my head, and I felt compelled to share it,” he explained. “Mila, what’s your gift?”

“Believe it or not... prophecy. Apparently Eliza plans to use me to share insights into the future. For now, all it really means is that I get premonitions about important people or things. I haven’t experienced it yet, but—” she froze midsentence as the door opened, and in walked the mysterious Kat that she’d been seeing around.

As soon as his eyes met hers, she felt the same tingling otherworldly thing that she’d felt each of the other times. His eyes seemed to see into her soul, and her into his. All of a sudden, she knew. This was the man she would marry.

*What?! She thought, as soon as the thought entered her mind. Marry? As in marriage? That is absolutely, absurdly insane! I don’t even know the guy, and besides, things are crazy enough right now without throwing a relationship into the mix. I’ve never even dated anybody, and now I’m getting married? Her thoughts were a mixture of purely panicked and utterly hysterical. How ridiculous!*

While those thoughts swirled around her head, the strange Kat had walked over to the group and stuck his paw out at Kinsy.

“Hi, my name’s Jay Ryans,” he said in a voice like warm honey, “Is it safe to assume we’re all here for the same reason?”



Kinsy shook his paw. “That depends on whether you’re here for the reason that we’re here,” she giggled. “I’m Kinsy.”

“I’m Marvin,” the young Lian said somewhat timidly, “And yes, we’re all here because we’re Eliza’s chosen ones. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jay shook his paw and then turned to face Mila. She was still staring at him, shocked into silence by the bizarre thought that had popped into her head.

“And who are you?” he asked, smiling at her in a way that made her feel self-conscious. She opened her mouth to try to say something, but all that came out was a strange dry rasp. She cleared her throat, embarrassed, before Kinsy jumped to her rescue.

“This is Mila,” she offered with a smile. “She can be shy at times, but once you get to know her, she’s much more talkative,” she teased, trying to dispel Mila’s obvious discomfort with the awkward moment. Finally, Mila was able to recover herself.

“Sorry,” she said, “I thought I knew you from somewhere,” she offered lamely. “It’s nice to meet you, Jay.” She stuck her paw out to shake his, and the moment they touched she felt it again, but even stronger—the electric sensation running through her body and the slowing of time as though something very significant had just happened. She quickly drew her paw away, and shook her head quickly in an attempt to clear it.

He smiled knowingly, and to Mila's surprise, winked at her before turning back to the others.

Marvin explained that the four of them were the only ones coming tonight. He also told Jay about Ginnifer, and the two others who were still unknown. He mentioned that they all had spiritual gifts, and explained what they knew of them so far.

"So thus far, our group includes Mila, Kinsy, Marvin, Ginnifer, and myself," he summarized. "Mila's gift is Prophecy, Kinsy's are Faith and something else we don't know yet, Marvin has the gift of Understanding, and Ginnifer has the gifts of Translation and Prayer. Did I get that all right?" The others nodded.

"We don't know who has more than one gift, or if two is the limit, but something tells me that Ginnifer and Kinsy aren't the only one with multiple," Marvin added. "Hold on..." he paused, closing his eyes for a moment. "Ahh, interesting," he finally said, opening his eyes again. "Mila has more than one, I may even be sensing three. I have a second gift, but I can't tell what it is yet. Jay and the last two of the group all have one. Jay, do you know what yours is?"

The gray and black Kat nodded. "It's called Protection, though I don't know exactly what that entails yet. Eliza said I'd figure it out in time."

*Protection, Mila thought, that's great. My knight in shining armor, apparently.* She rolled her eyes at her own thoughts.

“Awesome!” Kinsy chimed in, “This is so exciting to finally meet you all. Maybe we can meet here every night at this same time, to practice praying and using our gifts and stuff. What do you think?” she asked, looking around at the others.

“Sounds good to me,” Mila smiled. Marvin and Jay agreed.

“Oh, I have something else I wanted to talk to you guys about,” Mila said, remembering. “The whole issue with the pets being abandoned in the city. As you all know, my proposal was voted down in the meeting tonight. But I can’t accept that,” she explained.

“And neither can I!” Marvin piped in.

Mila nodded. “And I’m sure neither can many other pet owners in our community, who have been separated from their beloved animals. Personally, I can’t stand by and let so many helpless creatures die simply because we’re too afraid of what could happen if we unseal the Bunker. So, the only thing I can think of to do is to sneak out. Unfortunately, I have no idea whatsoever how to accomplish that,” she frowned. “I was hoping one of you might have some ideas or be willing to help.”

“I don’t know how to help you sneak out,” Jay said, “but I do know that if you’re leaving, I want to go with you. My gift is protection after all.” Mila tried to ignore the wave of attraction she suddenly felt for him, and simply nodded curtly.

“Well, I think I might be able to help you with the sneaking out part,” Kinsy said brightly. “Finn’s brother Marko is a security guard. I’m betting that he’ll be able to help us get out.” She looked hopeful.

“And of course, you know that I want to come too,” Marvin reminded her. To his dismay, the others looked at him with uncertainty. “What?” he asked, confused.

“Well...” Mila hesitated, “It’s just that you’re so young. I know you’re an Adult, but you just turned 15. I’m not sure it’s such a good idea for us to bring you into a dangerous situation like this,” she said gently. Kinsy reached a paw over and placed it on his shoulder sympathetically.

Marvin looked stricken for a moment, then determined. “Listen, guys, I may be the youngest here but Mila and Kinsy are only what, 18? It’s not like there’s that much of an age gap. And how old are you Jay? I’m guessing not that much older either,” he argued.

“I’m 20,” Jay replied, “which is five years older than you, and makes me a Full-Adult. I know it may not seem like that much in the grand scheme of things, but trust me, five more years of growing up can change a lot about you. It wouldn’t be wise of us to have somebody with us out there who we have to look out for even more carefully,” he said as gently as he could. “We’ll be faster and safer if you stay here, which means the animals will get help sooner.”

Marvin's expression turned incredulous. "You guys! I'm not a child!" he whined, before realizing that was exactly what he sounded like. He cleared his throat and tried to make it sound deeper and more assured. "What I'm trying to say is that I *am* an adult, and I expect to be treated as such. I promise that I won't be a liability, if you let me come," he said, then thought twice about the phrasing. "Not that it's up to you," he corrected. "If you guys are sneaking out to rescue the animals, then so am I. I've made up my mind."

Mila and Jay exchanged a concerned look, and she realized that it was the first time she met his eyes without weird feelings coursing through her.

"Hey, maybe he has a point," Kinsy chimed in. "We all expected to be treated like adults the moment we turned 15. It's only fair that we do the same for Marvin. He should be able to make his own choices." He smiled gratefully at the fluffy white Kat.

Finally, Mila agreed and Jay reluctantly let it drop. Kinsy told them that she would go find Finn and ask him to speak to his brother. They would meet up again outside her room in one hour, hopefully with a plan in place to sneak out tonight. With that, she hurried off.

"Marvin, would you mind if I spoke to Mila alone for a few minutes?" Jay asked, surprising Mila.

“Uhh... sure,” Marvin said, “I’ll see you later.” He left, and then a moment later a security guard poked his head in the door and informed them that the Light Room would be closing for the night in five minutes. Then he was gone, and it was just Jay and Mila in the darkened cavern. She felt a nervous thrill run through her.

“So...” she said quietly, “Why did you want to talk to me alone?”

He smiled at her in that bone-melting way of his. “I’m not sure, exactly,” he admitted with absolutely no trace of embarrassment. “I guess I thought that... well, I know you’ve noticed me around a few times before, and you always seemed startled by me. So here’s your opportunity to ask me any questions you may have, and we can clear away the weirdness.”

Mila was taken aback by his bluntness. “Oh, well that’s very... nice of you. I hope I haven’t made you feel uncomfortable,” she looked sheepish. “You’re not from Shaku originally, are you?”

“No, I moved here about two months ago. I’m from Garda, which is about a week’s journey from here. Not many people are too familiar with it, but it’s a nice place.”

“I remember learning about it in Basic Education. It’s mostly grassland out there, if I remember correctly.”

“That’s right. Well anyway, I’m new in town so I haven’t had a chance to get to know a lot of people yet. I’d really like to get to know *you* better, Mila.” He smiled flirtatiously.

“Umm,” Mila stuttered, “y-y-yheah, m-me too. I mean me getting to know you, too. Umm... you know what I mean,” she looked at the ground, blushing furiously. *Why am I acting so stupid?* She chastised herself. Jay just grinned at her, clearly amused.

“So why did you move all the way here, to Shaku?” Mila asked casually, trying to recover herself.

“I moved because Eliza asked me to,” he answered simply, with a shrug. “She hasn’t told me why, but I figured she must have a good reason.” With that, he looked at her as if to suggest that perhaps *she* was the good reason. Mila blushed again. *I have got to get this under control, she thought wildly. Now is not the time to get distracted.*

“Makes sense,” she said politely. “I hope you enjoy it here, I know I do. I don’t think I’d ever want to live anywhere but the forest.” She smiled wistfully. “Anyway, I hope we can become good friends, Jay,” she said, trying to nonchalantly emphasize the word *friends*. “I’m going to head off to bed now. It was nice meeting you.” She turned to walk away, but Jay reached to touch her shoulder.

“Mila,” he said, and she couldn’t help but enjoy the way his warm paw felt on her shoulder or the way her name sounded in his smooth voice. “I know we just met, but... go out with me sometime. What do you say?” His eyes looked straight into hers and he didn’t look away.

“Oh, gosh. Umm... thanks for asking, Jay, but I just don’t know. I mean, I don’t think this is a good time for me to be distracted, and I’m not really the dating type anyway, so... thanks, though. Okay, so I’m gonna go now.” She turned awkwardly and hurried to exit. A quick glance over her shoulder before the door shut behind her revealed Jay still standing where she’d left him. To her surprise, he didn’t look embarrassed or rejected. He looked patient. Mila was perturbed.

That night, despite her best efforts, Mila dreamed about Jay’s green-yellow eyes that seemed to see right into her soul. What they saw there that was worth looking at, she could only guess.

~

An hour later, the group reassembled outside of Kinsy’s room, with Finn joining them. Although he wasn’t one of Eliza’s Chosen Seven, Kinsy had been given special permission to share information with him, so he knew all about the secret group. After introducing himself to Marvin and Jay, he told them about the plan he’d made with his brother, Marko.



“So, what we’re going to do is meet Marko by the entrance to the Light Room at the next shift change, which is in about half an hour. He said that there’s a way to get out of the bunker from there—I can only guess that it has something to do with the giant hole in the ceiling. Nobody will suspect anything, since it’s not meant to be used as an exit or entrance to the Bunker. Marko should be the only Security Guard on duty there.”

Mila looked around at the group, which now consisted of Finn, Kinsy, Jay, Marvin, and herself. She could hardly believe what they were planning on doing. Breaking the rules had never been something Mila was very comfortable with, and this was way beyond a minor transgression. She didn’t know what would happen if they were caught—Felisaans as a rule were law-abiding citizens, so it was rare for disciplinary action to be taken against one.

From her days in Basic Education, she knew that any citizen who broke a law would be brought before the community in a Governing Meeting to be dealt with. Usually, they would be required to make amends for their indiscretion in some practical way, as well as cooperate with rehabilitation efforts. For a citizen who stole something, for instance, this might mean returning the stolen item along with some other gift of value and offering an apology to the victim; then, they would likely be given therapy to help them learn the importance of working for things that one wants and respecting others and their property.

Mila couldn't quite come up with a likely scenario of discipline for the crime of sneaking out of a sealed emergency Bunker. Nobody would be endangered other than those who did the sneaking out, so there wasn't really a victim, let alone a logical way to compensate him or her. But perhaps it wouldn't be seen that way, and the community decided that Mila and her friends were a danger to the other citizens. Would they be asked to leave the Bunker? Would they be imprisoned, like Arth? The thought sent a shudder through her fur. She couldn't believe how different her community was becoming, that she would even have to consider such possibilities.

Finn's voice broke her out of her reverie.

"Before we head over there, is there anything that you guys need to grab from your rooms?" Everybody shook their heads. "Alright, then, let's go. Quietly, just in case." He led the way.

## Chapter 13

They arrived at the doorway to the Light Room and waited for several minutes before they heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Finn put his finger to his lips, then turned and stalked silently down the hall towards the sound. He hugged the rounded wall, trying to stay as hidden as possible, until he could see who was coming. Just as he was about to catch a glimpse of the approaching figure, his paw hit a loose stone on the ground and set it bouncing down the hall.

The footsteps stopped.

“Who’s there?” a commanding voice called. “It’s past curfew. Nobody should be wandering the halls at these hours. Show yourself, immediately.”

Finn froze in horror. He was going to be caught. He hoped that the others could sneak away before they were discovered as well, so at least *they’d* have a chance to get out of the Bunker. He made a quick decision, and stepped out of the shadows.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—” he began, before seeing who had spoken. It was a large Black Panthre, and he was smirking.

“Marko!” he shouted in surprise, then looked around anxiously before continuing more quietly. “Man, you scared me. I thought I was busted.” He tried to look annoyed, but then couldn’t help laughing with his brother.

“You should’ve seen your face,” Marko chortled. “Caught in the act! Of course, I’m sure you would’ve realized pretty soon that there *is* no curfew. It’s a Bunker, bro, not a prison.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not entirely sure about that,” Finn replied, but it was light-hearted.

“Hey!” a loud whisper came down the hall. “Come on guys, hurry up! We have a mission to get going,” Kinsy called quietly.

The group gathered together and Marko led them into the Light Room, which.

“It’s my shift to guard this room,” he explained, “so there shouldn’t be anybody else here.” Once they were all inside, he walked briskly to the back of the room to the large wooden crank that Mila had noticed earlier. There was rope attached to it, which led up to the ceiling. Although the sky had been visible only an hour ago, it was now closed off with boards.

“The night guards close the ceiling at closing time, for added protection, but it’s pretty easy to open it back up from here,” he grabbed the handle and started pushing on it. The wheel started to turn, slowly releasing the rope that was wound around it, until inch by inch the sky began to reappear as the boards opened like a giant door. Mila and the others watched in fascination.

“Now, the tricky part is getting you all up there,” Marko said. “And then once you get up there, you’ll have to get through the net.”

Mila squinted up and saw that there was indeed a net stretching across the opening, blocking the exit. That would be a problem, not to mention the fact that the ceiling was quite high and there appeared to be no way to climb up the rock walls.

“Ahh... did you have a plan in mind?” Jay asked, voicing her concerns.

“That depends,” Marko replied evenly, “on how you define the word ‘plan.’ I have ideas, but as you may have guessed, I’ve never done this before.” He finished opening the ceiling and flipped a lock into place on the crank to keep it from winding back up. Then he pulled off the backpack he’d been wearing and started fishing around in it. After a moment, he pulled out a long-looking rope, which was neatly coiled. “I hope none of you are afraid of heights,” he said.

As life-long residents of a city built in trees, Mila knew that Kinsy and Finn were as unperturbed by heights as she was. She also figured that Marvin would be fine, since he’d lived in Shaku most of his life. Jay, however, was a mystery to her. She glanced at his face, trying to be discreet. His expression was blank, offering no clues as to his feelings about the task ahead.

“So, the idea I had was to simply hoist you all up, one by one. We can try to get this rope looped through the net and go from there, but I’m not entirely sure the

net is strong enough to bear your weight. I also don't know how we're going to get the rope all the way up there. I have a pretty good throwing arm, but I'm not that good," he scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Brainstorming time?" he looked hopefully at the others.

A few moments of silence passed. Everybody looked around the room, searching for a solution.

"There!" Marvin pointed, excitedly. "The hinge for the door, there's a gap that we might be able to get the rope through. If it's strong enough to support the boards, it should be strong enough to support each of us."

"Great idea," Finn patted him on the shoulder. "But it's going to be even harder to get the rope up there."

"I can do it," Jay said confidently. The others looked at him in confusion.

"Really?" Kinsy asked. "How?"

"With this," he smiled, pulling a small, unfamiliar object out of his pocket. "It's a slingshot," he explained. "I can tie the end of the rope around a stone, then shoot it up through the crack. It'll fall back down and we can grab it. Easy."

The others quickly agreed that the plan sounded good, and they searched the floors for a stone. Jay rejected a few until finally, they found the perfect one. Mila brought it to him and he smiled as he hefted it in his paw.

"Perfect," he said, looking directly at her. "Exactly what I need."

Mila flushed and looked away, but not before noticing that Kinsy was looking between her and Jay in a way that said she knew something they didn't. Kinsy tried to catch her friend's eye, but Mila purposely avoided her gaze.

Marko handed Jay the rope and started unwinding it as Jay carefully tied the end around the stone, winding it this way and that to ensure it would stay secured. Then he fit it snugly into his slingshot.

"Everybody stand back," he cautioned as he wound up his arm. Then, with an ease that spoke of years of practice, he released it and the stone shot up into the air. It sailed quickly and neatly through the small gap in the door's hinge and then fell back down to the ground. Marko whistled in appreciation, then hurried over to grab the rope.

"Whoa, where'd you learn to do that?" Kinsy asked with wide eyes.

"I grew up in Garda, and it's all grassland there. I was a hunter." He shrugged lightly. "Until I moved here, of course."

"A hunter?" Marvin asked in surprise. "That's cool. Garda is one of the only cities that still uses land animals for food. Most cities only harvest plants and fish."

"Yeah, we know," Finn smiled wryly at Marvin. "We all took the same Basic Education classes."

“Yes, but did you know that Danyo is the only city in which they hunt birds? While in Garda, they focus mainly on small game, such as rabbits. Fish are not as prolific in the water sources there, so they’re considered more of a delicacy.”

Finn looked mildly surprised. “Birds, huh? I actually didn’t know that. I must’ve zoned out in class when they taught that one.”



A Note to Readers:

And that's where I stopped writing! Life took over and other things have been demanding my attention. I had a lot of plans for this book, and other books to follow, and perhaps one day I will have the time and inclination to revisit them. For now, it will remain an unfinished tale, but I hope you were able to enjoy it nevertheless and get a taste for my style of writing. Thanks for your support!

P.S. If anybody cares enough to ask me about it, I might be willing to write a short synopsis of what happens after this writing ended. ;)