The Second Century: How a Half Elf Put Dogs on the Moon

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The Second Century: How a Half Elf Put Dogs on the Moon

by dyslexicqueen

Summary

Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans was born into a symphony of noise. Pure, endless, joyful noise that only came from the people in her family who all loved her and thought the world of her. Perhaps they thought more than just the world of her, but that was none of her concern for now. Her concern lay more within herself and how the world treated her. The years she spent at home learning from her family never showed her a day of hate, never showed her a reason to know what hate meant. She would be shown reasons for anger, or even rage, but hate was not something this family stood for, and Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans wanted to make sure hate was not something the world would stand for either.

A little blupjeans baby dumb idea that turned into a full fledged multi chapter plot line that my friends convinced me to publish. Special thanks to timeforlupsopinion on tumblr for the support of my dumb OC and beta-ing the fic for me!
Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans was born into an endless symphony of noise. Pure, endless, joyful noise that faded into the subconscious of her mind, just as the noise had faded into the subconscious of the people who witnessed the birth of that noise, just as those born after the fact before her, and just as it will for the people born after her. Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans was born with a movie running through her eyes before they ever opened, teaching her every important detail about her family and the world she was falling into. The screams that escaped her lungs from her first breath mimicked that of a piano note, longing for something she didn’t quite yet understand, but already knew. And it was a note that would carry her for the rest of her life in so many different ways, sometimes not even in the form of music. Sometimes it was a word, or a feeling, or a smell, or a texture, a taste, a thought, the reflection of mismatched skin patches scarred with her own mistake… It grounded her before she knew what music was, or what words were, or how to feel or smell or taste, and she didn’t understand. It over whelmed her. Thoughts of confusion flooded her new brain and overtook the noise, light bleached out the movie right as it ended, and she was scared.

Then she heard her father’s voice. It filled her brain with comfort, made it settle in a deeper, safer way. A familiar way. It stood out in the noise and stuck to her like super glue, binding freckles to cheeks like gravity binds stars into time and space. Before she figured out what was going on she felt warmth wrap around her, wipe her face and make it easier to breathe. That stopped some of her screaming. Her wiggling arms were held to her sides comfortably, and she heard his voice again, saying hello in anyway he could imagine, touching her nose and holding her head. His hands were shaking; his callouses ruffled her fine hair and sent tingles down her spine.

Shortly after, Sigfriede heard her mother’s voice, and this filled her heart with excitement. A different set of arms took her, daintier and more graceful, with hidden callouses strung across fingertips that vibrated against Sigfriede’s ears. They called back a different noise to her that stuck to her still, but stuck in a way that made her nerve endings fire up. She became aware of the blanket fibers restraining her, making her hot and restless; she wanted to move, crawl, walk, run. She wanted to go places and see things and claim them for her own. The excitement spread to her lips, and she screamed again, this time in joy. Sigfriede wrestled against her fluffy prison again, but to no avail. She called out one last time, letting her lungs take over and figure out their pattern of comfort.

Sigfriede babbled the rest of that day. She was too tired for much else. She might have slept between trains of thought, but she didn’t remember exactly. What she did remember was fleeting and unimportant. She remembered so many different voices, so many different noises and feelings, all of them safe and familiar. She remembered words that she didn’t understand, rhythms she couldn’t exactly follow. But it was all safe. Not safe like her father, but safe. Each different sensation reminded her of important things and made her become aware of new parts of her existence, like her fingers and toes, and made her want to do something, or find someone. It was a new kind of overwhelming. It didn’t scare her, but it made her mind rush at a million miles an hour, which was too fast for her little body to keep up with. She could barely hold her own head up yet, or open her eyes, so she left it. She’d have time. For now she just experienced anything she could, letting it wash over her and settle. When she slept, she dreamed of the movie again. When she woke, she heard parts of the noise again. And it repeated over and over until the dreams became shorter and the noise became quieter, fading into a part of given fact.

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CHAPTER ONE- FIRST IMPRESSIONS
“She looks like a singular refried bean.”

Lup cracked up laughing and Barry rubbed his face. Taako took one look down at his wrinkly niece again and handed her back to her mother. Babies were not his thing, no matter how much Lup insisted he let her play with his hair because its cute. There were a lot of things Taako would do for his sister, but let a grimy little newborn tug on his hair and ruin his braids was not one of them, even if the baby did have her mom’s freckles. But you don’t have to spend time putting freckles on your face, now do you?

Of course, Taako was excited for Lup and Barry as soon they announced they were having a kid. It was hard not to be; Lup was beaming nonstop until the kid was born. It wasn’t the first time Barry and Lup brought up having a kid, but it was the first chance they had to sit down and consider all their options. The excitement for it spread through the family like wildfire, and things happened so quickly Taako didn’t have time to mentally come to terms with the fact that an infant child would be entering his bubble of existence with no way for him to wiggle away from it. It made him… nervous. When the lump of half elf flesh was finally plopped in his arms, Lup seemed so proud of herself that Taako couldn’t bring himself to be immediately honest. So he held Sigfriede for a solid minute and a half, trying to be polite for his sisters sake, before he caved and just had to tell it to her straight.

“A singular refried bean, huh?” Lup reiterated.

“Exactly,” Taako made sure to cradle his nieces head in his palm as he handed her back to Lup. “Now take the refried bean back before I squish her and get bean guts all over my designer shirt.”

“Yeah, but she’s a cute refried bean, ‘Ko, come on, look at her!”

“No, no, I think hear Agnes calling for me-“ He poked his head out of the bedroom door and hollered down the hall, “I’m coming Agnes, don’t blow anything up,” before returning his gaze to his sister. He dismissively signed, “Look, I’ll try again once everyone’s here ok?”

Barry spoke up, “But that’s not for another-“

Taako was already out of the room.

Magnus showed up three days earlier than expected, but at least he didn’t bring his dogs with him this time. Merle showed up the next day with Mavis and Mookie in tow, shortly followed up by Lucretia the same day. Everyone gathered in the kitchen that night for dinner while Sigfriede was put down for a nap before her big reveal in the morning.

Davenport was late. Which was very unusual for him, but everyone figured they could keep a plate warm for him if he showed up later that night. The same was said for breakfast the next morning, and every meal after that for the next two days. Lup found herself glancing at the front door more
and more often, and she could barely manage to sit still the day after he was set to arrive. She eventually found herself anxiously sitting next to Sigfriede’s crib, letting the baby hold her index finger as she slept.

Lup studied the way her daughter’s tiny knuckles rested over her finger, fascinated by how big her hand looked in comparison. She had grown used to her hand looking smaller in most situations, since her hands were usually compared to Barry’s more square and bulky hands. It felt odd in her chest, feeling like the bigger person. She had always at least felt equal to the people she surrounded herself with, even if they were smaller than her, like Angus before his last growth spurt. But Sigfriede was different. Sigfriede was delicate; Sigfriede could be picked up and dropped and picked back up again. By anyone, including Lup. That was… a staggering responsibility. Had she been a little bit younger she might even describe it as sobering, the fact that she could pick up this human and accidentally do damage to her. Sigfriede stirred lightly and rubbed her face with her fist. A little whimper sounded from her as she settled back into place, letting her arms lay flat on either side of her head.

“You gonna keep holing her away until Davenport gets here, or are you gonna let her say hi to everyone?”

Lup turned around to see her husband leaning against the door frame, hands in his pockets and a soft smirk on his face. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before walking next to Lup and joining her on the floor, taking her free hand in his.

Barry give Lup’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re worried about Davenport aren’t you?”

Lup smiled and tucked a blonde curl behind her ear. She gave a small nod, turning to look at the sleeping baby again. Nothing much more in the way of a response was given.

A small silence passed between the two of them before Barry spoke up again. “You know he’s probably just fine. He gets… side tracked when he finds a place he likes; he’s probably just taken an extra pit stop somewhere and will be here before we know it.”

“I know,” Lup said, “I just got really excited about letting her meet everyone at once. It was going to be so funny, I was gonna do the Fantasy Lion King thing where I, like, lifted her up and everything. It just doesn’t feel right without everyone, Barry…”

“Ya’ know, to be honest that probably isn’t the best idea since she can’t really hold her head up quite yet.”

Lup chuckled and pulled her knees up to her chest. “Fair enough.”

Another silence settled in, longer and broken by Sigfriede this time. She woke up from her nap with a whimper, followed by the panicked cry Lup was starting to figure out to mean “I’m alone and I don’t like it”. Lup scooped up the infant and held her to her chest, tucking her head under her chin so she could rub her back. The cries were silenced soon enough and turned into contempt babblings. Sigfriede tangled her chubby little fingers in her mother’s hair and seemed satisfied.

“Well, she’s up,” Barry sighed. “Might as well make her debut now, huh?”

Lup had half a mind to actually lift Sigfriede up like a half elven Fantasy Simba until Mookie spotted the three of them walking down the hallway and decided to run up and nearly tackle Lup to the floor. Mavis came running up after him and grabbed his wrist right as Lup stopped in her tracks to instinctively hold the baby closer to her chest.
“I wanna see her!” Mookie whined as his sister yanked him back and gave him a stern look.

“She could have dropped the baby, Mookie, we talked about this; no tackling in the house anymore.”

“I wasn’t gonna tackle her Mavis, let me go!”

Lup side stepped the pair and patted Mookie’s head as she went along. “Watch out little man, you’ll see her soon enough.”

Mavis followed suit tugging her brother along, with Barry taking up the back end and herding everyone back to their spots in the living room. Merle apologized as the kids took their seats again, and Lup forgave him, of course. She waited for Taako and Barry to find where everyone else had hidden themselves in the massive mansion Taako called a home. Soon enough everyone was gathered in the same room, staring expectantly at Lup and Barry like they had for so many years. At least there was that familiar sense about it.

“Well,” Lup started. “I guess we could pass her in a circ-“

If there had been a baby in her arms before, there wasn’t anymore.

“Holy shit,” Magnus said as he lifted the infant by her armpits. “She’s so small! Is that an IPRE onesie? That’s so cute!”

Barry lurched forward and readjusted Magnus’ hands so his fingers supported Sigfriede’s neck. “Yeah, and she can’t support her own head yet,” he slid his glasses back up his nose. “But, yeah, we just found a nice red onesie and had Taako transmutate a little patch onto it. It was Lup’s idea.”

“I’ll fix that head thing for ya real fast.”

Sigfriede seemed to think that was funny. She gurgled as Lucretia rolled her eyes and took the baby from Magnus.

Lucretia rested Sigfriede’s head in the nook of her elbow and smiled down at her. She watched as the newborn continued to giggle lightly, focusing just past the top of Lucretia’s head. Letting her free hand brush up against the baby’s fingers, she muttered, “Hello there, little one. My name is Lucretia... How are you?”

She paused a moment when she realized that her niece probably couldn’t understand a single word she was saying. It was ridiculous, how happy it made her just talking to a baby and being ok with not getting a response, but she decided to humor herself for a moment. She hummed a small little tune, possibly something she had heard from Johan right after he joined the Bureau, and watched Sigfriede’s reaction. Her eyes seemed to focus more. Her head jerked towards Lucretia’s face, and her eyebrows furrowed together ever so slightly. Had the room not been so silently observing the infant, Lucretia would have missed the whines meant to mimic her humming. She found that interesting.

Finally, she gave Sigfriede one last smile before passing her gently to her left, where Taako happened to be standing.

Taako instantly passed her to Merle on his left.

“Taako?” Lup asked.

He turned towards the kitchen. “Hmmmmmm?”

Lup waved to catch his eye and signed, “Where’re you going, dingus?”
“To stir the stew, goofus. Y’all want dinner after this, right?”

Merle cut in as Sigfriede found entertainment in his beard braids, “Yeah, but she’s, you know, actually your niece. You of all people should have the chance to hold her.”

“I’ve already got to hold her,” Taako gulped and picked up pace. “Besides, Mr. Tackle-First-Think-Later seemed pretty excited to see his cousin, stop hoggin’ all the attention, Merle.” Then Taako disappeared behind the kitchen wall and let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Back in the living room, Merle shrugged and looked down at the baby he nearly needed both arms to hold. “Hey there, uh….”

“Sigfriede,” Lup offered.

“Sigfriede!” Merle nodded as if he had come up with the name. “You’re bigger than I remember my kids being at your age. Or maybe it’s a dwarf thing…”

Mookie popped his head up over Merles shoulder and sniffled. “Pa, I wanna see her.”

“Yeah, if she’ll let go of my face first, kid.”

“Dad, don’t pry her fingers open like that,” Mavis pushed her dad’s hand way from Sigfriede’s wrist and brushed her own fingers with her cousin’s tinier ones. Merle’s beard was released. “She just needs some gentle coaxing…”

Mookie walked around to the front of his father and held out his arms. “Lemme say hi.”

Mavis and Merle exchanged a glance. Merle gave in first. “Mookie, listen to me,” he glanced at Lup. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You have got to be gentle this time, ok? Don’t wander off with her or somethin’…” Merle showed his son how to properly hold a baby and let his hands hover just in case Mookie couldn’t keep still enough. But Mookie grinned his toothy grin, said hi to his baby cousin in a very proud voice, and handed her back to his dad. Mavis let out her own breath she had been holding. She took her turn patiently enough and smiled at her baby cousin, only for her glasses to slip off her nose and onto Sigfriede’s chest. Mavis gasped, shifted Sigfriede’s weight to one arm, slid her glasses back on and quickly passed her to Angus.

Angus McDonald had promised himself he wouldn’t cry when he finally got to meet Sigfriede. His excitement had boiled over on several occasions the past few weeks, but he had told himself he wanted to officially meet her with the rest of the family, even if Aunt Lup offered a chance to meet her early. Angus liked experiencing things like this with his family.

He cried anyway. As soon as Sigfriede got comfortable in his arms, she seemed to instantly know he wanted to be someone she could talk to. She began making her small little whimpers and gurgles, almost managing a full smile as she waved her little fists around. Angus wiped his cheek on his shoulder and laughed at himself.

“Hey, come on now, Ango,” Magnus teased. “What’d she do, punch you too hard? Seriously dude, that’s one smart baby, you gotta buck up a little or else she’s gonna kick your ass before she can walk.”

“She didn’t hit me, Sir,” Angus sniffed and grinned. “I’m crying because I’m happy! I’ve never met a baby before, let alone a baby in my family. I’m just really glad she’s here now… This is the closest thing I’ve had to a baby sister.”
Lup’s heart melted. Angus’s face was a mess, so she took Sigfriede from his arms and let him wipe his tears up. Once he was cleaned up, she responded to his big smile with a ruffle to his hair and a kiss to his cheek.

Taako watched his magic boy crumple under the weight of his own joy through the serving hatch. A smile laced its way across his lips, but was followed with the painful reminder that as much as he genuinely wanted to love his niece, something in him was worried about her. Taako remembered the way she had met his eyes for those brief few seconds, and all the knowing they already seemed to hold. He remembered the way she almost desperately grabbed at his braid and wrinkled her nose to hide her freckles. She seemed… aware; prepared in a way a newborn shouldn’t be. It made him worry that maybe somewhere along his long, intriguing life, he had done something to doom her. Did she even know about what all her parents alone had done to fight for her? What if that magic had already been lost for this world?

“Do I need to wash up for dinner yet, Sir?” Angus said from behind Taako. When he didn’t respond immediately, Angus tapped Taako’s hand. The only downside was that Angus startled him so badly, Taako burned himself on the stove top.

“Geez, Agnes, give an elf a warning next time, huh?” Taako glanced at his hand, then to his sister through the serving hatch again. She held up her daughter and waved her little hand. Taako waved his larger burnt hand in return. Then he turned back to Angus and sniffed. “Go wash up and set the table for me, Kemosahbe.”
Important people make good on promises. Barry makes up on his insomnia break, Davenport makes a peace offering, and Taako makes up his mind.

Davenport showed up at the front door with a souvenir and some new stories. He made a bee line for the guest room Taako had prepped for him, dropped his bags, and immediately went searching for the new person.

She wasn’t hard to find. Davenport was pretty sure he heard her before he actually saw her. He was able to discern the amount of screaming he heard coming from the kitchen as the new normal for two reasons: no one seemed to be concerned that there wasn’t a moment of silence to be had this morning, and two, he knew this kid was related to Lup, so what could you really expect?

Davenport decided he’d stand in the kitchen doorway for now in case this child was worse than he expected and made cause for a hasty retreat. Folding his hands behind is back, he cleared his throat and bounced on the balls of his feet. “Good morning, everyone.”

No one in the kitchen replied, and he doubted anyone in the adjacent living room heard him. So, seeing no reason to assume the breakfast routine had changed, Davenport helped himself to a plate of simple eggs with a bowl of an oat meal recipe Lup and Taako managed to keep track of from their home plane. Damn, he missed having those two on his ship sometimes. There was an empty seat to the right of Barry at the breakfast bar, and the seat to his left supported what appeared to be a baby carrier. If anything, the scientifically accurate mobile gave it away. Davenport took the seat on Barry’s right.

“Morning,” Davenport said.

“Yup,” Barry sniffed and sipped his coffee. “It’s morning.”

“So we’re back to this routine, eh?”
Barry picked up the baby bottle by his plate and pointed it to his left. ‘‘This routine’ implies I was on diaper duty while studying the light of creation. So, technically, no.’’

Davenport snorted and turned to his own plate. Not much was shared between the two as they ate, mainly due to the fact that the baby appeared to have started a conversation with the plane of thought and wasn’t anywhere near done with it. Both men had finished their meal and cleared their serving areas before Sigfriede found sticking her fingers in her mouth more interesting than what the plane of thought had to offer. She looked rather silly. Davenport watched as Barry tossed a towel over his shoulder, lifted the baby out of her carrier and laid her in his arm. It took him a moment to get Sigfriede to focus on her bottle but once she did, nothing else could grab her attention.

Barry sighed and rubbed his face. ‘‘Yeah, eating just suddenly seems like a good idea now, doesn’t it, Siggy?’’

Davenport raised an eyebrow. ‘‘Siggy?’’

‘‘Short for Sigfriede.’’

Davenport nodded, unsurprised that the kid already had a nickname. He watched Barry hazily feed his daughter, studying her face to see if he could pick up on any features or expressions she already shared with her family. She definitely had freckles and blonde hair. For now.

‘‘You know,’’ Barry said, ‘‘for a kid with a name meaning ‘peaceful victory’ you’d think she’d value a little peace and quiet and let me sleep.’’

‘‘Well, she is related to Lup, right?’’

‘‘Right.’’

‘‘Well, what did you expect?’’

Barry didn’t answer. Instead, he kept his eyes trained on the bottle in his hands and made sure his daughter didn’t eat so fast she chocked herself. Davenport was almost certain he saw the two make solid eye contact. He was positive he saw the kid smile at Barry, and Barry definitely smiled back.
Davenport turned to look at this family in the living room.

“Hey,” he turned back to Barry. “You wanna go sit in the living room with everyone?”

Barry shook his head. “She can’t keep her formula down if she’s jostled while eating. Go ahead, I’ll join you later.”

When Barry said “later”, he meant later. It wasn’t until right before dinner where he finally had the chance to find Davenport and properly have him meet Siggy. Not that Davenport minded. The child could be heard from any point in the house if she so chose to be heard, so there was little need for concern. Davenport filled his time during the day catching up with everyone else. He talked to Lucretia about how the Bureau of Benevolence was doing, listened to her stories about the influx of people turning in applications, how old employees were handling the final changes to everything. She talked at length about a natural disaster relief program she had an idea for. She seemed excited for that. It was a nice feeling to see a spark put back in her eyes. Merle swapped stories about kids fighting small beasts over the weekend with him for stories from Davenport’s visits to strange and interesting coastal towns over a deck of cards. There was very little silence between them this game. Lup and Taako of course had their own personal ordeals to share over weird teas. Magnus showed Davenport almost every dog picture he had and almost looked as young as the day Davenport first saw him in training for the Institute.

It was all very, very nice.

Then a baby was sat next to him as he read a book he meant to finish a long time ago. When she said hello in whatever alien language babies speak in, Davenport nearly dropped his book on her face.

“Oh,” he dogeared the page he was on and set the book aside. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“If you talk to her enough she’ll reveal to you secrets of the Universe,” Lup found a seat on the arm rest of the couch. Barry sat next to Sigfriede and placed a hand on her chest to keep her from rolling off the edge.

“Secrets, huh?” Davenport turned his full attention to Sigfriede. She giggled and kicked her legs. “I’m fonder of stories myself, but tell me of your ancient knowledge, oh small one.”
“Yeah,” Barry said, “she’ll tell you ‘bout something, that’s for sure. I don’t know about ancient knowledge though.”

Lup winked. “She’ll figure it out.”

Davenport shook his head and tried to pick the squirming baby up. She gurgled and smiled, turning her head to try and see why she was moving. Davenport watched her closely to see what she’d do next.

There wasn’t a lot a week-old baby could do. She squirmed a bit. Her head bobbed and jerked to which ever direction the latest noise was coming from. Of course, she gurgled and babbled. Maybe he she still was only making occasional eye contact and was just really good at making eye contact with Barry. Or maybe she was just focusing on his glasses; those were pretty hard to miss.

“Oh!” Davenport handed her back to Lup and jumped off the couch. “I’ve got something for her. I’ll be right back.”

He made way for his room as quickly as possible. The hat was still on the bedside table where he’d put it before breakfast. Davenport brushed it off and headed back to the living room.

“An apology,” he said, plopping the captain’s hat over Sigfriede’s face, “for being so late. There was a storm right as I got into the Sword Coast. Blew me off course for a day or so. I figured if she’s anything like her mom she’d want an appeasement in the form of material goods.”

Lup quirked an eyebrow. Davenport winked and started playing peekaboo with Sigfriede.

“You couldn’t have got one in baby size?” she asked.

“She’ll grow into it,” Davenport smiled slyly as he lifted the hat from his niece’s face again and finally made eye contact with her. “Believe me. She’s gonna need it.”
Taako was on baby duty that night. Which was fine, except for the fact that babies usually don’t laugh at a week old, and she had started cracking up at the slightest thing as soon as she was handed to him. And her eyes. Where the hell did this blue eye thing come from? Neither Lup or Barry had blue eyes, and Taako sure as hell didn’t. Barry said she probably got it from his mom, but Taako didn’t take that for much credit. He was quickly learning this baby defied all logic bound to this plane of existence.

He was proud of her for that, at least.

“Will you please stop messing with my braid,” he sighed, “and go the fuck to sleep? What do you need, a blanket? Do you need magic to sleep? What do your parents usually do to get you to shut up?”

Sigfriede blew a raspberry.

“Yeah, sounds about right….”

Taako and Kravitz were the only people awake at this point. Kravitz rarely needed actual sleep and Taako decided he’d just trance in the morning after breakfast. It was going to be a long, long month. Not that he really minded. He loved seeing all of his family, even Lucretia, though things between them were still a little tense. But this kid, man. She was just so…. Aware. Almost purely chaotic. She was learning too fast. Taako was willing to bet at this rate she’d be in his school before she needed two hands to count her age. Angus was bad enough on his own; now he had a mini sized brain buddy to egg him on. Perfect.

Taako put his niece down in a little bouncer and headed for the kitchen. “I’m gonna make you a bottle, Siggy. You stay there and be quiet. And don’t watch me, I don’t need you walking around and slamming into my legs while I cook next week, yeah?”

Sigfriede let out a whine as he walked off.

“I’m still here, homie.”

Her whines turned into a little yell. Taako hadn’t made it to the cabinets before she was full on crying and screaming.
“OK, alright, sheesh, I’m coming back!”

Taako picked his niece back up and placed her head under his chin, then headed back to the kitchen. “You’d think her parents have never touched her with all this crying she does. How am I supposed to pee, hmm?”

“Aren’t both of us on baby duty tonight?” Kravitz signed from the couch. “I’ll hold her if you need me to.”

“You can hold her if you want to go deaf,” Taako retorted. He opened the cabinet and pulled down the formula powder.

Sigfriede started playing with his braid again, and this time she decided she wanted to see if she could tug it off.

“Right, that’s it I’m done with this shit.” Taako gave up on balancing her in one arm and trying to make her food at the same time. She was just going to keep yanking on his hair and ramming the side of her head into the side of his. If she was going to be a little shit, she could be a little shit with someone who wasn’t making her food and had more patience.

Kravitz looked up from his paperwork to see a tiny little half elf descending upon him. His arms shot up to grab hold of her to make sure she didn’t let her head drop. As soon as Taako released her, Sigfriode let out a high-pitched squeal and started squirming like she wanted out. Kravitz ignored her and laid her on her back on his knees. She tried to roll off; Kravitz wasn’t having it.

He furrowed his eyebrows and held Sigfriode in place. “I don’t think she likes me much, Taako.”

“Kid doesn’t like much of anyway, Bone Daddy,” Taako replied from the kitchen sink.

Kravitz hummed and looked back down at his niece. She didn’t do much beyond a big yawn and another whine, which was better than Kravitz trying to pick her up and having her freak out again. He wondered if she intentionally did that because she really didn’t like him or because she had already pegged herself as a jokester. The latter would be better; Kravitz didn’t like the idea of not having a good relationship with his niece. There really wasn’t a way to avoid her, and he really hated awkward encounters.
“Hold this,” Taako handed him a lukewarm baby bottle and picked up Sigfriede. “I’m gonna see if feeding her and going on a walk will do anything.”

He started from the living room and worked his way around the hallways and up the stairs. Sigfriede took to her bottle easily this time, thank God. Now she was too distracted to grab for his hair anymore, and hopefully she’d fall asleep quickly. He’d have to think about what to say; his hands were too full to sign at her.

“Let me see your face,” he moved the bottle so they could see each other; he tried for a smile, and she hummed back at him. “Fuck, nothing can shut you up, huh? You’ve got a bottle all up in your space and you still have something to say… I respect that.”

Taako put a little bounce in his step like he’d seen his sister do with Sigfriede and turned a corner.

“You know, Kravitz thinks you don’t like him. I think he’s being dumb—” Sigfriede pushed the bottle to one side with her little fist. Taako readjusted his grip to match where she had moved it. “You’re too happy of a baby to not like anyone. You’re just bein’ cheeky, huh? You listen to your mom too much.”

He paused to think of something else to say. “Mmmm, here’s something. You’re gonna have a wand in your hand before you can walk; I’ll make sure of it. You already know magic, I can tell. Lup and I, we always needed to read books to know magic. Before we realized how well cooking can make people like you, magic really didn’t have much of a use for us. But then, you know, the caravan would run out of something dumb like matches and we’d have to find a way to start a fire, or we’d be in between towns and out of salt and need a way to get it. But you,” he bopped her nose with his pinky finger, “you already know magic. I can see it in your eyes. At first, I thought you were just too smart, or that something was wrong. But I was doin’ some thinking the other night, which is a dangerous thing by the way, and I realized you watch for magic, don’t you?”

Sigfriede hummed again and stopped eating for a moment. Taako raised an eyebrow and waited, then she picked up again.

“Yeah, you do. I think you pick up on little magic things like smiles, huh? Geez I sound like a fuckin’ nut case, asking a baby about magic… But that’s gotta be what it is,” he turned out a bathroom light and went down another staircase. “Cause there’s no reason for someone your age to be as aware as you. You’re not making eye contact, you’re watching for little things like bonds. Or somethin’ like that, I don’t know what your little underdeveloped brain is processing. Maybe you see something entirely new and you’re going to rewrite magic and physics as we know them…”
Sigfriede finished her bottle. Taako moved it away from her face and readjusted her weight evenly across his arms, letting the bottle dangle from his fingertips under her head. He watched as she let out a yawn and almost seemed to snuggle into him.

“Well I’ll tell you what kiddo, whatever you want to do, you ask me first, huh? Uncle Taako’s down for whatever you throw at me. Maybe you’ll even teach Angus a thing or two… get his damn nose out of a book for a bit.”

Taako walked around the house for a while more, telling his niece about different things he liked to cook, or something ridiculous he’d heard at the store last week. Watching her fall asleep so easily in his arms took a weight off his shoulders. Maybe he wouldn’t actually be so bad at this. He got her to sleep, didn’t he? Wasn’t getting a baby to sleep the hardest part of this parental-guardian thing? Really, Taako didn’t know; Angus got himself to sleep perfectly fine. But soon Sigfriede could barely keep her eyelids open, so Taako shut up and made his way back to the living room. Once she was put in a safe place to sleep, he took up his spot next to Kravitz on the couch and grabbed the TV remote.

“Say a single word and wake her up and I’m sending you back to Hell where you came from,” Taako warned.

“If anyone should be concerned with volume control, its you, love,” Kravitz said.

“Bold of you to think you can critique me.”

They shared a kiss and settled in for some long awaited quiet time. After a while Kravitz said, “I think I’ve seen people like her before. People like Sigfriede, you know? Really smart, observant… wise. Almost,” he snorted and pinched his nose. “I can’t believe I’m saying this about a newborn… Almost ancient seeming, you know? But I usually only ever meet them on the other side of life.”

Taako hummed. “What do you mean, Krav?”

“I mean I think Sigfriede has been here before. And I don’t think she’s totally happy to be back…”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, hello! I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter as much as you enjoyed the first
chapter. I'm honestly so thankful for the comments, kudos, and even just the number of hits this has gained so far. Its only the second chapter and we're over the 100 hits mark! I think a weekly schedule will work out fine for this, since I'm pretty stoked for the plot I've got in mind and I'm writing ahead pretty steadily at this point.

We've got a few more baby-Siggy chapters left and then we'll move on to her growing up and get into the meat of the plot. I have pretty much a whole almost-DnD campaign figured out for where I want this story to go, and I think it'll be pretty interesting. I hope you all like it once we get there.

Thank you once again to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being an awesome beta. Go check her out if you haven't, she's a wonderful TAZ blogger. Leave any questions you have below in the comments or send an ask to my personal at sadiexsketches.tumblr.com, and remember to leave some kudos!
Babies learn things very, very quickly. Barry tries to keep his daughter's mouth clean. Magnus forgets to follow instructions. Siggy speaks her mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THREE—FIRST WORDS

Barry had tried very, very, very hard to make Sigfriede’s first word something that wouldn’t be embarrassing to tell her about when she was older. He started off with the simple things, like “dada” and “momma” and other things that she interacted with on a daily basis, like “spoon” or “fork”. None of it worked. The one-year-old seemed to be picking up on the household sign language more than actual verbal words. None of her signs were solid enough to really mean anything, though one time Taako was trying to teach her the common alphabet and he swore up and down that she signed his name. Lup said she was probably flipping him off more than signing a “T”. One thing was clear, however: the kid liked communicating with her hands more than her mouth at the moment. Barry figured it was probably a tactile thing that was making her brain grow, so he saw no reason to stop it so long as she kept trying to speak with him.

Lup insisted that if Barry was going to take over teaching her to talk, then she was going to take over teaching Sigfriede to sign. With Taako being hard of hearing, the ability to fluently use sign language was as equally important in the household as being able to speak common. Since Sigfriede had moved back to Barry and Lup’s apartment with them, like she had a choice not to, she had seen a lot less signing happening around her. Sure, her parents used it every so often to stay in habit, but it’s not like her parents were holding her in one arm and using the other to communicate. That was why Lup was adamant on making sure her kid learned sign language along with elvish and common. She had to be able to communicate with everyone in the family, so there was no letting up on it. Any time she had Sigfriede on her hip or in her play pen, Lup would take a few moments to talk to her verbally and sign along to what she was saying. Hopefully it would work.

“And this,” Lup pointed at her wand in her daughter’s hands before picking it up and putting it out of Sigfriede’s reach, “is something you can’t play with.”

She signed accordingly and watched as Siggy’s eyes followed her hands. She seemed fascinated by the movement of her mother’s fingers, so Lup signed some things for her again. She spelled out her name, “L-U-P” and signed the according letters, followed by Barry’s name, Sigfriede’s name, and a few common things that Barry had tried to get her to say, like “spoon” and “fork”.

Sigfriede grabbed Lups thumb and gummed it excitedly. Lup quickly yanked it away before the baby could catch it between the four teeth she had, and replaced it with a teething toy they had lying around. Then she put her in the play pen.

“Damn,” she said. “You’ll get the hang of it, though. I’ll make you get the hang of it if I have to.”
Barry groaned from the couch and laid his glasses on the arm rest. He shuffled the papers in his lap and moved them aside. “I fuckin- shit, sorry. I hate all this extra paper work we have to do. The kids didn’t even do anything especially illegal…”

“There’s no point in not cussing around her,” Lup said. “She’s just gonna hear it from Taako and Magnus anyway.”

“I’m not going to be the one to teach her to cuss, though. Especially if I’m teaching her to talk.”

Lup sat next to him and looked over the papers. “I dunno, babe. I just try and get this shit over with as soon as I can so I can chill out faster.”

Barry grunted and picked his glasses back up. “You don’t get as much paper work as I do, though.”

“Right,” she kissed his cheek and got back up. “Because I just give most of it to you.”

“Maybe that’s why it feels like so much…”

“Love you!”

Sigfriede bounced and giggled from her play pen. “Looooo-lalala!”

Barry raised his eyebrows. “You got somethin’ to say to me, Siggy?”

She blew a raspberry and fell on her butt.

A few weeks later Barry and Lup were getting ready for work in the morning. It was one of the first days where they had both returned to work after Sigfriede was born, instead of them alternating who went to work and who stayed home. Magnus had been the only family member available that day, making him the babysitter. Lup had only requested that they come back to a clean apartment and a living baby. Barry requested the same thing, along with regular “conversations” with her and no cussing.

Seemed easy enough.

Magnus was cussing fifteen minutes in. Of course, Magnus had seen Sigfriede crawl around in pictures and on visits he made to Barry and Lup’s apartment, but he didn’t know that she could crawl so fast. Thank Istus that Barry and Lup got deep in the baby fever before she was born and baby proofed the house. Had the plastic outlet covers not been on, Sigfriede really would have been a refried Bean.

Calling her Bean was Magnus’s idea. Well, Taako’s calling her a refried bean when he first saw her technically meant it was his idea initially, but making it a solid nickname that she answered to was Magnus’s idea. That was something he was very proud of. He was so proud of it, in fact, that he planned on calling her nothing but Bean in an attempt to get everyone else in on it. And it would have worked, too, had she not been so damn stubborn.

“But Bean, Bean, don’t fucking do it—”

Her bowl clattered on the floor and her Fantasy Cheerios accompanied it. Sigfriede squealed and laughed and slammed her hands on her high chair table. Magnus’s reflexes may have been fast, but Sigfriedes thirst for chaos was more powerful. He could see it in her eyes.
“You know what,” Magnus grumbled as he pulled out the broom. “If you don’t want your cereal in a bowl, just tell me and I’ll spread it out on your little table for you…”

Sigfriede gnawed on her fingers in response.

Magnus threw away the wasted cereal and grabbed a different box from the cabinet. “I guess we’ll try Fantasy Lucy Charms now?”

Ditching the bowl this time, he poured a little bit out onto the high chair table and spread it out flat across the surface. Sigfriede dug right in.

“Perfect,” Magnus said. “Now eat it like a normal person instead of spitting it out like you always do.”

That evil little glint flared up in her eyes again. He pulled a chair from the near by dinner table and sat himself right in front of her. Magnus made direct eye contact with her and raised an eyebrow; he planned on staring at her the whole time if that’s what it took to get her to actually eat something.

It took a few tries, but he eventually got her to eat. The kid was ridiculously cute when she ate; hell, she was ridiculously cute when she did anything. Sigfriede definitely had a profile of looks and sounds that she could make to get anyone to bend to her will. It was genius. Magnus wondered if she’d keep it up when she got older, and if she’d teach him a thing or two. He could use some good looks to get him out of trouble now and then.

Once she had finished eating, Magnus picked her up out of her high chair and plopped her on his hip. She grabbed for his finger to gum it, but he quickly moved his hand so that he had her little fingers trapped in his palm. He waved her hand a bit and bounced her for a second before Sigfriede decided she didn’t like not having control of her body. She scrunched her nose and squinted her eyes before whining and yanking her hand away.

“What, do I smell?”

Sigfriede didn’t think that was funny. She wiggled like there was a purple worm in her diaper and just about leaped out of her uncle’s arms. But Magnus caught her before she so much as made an inch of progress to the ground. He sighed and put her on the floor feet first, since she kicked her little legs out and whined when he tried to put her on all fours.

“Oh, yeah,” Magnus mused. “You’re learning to walk, huh?”

He moved his hands from her armpits to her fingers, letting them grab hold of his thumbs. Sigfriede bounced a bit on her feet. Then she leaned forward and stood on her tippy toes. Her knees bent in a way she didn’t like, so she put her weight back on her heels. Then she picked one foot up, moved it forward a bit, and stomped it down with much enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Magnus said. “You teach that floor who’s boss.”

Sigfriede giggled and babbled. Then she pulled her hands away again, only for her to lose balance and fall on her butt. It didn’t seem to be much of a big deal, because she quickly recollected herself and shifted onto her hands and knees.

Magnus stepped back and put his hands on his hips. “Alright. You can crawl around for a bit but stay in the kitchen. I’m hungry and wanna make a sandwich…” He turned to the fridge and opened both doors.

That was his second mistake. His first mistake happened earlier that morning, when he needed an
outlet for a lamp in the living room, and forgot to put the plastic covers back on the outlet. Siggy made a bee line for the outlet as soon as he turned away, and Magnus hadn’t realized what had happened until he turned around and saw the baby jump back and fall on her back. She started crying instantly. But his second mistake was letting her out of his sights again. When Barry and Lup asked him to babysit that day, they both figured that the guy loved kids so much he probably wouldn’t let their daughter out of his sights. They underestimated Magnus’s misunderstanding of a baby’s goldfish-like memory. The sandwich was half way in his mouth when he heard a scream and the following cries come from the living room.

“Fuck!!”

Magnus had never run so fast in his life. He found Sigfriede laying in the same spot on the living room floor on her back, crying and waving her hands aggressively.

“Jesus Christ, kid, we’ve already gone through this.”

In Magnus’s defense, Lup probably should have warned Magnus about Sigfriede’s recent obsession with electrocuting herself.

But Magnus quickly found the plastic cover and made sure it was securely in place. Then he scooped up the baby and carried her to the kitchen sink. He turned on some cold water and let it run over each of her little hands for a few minutes at a time. Once her crying stopped, Magnus gave Sigfriede a good hug and kissed her forehead. He held her close and let her speak her mind, even though she got into this mess herself. Her cries turned to babbles, and he could have sworn she said something that almost sounded like “it hurts”. Magnus talked back and forth with her, comforting her and distracting her. He moved from chastising her about going back to the outlet, to apologizing for not watching her like he should have, to telling her a story about Fisher. That seemed to really steady her breathing. He missed that fish some days.

Sigfriede fell asleep rather quickly after that. Maybe she cried out all of the energy she had, or maybe Magnus was just an extremely comfortable presence for her. Back when everyone holed up in Taako’s mansion for a month after she was born, Magnus heard stories from everyone that it was such a pain in the ass to get the kid to sleep. Everything from not getting her to shut up, to screaming when someone carried her too far away from her parents; nearly the whole family seemed to struggle to get her to sleep, but Magnus had always found it rather easy for him. Perhaps it was that he and Julia had thought about having a kid at one point, and never really delved any deeper than that while they had the chance. Magnus never stopped wondering if he’d make a good dad.

Or maybe it was a human thing. Of course, Barry could put Sigfriede out like a light, but he was her dad, and Sigfriede had made it clear very early on that she was a daddy’s girl. On the other hand, now that Magnus thought about it, the only other person who seemed to have any ease with getting her to sleep fast was Lucretia.

Lucretia, of course, couldn’t spend the whole month at the house non-stop. She had an organization to run that she genuinely loved now, and she and Taako still had… agreement issues. But any free time she had that month, which was much more than the years before, became dedicated to helping with the baby in any way. Magnus was fascinated how she could just calm Sigfriede like no other. Every person had their own bond with the kid, but Lucretia seemed to have a unique one. A calm one; one time when Siggy got particularly fussy, she was passed around to everyone, anyone willing to hold the screaming baby, but the only person able to talk her down was Lucretia. And that wasn’t the last time it happened either. When Barry and Lup decided that they had the hang of this parent thing at the end of the month, Lucretia couldn’t leave unless Sigfriede was asleep,
otherwise the kid would lose her mind. Any time Magnus gave Lucretia a ring on the stone of farspeech, she always had some story about something weird happening between her and Siggy on visits. Maybe she got into Lucretia’s bookbag and found her private journal, or she found some hand book prototype for a new section to the Bureau; Lucretia mentioned how Sigfriede had a knack for finding information on the new natural disaster relief program when Lucretia had the info on her.

Magnus was convinced those two knew each other in a past life or something.

The rest of the day passed without many hitches. Sigfriede of course crawled her way back to the outlet any chance she had, and quickly became disappointed at her inability to electrocute herself. Magnus just stood by patiently and waited for her to move on. They played in her little play pen, Magnus fed her and changed diapers, he tickled her and played peek-a-boo, let her nap on his chest… the works. Of course, she had her moments of rebellion and testiness, but Magnus found that inspiring about her. A few minutes before Barry and Lup were due to come home, he sat down on the couch with Sigfriede in his lap and held her hands.

“You’ve got a real strong voice,” he told her. “You always have. Always lettin’ people know where you are and what’s on your mind. Its brave of you to be so honest. That’s a kind of strength I will never match you in.”

Sigfriede laughed and said, “Gooooossccchhhh.”

“Me too, Bean. Fuck, you’re a good kid…”

“I thought I said no cussing.”

The fabric of reality ripped open in front of Magnus, and Barry and Lup stepped through a few seconds later. Barry raised an expectant eyebrow at Magnus.

Magnus blushed. “You were serious about that?”

Barry rolled his eyes and picked up his daughter. “Don’t listen to your Uncle Magnus. He uses bad words.”

“In my defense I only used them when she electrocuted herself. Which, by the way, Lup, thank you for telling me that your kid has a death wish.”

“Hmmmmmm?” Lup batted her eyes and grinned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Maggy.”

Sigfriede said, “Fffffffvvvv—”

“Preach it, Siggy,” Lup cheered.

Barry’s face turned red. “Sigfriede, I just told you—”

Sigfriede shut her mouth and grinned.

Magnus blushed and picked up his things. “Well, the apartment is clean, the baby is alive, and as you’ve witnessed, I have been talking to her all day. I have a service animal class I should be getting to now.”

Barry rested Sigfriede on his hip and scowled after Magnus. “Yeah get out of here before I kick your ass.”
“Fuck!”

Magnus had not just said fuck. Lup gasped and covered her mouth. Barry’s eyes widened and the vein above his eyebrow popped out.

Magnus picked up pace and grabbed the front door handle. “Well, bye, guys!”

Barry was left with a wife who was laughing so hard she gave herself hiccups and a baby with a 100% cuss rate. That was the moment he realized the true power his daughter had. He regretted every moment of weird science that went into making her. He couldn’t even look her in the eyes anymore as she saw her mother laugh and took that as a good sign. Barry just stared at the wall ahead of him as Lup grabbed Sigfriede from him and cheered her on to say the word again.

“Oh, Barold, come on,” Lup said. “It’s not ideal, but its her first full word. She’s growing!”

Barry sighed and rubbed his face. “What about when she asks us what her first word was when she’s older?”

“If you’re really that upset about it we can listen for her second word and lie to her.”

Barry had tried very, very, very hard to make Sigfriede’s first word something that wouldn’t be embarrassing to tell her about when she was older. But as he watched his wife cheer on a developing cussing habit, he realized that his hopes and dreams of having a normal kid were gone. And if he were being honest with himself, he never really should have expected to have a normal kid in the first place. If the fact that he’d lived an extra century longer than most humans had nothing to do with it, then at the very least he should have known their being liches and reapers would have. But looking at the smile on Lup’s face and the validation beaming off of Sigfriede’s, Barry really couldn’t bring himself to be mad. Lup was right; it may not have been the most ideal first word, but it was, in fact, a real word. It was a real word that happened at the right point in time for half-elf development. That had to mean they were doing something right.

“Fine,” Barry cracked a grin and kissed Lup’s cheek. “But, she spoke before she signed, which means you’re falling behind.”

“Bet you fifteen dollars I can have her signing more words than she can speak in a month.”

“I’m not taking that.” Barry headed for the kitchen.

Lup kissed Sigfriede’s head and held her hand. “Your father is a very, very wise man.”

Chapter End Notes

Sigfriede said the fuck word! Thanks for reading again, guys! At this point we’re going to be doing roughly a chapter for each year of Sigfriede’s life until we get to the meat of the plot. I hope you all found this chapter cute, I had a lot of fun writing it! Don’t forget to leave some kudos, and if you have any questions, leave a comment. Yet again, thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being a wonderful beta. See you all next week!
Chapter Summary

Toddlers have short attention spans, and the moon seems like an interesting place to keep what little attention they have. Sigfriede upgrades her bottle. Lucretia tries her hand at baby sitting. Randomness ensues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER FOUR -- ANYTHING YOU CAN DO I CAN DO BETTER

The second Lucretia stepped in the door for Sigfriede’s second birthday party was the last second she ever really had to herself. Even on the moon, she couldn’t really get away from her niece; either she had learned it herself or someone taught her how to do it, but Lucretia would pick up her stone of farspeech to hear Sigfriede’s fragmented sentences in elvish with one or two common words thrown in over the frequency. The calls were usually short lived, with Lucretia saying hi and asking what the toddler was doing, then Siggy would get one or two words in before the owner of whatever stone she stole would find her chewing on it, take it back and apologize to Lucretia before hanging up. Lucretia thought it was rather cute.

However, with Sigfriede’s new found love of her aunt, Lup and Barry asked Lucretia to baby sit more often if only for the fact that the toddler would run and hide from whoever else was watching her and only come out when her parents came home. So, Lucretia found a way to keep the Bureau in check as she spent one or two days on surface level watching her little niece. And damn, did she pick a good time to do it.

Sigfriede had fallen into two common toddler stages at once: her “what’s that” phase and her copying phase. So anytime Lucretia would pull something out of a closet or a cabinet or take her somewhere public, it was easy to keep the kid in line by telling her to watch what Aunt Lucretia was doing. Of course, Sigfriede would immediately start copying her and ask Lucretia what every little rock on the sidewalk was. Lucretia loved answering all of her niece’s curious questions. She’d rather be putting up with a curious but easy to discipline kid than some of the stories she’d heard from Bureau employees. Back when Killian and Carry adopted a little orphan tiefling about a year after their wedding, Lucretia had heard horror stories of the kid distracting her mothers with a barrage of questions before bolting into the middle of a busy town square. She had no idea if the little tiefling was still doing it, but she did know she had to be at least five now. Lucretia would take a curious Siggy over a bolting Siggy any day. She hated to admit it, but some days when Sigfriede was a little restless, Lucretia found herself muttering that she was getting too old for this.

“Wha’s’at?” Sigfriede asked in elvish as she pulled on Lucretia’s pant leg and pointed at the roll of paper towels in her hands.

“These are paper towels, honey,” she answered in the same language. “I’m gonna clean the table before we start snack time.”
“Oh…”

“Do you want to help me?”

Sigfriede nodded vigorously and made grabby hands. Lucretia tore off some paper towels and handed them to the toddler. They walked together to the living room coffee table, and Lucretia made sure to stay slightly behind Sigfriede in case she fell. She could walk on her own consistently enough, but she was known for getting distracted by something off to her side, turning too fast and falling over. But today, Siggy made it to the coffee table all on her own with no distractions or falls. Lucretia let her take one side of the coffee table, so she could take the other. Just as she was about to begin spraying the disinfectant, Sigfriede let out a whine around her binky and made grabby hands for the bottle.

“I wanna!”

“You wanna what, sweetheart?”

“Little!”

Lucretia furrowed her eyebrows and stared at the toddler. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Little, little, little…“ Siggy made a beeline back towards the kitchen.

“Sigfriede—” Lucretia went after her and picked her up.

“Noooooo!”

“Honey, I don’t know what yo—”

Sigfriede started wailing. She was quickly put back on the ground, though Lucretia still held her hand. Maybe she was trying to show her something.

She tried addressing Siggy in elvish again, since that seemed to be the language she favored. “Are you trying to show me something, Bean?”

“Little!” Sigfriede pulled on Lucretia’s hand and guided her back to the cabinet containing the paper towels and disinfectant. She pointed up and repeated herself.

Lucretia shook her head but opened the cabinet anyway. She took another look inside, moved some things around, and found a tiny little red spray bottle with “Siggy’s Spray Bottle” scrawled across the front in Lup’s pretty cursive.

“Ohhhhh, little,” Lucretia smiled and pulled down the bottle. “You’ve got your own little helping spray bottle, don’t you? Well, I’m sorry, little miss, I should have looked better.”

She took another look at it and saw something else written on it too. A closer look revealed Barry’s chicken scratch to say, “Water only for fuck’s sake”. Lucretia raised an eyebrow, screwed open the lid and took a sniff. Definitely just water.

She probably already knew the answer, but Lucretia figured she’d ask anyway, “Why only water, kiddo?”

Sigfriede grabbed the bottle as soon as she could reach it, turned the nozzle around, opened her mouth and sprayed like it was normal. Just as Lucretia thought. Barry and Lup were probably trying to teach her not to do that, but she figured she could let this one slide.
“Ok,” she said. “Let’s go clean the table so we can have snacks.”

Sigfriede was already making her way there. She had sprayed the table down and smacked her towels down on the table by the time Lucretia caught up to her. This is where she took advantage of the copying phase. She had to say absolutely nothing as she handed Sigfriede a fresh paper towel, sprayed down the table with disinfectant and wiped it dry. Sigfriede did exactly the same thing on her side of the table.

“Good job!” she congratulated the toddler once the job was done.

Sigfriede smiled and handed her the water bottle. “Up.”

That one was easy. “Ok, I’ll put it up for you.”

Another day, Lucretia got called in for emergency babysitting. She was in the middle of some important Bureau business, so she couldn’t go surface level, but she said Barry and Lup could bring her up to the base before they left for their emergency job.

Sigfriede almost gave Lucretia a run for her money when it came to acting Director-ly. She could walk on her own very well now, and she followed Lucretia around her office and headquarters dome like a lost puppy. The whole time, any hand gesture, misstep, pick up of her robe, and Siggy was mimicking it with her binky between her teeth like a little mini Director. At one point, Lucretia was doing a check-up with Avi on management of employee transport, and the man could barely keep a straight face. Sigfriede had been so good and quiet at mimicking her aunt that she almost forgot she was there until Avi busted out laughing and had to excuse himself for a moment. Lucretia took the moment of privacy to scoop her niece up and tickle her relentlessly.

Later that day, Sigfriede got restless staying in Lucretia’s office and apartment, so Lucretia took her out to the Bureau’s cafeteria with a bottle of food her parents put in the baby bag and intentions of letting the kid socialize herself.

She regretted it as soon as a familiar flash of purple crossed Lucretia’s path as she entered the room. The scene could almost play out in her head, it had happened so many times across the base. Lucretia would be on a walk, or in one of the department domes, or anywhere on the moon and this blur of purple would happen somewhere in her line of sight, Killian would call after and Carrey would catch up a few moments later. The pair eventually stopped apologizing after Lucretia told them to. When kids set their mind to something, there was very little to stop them from at least trying. She would know, watching Magnus, Merle and Taako do some of the dumbest things yet while they worked under Lucretia.

“Random!”

“I’ll get ‘er.”

Per the usual, Lucretia saw Carrey Fangbattle run up after the blur and stop it, revealing a tiny little tiefling bouncing on her toes and giggling as her mom wrapped her in a bear hug.

“Hey, ice cream’s this way, kiddo,” Carrey said. She waved at Lucretia as she directed her daughter back to her seat.

Sigfriede squealed, let her binky drop to the floor, and started laughing. She bounced on Lucretia’s hip, but she wasn’t letting her down until Siggy found something else to copy. Under no circumstances was Lucretia going to let herself be the one to start Sigfriede’s running phase on top
of the phases she was in already.

Random grunted and turned back towards Lucretia and Sigfriede. “There’s a baby, Mom.”

“If you ask nicely after dinner I’m sure you’ll get to say hi then.”

Lucretia figured she owed Carrey and Killian a proper visit by this point anyway. She readjusted Sigfriede’s weight, helped herself to a nice plate of pasta and fish, and found a seat next to some of her oldest employees. There weren’t any high chairs in the cafeteria, so Lucretia sat her niece in her lap and made her a little plate of mashed carrots and Fantasy Lucy Charms.

“Good afternoon,” Lucretia waved. She saw Siggy try the same thing from her lap, but instead of repeating Lucretia’s greeting in common, she said some toddler version of it in elvish.

Killian raised her eyebrows. “Is she a new orphan?”

“Oh, no. This is Sigfriede Holly, my niece.”

“Oh, right on,” Carrey waved back. “Magnus told me about her! Barry and Lup’s kid, right?”

Lucretia nodded. “And I see Miss Random is doing as well as ever.”

Random Fangbattle narrowed her eyes as she inspected her ice cream bowl. “I’m good.”

Lucretia chuckled. “Well, Random, this is Sigfriede. Sigfriede,” she tapped the toddler’s nose to get her attention. “This is Carrey, Killian and their daughter Random.”

Sigfriede grabbed a piece of cereal, shoved it in her mouth, and spit it back out.

“Sigfriede, please—” Lucretia grabbed a napkin and started cleaning her up.

Random smirked and looked up at Killian. “I like her.”

Dinner went smoothly after that. Lucretia, Killian and Carrey all discussed different things from recent cases brought to the bureau’s attention, to the new restaurant opening where the Fantasy Costco had been, to different things their respective children under their care did. Once everyone was finished and Sigfriede seemed to find no more interest in her carrots and cereal, Lucretia packed up and decided to head back to her office before Barry and Lup came back.

“Wait, Miss Lucretia!” Random ran up after her and held her hands behind her back. Her purple skin flushed a deep blue. “Can Sigfriede and I play outside for a bit?”

Lucretia glanced up at Carrey and Killian, who shrugged and nodded. She looked down at Sigfriede, who had grabbed hold of Lucretia’s earring and started to tug it. Perhaps a little play was a good idea.

She set Sigfriede down on her feet and smiled at Random. “Ok, but listen here. Sigfriede is at a point where she likes playing by other kids, not with other kids. If you want to get along with her, she really likes it when people show her new and interesting things. And if you really want to keep her attention, she likes copying people right now. Just don’t do anything that could get you two hurt or in trouble, ok?”

“Oh!” Random smiled and reached for Sigfriede’s hand. “Come on, I’m gonna show you the cool rock corner I found.”
The two kids found entertainment in each other for the rest of the time Sigfriede had on the moon. By the time Barry and Lup found the adults standing watch nearby, Sigfriede was getting tired and Random was being called home for bedtime. As Random said her goodbyes to her new toddler friend, Barry and Lup caught up with Lucretia and made small talk with Carrey and Killian.

“Did she behave well?” Lup asked.

Lucretia shrugged. “She was perfectly fine. I almost forgot she was here at one point.”

“She didn’t break anything did she?” Barry asked.

“The base is still floating, isn’t it?”

“Fair point.” He picked up the toddler and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I see you playing with someone. Did you play nice?”

Random piped up from behind Killian. “She likes rocks.”

“Yeah? Maybe she’ll be a rock scientist one day.”

Lup snorted. Then she turned her attention to Random. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

Killian went to answer, but was cut off. “I’m Random Fangbattle. I’m a tiefling, but that doesn’t mean anything because my moms say I should be judged off of my character instead of my genetics.”

“Well Random, I’m Lup.”

“Are you Sigfriede’s momma?”

“Yes I am. Thank you for playing nice with Sigfriede today.”

Random nodded decidedly and headed back home.

The party said their goodbyes, decided to set up a play date in the future since both kids appeared to like each other well enough, and went on their ways.

Sigfriede hardly ever went up to the moon after that. Anytime she and Random had a play date was usually hosted in Barry and Lup’s apartment. By the time Sigfriede had grown up and come back to the Bureau, she wouldn’t remember anything about Random. But one day, when Carrey and Killian needed the kid out of their hair, Random spent her day with her tiny friend. At lunch, Barry asked Random what she enjoyed most about school.

“I don’t go to school,” Random took a big bite out of her sandwich.

“I see…” Barry waited for her to finish chewing. “So what do your moms have you do in place of school?”

“There’s a training program I go to. It’s like a, uh… What did Mom call it? A character school?”

“A finishing school? Like for girls?”

“No, that’s dumb. It’s a big word, like character, or charts, or something.”
“A charter school?”

“Yes! I go to one of those. It’s the big one that teaches all sorts of things like science and magic and fighting. I like the fighting best.”

Barry nodded. “Interesting. So do you think you’ll grow up to be a big fighter like Killian, or a sneaky fighter like Carrey?”

“I wanna be a sneaky fighter. My moms tell me that people are scared of people like me, so if I’m gonna be a fighter, I don’t wanna be a scary one; just a good one.”

“What do you mean people like you?”

“Tieflings…”

Barry hummed sympathetically. “I’ve met some really nice tieflings in my life. In fact, all of the tieflings I’ve met have been really nice to me.”

Random’s eyes got big. “You’ve met other people like me?”

“Oh, yeah! They’re all over the place, just like elves or humans or dwarves. Sometimes they’re hard to find because they hide or something, but I’ve never met a mean tiefling; at least, not one who saw it necessary to be mean to me.”

Random didn’t respond. Barry could see the little wheels turning in her head as she ate and watched to see how her emotions fluctuated. She didn’t get sad; in fact, she seemed to perk up and get a new idea. Soon, her sandwich was finished, and she handed her plate over to be put in the sink.

“Is Siggy’s nap over yet, Mr. Bluejeans?”

“Just about,” Barry checked his watch. “You want to help me get her lunch ready?”

The last Barry, Lup, and Sigfriede heard from Carrey and Killian about Random was when Sigfriede was five. Random had been accepted into a higher-level program of the one she was previously enrolled in. She’d be trained by the best people from top schools around Faerun in all kinds of trades and skills. Potentially, she could be hired right out of school by anyone in whatever field she went into. Unfortunately, that meant that she’d need to spend more time on school than she had before. As Sigfriede got older, their play dates became fewer and farther between, until one day they just stopped. Sigfriede didn’t seem upset about it, since she’d forgotten most of the play dates anyway, but Lup and Barry wished the greatest for that kid.

Random seemed like she was on the right track.

Chapter End Notes

Siggy's growing up! Look at all that walking and talking she's doing, plus she's making friends! Thank you to everyone who's left kudos and comments; it makes me feel all kinds of fuzzy in the cavity where my heart should be. I really appreciate it, and I can't wait to see what you guys think of this chapter. We're moving into the part of the story where we introduce new characters and expand Sigfriede's world a bit. I think you
guys will like where I go with this. Also, there was a new Amnesty episode the day I published this chapter, go listen to it!

As always, thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing and helping me come up with things for this hellbaby to do. Check her out if you haven't. I'll see you all again next Thursday!
CHAPTER FIVE-- NO!

Chapter Summary

Every smart toddler knows that the best way to expand your territory is to put your books in places they don't belong. Kravitz learns about dealing with odd nieces. Angus gives book recommendations. Sigfriede learns that her actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER FIVE—NO!

Sigfriede’s “no” phase was hell for Kravitz. If she wasn’t a strange child before, Kravitz definitely thought her strange now. She decided one weekend that she’d pull her usual gig with Taako to get him to open any door for her, answer any question for her, and pull down any book she wasn’t allowed to look at for her. When Kravitz caught on and asked Sigfriede nicely to put the necromantic tome back onto the shelf it came from, it was the first time she had ever said no to him. She had yet to stop.

“Sigfriede can you please let go of my hair.”

“No!” She grinned and let go of it anyway.

“Thank you…”

Kravitz sighed and looked his niece in the eye one more time. He put her down from his lap and turned back to his bounty book. “Please, just… stay in here where I can see you and once I’m finished with this we’ll go play, ok?”

“Mmmmm…. No.” She actually meant it this time. She didn’t act on it immediately, because Sigfriede had done it enough to know that Kravitz wouldn’t fall for it immediately, but as soon as her uncle turned away, Sigfriede pulled herself up and walked around the desk where she couldn’t be seen, walked to the book shelf, and pulled out a new book that looked interesting to her.

Of course, Sigfriede didn’t know how to read yet, either in elvish and especially not in common, but she liked looking at the pictures. They looked like the pictures her daddy showed her in his handwritten books. Those were cool to fall asleep to.

The book was rather thick and a struggle for the toddler to pull out, but she did it anyway, letting it fall onto its spine and open to a random page. Sigfriede sat in front of it and placed both of her hands on either page. Her binky, which for some reason her mother was letting her have less and less often, bobbed between her teeth as she studied the pages intently and gathered as much information as she could. As a three-year-old, that wasn’t very much. But a few words were written in a language she recognized from the pages her mother had written. It wasn’t as pretty as when her mom wrote them, but Siggy recognized the way the words swirled and connected in the same way. She grabbed at the pages and tried to turn them how her dad had done before, but she found herself getting confused and helpless. She let her binky fall from her mouth to let out a whine.
“Kaff…”

Kravitz looked up at his nickname, something that stuck from when Sigfriede was first learning to pronounce names and had trouble with the v-t-z sound in his name. “What is it, Siggy?”

“Read book, p’ease?” She said “please” like she was asking for peas.

Kravitz glanced down at the book she had in front of her and cursed. He got up from his desk and scooped up the book before she could read any more than she already had.

Could three-year-olds read? Kravitz wasn’t sure. Sigfriede was the only toddler he had interacted with in a long, long, long time.

“Let’s not read this one, huh?” He tried to sound like he wasn’t scolding her. “Let’s, uh, read…. Uh…. Shit.”

None of the books in his office weren’t necromantic tomes. “L-let’s read something not in here.”

He reached down to pick her up, but like normal she whined and ran from him. “Noooo!”

“Sigfriede, please—"

“Nooooooooo!” She ran out of the room and down the hall.

Kravitz sighed and walked after her. He caught up to her quickly on account for the fact that he had longer legs and Taako picked her up half way down the hall.

“Where you goin’, Bean?” Takko asked as he propped the toddler on his hip.


“Can you tell me in common, sweetheart?”

Sigfriede shook her head and hid her face in Taako’s shoulder. Taako rolled his eyes and tapped her cheek. “Come on, Bean, you’ve said it before. Can you tell me that you were reading a book in common?”

No response. Kravitz winced and shook his head. Sigfriede was developing fine with her language and reading comprehension in every area she was being taught except common. Which was troubling, but when her parents checked that they shouldn’t be concerned, they told everyone to just keep encouraging her to try and repeat what she says in common after saying it in elvish. So far, it had only worked so often. Of course, any time Taako asked Sigfriede to repeat something in sign language because she mumbled or was too far away, the kid had no problem with that. She took to sign language like a cat to catnip. Sometimes, when she was particularly mischievous or grumpy, it was hard for her to use words instead of signs. Of course, she needed to know sign language for the family, but common was used worldwide. If Sigfriede didn’t learn common for a long time, or even ever, that presented a few challenges in her life if she wanted to be an adventurer.

Kravitz cleared his throat. “She was reading a necromantic book that she isn’t allowed to read.”

“Maybe you should start bringing some of her own books into your office.”

“What good would that do? She keeps pulling down the big ones.”

“Because they look new and interesting to her, Krav.” Taako walked past him and down the hall
towards Sigfriede’s bedroom. Once she was old enough to not need a crib in her parent’s room, Taako and Lup indulged themselves in designing Sigfriede her own room for when she spent weekends at Taako’s house. It was very, very cute and very, very inspired by the planar systems.

Kravitz followed the pair into the room and watched Taako set Sigfriede down so he could look at her books.

“Can you stay right by me, pumpkin?” he asked.

Sigfriede giggled and hugged Taako’s legs. “No.”

“Yeah, you say that, huh?” He rested a hand on her head and ruffled her hair. “The mouth can lie, but the soul knows nothing but truth.”

“Taako, I just don’t think she likes me,” Kravitz said.

There was a pause as Taako pulled down some of Sigfriedes books and handed them to his husband. “She likes you plenty. Trust me, have you seen her around Lucas Miller?”

“No.”

“Barry took her on one of his visits to the nerdlord’s new lab to do some research and Lucas tried to say hi to her. Barold tells me the screams that came out of her mouth were some of the worst screams he had ever heard in his life. And believe me, bone daddy,” Taako pressed the corner of the last book into Kravitz’s chest. “We’ve all had a long, long life.”

Kravitz didn’t object. Taako picked Sigfriede back up and motioned Kravitz out the door. “Now,” he said, “let’s see what this little hellion got herself into this time.”

Sigfriede blushed and hid her face again.

Taako decided that Kravitz was probably going to be clueless until Sigfriede graduated from his school. And yes, Sigfriede was absolutely going to Taako’s school if it was the last thing he did. Angus had already betrayed him, he wasn’t going to let it happen again. But as for Kravitz, the guy was clueless on how to handle babies. The fact that Angus was in their care and was already pretty much a fully functioning adult probably didn’t help. He was more of a case of enforcing curfews and providing food than discipline and raising up. But if Kravitz really wanted to get Sigfriede to listen to him, someone had to teach him how to teach her.

“She doesn’t fully understand right from wrong yet, Krav,” Taako explained as he sat Sigfriede down by the book shelf. He kneeled down next to her and told Kravitz to watch what he did. “Hey, Sigfriede. Can you show me the book you pulled down earlier?”

Sigfriede thought for a moment, nodded, and found the book again.

“Oh, now. Look at me.”

She made eye contact. Taako tried for a kind smile.

“This isn’t a book you’re allowed to read, ok? You aren’t ready for all the information it has in it yet.”

Kravitz interjected. “She can’t legally—”
Taako held up a finger and gave him side eye. “She doesn’t understand what ‘legally’ means. All she knows is what she can and can’t do. Full reasoning doesn’t totally work yet. At least that’s what Lup says.” He turned back to the toddler. “Do you like pulling books off of big shelves like this, Bean?”

“No!”

“Sure you don’t. How about this, huh? I’m gonna take some books down that Uncle Kravitz can put somewhere else,” he started pulling out books and placing them behind him towards Kravitz. “And I’ll replace them with some of your pretty, colorful books. That way, when you want to pull books off the shelf like a big girl, you can have books here that you can read.”

Sigfriede smiled and giggled. “I read books here?”

“Yeah, all of these books I have right here,” Taako showed her the little stack he had between them. “Those are all books you’re allowed to read in here. Do you wanna help me put them on the shelf?”

“Yeah!” Sigfriede grabbed the first book and tried to shove it between two thicker tomes. Taako made room for it and helped her slide it in.

“Kravitz,” Taako turned to face him with stern eyes. “Do you want to help us put some of your niece’s books on the shelf?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Taako raised an eyebrow.

“Uhh, yeah, sure, I’d love to help.” Kravitz joined them on the floor.

Sigfriede picked up a book and handed it to him. She stuck out her chest and smiled. “Help!”

A grin broke across Kravitz’s lips. He nodded and looked for another space in the bottom shelf, then slid the book in. In a matter of minutes, the bottom shelf of one of the many bookshelves Kravitz had was patterned with bright blue, yellow, green and purple books much thinner than the tomes accompanying them. It was almost humorously out of place, but cute.

Sigfriede tangled her fingers in her little elven tunic and beamed with pride. She looked at both of her uncles, then found one of her books, tapped her index finger on it, and said, “My book!”

“Yeah,” Kravitz said. “You can pull your books from here whenever you want.”

He looked at Taako for reassurance. Taako smiled and nodded.

Within the next few weeks, Kravitz had given up all of the bottom shelves of his office book cases for Sigfriede. That first weekend where she had her own books in his office made her so happy and proud, and Kravitz wanted to keep that happy streak going. It was the first bit of a cooperative relationship they had in Sigfriede’s whole life. He made it a point to show Barry and Lup the little bit of progress he made with understanding the toddler, and the reassurance he got was comforting. When Angus saw the little strips of color in the office bookshelves, he smiled and went about his business. Then Kravitz had an idea.

The next weekend that Sigfriede wasn’t visiting her uncles, Kravitz made a shopping day with
Angus.

“You want me to help you with what now, Sir?”

Kravitz sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Listen, Angus, it’s the only way I’ve gotten her to not mess with my books.”

“Well, yeah,” Angus pushed his glasses up. “But why do you want me to help you find more books for her?”

“Because you seem to understand her interests better than I do.”

Angus smiled. “Her interests are pretty easy to understand, if you ask me, Sir.”

“Angus, I refuse to believe my three-year-old niece has a distinct, consistent interest in necromancy.”

Angus smirked and turned towards the front door.

Their first stop Angus actually vetoed. The second stop was better, but they only found a few books that Angus thought would hold Sigfriede’s attention long enough. On the third stop, Kravitz gave up and let Angus take the lead.

“I don’t think she enjoys regular toddler books…” Angus steered the cart away from the toddler section of the book store and more towards the research and magics section. “She’s in a part of life where her brain is constantly growing. And if Lup and Barry have been reading her their notes as a way of entertainment, she’s probably used to something more substantial.”

Kravitz followed quietly. He watched as Angus stopped the cart in front of a section he never would have thought about shopping for a toddler in. Angus took a moment to observe his options, then he began pulling different books down. Some were rejected for reasons Angus didn’t voice, and others were accepted with a quiet nod. Before Kravitz knew it, the kid had a pile of books about all sorts of things. He picked one up and read the title incredulously.

“I Can Be an Occultist; an Introduction to Necromancy for Kids?” Kravitz raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t I tell you I was worried about her ready necromancy books?”

“No, sir,” Angus moved the cart to a new part of the aisle. “You told me you were worried about her reading illegal necromancy books. Do you think they’d sell illegal books in a public book store, Kravitz?”

“… No.” He threw the book back into the cart.

By the end of their haul, Kravitz was almost sure he needed to just buy his niece her own book shelf. It took several trips, even with Taako’s help, to get all of the books inside. Once they were all piled in his office, the bottom three shelves of each bookcase were cleared of their books and replaced with Sigfriede’s new materials. It looked… ridiculous. But if it was what it took for Sigfriede to stop shoving her freckled nose into places it shouldn’t be, then Kravitz was willing to put up with it. She’d be over it in a few years, right?

“You know, Krav,” Taako said from the doorway. “I didn’t think you’d get this deep into it.”

“It was Angus’s idea,” Kravitz grabbed a book, stood up, and held it to Taako’s chest. “Now put the wine glass down and help me get all this stuff put up before I change my mind and take all the books back.”
Taako chugged the last of his drink and got to work.

The next time Sigfriede visited the house and found her way into Kravitz’s office was probably one of the funniest visits she’d had yet. The gasp she made was one of the cutest noises he had ever heard, which wasn’t saying much because as a reaper, Kravitz hadn’t heard a lot of cute noises. He watched as she toddled around, pulling out random books and then putting them back up. She did so clumsily, of course, but he was impressed by her understanding of putting things back up.

“Do you like it, Sigfriede?” he asked.

She smiled at him over her shoulder. He walked over and crouched down beside her.

“It was your cousin Angus’ idea,” he explained. “We spent a whole day out in town looking for books just for you.”

“My books!” she giggled. She reached up and pulled down another book. She looked at it, went to put it back up, and made a double take. Her smile fell.

“What’s wrong, Bean?”

“My book, Kaff?” she asked.

Kravitz nodded. “What’s wrong with it, Sigfriede?”

She made a face and shoved the book at him. He took it and looked at the cover and didn’t even need to read the title. The big block letters in bold primary colors told him enough. *Why Is the Sky Blue? And Other Science Facts for Kids.*

Kravitz didn’t get it. He handed the book back to her and shook his head. “Its fine, sweetheart. You can rea—”

Something smacked him right between the eyes. His head flew back and he lost his balance. The last think he saw before he let his head drop back to the ground was Sigfriede’s tiny body bolting from the office and Angus taking its place.

Kravitz groaned and rubbed his face.

“I told you she wanted something with more substance, Sir.”

“Angus?”

“Yeah?”

“Go to your room.”

That was the first time Sigfriede had ever suffered real consequences. Kravitz found Sigfriede hiding behind Taako in the living room, refusing to tell him what had happened. She shoved her hands under her armpits and refused to talk; she wasn’t saying anything in any way. When Taako saw Kravitz holding his forehead and scowling he pieced together the situation and scowled at Sigfriede.

“Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans,” Taako squatted in front of her. “What did you do?”
“No.” Sigfriede hid her face in her shoulder.

“Sigfriede look at me,” Taako tapped her chin. “Tell me what happened.”

“She threw a book at me,” Kravitz said.

Sigfriede tried to run, but Taako grabbed her arm and picked her up. “Sigfriede, did you throw a book at your Uncle Kravitz?”

“No!”

“You can’t throw books at people, Sigfriede.”

“Nooo!”

Taako grabbed her face and turned it towards him. He made eye contact with her and gave her a stern look. “Would your parents let you throw books at people at home?”

“… No…”

“Then why do you think you can throw books at people here?”

“Don’t like it.” Of course, she spoke in elvish.

Taako sighed. He wasn’t going to fight with her to speak in common right now. He asked in elvish, “Don’t like what, Sigfriede?”

“Book.”

“What? You love books?”

“I showed her a fact book I picked out for her and she didn’t like it, so she threw it at me,” Kravitz explained. “Angus said she probably wanted something with more substance than just scientific facts and I didn’t take his word on it.”

“Still isn’t an excuse for her to fuckin’ launch it at you.” Taako put Sigfriede down and thought quick. He had to teach her that throwing this was not OK and that it had consequences. Lup said time out didn’t teach well, but he needed to keep her distracted. What would happen if she threw a book to any other person in the world?

… Perfect.

“Sigfriede, you stay on the couch for me, ok? I’m gonna go bandage Kravitz up because you gave him a booboo by throwing that book at him.”

Her eyes widened, and she grabbed for Taako’s hands as they left her sides. “Booboo?”

“Mhm. Look at him, he’s holding his forehead. He’s bleeding!” Taako’s voice turned the slightest bit over dramatic.

“Taako,” Kravitz said, “I’m fi—”

“Headed to the bathroom right. Now.” Taako interjected. He pushed Kravitz out of the living room and towards the bathroom.

Kravitz looked back at his husband. “What are you doing?”
“Lying to teach her a lesson. You can’t bleed, right?”

“Right.”

“Wrong. Today, you shed blood.”

“Little dramatic, love.”

Taako opened the medicine cabinet and pulled down a pink box of band-aids. He pulled one out and ripped the paper open. “Where’d she hit you?”

“Right between the eyes.”

“Come here…” Taako plastered the bandage between Kravitz’s eyebrows.

Kravitz sighed and closed his eyes. “I have a bright pink Fantasy Hello Kitty band-aid on my forehead right now, don’t I?”

“How else is she gonna learn that throwing shit isn’t ok? What do you want me to do, spank her?”

“Well, no…”

“Then deal with it and act like she broke skin.”

When Sigfriede saw the bright pink strip on Kravitz’s face, the look on her face was of pure horror. It almost made Kravitz bust out laughing, but he held it in for the sake of Taako’s plan.

Sigfriede jumped up from her spot on the couch and ran over. Her little breaths hitched as she threw her arms around one of Kravitz’s legs and hugged it tightly.

Taako hummed. “You see that, Siggy? Kravitz needed a band-aid and everything. What do you have to say for yourself?”

She whimpered and looked up at Kravitz. Then she raised her arms and said, “Up.”

“You gonna apologize to me?” he asked.

Sigfriede nodded, so Kravitz obliged. He lifted the toddler up and let her sit on his hip, then he waited.

“I sorry,” she mumbled.

Kravitz smiled and kissed her cheek. “You are forgiven.”

Then his niece did something he never thought she’d do. She reached up, gently grabbed the sides of his face, pulled it down and kissed his “booboo”.

Kravitz started crying.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter ended up with my friend asking me if I was pregnant because I searched "safe and understandable ways to punish a toddler" for three hours. Being a
writer is tough. Anyway, I hope you guys like this chapter! Its been one of the top three I've written so far. I just love toddlers that know they did something wrong and their guilt is enough punishment as it is. That's how I was as a kid.

I wanna say thank you for the continued kudos and comments from y'all, especially the two or three of you that are return readers! It makes my lil heart sing. If you love Siggy and want to spread her terrible twoS tyranny around, link your friends, tell them to read, force them to read! Tape their hands to their thighs until they read, I dunno. Whatever motivates your friends to read, do it.

If you guys were wondering, more characters have yet to be introduced and some characters are definitely going to return. You'll just have to keep up to see who's who. ;)

And lastly, as usual, thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing and enabling Sigfriede's abuse of tiny power. Send some love her way, too. See y'all next Thursday!
CHAPTER SIX-- IMPULSE CONTROL

Chapter Summary

Change is hard when you're used to being the baby. Taako lacks impulse control. Lup has motherly doubts. Sigfriede has to grow up.

Chapter Notes

The notes are at the beginning of this chapter because I want you guys to know that the two new characters of this chapter, Eva and Cashmere, ARE NOT my original characters. My beta, Dana (timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com) came up with them, and she's given me permission to use them in the story! So, if you end up loving them, go give her all the compliments!

As usual, thank you all for coming back, reading, and leaving all these nice comments on the chapters. It makes me so happy and excited to write for you all. Thanks to Dana for being a wonderful beta, and I'll see you all next week! Next chapter's a big one... ;)

CHAPTER SIX- IMPULSE CONTROL

Sigfriede had an innate knowledge of a lot of things, even if she didn’t realize it. She knew how hard her parents fought to give her a good life before she had even been thought of. She knew songs and could hum them in her sleep. She knew about magic and how magic bends reality. She knew how lightning arcs through the air and the way it would eventually feel as she twirled its plasma between her fingers.

One thing she did not have an innate knowledge for was Taako’s habit of impulse decisions. Taako would tell anyone he didn’t let his emotions control him, but anyone who knew him well enough would know what bullshit that was. One day he’d be on a call with Lup, listening about how Sigfriede refused to even speak anymore, resorting to using sign language to communicate, and dreading the idea of raising anymore kids. The next, he was walking through the nursery of an orphanage his school had partnered with and signing adoption papers for a couple of elven twins. Within the next month, Taako was calling everyone to his house for a very special meeting.

Of course, Barry and Lup were there first with Siggy. He smiled wide and waved as his niece, who had just turned six, ran up signing excitedly to him.

Taako bent down to give her a big hug. “Hello to you, too, Bean.”

“Where’s Angus?” she signed.

“He’s up in his room somewhere with his nose in a book like always.”

Sigfriede nodded and ran up the stairs.
Taako looked up to his sister and shook his head. “Not a peep out of her.”

“I know,” Lup hugged him tightly. “One day she just woke up and decided she was done with talking. Its so weird… The house is so quiet now.”

“At least you guys can sleep again,” Kravitz said. He only sounded slightly bitter.

Barry raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see…”

Luckily, it was close enough to Candlelights for Davenport to be on time this time. There was a quick talk about what to have for dinner before Taako got antsy and made everyone wait in the living room. Then he ran upstairs, grabbed the twins, and headed back down stairs.

Lup caught on first. “Oh my fucking god. Taako, you didn’t.”

“Steal them?” He smirked. “No. I don’t steal people anymore, Lup, please.”

“What are you doing with two babies, then, Taako?”

“These are my fucking daughters, Lup.”

Everyone stared at Taako in sheer confusion. Except Kravitz; Kravitz bit his fist and clamped his eyes shut to keep from laughing.

Sigfriede broke the silence. She tugged on her father’s sleeve and hummed for his attention. When he looked down at her, she signed, “Where do these babies come from?”

It was close enough to “Where do babies come from?” to shake Barry from his shock. “Uh, yeah, Taako,” he took a double take at his daughter to check if she had signed anymore. “Where—uh—where’d you get the kids?”

He really hoped that Taako hadn’t found some loose notes from when he and Lup were planning Siggy and used them for himself. Some of the stuff in that was technically borderline illegal.

“Well, Barold, I’m glad you asked.” Taako handed one of the bundles to Kravitz, who looked tense. “You know how I have a school where I teach kids of all backgrounds magic?”

“I’ve never seen you spend a day in the classroom,” Barry said. “But go on.”

“Well recently I signed into a partnership with some local orphanages to start a program for older kids who age out of their orphan homes to enroll and have a place to stay on campus while getting an education. One day I decided, ‘fuck it’, and took a stroll through one of the orphanage’s nursery. I thought maybe I’d find some kids to keep an eye on for scholarship opportunities or something; nothing too serious. But then I saw these two little twin elves laying alone—”

“You big softie!” Lup was grinning from ear to ear as she jumped up and grabbed the baby Taako was holding. “You adopted a couple of orphan elves because you related to them!”

“No—”

“Shut up, you can’t lie to me. What are their names?”
“We, uh,” Taako blushed. “We haven’t named them yet.”

Lup deadpanned. “You brought the whole family to your shitty mansion on short notice to meet a pair of elf twins you adopted on a whim only for us to have nothing to call them? What kind of father are you?”

“I’m not a father, Lup.”

“Yes, you are,” everyone responded in unison.

Introductions, though lacking names, went the same way they had for Sigfriede. Each of the twins was passed between the adults, and then the kids with some aid on how to properly hold a baby. Everyone said hello, looked at each of the twins, commented on how cute their ears were, or how quiet they were compared to Sigfriede. Kravitz made a joke about getting a break with super smart kids with these two. Most everyone found that funny.

Sigfriede wanted nothing to do with it. “Where are my books?” she signed.

Lup tapped her daughter on the head. “Sigfriede, say hi to your cousins.”

Sigfriede waved, then looked back at Taako. She repeated her question.

Taako decided he’d talk with her later.

Eventually, by the end of the week, Kravitz and Taako settled on the names Cashmere and Eva; both named after important things to the couple. Cashmere to highlight the importance of good appearance, Eva for Evard’s Black Tentacles. Lup said Taako never accounted for taste, anyway.

Taako didn’t expect anyone to spend the first month at his house like they had with Sigfriede. The girls were already nearly a year old at this point anyway, and either way no one had the time for a month of family bonding. Once names were decided on, one last dinner was shared, and, in the morning, roads were traveled back to everyone’s homes.

Except for Sigfriede. Sigfriede screamed when Barry and Lup tried to take her home. Taako was quickly learning that those seemed to be the only sounds she made anymore, hums and screams. All other emotions were communicated with her hands.

He hoped he hadn’t gone overboard on excitedly teaching her to sign.

Sigfriede yanked her arm from her mother’s grip and ran back into her uncles’ house. Taako tried to catch her but got shoved away harshly.

“Yeesh…” he sighed.

Lup ran past him and after the bolting six-year-old. “Sigfriede Holly you get your ass back here right now or you’re grounded!”

Sigfriede ran for the stairs and out of sight before Lup could catch up to her.

“God what is her deal?” Lup rubbed her temples.

Taako and Barry stood behind her and exchanged tense looks. Barry shrugged. Taako hummed and thought for a moment.
“Has she only been acting up recently?”

“She’s not… acting up, exactly. She just… isn’t like herself?” Lup sounded unsure.

“She started school recently, right?”

Barry and Lup nodded.

“Is she making friends ok?”

Barry and Lup shook their heads.

“I see…” Taako hummed and glanced towards the hallway leading to the twins’ nursery. “Does she get along with anyone in her class?”

Barry and Lup scoffed. Taako nodded and waved them to the kitchen.

“But Sigfrie—”

“Sigfriede will come down in her own time,” Taako said. “We’ll just wait for her over tea.”

Lup slammed her head down on the table as soon as she sat down. Barry patted her back.

“I just don’t get it,” Lup whined. “Is it how I parent? I don’t cuss too much at her, do I?”

Barry inhaled sharply and adjusted his glasses. “Well… considering her first word was fuck, and considering Magnus taught her to say it, I don’t think we can put all the cuss-blame onto you.”

“Maybe I’m just a bad mom…”

Taako set a steaming mug in front of both of them. “So, Bean isn’t making friends; did I hear that right?”

Barry nodded. “She’s a little headstrong. Her teacher says she was nice for the first few days of class, just that she had a problem finding kids who understood elvish as much as she did. Obviously they’d ask her to speak in common, and she only knows so much common, so she got frustrated. She came home from class in tears one day because she was so upset that she couldn’t communicate with anyone. The next day, she just… stopped talking. She signed to us as we got her ready for class, and never stopped. She’ll talk sometimes, like when she’s asking about a new word, or her thoughts are running too fast for her hands to keep up. But most of the time she signs.”

“I take it that didn’t help on the friend-making front?”

“Nope.”

Taako nodded. “It could be worse,” he offered. “She could be lashing out in worse ways.”

“Taako, she loves babies,” Lup said. “She didn’t even want to look at the twins.”

“Maybe she’s just mad that she’s not the baby anymore,” Taako sipped his tea. Too weak for his taste; it needed more time. “I’ve heard that some kids get really upset when they start growing up.”

A silence fell over the table. Lup finished her tea before she spoke again.

“Do you think having Sigfriede was a bad idea?”
Taako choked on his tea. “What the fuck?”

“I mean—” she sniffed and rubbed her nose. “She’s not… normal. We all know that, especially now that we’ve got two normal elf babies to compare her to. And don’t say Angus or either of Merle’s kids were normal enough to compare her to either, we all know that’s a fuckin’ lie.”

Taako raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't say they're normal... the orphanage says they're half drow, half high elf..."

“Oh, come on, ‘Ko. Sigfriede was laughing at a week old; one-week-olds do not laugh. She’s way too smart for her own good.”

Barry cleared his throat. “I was only kidding when I said she was a mistake, you know that right?”

“No, Bar, I know. But its just… I don’t know if she’s ever been… happy?”

“Bullshit,” Taako grabbed his sister’s hand. “That kid was laughing at one week because of how happy she is. She nailed Kravitz in between the eyes with the corner of a book because it wasn’t as interesting as what she was used to. Sure, she may be a little weird and stubborn and unnaturally smart, but she’s your kid; it’s what everyone fucking expected from you. No one wanted a normal kid for you guys, you’d be bored out of your goddamn skin, literally. Lup, I promise you, having Sigfriede and giving her the kind of honest, loving life you’ve given her was probably the best decision you’ve ever made. She’s made everyone’s lives brighter because of it, too. Is the kid still alive?”

Lup made a face and glanced at Barry.

“Hey, if she’s a lich at six, don’t blame me,” Barry leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

Lup sighed and turned back to Taako. “Yeah, Sigfriede’s still alive.”

“Is she still going to school and doing homework?”

“Still going to school and doing homework…”

“Is she telling you she hates you and that she wishes she were never born?”

“…. No? Why would she do that?”

“Exactly. Then you’re fine. She’s just used to being babied and having things handed to her how she wants it. That’s not a bad thing, especially with how we grew up and how bitter that could have made you. You think I would have brought two little shits into my care if I didn’t think Kravitz could pull my head out of my ass around them?”

Barry gagged. “I didn’t need that visual.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the truth Barold, and if you can’t handle it, don’t be a dad.”

Barry shrugged.

“Listen, you grew up to be much more loving than I did, Lup. I’m not worried about you raising Sigfriede up fine. She’ll get over the whole elvish versus common versus signing thing eventually. She’ll make friends eventually. She’ll get over not being the baby eventually. Sometimes you just gotta let bitches bitch about things for a while and they’ll get over it. Just like I do with most things in life.”
Lup dug her finger nails into the back of Taako’s hand. “Call my daughter a bitch and consider yourself dead.”

“See?” Taako’s voice cracked and he tried to free his hand from her death grip. “Great Momma Bear instincts there!”

Sigfriede came out with Angus by the end of the day. She was sleepy and needed a good cuddle from her dad. She came down the stairs by the kitchen gripping Angus’s hand. He went down the stairs before her as she rubbed her eyes and yawned. She used her free hand to speak.

“I’m sleepy,” she said.

“Yeah?” Barry asked. “You gonna go home with us now?”

“I want cuddles,” she huffed.

“Well come down here and I’ll carry you while we go home, how does that sound?”

Sigfriede nodded.

Angus gave his little cousin a hug when she reached the bottom of the steps. She returned it gently and walked towards her father.

Barry picked her up and groaned. “I’m too old for this…”

“You’re too old for a lot of things, Babe.” Lup patted his back.

They all headed to the front door. When they passed the hall that led to the twins’ room, Siggy whined and tapped Barry’s head. She signed, “I want to see the babies.”

“Now?” Barry asked.

Siggy nodded.

“Uh,” he looked at Taako. “Is that ok?”

Taako shrugged and headed to the nursery. “If they wake up and scream I’ll accept my fate and just become def in both ears.”

Barry sighed and follow suit.

When Siggy saw the two babies, she scrunched her nose in the way she always did that hid all of her freckles. She shoved her face in Barry’s neck for a moment, then took a closer look.

“They look the same,” she signed.

“They’re twins, Little Bear,” Barry said.

Sigfriede thought for a moment with her fingers on her lips. Then she motioned, “Like Momma?”

“Yup.”

“Oh…” She leaned down to get a closer look.

Barry groaned and put her back down. “You’re too big for me to hold you like that, Sigfriede.”
“I wanna hold one.”

Barry and Taako shared a nervous glance. Sigfriede, while very smart and mostly respectful, was prone to dropping things. Her parents couldn’t figure out if it was a phase, or if she was testing them, or if she legitimately had something wrong with her hands, but most of the time she wasn’t allowed to hold breakable objects without assistance. She’d been getting better at it, but most of the time she wasn’t holding a living being. If she dropped one of the girls on their heads…

“Here,” Taako lifted one of the twins, Eva, from her crib and sat on the floor next to Sigfriede. “How about I hold her for you and you can get as close as you want?”

Sigfriede nodded and sat right in front of him. She leaned over the baby and stared at her for an unnecessarily long amount of time. Eva was asleep, so she didn’t do much. Maybe Sigfriede just got bored, or maybe she didn’t entirely understand what a baby was or what it meant, but after a few minutes she scrunched her nose again and got up.

“They’re ok,” she signed as she walked out the door.

Taako grimaced. He’d never seen his niece so dismissive. She didn’t seem as curious anymore; Taako knew for a fact she was always more likely to ask questions about new things than to just look at them and leave. She was in school with kids her age, and even though she had a problem communicating willingly, she wasn’t a mean child; a little harsh and bratty at moments, but she didn’t hit, or throw things, or bite. She’d been taught that none of that was ok long before Sigfriede even knew what a school was. There wasn’t any evident reason for her to be so… disenchanted.

Maybe she really was just bored.

He put Eva back in her bed and sighed. Barry had already made his way after Sigfriede, so he caught up, said goodbye to the three of them, and headed to his office.

Closing the door behind him, Taako rubbed the back of his neck and exhaled sharply. He looked at the single bookcase on the wall behind his desk, scanning the multicolored spines for two very important things. When he found the catalog and spell book, he immediately flipped to the old bookmarked pages and grinned at Angus’s old messy handwriting in the margins. The first time Taako ever looked at a page of notes Angus had taken from their magic lessons on the moon, he nearly had an aneurism. The kid could write so well when he needed to, but if he thought no one else was going to see what he had written, the words were all but written in one of the few languages Taako didn’t know. Now Angus just always wrote in tiny, exact cursive. But all of the important information was still there. The same could be said for the catalog. Granted, Angus never took notes in the wand catalog because the kid somehow got his hands on a wand of his own before Taako had the chance to get him one first, but the notes Taako had taken for him were still there. Taako’s handwriting was immaculate, if he said so himself.

Of course, he was the only one who would say that. But he was the only one who had an opinion about his hand writing that mattered, wasn’t he?

Taako reread the notes he had taken about his magic boy’s subtle habits, the things that stood out to him, the way he thought, which wands would and wouldn’t work for him, and added onto those notes in the context of his niece.

Barold said he’d never seen Taako spend a day in the classroom. Technically, he was right. Taako hated teaching magic in a normal classroom. Even wizards didn’t properly learn magic if all they did was read all day. Magic was kinetic, tangible. It was literal, it was something woven into the fabric of the prime material plane’s reality. Some people needed to be shown how to touch it. Some
people needed to be shown that magic was even there in the first place. That’s what Taako’s school was for, what his teachers were for. But Taako? Taako only taught those himself who knew those things already.

After hours of examining different makes, materials, features, and safety components, Taako dog eared a new page in the catalog and grabbed his stone of farspeech.

“Hello?” Lup answered.

“Hey, Lulu.”

“Shit, did Siggy leave something behind again?”

“No, no, Siggy’s all good. Hey, I have a question for you kemosabe.”

“Uh, ok. Shoot.”

“How much have you been teaching Sigfriede about magic?”
CHAPTER SEVEN-- GLOW WORMS!

Chapter Summary

Sometimes plans can backfire in new and unusual ways. The family is thrown for a loop when Sigfriede barrels through Taako's living room with a fresh look that she's determined to rock until the end of times. Taako tries to find the right time. Mookie tries to be a good cousin. Sigfriede gets ahead of her communication barrier.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER SEVEN—GLOW WORMS!

Taako held on to the wand until he saw the right time to give it to Sigfriede. There were a few close calls, like when she decided one weekend to spend literally all of her time with him no matter what he was doing and he found her reading from his personal spell book in his office, or when she was trying to help with Eva and Cashmere with Angus and she almost got the friends cantrip spot on, but Taako wasn’t paying attention and he could have sworn a spark of electricity flew off the edge of her glasses (which were a bitch to keep on her face and in one piece). Sigfriede yelped, tore the things off her face and proceeded to stomp on them. Angus was horrified and Taako was genuinely confused.

The next time was right at Angus’ twentieth birthday, which Taako insisted on making a huge, huge family event. He even suffered through a call with Lucretia to see if she could take the day off. On the day of the party, when the cake was brought into the room, Sigfriede seemed so excited about seeing a fire on top of some food that when the cake literally exploded, Taako had to question if correlation really did mean causation. Anyone else would say that it was a prank that Taako had planned all along, and he let them think that for a while, but he saw that surge in his niece’s eyes.

By the time Lup and Barry started planning for Sigfriede’s seventh birthday, Taako knew something was up. He went to the closest gift shop, found a box and matching ribbon he thought Siggy would like, laid her wand in it gently, and wrapped it up neatly.

“Now we wait…”

That was the worst part. Not because giving gifts made Taako anxious, he knew he was great at giving gifts. It was the worst part because Sigfriede was so damn nosy. The week leading up to her party, she picked up on all the extra attention and ran with it. Which meant she pulled more shenanigans that week than normal. Which also meant she was back on her breaking-into-rooms-I-shouldn’t-be-in phase.

Thankfully, Angus and Lucretia were more than happy to pull her nose out of places it shouldn’t be when Taako, Barry, and Lup were setting up for the party.

“Siggy, love,” Lucretia ran after her for the fifth time this morning. “Sigfriede, I’m not done with your dress! Come back!”
“I’ll get her, Miss Lucretia,” Angus shot up and ran after his little cousin. He was so tall, now. He caught up with no worries and tickled her.

Sigfriede screeched and dropped to her knees, but Angus lifted her back up and tickled her some more. She was laughing so hard and squirming so much, the signs she made were almost unintelligible.

“You think your mom’s gonna let you go out without all your ribbons all tied up, Siggy?” Angus kissed her cheek and put her back down. “Come on, let Miss Lucretia and I finish with your little robe and then you can go play.”

Sigfriede giggled and ran back to Lucretia. A few moments later, she was all dressed up in mini elvish robes and matching shoes. It all lasted for about negative four seconds the instant the Highchurches walked in.

“Mookie!” It was probably the first word Sigfriede said verbally in a year and a half. Then she slipped right back into her expressive silence. She ran up to the door, tore off her robes, kicked her shoes off, and dragged her cousin out to the trees in the front yard.

“Well…” Lup sighed and shook her head. “At least she kept it on for the photos…”

Sigfriede found her favorite tree and headed straight for it. Mookie followed suit, laughing and calling after her.

“Sigfriede, wait up!”

She didn’t listen. Mookie was a big kid, she thought. He could catch up to her just fine. Everyone did eventually. Sigfriede started climbing the tree like her big cousin had taught her and paused for no man.

“Geez, you’re fast,” Mookie huffed and started up the tree as well.

Eventually, he found Siggy sitting on a thick branch in her smock, with her bare feet dangling on either side. She was smiling and breathing hard, catching her breath. Once Mookie situated himself on the branch next to her, he gave his goofy grin and took a good look at her.

“You’re almost as tall as me now,” he said.

Sigfriede nodded. She began to say something complex in sign language, then remembered that Mookie only knew some very basic signs. She huffed, rolled her eyes and simply made the sign for “yes”.

“You still on this sign language thing?”

She shot him a dirty look.

Mookie shrugged. “Suit yourself. I like being loud.”

She gave him the same looK.

“Hmmm… Wanna go look for bugs again?”

Sigfriede smiled and nodded her head.
“Cool! We can start at the top of the tree and work down to the dirt.”

They started their ascent back up again and only stopped when the branches got too thin for their weight. Each of them inspected the bark closely, looking for any kind of new ant, or if the ladybugs had come out yet, or if any butterflies had found some sap. Any insect of interest was fearlessly caught if their reflexes were too slow. The two ogled over the colors, legs, and antenna before the insect was put back where it was found unharmed. That routine was repeated several times before the pair made it half way down the tree.

Then something happened. If you were to ask Sigfriede when she was older, when she was a leader, she’d tell you she didn’t remember. She’d tell you maybe her foot slipped, or the branch was too weak, or she was trying to be dramatic. The only thing that she could be sure about is that she found a glow worm, and it made her very, very excited. Next thing she knew, the worm was gone and replaced by a set of bright, colorful, dancing lights with her back on the ground and the wind knocked from her lungs.

She lifted a hand to her face to readjust her glasses. The light from the now vanished glow worm turned her skin blue. That was funny.

“Oh my gods,” Mookie swung down from the lowest bough and covered his mouth. “Oh my god, Siggy you’re blue!”

Sigfriede’s brow furrowed as she sat up. She inhaled roughly and took a better look at her hands. This time she turned away from the light to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her.

Still blue.

She took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes.

Definitely still blue.

Laughter bubbled up from Sigfriede’s lungs as Mookie pulled her up and pushed her towards the house. His calls for an adult were muted out by the maniacal laughter that poured from Sigfriede’s lips as she spun in place, looking at any bit of exposed skin she could. All of it, her fingers, toes, ankles, and knees were a violent shade of blue. If she had been unconscious when Mookie found her, you would have thought she was dead.

“Daddy!” Sigfriede screamed and ran for the door. She pushed past Mavis and Merle and into her dad’s legs. “Dad, Dad! Look, I’m blue!”

Her words were rough and her voice a little course; not talking for a year did that to you. But she mustered through it and tried to remember how to pronounce things.

Barry’s eyes grew to the size of dinner plates. He froze in place and tried to keep his daughter still. So much was happening at once that it was hard for him to keep up. For one thing, his seven-year-old daughter was violently blue. Head to toe, it looked like someone had just taken a photo of Sigfriede and edited it so that her skin was blue, her freckles were indigo, and her lips were purple. For another thing, she was talking so fast and so excitedly that it was hard for him to keep up; hard for him to even process that she was speaking in elvish rather than with her hands.

“Sig—Sigfriede, slow down, holy shit.” He knelt down to get a better look at her. “What the fuck happened?”

“I was climbing a tree with Mookie and we were looking at bugs like normal and I found this really cool bug, except it wasn’t a bug—” she paused to catch her breath. “it was a glowing bug and I
thought that was cool, so I got excited!” She stumbled over the word “excited”. “And then next
ting I know the bug is gone and these lights are all around me and I’m on the ground and now
the bug turned me blue!”

Barry didn’t respond. Panic flooded his chest. What if this was permanent? Regardless of if it was
harmless how could her new complexion affect her adult life?

The rest of the family walked into the front entry way and watched the odd scene unfold before
them. Lup and Taako were leaning onto each other to keep from laughing, biting their fists and
gasping for air. Angus stared at Sigfriede and adjusted his glasses uncomfortably. Lucretia covered
her mouth and giggled quietly. Davenport took one look at the kid, coughed, and walked back into
the living room.

Barry glanced up at Merle, who was standing at the doorway next to Mookie; he had gone running
when he heard his son calling for him.

Merle shrugged. Barry shrugged and gulped. Sigfriede saw her mom and ran up to her.

“Momma, look!”

Lup took a deep breath and stood up straight. “What, Siggy Bean?”

“I’m blue!”

“Yes, I see that. What do you want me to do about it, baby?”

“Nothing.”

Barry coughed. “Uh, Siggy, honey… W-we can’t let you stay blue forever.”

Sigriede’s shoulders dropped. “No?”

“Because, um…” He shook his head in bewilderment.

Angus spoke up. “Uh, sorry to interrupt, but Sigfriede, you said you found a bug, and then the bug
disappeared, and some lights took its place?”

She nodded her head.

“And then the bug… turned you blue?”

“Uh huh!”

“Hmmm…” Angus glanced at Taako, who was leaning against the wall and smirking. “Sir, can I
look at some books in your office for a moment?”

“Shit, go buck wild,” Taako threw his hands up. “We’ve got a blue seven-year-old now, nothing
can be normal for us anymore.”

Angus rolled his eyes and headed upstairs. He returned a few minutes later with one of the wizard
text books Taako had and a few other books pertaining to certain spell effects and practices. He
flipped through some pages of each book and found what he was looking for.

“Ah ha!” He sat on the floor next to Sigfriede and showed her the page. “Look here, Siggy. This is
a cantrip called dancing lights. It requires a bug called a glowworm and some vocal components;
that means you have to say the right words in a certain way to make the spell work. Was the bug
you found long and kind of glowing?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Do you remember what you said?"

She gave him some side eye.

"Hmm, you’re right. I don’t suspect you said much…. Perhaps…” he put the spell book down and lifted another book into his lap; a book about sorcery and signs of being a sorcerer. “It says here… Sometimes, when strong sorcerers show comprehension of magic at a young age. Sometimes they can even accidentally cast spells and cantrips if their surroundings and circumstances are correct. That would make sense as to why you only needed a glowsword to cast it. But that spell needs word and motions, too…”

Taako tapped Angus in the back with his shoe. “Hey, do you remember that time when she was trying to help with the twins—”

“I know,” Angus muttered. He flipped to another page.

“And the thing with her glasses—”

“I know.” Angus sounded horrified. Those glasses didn’t deserve that.

“I thought it was light reflecting off the rims—"

“Sir, please.”

Taako rolled his eyes and returned to the kitchen. Sigfriede was fine. If she really had cast a few accidental spells on herself, she’d be fine in the morning.

Siggy removed her fingernails from between her teeth and coughed. “S-sorc… Sorck—”

“Sore-sur-ur;” Angus sounded the word out for her and smiled softly. “It’s ok, Bean. That’s a big word; you don’t have to get it immediately.”

“Is that common?”

Angus nodded. Sigfriede sneered.

“Here,” he picked up his books and stood up. “Don’t worry about what a sorcerer is; its not important to you, yet. How about you go up to your room with your mom, put a clean dress on, put your robes back on, and we can start dinner and cake, ok?”

Siggy nodded silently and turned to her mom. Lup held her hand out and headed for the stairs. The rest of the family left with cackles and long sighs, and Angus returned to the kitchen with Taako.

He tapped Taako’s shoulder to get his attention.

“What’s up, Agnes?”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Sir?”

“What are you thinking, homie?”

“Well. If what she’s saying is true, which she doesn’t have a habit of lying, then there is a chance
that she maybe… subconsciously knows magic?”

Taako sniffed. “I’m not surprised.”

“Well—” Angus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, me neither, but… Why would that make her blue?”

Taako shrugged. “Maybe she accidentally cast two spells?”

“What would she cast, though, Taako? It’s not like she’s been actually reading and learning spells from your spell books or whatever. She’s seven. The only things that could turn her blue are more intense spells like alter self or disguise self.”

“I’m not worried about it, boychik. If it’s nothing serious she’ll be fine in the morning.”

Maybe now was the time to pull the wand out.

Sigfriede wasn’t fine in the morning. Birthday traditions were followed regardless of Sigfriede’s skin color, cake was dished out in one piece, and not all over the walls. Presents were unwrapped, except for the long box with a ribbon bow on top. Taako held on to that for when Siggy was better.

But she never got better. The next morning, she woke up and was still blue. She ate breakfast and was still blue. Lunch, snacks, play time, naps, dinner, bedtime routine and she was still blue.

Finally, Barry broke.

“Merle, you gotta fix Siggy’s skin, I’m begging you.”

Merle put down his coffee and raised an eyebrow. “Okay…”

“It’s just… not knowing what happened to her makes me anxious and you’re the healer of the family.”

“Well… I guess I could try a lesser or greater restoration. I haven’t prepared my spells yet, this morning.”

“Great, thank you so much!”

It didn’t work.

Merle tried it three times to make sure he didn’t fuck up the wording.

It just didn’t work.

Sigfriede even giggled and rolled around on the couch shouting “It tickles, it tickles!”

Barry had no idea what to do. Thank god, for Angus, though. By lunch time that day he decided he was going to take matters into his own hands and find out exactly what happened.

“Barry, sir, could I ask you a favor?” He said at lunch.

“Uh, sure. What do you need?”

“Once we’re finished eating and all of that, could you keep Sigfriede still for a minute for me? I’m
going to see if casting identify on her will tell us anything about what happened to her.”

Barry deadpanned. “You want me to keep her still?”

“Uh… yes? The spell takes a minute to cast and I need to be touching her for this to work right.”

“You know that’s impossible, right?”

“There’s a first time for everything, Sir.” Angus took his plate to the sink and went to go find his wand.

Siggy didn’t sit completely still, but she sat still enough. It took a few restarts, but soon the spell was cast on her and the information flooded Angus’s brain.

He sighed and sat next to his cousin. “Right,” he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “So, identify only gives me what spells are currently on effect for herself, as in they’ve been casted on her.”

“Right,” Barry was staring at him very, very intently. It made Angus nervous.

“And… well… I don’t know how to say this, because Mookie was the only person around her when this happened, and I don’t know why anyone would cast something like this on themselves, but… This blue thing she’s got going on is a curse.”

Barry blinked. “A curse?”

“That’s what the spell told me.”

“Sigfriede doesn’t know magic, Angus.”

“Not completely, no. I never said she did. But… have you been watching her when she gets excited? She has these moments where she almost naturally knows a spell. Anytime she gets close to casting one, something happens. One time I saw lightning fly off the rim of her glasses, and another time, she blew up that birthday cake at my party. She might not know magic, but she… I don’t know… knows it, I guess. I swear, I’ve read something somewhere about some type of caster that had the ability to cast additional spells when they used magic with no control over what the additional casting is…”

“Listen, Angus,” Barry cleared his throat. “You know I’d talk about this stuff with you all day in any other situation.”

“Right. I think…” Angus hummed and looked down at his cousin. She was playing with the hem of her shirt and dangling her feet over the couch edge. He ran his fingers through her blonde curls and tousled her bangs. “I think a remove curse should be able to fix this. How does that sound, Siggy?”

Sigfriede shoved her glasses up her nose and nodded. “Will it tickle?”

“Probably. But it shouldn’t hurt.”

“Okay.”

Angus sniffed and thought for a moment. “I don’t think anyone here really… has remove curse ready to use today… I could find it in a spell book and start studying it today, but it wouldn’t be ready to use until tomorrow morning.”
Barry sighed. “Well, in that case Lup and I may as well just do it ourselves… We go home tonight anyway. Thank you for the help, Angus.”

“No problem, Sir!” Angus smiled and got up.

Taako pulled Sigfriede aside in his office as she was packing her things up with her mother. He held the door open for her and shut it behind him. Sigfriede climbed into one of the chairs he had in front of his desk and began playing with the silver rivets on the arm rests.

“How you doing, Bean?”

“Good,” her voice was small but confident. She’d been speaking more since her color pallet change.

“Good. You gave your dad a pretty big scare there the other day.”

“I know.”

Taako raised an eyebrow and sat on the other side of his desk. He looked at her and made a funny face, to which she giggled and laid her hands in her lap.

After a few moments, he inhaled and held up an index finger. “I’ve got somethin’ for you, pumpkin.”

“Another birthday?” She meant “present”, but that was a bit of a tough word for her.

“Yup,” Taako opened his desk drawer and pulled out the box with her wand. “Another present for you. I forgot to put it in the pile last night.”

That was technically a lie, but Siggy didn’t need to know that.

He put the box in front of her and smiled. “Just untie the bow and pull the lid off.”

Sigfriede’s eyes lit up. She yanked the box off the desk and into her lap. She tugged the loose ends of the bow and threw the lid off to the side. The smile on her face dropped a bit. She looked back up at Taako in confusion.

He smiled softly and held his hands out. “It’s a wand, just like what your dad uses for his magic.”

“Magic? Momma says I can’t do that yet.”

“Well, your mom’s a dingus who can be overprotective and get stressed about your safety when I know you can handle yourself,” he motioned for her to give him the wand. “See, you hold it in your hand like this,” he showed her a basic grip. “And you hold it just like that any time you cast any spell or cantrip. What it does is it directs your spell where you point it, just like a water hose directs water where you point it.”

“Oh…” Sigfriede rubbed her nose and took off her glasses.

“Put your glasses back on, baby, you know not wearing them hurts your head.”

She put her glasses in her shirt pocket and stuck her tongue out.

Taako shrugged. “Suit yourself. You’re not my kid to deal with when you get headaches. Now,
most magic users, like me, your parents, your cousins Angus and Mavis, your Aunt Lucretia and Uncle Davenport, we all use some something to direct our magic. Anything that directs magic, like this wand I’m giving you, is called an arcane focus. There are lots of different arcane focuses though. Your mom’s is her big umbrella she made right before you were born. The rest of us use wands like you will.”

“I’m gonna use wands and magic?”

“Someday. It’s a long learning process, but I’ve always known that you kind of already knew about some magic in the world. You were a very smart baby, Siggy. Did you know that?”

She shook her head.

“Well… without confusing you, I’ll tell you this. You were showing signs of magical awareness since you were born. I just think that now is the right time to start teaching you how to use it. What you told your dad when he asked what happened, with the bugs and lights and everything? I think you cast dancing lights. A whole, full cantrip! That’s a big first step in learning magic, and you did it all on your own!”

Siggy’s face lit back up.

“So, how about this? You leave this wand here, with me in my office where no one else can get to it, and don’t tell your parents about this, and I’ll start teaching you little things bit by bit on your visits here. How does that sound, little homie?”

“Good!”

“Good,” Taako placed the wand back in the drawer and got up from his seat. “Then its settled. Now, lets get you back to your room to pack up.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Not a whole lot to talk about this chapter. What's going on with Siggy though? Blue skin! Who really knows what happened, a seven-year-old's story is only so reliable. I hope you guys have had a good week since last chapter.

Thanks again to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being a wonderful beta. Don't forget to leave kudos and comments, that's how I know you guys are enjoying this! See you next week!
CHAPTER EIGHT-- FAMILY RESEARCH FIELDTRIPS

Chapter Summary

After Sigfriede's chroma fiasco, Barry decides he's had enough of this "blind Dad" thing and takes matters into his own hands. One hundred years of research creates a habit, and old habits die hard. Lup leads by example. Sigfriede learns how to check out books. An old stranger just can't get a break.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER EIGHT— FAMILY RESEARCH FIELDTRIPS

Barry and Lup tried to keep Sigfriede’s skin any color besides blue. It worked; Barry would add “for the most part” on the one account of Sigfriede finding another glow worm on her school playground and was teleported sixty feet from the building. When Barry and Lup asked the teacher if they’d heard anything like a spell come out of her mouth, they shrugged and gave a simple no. When Barry and Lup asked Sigfriede if she’d snuck anything into school with her, she also said no, promised she was telling the truth, and told the same story as when she’d found that first glow worm in the tree; she found it, got excited, watched some colorful lights pop up, and suddenly she wasn’t at school anymore.

Barry absolutely hated not having answers for this. It wasn’t so much that he was mad at Sigfriede; clearly, she wasn’t intentionally turning glow worms into lights, and she wasn’t intentionally turning blue or teleporting away. She was just being a good kid who stuck her nose in odd places and odd things just happened to happen to her because of it. But magic wasn’t the only place she was sticking her nose into, though.

One time, right after the Blue Event, as the family had come to call it, when she’d started speaking in elvish again, her parents signed Siggy up for a speech therapist. They’d hoped the extra time out of class dedicated to helping her get the hang of common would do well, so long as Siggy didn’t feel upset or offended. It didn’t start smoothly, at all. The first few sessions Sigfriede refused to even speak in elvish with the therapist. There was a lot of sign interpreting, compromising, and crying. After the third session when Sigfriede finally gave in, she retaliated by breaking into Barry’s office instead of Kravitz’s that weekend. She tore every single book she could reach from its shelf, took all of his blankets and pillows from the seats and couch he had, knocked over his glass of water all over his paper work, and broke what few science-looking items she could find. She was grounded for two days after that.

But the thing that baffled Barry the most was her finding glow worms and breaking into offices were almost the same thing for Sigfriede, at least at the base level. She was just curious. Obviously sometimes she had malicious intent, but either way she wasn’t objectively doing anything different. She was either looking for cool things outside or looking for cool books inside; very little difference at all. One happened to result in magic sometimes, the other resulted in… unique varying ways. But at the end of the day, no matter how objectively similar the two were, only the times where her curiosity resulted in magic ended with her in a sticky situation. So where was the
Barry brought it up to Lup over lunch one day, and after some eye rolls and teasing, she listened to Barry’s hypothesis and thought about it. The next day, when Angus called from his new job as the director of the Arcane History department at Lucas Miller’s school, Lup asked if there was any way to visit the school. Plans were made, and two weeks later, Barry and Lup took a day off from Reaper Duty to take their daughter on a library adventure.

“That’s a lot of books, Momma…” Siggy stopped in the doorway to the campus library and let her mouth gape open.

Lup smiled and patted her back. “There’s a lot of people here who need a lot of books.”

“Are there any… uh…” Siggy paused and thought of the word in common. “Are there any story books?”

Lup grabbed her daughters hand and guided her in after Barry. “Hmmm…” she said. “There might be. This is more of an information library, honey. So, most of the books here are going to be about facts and ideas. Think like the books Dad has in his office.”

“Oh…”

Lup smiled and scratched the top of Sigfriede’s head lightly. “Good work on the common, too, Kiddo.”

Siggy didn’t respond. She looked at the book shelves and tables as they passed, trying to pronounce words that she saw on book spines; most were too big to comprehend. Some she recognized from books she’d seen laying around her homes. One looked like a book Taako had shown her when she was bored one day. She liked that one; it talked about storms and electricity and how it can be used in magic. She didn’t know a lot about magic, but it was interesting to her.

She looked over her shoulder and saw her parents turn a corner. She ran to catch up with them and grabbed her dad’s fingers.

“Hey, Daddy,” she said.

Barry hummed.

“Are we taking any books home with us from here?”

“I’m not sure yet, Baby Bean.”

“Can I find a book for my cousins?”

“Like,” Barry glanced at her over his glasses. “to give to them?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll go to the store for that; all of these books belong to someone else already.”

“Oh…” she sniffed and rubbed her nose.

A few minutes later the trio found themselves in the biography section, looking at different well-known magicians, wizards, and sorcerers to glean any hint from them as they could. Barry chose a
point to start at, did one sweep of the whole section, and started pulling titles. A pile found its way
to a table, and Barry dug in. He let Lup and Sigfriede find entertainment themselves; he knew at
least that if Sigfriede got into researching with him, Lup would eventually get bored either way.
So, he left that matter to take care of itself while he found answers to what he was looking for.

Hours passed before Barry decided to give up and go home. He would have gone for longer, had
Sigfriede had better control of her mouth. But, she didn’t and neither did her mother, which left
Barry on damage control and mediator duty.

It wasn’t often that Lucas made specific time to find material himself in his library. Usually he
could have someone bring the material he wanted up for him when they were making office stops
or something. But for some reason, he had decided to make the trip himself, and Sigfriede didn’t
like it.

If you asked her why she thought it was OK to bad mouth him, she’d tell you her mother started it.

“Sup, Nerdlord?” Lup smirked and leaned back in her chair. “Making rounds? Double checking
the status of the Fantasy Cheeto fingerprints on your books?”

Lucas looked over from his spot in the adjacent aisle and sighed. “Hello, Lup.”

“What brings you to your campus?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Oh, me and Barold are just doing some research for the kiddo.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong with your kid?”

“Dunno,” Lup picked at her nail polish. “That’s what we’re researching.”

Lucas shook his head and turned back to the bookshelf. He looked at a few other books for a
moment but felt a pair of eyes piercing into his side. He furrowed his eyebrows and turned his head
slowly.

Now sitting next to Lup, patiently waiting as the elf glanced over what looked like a philosophy
book, was a small child who couldn’t have been more than eight. She had messy blonde waves and
a patchwork of freckles across her nose. A pair of taped up glasses rested on top of her head, like
she was supposed to be wearing them but refused. Her miniature elvish garb was wrinkled and had
a purple stain on the front lapel. Squinty grey eyes bore into Lucas’s forehead as he grinned and
waved softly.

The child stared for a moment later, then turned to Lup and whispered something. Lup looked up,
looked over at Lucas, smirked, got up and waved the kid over.

“Sigfriede,” Lup stood behind the child after they’d walked over. “This is Lucas Miller. He’s a
scientist, like your dad. But instead of the kind of science your dad does, Lucas makes things with
his science—”

“I’m an inventor, Lup.”

“I know,” Lup snapped. “But Sigfriede is seven years old, Miller. She needs things explained to
her.”

“Why would she need the word inventor expl—”
“Hi, Lucas Miller,” Sigfriede interrupted and spat his name like poison. “My name is Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans. I’m seven and my favorite color is purble.”

“Purple,” Lup corrected. “Close.”

“Purple…” Sigfriede repeated and popped the p. “What’s your favorite color?”

Lucas sniffed and grimaced. “I, uh, don’t have one anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Adults don’t have favorite colors.”

“Mine’s red,” Lup said. “Barry’s is blue. Magnus likes yellow. Taako likes—”

“Ok, I get it.” Lucas shut the book he was looking at and put it back up. “If I had to pick one, I’d say green.”

Sigfriede gagged. Lup tapped her on the ear and told her to be nice.

Lucas returned the book to its spot and walked in the other direction, even though he had already scanned that part of the shelf.

“What do you invent, Mister?”

Lucas turned around and saw the same tiny child walking after him. Lup was nowhere to be seen.

“Uh—” Lucas scratched the back of his head and turned around. “You said your name was Sigfried?” He pronounced her name with a soft g, and said the end of her name like fried chicken.

“Sigfriede,” she corrected; hard g, and she said the end of her name like freed from hell. “But if that’s too hard to say, you can just call me Siggy.”

“Sssssssiggy…” he nodded slowly. “I think I’ve heard your cousin talk about you. Angus, right?”

“Right.”

“Yeah, your reputation proceeds you.”

“My what?”

“Don’t worry about it. What are your parents doing on my campus? Don’t they usually visit your uncles?”

Sigfriede sniffed and tried to look smart. “Yeah. Dad says this one probably has what he’s looking for.”

“Do you know what he’s looking for?”

“He said I shouldn’t tell things like that to strangers, Mister.”

Lucas rolled his eyes and watched the girl walk behind him. She was pulling random books from the shelves that were way too advanced for her. Lucas figured she could probably piece that together for herself, until he saw her pull down another philosophy book, this one over music, tuck it under her arm, and keep walking.
“Do you know where your dad is, Siggy?”

“I take it back,” she turned on her heels and walked away. “Don’t call me Siggy. It sounds weird in your mouth. My dad is this way.”

Barry wasn’t exactly paying attention. He let Lup sit a book by his elbow and waved off her question. When the book he was reading seemed fruitless he set it in the return pile and moved to the next. This one spoke briefly of a type of magic user who was hard to understand; he naturally knew magic, making him a sorcerer, but had a hard time casting it correctly. Not much was spoken of him more. He’d lived a few centuries ago, back before Faerun dedicated itself to writing down much about its magic history. The sorcerer died just before the Starblaster found its way to Faerun. Damn.

Another book plopped itself down by Barry’s elbow. The brush of wind caught his attention and he looked up to see his daughter’s glasses just poking up over the edge of the table. She’d found another book to read.

“Please keep your glasses on, Sigfriede,” he gently took her pair from her head and slid them onto your nose. “You know your eyes are as bad as mine and you’ll get headaches if you try to read without them.”

Sigfriede immediately took them off and put them in his lap. “I’m not reading, yet. I found a stranger, Dad.”

Barry glanced further up and sighed. “Hello, Miller.”

“Barry,” Lucas took a seat. “Your, uh, daughter told me you were looking for something?”

Barry adjusted his glasses and paused for a moment. “Yeah. I’m researching people who seemed to naturally know magic but couldn’t seem to get it right.”

“You mean like defunct wizards?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Something like that…” Barry returned his attention to the book.

“Oh, well. We’ve probably got a larger data pool in the library resources. I made these things cal —”

“I know, Miller.” Barry smirked. “Believe me, I know. Magnus doesn’t shut up about anything you do, and Angus loves talking about his job. Though, they seem to have differing opinions on the subject.”

“Well then why aren’t you using them?”

“I was a researcher for a whole century, Lucas. I know how to find what I want from a book.”

Siggy reached for her first philosophy book. “Did Momma say I could read it?”

Oh. Barry coughed. “Uh, yeah, sure, knock yourself out, kiddo.”

There was a pause as Sigfriede opened the book. Right as the cover was about to smack her nose, Barry reached out to push it back down. “Don’t,” he said. “don’t actually knock yourself out, please. We’ve had enough accidents from you this month.”
“What accidents has she gotten into?” Lucas asked.

Barry sighed. “Not that it’s really your business—”

“Sorry…”

“But Sigfriede has a tendency to, uh…. I really don’t know, Lucas. She says she finds cool things and gets excited and next thing she knows something has happened to her.”

“I was blue once!” Siggy said proudly.

“Yeah, that was…. Concerning. And most recently she’s teleported out of her school playground. Taako says one time electric sparks flew off her glasses…” he shrugged. “I don’t know, Lucas, that’s kind of what I’m researching; to see if there’s any record of this happening to other people…”

“Your researching to see if your kid is normal,” Lucas surmised. "You want to know if you're good enough as a parent."

Barry blinked. “I guess so.”

“Well, I’ll tell you right now, I don’t think you’ll find anything for that in the school’s library. But if you really need a hand in finding what you need, Angus can help you find your way to my personal library.”

Barry smirked. “Yeah, you’d keep books over weird ass people for your own bemusement and ego, wouldn’t you, Miller?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Barry flipped through some pages and smiled. He caught three key words in one sentence, *unpredictable, surge, magic*, dogeared the page and got up. “I think I found my book. Ready to find your mom, Siggy?”

The child picked up her big philosophy books. “Ready.”

Barry gave Lucas one last grin. “I’ll take you up on that lab visit. I think I found my lead. Have a good day, man.”

He guided his daughter downstairs to find Lup, who was hiding out in the arcane science sections. Just as they checked their books out and left the building, Sigfriede tugged on Barry’s fingers.

“What, Bean?” he said.

“I didn’t like that guy. Why is he important?”

Barry snorted. “He isn’t, so far as you’re concerned, Sigfriede.”

“You found records of a *what now*?” Taako’s voice dragged over the stone of farspeech in Lup’s hands.

Lup sighed. “Barold found records of something called a *wild magic sorcerer*. Newer name for the, uh, I guess *disorder* wouldn’t be the right word…”
“Never heard of it,” Taako said.

“Well, neither have I, doofus. If I knew about it do you think we would have spent a whole day researching?”

“You guys have spent countless entire decades studying a fuckin’ light, Lulu. Don’t make it sound like you’re less of a nerd than your husband.”

“We found something interesting, though.”

“**Barold** found something interesting, though,” Taako mocked her.

“The last known person who casted magic like this? He was this halfling sorcerer who was born about a century before we got here on the Starblaster. What’s super weird though is that his last recorded sighting was the day before Siggy was born.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, what?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I dunno. Dudes probably already dead, anyway. If he was an adult by the time we got here he most likely died pretty recently.”

“What does this have to do with Bean, though?”

“Not a lot,” Lup sighed and flipped through some pages. “It says here that he didn’t really do much. He casted magic like Sigfriede does; he’d cast a basic spell, even a cantrip, and another magic effect would be cast by itself randomly. Sometimes it was cosmetic, like the Blue Event, or there would be actual other spells cast, which is I guess what happened when Siggy got teleported away from her school playground.”

“Is there any other record of people like him?”

“Barely. There was one other person like this, but they’re treated more like some sort of mythical being. And before that, it’s like... Faerun’s Stone Age or somethin’; we can only glean that part of history from cave drawings and bones, ya’know?”

Taako hummed. “So, how’d we get such a clear record on this guy?”

“Every world has its big biographers and ghost writers, ‘Ko. Especially after what went down with Fischer. It says here that he fought as a town leader on the day of Story and Song…” she read a few more lines and summed them up. “Apparently he was already super old when that shit went down. He spent his time immediately after that day rebuilding his town’s libraries and schools. Then he disappeared.”

Taako sighed. “Sounds complicated and dramatic, if you ask me.”

“Oh, yeah. Natch. She’s *my* daughter, what did you expect?”

A silence fell between the two. Lup could hear Eva and Cashmere over the stone. She smiled when Taako took a moment to break up a spat that flung up between them; he reminded the girls about sharing and being nice and muttered a few curses under his breath.

Lup cleared her throat. “Have you and Ghost Rider been able to find out anything else about the
"Besides the fact that they were probably given up for being half high elf, half drow?" He snorted.
"No. The orphanage only kept so much about them on their record. The rest was up for us to figure out. I'm just scared of them being bullied for it in school, you know?"

"Yeah," Lup's voice faltered. "I... God, I wish I had advice, Taako. I just don't know a lot about that kind of thing, at least in a way to help your girls. Siggy has... completely different issues, you know?"

Taako hummed.

A scream flooded Lup’s ear, and she stifled a laugh. “Oh, the Terrible Twos. Sounds like you’ve got double trouble on your hands. I’ll let you go and talk to you later, kay, bro?”

“Uh, yeah, hey—” Taako was cut off by what sounded like him dropping his stone. His voice returned a moment later. “Hey, bring Sigfriede by this weekend, alright? I wanna show her something.”

“Sure, if the girls let you live for that long. Later, Taako!”

Lup hung up before her brother could ask her for baby advice. Lup suffered that alone with her husband, now it was Taako’s turn.

She left her spot in bed and walked to the kitchen. Barry and Siggy were cuddled up on the couch with one of Siggy’s philosophy books perched between their knees. Her blond hair was tied back in a fluffy ponytail, and she was wearing her glasses for once. She’d squinted her eyes and was reading out loud to Barry, who was smiling and helping her with big words or words she knew better in elvish.

It probably wasn’t normal for a seven-year-old to devour huge books over one topic and understand what was being read to them, but it kept Siggy still for a half hour and it worked on her language skills; the perfect combo. Distraction for Mom and Dad to chill out, but also a learning experience that focused on something she needed help with. Lup let it slide and just bought Sigfriede any book she wanted when she’d discovered that little hack. Go, Momma Lup.

She sat next to Sigfriede and kissed the side of her head. “Your uncle Taako wants to show you something this weekend, Baby Bear.”

“I know, hush,” Sigfriede muttered and kept reading.

“You know?"

“He told me on my birthday… Said it was a secret and I couldn’t tell you. But I know. Don’t worry, he’s not gonna let me blow anything up, yet.”

Lup blinked. Then she looked up at Barry, who shrugged.

“She gets to blow stuff up with me, so I don’t see the issue,” he said.

“What would he want to show her, thought?”

“I dunno. Could be a lot of things; it’s Taako. He could be wanting to teach her how to cut an onion or something, so he has another minion again. Angus, Mavis, and Mookie are all too old to do stuff for him now.”
Lup thought for a moment. She watched Sigfriede sound out words, how her expression changed slightly to make room for odd sounds. Her little finger traced along the bottom of the text line, across the page, and back again. Then a thought struck Lup.

“Do you think he’s gonna teach her magic?”

Barry furrowed his eyebrows. “What?”

“Taako, this weekend. He knows that there are casters like Siggy now, and he’s always wanted to teach her, and he had that present he wanted to give her,” she made air quotes, “’when the time was right’. All that cryptic bullshit…”

Barry thought for a moment, then looked down at Sigfriede. Lup did the same.

Sigfriede said absolutely nothing. She grinned, but kept her eyes glued to the page. There was no way she was giving this up to her parents. They’d just have to wait and see. But Sigfriede wanted something unique that she did with each of her family members; something special that she didn’t do with anyone else. It had to feel right, and be something they’d decide on together. If Uncle Taako wanted to teach her magic, then that was that. No if, ands, or buts.

Sigfriede found the end of the paragraph, thought about what she’d read, and closed the book. She pushed it into Barry’s lap before giving him and Lup a hug each.

“I’m gonna go take a nap.”

Up in Sigfriede’s room, you wouldn’t think a seven-year-old used it. Her parents lived in a big apartment in the middle of Neverwinter. There was always some sort of city noise from down below Siggy’s big wall of ceiling-to-floor windows. Bookcases and chests replaced most of her toys, though she had a few she really enjoyed. Her favorite toy, which wasn’t much of a toy-toy so much as something Sigfriede just found entertaining, was just a clear cylinder of plastic with bubbly, soapy water in it. She could shake it up, spin it around in circles, and a little soap tornado would drop down to the bottom of the cylinder, kick some glitter up and disappear into its bubble cloud. Her Aunt Lucretia found that for her. Sigfriede appreciated it.

But Sigfriede’s most prized possession? An old, torn up notebook made from a hodge-podge of binding materials with an unfinished wand sticking out from the top, like a bookmark. Different types of paper made up different sized sections. The farther back you got into the book, the neater the handwriting became, and the more focused the type of spell written down became. Sigfriede didn’t necessarily like changing something into another thing like her uncle did, nor did she like setting things on fire like her mom did, but Taako’s first spell book held many, many tips, tricks, accidents, and steps to follow; perfectly laid out for a magic learner by the world’s greatest transmutation wizard from all the way back when he was learning magic.

Sigfriede absolutely loved it. She pulled the book and wand out from the shoe box under her bed, and let her fingers follow the carvings Magnus had done for her. The wood was unfinished, still a little rough around the carving’s edges. Notches were marked with blue marker where gem stones were supposed to go. When Magnus had asked her what she wanted her wand to look like, all she’d said was “lightning. Make it look like a storm is in my hands”.

Magnus said that was a good idea.

Sigfriede placed the wand by her feet and opened the old magic book again. She found the spell
where she left off, *chromatic orb*, and picked up her studying.

There’s a lot a seven-year-old could learn when she pretended to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, if a small child, basically a toddler, came up to you and started giving you shit for things you did before she was born, what would you do? And if you took that small child, basically a toddler, back to their parents, and their parents were famous people who made you swear never to show your face to the light of day again, and who are your leading rivals in the science world, what would you do?

The obvious answer, clearly, is to just kill her. Good thing I have control over what you'd do in this scenario because otherwise this would be a very, very short fic. No one likes Lucas anyway.

So, as a heads up, if you're a DnD nerd who enjoys looking at handbooks and bonus materials and classes and stuff, now is a good time to start paying attention to character's abilities and skills to decode their classes and subclasses. I'm using the player's handguide, Xanathar's guide, and referencing some stuff from Sword Coast guide. I'm not changing anything for the canon characters, so don't start over analyzing the Birds or somethin' lol. I hope you guys have had a great week, and I hope you all enjoyed any trips you've been on, or have handled any tests well, or whatever's been going on in your life, I hope it's gone well for you all! Y'all know the drill, comments and kudos are the door to the soul, thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing, and I'll see you all next week!
CHAPTER NINE-- MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS

Chapter Summary

Our story keeps chugging along as Sigfriede grows up and learns to speak her mind and control her magical abilities. In celebration of a recent publication by one tiny half elf, a special weekend trip is organized to give Siggy a taste of adventure. Merle mishandles a stressful situation. Mavis makes an adult decision for her life plans. Sigfriede learns to make friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER NINE—MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS

“Dear Everyone,” Taako read aloud at the table. “My name is Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans, I’m nine years old, and this is why Lucas Miller needs to stop.”

Snickers erupted from the family, and Sigfriede smirked proudly. It was Candlenights, one of the few times the whole family was found in one place, and publishing this letter herself was Sigfriede’s greatest achievement. She needed the whole family to understand her concerns.

“First of all,” Taako continued. “My Uncle Magnus told me he’s a liar and a fraud, so there’s that…”

Taako kept reading from the newspaper as Siggy nibbled at her Fantasy Jell-O. It had been a long process, but after all the times Barry brought Sigfriede to Lucas’ new lab to try and understand her wild magic abilities, Sigfriede couldn’t help but notice all the bad science this guy did; it was horrible. He couldn’t even get the planar system diagrams right, and literally every person on this plane knew what the planar system looked like. On top of that, he was just generally easy to pick on. Lup usually started it, but there was always something to tease him for that would make him flustered, and Sigfriede found that funny. Lucas had become one of the few people who couldn’t see through her gig; it’s hard to keep teasing family when you’re one of the babies. So, as practice for when she could start teasing Cashmere and Eva, Sigfriede picked on Miller. Obviously, Lucas didn’t like that, and brought it up to Barry and Lup multiple times. Their response? She’s almost ten, it’s what ten-year-olds do; ignore her and she’ll move on.

Taako kept reading the published letter, leaving room for laughter when needed. There was a whole list of things that Sigfriede pointed out, and the adults seemed to take it seriously. Good. They needed to understand exactly how much Sigfriede had grown to despise Lucas Miller. She didn’t hate him, not yet; her mother had taught her better. But there was no way in any of the twelve planes that Sigfriede would grow to like him.

When the letter was completely read, there was a small round of applause before the compliments came in.

Magnus spoke first, raising his glass to his little niece. “Well I for one agree with everything you said, Siggy. You tell them who’s boss.”
“I’m just most amused the company let her publish it,” Lucretia said. “Someone must have put it a
good word for you, Bean.”

Taako snorted. “Yeah, sure. Some anonymous person put in a good word for a random nine-year-
old to get her published.”

“No one needs to know who helped her,” Lucretia took a sip of her wine.

“Right, and no one needs to know about my magic school and give me money,”

“Hey,” Davenport cut in and turned his fork to point at Sigfriede. “The important thing is that
Sigfriede is officially a published author. And only at nine, too. Better up the ante, Angus, Siggy’s
comin’ for you.”

Angus chuckled. “She can be good at her own thing and be equal with me. She can be the world’s
most honest social commentator.”

The adults had a good laugh about that. Then the conversation died down. Siggy took that moment
to thank everyone for the compliments, and she set back in to her mashed potatoes.

Then Merle spoke up. “Hey, you know what? I think this really is a special thing. How about I take
Sigfriede with me and Mavis and Mookie on one of my Extreme Teen Adventure weekends?”

Sigfriede’s eyes lit up. She tried to contain her grin, but it didn’t work. Her nose scrunched up and
hid her freckles. The little gap between her front teeth whistled, and she giggled. Sigfriede wanted
nothing more in life than to be an adventurer and be known across Faerun. She looked up and to
her left, where her mother sat. Lup grinned and raised an eyebrow. Sigfriede looked to her right,
where her father sat. He winked and shrugged his shoulders.

Her parents exchanged a look over her head.

Then Lup said, “Well, I don’t see a reason as to why she couldn’t.”

Sigfriede’s smile morphed into something more mischievous and coy; more elvish in nature. She
made direct eye contact with Mavis across the table, stabbed a bit of turkey, and shoved it in her
mouth, all while maintaining the same eye contact.

Mavis snorted and rolled her eyes. “Eat like that out there, and I’m not saving your life.”

“That’s fine,” Siggy swallowed her mouthful, choked a bit, and sat up straight, like she’d seen
Kravitz do. “I have magic powers. I can save myself.”

Barry placed a hand on her head. “Simmer down, Sigfriede, you’re not taking that wand anywhere,
you understand?”

“Well what the hell else is she supposed to be doing, then, Barry?” Merle said. “Hide behind a
bush?”

“No, give her a dagger or something, she can handle that.”

Lucretia shook her head. “That’s not a good idea. Remember when Magnus babysat her when she
was four and tried to teach her to carve wood? She’s still got a scar on her thumb.”

Magnus held up a finger. “She was four. Now she’s ten. I think she can handle sharp objects on her
own now.”
“I’m nine, Uncle Magnus,” Sigfriede said.

“Same thing.”

Taako cleared his throat. “I think she’s doing fine with her magic. Besides, the best way to see how much she’s learned is through letting her go out and use her magic. Merle’s an adult, anyway, he manages, like, twenty kids on these things, she’ll be fine.”

“Uh, I’m also a cleric,” Merle sounded incredulous. “And I only handle five to ten kids at a time. So, yeah, Sigfriede will be fine.”

Davenport cleared his throat. “Merle, for the last time, your being a cleric isn’t as great of a qualifier for you as you think.”

“Hey, listen—”

“I think having Sigfriede come along is a great idea,” Mavis cut in. “We can have one last cousin hang out before I go.”

Sigfriede hummed and put down her utensils. “I don’t think you’re gonna like being a druid, Mav…”

“Why not?”

“Cause I said so.”

A silence fell over the table. The topic of Mavis’s decision to head out with a druidic enclave she’d found had been tense amongst the cousins of the family. Or at least the cousins who could understand what it entirely meant; Eva and Cashmere were only four, so they didn’t quite get it yet. But Sigfriede did. She’d seen similar things happen her whole life, mainly with Angus. But the behavior seemed to be standard for the family. Someone would decide they wanted to learn something new and learn a lot about it, then they’d leave the family circle for a while to live somewhere else while they learned. Sigfriede thought that was stupid. She lived at home and went to school every day, and she learned all the time. It didn’t make sense as to why someone would need to leave the comfort of their own home for long periods of time to learn. She especially didn’t understand why Mavis had to. Mavis was smart; not the same kind of smart that Angus was, or the kind of smart Siggy thought she was, but Mavis was still smart. She didn’t need to leave home. She was the only other girl Sigfriede could talk to; sometimes Angus and Mookie didn’t understand, and Eva and Cash were little. They didn’t know anything useful yet. But the only plausible thing Sigfriede could come up with to keep Mavis from going was that druids were lame. It wasn’t working so far.

“Tell you what,” Mavis said after a few moments. “I’ll go out and try this druid thing, and if I don’t like it, I’ll go to Taako’s school with you when you’re older.”

“Pinky promise?”

“Not over the dinner table, but…” Mavis thought for a moment, then gave in. “Sure. Pinky promise.”

“Okay!” Sigfriede perked back up and went back to her food.

“Alright, everyone let’s take roll, and then we can start this weekend’s adventure!” Merle pulled a
scroll from his backpack and unfurled it. He began reading off a list of kid’s names that Sigfriede couldn’t really care less about. Sigfriede’s name was called like all the other kids, along with Mavis and Mookie. Rules were explained, “No wandering off alone, the buddy system is the best system”, etc. Siggy didn’t pay attention. She had her newly finished wand in her hand and her little dagger at her hip. She was ready for her first adventure, and nothing in life could stop her now.

She stuck close to Mavis and observed the other kids with curiosity.

“You can go say hi to them, Siggy,” Mavis said. “I’m gonna have to go help my dad, soon. You can’t stick by me all weekend.”

“They all look dumb,” Siggy responded.

“They’re all your age, Sigfriede. That means you look dumb, too.”

“I don’t look dumb, Mavis. I look cool…”

“Suit yourself.”

At lunch, a boy sat next to Sigfriede as she ate her sandwich. She tried to ignore him, but Mavis told her not to be rude, so Siggy started talking eventually.

“Didn’t Mr. Highchurch say your name was Sigfriede?” the boy asked.

Sigfriede took off her glasses and gave him side eye. “Yeah.”

“My names Alfie,” Alfie stuck out his hand. “I’m a half elf, and when I grow up I’m gonna be a cleric! Just like Mr. Highchurch.”

Sigfriede busted out laughing. “I think clerics are frauds.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Merle can’t heal a scrapped knee to save his life. My dad says that some clerics steal from their churches.”

Alfie shook his head. “I’m not gonna stay in a church; I’m gonna work out in the real world, just like—”

“Just like Mr. Highchurch, huh?”

“Exactly!”

Sigfriede took another bite of her sandwich and studied the boy’s face. Specifically, his ears. Sigfriede had never seen anyone with ears just like hers. The way her ears were shaped was… odd, when compared to her family’s. They’d always seemed unfinished; her dad always said how much she looked like her mom, and her mom always said how much she looked like her dad. She could understand it when it came to her face, her blond hair, nose and tooth gap came from her mom. Freckles, hazy blue eyes and curls came from her dad. But her ears? Sigfriede had always assumed she just had defunct versions of her mother’s. She’d never asked questions about it, because no one seemed concerned about it. So Sigfriede accepted her short, rounder elf ears and ran with it. But this kid said he was also a half elf, and his ears looked like Sigfriede’s…

“You said you were a half elf?” Siggy asked.
“Yup! My mom was human and my dad was an elf.”

“Hmmmm… My mom’s an elf and my dad’s a human… Are our ears supposed to look like this?”

“I think so…” Alfie hooked his fingers around the point of his ear and rubbed it. “My parents say that my ears look like this to show people that I’m the best things of two people.”

“That’s dumb. My mom just said that I hadn’t had enough elf practice.”

“I’ve never heard of elf practice.”

“Neither have I.”

Alfie hummed and tapped his ear. “I don’t think I’ve ever met another half elf my age, though. This is cool!”

Sigfriede grinned from behind her sandwich. “I guess so… You wanna hang out this weekend?”

“Sure!”

Merle took the kids to a forest clearing that weekend. Nowhere too remote, just a nice little area off the side of a camping grounds, but isolated enough to make them feel like they’d gone somewhere special and important. He had Mavis and Mookie help them set up their tents, as well as help him set up little camp fires in front of each of the tents. Kids were assigned their sleeping places for the weekend and given some free time to mingle and play around.

Sigfriede’s tent was across from Alfie’s. She’d been assigned to sleep in the same tent as two other girls. One was another dwarf, and the other was a gnome. She didn’t say much to them. Any time she had to run around and climb trees was spent with Alfie. Saturday night was uneventful as far as Sigfriede was concerned; Merle taught the kids some basic survival stuff that he’d already taught her, some small adventure stories were told over a big central fire, and the kids asked Merle questions about anything from his favorite plant (Mavis gagged at that) to what he missed most about the Starblaster (Sigfriede took notes on that). Then it was dinner time, followed by a little magic training and combat instruction, then bedtime.

Sigfriede stopped by Alfie’s tent before she went to bed.

She handed him a glowworm she had found earlier that day. “Do you like being outside like this?”

“Yeah!” Alfie grinned his wayward grin and let the worm inch over his arm. “I like watching how the weather changes and stuff. Clouds are pretty cool to me.”

“I like glowworms. One of them turned me blue once.”

“Like… It’s glow was blue and it made you look blue?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Alfie set the worm on the ground.

Sigfriede didn’t offer much more explanation. She watched the worm dig its way back into the dirt and smiled. Another good science moment of ethical observation; she’d have to tell her parents when she got home.
Alfie broke the silence, “I’m gonna go to sleep. All this adventure stuff is exhausting.”

“I thought it was fun.”

“You sat out, though…”

“Yeah. And?”

“Are you always like this?”

She grinned and rubbed the tip of her ear. “Sure. Good night, Alfie. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The morning came with the smell of burnt bacon. Siggy grabbed her blanket from under her sleeping bag, wrapped it around her shoulders like a cape and left the tent. Most of the kids were already awake and sitting around the central fire. Merle had Mavis and Mookie helping him with the food, which, from the way it was smelling, was less than Uncle Taako Quality. She looked around, and not seeing Alfie anywhere, sat next to Mavis and Mookie.

“Mornin!” Mookie beamed at her and patted her head. “Sleep ok?”

Sigfriede grunted in response.

Mookie returned to his cooking and let her be.

Sigfriede took a moment to take in her surroundings again. She was still in the clearing they’d set up the day before, good. None of the other tents seemed harmed or damaged, so she took that as a sign that all other kids were still alive. Some of them were sitting around the fire with her; a hodgepodge motley crew of elves, gnomes, tieflings, dwarves, and a few other kinds of people Sigfriede didn’t have much experience with. One of the tieflings looked like one of her old friends, Random.

Sigfriede missed Random. She hadn’t visited her moon friend since Sigfriede had been put in grade school, and the last she’d heard from Magnus about Random and her moms was that Random had recently been accepted into a special program the Bureau of Benevolence offered with schools around Faerun. If Siggy remembered right, Random had taken the chance to train as some sort of combat master. That was a few years ago, now. She wondered how Random was doing with that. Did she like it? Was she doing well with it? How good at punching was she? Did she even stick with fighting?

Sigfriede decided she’d have to convince her parents to go to the moon soon. It wasn’t like it was hard or anything.

A plate of sliced fruit, berries and less than burnt bacon found its way under Sigfriede’s nose. She took it quietly and glanced up to see who had handed it to her. Mavis grinned kindly and sat next to Sigfriede once she’d situated her plate in her lap. Sigfriede said nothing as she started gently nibbling on the berries. Mavis placed her hand on the back of her cousin’s head and gently combed out her bedhead as best she could.

“I’m headed off tomorrow, Siggy,” Mavis said.

Sigfriede tore off a bit of bacon and chewed it.

“Have you at least had fun?”
Sigfriede nodded.

“Good. Have you made any friends?”

“I don’t know if I’d say he’s a friend…”

“Do you like being around him?”

“I hate him less than the other kids around here.”

Mavis laughed. “I think that counts as a friend for you.”

The two cousins sat together, finishing their breakfast and gathering things together for the last day of adventuring. Mavis had Sigfriede help her pack all of her things together before they rejoined the group for the final activity of the weekend.

“I’m not gonna make you pinky promise me,” Sigfriede said as they walked along a trail with the group. “I trust you to keep your promise, pinky or no pinky.”

Mavis furrowed her eyebrows. “What promise?”

“To come back.”

Mavis inhaled sharply. “Well, yeah. I’ll come back eventually. It’s not like I’m leaving home forever. I’m just training. Like going—”

“Like going to school, I know… That’s what all the adults have told me.”

Mavis sighed, took off her glasses, and rubbed her face. “I know you’re upset about me leaving, Siggy. But, listen, me leaving doesn’t mean I love you less, or that the family is falling apart. We all just have different things we like and want to learn; even you. You’ve got your interest in learning magic and dogs and glowworms. You have your little beginner’s necromancy books and stuff. This is like that for me. I’ve learned all I can from my beginner’s druid books; now I gotta go out and learn in the real world. And one day when you’re older you’ll learn all you can from your magic books and go to a school for magic.”

“Why aren’t there schools for druids? I could visit you then.”

“I… don’t really know, Siggy. There just… aren’t. Why aren’t there any schools for rogues?”

“Because rogues are sneaky and know where to hide their schools. At least, that’s what Miss Carey told me last time I went to the moon.”

Mavis chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Merle called for Mavis’s help, so she left Sigfriede to find her friend.

Alfie was at the front of the group, which Sigfriede hated. She dragged him back to where she’d been before and sniffed. “People can look at you when you’re in front of them,” she hissed.

“But I like people.”

“Too bad. You can have people, or you can have Sigfriede.”

Alfie thought for a moment and smiled. “What do you do, Sigfriede? I haven’t seen you do a whole lot this trip.”
“What do you mean?”

“Like, do you wanna be a fighter, or an archer or—”

“Wizard!” Sigfriede’s face lit up as she pulled out her wand and Taako’s old spell book. “I wanna be a wizard, just like my mom and dad, and my uncle, and my aunt, and my other uncle, and… Wow, I have a lot of wizards in my family…”

“So then why haven’t you practiced magic on this trip?”

“I’m bad at it.”

“Oh.”

The wind picked up and rustled the trees and bushes around them. Sigfriede thought she heard a small animal run by.

“I wonder where Mr. Highchurch is taking us,” Alfie said. “I’m excited! I heard he’s got a big thing planned before we head back to the place our parents are supposed to pick us up. Are your parents picking you up?”

“Dunno,” Siggy found a big crunchy leaf to step on. A twig to her left snapped in response. “Merle’s my uncle, so my parents may just have me come home with him.”

“Mr. Highchurch is your uncle? I thought elves and dwarves didn’t get along; unless it comes from the human side of your fam—”

“Yeah, cleric sounds right for you. You’re just about as dumb as they get, Alfie.”

“What do you mean?”

Sigfriede sighed. She hated this part. “You heard of the Seven Birds?”

“Yeah! Mr. Highchurch and his family, right? They came from another plane system and fought the Hunger. Everyone knows them; like knowing how to breathe.”

“Mhm. Merle, Magnus, Taako, Lucretia, Davenport, and my parents, Barry and Lup.” She ignored the last part of Alfie’s explanation.

“Oooooohhhhh,” Alfie’s eyes got big. “I bet people ask you what it’s like being related to them a lot, huh?”

“Yup,” Sigfriede popped the p. “And if you join them, I’m gonna punch you in the gut.”

“You can punch me anywhere, if you want.”

“What?”

A kid at the front of the group shrieked. The group startled, and a few easily frightened kids ran behind Merle for protection. The bushes behind Sigfriede and Alfie rustled, and the next second she was on her butt and he was on his back. Something rough and prickly rushed between the two of them and plowed into the group of kids. Sigfriede’s glasses had fallen off her face and snapped under the weight of the attacker’s foot.

One kid thought fast and drew their dagger. Another whipped out a wand and tried for a fast cantrip.
Sigfriede got up, kicked away her snapped frames, and pulled out her own wand. What she saw before her took a moment to process for two different reasons: one, she was near-sighted, and the culprit was running out of her field of clear vision, and two, because they looked like bushes. Just, tall, bristly bushes running around and whacking kids with their branches. Sigfriede stood there, in the combat position Taako had taught her, and stared.

Perhaps the wand was for another day.

She drew her dagger and ran in head first. Most of the kids had gathered their own senses and had their weapons in hand or were drawing them. By the time the first attack was made, Sigfriede had already jumped on one. She gripped one of the branches tightly with one hand while she drew the other back, ready to take a stab at it. The bush jerked and bucked, running around trying to throw her off and attack the other kids. Sigfriede jabbed her knife into what she thought was the bush’s side before being thrown off. She landed in the dirt face first this time, and the wind was knocked from her lungs. She felt a sharp pain drag across her back before one flesh hand and one wood hand grabbed her arms and drug her up.

“I gotcha, Siggy,” Merle smiled and pulled her from the chaos momentarily. He touched the center of her back, and suddenly the pain subsided.

“Thanks Uncle Merle,” she dropped her dagger and pulled her wand back out. Stabbing a bush, what was she thinking? There was nothing to stab! Plants didn’t bleed; at least, Sigfriede didn’t think they did.

One of the girls, a small dragonborn, let a fire bolt shoot from her hands. It caught the bush easily, and it sparked an idea in Sigfriede’s head. Most of the other kids caught on, too. Those who didn’t use magic fell back to cover behind the magic users. One of the bigger kids pushed Sigfriede back with them, but she shoved them off and pushed her way to the front with the rest of the casters.

Most of the spells weren’t landing. The bush that the dragonborn girl caught on fire was nearly burned out. Sigfriede sniffed and tightened her grip on her wand. She watched the way the flames glinted off the gemstones embedded in the wood and took a deep breath.

Then she cast chromatic orb like she’d been studying. She focused on how the spell felt, the way the power in her surged; it started with a tug at her gut that flared up into her head, then followed her veins to her finger tips where it poured into her wand and out like pressurized water.

Or at least it should have. Sigfriede had really only ever cast this spell correctly twice before.

Instead, what she felt after the tug in her gut was like a switch in her chest flip; a small cut in the flow of the power that sparked back on inside her lungs only to explode out from inside her. Electricity flew off her fingers and her wand leaped from her hand. Sigfriede was thrown backwards as what was supposed to be a small contained ball of lightning emitting from her wand sputtered and sparked. It exploded, tearing apart the air and connecting with each bush, the ground, and the surrounding trees. All of the kids went flying backward from the force of the explosion. Thunder roared past their ears and into the woods behind them. Then everything was calm. Everything was silent.

A few moments later, kids started coughing and stirring. Groans crawled from their throats as they pushed themselves up on their hands. Some started crying. Merle, Mavis and Mookie came to their senses and started gathering kids up, giving them heals and making sure no bones were broken. Mookie grabbed Sigfriede’s wrist and tugged her up. Her shoulder blades popped and stung.

“Did I get it?” Sigfriede coughed and spat dirt from her mouth. “Did I do the spell right?”
“What?” Merle helped one kid to sit up. “Who’s hurt?”

“I don’t think she’s hurt, Dad… I don’t know what this is?”

“Oh my—” Merle covered his mouth as he studied the sight before him.

Stood before him, with dirt covering her face, was Sigfriede, Merle’s nine-year-old niece, with what looked like wings of electricity clung to her back. Huge, properly proportioned wings, with a proper wing span and everything. She didn’t seem to be startled, but that may have been on account for the fact that she didn’t seem to be aware of them.

“Sigfriede, honey,” Merle spoke softly. “Don’t… don’t move, ok?”


“You didn’t do anything… wrong, sweetheart,” Merle walked over to her and took her hand in his. “I just need you to follow my instructions very carefully, ok?”

“Okay…” she tightened her grip on her uncle’s hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, you know… Sometimes you…. What was it you said the first time? Get excited?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you get excited?”

“No…. I just wanted to electrocute a bush…”

Merle hummed. “Ok, I need you to stay still and I’m gonna try something really quick.”

“No!” Sigfriede stepped away and fear flooded her eyes. “If somethings wrong I don’t want anyone touching me!”

“Ok, ok!” Merle held up his hands. “Sigfriede, listen to me. I need you to calmly listen to me, or else we can’t problem solve this.”

“What problem, Merle?!”

“Sigfriede, you have wings on your back and I don’t know what to do about it, ok?”

There was a pause as Sigfriede stared at Merle in confusion and disbelief. Then she furrowed her eyebrows and flung her arm across her chest to feel her back. She couldn’t feel anything, but a flash of light flooded the corner of her eyes. Looking over her shoulder, Sigfriede saw all the details of her new appendages. She saw how the electricity arched to wrap around her shoulders, how there were layers and layers of light that looked like feathers. She felt the light heat prickle her cheeks and warm her freckles. She stared in shock for a moment before excitement flooded her chest and she bounced on the tips of her toes. Maniacal chuckles bubbled from her throat, and before Merle could do anything to stop her, Sigfriede started running around the other kids like she was flying.

“Alfie, look!” She ran to her friend and pulled him up. She was practically vibrating at this point. “Wings!”

“Woah!!” Alfie’s eyes lit up. “Where did those come from? They look so cool!”
“You know how I said I was bad at magic? This is the kind of stuff that happens when I’m really bad at it!”

“So can you fly?”

“I… actually don’t know…”

Merle cut in. “Let’s not try that out, Siggy. we gotta get these kids somewhere safe to heal up and then get them to their parents. I don’t want any lawsuits on my hands.”

“Oh, come on, Uncle Merle,” She was already looking for a tall rock to jump off of. “Like I’m gonna hurt myself flying when I have wings.”

“Sigfriede, I especially don’t want a lawsuit from your parents on my hands.”

“Barold will get over it!” And she jumped.

It wasn’t exactly flying, but Sigfriede had jumped off of some pretty high places before, and this felt different. It felt almost lighter, like she’d become a feather. She jumped higher than she’d ever jumped before, well into the forest canopy, and floated down, watching the electric wings innately buffet the wind underneath her and carry her safely down. When she reached the rock she’d jumped from, Alfie climbed on with her in excitement just as the wings sputtered and sparked out.

“That. Was. So. Cool!” Alfie was busting at the seams. “You were all like, nyoom, and then Mr. Highchurch was all like Nooooooo! And then you were all like floaty and angelic and stuff! Do it again!”

Sigfriede looked over her shoulder and let her grin fall. “I don’t think I can. Not unless I can figure out what spell to cast to get them back. I think this is another thing like when the worm turned me blue…”

“So this stuff just… happens to you?”

“Only when I’m bad at magic.”

“Man… you’re like a superhero, Sigfriede….”

Sigfriede’s shoulders tensed at that. Merle cleared his throat and held out a hand to assist Sigfriede down from the rock. She gave Alfie one last grin before taking her uncle’s hand and climbing down. She looked around to see if any of the other kids looked as excited as Alfie.

None of them did.

Within the next two hours, all of the kids were healed up, bandaged up, and brought back to tip top shape. The group trekked through the remainder of the forest path in relatively consistent chatter, mostly about Sigfriede.

She and Alfie started off talking like normal, but the more Sigfriede heard her name in the mouths of other kids, spoken in tones she’d never heard applied to her voice before, the more self-conscious she became. Eventually, when she caught the gaze of her tent mates staring back at her over their shoulders, Sigfriede pushed her way to the front of the group by Merle. When he asked her what was wrong, she only sniffed and wiped a tear away.
When they reached the clearing where the parents were meeting them, Merle asked again.

“I’m just upset about my glasses,” she lied.

Merle didn’t press. He let Siggy sit down on the side with Mookie as he handed out bottles of water and snacks to the kids before they left with their parents. Sigfriede paid attention to none of it; she didn’t even remember saying goodbye to Alfie. One moment he was bouncing around, introducing his parents to all of his friends, and the next, Lup came over to take Sigfriede home and Alfie was just… gone. Kids paired off with their parents. Hugs and kisses were dished out properly. Thank you’s and Pan blesses were exchanged between Merle and the parents, and soon enough, it was just Sigfriede’s family left. They stayed in the same clearing for a while, on Mavis’s request, as she waited for her set time to depart for her enclave. By the time that time had come and passed, Siggy had crawled into her mom’s lap and fallen asleep.

“So what happened this weekend, Baby Bear?”

“I told you, Mom, nothing!”

Lup pursed her lips and tucked a curl behind Sigfriede’s ear. “I know, but Merle said you were crying, and Mookie handed me your wand… It’s all busted up and burned. Were you attacked? Did you get in a fight with the other ki—”

“Why would I fight another kid, Mom?! I’m not a bad kid!”

Barry held out a hand and furrowed his eyebrows. “Woah, woah, Sigfriede Holly, calm down. Your mom didn’t say you were a bad kid.”

“Then why’d she say I started a fight?”

“I didn’t say you started a fight, honey,” Lup spoke softly and held the back of Sigfriede’s head. “I’ve been in lots of fights I never started. Sometimes fighting is all you can do. If you got in a fight, tell us so we can—”

“We were just attacked by some wild bushes and I broke my glasses, ok?”

Barry stared at her.

Lup raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Sigfriede dropped eye contact and played with her carrots. Her breath hitched, and her shoulders dropped. “I had another worm incident…”

She told her parents everything; she had no reason not to. She detailed how she and Taako had sent his first spell book home with her, and how he’d been teaching her \textit{chromatic orb}. She told them about the bushes, how the dragonborn girl summoned a fire bolt so well it made Sigfriede want to summon some lightning. She detailed when she’d properly casted the spell before and how it felt, then she contrasted it with how the spell felt this time. She told them about the explosion and roaring thunder, how she’d thrown even the toughest kid unconscious, and how when she woke up, electric wings curled around her shoulders. She told them about her jump, and how Alfie had said she was like a superhero.

She told them that she didn’t feel like she was a superhero.

Barry adjusted his glasses. “So, you were crying because Alfie said something nice to you?”
Sigfriede shook her head. “Kids started talking about me. When I came down from my jump, they looked terrified. Like I’d done something wrong…”

A silence fell over the table. Sigfriede lost her appetite, which was a shame, because her mom had spent extra time making all of Sigfriede’s favorite foods for dinner. But she wasn’t hungry anymore, so foil went over the plate and the plate went in the fridge. Sigfriede gave her parents obligatory good night hugs and kisses, went to bed, and wished she’d found a way to keep in contact with Alfie.

She didn’t sleep well that night.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello, my good good friendos. I hope you all have had a good week, especially since my week has been rough. But, one good thing that happened this week was I got a hair cut and went short after having long hair for five years! I feel super cute and spunky. I hope y'all get a chance to feel super cute and spunky sometime soon. Anyway, you just read another glimpse into Siggy's life! We're getting super super close to the main chunk of the plot where all of the important characters are gathered back together for one big Dungeons and Dragons shebackle. How exciting! I'm going to make a blog for this fic and all the other blupjeans baby OCs, so once that's up and running I'll give you all the URL. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, and per usual a special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for beta-ing this fic, go give her some love if you haven't. Just a reminder that you shouldn't have to put your feelings on hold for anyone, so go be honest little beans this week! I'll see you all next Thursday.
Chapter Summary

Part of growing up is deciding what you want to do with your life as an adult. With such a big family, there's a lot of different things our haphazard half elf could think about doing. It can be overwhelming at first, but that's what research and the scientific method is for. Sigfriede starts asking tough questions. Taako cracks under pressure. Eva and Cashmere do damage control.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TEN— GROWING PAINS

Merle apologized to Sigfriede for handling that surge so poorly. She forgave him, of course, because she loved him, and he’d never dealt with anything like that without her parents around to help. The tension of the moment was quickly let go of and forgotten.

In fact, Sigfriede was so on board with this whole “forgive and forget” thing, she barely remembered anything that happened on that weekend trip by the time she was fourteen.

Today, she stood on the deck of Uncle Davenport’s ship, letting the wind tousle her curls that stretched to waves under the weight of their length. She watched the clouds flow in and out of the sunset glow and studied the colors the light made on their fluffy surfaces. Her gaze drifted from cloud to cloud along the horizon, up the skyline and towards the two moons hung in the sky.

It was Mookie’s birthday, and everyone, save for Mavis since she was still with her enclave, had made their way down to Merle’s beach home to celebrate. Davenport was taking family members on roundabouts with his little ship.

Sigfriede sniffed and looked over her shoulder. Davenport was wrestling a few ropes before untangling them.

“Uncle Dav?”

Davenport stood up straight and raised an eyebrow. “Huh?”

“Which moon is Lucretia’s house?”

“Uh… I don’t think I’d call it a house, Siggy.”

“Yeah, but, I mean which one is the Bureau on?”

“Uh, the left one, I think.”
“Left from where?”

“Here, the one facing north-north west.”

“Oh.”

Sigfriede didn’t know which direction she was facing. She’d figure it out later. She watched Davenport struggle with a few more ropes, and gave in. She moved from her spot by the rails and started helping him untangle things.

“Here,” she grabbed the end of the rope and held it up for him. “Team work.”

“Thanks, kid.”

A few minutes later, sails had been properly adjusted and the deck was tidied up. Davenport invited Sigfriede down to the kitchen area for some tea.

“So…” Siggy stirred her spoon around and watched the honey melt. “I don’t know if you’d have answers as to what its like now, but what was it like in the Bureau when you were there?”

Davenport stopped stirring his tea and blinked. “Do you want an honest answer?”

“Yes.”

“Hell.”

Sigfriede inhaled. “Right… That would make sense. Sorry for asking.”

Davenport shook his head. “Don’t apologize for asking questions, Sigfriede. That’s how you learn. But, just because it was hell for me doesn’t mean it was hell for everyone not in my position. If you’re curious about it, I may not have good personal stories, but I could explain everything inside and out for you.”

“You’d do that?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“How has it changed? What was it like when it went from Balance to Benevolence? Do you think, if I really failed at school and shit, that Lucretia would hire me?”

“Why do you think you’d fail at school? You’re a smart, good kid, Sigfriede.”

She blushed and peered into her tea sheepishly. “Well, you know. Sometimes I’m just bad at magic.”

“We’ve been over this, kiddo. You’re not bad at magic. You just—”

“Have a condition where sometimes I channel to much energy and lose control. It’s called a ‘wild magic surge’ and it’s not something to be afraid or ashamed of; I know. But that’s only from what little record we have of people like me.”

“There’s little record of gnome sailors but I’ve met plenty of them in my travels.”

Sigfriede shrugged and tilted her head. She sipped her tea and traced her finger along the rim of the cup.
Then she said, “Do you think I’d work well in the Bureau?”

Davenport smiled. “Which one?”

Sigfriede narrowed her eyes. “Benevolence? Duh?”

“Good. I don’t think you could have handled Balance. Too much pressure.”

“I didn’t ask about Balance.”

That earned her a chuckle. “I don’t think I’m the right person to ask about the Bureau of Benevolence, Siggy. From what I watched and helped Lucretia with, and what I’ve kept up with, I think there may be some opportunity for you. I really don’t know; at one point, when you were little and just too big for me to hold you anymore, you’d learned how to dig around in Lucretia’s book bag and find pamphlets on some sort of disaster relief program she was thinking up. Don’t know where that went…”

Sigfriede watched her uncle sip his tea and dab at his mustache. She knew that babies were small, but it was hard for her to imagine Davenport ever holding her. The thought of it made her giggle.

“But,” Davenport continued. “You always seemed fascinated by it when she’d talk about it. It may have just been a baby thing, but you may look into that. I personally think you’d do well as an adventurer. You still have that hat I gave you right after you were born?”

“Its never left my room.”

“Good. You’ll need it.”

Sigfriede threw a napkin at him.

That night, once the birthday party wrapped up, Davenport set course back for the port closest to Neverwinter. Magnus headed back to his home in the country side, Angus went back to his small apartment, Taako and Kravitz returned to their oversized mansion on the outskirts of Neverwinter, while Barry, and Sigfriede went home to their downtown studio home.

Sigfriede tried to sleep that night but found it difficult. Her brain wouldn’t stop thinking about anything and everything, and relating it back to magic and the Bureau. She decided that instead of fight it, she’d take some melatonin and make some sleepy time chamomile tea. Quietly padding her way into her bathroom, then into the kitchen, Sigfriede tried not to make much noise as she passed her parents room. She found the melatonin, downed it, and headed for the kitchen. She made sure to stand by the kettle to catch it as it whistled before it got too shrill. The tea bag splashed in the steaming water and bobbed back to the top. Sigfriede found her favorite tea spoon and stirred the bag around.

The living room was dark. She had darkvision, so she could see shapes without color, except for the fact she hadn’t been wearing her glasses lately. With such a short field of clear vision, it might as well have been as if she didn’t have darkvision at all. It must have been very late at night, or very early in the morning; all of the lights down in the city below the apartment were out, save for street lamps. It was too dark for her to walk to the couch safely with such bad vision, so Sigfriede left her tea on the counter to pad back to her room, grab her wand, and cast dancing lights to sit by the window and sip her tea.

The spell felt right this time. Dancing lights rarely ever went wrong since she’d grown used to her
Moonlight cascaded across the floor, and Sigfriede remembered what she’d learned earlier in the day. Lucretia’s moon faced north-north west. If she remembered correctly, there was supposed to be a compass in a drawer somewhere in the living room…

Sigfriede grabbed her wand and directed one of the lights in front of her. She used it like a torch as she found the coffee table with the miscellaneous doodads and thingamabobs. A few moments of digging and shuffling things around produced a small, beat up compass with a wobbly needle. As far as Siggy was concerned it still worked, so she returned to the window and found her moon.

“Gotcha…” Sigfriede took another sip of her tea and stared at the moon. “One day,” she said, “if all else fails and I hit rock bottom, I’m going to own you…”

A few weeks later, Sigfriede was visiting Magnus’s dog school and helping him with the training classes. She checked dogs in, called roll, and distributed treats and pats. At the end of the morning class, Magnus invited his niece to the break room for lunch.

Magnus asked her how school was going.

“Fine,” she picked at the crust of her sandwich. “Its not teaching me useful things like magic, but fine.”

“Ohhhh,” Magnus smiled. “So you’re still in the learning math and shit part, huh?”

“Yeah…”

“Math is absolutely useless, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. I would know. I’ve seen a hundred different versions of it. It’s pointless.”

“That’s… not relevant to my life plans and goals, but thanks. I’ll remember that.”

Magnus cleared his throat. “So, given that you find school boring without magic, I take it you’re still chasing that wizard dream of yours?”

“Mhm,” Sigfriede swallowed her bite. “Taako says I’m gonna be the greatest magic girl ever.”

“Well, I still think you’d make a great fighter. Just sayin’.”

“And there’s no bias in that statement whatsoever. Right, Uncle Magnus.”

Magnus sat up straight and leaned into the table. “I’m serious, Bean. I wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t think even in the slightest way that you couldn’t handle it. You’ve always been so tough and hard headed. I remember when you turned blue that one time, Mookie said you should have broken a bone or something the way you fell. But you were fine. And throwing a book at Kravitz? Classic fighter moves. You’ve got it in you, Siggy, you just gotta find the right person to teach you how to use it.”

“Magnus, I don’t even know what it is. What are you talking about?”

“It is different for everyone. But whatever it is for you is there and just needs to be directed. Besides, being a fighter guarantees you a job anywhere so long as they’re hiring. Lots of adventuring, too, Sigfriede.”
“I don’t want a job yet, I’m only fourteen.”

“Didn’t say you needed one right now, did I?”

Sigfriede blushed. “No. I guess not.”

“But,” Magnus shrugged and relaxed back into his seat. “I’ll still support you no matter what you do, so long as you’re happy. That’s really all that matters, is if you’re happy.”

“I’d be happy if I had a dog,” she smirked.

“Uh huh. You’d take every dog you’ve seen today if no one could stop you. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you should be a rogue.”

“Rogues suck.”

“Hey,” he pointed a finger at her. “Watch your mouth. My best friend’s a rogue.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “Do you think Lucretia would hire me onto the Bureau?”

Magnus blinked. “Uh… why?”

“Dunno. Just looking at all of my possibilities. You said that being a fighter would be a good idea and would get me hired anywhere. If this magic thing falls through and I do have to be a fighter, is that guaranteed hire extended to the moon?”

“Well, yeah,” he shrugged. “The Bureau is huge now, Siggy. There’s all these different departments and sections… Much, much bigger. You know, there isn’t just one group of dumbasses going out and doing all these big, larger than life adventures with their one group of back up intelligent women, you know? That’s really all the Bureau of Balance was; me, Taako and Merle down here, and Carrey, Killian and Noelle backing us up. Everyone else just kind of made up the office work. But that’s not what its like anymore. Obviously I don’t work there anymore, but you know, I still talk to Lucretia. She’s got all kinds of things up there, now. Like, the Seekers were reassigned as scouts for humanitarian issues. And then you’ve got things like the adoption agency and disaster relief that use the info the Seekers relay and stuff. I’m sure if you really wanted to, Lucretia could find you something that would work well.”

Sigfriede nodded intently.

A few moments of silence passed over them. Then Magnus spoke up again. “Now, Sigfriede, look at me.”

She met his eyes.

“You don’t have to work at the Bureau. Whether its your first choice or last resort, if you want to work somewhere else we’ll help you find work.”

“I know.”

“But if you really want to work there, I’ll support it.”

“I know.”

“Ok,” he smiled at her. “Just making sure you knew.”
Her spring break was spent at home, sleeping. Specifically, Sigfriede spent her spring break at home, sleeping, on the couch with a book in her lap and her head on her dad’s shoulder. Sometimes, just to change it up, she put her feet up in her mom’s lap. On the special days, she did both at the same time. Those days made the best naps. Being a teenager was hard, especially when all of your classmates were dating and going through growth spurts and you were stuck with a general disdain for people and stuck at four-foot-eleven. Not to mention acne, but Lup was trying to help her daughter with skincare as much as she could.

That week was structured specifically to allow Sigfriede to rest. Breakfast was served at 9:30, unless she slept through it, in which she made herself a bowl of cereal. Lunch was at one, and dinner was at 7:30. No other plans were made, days were taken off of work, and tv shows were caught up on.

“So, Siggy,” Lup elbowed her as they cleaned dishes after dinner one night. “I hear you’ve been asking around about work?”

“School’s making me do it,” she mumbled.

“You’re a kid, though.”

She shrugged. “Just thinking ahead, you know?”

“Alright…” Lup watched her daughter scrub a tough spot on a plate. Then she said, “So what have you found in your little research endeavors?”

Another shrug. “There’s a lot I can do. Magnus thinks I’d be a good fighter.”

“He’s always thought that,” Lup chuckled. “He’s been saying that since you were born; always thought you were the next Big Toughie, you know? Take what he says with a grain of salt. One time, when I was trying to figure out my feelings for your dad, we landed in this high-tech world, lots of machines and computers… very futuristic. Barry was fascinated. Anyway, Magnus and I went out one night for drinks. He convinced me to just go hard on it and go talk to Barry later that night. Horrible idea. I never recovered from that embarrassment.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“What does that have to do with me deciding what to do with my life?”

“Magnus gives very bad advice. Don’t listen to him.”

“I didn’t plan on it.”

Lup started the dishwasher and sat at the kitchen table. Sigfriede sat next to her and picked at her fingernails. Motion caught the corner of Sigfriede’s eyes, and she glanced over to catch the tail end of a sign from Lup.

“What, Momma?”

“What else did you find?”

“Oh,” she scratched her nose. “Um… Well, nothing more besides, like, advice on what I should avoid, like high pressure jobs, and that the Bureau has expanded a lot…”
Lup raised an eyebrow. “The Bureau? Who told you the Bureau was an option?”

“Myself.”

“I see… What do you see in the Bureau?”

“Not a lot,” Sigfriede admitted. “I know that I tended to find random pamphlets and tid bits of information on that new natural disaster program; that might be interesting if that went anywhere. And, uh, Magnus says I can get in anywhere if I become a fighter. If that works I may look more into different departments and programs… I dunno. They’re all just ideas. Concepts, you know?”

That last part was a bit of a lie, but that didn’t need discussion at the moment.

Lup gave her a soft smile. “That’s fair. There’s no rush for you to decide just yet, Baby Bear. But, I’m proud of you for doing all of this by yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Lup thought for a moment longer, chewing on her lip. “Y’know, Sigfriede, you’re a bright child. If you really wanted, you could go anywhere, just with your brain alone. You know that your dad and I will support you in everything you do… However, we don’t want you to feel trapped in this family; there is no expectation from us for you to stay in this little circle we’ve built.”

Sigfriede nodded.

“And… Sigfriede, honey, listen, I know that you’re going to do whatever you want—”

“You don’t need to sound so stressed, Mom.”

“I know, but listen to me, really, ok?” She turned to face Sigfriede and cup her cheek. “You are the center of your father and I’s world. There is nothing we would dismiss that you brought up to us. And we will wholeheartedly support you in absolutely anything, so long as you’re safe and happy. But listen to me; there are people in this world who would despise the idea of you doing humanitarian work with the Bureau simply because of who you’re related to and what the Bureau stood for before you came along. Some people just… can’t let go of some things. And that’s not a bad thing, just a… complex thing. And if you meet some of those people, and they dig into you, or ridicule you, or slander you, you can make the choice to leave or stay. And either way, I want you to remember I will have your back. Your father will have your back. We will help you find what is right for you, ok? No questions asked.”

Sigfriede blinked, confused. “Why would people despise me for wanting to help people.”

Lup pursed her lips and scratched her ear. “Everyone has their reasons. Some of those people are just steadfast in their reasons. Its not your fault, but its also not something you can really change. And sometimes, even when its someone you know and love, its not something you can understand. But don’t let that shake you being steadfast in your own reasons.”

“So… its just how people are?”

“Exactly. There’s only so much one half elf can do, yeah?”

The end of the school year was spent in Taako’s house, with Angus tutoring her for finals. Personally, Sigfriede thought Angus was a better teacher than any of her teachers, because he was
the only one that got her to understand fractions. Even then, she’d get frustrated and need a break, or they’d run late and she’d be tired.

One day, she was having focusing issues. She found anything besides the essay that was due in a week interesting; the hem of her shirt, her nail polish, where’d she put her glasses, the fact that she hadn’t worn her glasses for a month straight, the blurry freckle on her nose, how bad her head hurt… Anything was more interesting than studying the shitty writing of an old dead dude who probably died before her parent’s parents were thought up.

“Sigfriede, please” Angus tapped the back of her head. “We need to get this done. I promise you if we just bang out the thesis and argument points, we can finish this in one sitting.”

“I don’t even know what a thesis is, Angus,” she said.

“Its—” he sighed and pinched his nose. “Are you at least paying attention in class?”

Sigfriede shrugged.

“What have you been reading?”

Another shrug.

“Sigfriede Holly—”

“Hey! Only people with authority over me can use my middle name!”

“I’m your older cousin Sigfriede, I baby sat you and wiped throw up from your bib for three years.”

“Yeah but you never earned the ability to ground me. So, hush.”

“Then why do you keep trying to ground Eva and Cashmere?”

“Taako told me I could.”

Angus sighed. He closed the text book in his lap and placed them on the table next to the couch. “Listen. How about we make some tea and regroup, huh?”

Sigfriede jumped up and skipped her way to the kitchen. She almost ran into the doorframe but moved at the last second as the frame moved into her field of clear vision. She spun around it, hugging the wall, and found the tea kettle resting on its usual stovetop burner with the lid off. Grabbing the lid with it, she picked up the kettle and filled it with water. Then she put the lid back on, and returned the kettle to its burner, turning the heat to high.

“I’m having a minty boy…” she sing-songed.

Angus reached over her head and pulled down two boxes; one mint tea, and the other chamomile.

“Hey!” Sigfriede smacked at his wrist as it passed back over her head. “I could have gotten it myself!”

“You’re short, Siggy. How much honey do you want?”

“Honey doesn’t go with mint tea, you nimrod. I want three scoops of sugar.”

“Alright, sugar and honey.”
Both items were pulled down next, and their proper serving size was dispensed in their respective cups. Tea bags were plopped in shortly after.

“Has your mom gotten around to getting you shoes yet?” Angus asked.

Sigfriede shook her head. “We’re doing that this weekend once I’m out of school. Has Evelyn picked out a dress yet?”

“Probably. She won’t let me see it.”

“Maybe it’s made out of angus stake cuts. That’d be funny.”

“And smelly and unsanitary.”

“Why won’t she let you see it?”

He shrugged. “I guess it’s just a human wedding tradition.”

“Humans are weird…”

The kettle began whistling. Angus lifted it and removed the spout cap. He poured so both mugs were perfectly even. Sigfriede smiled, pulled out one of Taako’s fancy tea spoons, and stirred the sugar.

Sigfriede hadn’t really paid attention much to Angus’s now-fiancé on the account of two facts: they started dating when she was nine, and Sigfriede didn’t like making attachments to people who weren’t officially in her family. The closest she got to a strong, continued bond with a non-family member was Ren, and that was just because she was in Taako’s house a lot and made really good bread puddings. But other than that, Siggy avoided letting in strangers too much. She’d seen the way fame had laid unwanted but seemingly unavoidable consequences on the people who bore the fame. She’d seen the anxiety spike in her dad’s eyes when he bought milk by himself, or how Lup sometimes had to actually disguise herself to go on an anxiety walk. She hated the way it made her parents feel sometimes. Well, Lup said hate was a powerful word with little place in the world, so perhaps Sigfriede didn’t so much as hate it as she just wished she could help. So far, the only way she’d found to do that was to keep the number of parents they had to meet for playdates and study sessions to a minimum.

Anyway, this wedding was supposed to be the biggest thing in the family since Sigfriede was born. Sure, Angus had grown up and graduated and moved out like normal human kids, but nothing is treated as wonderfully in human culture as a wedding. Evelyn’s family treated it like a big thing, so Angus’s family went along with it. So, preparation rolls were split between both sides of the couple, bridal parties were assembled, groom’s parties were assembled, and flowers were ordered. Angus decided he wanted Sigfriede in his groom’s party, and on top of that, she and her little cousins Eva and Cashmere helped the maid of honor decide on flower arrangements. Sigfriede was happy to do it all, but she’d also been trying to convince the couple to let her stand on the bridal party side of the altar, even though she was in Angus’s party. She explained that Angus would probably be nervous during the whole thing, so letting her stand behind Evelyn would allow Siggy to make funny faces at Angus so he wouldn’t have to turn around to see them. They hadn’t budged yet.

Sigfriede picked up her mug and headed back for the couch. Angus followed her. They continued their conversation about the wedding, and soon Taako found his way into the living room with Eva and Cashmere close behind. Sigfriede was in the middle of trying to convince Angus of her funny faces idea.
Taako gave his two cents on the conversation. “Sigfriede,” he said, “you make a fool of yourself at this thing and no one’s gonna save your ass from the repercussions.”

“You said you thought it was a good idea,” Siggy whined.

“Bold of you to put words in my mouth. She’s a dirty liar, Agnes.”

“Listen Uncle Taako,” she said. “once this whole wedding thing is over and done with, so long as I get away with all the amazing high jinx I have planned, it’ll be the end of me. The Perect death. I will have reached my peak. No need for a job or degree.

“You’re getting a degree, Sigfriede, and it will be from my school if it’s the last thing I do. You aren’t betraying me like Boy Wonder here already has.”

“Maybe I’ll run away to a rogue school,” she sneered. “Leave nothing but the fading memory of me in my little cousin’s heads like Mavis has with me, never to be heard from again.”

“I wanna go to a rogue school!” Eva bounced on the balls of her feet. “Take me with you!”

“Eva, you’re six, hush,” Taako patted her head. “And Sigfriede, I hope the fuck you do, you’ll be a dead son of a bitch, I’ll tell you that.”

“Dad!” Cashmere shoved him in his back. “Language!”

“Yeah!” Eva giggled. “If we can’t cuss, neither can you.”

Taako rolled his eyes. “Well, pardon me girls. You’ll have to forgive me in these most trying of times. Your precious cousin Sigfriede is threatening to betray the family name in ways almost as bad as her running away to the Bureau without so much as a note.”

The half-drow twins cackled, their charcoal skin catching the light and reflecting off their cheeks. But Sigfriede wasn’t laughing. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“What do you mean what do I mean?”

“About the Bureau. It’s a viable option.”

Taako raised an eyebrow. “Viable option for what?”

“Me? They’ve got all these different departments and stuff, and its all humanitarian work! They don’t even look for artifacts anymore; its safe, and pays well, and I’d get to adventure.”

“You can adventure however you want, Siggy…”

“Well, yeah, but… I’d get paid for it. And they’ve got connections all over the world, not just with Faerun! There’s a whole world out there past the Sword Coast. Like, the Dari Sinora, or even just the mountains in north Faerun. I have this dwarf friend who moved here from the mountains. He tells all these stories about how pretty the mountains are, and the animals there… It’s fascinating!”

“Well if you really want to go there we can visit or something,” Taako turned towards the kitchen.

“No, Uncle Taako,” Sigfriede hopped up and followed after him, pushing past her little cousins. “I don’t want—listen, I appreciate it, but I want to go by myself, you know? As an adventurer, and stuff. I might even find my dad’s old cave! I think he has all these books and stuff—”
“Woah, woah, slow down kimosabe. You want to find what now?”

“My—my dad’s cave?” Sigfriede stuttered.

“Not alone, you aren’t,” Taako waved as if to erase the idea from existence. “Not alone. It’s too dangerous; if you read some of the things he tried when he had that cave… You’d have too many surges, Baby. If you want some books, ask Barold himself, ok?”

“But… But I’m getting better at controlling them. Like, I’ve got _chromatic orb_ memorized, and can cast that fine. All of my cantrips work now, too! I haven’t had a surge in years.”

“Cantrips aren’t high power necromancy, Sigfriede.”

“But, Taako—”

“Siggy, we can talk about this later, ok?”

“No, listen to me! Mom says I’m being really smart about this—”

“Sigfriede, please,”

“And I might as well make money while I’m at it!”

Taako spun on his heels. “Sigfriede Holly, I said that’s enough!” He signed “done” to punctuate his point. “Working for the Bureau has a lot of hidden consequences you don’t want on your shoulders. You _are not_ working there, especially while Lucretia runs it, do you understand me? Get the idea out of your head.”

“What did Lucretia ever do to you?!” She hadn’t meant to raise her voice. Rage flared in Taako’s eyes. “Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans, stop it! Please,” his voice broke, and he ran his fingers through his hair. “just… please, Bean, go back and finish your essay. You can’t fail this course, ok?”

Sigfriede took a step back and bit her lip. She tried not to cry. She wasn’t angry, just confused. She’d seen all of her family do dangerous things; she was born _knowing_ what some of those dangers were. It just made sense to her that danger and consequence were just part of life. And it wasn’t just the adults dealing with those dangers and consequences; if Mavis could leave home to travel with a druidic enclave, and Angus could travel as a private detective, why couldn’t Sigfriede do humanitarian work? It just seemed to fit, like a puzzle piece. She’d always loved problem solving and finding ways to help people. So why did Taako seem so upset about her doing it?

“Fine,” she muttered. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Taako spoke softly and sighed. He watched as Sigfriede stared at her toes and rubbed her arm, then glanced past her at his son and daughters. “Now, what do you all want for dinner?”

Sigfriede didn’t answer. She sniffed before walking back to the couch, where she curled herself up against the arm rest and cuddled her warm mug. A few moments passed before Cashmere and Eva sat between her and Angus.

Angus spoke first. “Hey, Sigfriede… listen, the Bureau’s kind of a… rough topic for Taako. It’s not your fault, though. You didn’t do anything to cause any grudges he holds. I know you didn’t mean anything harmful or malicious, just try to be a little less,” he inhaled and thought for the right word. “Pushy next time, ok? Sigfriede?”
Cashmere rubbed her nose and swung her legs. “I think that’s the first time Dad’s ever been that mad before… It was kind of scary.”

“Cash, hush,” Eva smacked her arm. “You aren’t helping!” She turned to Sigfriede. “I think you’d make an amazing rogue! You could get, like, one small cape you wear for warmth and then have a longer one you wear over it where you hide all of your knives!”

“Eva, that’s stupid….”

Their words faded to the back of Sigfriede’s mind. Eventually Kravitz joined them and gave Sigfriede a confused look. That was the last straw for her. She grabbed her notebook and textbook, poured her tea in the kitchen sink and tried to avoid touching or looking at her uncle. Then she headed upstairs to her room.

She finished her essay and went to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I HOPE YOU GUYS LIKE SOME A N G S T. I don't have a lot to say about this chapter besides the fact that I wanted some good angst to make things interesting for Sigfriede. Wonder when things will get better for her?

Hope y'all had a good week! New Amnesty up today! Go listen to it. I'm still working on the blupjeans baby blog; its gonna be a while since finals are starting up for the summer term here soon. Remember to drink water and eat fruit, or veggies if fruit is too sweet for you (I relate). Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing and letting me include her taakitz baby OCs Eva and Cashmere. Stay cool if it's summer for you or stay warm if its winter for you! I'll see you guys next week.
CHAPTER ELEVEN-- THE LIGHTNING STRIKE, BEFORE THE STORM BEGINS

Chapter Summary

We follow our wayward half elf to college as she finally is given the chance to study what she's wanted to her whole life: the magics of a wizard. Will the textbooks and demonstrations give her the boost she needs to get the better of her wild magic surges, or is there no real way around her condition? And if there really is no way around it, what consequences does that imply for Sigfriede and the people around her? Taako finally gets to see one of his babies taught under him. Kophyn makes his introductions. Sigfriede learns part of the truth the hard way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN—THE LIGHTING STRIKE, BEFORE THE STORM BEGINS

The night before Sigfriede moved into college was spent out on the town, intentionally not sleeping, possibly doing illegal things. Her friends may or may not have convinced her to get a fake ID, get into a premiere bar in Neverwinter, and swindle some poor shmuck out of his glasses in pool. Sigfriede had never played pool before. She tried her hand at it anyway. Eventually, she walked her new glasses into her apartment downtown at three in the morning, packed her clothes and decorations at five in the morning, and woke up at six.

Taako’s Amazing School of Wizardry, Cantrips, and Other Magics was a multifaceted university designed to bring the knowledge of adventuring magics to children of all socioeconomic classes across Faerun. In the classroom or mailboxes, students pay a small fee to enroll in courses created with their adventuring careers in mind. And Sigfriede absolutely hated the dorms.

She hated them so much, in fact, that she honestly took a hot minute to consider dropping out and transferring to Miller’s school of arcane sciences. Then she remembered the fake science and back door ethics and decided against it.

But, Sigfriede’s day looked like this: Lup made Sigfriede’s favorite breakfast and treated her to some fantasy Turkish coffee, with sugar. Taako came by to pick up Sigfriede and take her to campus early so Barry and Lup could finish up Sigfriede’s packing while Taako helped her finish paperwork and room key assignments. Barry and Lup showed up with the rest of the family for lunch. Then they moved all of Sigfriede’s things into her room, helped her set up, and left after dinner.

Sigfriede’s roommate was a wood elf from Waterdeep. She didn’t talk much, but Siggy couldn’t tell if she was just a shy person, or if she had something against half elves. She’d heard stories and statistics about half elves being mistrusted or outright hated for their mixed genealogy. Sigfriede had been lucky to never meet a person who truly held prejudice against half elves, but then again, given her relatives, she wasn’t really an average half elf. In fact, Sigfriede could probably even consider herself an outlier, or even privileged. Either way, Sigfriede tried her hardest for three
weeks to make friends with the wood elf, then gave up. She threw herself into her studies instead, trying desperately to learn *illusory script*.

It didn’t work. She failed so hard at any of the spells taught in her classes that her academic advisor suggested she *drop out* of the wizardry program and study something else.

“Perhaps you could be a bard,” the gnomish woman suggested. “Your classmates always say how pretty your singing voice is. And you played piano in that orientation talent show… You’d make a wonderful bard! Especially with how your parents got together.”

Sigfriede didn’t listen to her.

“I just… I know I can do this shit, Mom…” she bit her nails on a stone-call one day.

“Well, maybe don’t be a bard,” Lup chuckled. “But maybe your advisor is right; maybe wizard isn’t right for you.”

“But I’ve been doing magic since I was six!”

“Well, Siggy, honey, most wizards don’t comprehend magic like you did at six. Maybe being a wizard just… isn’t for you.”

Sigfriede sighed. “Have you and Dad looked anymore into that wild surge thing? You find any wizards like me?”

Lup hummed. “I… don’t think so, baby. When’s your next break?”

“Candlenights,” Sigfriede bit into a carrot. “After finals. I gotta study this week.”

“Study? How’s that work?”

“I dunno. I guess we’ve got like… practice rooms? I guess we’re supposed to be going in with our little spell books or something and fight with each other as practice.”

“Well… I guess just get through these finals fine and we’ll hit the libraries again, how’s that sound?”

“Yeah,” Sigfriede sighed and finished her carrot. “I’ve got class soon. Tell Dad I said hi, yeah?”

“I got you. Bye, Siggy.”

“Bye, Mom.”

The first time Sigfriede went to the practice rooms, she met the first full drow elf in her life. Sure, she’d seen Ren a few times around Taako’s house, and her cousins, Eva and Cashmere, were half drow, half high elf, but that was different. Their skin wasn’t as dark. Ren wasn’t around often enough for Sigfriede to consider knowing her. This drow, however, stood out to Sigfriede immediately if not for his looks, then for his charisma.

Kophyn walked into the practice rooms with Sigfriede and immediately buttered himself up to her.

“You’re in my Theory of Bonds in Motion course, aren’t you?” His voice was like crisp scotch over perfectly cubed ice.
“Sure,” Sigfriede raised an eyebrow, then pulled out her wand and spell book. “If you can call it a course.”

A grin pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Why do you say that?”

“My, uh… dad. My dad. He, uh… likes to talk about that kind of thing a lot.”

“Does he know what he’s talking about?”

“You calling my dad a prick?”

“How can I call your dad a prick when I don’t know who he is?”

Sigfriede scoffed, shook her head, and walked to the center of the room.

Kophyn walked after her. “You’ll need a duel partner!”

“I can find one on my own, thanks.”

“What’s your name?”

“Why?”

“Because,” he pulled a wand of ivory from his robes and smiled at her. “I like to know a lady’s name before I fight her.”

“Dick…” Sigfriede muttered under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said. “You go first.”

Basic practice duels and spell assessments worked like this: all students were given a casting of *false life* before the duel began. They were given one minute of combat, unless one student was hit hard. In that case, the duel is called off early, grades are given, and medics heal. Students are given a second round of combat, then final grades are given. Noncombat spells are usually casted by one student by themselves on objects in controlled environments.

The duel with Kophyn didn’t work like that. Sigfriede would have sworn he played dirty. He casted one *dissonant whispers* at her, and she was knocked out. She woke up five minutes later on a bench off the side of the room. Anger surged in her veins, so she got back up, assumed position, and tried to cast her own spells. None of them worked. Kophyn stood in his spot, stared at her and tried not to laugh.

“Oh, shut up, dude! This isn’t funny!”

Kophyn laughed. “These spells aren’t even hard. How can you not get this?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a bard?”

“Yeah?”

“Then why are you here?”

“We all go through finals at the same time. Now, come on, give me something fair.”
Sigfriede tightened the grip on her wand. She blew a sharp exhale and tried to read from her spell book again.

The thing about spell books, Sigfriede found once she started school, was that they didn’t work. She’d cast spells taught in class before, just off of memorization, since she was six; she knew what magic felt like. When she tried to cast those spells out of her book, they just felt wrong. The words would jumble up on the page, she’d stumble and stutter and give up half way through it. She knew quitting half way through a spell could be dangerous, but anytime she casted out of her spell book she felt nothing. No power, no force, not even a switch flip or surge when a spell went wrong. Spell books were just…. Useless to her. What was the point in writing down spells that didn’t work when she could memorize the ones that work and keep a free hand?

She sighed and slumped out of her dueling stance. “Listen, dude, I’m sorry, but I’m just not feeling it tonight. You’re a… suave piece of work, I’m sure you can find a, uh… fair, was it? Yeah. You can find a fair challenge for yourself. Have a nice night.”

Sigfriede kept an eye out for the drow the next time she had Theory of Bonds class. Sure enough, at the end of the front row, in the corner, was the only drow in the class. He had the same long, silver hair, beady eyes and inky skin. His smirk seemed stuck in place, and he slumped in his chair like he had better things to do.

They got stuck in a study group together.

“Hey, its One Hit Wonder,” he dropped his note book on the empty desk beside Sigfriede and flumped into his seat. “How’s your head feeling, there?”

“Shut up, asshole. I just want an A in this class, ok? Pull out your packet and I’ll give you some answers.”

He turned his head so he could read her name at the top of the packet. “Sijjj…”

“I’mma stop you right there, homie,” Sigfriede covered her last names and pushed on his forehead with the end of her pen. “You can call me Holly.”

“Holly? Isn’t that a human name?”

“Aren’t bards supposed to be nice people?”

Kophyn narrowed his eyes. “Point taken. I’m Kophyn.”

“Cool. Number one-b is false…”

Sigfriede tried to sneak out of class early. She snuck along the walls and took one step out the door before her name was called.

“Holly!”

She sighed, slumped her shoulders, and turned around. “What?”

Kophyn jogged after her. “You want some help with those spells? I’m free.”

“And I’m expensive.”

“Why’s that?”
“Hey, uh, now that I think about it, I’ve got work in a few minutes. How’s about you piss off somewhere else.”

“Where do you work, Holly?”

“Hell.”

Sigfriede’ anxiety made it hard for her to study actively. The more she hyper focused on casting out of her spell book, the harder magic became for her. She didn’t understand why magic had become so… hard.

One night, she couldn’t sleep at all. Her sleep habits had become progressively worse as finals season crawled on. By the end of it, she was lying awake in bed all night and napping between classes. By the time it reached four in the morning, she got up, put on makeup to look less dead, and shlumped her way out of her dorm and into the practice rooms. No one was awake yet, so she gave herself a small warm up casting cantrips she’d had memorized for a long time; friends, dancing lights, and chill touch. Nothing too complicated. It all felt right. She cast chromatic orb once or twice. That felt fine as well.

At around six in the morning, the doors to the room opened. A group of four or five students walked in and paired off for duels. One of them stood on the side and observed. Sigfriede went back to her spell book. Eventually, she got a flukey half cast of illusory script at some point.

“You’re holding your wand wrong for a wizard,” a familiar voice said behind her.

Siggy jumped and turned around. “Kophyn… Jesus Christ, man, don’t do that to me when I’m tired.”

“You’re choking it,” he pulled one of his hands out from behind his back and held it out flat. “Let me show you.”

“No.”

“Your grip should be at the end of the wand, not in the center with the end pressed against your wrist. Scoot your hand back.”

She took his advice. It felt better.

“Now,” he tilted his head toward the target on the wall. “Cast it again.”

Sigfriede sighed and began casting chromatic orb from memory.

“Where’s your spell book?”

“You’re not the professor dude, shut the fuck up.”

“You’re studying to be a wizard, right?”

Sigfriede restarted. It cast properly; no hitches, switch flips, no surges. She turned on her heels and huffed. “There. Now can you please leave me alone?”

“Uh,” Kophyn scuffed the floor with his shoes. “Sure. You want to go to breakfast with me and my friends in an hour?”
“Why?”

“They’re… our study group?”

“What?”

“For Bonds in Motion?”

“Oh… Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’ll meet you guys in the caf in an hour.”

Kophyn smiled and walked off.

An hour later, Sigfriede put her plate of eggs, sausage and hash browns across the table from Kophyn. She shoveled a fork of eggs in her mouth and glared at the drow.

He put his glass of water down and crossed his arms. “What?”

“I don’t like you,” Sigfriede took a drink of her milk.

“I know. But you and I both want an A, you and I share a class, and I hate this just as much as you, so let’s just get through this and we won’t have to deal with each other again.”

“Why’d you come here?”

“You want a nice answer or an honest answer?”

“Honest. My uncle owns this place, I want some tea to spill for him.”

Kophyn choked on his oatmeal. “Your uncle?”

“Mhm. I don’t like you, and if you become a problem child I want to know as much as I can to get you out.”

“Wait, wait, wait, you’re Taako’s niece? Like… Taako Taaco? You know—”

“From TV, yeah, him. Why’d you come here if you hate it.”

“You still want an honest answer?”

“Mhm.”

“Ok. I want to be a bard.”

“Never heard of a drow bard.”

“I know. There’s a strict order in drow culture. The most powerful you can be is a cleric to the patron drow goddess, Lolith, specifically a female cleric to her; a priestess. Then below that you have female wizard, then your male wizards. Most of the power is held by women in drow culture.”

“Cool,” Sigfriede grinned.

“Lastly, you’ve got your fighters; people with no arcane or divine abilities. That’s the lowest you can be. My parents always thought I’d be a fighter. I was hardheaded and rambunctious. They hated me. So, the older I got, the more I wanted to climb in ranks. I thought, if I can’t be a
priestess, I’ll get the next best thing. I’ll be a priest. That didn’t work.”

“Why?”

“Don’t worry about it. I was kicked out of my house for it, though. Another thing in drow culture is that you don’t mix divine and arcane magics. There aren’t any drow bards because bards mix arcane and divine. It’s a disgrace to do it. But if I can become one of the best bards there ever was, they’ll have to take me back. No questions asked. I’d prove them wrong for it, and the whole drow world would change because of me.”

“You’ll never be as good as Johan…”

Kophyn gave her a sharp look. Then he continued, “I wanted to go to Lucas Miller’s school. I thought I could disprove some drow theories of life if I walked out with bardic training and a science degree. But the school turned me down; said bards are too flimsy for science… too blurry. So I’m stuck here.”

Sigfriede took another bite of her eggs. “You still sound like an asshole.”

“So,” Kophyn leaned on the table. “If you’re Taako’s niece, why are you down here in these shitty dorms struggling to pass wizarding basics.”

Sigfriede gulped. “Because,” she spoke sharply. “Just because I was born into privilege doesn’t mean I don’t want to earn things myself. I like learning. I like growing. This is a comfortable environment for me, especially as a wizard. And I will be a wizard. Everyone has a learning curve, Kophyn; you gotta break a few eggs to make a fuckin’ omelet, my dude.”

She picked up her plate and moved seats.

That night, after dinner, Sigfriede wandered her way back into the practice rooms to give these spells one last shot. Of course, Kophyn insisted on bringing the whole study group with them, so Sigfriede was stuck with another dueling match, with round after round of one hits and five-minute pass outs. Eventually, she got fed up.

Sigfriede groaned and threw her wand down. “This is ridiculous! You aren’t even giving me a chance!”

Kophyn rolled his eyes. “Maybe if you used a spell book like a proper wizard…”

“That’s not the point! I know what magic is like! I’ve been doing this for years, Kophyn! This shouldn’t be such a pain in the ass!”

“Fine. If you’re so upset about it, you go first this time.”

“Fine!”

Sigfriede sighed and adjusted her grip on her wand. She concentrated and cast *chromatic orb*.

Then it happened again. But something new happened with it. Every time she’d had a wild magic surge, Sigfriede completed the spell she’d initially cast, and then something else happened afterward. She’d never had a spell *change* on her before. Maybe she was angry, maybe she was tired, maybe she’d gotten in her head, but this time, the spell *changed*. Sigfriede had cast *chromatic orb* so many times, she could do it in her sleep. She knew the ins, outs, ups, downs, lefts and rights
of the spell. The instant that felt different, she panicked. The spell sputtered, tripped, tumbled, and
stopped.

“Oh, shit,” she muttered.

The orb flickered out in front of her. The next second, she felt the hair on her arms stand on edge.
Electricity sizzled through her body. She felt an itch between her shoulder blades, like when
someone sneaks up on you. The air grew still. Ozone flooded her nose. Something pierced her back
and threw her forward. Sigfriede let out a guttural scream before everything went black.

“Holy shit!”

Kophyn stumbled back and covered his mouth. Screams erupted from the other students around
him. They hit the floor with Sigfriede’s body. The smell of singed hair and burnt flesh filled the
room. Kids started running around and shouting, but the ringing in Kophyn’s ears rang from the
thunder that roared off of Sigfriede’s limp body across the room. Moments later professors and
healers rushed in the room and took order of the room. People were guided out into the halls as
healers rushed to Sigfriede and tried to wake her up.

“What happened?” Kophyn’s Bonds in Motion professor stood next to him.

He shook himself from his shock and took a deep breath. “I-I… I don’t know. We were studying…
dueling. We were dueling, like for finals, and she was getting frustrated. I let her go first and she
tried to cast a spell from memory, and it just… I don’t know, Dr. Fink, she just… the spell, it
sputtered and died out, and she said, like, ‘oh, shit’, or something, and then next thing I know
there’s a lightning bolt arching through her and it came out right in the chest and she went flying
and there was this clap of thunder and—”

“Oh, ok, Kophyn,” Dr. Fink stood in front of him and held his hands up. “Slow down, breathe.
You swear you didn’t see anyone attack her?”

“No! Of course not! It was just us, our study group for your class, I promise! We don’t like each
other but no one would attack anyone. We just want to pass, ok?”

“I know, I know. Breathe, Kophyn. Do you want me to walk you back to your dorm? We need to
get everyone out here so we can help her.”

Kophyn took a deep, sputtering breath and shook his head. “I’ll be ok.”

“Alright. Drink some water, Kophyn. And get some sleep.”

Kophyn took one last look at Sigfriede’s still body and left.

Chapter End Notes

There is just no break for our ambitious little Bean, is there? Is she ok? Is she alive?
What does this mean for Sigfriede’s goal to be a wizard? All I have to say is the plot
thickens! You’ll just have to see next week.

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing this fic for me. I
do have to say that I am taking summer classes at my university, and Dana is busy at the moment, and this is the last chapter she's officially given me feed back on for now, but the rest of what I do have written is in her hands and I'm just awaiting her thoughts before I post next week. Don't worry, though! I'm sure she'll have it all read by then, and I've written ahead enough to be able to post through my summer term finals. With that being said, I'll see you all next week! Be good to each other and others will be good to you. Bye, guys.
CHAPTER TWELVE-- WAKING UP

Chapter Summary

After Sigfriede's daily routine was disrupted by her strongest surge yet, she finds herself in a place she never figured she'd see. She wakes up facing consequences that take more than she may have. How will Sigfriede adjust to life after such a life changing event? Sigfriede memorizes a new reflection. Taako imparts some sage wisdom. Barry tries to keep his baby girl happy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWELVE—WAKING UP

Beep, beep, beep, beep…

Sigfriede woke up to the sunrise in her eyes, in a gown that felt scratchy and unfamiliar. The air smelled sterile. Her blanket was thin, white, woven from loose threads. There were socks on her feet. That’s how she knew she wasn’t home. Then the pain flared. It started in her chest and flew down her side, wrapped around her left thigh and made her toes numb. It climbed its way around her shoulder to her back and into her hair. It spiderwebbed over her collar bone, under her chin and across her nose. It hurt where her glasses rested.

When had she put on her glasses? The pain on her nose became so unbearable that she went to rip the lenses from her face.

“Move slow, Sigfriede,” Barry’s voice came from her right.

She looked over and saw her dad sitting on the edge of her bed.

A bed. She was in a bed. Yes, and it was small and hard. Her fingers curled into the loosely woven blanket as the rest of her senses came to her. The sunrise in her eyes came from a small window to her left, and a dingy plastic seat was positioned under it. The walls were a sickly cream color and the white tiles had grey flecks in them. The tip of her left ear burned, and as she went to rub it the flashing of a heart monitor caught the corner of her eye. She glanced at her fingers and saw the connecting finger clamp and IV needle resting in the back of her hand. It all fell into place, and Sigfriede realized she was in a hospital.

Sigfriede had never been in a hospital. Well, not as a patient. She’d visited inside one before for little things she didn’t remember, but she did know they weren’t in high demand due to the easy access most people had to healers and clerics. Hospitals were usually reserved for those in extreme causes of illness and physical ailment uncurable by magical means.

The idea that whatever had happened at school made her one of those few people in the world terrified her.

“I know, Siggy, I know.” He sat on the edge of her hospital bed and wiped at the tears Sigfriede
couldn’t feel falling down her cheeks.

“Dad, what happened?” Her voice croaked, just like when she’d turned blue and broken her voluntary silence.

Barry adjusted his glasses and sighed. “We’re not entirely sure of the play by play, but from what the kids that were there are saying, I think you had a bad surge.”

Sigfriede inhaled and tried to push herself up. Barry moved to help her, but when his hand brushed against Sigfriede’s left arm, she screamed and yanked it away.

“Sorry, sorry!” Barry let his hands hover. He hated seeing his daughter in so much pain. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” she took a shaky breath. “It just hurts…”

Barry sighed and adjusted his glasses. “We think the surge was a lightning strike. You’ve got the right burns for it.”

“Burns?” Panic flooded her chest. She looked down at her hands and arms. Her right arm was fine, but the left had, well, burns arching over her skin like lightning.

Her hands started shaking. Tears flooded her eyes. She looked back up at her dad and stuttered.

Barry’s eyebrows furrowed, his shoulders slumped, and he grabbed her unburned hand.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey, look at me. Take a deep breath, don’t cry, please, it’s gonna hurt…”

She felt the sting right as soon as he said it. She couldn’t stand it anymore. The glasses were ripped off, she slapped at her face and wiped at the tears. Her cheek seared, her hands shook, and the words fled her brain. Before she knew what she was doing, her hands flew into signs.

Barry shook his head. He’d never seen her so upset before, and he’d seen Sigfriede upset. This was a new level of fear and uncertainty that he could tell had shaken her to her core. He melted; he couldn’t take it anymore. Scooting in closer to her, Barry took Sigfriede’s hands in his, pulled her into his chest, and held her tight. Had she not been hooked up to so many machines, he would have pulled her into his lap. He hated it when the people he loved were just… broken. He’d seen it so many times; he’d seen it in so many ways. It was the very, very last thing he’d ever wanted to see in his daughter’s eyes, but here she was, sobbing into his shoulder, broken and hurt and confused, and there was nothing he could do to fix it.

Damn. And he’d thought the twelve years alone were bad.

After crying for a few minutes, Sigfriede sniffed, wiped her face, and tried to catch her breath. “How long was I out?”

“Only a day or so,” he tucked a wave of hair behind her ear.

“How bad are the burns? Am I gonna be scarred?”

“Probably… The healers they had on campus tried to curb the damage as much as possible, but there was only so much they could do.”

Sigfriede’s shoulder’s slumped. “I tried so hard, Dad. I want this degree so much…”

“I know, believe me, I know. What makes you think I wouldn’t ever believe that?”
“I just…” she took another sharp inhale. “I was studying so hard. I was trying to understand that fucking spell book so, so hard but it just wouldn’t click. I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong...”

“Sigfriede…” Barry rubbed the back of his neck. “Listen, your mom and I tried not to make this such a big deal, because it really isn’t. But this wild magic thing you’ve got going on… this seems to only happen to sorcerers. And sorcerers are completely different casters from wizards. There is no denying you know magic and understand it and can use it. But maybe you just aren’t meant to be a wizard. You might just be a sorcerer.”

“But I’ll have to leave school.”

“No, you won’t. There’s a department for sorcerers just like wizards. It’s smaller, because sorcerers are rarer than wizards, but it exists.”

“Dad, I don’t…”

“Don’t stress about it,” he said. “Just rest. Your body’s recovering. You need rest. We’ll worry about school later.”

Sigfriede thought for a moment. “I wanna see it.”

“See what?”

“My burns. I want to see what I did to myself.”

Barry called in a nurse. After a quick consultation of strength and some food, her IVs were moved to a mobile pole, and she was disconnected from her machines. She was walked to a bathroom and went in on her own. She peed first and made a point not to look in the mirror. Then she washed her hands, grabbed the collar of her gown and pulled it down. Her breath hitched. On the left side of her chest, marred and swollen and dry, was a pustule of burnt, ruined skin. And arching out from it across her bust, over her left shoulder down her arm, torso, and thigh were strings of sharp angles just as burnt. It wound and wove across her neck, over her cheek and straight through her nose. The burns were puffy, raised, red around the edges and sickly white in the center. They ached and pulsed. If it was possible at all, what was left of Sigfriede’s spirit sank. The scars seemed to be never-ending. All the places she had felt pain were risen in these pustule veins. Her thigh, hips, stomach, back, chest, shoulders, arm, face; each woven with the swollen burns she was beginning to come acclimated to. How had she laid on her back and not felt the pain? How had the burns across her shoulder blade not burst yet? How had the doctors kept them so clean? Sigfriede hardly believed in clerical ability to heal basic wounds and diseases, what more could medical science really do in such a low demand society?

Nonetheless, she’d finally seen the extent her lack of control could go to. There was no going back. Each patch of skin, each hair on her burnt flesh and freckle across her marred nose was banished and irreplaceable. Her left earlobe had melted its piercing closed. She’d have to have one of each of her earrings converted into clamp ons; she really didn’t want to imagine what having scar tissue pierced felt like.

Sigfriede took hold of her IV pole and left. Her nurse walked her back to her room and helped her into her bed. They checked her fluids and vital signs, told Sigfriede she was doing well, and closed the door behind them.
“Dad, what did I do?” Sigfriede asked.

“It’s just… sometimes surges can get dangerous. Some of the sorcerers like you have died from their surges. It’s just risky.”

“How many people know I did this?”

“The whole family.” Barry coughed. “Well, everyone besides Davenport. He’s off on a trip; we’ll try to get a hold of him as soon as we can.”

Sigfriede nodded. Her stomach growled.

“Lunch is soon,” Barry said. “I’ll let your nurse know you’ll want some.”

He got up and kissed Siggy’s unburnt cheek. He placed her glasses in her hand and gently patted her head. “I’ll go home and let Mom know you’re up. We’ll be back soon.”

The week and a half she stayed in the hospital was strange. Her family rotated spending the day with her. Taako cried. Lup refused to sit in the chairs beside the bed, and instead laid with Siggy. Magnus brought the dogs he was training to help with her guilt and anxiety. Merle brought all of her succulents and her glowworm habitat. Lucretia brought journals and books and read with her. Students and friends brought in flowers and balloons and cards. Her professors visited her. She was excused from her exams for medical reasons. She was released from the hospital the day classes ended. The doctor sent her straight home in Neverwinter with a topical cream and some painkillers with refill information. Taako, Lup and Barry personally packed her dorm up for her and moved it all back home.

No one asked her if she planned on going back to school. She didn’t think about it, either. In fact, she left her wand in its wrappings on her desk for a year and a half while her burns healed to milky white scars and she rested.

It was hard, learning to cope with nerve damage and trauma. Mentally, she felt drained. She’d worked so hard to make something of her gift with magic, and it got her half killed. Physically, her life changed. She needed help getting dressed. She couldn’t brush her hair without crying. She couldn’t wear her glasses without rubbing the scar on her nose raw. She couldn’t shower without help. Thunderstorms terrified her when they used to lull her to sleep.

Eventually, the pain subsided enough for her to function on a basic level. She found ways to keep herself busy by working in Magnus’s dog school, helping with Merle’s weekend adventures, and researching her wild magic surge with her parents. She baby sat Eva and Cashmere for Taako and Kravitz on their date nights. One night, when she’d baby sat again and Taako and Kravitz came home early, she broke down.

“Siggy?” Taako said. He waved for her attention and signed. “Sigfriede, are you crying?”

“No!”

He sat next to her on the couch and carefully held her chin. “Sigfriede, look at me, Baby. You’re crying. What’s wrong, Sigfriede? Do you hurt? Do you need your medicine?”

“No, I’m fine, Uncle Taako.”

“Siggy…”
Sigfriede sighed and rubbed her nose. “It just… I don’t have as many freckles anymore, Taako… I loved my freckles. They were the only thing I shared with both of my parents… I was trying so hard and I almost ended up killing myself and now I can’t even enjoy my freckles…”

Taako’s shoulders drooped. He sympathized with her so much. “Hatchi matchi, Bean… Geez, I’m not very good at this, but, uh… Listen. You know I don’t look like this, right? I’ve never lied to you about how I handle my face and all that after everything. Loosing something you love about yourself when you feel down and out on your luck sucks major ass. It takes a lot of confidence and self-awareness to be able to handle shit like that and just find an alternative and go on with life. Hell, the only reason I could do it so easily is because I knew I’d have a way around it. There wasn’t anything I could really actually loose in that situation. But… you’re young, you know? Regardless of life span, you are young. You’ve just reached adulthood, you don’t know anything. And I mean that, you really, honestly have no clue what’s going on in the world. At all. You’re just figuring that out, let alone figuring out how to easily handle what’s going on with your own body. You just got to the point where you barely have acne and now you’re stuck with nerve damage and scars and… just all of this hot mess. It hurts. Not just physically, but, like, in the heart or somethin’. But, here, come here. Follow me.”

Taako took his niece’s hand and helped her up. Then he led her to the bathroom down the hall and stood her in front of the mirror. He rested his hands on her shoulders and rested his chin on her head.

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?”

Siggy scoffed. “Do you want an answer you want or the honest one?”

“I think they’re the same in this case.”

“I see all of the screw ups I’ve ever had… all of the screw ups I haven’t had yet.”

“I see a strong, smart, independent, brave, ambitious young woman with a heart of gold and a brain of steel. I see the epitome of everything the universe was created for. All of the good things that make up the sunshine and the starlight and the weave of magic and the bonds that keep everything held together. These scars? They’re just millions of tiny little bonds that have formed something important in you. And we may not know what that is yet, but I spent a century waiting for things like that in one hundred different worlds…” He pursed his lips and sighed. “Listen, Sigfriede. We’ve both lost freckles. The only difference between you and I, though, is that I’m older. That’s it. One day, when you’ve run around and killed goblins and saved peasant towns from tyrant kings, you’re going to wake up and have an epiphany about how to handle all of this in your own way. But for now, I want you to pinky promise me that you’ll try to start looking at the missing freckles as new opportunities. It’s hard, but there’s no rush. Just promise me you’ll try, ok?”

A smile tugged at the corner of Siggy’s lips. She sniffed, smiled, and turned around to hug Taako around his waist.

“Pinky promise,” she whispered.

On Sigfriede’s twentieth birthday, she re-enrolled in Taako’s school. She’d learned how to function with the nerve damage and limited mobility and felt brave enough to challenge herself in what she still wanted to do. The school, however, wasn’t ready for her to come back yet.

“Holly!” Kophyn sat next to her on the first day of class and clapped her on the back.
Sigfriede winced and shot him a glare. “Don’t talk to me.”

“Man, what happened to your face?”

“Oh, I’d think you would have heard by now, given that you were there to witness what happened.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You mean that freak accident with the lighting did this?”

“It wasn’t a freak accident, Kophyn…” she sighed and rubbed her temples. “I’ve got this rare disorder where sometimes my magical energy gets out of control and it surges. Usually something small happens when I experience it, like turning blue or getting wings for a bit. That was the first time a spell had ever changed while I cast it.”

“So… what does that mean?”

“My parents think the spell changed to a high-power lightning bolt that was centered behind me for some reason. I struck myself with my own lightning, and the burns left scars.”

“I see…”

“Alright!” The professor walked to the front of the room. “Welcome! Let’s call roll, yeah? If you go by something other than your listed name, let me know.”

“By the way,” Sigfriede whispered. “It’s Sigfriede. S-I-G-F-R-I-E-D-E. You can call me Siggy if that’s too hard to pronounce.”

“Oh,” Kophyn tucked a lock of silver hair behind his ear. “I already know. People haven’t stopped talking about you.”

The semester didn’t go well.

She listened to her parent’s suggestions to take classes designed for sorcery, but it was hard for Sigfriede to give up the idea of being a wizard. So, as a compromise, she took classes for both. Spells she memorized were written down in a spell book, but the spell book hardly worked much outside of the classroom.

“I can’t focus,” she muttered to herself at a lonely dinner service. “I know I can do this, it’s just… different this time. I have these scars, yeah? I just got to the point where I can lift a wand like normal, of course it’s going to be different. I just need time…”

Her thoughts came to a halt when she heard familiar whispering behind her back. She didn’t want to look suspicious, so Sigfriede got up to refill her glass of water and looked over the seating area calmly. Sitting at the table behind her, a little off to her left, sat Kophyn and his friends, the kids in Sigfriede’s last study group. They glanced at her and smirked. One of the kinder students of the group winced and waved at her. Sigfriede returned the wave with a half-smile, she was still learning to reuse the muscles on the left side of her face, and a weak one-fingered wave.

Then she noticed something interesting that she hadn’t noticed before. It brought back brief memories of the few times she’d sat at a meal with them before; Sigfriede had always sat herself across from them, it isolated her from their group enough to make a point she didn’t hang with them, but evenly enough to see everyone’s face. Then she realized that there were five of them. She placed her glass under the water fountain dispenser and absent mindedly pressed the button. She
remembered that each time she’d seen them, Kophyn, coolly and calmly, through little sense of oddity at all, always sat directly across from Sigfriede, exactly in the middle of the group. It didn’t matter the day, the time of semester, the meal, what was being talked about, or even the few people that were briefly welcomed into their little posse; Kophyn always sat between two on each of his sides. And because Sigfriede liked to be able to give everyone equal chance of fair conversation, she sat opposite Kophyn, not because she thought she deserved the center spotlight, or that she wanted to be surrounded by people, but because for some reason, though she’d never tapped into the feeling before, she felt a twinge of challenge from him.

The center of her scar over her chest twanged in a fit of pain as Sigfriede’s glass overflowed. She gasped at the shock of the cold water and released the fountain button. She let go of the glass and nearly doubled over, though she caught herself and inhaled sharply. Her right hand flew over her scar as she whipped her left hand sharply to fling off the excess water from her skin.

Snorts and giggles flooded Sigfriede’s ears as she stood up straight and sighed. She swallowed the bitter, metallic tasted from her tongue, tipped her glass over gently to drain the extra water, and began walking back to her seat.

“Need some help, Siggy?” Kophyn called.

She shot him a dirty look at placed her glass on the table. “No,” she reached for her medicine in her backpack. “Thank you.”

Kophyn stood from his seat and picked up his half-eaten plate. “You look lonely, there. We could —”

“I said I’m fine, Kophyn! Please, just… leave me alone, I’m trying to study.”

One day, when an exam was coming up for one of her Applications of Combat Magics tests, she decided to just ditch the spell book altogether and go off memory. It was what felt best, most natural.

Sigfriede walked to the practice rooms just like she had before she’d had her last surge. She selected a different room from the semester before, locked the door behind her and shook the whispers of the halls from her memory.

It was the same as Sigfriede hazily remembered: targets painted on explosion tainted walls, some freshly coated, and others pock marked with fuzzy bullseyes. Rectangles were taped out on padded floors where duels took place. Along one wall perpendicular to the dueling rectangles were signup sheets for dueling times. Sigfriede could tell time had worn away at the floor since she’d been gone; the edges of the tape curled up, and some sections were missing chunks of it. Some spots on the padded floor looked burnt or stabbed, but none of it looked dangerous.

If this is what a normal, controlled damage zone looked like, Sigfriede hated to wonder what the last room she’d used looked like.

“Right,” she said. “Pick a target and get at it. Five minutes and you can nap.”

Left foot in front of right foot brought her to the nearest target. It was cleanish, clear enough to easily find the center. Sigfriede put her bag down and pulled out her wand. Her spell book slipped out as well, but she let that fall to the floor. She was probably going to fail that class, anyway. Her wand was still wrapped in its cloth coverings, as if she’d hardly used it since returning to school. Granted, she hadn’t, but it was still satisfying to unravel the neat little string bow and grab the edge of the fabric, hold the bundle over her free hand, and catch her wand as it fell. It made her feel
Sigfriede let her fingers fall into place over the handle and adjusted her grip slightly. The tiny gems inlaid in the wood glimmered, and the carvings looked like new. When she’d electrocuted herself, one of the first things Magnus made sure to do was clean up her wand and make it like new again. He’d done it during her hospital visit, so she wasn’t entirely sure if he was able to polish up the wand and tidy things up, or if he had Taako had just spent time remaking the same wand from scratch. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

The center of the target stared Sigfriede down quietly, with little care for her emotions. She stared it back but found little courage to do much else. Her palms grew clammy and sweaty. The grip on her wand slackened. Her left cheek flinched and sent waves of pain over her nose. Sigfriede’s battle stance wavered, but the target stood strong. She studied it, looking at the holes filled with chipped paint, wishing they’d stop piercing her skin and studying her organs, her thoughts and fears, like the scrutinizing, hungry eyes of a hateful politician. Her vision tunneled, and suddenly she could see every dip and crevice of the concrete wall in front of her. Shadows were no longer grey and black, but shades of red; crimson and violet contrasted with neon pinks and fuchsias.

Suddenly the rings of the target vibrated and pulsated, they began dancing and weaving as Sigfriede’s head pounded. She was wearing her glasses, right? Why did her head hurt so much? Her hands shook as she let her wand fall to the floor. She gripped the wire frames resting on her nose and bent over slightly. Nausea waved over her, making her knees buckle. She fell to the floor meekly, trying to swallow down the bile flooding her mouth. Her heart raced. Her throat closed up. What if something went wrong? What if she’d lost all ability to control any of her magic? What if she just… couldn’t anymore? That would make some sense, right? She had blown all of her magical energy into that last surge and she couldn’t tap into anymore, that made sense. She was just over exhausting herself, trying to cast spells again. At least for now, it made sense. She could just pack up her things, go home, eat something and sleep. Tomorrow, she’d go talk to her advisor and see what was going on. Maybe she could go to Lucas’s school, get a science degree or something. That would be cool. Her dad had always read to her about astronomy at bed time, she’d love a degree in astronomy.

Sigfriede’s heart raced a little bit slower, and her vision opened back up again. Oxygen weaseled its way back into her lungs as her fingers untangled themselves from her mother’s old cloak. Huh. Yes, that was right. Lup had given that to her for bad days. It was a hug, she’d said. For the bad days and tough times. Sigfriede ran her fingers over the silver embroidery along the hems. She focused on that, and soon her hands were still, and her breathing returned to normal. Her head didn’t hurt. The pain along the left side of her body subsided. She swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and picked up her wand by her knees.

“Maybe not today,” she said to herself, trying to imitate Lup’s soothing tone. “Tomorrow will come along eventually. Maybe not today.”

Sigfriede slowly found the string and cloth to wrap her wand in again. She replaced it into her bag, along with her neglected spell book. Then she flung the bag over her shoulder, rubbed her temples and sighed. She decided she’d be back tomorrow to try again, so she unlocked the entry door and let herself back out.

As soon as Sigfriede returned to her dorm, she pulled out her emergency pain and anxiety medicine. She was about to double check the dosage and instructions on each when something caught the outskirts of her vision. Her pill box marked with each day of the week. She’d left the days where she’d successfully remembered to take her medicine open and empty. Today’s was closed and full.
She’d forgotten to take her medicine that day.

Another time that made Sigfriede unsure of herself was the first thunderstorm Sigfriede experienced alone after her electrocution.

It wasn’t like there hadn’t been any thunderstorms at all since she left the hospital; she’d been out for a year and a half, of course there were thunderstorms. But she’d never been alone when one happened. Usually she’d be at home with her parents, or at Taako’s house. Taako’s house was big enough to make thunder quieter than it actually was. On top of that, both Taako’s house and her parent’s apartment were usually filled with noise. There was always music or conversation or something; it was hard to hear thunder.

Dorm rooms weren’t as big or noisy.

Sigfriede woke up alone to the loudest crash of thunder she’d ever heard. Thank god she had been given a private room with a shared bathroom, or else her roommate would have heard her scream.

Her heart pounded. The sweat on her back chilled her skin as the air conditioner blew against it. Long, wavy blond hair stuck to her lips and teeth. Her mouth felt like cotton.

Lightning flashed and violently flooded the small bedroom with rosy light. Thunder screamed after it, and Sigfriede slammed her hands to her ears. Once the noise subsided, she climbed out of bed, letting her sleep shirt fall against her thighs. She slipped on her fuzzy flip flops and turned on the room light.

Her water bottle sat on the desk by her bed. She eagerly grabbed it and drained it despite her shaky hands. Then she pulled up the blinds to her window and watched the rain drench her window.

Another flash of lightning and roar of thunder sent Sigfriede falling on her ass and her breath flew from her lungs. She groaned. She was too tired for this. It couldn’t even be dawn yet, it was too dark.

There had to be some way to cover all this noise.

Sigfriede looked around her room. There was a wind-up music box her aunt had given her, but that would keep her up if she wanted to have it play the whole night through. She had one of her dad’s old recording coins filled with music, but the volume on it was very faint. Beyond those options, Sigfriede really had none.

More light flooded the room as the electricity stuttered. She could feel the thunder that tore through the air this time; the whole building shuddered, and Sigfriede finally gave up.

She reached for her stone of farspeech and rang up her dad.

“Hello?” Barry’s voice was rough and groggy.

“Dad,” Sigfriede’s own voice cracked. “Dad, I need you to come to campus.”

A pause. “Sigfriede?”

“Dad, I’m not kidding, I don’t want to be alone right now.”

Barry coughed. “Is something wrong?”
“Not… wrong,” she sighed. “Just… is it storming at home?”

“I think so.”

“I don’t want to be alone…”

Another pause. Lup’s voice was faint in the background, but whatever she said, Barry told her to not worry about it.

“Sigfriede,” he continued, “are you scared of the storm?”

No answer.

“Honey, it’s not going to strike you through the building—”

“I’m not scared about that, I’m scared of the thunder. It’s too loud.”

Barry chuckled and cleared his throat. “I’ll make you a deal. You start some tea in your room and I’ll be over in five minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

They hung up. Sigfriede used her electric kettle to boil some water and pulled down her chamomile tea. By the time the rift opened in her room, both mugs were steaming on her desk.

Barry stepped through and gave a groggy smile. “I’ll stay until you go back to sleep. If it’s still storming in the morning and you’re still scared, I can come back then.”

“Don’t you have work?”

“Don’t you have class?”

“Fair enough.”

Sigfriede arranged her pillows and pulled out her extra blankets. In ten minutes she was curled up in a fluffy pile, sat in her dad’s lap like a two-year-old, sipping tea and trying to ignore the thunder.

“This is stupid,” she muttered.

“It’s not stupid, Baby Bean,” Barry said. “It’s ok. You’re allowed to be afraid of things after what’s happened to you.”

Sigfriede sipped her tea and closed her eyes. “Yeah, but I’m a full-grown adult sitting in my dad’s lap like a five-year-old.”

“I could go home, if you want.”

Sigfriede wrapped her arms around Barry’s neck.

“That’s what I thought.”

Not long after that, Barry launched into sleepily telling her stories about his own fears. He talked about how he was scared of the dark when her mom was missing. He talked about how he couldn’t swim at one point and feared ear infections. He told her about how one day, he couldn’t remember her mother’s face; he talked about the fear in his chest and the fuzziness of his brain. Barry always felt he was a sharp minded man. He had his wits about him at all times. In that moment, when he
could no longer remember names or faces, or feelings, how to cry, how to laugh, how to be confident, how to love, when his brain became dull in a moment’s life span, was when he was most afraid. Not because he was losing it, he had a way to find it; but because that was the first time in decades that he’d felt truly selfish.

“I’ve told you about the cycle of judges, right?” he asked.

Sigfriede hummed and put her mug down.

“They,” he yawned. “They accused all of us of some harsh things, however true they may be. It hurt at first, but… nothing that came from their mouths hurt as much as feeling selfish for a moment…”

There was no reply.

“Bean?”

Barry glanced down at his daughter’s face.

Her eyes were shut. Her mouth hung open slightly. A pool of drool was forming on Barry’s chest. He smiled and chuckled, kissing her cheek gently. He moved slowly as to not stir her much, then laid her head against her favorite pillow. A whine escaped her lips, and she half reached for his fingers. Barry let her fingers grip his as he took a seat on the edge of her dorm bed. He held his head in his free hand until he felt she’d fallen back into a deep enough sleep, holding his glasses to his nose with the butt of his palm. Then he reached for his scythe one more time and went home.

When Sigfriede finally dropped out and moved her things from the dorm, Kophyn decided to hang out in the lobby.

“Damn,” he stepped up beside Siggy as she cared a box out. “So sad to see you leave, Bluejeans.”

“Just because you know my real names doesn’t mean you get to use them in a dickish condescending tone, Kophyn.”

“You know,” he smiled and waved at Taako as they walked by. “This is definitely gonna hit the press soon. They’ve started doing that twenty-four-hour news reel thing since the resurgence of sorcerers like you from the magic plague—”

Sigfriede coughed, “The what?”

“Oh, we learned about that in a class you missed last year. I’m almost graduated now, by the way. It’s fantastic. But, uh, yeah,” he gave a tight, cold smile as they exited the stairwell to the main lobby. “All day news coverage. They need things to fill that time. Oh, man, I can see it now; it’s so sad: Sigfriede Holly, Niece of Taako Taaco, Drops Out for Second Time; Seven Birds Struggle To Find Her Work.”

Sigfriede turned and dropped the box on his toes to open the front door. “Sounds fake. Maybe that’s why you’re so shit at being a bard. No natural charisma. Or maybe its that shitty ivory wand you use. Everyone knows bards don’t use wands.” She picked up the box and left.

“It’s not a wand,” Kophyn muttered as she walked to Magnus’s caravan. “It’s a flute made to look like a wand. Uncultured bitch…”
I'M SO SORRY FOR UPDATING LATE I HAVE SO MANY THINGS GOING ON. But it's here, and that's what's important. Thank you guys for tuning in for this chapter! It's a long one, but that's because we had a lot to cover. Soon, we'll get the big ball rolling and plot will unfold!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing this fic and putting up with three different versions of this chapter. Go give her some love! I'll see you guys next THURSDAY for sure!! :)}
CHAPTER THIRTEEN--DETOURS

Chapter Summary

After her struggle to recover smoothly from her electrocution, Sigfriede desperately looks for something to keep her busy. After some patience and reconsideration, she leaves behind the idea that the only way for her to get the job she wants was to get a degree. Perhaps some career detours are in order. Sigfriede looks for an unconventional path to what she wants. Lucretia keeps her nose out of personal matters. Lucas Miller forgets a key point in the invention process.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN—DETOURS

“Well,” Sigfriede’s doctor smiled at her and sat on his stool in front of her. “As usual, Miss Bluejeans, consider yourself lucky you survived this.”

Sigfriede tried not to roll her eyes and smiled instead.

“Your scans came back the same as the last ones. Nerve damage along the scars, but otherwise fine. How’s your pain management?”

“It’s getting better,” she said. “I don’t wake up in pain anymore. Its usually just flair ups.”

“Do the emergency pills help?”

She nodded.

“Alright. Is there anything you can think of to make this coping easier on you? Any other issues you’ve run into… anxiety issues? You mentioned that at the beginning of the appointment.”

“Oh,” Sigfriede sniffed and rubbed the tip of her ear. She’d picked that up as a nervous tick from… somewhere in her childhood. She couldn’t remember where. “Uh, yeah. Sometimes, when the flair ups happen, I just… I dunno, it just makes me anxious. I’m scared I can’t do things anymore. Thunderstorms make me uncomfortable.”

“Does it send you into panic attacks?”

“Sometimes.”

“Alright…” The doctor wrote some things down and smiled back up at her. “If that’s all, I’ll send in a refill for your pain medication and we’ll start trying some anxiety medication, does that sound all right?”

She nodded. “Thank you.”
“No worries. See you around.”

The door was shut, and Sigfriede sighed. She gathered her coat in her arms and slung it over her back. The elevator took her to the ground floor, and Sigfriede took herself home.

“I just gotta find something to do,“

Sigfriede sat on the counter as her mom flipped through a book. Lup’s short hair hung at her jaw with one side tucked neatly behind her long ear. She’d taken out all her extra piercings. It was a lazy day in the house; a weekend.

“I’m just bored out of my mind,” Sigfriede continued. “You know?”

“The tavern down the street is hiring,” Lup offered.

“Yeah, and they’ll stay hiring because if one drunk asshole touches me, I’m decking them.”

Lup smiled and chuckled. “Maybe Magnus needs some fulltime help.”

“Maybe…”

Sigfriede stood up on the counter to open the cabinet and pull down a water glass. Then she hopped down and filled the glass.

“Do you think Lucretia’s hiring interns?”

“Still thinking about that?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t.”

“Why don’t you call her and ask, baby?”

The paperwork was the longest part. Moving was the hardest. The closest base to her parent’s apartment was too expensive to commute, but too far to walk. Barry and Lup helped her find a decent apartment with reasonable rent. Lup said, when she was little, she and Taako had heard of an elven tradition that when an elf child declared themselves an adult, it was common for the family to give them everything they needed to start living independently. That included a house and furniture. Sigfriede went along with it.

She’d landed a year long internship with the Bureau’s Internal Affairs department by the time she was twenty-two. Since the Bureau’s expansion after Story and Song, surface side bases were built in large cities and towns. They allowed field employees a safe and secure place to check in and replenish their supplies. Paperwork could be filed and sent up to the moon base. Faster transport, around the world and to the moon, was also available at certain bases. Since Neverwinter was a large, important city, the base there was how Sigfriede got to work every day. It was how she got home every day. It created a routine for her that she could plan her medication around, gave her new things to research and books to read. She found ways to learn to play instruments. First, she tried the violin, but it made her fingers bleed too much. Then she decided she’d pick up piano again. Everyone always said she played really well when she was in school.

One day, when she had a day off, Sigfriede visited Eva and Cashmere. In a moment of free time,
when her cousins, now sixteen, decided to go off and do something by themselves, Sigfriede decided to visit the music room in Taako’s house. She found the piano and started stringing together half-hearted chords.

“I never knew you played the piano!” Cashmere sat next to Sigfriede on the bench.

Sigfriede’s fingers jumped. She looked at her side and gave a weak smile.

“I never really played a lot,” she said. “I mostly just threw together lazy chords when I was bored in college.”

“Can you show me?”

“I… I guess? Why, though? You’re the one who wants to be a bard.”


Sigfriede sighed. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to show Cashmere that she could play, just rather that she was insecure. A lot of people told her she could be a bard if she wanted to. If her cousin was one, then why would she even try? Who was to say her wild magic wouldn’t ruin her songs?

Something strange about how the universe changed after Story and Song is that people are born knowing songs. Not just the Song, but their own songs. Not everyone can express them; most of them just stay in the back of most people’s heads and die there. Some people let out half chords and mini choruses of them out when they hum or learn an instrument for school band. Bards never finish theirs. People who were supposed to be bards struggle to get theirs out on paper. People who could be bards but don’t understand their magic played their songs for fun. Sigfriede fell into the latter category.

Sigfriede’s songs and chords changed with her confidence. When she was little, and her dad would play with her, they were playful and happy; the two would bounce off of each other, having conversations in measures. Through school, they’d wain and waver, curious and missing something. When she was in college, they were brave, loud, ambitious. She hadn’t played since she left the hospital.

Her song changed. She didn’t use the higher pitched keys. The notes drug on and held out, waiting or searching for a step up that never came. They formed a waltz, longing and melancholy. It held a weight to it, stumbling and slipping. Some of the notes she hit were off key, or sloppy. They bounced and flopped to the ground like slime. Images of inky black tendrils dripping and seeping from the sky to the ground filled her brain. She felt consumed by it; incomplete, drained, hungry. Not even hungry in the sense of food. She felt a craving for… something. Knowledge? Power? Normalcy? She couldn’t tell the difference between the three, but she did know that there were holes. There were holes, and they needed to be filled, but she didn’t have all the answers to fill them. It made Sigfriede want to sob.

The keys shifted again, making a petite waltz. No, petite wasn’t the right word. Petite was small, but strong. Petite was a kind of beautiful. This was meek, thin and sickly. It felt like fog. The kind of fog that crept over untamed forests and hid sea hags. It hid something in whispers and dissonance. It crept and seeped, falling from air vents and window panes. It flooded the floors with sticky wisps and slithering strings. But the floor wasn’t enough. Soon the whispers turned to dry cries that filled the air and lifted the fog. It never cleared, though. The fog rose with the cries, cocooning around Sigfriede’s ankles, legs and wrists. It rushed past her ears and made her hair float on edge. It became hard to breathe. There was more fog in her lungs than oxygen, and it stung. It pierced the tissues of her organs, glued her lips shut and clung to her brain.
Then Sigfriede lost her train of thought. The song stopped abruptly.

Cashmere smiled. “That was pretty.”

Sigfriede blinked. “Thanks.”

“You could be a bard if you wanted, Siggy.”

“I know,” she gave her cousin a small smile. “I could be a lot of things if I wanted, Cash.”

“So, that hurricane that blew through the east coast of Faerun has passed through,” Sigfriede walked after Lucretia. “The disaster relief programs filed their papers to send out relief teams. They’ve got, uh… three different teams they think would work well, but they’ve noted all of the teams are short on funds. And Internal Affairs told me to tell you that Social Conduct and International Relations are at ‘it’ again; they can’t decide on how to handle the issue between the drow and dwarves in Abburth. Social Conduct says that they just need someone to come in and be a mediator, but International Relations thinks it’s too far gone and we have to worry about another war breaking out…” she stopped in her tracks and flipped through some papers. “Another?”

Lucretia opened the door to her office and motioned Sigfriede in. “I don’t really know a lot about that. The only wars I’ve witnessed here were something of, uh… my own involvement.”

Siggy nodded and followed in after her. “Well… I’ve only really met two drow. I can’t give much advice on this one.”

“That’s not your job, Siggy. Don’t worry about giving me advice.”

Lucretia sat at her desk, and Sigfriede stopped just in front of it.

“Sit down, Siggy.”

“Why? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing. I never said you could go home. You’re still on the clock.”

“Oh.” Sigfriede took a seat.

“What else?”

“Oh, uh… that’s it. Slow day.”

Lucretia nodded. “How do you like it here?”

“I think the moon is cool.”

“And being an intern?”

Siggy inhaled and looked around. “It’s… fun. I get a lot of dirt on people. I just wish I got to see more things.”

Lucretia hummed and nodded. “Do you think you’ll go back to school when your internship runs out?”

“No,” Sigfriede spoke sharply and shook her head. “No, I don’t want too. Its too dangerous for
me.”

“School?”

“Magic.”

“I see…” Lucretia thought for a moment, then smiled. “You said you wanted to see more things?” Sigfriede nodded.

“Do you have a uniform?”

“Interns aren’t given uniforms, Lucretia.”

“I’ll have you fitted for one. There’s a convention in Gold Cliff for research facilities and humanitarian groups. The Bureau counts as both, so we’ve got a ticket in. It’s an annual thing; researchers show the new stuff they’ve got, humanitarian groups use it in their work. I figured it would give you something to do in your last few months.”

“You mean paperwork for whatever new shiny toys you add in?”

“No. I want you to take something home.”

Sigfriede raised an eyebrow. “So.. I’m in?”

“Oh, you’re knee deep in.”

The uniform was, if Sigfriede was being honest, very, very uncomfortable. The sleeves were skin tight and cuffed around her wrists. The collar reached just under her chin and buttoned in place. The shirt closed over her torso like a trench coat, with one side laying over the other and buttoning on the left side of her chest. She had the choice of a pencil skirt or dress pants. The pants were high waisted and made her look taller, so she went with those. The trim and embroidered symbol over her breast were white, so she found a pair of white flats and went with that. She slicked her blonde waves back into a low bun and curled her wispies. Before she left for the base down the road, she planted a kiss on one of the family photos she had by her door. Then she bolted down the street.

“Now, Sigfriede, listen to me.” Lucretia handed Siggy her access pass on a lanyard. “You’re still an intern, so you’re going to have to act like it. I know I let you get away with… lots of shit on the base, but this isn’t the base, ok?”

“I’m twenty-three, Grandma, stop babying me.”

“I’m not babying you; that would be unprofessional. I’m your boss right now, so I’m bossing you.”

“Cause that sounds so much better…”

“I’ve got meetings to be at, so your job for today is to go around and find some interesting equipment you think the different departments could use, yeah? I want you to have a report of everything you find on my desk by tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning?! When am I supposed to sleep?!”
“You don’t,” Lucretia smiled. “We’ve known this for years, Sigfriede. You get it from your dad.”

She turned a corner and left Siggy to her own devices.

Siggy grinned and grabbed a map.

At one point, she got sensory overload. She made a mad dash for the concessions, bought a bottle of water, and excused herself to the bathroom. She made a point to take her anxiety medicine first, then decided she wouldn’t leave her stall until she could breathe again and had finished her water. Once she was calm again, she headed back out.

The first thing that caught her eye when she exited the bathrooms was a large crowd at one of the kiosks. Lots of people meant that there must have been something worth attention. She made her way over and pushed her way to the front.

Then she instantly regretted it. Stood in front of her, brandishing something that looked like a demented baseball bat with a handle, was Lucas Miller.

“You,” she sneered.

“Huh?” Lucas looked around and met Sigfriede’s eyes. “Sorry, have we met?”

“Yeah, I’m Barry Bluejeans’ daughter,” she stuck out her hand. “You can call me Holly.”

“Oh, Sigfriede…” he put the item down. He didn’t take her hand. “You’ve got these, uh… I didn’t recognize you. I suppose it’s been a while, huh?”

“Yeah, school does that. What’s this dumb metal thing you got here?”

“Oh, this!” Lucas broke out in a smile. “This is a pistol. It’s a type of new weapon I’ve been researching and building. They use a chemical combination of sulfur, charcoal, and potassium—”

“Yeah, you’re losing me, homie. What do they do?”

“Well, the sulfur and charcoal mixture, that I call gunpowder, goes in this little compartment,” he pointed to an opening at the top of the barrel. “And when I pull this trigger down here with my finger, a lever hits the powder and sparks a small explosion—”

Sigfriede’s jaw dropped. “It explodes in your hand?”

“Yes! Well, no—it’s a controlled small explosion. It happens inside the weapon. Your hand is safe. When the explosion goes off, it builds pressure in the barrel, and that pressure shoots one of these little guys out the opening in front.” Miller held up a tiny metal torpedo. “This is called a bullet.”

“So, how is it a weapon? How does it hurt people? Can I throw it?”

“Well… I guess if you wanted to. That wouldn’t be smart, though.”

“Never said it was.”

“Uh… the damage comes in after the bullets been shot out of the pistol barrel. The explosion from the gunpowder builds up a lot of pressure, like I said, and high amounts of pressure in a small area can send something with little mass flying through the air at extremely high velocities! So high, in fact, that if a living person is in the projectile path of the bullet, it could pierce their skin and even
potentially their organs.”

“Woah… That’s… kinda cool.”

“It really is! It’s chemistry and physics and biology all at once!”

“You lost me again. Are they magic?”

“Nope! Complete items of science and mechanics. No magic required. I wanted these to be for anyone.”

“How much do they cost? Are they easy to make? Are they reliable?”

“Oh, well… Not really. These are just prototypes. Most of the time, they misfire and the explosion of gunpowder gets out of control or goes off late. Sometimes it doesn’t go off at all and the pistol jams. They’re expensive to make because they have so many tiny, delicate moving parts. It’s hard to unjam them in a small amount of time and sometimes rushing to unjam them completely ruins them…”

“Oh…” Sigfriede bit her lip and looked at the different models he had laid out on his table. Then she inhaled and tried for a smile. “Intriguing. Good luck with it, dude.”

She made her way to the side of the crowd. Really, these pistol things sounded interesting. They weren’t magic, but they appeared to be ranged like it. They were controlled, predictable, and fixable. Even if they did misfire and get jammed, at least they didn’t have repercussions as big as her wild magic surges. And besides, Sigfriede was a smart girl; she could figure out how to make those things work on her own if she wanted to. And even if she couldn’t, her dad would probably help her. He loved messing with stuff like that…

Sigfriede stood at the edge of the crowd and watched Lucas perform a few demos. None of them misfired. But the things were loud. They sounded like miniature thunder clouds. The claps they made echoed through the convention room for a few seconds before fading. Sure enough, when the bullets made contact with the target in front of Miller, they imbedded themselves inside. Tiny holes littered the surface. Lucas turned around and blew the smoke bellowing out from the barrel. Oh, yes. Sigfriede wanted one of those.

She waited until Lucas was distracted. Then she pushed her way to the front again. Not all the way to the front, but behind just one or two people. Sigfriede bided her time, biting her lip and watching those around her. A few brief moments came where she could have snatched one up and bolted for it. But they happened too quickly, and Sigfriede really didn’t want to have to get into it with Lucas. So, she waited for the right moment, the moment when her side of the table was unwatched; then she reached out, picked up a reasonably sized pistol, slipped it into her bag, and walked off.

Mission accomplished. Now she just had to fake a report for Lucretia.

Barry picked up his stone of farspeech. “Hello?”

“Dad!”

“Siggy! What’s going on, Bean?”

“Not a whole lot. Just working on a little project for Lucretia.”
“What is it?”

“Nothing really big. Just a new kind of toy or somethin’. Some small stuff, you know? Hey, do you or mom have some tools I could use for small little machines?”

“Uhm… like what?”

“Oh, gosh, I don’t know. I’d think something like what you’d use to fix a watch or a music box or something.”

“Oh, you mean tinker’s tools?”

Sigfriede paused. “Sure?”

“I think I may have a small little set somewhere around here. Unless it got left on the Starblaster…”

Siggy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you would leave them there. Just jumpin’ off the deck like that. How irresponsible of you, Dad.”

“Oh huh,” Barry smiled. “I’ll look around for them and see if I can get them to you. And if not, they shouldn’t be too expensive; I’ll just get you your own set if we need to. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds like a plan! Thanks, Dad.”

“No problem, Siggy. I’ll tell Lup you said hi.”

A few days later, Sigfriede had acquired a set of tinker’s tools and picked the pistol apart. With this newfound fountain of information and opportunity, she asked for an extension on her report. By the end of the week, she knew the ins, outs, ups, downs, lefts, and rights of her new toy. By Saturday, a fully printed out, laminated, bound information report was on Lucretia’s desk along with an official Bureau employment application, and Sigfriede visited Magnus’s cabin.

Magnus coughed and gave a tight smile. “Bean, I know nothing about this. Why don’t you just ask Lucas to teach you how they work?”

“Oh, Magnus?” Sigfriede placed her fire arm on the table gently. She couldn’t remember if she’d loaded the gunpowder before she left her home. “Two things: one, Lucas is a dumb bitch who can’t teach for shit. Two, he doesn’t know I have this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I fuckin’—” Sigfriede twisted a curl through her fingers nervously. “Uncle Magnus, I straight up stole this from him.”

Magnus blinked. “Siggy, you can’t steal from people.”

“Listen, you said you’d teach me to be a fighter, and this is the closest I’m going to get. If you can at least teach me how not to fall on my ass when I fire this thing, I’ll owe you my life.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t use ranged weapons. I’m not a versatile adventurer. I do one thing really, really well.”

“Uncle Mags, I’m not asking you to fuckin’… just teach me how to stand with strength and I’ll go home and never talk about this again.”
“Except you won’t, because that’s what you do.”

“Magnus—”

“But! Because you’re my niece, and I love you, and I can definitely teach you how to stand firmly, I’ll do it.”

“You’re not locking your knees.”

“Knees don’t have keys Magnus, fuck off!”

“Sigfriede, lose the attitude or you’re gonna shoot your eye out.”

“Good! Maybe then my parents will get off my dick about wearing my glasses… I don’t even know where they are anymore…”

Magnus took the pistol from Sigfriede’s hand. “You still haven’t been fitted for contacts?”

“It’s too expensive…”

“Sigfriede, if you need money—”

“I know, I know! I just feel bad asking for it.”

He paused and thought for a moment. “How are you hitting the bullseye if you can’t see? You’re near sighted, right?”

Sigfriede shrugged. “Same way I can still tell how big Taako’s living room is; my brain’s just gotten used to it.”

Magnus raised an eyebrow and took a closer look at the target. Then he looked back at Sigfriede, and shuffled so he was behind her.

“You’re shooting at an angle,” he said. “Aren’t you supposed to be shooting from straight across from the target?”


“Yeah, but…” He took another look at the target. “Maybe you should go find your glasses, Siggy.”

“No. I’ll break them if this thing explodes in my hands. I’d rather find a way to have my prescription fitted to the gun than break another pair of glasses. Dad would kick my ass.”

“Oh. That’s fair…” He raised the pistol and took a closer look at it. “Show me where the viewfinder is, again?”

“Well,” Sigfriede turned and took it from his hands. “There really isn’t one. I just kinda…” she turned and faced the target. “I just look down the top of it, kinda like how you look down a wand.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“Okay, you’ve held a sword before, right?”

“I’m better with an ax.”
“So, imagine if you were holding that ax straight out at eye level, blade down.”

“Okay…”

“Now turn the blade so the sharp end points up.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Now look down the edge of the blade. That’s what I do to aim the gun.”

“Ohhhh. But that doesn’t explain why you shoot at an angle.”

She shrugged. “My right eye is stronger than my left eye. So, when I close my left eye, the image shifts a bit and I miss the target completely if I don’t adjust my stance.”

“Wouldn’t the image shift if you closed your right eye, since the left is weaker?”

“I never said my right eye was good, just that it was stronger.”

“You’re still near sighted, though.”

“Suck my dick, Magnus.”

She took another shot and hit the center without falling on her ass again.

The next week, Sigfriede ordered a small circular prescription lens for her pistol. She spent her Saturday out shopping for little metal bits and bobs that she could tinker with and attach to it, as well. Then she found a way to weld the base of the piece to the side of the pistol barrel and secure the lens in place. It looked a little dinky by the end of it, since the viewfinder stuck up a bit from the gun, but when she returned to Magnus’s house for more training, her shots got closer and closer together. When she closed her left eye to take aim, the image shifted less. She could see the limits of each ring clearer. Needless to say, she was happy with her modification.

But, once Magnus had her running around and firing in motion, as if in combat, Sigfriede quickly found herself out of breath and tired.

“You’re out of shape,” he said. “You need some strength and endurance training.”

“You’re not turning me into a fighter, Uncle Magnus.”

“Well if you’re not a fighter, and you’re not a wizard, and you refuse to go back to school for sorcerer training, what are you gonna do when Lucretia hires you onto the Bureau and sends you on field missions?”

Sigfriede perked up. “She told you she’s hiring me?”

“She told me you put in an application. Get up, I’m teaching you how to punch someone.”

Magnus beat the shit out of his niece.

Not literally, he knew if he sent Sigfriede home with too many big bruises Lup and Barry would find out, and he’d spend the rest of the eternity in the stockade. So, he never actually hit her. They
used a tap out system; each person was allotted a certain number of taps before they were “knocked out”. Magnus got her every single time.

Granted, it may have been a little unfair, since Siggy was untrained and unaware of her body. But when Magnus stood up for that dog, or when he trained with the power bear, that wasn’t fair either.

“Out!” Magnus pinned Sigfriede’s arm behind her back. “Knocked out. Take a breather.”

Sigfriede yanked her arm away and huffed angrily. “This is stu—”

“Sigfriede, stop saying things are stupid. You’re taking on a defeatist attitude.”

“No, I’m not! This is so unfair!”

“Go get a glass of water and we’ll talk it out, okay?”

Sigfriede stood in place, rubbing her shoulder, then she huffed and walked to the house. She returned a few moments later with two glasses of water. She handed one to Magnus and sat in the grass.

Magnus joined her. “Hey, Bean?”

“Hmm?” She didn’t meet his eyes.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad.”

Sigfriede rubbed the tip of her ear. “You’re bad at it.”

“You know,” Magnus inhaled sharply. “One time, when I was little, I found this dog surrounded by these big, buff, tough kids—”

“You’ve told me this before, Uncle Magnus.”

“And I got my ass handed to me on a silver platter. Ten, fifteen years later, I’m stuck on this ship, right? And there’s six other weird ass people on it with me, and we don’t know each other well, and we just had this weird ass night with bar fights, no sleep… everything. It was a shitty day at work the next day. You know why?”

She still wouldn’t look him in the face. “The Hunger.”

“Exactly. We all stood there, on the deck of this weird ass ship, watching people die. Like, my mom was there. My dad was there. That dog, hopefully, was still there. All of these things that happened to me to make me want to protect people were just gone. Then, we try to go back home, but we find ourselves on this strange new planet where people didn’t exist, and I hear about this fucking bear.”

“I know, Magnus—”

“It wasn’t fair when I trained with him either. It was like the dog all over again. I got my ass served to me deep fried, oven baked, pan fried, defrosted, raw—”

“That sounds awful.”

“And it was! It was terrible. I mean, that bear beat the shit out of me. He dislocated my shoulder at one point. We spent weeks and weeks and weeks of the same thing every single day. I’d walk into the cave, he’d tell me to ask for help when I needed it, we’d start fighting, and I’d never listen to
him. I wanted to prove that I was strong enough on my own. It wasn’t until the end of the year when I learned that strength comes from a lot of different places. I had to learn the hard way. I think you’re like me with that; needing to learn the hard way.”

Sigfriede took a drink. “So, what do I need to learn here?”

“Nothing big. You just don’t know what your limbs are doing ever. I know you don’t want to be a fighter, and that’s ok. But if you’re serious about this… pistol, gun, explosive thing, you need to be aware of yourself at all times. You said it yourself, this thing could explode in your hands and you never know when it’s gonna happen. So, to avoid you shooting your eye out, you need to know where your eyes are, and where your hands are, and were your fingers and elbows and knees and ankles and all of that stuff is. Even as a magic user. The only reason Taako could pull off the amazing stuff he did was because he’s aware. He’s smarter than he lets on, we all know that. Has anyone told you about what he did in Wonderland?”

“No,” she shook her head.

“Well, without telling too much, ’cause I don’t know his boundaries around all that hot mess, but he wouldn’t have saved my life had he not been so on top of things. He was aware of himself, what he could do, and all of the things around him. You’ve got a lot you can do, Siggy. You’re a smart girl; you’ve just got to know what you’re doing when you use it.”

There was a hum, then a tongue click. Sigfriede looked up with a tight grin, “One more round?”

Sigfriede dug her knee between Magnus’s shoulder blades and pressed his face to the dirt.

“Out!” She smiled and laughed, catching her breath. “One more?”

“Lemme up, Siggy, I’m too old for this!”

“One more?”

“Sigfriede!”

She got up and bounced on the balls of her feet.

Magnus stood and swung his arms, grunting and panting.

“So,” she tied her hair in a knot at the back of her head. “One more?”

“Nah,” he waved her off. “It’s late. You’re getting it. We can regroup tomorrow, yeah?”

Siggy’s smile wavered. “What? No, I got work tomorrow. Lucretia’s got me working with all these different departments and stuff… One more round, please. I feel so much better about this. One more time. Please.”

There was a pause. And Magnus looked her in the eyes. His eyebrows furrowed.

Then he exhaled and cracked his neck. “Fine. But then you go home and you sleep, understand?”

“Deal!”

Chapter End Notes
Again, I'm so sorry for posting this late. Finals just ended and I'm visiting home for a couple weeks, which means catching up with friends. I've been SUPER busy, so I'm so sorry for being off the roll lately. Additionally, my beta, Dana, lives across the world, so when I finish one semester, she starts hers. It's just Hell Time.

Anyway, things will get better, soon! Thank you guys for sticking with me, and I'll see you some time around Thursday next week. Thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for betaing and letting me include her wonderful OCs Eva and Cashmere!
CHAPTER FOUR-- THE FINAL DESTINATION, THE CLOUDS HAVE GATHERED

Chapter Summary

Sigfriede makes herself at home on the moon base of the Bureau of Benevolence. She starts her employment with paperwork, official uniforms, and three very... special blasts from the past. Kophyn pokes a sore spot. Mavis keeps a forgotten promise. Random stands still for once.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN—THE FINAL DESTINATION, THE CLOUDS HAVE GATHERED

When Sigfriede first got confirmation she’d been hired on as a Bureau of Benevolence employee, not just an intern, she immediately called everyone in the family.

Well, everyone besides Taako.

Sigfriede didn’t know what people thought her perception of family tensions was, but there was no easy way to cover up the fact that Taako hated Lucretia, and Sigfriede had put herself in the middle of it. Unwittingly, of course; she had no intentions of making things worse between them or taking on responsibility for an issue that wasn’t hers. The first time she really pieced things together was after the first fight she ever had with Taako. She’d brought up that she was thinking about working for the Bureau, he’d brushed it off, and she’d pried a little too hard. Then little things meant more when Sigfriede started to pay attention; Lucretia never asked Taako to pass her something at the table; Taako busied himself with something else when Lucretia entered his home; they never made eye contact; Lup sat between them any time they came close; Taako never wore blue; Lucretia never wore red. By the time she’d decided to drop out of school and go straight into the workforce after her lightning strike, tensions about her choices were too high and it was too late for Sigfriede to really back out or find a different place to work.

Not that she really wanted to find a different place to work. Her intentions had always been to find the company that allowed her the biggest chance to help the most people possible. When she’d gathered all of her research and data, she gave each contender a fair, unbiased, equal opportunity. She compared salaries, international connections, interesting programs and departments, longevity opportunities, possible positions, and anything else she could think to compare and contrast. In the end, regardless of family connections or tensions, while the Bureau didn’t necessarily pay the best at the beginning, there was a lot of promotional opportunity with raising salary, paid leave and vacation with the widest reach to the most diverse people on the planet. It was just what Sigfriede wanted to do. And at the end of the day, after break downs and panic attacks, her mother and father always told her to do what she wanted; what she felt was best for her regardless of the backlash or conflict, so long as no one was being seriously hurt.

So, no. Sigfriede didn’t think the best way to tell her uncle she’d decided to work in the place he despised was on a stone of farspeech call by herself. She at least needed her mom there for help.
Either way, she moved from her dingy apartment surface side to a dorm on the moon base and started training. It was a month-long program that tested you on the skills in the abilities you reported in your resume. Then, once you passed your exams and were placed in your department, you were given a uniform, with your name embroidered under the Bureau logo, and quickly matched up with a team of other people from different departments.

Sigfriede got so wrapped up in her work as an intern and her training as an employee, she forgot how long it had been since she was in school. Being in a large group of people with all different talents and skills reminded her of when she used magic. She watched in bittersweet awe during her breaks from target practice as wizards and clerics slung spells and cantrips with ease. They all manifested in different ways that, when Sigfriede paid special attention, reflected important parts of a person’s personality. There was one person in particular, perhaps another half elf, who specialized in magic dealing with storms and weather.

She wondered what that said about her when her magic manifested as lightning.

One day, while she was cleaning her small room and humming to herself, Sigfriede was called to the Director’s office. She was escorted by one guard who didn’t talk much. When Siggy asked what she was going to the Director’s office for, he gave her side eye and said nothing. Then she was dropped off inside the dome, right in front of the door to the office, alone. Shortly after that, the door opened, and another guard ushered her in.

Sigfriede had never been in the formal public office that Lucretia had. She’d hear stories from Magnus and Merle about the ornate columns, the clean walls lined with bookshelves and pedestals, the big rug designating where employees were to stand, all of the paintings and tapestries, and the large, crisp throne sat on top of a central dais. Curtains hung from a tall curtain rod on the right side of the room, just beside the dais. On the other side, there was a closed door that almost blended into the wall. When she’d heard about the revamp the Bureau went under after Story and Song, Sigfriede figured the throne room nature of it would have been done with. But walking in and soaking in the different author names, colors and textures, she couldn’t imagine the Bureau existing without it. It just felt… right. Calm, wise, and prepared. The written world was all at the Directors fingertips, and all you had to do to have that world at your fingertips, too, was just ask.

Probably.

“Sigfriede,” a warm, regal, familiar voice said on the other side of the room. “Come grab a seat, dear, I’m just finalizing this report and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Lucretia sat in her throne, trying her hardest to hide the coy, knowing smile Sigfriede had seen so many times before in her life. It was strange, seeing her in her Director regalia. She seemed taller, if that was possible. Her robe rested over her shoulders and curled around her legs like a waterfall, decorated with shimmering embroidery of shapes that Sigfriede couldn’t tell what they were; they shifted from water cascading over rocks to flower petals falling from trees to lightning reaching and stretching across the curvature of the earth. Sigfriede liked the last image the best. Lucretia’s uniform had changed since the switch from Balance to Benevolence. Instead of a regal gown she now wore a similar uniform to the one Sigfriede wore; an asymmetrical button up with the Bureau’s symbol embroidered over her breast. High waisted pants buttoned over the shirt like Sigfriedes, but she could tell they were made of different material. Sigfriedes’ pants were more straight leg cut, stopping just at the ankles; Lucretia’s were made of a nicer, flowy-er material than Sigfriedes, wide legged and t-length. Her short-cropped silver hair gleamed almost blue, reflecting her robes and the tapestries hung around the room.
Sigfriede made it to the central dais and looked around. “Uh,” she said. “There aren’t any chairs.”

Lucretia looked up. Noticing the lack of seating, she smiled sheepishly. “No, there aren’t any, are there? Go ahead and just sit on the dais and I’ll take you to my personal office in a moment.”

She sat on the step and crossed her legs. Then she turned to stare at Lucretia.

“What?” Lucretia said.

“What are you doing?”

“Work.”

“I see.”

A few moments later, Lucretia put down her pen, placed the papers in a folder, and stood up.

“Follow me,” she said.

Sigfriede did as she was told.

Lucretia took her niece to the door off the side of the dais. The door led them down a hallway, which led to another set of doors, which, after Lucretia cast a quick spell Sigfriede had never seen before, led to a shorter hallway, which led to one more door. That final door was unlocked, so Lucretia opened it and held it open for Sigfriede.

The office was simple, or at least simpler than the throne room-like office Sigfriede had just seen. There weren’t any columns, or tapestries, or big curtains. There certainly wasn’t a throne. But there were book cases filled with books that Sigfriede was more familiar with, books Lucretia had read to her when she was a child. And there was a desk that was sleek, simple, and tidy. One chair sat on either side of it, and Sigfriede took the seat closest to her. Lucretia sat behind the desk. She smiled warmly at Siggy, then folded her hands and inhaled.


Sigfriede grinned and nodded. “I thought I would. I wasn’t, like, too stressed about it, I guess.”

“You should know that I wasn’t the only person who saw your application. The director of the department you applied for had to look at your resume as well. Let’s see, you applied for the Natural Disaster Relief department, yes?”

Sigfriede nodded.

“You should know that I wasn’t the only person who saw your application. The director of the department you applied for had to look at your resume as well. Let’s see, you applied for the Natural Disaster Relief department, yes?”

Sigfriede nodded.

“Then I believe Miss Cilia Bophill reviewed your application as well,” Lucretia winked. “She likes to see potential in people; lovely woman. Your little mechanical discovery at the convention probably didn’t hurt.”

“Oh! You mean the guns!” Sigfriede’s face lit up and she sat up straight. “I’ve been working on them for a while! I’ve got this thing that Dad’s called a viewfinder in it. Or, well, I guess on it. It’s a little welded piece of metal that sticks up from it and has my prescription in it—”

Lucretia held up a hand. “Sigfriede, I’m going to stop you right there.”

She faltered. Her voice fell, and her jaw hung. The only times she’d been cut off like that was when she was in trouble. Sigfriede shut her mouth and cleared her throat. Once she’d recollected herself, she looked Lucretia in the eyes. “Sorry,” she muttered.
“You’re alright,” Lucretia said. “That’s actually what I called you in here to talk about. You’re not in trouble, but I want to explain something to you so that you stay out of it. Siggy, you’re an official Bureau employee now. There’s a lot of legality and red tape involved with that, especially since you’re a family member, and especially with this, uh… fame thing we’ve got going on. Everyone is watching me specifically to see what direction I’m taking the Bureau in. Once this became the Bureau of Benevolence, it became an organization for everybody, not just the select few close to me who already knew things no one else did. Me hiring on my niece is a sticky subject for the public, and I would never want to force issues that are my own onto you, understand?”

Sigfriede nodded slowly.

“And I know Taako is probably upset with you for this—”

“He doesn’t know.”

It was Lucretia’s turn to falter. “He doesn’t?”

“Mom and I haven’t had a good time to tell him, and I’m scared to tell him alone.”

Lucretia hummed. “Would… it make you feel better if I helped you with that?”

“No!” Sigfriede shook her head fervently. “You guys already have enough issues between you, and I didn’t apply here to create more. I want to work here to help people, not tear apart the family. The issues between you two are your own, and any issues that may arise between him and I are my own. I’m an adult now, I can handle this.”

There was a pause. Lucretia’s eyebrows furrowed, then she took a deep breath and seemed to move on. “Right. That’s fine. But, listen to me, okay sweetheart? Do me a favor while you’re here; as of today, I am now your boss. And because I’m your boss, I have to be that first before I can be your aunt. In a work environment I have to be everybody’s boss equally and fairly. I can’t tend to your issues first, or give you a raise first, or anything else first. I have to put you in line just like everyone else so it’s all fair. And this isn’t me… I dunno, punishing you or anything. It was different before because you were my intern, and interns are different from employees. But just know that if I cut you off for calling me Aunt Lucretia like you normally do, it’s because you’re on the clock as my employee and that means you have to call me by my title of Director just like everyone else, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

“Now, once you’re done for the day and offices are closed, that’s another matter. But anytime I call you in for missions, or whatever else and it’s clear that it’s a business matter—”

“Madam Director,” Sigfriede smiled. “I got it.”

“Or just Director is fine, that whole ‘madam’ thing was… not my brightest choice.”

Sigfriede smirked. “I know. When am I on the clock next?”

“Sigfriede, don’t think you can start playing games—”

“I’m not! When do I go on the clock?”

Lucretia sighed. “Every work day starts at eight a.m. local time and ends at five p.m. That’s when offices close. You can call me by my name then, okay?”
“Cool beans. Anything else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Sigfriede checked her watch and giggled. “Cool. See you later, Aunt Lucretia.”

“Technically this was a business meeting, Sigfriede,” she called after Siggy.

“Bye, Grandma!” Sigfriede was already out of the room.

The next string of days was filled with paperwork. At one point, Cilia Bophill, the woman Lucretia mentioned, called in Sigfriede to her office. She was a tiny halfling with bright red hair, a square face, and spunk to make up for her height. She introduced herself, gave Sigfriede a tour of the Natural Disaster Relief center, and finished off with having her fill out a personality questionnaire. Sigfriede had no idea what that was for. Then she was given an official Bureau of Benevolence Natural Disaster Relief uniform. It was similar to the uniform Lucretia gave her for the convention, but instead of just the Bureau logo with Sigfriede’s name, there was also her department name under the logo, but on top of her name. She started work the next day, which consisted of basic department training, meeting the rest of her higher ups, and filing for a team request, since Sigfriede wanted to work surface level.

One day, she was called from her desk to be escorted back to the throne room, in the same fashion as before; a single, quiet guard led her to the dome where she was dropped off in front of the throne room doors with a purple tiefling sitting on the floor, a tall, slender figure with silver hair and charcoal skin, and a very, very familiar dwarf.

“Mavis?” Sigfriede asked in shock.

Mavis Highchurch looked up from the book in her lap, adjusted her glasses, and smiled. “Sigfriede, holy shit!”

Mavis moved to hug her cousin, but Sigfriede stepped back and held out a finger. Her jaw dropped slightly.

“Siggy?” she asked.

Sigfriede raised an eyebrow. “Why are you here?”

“I… I work here?”

“Since when?”

“I just finished training.”

“Fuck off, no you didn’t! Why didn’t I see you?”

“I don’t know! Why didn’t I see you?”

“Because you’re short.”

“Oh, hush, you’re basically a tall dwarf.”

Another voice spoke up. “Well, well, Holly Taaco-Bluejeans. Fancy, seeing you here.”
Sigfriede winced. She whipped her head around and made eye contact with one of the people she disliked the most in her life. “Fuck… Kophyn.”

“The one and only. I take it you made it out of that… incident you caused fine.”

“I’m alive.”

“If a little scuffed up.”

“Didn’t we go through this at school?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You work here, too?”

“Sure.”

The wheels in Sigfriede’s mind started turning. She looked at Mavis, then at Kophyn, and back to Mavis. Then a very brief memory surfaced that included rocks, worms, and a tall purple figure that could run very, very fast. Siggy turned on her heel and glared at the tiefling sitting behind her. They were playing with the hem of their uniform shirt.

“Hey,” Sigfriede waved in the tiefling’s direction. “What’s your name? You wanna join the whole… meeting-the-party shebang we’ve got going on here?”

The tiefling’s head flew up. They had deep purple-black hair that was cropped neatly, with spiky bangs that hung between their horns. Their nose looked like it had been broken too many times. “Sorry,” they had a rough but feminine voice. “Uh, yeah. I’m Random. Random Fangbattle. I, uh… I work here, too.”

Sigfriede didn’t drop her glare.

Random’s eye contact wavered. “What?”

“Do I know you?”

“Not… not really, no. What’s your name?”

Siggy sniffed. “You’ll see,”

“Her name’s Sigfriede,” Mavis said.

“Mavis!”

“What? Everyone knows teams are being assigned this week, we might as well get the introductions out of the way now.”

Sigfriede sighed and rubbed her ears. “So why are you guys here? You get pulled out of your rooms, too?”

The both nodded.

“Random?”

“Yeah, I was having lunch with my moms.”

Sigfriede sighed and twisted a curl between her fingers. “Cool. Cool… this is just… cool. This is fine. I’m just surrounded by chances for Taako to find out I work here and then everything’s gonna
blow up in my face! I knew this was a bad idea. There’s no way he’s gonna let two of us stay here, Mavis. One of us is fucked!"

“Taako already knows I’m here, Siggy,” Mavis said.

“What?”

“Yeah, Dad told him. It’s not a big deal.”

Sigfriede couldn’t think of anything to say. She floundered for a moment, looking back and forth between the three people with her, before sighing and running her hands through her hair.

“Did he freak out?” she asked.

“Not really?” Mavis scratched her cheek. “He seemed tight lipped, but not upset. But then again, I’ve already gone out and learned all my druid stuff; I’m an adult. And even if I wasn’t, Taako’s always seen me as more of Merle’s responsibility than his.”

“This is bullshit.”

The door to the Director’s office opened, and another group of four walked out. They smiled at each other and laughed, exchanging contact information and making plans. Sigfriede stared at them as they passed, then looked back at Kophyn and sneered. If this was what she thought it was…

A guard walked out after the group, and motioned the four remaining people in. “The Director is ready for you,” she said formally.

Sigfriede pushed her way past Mavis and Kophyn into the throne room. She didn’t look back to see if they were following her, but she stopped in front of the dais and waited for them to catch up.

Lucretia stood in front of her throne. She gave Sigfriede an odd look, to which Sigfriede gave no verbal response or sign response; only strong eye contact and a tight grin. Then Mavis, Random and Kophyn made their way to the dais as well, and Lucretia inhaled sharply.

“Welcome,” Lucretia said. “I see the four of you made it here safely.”

“Madam Director,” Kophyn said. He used the voice Sigfriede had heard him use so many times to sweet talk his way into an A.

Sigfriede rolled her eyes and sneered at him over Mavis. “Stop kissing ass, dude.”

Mavis jabbed her in the hip. “Shut up, Sigfriede.”

Random groaned.

“I take it you’ve all made introductions,” Lucretia said. “Correct?”

“Uh,” Sigfriede sniffed and rubbed her nose. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“You could say more than that,” Kophyn said.

“Dude, shut the fuck up, seriously!”

“Sigfriede!” Mavis grabbed Sigfriede’s sleeve and tugged on it. “You’re gonna get us fired!”

“It’s not my fault Kophyn’s an ass kissing sucker!”
“Excuse me,” Lucretia spoke sharply. “Is there an issue I’m unaware of?”

Silence fell between the group. Sigfriede glared at Kophyn. Kophyn scratched his head and nearly knocked Mavis in the head with his elbow. Mavis adjusted her glasses and exhaled. Random spoke first.

“I want it known I didn’t start this,” she said.

Lucretia cleared her throat and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Let’s back up, yes?”

No one spoke.

“The four of you,” Lucretia continued, “were brought to my office today to introduce you to each other because the leaders of your departments and I thought you all would work very, very well together. As a team. However, upon further evaluation, if there are objections—”

“We’re fine,” Mavis interjected.

Lucretia glanced between the four of them. “Sigfriede?”

“Everything’s fine,” she signed.

Kohpyn scoffed. “What is that?”

“Guys,” Lucretia closed her eyes; she was losing patience here. “Seriously, I have other teams waiting—”

“No, seriously, what is that?” He reached over Mavis and tapped Sigfriede on the shoulder. “You expect us to understand what she’s saying?”

“Dickhead,” Sigfriede signed at him.

“Siggy, stop it, I swear to God!” Mavis reached up to grab her hands.

“No, no,” Kophyn side stepped the dwarf and tapped at Sigfriede again. “If she wants to take the piss in front of our boss, let her take the piss! She pulled this shit in college all the time; there’s a reason she dropped out.”

“Yeah,” Sigfriede whacked his hand away before he could tap her and twisted it behind his back. “Well, with how you kiss ass, looks like there’s a reason no one in your family liked you!”

Random started cracking up as soon as Kophyn bent over. She covered her mouth before shouting, “Don’t get blood on the carpet, guys, come on!”

“Holy Pan almighty,” Mavis muttered and threw her hands up. “Can I have a new team? I don’t think working with family is gonna work for me.”

Lucretia lost all patience. There was no reason for a fight to break out in her office, especially after making it a point to try and warn Sigfriede to stay in her lane. She pulled out her wand, quickly cast bigby’s hand and used it to shove Sigfriede off of Kophyn. She pushed the half elf back into line and did the same for the drow. The guard at the door moved to run up and help, but Lucretia waved her off.

“Now,” she said sharply. “As I was saying. The four of you are a team, and I expect you to behave as such. The missions you will be sent on are separate and unrelated to any internal biases or prejudice each of you may have against each other, however if you find it hard to work together
fairly, we can have HR give you all some training, and if all else fails…” Lucretia sighed again. “We can see if there are any other employees looking to do field work and are asking for a new team. But, for organization and efficiency, the Bureau would prefer if all teams worked to solve their issues instead of disband and go back into the paperwork piles; do I make myself clear?”

They all concurred in unison.

“Wonderful. Now that that issue is out of the way, I’ll make sure to file an application for HR to speak with you all. But between now and then, let’s have official introductions on my behalf. I am the Director, as I’m well aware you all know by now. Your team consists of Random Fangbattle;” Lucretia began reading off some papers she held in her hands. “She’s your tiefling Barbarian here; probably the tank of your group. Her personality questionnaire say’s she’s got an affinity for nature and science, making her compatible with your druid and your gunslinger’s hobbies—”

“Gunslinger?” Kophyn asked. “I don’t know any—”

“Random also stated she’s straight forward with people due to a lack of charisma,” Lucretia continued, “but she’s willing to give people the benefit of the doubt and believes in second chances. Random, say hello to your teammates.”

Random waved and smiled. “Hey guys.”

“Next, your bard is Kophyn Liadon; he’s a drow, so I’m sure he’s got a unique perspective on life. He says he’s great at reading people, and likes to help teammates solve communication issues, both… in the team and on the field. He graduated from Taako’s Amazing School of Wizardry, Cantrips, and Other Magics at the top of his class. He went to school there to study the bardic college of glamour, where he homed in on his Fey ancestry and is proud to teach anyone about it so long as they’re willing to listen. His favorite personal belonging is his bardic focus, which is a flute made of ivory specifically designed to look like a wizard’s wand. Kophyn,” she glanced at him cautiously. “Keep your hands to yourself and greet your teammates.”

Greetings,” he said flatly.

“Thirdly,” Lucretia gave another sigh and muttered something beneath her breath. “You all have been assigned Mavis Highchurch as your healer. She’s a dwarven druid who learned her trade in the real world while traveling with a nomadic druid enclave in the circle of dreams. They trained her in the protective magics of the fey, nature magics and the basics of beast shaping. She is exceptionally studious and describes herself as a naturally strategist and leader. Mavis,” she waved her hand vaguely.

Mavis waved.

“And finally, your ranged fighter is Sigfriede Holly Taaco-Bluejeans… Looks like she’s left a note here; she’s requested that you either call her by Siggy or by her middle name, and—” she sighed and pinched her nose again. “Sigfriede, I’m not reading this part.”

“Sorry,” Sigfriede looked up from her nails and grinned. “What was that, Madam Director?”

“This part on your personality questionnaire, the one after your name note.”

“Oh!” she cackled and glanced at Kophyn. “That’s not important. People who need to know already know.”

“What?” Mavis looked up at Sigfriede incredulously.
“Exactly, now hush, the Director is speaking.”

Kophyn scoffed, “What, that you can’t read?”

“I’ll read your dick if it’s the last thing—”

“Enough!” The vein above Lucretia’s left eyebrow popped. “That’s quite enough. Can I finish?”

Sigfriede blushed. Kophyn sneered.

Lucretia shook her head and continued, “Sigfriede is a loosely trained fighter, so she’s proficient in all weapons but specializes in firearms. She notes that she’s happy to explain them to her teammates as they are a new technology to this world, however she isn’t willing to share them with her teammates. She has minor training in arcane sorcery, and attended the same school as Kophyn, but dropped out prematurely for medical reasons. She describes herself as headstrong, intelligent, and a natural problem solver.”

“Do I get to say hello,” Sigfriede asked.

“I think you’ve said enough today, Sigfriede,” Lucretia put her papers away and smiled at the group. “Now, you will all be going through one last round of training to develop team strategies that you will use in the field. Your department heads will get that schedule to you as soon as possible, and once that training is completed you’ll be assigned field missions. In the meantime, you’re all to continue your office work. Any questions?”

“What’s the pay rate,” Kophyn said.

“As of right now, you’re all earning base line Bureau salary,” Lucretia said. “Once you start your field work, your pay will be adjusted to the level of work performed. Anything else?”

No one responded.

“Very well. You’re dismissed, and you can return to your offices.”

Sigfriede inhaled to ask a question, then thought better of it; she’d already stepped out of line enough for the day. She wavered for a moment, studying Lucretia’s body language, and gave a tight smile when they made eye contact. She quickly signed, “Sorry, I’ll try harder,” then turned on her heels and walked for the throne room exit.

“Well,” Random tugged on her little bangs, “that, uh… that could have gone better.”

“Could have gone worse,” Mavis said. “I genuinely thought we were getting fired then and there. Sigfriede, what happened to you?”

Sigfriede bristled and glared at her cousin. “What do you mean?”

“You were so—”

“Aggressive?” Kophyn offered.

“Out of line,” Mavis corrected. “You were such a good kid; there was no reason for you to act out like that.”

Sigfriede moved to adjust her glasses, but remembered she’d lost them in the move to the moon.
“Yeah, Kophyn, there was no reason for you to act out like that.”

“Sigfriede, stop it,” Mavis’s voice filled with concern. “Seriously, I’ve never seen you so defensive before. And leaving magic? You’ve always wanted to be a wizard, and you were so good at it. What happened? I mean, clearly something happened. You’ve got these scars—”

“Mavis, shut up.” Sigfriede picked up her pace and hid her face. “I don’t want to talk about it. Shit hit the fan, and magic isn’t safe for me anymore. I just like guns, ok?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Random had invited the group back to the cafeteria for lunch with her moms, and Sigfriede was hesitant at first. Now she didn’t even want to eat; she’d lost her appetite. She left her teammates in the dust as she all but ran across the campus quad, straight back to her room where she fell face first into her pillows and tried not to cry. Perhaps she’d accepted the permanence of her scars, but it was still hard to feel complete with them, especially with Mavis being back so suddenly.

Sigfriede didn’t really think she’d see Mavis at all with how long she was gone. The day she left was such a distant memory in her head, Sigfriede had just taken what her family had told her and ran with it; she had no memories of an emotional attachment, so there was no active grief registering in her brain. When she’d been struck in school, Mavis didn’t even surface as a problem in her head. She hadn’t been there for when Sigfriede got walking pneumonia that one time, or when her parents went on a long trip and Sigfriede was convinced they’d died for good; she hadn’t been there to see Eva and Cashmere grow up, nor had she made her way to Angus’s wedding. That alone was cause enough for Sigfriede to hold a grudge, but the family didn’t treat it as such, so the grudge was never fed attention. It just sat there, festering and bubbling, like a chili left on low heat over night; still, quiet, and covered, but only just barely acknowledged. The struggle to function after her lightning strike left such a big impact on the family Sigfriede saw every day that thinking about how it would affect Mavis hadn’t crossed her mind. Or perhaps it had, and it was too subconsciously painful that she refused to take the thought any further.

One thing was for certain, though.

When Sigfriede first got confirmation she’d been hired on as a Bureau of Benevolence employee, not just an intern, she immediately called everyone in the family. Well, everyone besides Taako and Mavis. The two of them were important to her, but delicate and fragile; two alienated people she looked up to and loved but never understood. Now both of them seemed to be caught in the crossfire of Sigfriede’s life decisions, and she couldn’t quite comprehend how to handle that guilt.

Chapter End Notes

Now we get into the good stuff!! I'm super excited that were finally here, with Sigfriede working at the Bureau and the big plot starting. How do you guys feel about seeing Mavis and Random again? Will Kophyn ever keep his fucking mouth shut? How about Sigfriede's anxiety over Taako knowing where she works? Can Sigfried and her ream learn to work together? Fun things over here, y'all!

Thank you guys for the kudos and comments! They're the best way to let me know what you're feeling about this. I really appreciate all of you who have returned and commented on almost every chapter; you guys still mean a lot to me!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being a great beta
through all of her trying busy times! Give her some love as well. Stick around until next Thursday to see the groups first mission, that should be fun. There was also a new TAZ episode posted today! Give that a listen. Be kind to each other, and I'll see you guys next week.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN-- THERE'S A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Chapter Summary

After several failed Humaniod Resources attempts as solving the teams personal issues, Lucretia decides the team's tension is from boredom rather than butting heads. She assigns the team their first mission, thinking it should be easy enough to solve quickly, but challenging enough to get their cabin fever out. But Beacon is a small town, and it may not be big enough for Kophyn and... Mavis? Sigfriede takes the back seat for once. Mavis goes into Big Sister Mode. Random watches with popcorn in the background.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER FIFTEEN—THERE’S A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

The team’s first mission was a civil case. It was supposed to be simple, easy to handle, and a team building experience. Lucretia had examined each potential mission for this team specifically with a cautious eye; she didn’t want to give them anything too complex because they weren’t all at the same skill level yet, despite being very close in ability to each other; she didn’t want to give them anything too simple because she knew all of them would become too bored. Despite her attempts to get the four of them to work together well, be it through Humanoid Resources or simple team training, Sigfriede and Kophyn just couldn’t seem to drop little things and move on.

Granted, through observation Lucretia had noticed that Sigfriede was, in fact, trying her best in the situation she was in and Kophyn appeared to find joy in instigating her to fights, though she didn’t quite see it to the degree Sigfriede insisted Kophyn went to. Perhaps it was simple personality differences not picked up on when they first arrived on the moon, or maybe one or both of them lied on their personality questionnaires, or maybe Lucretia was just simply missing something here.

“Ma’am,” one of the guards poked their head in through the door to Lucretia’s personal office. “They’re here and prepared for their assignment.”

Lucretia sighed and put down her pen. “I’ll be out momentarily.”

The guard left as Lucretia gathered up briefing papers and maps for the team. Then she made her way to the throne room.

Standing in crisp blue uniforms, in a straight line facing the central dais, were Kophyn, Mavis, Random and Sigfriede. Lucretia was slightly relieved Kophyn and Sigfriede stood on either end of the group; she wasn’t sure she could handle another fist fight today.

“Howdy,” she smiled. “How are you all doing today?”

They all muttered assurances, which Lucretia took as a sign of progress.

“Glad to hear it. I’ve called you all in here today to give you your first field mission. It shouldn’t
be anything too complicated. I’ve got your briefing papers here,” she held them out and motioned for the team to come grab them. “But there’s no harm in going over them all together. You’re being sent out to a small farming town called Beacon; the farmers there have reported an issue with their irrigation systems and fear that it may be a sign that the nearby river is drying up. If that river does go dry, the town won’t have an easy way to replenish their water supply and may go into famine. I find it logical to think solving a water issue is easier to fix than famine, don’t you?”

She smiled at her employees and watched as they quietly flipped through their papers. Then Random looked back up and sheepishly cleared her throat.

“Uh,” she stammered. “Where exactly is Beacon located?”

“Oh!” Lucretia pulled out the maps she’d gathered for the team and handed them to Random. “I’ve circled its location on a map of Faerun and also supplied a map of the town. The map of Faerun isn’t exactly necessary in the flattest terms of the word since the Bureau offers transportation for its field missionaries, but it might be nice for some wider orientation. As you can see, it’s located sort of in the middle of the continent right by the Sea of Fallen Stars, just west of the sea.”

Random hummed, nodded, and passed the maps down the line.

Kophyn spoke up next. “When do we head out?”

“You’ve got an hour to eat something and pack your bags. Then you’re to find your way to the Main Hangar Bay where Avi will happily get you all where you need to be. Any more questions?”

There was a pause for a moment, then Mavis raised a finger. “Do we have any other sort of intel? Like, do we know if it’s a plumbing issue, are we dealing with things we can’t solve as… I guess I’d say beings with limited ability? Are we talking things like elementals or undead or…”

Lucretia thought for a moment, then pursed her lips and shook her head. “I’m not really sure, Mavis. I can only tell you what I know, and I only know as much as the papers, and even still the papers only know as much as the citizens surface side know. They’re sort of asking us to at least come in and help them figure out what the root of the problem is, if not solve it.”

Mavis nodded. “I understand.”

“Very well,” Lucretia clasped her hands together. “Last call for questions or concerns.”

No one spoke up. Sigfriede adjusted her glasses and studied the map intently.

“Sigfriede?” Lucretia asked.

“Hmmm?”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“Mmmmm…” she sniffed and rubbed the tip of her ear. “I don’t think so.”

Lucretia paused, then sighed. “Very well. I’m sure this has been covered by your department leaders, but the Bureau will cover any sort of lodging and food costs you require on this trip. Otherwise, I believe we are done here.”

The four of them shared glances, then Kophyn shrugged and walked off. With nothing else to do, the three girls followed suit and high tailed it.
“Sigfriede,” Lucretia called.

Sigfriede turned on her heels and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You can still have personality here, you understand that, right?”

“Sure,” Sigfriede tried to turn around again.

“Sigfriede.”

“What, Madam Director?”

“You know where my office is if you need any personal help. I want you to succeed here, and if something is upsetting you—”

“I’m fine, Luc—” she caught herself and stuttered. “I’m fine, I promise. I’m just… tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Lucretia studied Sigfriede’s face, then shrugged and grabbed for the hem of her robe. “Very well. Go catch up with your team, I’d hate for you to be late on your first mission.”

Sigfriede began walking off one last time. Then Lucretia called after her absent mindedly, “Try to have fun in Beacon, Siggy!”

Sigfriede let a grin tug at the corner of her lips as the throne room doors shut behind her.

The Main Hangar Bay was one of the most intimidatingly cool things Sigfriede had seen in her life, if you didn’t count the times her parents had come home in their reaper forms. It was tall, taller than the throne room dome. It was completely made of lightly frosted glass, so Sigfriede could see blurry shapes on different floors, given she was wearing her glasses that day. She wasn’t sure what exactly she’d find inside, because the shapes she saw were either circular in nature or humanoid.

Random led the group to the dome entrance, with Kophyn and Mavis following her; Sigfriede brought up the rear. Spread before the four of them was a huge hangar, with neat rows of big glass balls. There were dozens of them, each with the Bureau logo frosted across the front. Sigfriede could see tiny seats inside the balls, but she saw no doors. Above them were levels of balconies, like the ones in the circular entry rooms to art museums. Crisp, white rails lined the edges of each balcony, with sections of what could have been control stations, or exhibit info cards. Sigfriede wasn’t sure. The walls, just like the outside of the dome, were all windows, except you could see clearly outside; they weren’t frosted inside. It would have made sense, Sigfriede thought, that the view from the inside would have been fuzzy as well if the windows were physically frosted. Now she thought perhaps the frosting of the windows was magical in ability. She’d have to investigate that later.

A taller figure moving through Sigfriede’s field of clear vision pulled her from her thoughts. She hummed and made eye contact.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Come again?”

She saw a kind face, with dark eyes and eyebrows above a crooked smile. “Are you with them,” it asked.

“Oh,” Sigfriede blushed. “Yes. Sorry.” She walked back to her teammates.
“You’re fine,” the person said. “Uh, as I’m sure you’re aware, I’m Avi, Director of the Bureau’s Transport System. I’m glad you’ve all chosen field work! It’s an important and integral part to keeping the Bureau of Benevolence running efficiently. This is how you’ll be traveling to the field, or surface side, as we call it here. Follow me.”

Avi turned and headed for the neat rows of orbs.

Sigfriede’s ear twitched. “Avi, you said?”

“Yes,” he glanced over his shoulder and waved. “Nice to meet you.”

“My uncle talks about you a lot,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you say something?”

“I said my knuckles are something I chew a lot.”

Avi’s eyebrows furrowed. Mischief sparked in his eyes. “These are our main form of transport,” he slapped a hand on one of the orbs and grinned. “Any of you have a fear of heights? Motion sickness? Fear of death by falling?”

No one responded.

“Good,” Avi’s grin grew cheekier. “I’m gonna like you guys. I suggest you hold on to your asses.”

The team’s flight over Faerun was the most wonderfully beautiful thing Sigfriede had ever seen. Their vessel soared over a huge thunderstorm, raging and ravaging across flat farm lands with winds that shook the glass around Sigfriede. Lightning popped and sizzled through the clouds below her, and for the first time seemed tiny under her feet. It was a strange sensation, feeling like she had power over the thunder and lightning. She waited tensely for her scars to wince, but they never did. A grin broke across her lips. She felt the left side of her smile lift a little higher than usual. Her scar made its first crinkle. No rain fell from these clouds onto her head; instead the water fell from her feet. Perhaps she was getting better, less fearful and more like her regular self again; an ambitious young woman with no fears and no one to answer to. Or maybe she was just flying too fast to let the thunder get too deep in her head. Then the storm sailed back behind them.

“Kophyn,” Mavis whispered. “You know what Avi said about not braking soon enough.”

“You said you weren’t afraid of death by falling,” he answered.

“I’m not afraid of it but I don’t prefer it.”

Kophyn sniffed and glanced over his shoulder. Sigfriede glanced over the same shoulder at his fingers on the brake.

“Pull it, dude,” she said.

“We aren’t close enough yet…”

“Pull the brake,” Random said tightly, “before I knock you out and pull it myself.”
Kophyn pulled the brake.

The group’s decent through the air jerked, then slowed. A big blue parachute deployed behind them. Soon, the horizon line reached up, growing longer and darker. Soon church towers and water wells popped into view, followed by tavern roofs, road paths and faces, all signed off with a lake that Sigfriede imagined should have been full of clear, crisp, sparkling water. Instead, it was dry, almost barren, with sand bars exposed and small river life dying. Houses skirted the edge of the town, then sailed closely under the glass floor just as the storm had. Moments later, the town and its thinned-out river coasted behind them as the orb sailed gently to the unclaimed lands below them, landing with three soft thuds through the leaves and dirt.

Sigfriede sniffed. “That was easy.”

“Too easy,” Mavis said. “Dad told me one time this thing got him and Magnus and Taako stuck in some trees…”

“Maybe this is what happens with competent people do their jobs with competence?” Mavis shrugged. “That’s fair.”

The group unbuckled their seat belts and filed out of the orb in an orderly fashion. They lined up in front of it and watched as Random pressed the key pad on the side of the orb to recall it. Avi had made sure to explain in detail how to work that part. Each team was given a key code on their first mission that they’d use until their team was disbanded. This code was to be put on all field reports, paper work, service requests, training time sign ups, and transport orb check outs, recalls and check ins. This would widely replace the need for the bracers Sigfriede had been told about before, along with the uniforms all employees wore on certain occasions, including the first day of field missions.

Sigfriede checked her pants and brushed a piece of lint from her thigh. Perhaps she should get a tattoo over the scars on her thigh….

“Well,” Kophyn said. “Avi’s got shit aim.”

Mavis, Random and Sigfriede shared a glance.

“I think he put us out here on purpose,” Random said softly. “So that we wouldn’t crash into civilian buildings.”

Kophyn gave her side eye. Then he headed for town.

Beacon was, for want of better word, shitty. It was clearly a smaller, poorer town with the main objective simply to trade, farm, and live off those two things. Nothing more, nothing less. Taverns with bars and rooms for rent were on every corner, surrounded by farmer’s kiosks, trading stops, and supply stores. The bells of the church Sigfriede had seen struck the beginning of the hour; just at one p.m.

“Right,” Mavis bounced on the balls of her feet. “First things first. Find rooming. Find food. Find some basic supplies. We can probably start gathering intel from civilians over food and drinks. I suggest that Kophyn and I do most of the talking, while Random and Siggy keep watch for—”

“Why?” Sigfriede asked.
“What?”

“What can’t I talk to people? Lucretia said we were all supposed to be complimentary in skills. I get Random, she says she has no charisma—”

“It’s true,” Random said. “People surface side don’t like tieflings. Fuck ‘em.”

“But I can carry a conversation just as well as you and Kophyn can, if not better.”

“Siggy,” Mavis adjusted her glasses. “You were mute for three years. You had a stutter—”

“That we fixed?”

“That. Here, you still like to read, right?”

Sigfriede nodded.

“Okay. Scratch that plan. We all find a place to sleep. Then we all just… find things we want to do in town until whatever inn we find starts dinner service. Then we plan to meet in the dining hall at that time and start talking to people, yeah? Fair?”

The three shared a glanced. Then they nodded.

“Cool. There’s gotta be a library here, somewhere, Siggy…” Mavis turned in a circle. “What kind of town doesn’t have a library?”

“Many drow towns don’t have them,” Kophyn said, heading east. “The towns consisting mostly of brutes and fighters. Libraries are saved for mages and clerics.”

Mavis blinked. “That sucks.”

“I know.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “Remember that mini library Kravitz kept for me in his office?”

“Oh shit, yeah!” Mavis beamed up at her cousin. “ Didn’t you chuck a book in his face?”

“Oh once in the face,” Sigfriede agreed. “Multiple times in the ass.”

“Nice.”

Sigfriede’s smile grew tight as she thought about what happened to that library.

The older Sigfriede got, the hungrier she grew for substantial materials. She quickly moved on from *I Can Be a Necromancer, Too, an Introduction to Necromancy for Kids* and weaseled her way into her dad’s illegal notebooks. Or rather, whatever he had left of them sitting around the house. By the time she’d found her way to class with Kophyn, she’d torn through basic books on wizardry and science and started in on specializations in weather, the way it shaped the air around a person, and how that affected the weave of magic that made up the bonds of the universe. She’d started to pick at the bones of a hailstorm of knowledge; she felt prickles in the wind lifting her wand, the whispers tangling in her blond hair, the rain that washed the week-old dirt from under her nails. She wanted control of it. She wanted to understand it. She wanted to look at a storm cloud, miles and miles above her head, and summon its power’s straight down to the ground. She wanted to use its power to shake the ground and singe the hair off the arms of her enemies.

There was a chance, she considered, that her ambition had been her ruin. Perhaps she’d known too
much, gotten too high up in her head about it. Perhaps she’d been thinking too much about making the magic work instead of letting the magic work. Now she was too scared to try at all.

The scars over her left wrist flared in pain and made her hand twitch. Her wrist popped. Sigfriede winced and pulled her hand to her chest. She rubbed the sore spot on her wrist.

“You okay, Bean?” Mavis asked.

“Y-yeah,” Sigfriede answered. “Just… Kravitz got rid of my library once Eva and Cashmere started learning to read. You were gone at that point.

Mavis hummed.


“Don’t get any ideas,” Sigfriede spat. “My family calls me that. Consider yourself lucky I let you call me Siggy at all.”

“Hey, guys!” Random stuck her arm out and pointed at a tavern across the street. “The Voidfish Chamber! I’ve heard about this place. I think my moms mentioned it being owned by a bard who worked for the Bureau at one point, said something about them wanting to keep Johann’s story alive. We could totally stay there!”

Then Sigfriede remembered where it was Random fell into her life. Watching the purple barbarian bolt without consideration for those around her struck up a fuzzy, short memory of noises. Rocks bounced along cool concrete as a purple tiefling child ran a young toddler Sigfriede along the paths in… oh, where was it? Her mother’s voice in her head told her she was on the moon. That had to be the center pavilion, if the moon was Bureau headquarters. Didn’t her parents mention having a friend not much older than her living on the moon? And Barry had said she was a runner, then at some point she left for school, right?

Or it could be that Sigfriede was entirely wrong. Oh, well.

She followed her team into the tacky hotel.

Taako, if not for subject matter, would have loved the aesthetic of the place. Gaudy, flashy, mismatched patterns and splashes. It was mystical, if slightly tacky, and breathed with the lightest hint of mockery.

Lucretia would have found it funny. So did Sigfriede.

The entry way looked just like the halls of any dome on Bureau base. They weren’t as tall, but the fake columns were pretty accurate. The desks and chairs were decked in ivory white and shimmering blue. Marble tile neatly sat in rows leading to the check in desk and hallways. There was an employee at the desk scribbling something down. He was a half elf, with a curly mop of dark hair on his head. Thankfully, his work uniform wasn’t similar to a bard’s usual garb, nor similar to the uniforms Sigfriede and her team wore. If it had been, she didn’t think she could have contained her laughter. Instead, he wore a navy polo and slacks, with a watch sitting on his wrist.

As the team approached, he looked up and smiled a lop-sided smile with crooked teeth and a dark freckle on the bridge of his nose; his nose looked like it had been broken too many times.

Random handled the finances, and the four each took their own private rooms. They took note of food service times and grabbed some small maps of the town. Then they took what few things they
Sigfriede’s room was small, with a tiny bed, a closet, and a standing mirror. There was a door to an equally small balcony. Despite its size, the room was still nice. The bed was stacked with fluffy pillows and paired with a big comforter. The closet was tiny, but the inside was maximized for organization. Sigfriede quickly put down her bag and started organizing what little she packed. She brought an extra uniform if needed, and two other grunge work outfits. She had her professional work boots on her feet, and work-work boots in her bag. She put the work-work boots on the floor of the closet. She shut the closet doors and took another look around the room. Everything was decorated similarly to what she’d seen on the moon base, in shades of white and blue, with embroidery that shifted. The walls were crisp. There wasn’t any art on the walls, instead there were maps and tapestries. A clock sat above the bed. Peculiarly, sat in the corner of the room on a tiny marble table, was what Sigfriede would have initially thought was a night light. But upon further evaluation she found it was a mobile. Not the same kind of mobile that you would put above a baby’s crib, but it was similar. A tank, maybe a fish tank, contained a puppet on a tiny roller coaster track. Lights shifted between different colors like a galaxy in motion as it spiraled in on itself. Inky water, probably contained in a double wall lining the tank, obscured the puppet at first. But moments later Sigfriede realized the puppet was a jellyfish. Its bell cap was painted in intricate detail, with swirls and stars and frills. It floated and bobbed, and something in the back of Sigfriede’s brain played a seven-note melody. She hummed along to it for a few moments. A soft smile tugged at her lips. She felt warm.

Someone knocked on Sigfriede’s door. She jogged to it and swung it open.

Stood in front of her were her teammates. Mavis took position at the front of the group. Kophyn didn’t look happy about it.

“We gotta go somewhere really fast,” Mavis said.

Sigfriede blinked. “What?”

“Our plan for the day; I said we’d check in, get settled, find out when dinner service is and split up. Before we can split up we’ve gotta go check in with the town mayor. They may know something, too.”

Sigfriede thought for a moment. Seeing no reason as to why she should disagree, she shrugged and locked her room door behind her.

“You’re here from the Bureau?”

“Uh,” Random coughed and smiled tightly. “All four of us, yes, sir.”

“I see.” The mayor nodded. He was an older man of short, square stature. He was human, so his age didn’t show itself gracefully. Sigfriede wondered if her dad would age as poorly as this man.

“So,” he continued. “A dwarf, a drow, a tiefling and a half elf. Peculiar group but I’d expect no less. Welcome to Beacon, either way!”

Mavis rubbed at the floor with the tips of her shoes. “Thank you. Pardon my… bluntness, but would you happen to have gathered more information on the situation since filing the paperwork we received?”

“I’m afraid not,” the mayor shook his head. “We’ve gathered a small group of willing men to travel
the half day’s trip to the lake nearby, and they have yet to return with information.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Three days.” He didn’t sound particularly worried.

“Three days?” Mavis sounded worried.

“Well,” the mayor stuttered. “I’d imagine they’d be out doing… research. Investigations.”

Sigfriede scoffed. “You said the lake was possibly drying up, how much research or investigations does it take to see if the lakes dry or not?”

“They could be taking samples.”


“Sigfriede,” Mavis warned.

“No, I’m serious. I promise I’m not taking a piss,” Sigfriede glanced at the mayor. “With all due respect, dude, it’s a fuckin’ lake. Your irrigation systems have been dry for how long? And you’ve mentioned they’re connected straight to the lake. Unless there’s a problem with your plumbing systems, I don’t think it would take a squadron of, as you’ve said, willing men three days to travel to a lake half a day away and bring back the observation that the lake is, in fact, drying up. Something obviously has had to have happened.”

The mayor blinked his dopey, square eyes. His round spectacles slid down his nose before he responded to Sigfriede, “Then I suppose that’s what the four of you are here for, isn’t it?”

“So, this sucks,” Random took the steps two at a time out of city hall. “I thought people respected the Bureau more.”

“People respect the Bureau plenty,” Mavis answered. “They just expect Lucretia to send out people who behave like her employees did before Story and Song. They want spies, interrogators, and fighters.”

“Seekers, Reclaimers and Regulators,” Kophyn echoed. “It’s hardly been two decades since the switch. Some people in the Underdark haven’t even received word of the Bureau being opened for business again.”

“You’re not serious,” Sigfriede said. The team turned to the town square. “That’s got to be a joke. The Bureau is so efficient.”

“Not the Underdark though,” he shook his head. “There are issues with… how would I say this. News not being… skewed.”

“Propagandized,” Sigfriede offered.

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

They walked into the center of town square. Sigfriede sighed and scratched the back of her head.

“Now what,” she asked.
“Go find something you want to do,” Mavis said. She pulled out the maps she’d gathered from the inn, along with the map Lucretia had supplied them. “Be back at the dining room at six thirty.”

Chapter End Notes

Y’all life sucks my car won’t start and I’ve tried literally everything I feel safe doing myself and I just give up. Anyway, FIRST MISSION!! YAY!! We finally get to see how our misfit team works together, and who takes the reins as team leader. What do you guys think is messing with the water supply in Beacon? It could be something dumb like a beaver dam.

Thank you guys for returning and leaving all the awesome comments you do!! I’m so glad you're all liking the characters so far, and you all seem to really like Random. I've shared this with one reader, but I'd figure I’d share with you all, too. Random was one of the TOUGHEST characters for me to flesh out; I wanted her to be the quiet one and all, but I still wanted her to have physical quirks and ticks. You know how Sigfriede rubs the tip of her ear? I couldn't decide on what Random's nervous tick would be for the longest time. Her physical appearance was also hard for me to decide on, as well. She's gone from having blue skin to albino skin to purple skin, and then she's had blue eyes and red eyes and yellow eyes, and then her hair's been curly to wavy to long to short to buzzed to pulled back all the time. Random was just a pain in the ass to finalize. But I'm glad you all love her! I love her too. <3

Thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being an amazing beta, even though we've both been riding on the struggle boat lately. Go give her some love if you haven't already. Be kind to each other, and I'll see you all next Thursday.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN-- FANTASY UBER

Chapter Summary

The team gets their first mission underway in the small farming town of Beacon. When three boys return from a scouting job at the lake, anxieties rise in the townspeople as they learn the lake is drying up. To make matters worse, the boys reveal that the water seemed to form a mind of its own and that it attacked them. Seems like a direct enough mission, but as the team travels to the nearby Lake of Mists, somethings are said that makes the girls a little uneased. Mavis keeps fighting to put a word in edgewise. Sigfriede learns the importance of listening to people. Kophyn shows his true colors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER SIXTEEN—FANTASY UBER

Sigfriede took her guns out to the edge of town and hunted birds. She did poorly in terms of killing anything, but she felt her understanding of how her pistol worked improved greatly. None of her shots misfired, and she sped up her time for reloading. Then she wandered around town and marked down places of interest on her map. She found only two. Neither were libraries; the town appeared to have none.

When she returned to the inn at six thirty, she found her teammates sitting in the lobby, apparently waiting for her.

“Turn around,” Kophyn said. “We’re going to town square again.”

“Why?” Sigfriede fussed with the hem of her shirt. “I’ve just come back from there.”

“Words gotten around. The guys the mayor sent out have come back. People say they’re going to give an announcement to the town.”

“People still do that?”

Mavis pushed her way to the exit. “It’s a farming town, Bean. It’s a small town, a vacuum town. Everyone can make it to town square in five minutes. It’s not like Neverwinter.”

Random shrugged and followed. “They may have something useful for the mission.”

Kophyn followed but held the door open for Sigfriede. “Let’s go, Bean.”

Sigfriede didn’t respond.

“Siggy.”
No response.

“Are you kidding me?”

Still nothing.

“Sigfriede!”

“What?” She sniffed and looked at him down her nose. Which was hard to do, given he was taller than her, but she liked to imagine it ended up with her just giving him a disgusted look.

“Let’s go. We can’t lose the team.”

They took up the rear of the crowd. A group of three scuffed up boys stood atop a raised wooden platform behind a podium. They seemed fidgety, uncertain. Sigfriede couldn’t tell if they were afraid of public speaking, or if something bigger had laid weight on their consciousness. Soon, the squarish mayor joined the boys on the platform and the chatter among the crowd died down. One proud mother in the front shouted out for her son. He gave a meek wave.

“Right,” the mayor coughed. “Good evening! I’m pleased to see all of you here. In daily news, Mr. and Mrs. Dondre have welcomed their first child into the world. Both the mother and child appear to be in good health.”

Small happy babble bubbled from the crowd. It quickly died down.

“Furthermore, as you can all see, our brave team has returned from the Lake of Mists with a report! Let’s hear it, boys.”

The mayor stepped aside and opened the podium to the trio. None of them moved. Nervous tension passed through the air as the boys started to quietly argue between themselves. Then one of the boys threw his hands up and stepped up to the podium.

“We, uh,” his farm-boy drawl of a voice cracked. He cleared his throat and took a shaky breath. “We traveled to the Lake of Mists to, uhm, see what was going on with the irrig-irrigation systems… When we arrived, we started looking to see if anything was wrong with the shore line. Then we found, uh… this is gonna sound bad, but we found that the lake had, in fact begun to dry out.”

The crowd struck out in anguished whispers again. Some more emotional people cried out. Sigfriede raised an eyebrow and shared glances with her teammates.

She signed to Mavis, “Is that a wrap?”

“No,” Mavis signed back. “They’re going to want our help fixing the lake issue.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes.

“What did you guys just say?” Kophyn whispered.

“Dude,” Random punched him in the arm. “Leave them alone. The kids are talking.”

“Additionally,” the boy continued. “When we went to look if we could find any hints as to why the lake would be… y’know… drying out… we, uh…”
He looked back nervously at his friends. Sigfriede thought she saw a leaf fall from his hair.

“There was,” he stuttered. “this… We ran into this… We were attacked. I think. We were attacked by this… thing. I don’t know how to explain it. It was like this—”

“It was like the water itself attacked us,” one of the other boys spat out.

“Yeah,” said the third. “It was like it had a mind of its own. It just lashed out, you know?”

The mayor’s face paled. Panicked whispers spread across the tiny gathering, and Sigfriede’s brain started thinking of anything that would fit that description. What kind of creature would use the water like that? Would it even be a creature? Could they be dealing with a powerful magic user? What if this was another wild magic user like Sigfriede?

The idea of meeting someone like her made Sigfriede shutter.

“Now, now,” the mayor rushed back to the podium and tried to calm the crowd. “This doesn’t mean anything bad right off the bat—”

“We’ll have a famine!” one of the civilians called. “The town’s done for!”

“Here, here!” cried another.

“Listen—” the mayor stuttered and faltered.

It was clear the townspeople were upset that the lake was drying out and appeared to have a mind of its own. Sigfriede watched as the cohesion of the gathering quickly unraveled. Her shoulders tensed, and she glanced at her teammates once again. Kophyn seemed to be watching the crowd closely as well, but when he felt Sigfriede’s eyes on him, he gave a tight smile. He let his hands fall from behind his back to his sides.

“We’ll help them,” he said.

“How?” Sigfriede hissed. “They’re going to deteriorate to panic and move out of town before dinner tomorrow. How can we help a ghost town?”

“Didn’t you pay attention to training?”

Sigfriede shut her mouth. In all honesty, she really hadn’t. She’d gone through training and orientation with the rest of the new hires she’d come on with, but she’d figured the training and seminars given that time would be the same as the one given to the interns. Now she realized she may have been wrong.

Kophyn rolled his eyes and tightened the ponytail he had his sliver hair in. “Step one of dealing with a panicked city is to assure them that the Bureau has sent out proper aid. That aid will quickly and safely find a way to solve the issue presented by the city and ensure that the issue has no cause for return in the future. Step two is to keep that promise. I’m sure that jogs your memory, yes?”

“Stop patronizing me.”

“I will when you stop needing to be patronized.”

“I assure you,” the mayor said over the chaos of the town. “representatives from the Bureau of Benevolence arrived today. They’ve offered their help in the investigation as to why the lake is having problems! I’m sure that they’re well equipped to solve this in no time!” He motioned to the
group at the back of the crowd.

Everyone turned to look at them. The scars on Sigfriede’s chest flinched and tightened up. It took everything she had in her body not to double over and hide from everyone. Sigfriede realized she hadn’t been prepared for attention. At all. The only time she’d ever been given attention was with her family, and even that was a contained, predictable situation. Any time she was in school she tried to blend in. She already had so many issues with her wild magic surges that she didn’t want any attention from strangers unless she absolutely couldn’t help it. She’d hoped that she’d become good enough at makeup to make her scars less noticeable, if noticeable at all. But she realized now that she, along with her teammates, was the only person in the entire town with her hair pulled back in a formal twist and her body decked in bright blue and white threads.

Without realizing it, she reached out and grabbed Mavis’s hand just like she used to when she was little. Mavis looked up at Sigfriede in shock, then adjusted her glasses and gave her cousin a warm smile.

“Yes,” Mavis gave Sigfriede’s hand a tight squeeze, then took a step forward to address the crowd. “We arrived in town earlier today—”

“And we plan on solving this issue as soon as possible,” Kophyn said. He shot Mavis a dirty look. “My teammates and I have been sent out on special request of the Director herself on accord of our specific trainings and specializations. Each of us has a specialization we’ve been trained in that curtails usefulness to the issue that’s plagued such a virtuous town as yours. There’s no need to fret; whatever has lent itself to the lake, given it a mind of its own and left it to dry like the bones of a fallen beast will be swiftly handled at no danger to you. Your irrigation system will be restored in a timely manner, and your farming and trade can be restored as normal.”

That seemed to ease the crowd’s tension. Sigfriede glanced up at the mayor. He dabbed at his face with a handkerchief but seemed relieved that the burden of explanation had been taken off his hands. She sneered and looked back at her teammates. Random shrugged. Mavis scowled.

People in the crowd started to shout questions at Kophyn, who took it with suave ease and waved at the crowd. “We appreciate your investment and curiosity, but we’ve got an early morning tomorrow! I suggest everyone return home, eat a healthy supper and turn in for bed. We’ll start our trip to the lake in the morning.”

Then he turned, grabbed Sigfriede’s arm, and all but pushed her in front of him towards the inn.

“Let go of me, dude!” she spat.

“Walk swiftly and confidently back to the inn.”

“You don’t need to grab me…”

“What the hell was that?” Mavis ran up to Kophyn as they entered the inn lobby and tugged on the hem of his uniform shirt aggressively.

“What was what?” He looked at his dwarven companion over the back of his shoulder.

“I was talking!”

“No, you weren’t. No one’s spoken since we left town square.”
“I meant at town square, you ass hat! I was gonna talk to people! I was gonna start with explaining our mission plan, then open up to questions from the people. I had it handled!”

Kophyn scoffed. “Mavis, please, this is a town full of humans, they could barely see you over each other.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think they’d take things a little smoother from a dwarf than a drow?”

“Watch your tongue,” Kophyn spun on his heels and stuck his finger just in front of Mavis’s nose. “No one needs comfort from a squat little druid with four eyes and a father who can barely keep his senses about himself. This isn’t a matter of what race we are, this isn’t a matter of what seniority each of us has over the other. I couldn’t give two shits about either of those things. The fact of the matter comes down to it that I got stuck with a bunch of numbskulls who don’t even remember the basics of training for the situation we’ve been put in! I’d appreciate it if you’d pull your head out of the leaves for a moment, Mavis, and think critically. Out of a dwarven druid, a tiefling barbarian, a half elf who can’t even cast a spell correctly, and a drow bard, who has the better social skills of us all?”

“Gunslinger.” Sigfriede said.

“What?”

“There’s a title for what I do, Kophyn. Guns are gaining in popularity since I brought my report on them to Lucretia last year. Lucas Miller has patented them and started funding research into them to make them cheap and accessible to the public for professional training and common civilian defense. With proper control, of course. People like me who are hired for their skill with these things are called gunslingers. And don’t speak to my cousin that way, Mavis is one of the most intelligent, socially graceful women I’ve ever met. She gets it from Merle.”

Kophyn’s jaw clenched. His fingernails dug into the pale charcoal skin of his palms. His eyes passed between Mavis and Sigfriede, then fell to the pistol sat in its holster on Sigfriede’s hip. Her credentials and clearance paperwork sat in a neat little file tucked between her pants and holster on her other hip.

Kophyn’s confidence seemed to waver. He ran his tongue over his teeth and looked down the hall to the dining pavilion. Bar maids and waiters were filing back in from the town square meeting. Inn patrons were taking seats and placing orders, making light chat. Some were even civilians going out to eat. They pointed and waved at the team; the team sent from the Bureau on personal request of the Director herself.

Kophyn had lied. To each and every one of them. Sigfriede knew it for a fact. She remembered the lecture Lucretia had given to her just before she’d been assigned her team; she remembered how much stress Lucretia had put on the fact that she’d treat Sigfriede and her team equally and orderly just as she treated every other employee on the Bureau payroll. No one got special treatment anymore. No one was sent out on personal request by Lucretia anymore. That died the moment John had died.

Where had Sigfriede gotten the name John from?

“I’ll just call room service,” Kophyn said. “For supper. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

At dinner, Sigfriede made sure to sit next to Mavis.
“Your dad isn’t dumb,” she said to her cousin.

“I know.” Mavis sounded unaffected.

“Its just…” Sigfriede messed with the condensation on her water glass. “Kophyn’s just a sad person, you know? Like, you get what I mean when I say that, right? Merle has always been about choosing joy and finding happiness, or even making it if you have to. And that takes admitting you can be sad sometimes. The difference between being a person who can experience being sad and being a sad person is what Merle always taught us.”

“Not always us, String Bean.” Mavis gave a tight smile. “But that’s ok. He teaches that to us now. And I guess that’s the important thing, isn’t it?”

Sigfriede nodded. “Have you called him since you moved to the moon?”

Mavis blinked. “I… I don’t think I have.”

“You should do that tonight. I’m gonna call my dad.”

“Oh, geez, that should be fun,” Mavis sipped her water through her straw. “Wonder what Barry’s gonna roast you for this time.”

“If anything, he can always go back to my height.”

“He gave you that gene, you know. There’s no way in hell Lup could have made you this short.”

“Hey guys,” Random spoke up. She picked at her eyebrow, and her completely blue eyes gleamed. “I’m glad I got added on to your team. Even with Kophyn, you guys just make things a lot lighter. I like you guys.”

Sigfriede smiled. “Thanks, Random.”

“Yeah,” Mavis said. “That’s really nice of you. We like being on your team, too.”

Random pursed her lips and studied her fingernails for a second. Then she smirked and looked back up across the table. “Maybe whatever’s gotten into this water at the lake will pick up on Kophyn’s bullshit and kill him. Then we can tell Lucretia we like it being just us, and we can just be our own little trio, you know? My moms always worked in trios for the Bureau.”

“Hey, yeah!” Mavis smiled and sat up straight. “I mean, I wouldn’t wish death on anyone, but Random’s got a point! If we can’t figure out how to work with him at the end of the mission, maybe we can put in a request with Lucretia; make our own team. And besides, Merle and Taako always worked with just Magnus.”

“Fake news,” Sigfriede flung water at Mavis with her fingers. “They absolutely worked with my dad through that whole thing, too!”

“Bullshit, your dad lived in a cave for twelve years!” Mavis flung the water back.

Random giggled and decided to get in on the fun. She dipped both of her hands in her water and flung it at her teammates at the same time. “Hey, all four of them were complete idiots! We all know who hauled the real ass for the Bureau of Balance!”

Sigfriede squealed as water splashed into her eye. She almost fell backward in her chair as she threw her hand over her eye and laughed in astonishment. Mavis jumped up from her chair and
clumsily went to catch Sigfriede, even though she didn’t fall. Random gasped and covered her mouth. All the ruckus from the girls garnered attention from the other patrons, and when one older woman cleared her throat, the three of them gathered themselves together and returned to their seats. They all giggled, trying desperately to not bust out laughing again.

“For real though,” Random said. “I’d be fine if we ever just had to work with the three of us. I like us, even though we haven’t really done any real fighting yet.”

“Yeah,” Sigfriede smiled again. “Me, too. And we can call ourselves Tres Party Babes.”

“Clearly,” Random snorted. “Y’all can’t keep your damn mouths shut.”

“You’re the one who got water in my eye!”

“Oh great,” Mavis held her face in her hands. “Yeah, Tres Party Babes is *such* a great fucking idea, Siggy. Because Tres Horny Boys wasn’t bad enough.”

“Gotta keep the brand going,” Sigfriede winked. “We’re all next gen employees, you know? Keep that good shit going, man.”

“Taako taught you that, didn’t he?” Random asked.

“You know it.”


Tres Party Babes spent the rest of their meal joking and laughing, sharing memories and stories. Sigfriede felt secure in her choices leading up to that moment.

In the morning, the four of them headed to city hall to inquire about finding a way to make it to the lake. They quickly found a listing for requesting caravan rides to and from certain locations in and around Beacon, charged at a rate per mile of travel. The four of them took note of the nearest pick-up location. When they arrived, they found a sign-up sheet that they filled their names and destination in on. Once they were next in line, they lifted a ride with a nice middle-aged human woman in her caravan. They rode in silence most of the way to the Lake of Mists.

About half way through the ride, Kophyn looked up from his book and sniffed. “What do you all take away from the Day of the Unseen Invaders?”

Random choked on her cheese. “The who in the what, now?”

“Oh,” Kophyn smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I keep forgetting people above the Underdark call it Story and Song.”

“Oh,” the girls sing-songed in unison.

“What about it?” Mavis asked.

“Like,” Kophyn adjusted his posture against the caravan wall. “I dunno… I guess everyone knows about it, right? Like, Sigfriede and Radnom; you guys were born after it happened, right?”

The two girls shared a glance. “Yeah,” they answered.

“And you guys have always known the story and song, right? Like the story of what the seven
“birds did and the song that one bard guy wrote, yeah?”

They affirmed in unison again.

“So, like. What do you guys think about it?”

Random thought for a moment. Sigfriede’s eyebrows furrowed.

“Well,” Random said softly. “I guess I think its pretty cool. It’s a lot to know all at once, too, you
know? I feel like sometimes I only remember details that are important to what I need at the
moment. Like how there was one time I remembered about Magnus trying to sneak dogs onto the
Starblaster when I tried to sneak a dog back onto the moon; but when I started learning how to be a
barbarian, I forgot a lot about Magnus and his fighting things and started remembering more
details about Merle and his philosophy of nature and Pan.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mavis said.

“Why?” Random sounded seriously curious.

Sigfriede threw a tiny pebble at Mavis’s head. “Don’t you dare fucking tell her. She’s too
innocent.”

“Bold of you to assume I want to admit to my father’s sins.”

“Anyway,” Random grinned. Sigfriede thought she had a nice smile. “I mean like, I’ve always
liked being outside, and I’ve always thought rocks were cool and shit. But I’ve also always been
too headstrong to be a cleric. I’m too antsy. So, when I learned about the barbarian stuff, I still
wanted to know some nature things, too. I guess what I’m saying is like, when I grew up and
figured out who I wanted to be, more specific things to what I needed came to the forefront of my
memory, where as before it was more of a situation where something would remind me of a
moment in the story.”

Sigfriede hummed. Kophyn nodded.

“Mavis?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t have any interesting thoughts on it. I was, like… twelve when it happened. My
understanding of it is pretty general and basic.”

“Did it change the way you viewed your dad?”

“Of course. A lot more made sense then. I couldn’t hate him knowing all of that.”

Sigfriede played with the soles of her boots. She’d put on grunge gear that day, complete with her
pistol and backpack full of her ammo and tools.

“What about you, Siggy?” Kophyn said.

Sigfriede looked up and inhaled sharply. Then she shrugged. “I dunno. I think Random got it pretty
head on when she said it’s a lot to know all at once. I think I remember sounds more than details?
I’ve always liked to make music to what I’ve remembered—”

“You play instruments?” Kophyn sounded surprised.

“Uh…” Sigfriede scoffed and grinned. “A little. I wanted to play violin, but it made my fingers
bleed too much; my mom flipped out. She made my dad teach me how to play piano instead. I
sing, too. Sometimes.”

Kophyn seemed to genuinely smile for once. “Sing for us, then.”

“Oh, uh. No, I can’t.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, Kophyn, seriously, I haven’t sung since before we started college. I’m really out of practice.”

Mavis tapped Sigfriede’s hand. When Siggy looked over, she signed, “I miss your songs.”

“Thanks, Mav.”

Kophyn coughed. “I, uh… I was asking because when I was in school, closer to when I graduated, I took this class specifically over Story and Song. The professor started the semester by asking each of the students what they thought of it.”

“What’d you say,” Sigfriede asked.

“I didn’t. I, uh, chickened out.”

She snorted. “Now it’s my turn to call bullshit.”

“I’m not kidding, Sigfriede. I was one of the last kids to get their turn to answer, and I changed my answer because no one else said they thought the same things about it as I did…”

“What do you think about it, Kophyn?”

Kophyn paused. He picked at his fingernails, then inhaled. “I don’t think John was as bad as people can make him out to be. I think he had a really good idea, probably, at the beginning. Like, hear me out and think about this, yeah? These, like, gods or people or Elohim or what-the-fuck-ever that created the universe, right? These sentient shitheads make us with this tool, and each of them has to keep track of this tool because it’s insanely powerful. So powerful, in fact, that if any of their creations get their hands on it, exposure to it could lead to some fucked up shit. But somebody up there doesn’t keep their end of the deal; that tool gets lost in the mess of our little universe down here, someone finds it, brings it to the IPRE, yada, yada, we all know that whole thing. But my point is that they made us; they should know us inside and out. How are they going to expect us to just… go back to normal after something like that has drug it’s foot three feet deep through the universal mud? They can’t ethically keep limits on the abilities they give to us now, not after we’ve been exposed to the power that tool could give us. Seriously, it gave seven seemingly normal people insane amounts of power.

“Think about it, a stone that could make something a homeless kid finds on the ground into a mound of gold, a staff made to make the strongest people in the world bend to your will, a gauntlet of pure, unadulterated wrath, a fucking tiny ass bell that devours people’s souls. These are not normal things our level of consciousness is supposed to give us! Those things went out and ravaged across our world, tearing apart forests and labs and towns and people’s lives… think about all the people who’ve had the slightest idea of what power those things could give them. You can’t expect us to just not wonder what it would be like to make that power by ourselves. Why should we limit ourselves? Why should we stay in the bounds of living these laws that no one enforces? Why should we exist in the pitiful, dreadful way we always have when we know what we could have?”

The caravan grew quiet. Very, very quiet. The kind of still quiet Sigfriede imagined people’s
corpses heard just after death. The kind of still quiet that came just before the first strike of lightning a storm sends to the ground before it lets loose the rain. The kind of still quiet that came as the Hunger came, leeching color and taste and sound and texture from the world, devouring bonds and memories, never to return them.

“Dude,” she said.

Kophyn held out his hands. “I mean, the whole voring planets thing? Not the greatest idea or execution. I’ll admit John didn’t carry through this idea in the best way he could have, but he was right, yeah? Why should we fucking limit ourselves when we know what’s beyond the limits? Maybe now that we know more, we could safely break those limits.”

“Kophyn,” Sigfriede’s voice wavered. She looked at Mavis and Random, who looked just as shaken as she felt. “Kophyn, are you ok?”

“Yeah,” he said. His shoulders were slumped over; his uniform didn’t seem as bright anymore. “I’m fine. I just… that makes sense to you guys, right?”

No one answered.

Sigfriede exchanged a glance with Mavis. Mavis couldn’t hide the concern from her eyes, but she smiled for Sigfriede’s sake.

Besides; despite the jarring experience she’d just gone through, part of Mavis didn’t want to end the tension in the caravan just yet. Letting Sigfriede come to her for comfort and guidance was letting Mavis play a role she hadn’t played in a long, long time; she was finally getting to play Big Sister again.

When they reached the Lake of Mists, Mavis tried to take the groups mind off the conversation they just had. She immediately went into Big Sister mode and started assigning people jobs.

“Okay,” she sighed. “We should get this figured out as soon as possible; this town relies on their farming and trade, and if we can’t get their plants back on their feet, they’ll be screwed. So, I say we divide and conquer. I’m a druid, so I’ve pretty much always got speak with animals prepared. If nothing else, I can start talking around with the fauna here and see if they’ve got anything useful to say.”

“Oh!” Random raised her hand. “I’ve got speak with animals as a ritual spell.”

“What’s a ritual spell?” Sigfriede asked.

“It’s like a normal spell,” Random said, “but instead of it taking the regular amount of time to cast it, I have to take another ten minutes. It doesn’t cost me any spell slots, though.”

“I see. How long will this one take you?”

“Just ten minutes.”

Sigfriede nodded. “Kophyn?”

“I’ve also got speak with animals memorized,” he seemed tense. “Girls, if you want to split the shoreline into thirds and each of us take a third, that would make it go faster.”
“I think that works,” Mavis said.

“Where does that leave Sigfriede?” Random asked.

“Oh…” Mavis gave her cousin a worried look. “Uhm… What do you think you could do, Siggy?”

“I, uh… I dunno. I guess I could poke around, see if I could find any creatures hanging out; see if there are any, like… elementals or something.”

“That could work…” Mavis didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, though.

“Hold on,” Kophyn made a timeout sign with his hands. “Random, did you say casting *speak with animals* will take you ten minutes?”

Random nodded.

“Okay, then if we all start casting at the same time, you’d probably finish by the time Mavis and I have gathered all the information we can. Mavis, do you have any other druid things you think would work well for this?”

Mavis adjusted her glasses and twirled her red hair between her fingers. “I think so… I may have a few things up my sleeve to look at weather patterns and stuff… see if that has anything to do with the lake. Like a casting of *druid craft* and do a weather forecast. That’s a cantrip…”

“That sounds perfect,” Kophyn said. “So, you get started on that, and Sigfriede and I can see if there’s any trace of any creatures,” he turned to Sigfriede and smiled. “I think you’re onto something with that. And while the three of us do those things, Random can start casting *speak with animals*. After ten minutes, I can leave Siggy by herself and join Mavis with casting *speak with animals*, taking one side of the shore each. How does that sound?”

Tres Party Babes shared a look with each other. Then they all shrugged and got started.

If Sigfriede hadn’t liked Kophyn beforehand, she definitely didn’t like him after the caravan ride. She especially didn’t like being left alone with him. Granted, she wasn’t alone alone with him, but they were far enough away from Mavis and Random to be out of earshot. Thankfully, Kophyn didn’t say much unless it related to the mission; does this look like something of interest to you; look, you can see where the moss used to grow on the surface of the water before; was that a monster, no it was just a water snake. Simple things like that. By the time Random had finished her ritual casting, neither of them had found anything interesting. Sigfriede and Kophyn headed back to their starting point. As Kophyn started heading towards his third of the shore line, Mavis reported what her weather forecast told her.

“Okay, so *druid craft* didn’t get me a whole lot,” she said. “I thought if I could get a reading on this area, I may have been able to figure out what past conditions were like as well. Unfortunately, or fortunately if you wanna look at it that way, the weather around here seems normal. There’s no real, like, external cause for the lake to be drying up. Temperatures seem normal, there aren’t any signs for cause of freak storms… it’s all just fine here.”

Sigfriede rubbed the tips of her ears. “Yeah, Kophyn and I didn’t really see anything weird at first glance. We didn’t look too deeply into anything, but just looking around we didn’t find anything of threat beyond a water snake that might be poisonous.”

“Most water snakes aren’t poisonous or venomous, Bean.”
“What do you know about snakes, Mavis?”

“More than you apparently.”

“Okay,” Kophyn pulled out his wand and twirled it between his fingers like a baton. “That’s enough, girls. If looking around at the lake and looking at weather patterns isn’t getting us anything, our best bets at this point is *speak with animals* and just going romping in the lake. I don’t know, it might be something stupid like a beaver dam in the wrong place or something. Let’s just get this over with, I don’t like being in the sun for this long.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before joining the Bureau…” Sigfriede muttered.

“What?”

“What?”

Kophyn rolled his eyes and put his wand to his lips.

“What are you doing?” Sigfriede asked. “Weren’t you the one who scolded me on holding a wand properly?”

“I’ve told you this before, Sigfriede, it’s a flute made to look like a wand. Now shut up so I can cast this dumb spell.”

As Kophyn started his little melody, Mavis and Random started working on their ends of the deal. That left Sigfriede alone on watch duty. She was quickly coming to the conclusion that this whole “no magic whatsoever” approach wasn’t as great of an idea as she thought. If she was stuck on a team where even the tank knew some spells, and she was the only one without it, her mind raced with all the disadvantages that could put her team at. Maybe it wasn’t as big of a deal for this mission, but she couldn’t imagine what hell it might cause if they ever got into the big leagues like Magnus, Taako and Merle had. What if they ran into a creature that had resistance to damage dealt by nonmagical weapons? That was a thing, right? Sigfriede could have sworn she remembered something like that from one of her early classes. And even if they never did run into a creature like that, who’s to say that they wouldn’t get caught up in a fight with some rogues? If Sigfriede made Mavis or even Kophyn waste spell slots on her to boost her survivability in combat, that’d make it harder on them without many benefits to make it worth the effort. And if they went without using magic on Sigfriede, all of her guns were ranged, and she liked to shoot two-handed. She didn’t have a shield. She didn’t have great stamina, either. If she was stabbed in the middle of aiming at somebody, there wasn’t a great chance of her surviving. In all of Sigfriede’s twenty-three years of life, healing magic never really did the trick. She’d have to go back to the hospital, and that was a punishment worse than being reaped by your mother and grounded in the eternal stockade.

Random patted her turtle’s head and put it back down in the grass. She started carefully walking along the shoreline until she found a cool rock, pocketed it, and then found another turtle to talk to. Mavis had a trio of birds sitting long her freckled arm. One was pecking at her glasses. Kophyn had found a snake and was letting it slither along his arms as they talked. Gross.

Sigfriede sighed and decided to kill two birds with one stone. She doublechecked that her boots were laced up tight, pulled out her pistol, and waded into the water.

The mud sucked her in lazily until it wrapped around her ankles. She could really get a sense for how dry the lake was now, since the water only came up to her thighs. Sigfriede didn’t have much experience with lakes, she was more of a beach half elf, but she could imagine that, given the top
of the lake basin was just taller than she was, there was supposed to be much, much more water
than this. It kind of made her heart hurt. Not in a heart attack kind of way, but a sympathy kind of
way. Of course, the town would have panicked hearing the lake was drying out. This was a big
lake; how much would it take to make it this small? She walked deeper into the lake, and the water
didn’t rise much higher. Silt swirled around her feet as she walked, and it made her feel ethereal, or
spectral. Her feet were hidden in a cloud of swirling matter, and the water around her legs made her
walk slower, with more resistance, like she was floating instead of walking. Little fish and plant
life swam in and out of her path, pecking at her boots and tangling with her laces.

Then something moved out of the corner of her eye. She cocked her pistol and turned as quickly as
she could, aiming down in the water; she was expecting a water snake, but nothing was there. She
raised an eyebrow. Turning in a slow and steady circle, Sigfriede watched to see if anything else
would move again.

Nothing happened.

She shrugged and kept walking.

“Sigfriede!” Mavis called off the shore. “Don’t go in too far, you don’t know what’s in there!”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “I’m fine, Mavis, I’m not six anymore!”

“Yeah, but there might be a monster, and you don’t know enough magic to defend yourself!”

“And you do?”

“Don’t make me get in there with you!”

Sigfriede flipped her off and turned back to watching the water. “Like you’d be able to see much
more than me…” Something moved again. Sigfriede aimed her pistol at it. “You’d lose your
glasses and bring the whole mission to a holt…”

The movement grew bigger, moving away from Sigfriede and off to her left.

“Sigfriede, seriously!” Mavis called again. “Just come back up here and we’ll send Random in!”

“And how the hell am I supposed to do that, Mav?” she answered. “This thing is deeper than I am
tall.”

“I’ll help you up!”

“Mav, I love you and all, but you’re shorter still. I’ll just climb up by myself, geez…”

Sigfriede started walking to the edge of the lake. She giggled at the mud and silt swirling around
her, aggravating little schools of baby fish. They attached the soles of her boots; it made her feel
like Godzilla.

“Uhhh, Sigfriede?” Kophyn called at her this time.

It took every atom in her body not to just drop her arms and let her pistol get wet. “What do you
want, seriously? I’m coming back!”

“No, I’m not kidding, Siggy, you need to move faster.”

“Kophyn, you’re not my fucking dad, okay?”
“Sigfriede—”

Something behind her made the water move. She heard the trickle of the waves move into drips and drops. Something cold breathed down her neck. The dripping never stopped. The breathing grew louder, and soon growls accompanied it.

Color drained from even Random’s face. The three of Sigfriede’s shore-bound teammates shared a nervous glance.

“What?” Sigfriede asked.

“Uh, Bean?” Mavis said. “Please don’t move.”

“Why?” Sigfriede’s brain flashed back to something she hadn’t thought about in a long, long time. A weekend, years and years ago, in the middle of the nearby woods. There were shrubs that came alive, and attacked her; attacked the other kids, too. She was with other kids, right? And those kids were scared of… something. They weren’t scared of the shrubs, the shrubs had been taken care of. Then she remembered the crackling of electricity in your ears, and the ringing of a shrill voice. But that voice was welcomed, warm. Familiar. She liked that voice. It made her blush, all the way to the tips of her ears.

“Sigfriede, please don’t freak out,” Mavis said. “Stay still, and if you know any spells, I suggest you start remembering them now. There’s a water elemental behind you.”

Chapter End Notes

I really hope y'all are having a good time because I'm not. My car won't start and my mechanic is saying the engine is shot, but my engine light wasn't on before hand. I'm trying to get a second opinion but the few friends I have are all busy at the moment so I have no idea where to start. Anyway, I'm hoping to distract myself with school starting on Monday and this fic, so I really hope you guys are liking it.

How about Kophyn's power speech, though, huh? Bet you didn't see that coming, huh? This came out of left field for Sigfriede. She isn't entirely sure what this means in the long run, but it definitely has effects on the team in the short term. But they've gotta deal with this elemental first. I suggest you guys start paying special attention to the notes here in these next few chapters, I'm going to start listing information concerning character sheets and magic items soon, and if you're a rules slut you may want to list all the information down to follow along with the mechanics in the story!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being a great beta while her life gets all wonky. She's essentially become a dyslexia filter for me. Don't forget those kudos and comments, I love talking to you all about the story so far! You guys be nice to each other, and I'll see you next Thursday.
Sigfriede stood still, with her shoulders hunched and her pistol hovering just above the water’s surface. She started taking shallow breaths; she didn’t want to aggravate the creature behind her. Its shadow loomed over her, stretching over the still water. Short, cold, brutish breaths blew the hair on the back of her head over her face. Her glasses started slipping off the bridge of her nose.

She tensed, watching Mavis all but chuck herself into the lake with Sigfriede. The water came up to her hips, and she seemed to struggle with walking more than Sigfriede had. Still, she made her way to her little cousin, holding up her holly branch like a club.

Sigfriede’s glasses fell off her nose and into the water below her. She cursed under her breath.

“Mavis,” she hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Shut up,” Mavis hissed back.

The water elemental roared, slamming a huge fist into the water, sending waves of force over both of the girls. Sigfriede’s knees buckled. She heard the rush of water fill her ears, and the breath was knocked out of her lungs. She couldn’t see anything in the murky water, and even if she could, she was tossed around too much to see past the fury of hair around her head. There wasn’t any sign of her glasses.

Above water, Mavis stumbled; she fell on her butt in the muddy silt, losing her holly branch. Kophyn jumped in the lake but didn’t advance too far. He still had his wand out and was careful to keep it out of the murky waters. He pointed the tip of his flute out in front of him.

“Hey!” he called. “You big dummy! Over here!”

That got the elemental’s attention. It dug its ghastly eyes into Kophyn’s, its form shifting, waving, dripping. Kophyn finally understood what the word semi-corporeal meant; this thing had no solid form, no standard state of being. And yet, if he wanted to, he could reach out and touch it.

Kophyn seemed to waver. His wand dipped. What could he do against this thing? A vicious mockery? Then he stuttered out, “W-what? You gonna just… float up to me? Like a… dead…
leaf?"

That spell definitely didn’t land. He could tell.

The elemental wavered, then scoffed and moved closer to Sigfriede.

“Wait, wait!” Mavis held out her hands. She stumbled to her feet, then started speaking in a rough, alien language Kophyn had never heard before. “Hang on, hang on. Please.”

The elemental stopped moving. His form churned in place like a waterfall. He was inches away from Sigfriede. She still hadn’t come up from the water.

Mavis tried to contain her panic. Maybe she’d taken after Mookie; she was just pulling her leg.

“We aren’t trying to hurt you,” she continued; if she remembered correctly, her mentor from her enclave had told her elementals spoke different dialects of Primordial. She’d learned it for this reason exactly. “We’re just… uh… we’re civil people, on a job. There’s this town nearby that relies on the water this lake supplies. We’re just trying to find out why the lake is drying up and help the town get their water supply back. Do you know anything about it?”

It tilted its head amorphous head. “What town,” it asked. Its Primordial was eloquent, flowing and graceful. “There are no towns here. I’m just trying to have a good time.”

Mavis faltered. A good time? By doing what, indirectly starving people?

Random moved next. She jumped off the edge of the river bank and tried to land on her feet. But she misjudged the depth of the water, rolled her ankle and landed on the side of her foot in the mud. She stumbled, got back on her feet, and got ready to charge the thing.

“Random don’t!” Mavis shouted. “I’m talking to it, it’s right on top of Sigfriede; just stay right there.”

“Yeah,” she responded. “It’s right on top of her and she hasn’t gotten back up yet, it’s clearly aggressive!”

“Stop thinking with your fists for five minutes!”

“We don’t have five minutes, Sigfriede’s drowning!”

Sigfriede pushed herself up from the muddy ground. The water wasn’t deep, but she remembered the time she’d slipped and almost drowned in the bathtub when she was little. Her dad panicked and grabbed her arms. His calloused hands yanked her up, then cupped the back of her head as Sigfriede’s little lungs convulsed, shooting water out of her mouth and burning the back of her throat. Barry smacked her back over and over, a little too harshly she remembered, but she was too out of breath to say anything. Once she stopped coughing and started breathing again, Barry scooped her out of the bath and into a warm, fluffy towel. He held onto her tightly, rocking her and rubbing her back through the towel. When she’d calmed down and stopped crying, Barry explained, as best he could to a small child, that it was easy to drown in any depth of water.

“It doesn’t matter how deep the water is,” he said, his voice still a little shaky, “what matters is that when your head goes under water and you panic, your body is naturally going to want to take in air. But there’s no air under water, right?”

Sigfriede nodded her tiny head.
“Right,” Barry brushed strands of wet hair from his daughter’s forehead. “There’s only water under water. And we can’t breathe water. So when you’re underwater and you try to take in a breath, you just inhale water. That’s what drowning is; flooding your lungs with water, not getting any oxygen and suffocating. You could drown getting a swirl in a puddle if someone tried hard enough.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Your uncle tried it on me once when we were stuck on a beach. He was teaching me how to swim.”

“That’s mean.”

“Teaching me to swim?”

“Bullying you.”

Barry laughed. “Yeah, well, your mom made sure Taako learned his lesson soon enough. You ok, Baby Bean?”

Sigfriede’s lungs burned. She tried her hardest not to inhale water. Her hands dug into the mud and pushed her up into a sitting position. As soon as her head was above water, her body acted on its own volition; she gasped for air and coughed, just like her little lungs had in the bath tub.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “I can’t breathe.”

“Don’t move!” Mavis said. “For the love of literally every god ever, don’t fucking move, Siggy.”

“Mavis,” Kophyn hissed. “This thing is big, and it’s not taking any prisoners. We need to just kill it and get the fuck out of here.”

“Kophyn, I swear on my fucking life—”

Kophyn tried for another vicious mockery. He gripped his flute with grit; he thought back to his time in the Underdark. All the times his family had shamed him, the hits, punches, thrown knives and discarded ideas. He thought back to every single time he’d tried to prove the hierarchy of his home was stupid, and the same word everyone had ever called him.

“Hey,” he called again. “Don’t drown my fucking teammates, you fucking drongo! Get stuffed!”

Silver tendrils of light flew from his flute. They twirled and twisted their way to the elemental’s ears, where they sparked, then died out. The elemental flinched, then growled. Kophyn could tell the spell hadn’t done as much damage as he’d hoped, but it was just enough to make the thing hesitate; it was just enough to let Random run up and pull Sigfriede to her feet.

Mavis splashed water in Kophyn’s direction. “I fucking told you to stop!”

“I’m trying to get Sigfriede to the shore!”

“And I’m trying to solve this without killing anyone!”

“Oh, shut up, you hippie pacifist!”

The elemental roared again. He raised another shapeless arm and looked ready to drop it with reckless abandon.
“Wait, wait wait!” Mavis tried for Primordial again, this time hoping to mimic this thing’s accent. “Please, I promise you we aren’t trying to harm you. My teammate here just doesn’t understand Primordial and is confused.”

“Tell him to stand down,” the creature warned. “Stand down now, or else the half elf gets it.”

Mavis didn’t entirely take that threat seriously, what could slamming Sigfriede in the face with a bunch of water do beyond breaking her glasses? What could slamming Sigfriede in the face with a bunch of water do when her glasses were already lost and probably broken anyway? Still, she was still doubled over Random’s arm, heaving and wheezing. She probably didn’t need anymore water than she’d had for the day.

“Kophyn,” Mavis said. “Don’t do anything else. This thing is just confused and defending its territory. If you don’t make another attack, it’ll calm down and talk with us.”

“What language are you using?” He still had his wand at the ready.

“Primordial,” she explained. “Elementals are, like… I dunno, ancient beings or something. They speak dialects of Primordial because of how old they are.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“My enclave. My old mentor taught me it. We ran into a lot of wind elementals in the woods.”

“Hey,” the water elemental called again. “What’s going on? What is this drow saying?”

“I’m explaining your side of things to him,” Mavis said. “I think he’s agreeing to stand down.”

She turned back to Kophyn and raised a ginger, freckled eyebrow. “You’re agreeing to stand down, right Kophyn?”

Kophyn bit his lip. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. His fingers grew sweaty around his flute. He adjusted his grip, then inhaled and placed the instrument in a pocket on his uniform. “Fine.”

“Thank you.”

The elemental hesitated. It glanced between Mavis and Kophyn, then looked back at Random and Sigfriede in the background. Sigfriede was starting to stand up straight and breathe properly.

“So,” Mavis said. “Like I said. There’s a nearby farming town that relies on the water this lake supplies.”

“Farming?” it asked. “What does that mean?”

“They grow plants, and food, and animals,” Mavis explained. “But they’re a very small town. Not a lot of people live there. They use the water here to keep their plants and foods and animals alive. If this lake dries out, they may starve and die. There were a few boys who came by just a couple of days ago. They mentioned being attacked. Do you have any idea what happened to them?”

The elemental grunted. “Yes. I do that.”

“You did that? You attacked them?”

“Yes.”
“Why?”

“They don’t know their boundaries, just like you and your friends don’t know yours. I am a water elemental; all water is my territory, and I can use it as I please.”

Mavis coughed and started twirling her hair between her fingers again. “So… so, you’re drying up the lake?”

“Not drying up,” the creature crossed its arms. “Using.”

“How?”

“Make big! I am a small one, see. Smallest of my family. And still, I find nice wife who I love very much. We try to pleasure each other very nicely, and we do a pretty good job of it for a while. But then, we both become bored, see.”

Mavis groaned. She took her glasses off and pinched the bridge of her nose. She could tell where this was going; her dad had enough of a filter to give her experience in this field.

God, Mavis really hated existing sometimes.

“Are you okay, friend?”

“Yeah, yeah!” she put her glasses back on and gave a tight smile. “I’m fine. So, you’re using the water for pleasure?”

“Yes!” The elemental beamed and puffed its amorphous chest out. “Big pleasure! I find the bigger I am, the better I feel during—”

“Yeah, yeah I get it, thanks,” Mavis waved it off and sighed. “Let me talk to my teammates, okay? I think we can find a… compromise for you.”

It seemed satisfied with that.

Mavis walked back to Sigfriede and Random, dragging Kophyn behind her. She looked back over her shoulder to find the elemental sucking up more water into its form with a big, pleased smile on its face. She shuttered and gagged.

“Guys,” she said. “This thing’s just looking for ways to spice up its sex life. We can’t kill it.”

Sigfriede coughed again and squinted. “You can’t be serious.”

“I mean… it didn’t out right say it, but it was pretty heavily implied. It doesn’t even know there are towns around this lake. We need to just convince it to put all the water it’s taken from the lake back, and then we can have the Bureau find a place to put it where it can… enjoy itself… without unintentionally putting consequences on innocent people.”

“No,” Sigfriede said. “We deal with enough of this shit from your dad. I say we just kill it.”

“Sigfriede, I’m not joking right now.”

“Neither am I! That’s disgusting! No town wants some freak’s kink water to water their crops with!”

Mavis rolled her eyes. “No one needs to know the details of it, we can just tell them there was a misunderstanding with a water elemental and the Bureau is handling it; their water should come
back by the end of the week.”

Random tugged on her bangs. “I mean, what can the Bureau actually do for it? We can’t just bring it up on the moon with us.”

“I don’t know, Random,” Mavis threw up her hands. “Maybe Lucretia can find a spot in the middle of the ocean somewhere for it or something.”

No one offered any other ideas. Mavis scanned the faces of her teammates and stopped on Kophyn. He seemed pale and unfocused.

“Kophyn?”

The drow startled. “What?”

“You alright, there, dude?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Sigfriede coughed again. “You look called out.”

“I said don’t worry about it, Sigfriede.”

“What,” a grin spread across Sigfriede’s lips. “You wanna join it over there? Get in on some of that good good water action?”

“I said shut up, Sigfriede!”

“Guys, stop,” Mavis interjected. “Are we calling Lucretia or not?”

“I dunno,” Sigfriede said. “Maybe we should wait for Kophyn to get his fill, if you catch my drift.”

“Call Lucretia,” Kophyn snapped. “I’m getting in the shade; this sun shit sucks ass.”

Sigfriede busted out laughing, and Random joined her. Mavis sighed and shook her head.

“One of these days,” she warned, pulling out her stone of farspheeche, “You’re gonna say something stupid and call yourself out. Then you’re gonna need to join him in the shade.”

Lucretia’s stone started ringing in the middle of filing paperwork. It was rather important paperwork, but she’d been doing paperwork all day, so she figured a break was in order.

“Hello,” she said.

“Lucretia!” Mavis’s voice came through on the other end. “Uh, Madam Director, sorry. Hey, uh, we’ve solved the issue with Beacon, I think.”

Lucretia furrowed her eyebrows. “Really? It’s only been a few days.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lucretia heard water splashing under Mavis’s voice. “It wasn’t the most complicated thing ever. A little tricky on team work, but... I think we got it.”

“And what exactly was the issue?”
Well, the lake was drying up. When we found that out we started trying to figure out what had caused it; weather patterns or environmental issues… I talked to a few birds who wanted to use my glasses for their nests, but eventually Sigfriede found the issue for us.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah, well, indirectly. She decided she was going to look around in the lake and ended up startling this water elemental. Long story short, the elemental decided the water was its territory and it was going to… hoard it…”

Lucretia raised an eyebrow. “Hoard it?”

“Don’t ask. I just want to know if there’s a way we can relocate it to the ocean or something, where it can hoard all the water it wants and not indirectly starve people.”

“I see…” She pulled out a new file to fill out. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

There was a pause. “That’s it. I just wanted to know if there was a way we could relocate this thing.”

“Can you restore the water supply?”

“I can probably convince it to release this hoard, yeah.”

Lucretia hummed and tapped her pen on her desk. “You know only dragons really hoard things, Mav.”

“I said don’t ask.”

That earned Mavis a chuckle. “Fine. I’ll have a caster come down and assist you four with that. I don’t want you coming back to the base until this towns got running water again, do you understand?”

“Got it.”

“And Mavis?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell your teammates I said good job on the quick work.”

“I will. Bye, Lucretia.”

“Bye, Mavis.”

Mavis put her stone back in her pocket and headed back to the elemental.

Within the next day, the lake had been refilled and the now tiny elemental and its wife were relocated via a teleportation spell from a higher-level caster sent by the Bureau. The team headed back into town, reported the success with the mayor, and then headed into their inn.

Sigfriede had retired to her room after dinner. She called her parents to report on the mission; she told them about her near-drowning experience, she told them about the elemental and its adventures in the bedroom, she told them about Kolphyn. All the things he’d said, the way he’d
spoken to Mavis, the way he talked about John. How he’d paled with Mavis talked about the elemental’s motives. When the conversation ended, she remembered to tell her dad she’d lost her glasses again. He wasn’t surprised and promised to have the prescription put in by the end of the week. They said their “I love you’s” and their “goodbyes” and hung up.

Then someone knocked on her door.

“Who is it?”

“Its Kophyn.”

Sigfriede hesitated. Why would Kophyn just randomly show up at her door?

“What do you want.”

“I found your pistol in the lake. I figured you’d want it back.”

Oh. She’d dropped it in the lake, hadn’t she?

Sigfriede opened the door a crack and stuck her head out. She had to squint to see his face clearly without her glasses. “Did you find my glasses, too?”

“I found half of the frames.”

“Never mind. Can I have the gun, please?”

Kophyn handed it to her, grip first. She took it, placed it on the entry table, and then stuck her head back out the door.

“What,” Kophyn said.

“Why are you still here?”

“Nothing.”

She squinted harder. Lup would have said she looked like her dad. “It’s not nothing, you would have left by now if it was nothing.”

“I was just wondering like…” Kophyn rubbed the back of his neck. “You know, the few spells you did get right in school were pretty fuckin’ powerful. You had something in you. I was just wondering, like… I don’t know. I was wondering, because I figured you had medical stuff after your—” he made a general motion to his face. “—mishap, and that you’d just come back to school. What made you leave and become a, uh… what’d you call it? Gunslinger?”

Sigfriede nodded. Kophyn didn’t move.

“What?” she asked.

“What?” He sounded defensive.

“Why are you still here?”

“Do you even use magic at all anymore?”

“No.”
“Oh.” There was a pause. “I don’t want to be rude, but can I come in?”

She was about to say “no”, then thought the better of it. Clearly something was up; Kophyn had never been this nice to her before. Granted, she didn’t think he’d miraculously changed or whatever, especially after the things he’d said to Mavis and his thoughts on Story and Song, but it was clear something else was going on.

Sigfriede opened the door and stood aside.

“Thanks,” he walked in.

Besides Sigfriede’s bed, there wasn’t much in terms of seating. There was an armchair off to the side of her bed, and Kophyn walked straight for it. Sigfriede sat on her bed, leaning against her pillows.

Kophyn had changed out of his dirty uniform. In the last few months, the regal blues and clean whites were all she’d seen him in, so it was odd to see him back in his loose, traditional drow garb; black linen with purple accents, with brown twine tied around his waist that kept the hem of the shirt close to his torso. He’d pulled the fabric so that the excess draped over the string and filled out his twiggy form. He’d kept his pants tucked into his leather boots through school, but let his toes air out this time. A small cape rested over his shoulders, presumably for warming up after spending the day wet, and the same twine kept the hems of his sleeves against his wrists, with the same styling of fabric from his waist. He seemed to almost blend into the dimly lit room.

“I guess all of the rooms are decorated similarly here,” he glanced around the room, inspecting each piece of artwork and every map hanging from the walls. He pointed to one of the larger maps. “I don’t have this one in my room, though.”

Sigfriede hugged one of her pillows. “What do you want from me, Kophyn?”

“Would you mind explaining your little… pistol, was it?”

“What, showing you how to use a gun?”

“I mean, I’m not particularly interested in knowing how to use it. I was just wondering how it works, and why you’ve decided you’d rather do that instead of continuing to learn magic.”

The scar under Sigfriede’s left eye twitched. She’d just told her parents about the things Kophyn had said; the desperation in his voice when he spoke of being limitless, the way his eyes hollowed out, and his shoulders hunched over. Sigfriede had never met anyone so starved of validation. Why should she explain her safety net to him?

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he said. There was a calmness in his voice; a rational. It seemed… reasonable. “I was just curious. If you don’t want to, we could talk about other things.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know… I told you what it’s like in drow society; why don’t you tell me what it’s like living with the Seven Birds.”

Sigfriede yawned. Her brain got a little fuzzy. She rubbed her face, gave it little thought, then got up and grabbed her pistol from the table she’d placed it on. Thankfully the eyepiece was still attached. She’d need that until her glasses came in.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll make a compromise. I’ll tell you the mechanics of this thing, which goes
into why I’ve decided on it over magic, and then tell you a little about how my family handled my surges.”

“I didn’t ask about how your family handled your surges.”

“I’m not telling you Taako’s net worth, or what my dad’s favorite dairy-free coffee recipe is. You’ll never dig out Merle’s favorite way to use Parley, and Lucretia’s personal life is under wraps. My mom’s favorite lullaby isn’t from this planar system, so don’t try to learn it, and Magnus doesn’t have a favorite dog. Now,” she went to her closet and dug out her tinker’s tools. “I’m only taking this apart to see if the water did any damage to it—”

“What about Davenport?”

“No one knows what’s going on with Davenport except Davenport. Stop asking. I like my guns because they’re more predictable than my magic. They aren’t perfect, because they still misfire and jam, but those are easy to solve and fix…”

Kophyn spent the next hour or so quietly watching and listening. As Sigfriede picked apart all of the little bits and bobs to her pistol, she inspected each of them for cleanliness. She dug out dirt, mud, rocks and plants from tiny crevices. Her tools were so small, petite even, and delicate, but they each served a purpose; they each functioned like a puzzle piece. Screws to unscrew pieces of metal from each other, leather to patch up the grip of the machine, twine to keep the leather in place, brushes and spoolies to dust and clean, chambers and bullets and mallets and powder all went in to this hand held, mechanical thing. Kophyn would almost go as far to say it was as if Sigfriede had picked apart all the different parts of a magic missile and put it in a tangible tool. It was fascinating.

“What happens if you can’t fix a jam in combat?”

“Then I can’t use it again,” she blew some caked in gun powder from its chamber, “until I take time out of combat to take it apart and fix it.”

“Is this the only one you have?”

“Yeah…”

Kophyn hummed. “Maybe you should consider making another one. Just in case this one goes out and you can’t use it; I wouldn’t want you to be defenseless in combat.”

“Why?” She picked at one of the raised scars on her chest. “So you won’t have to file HR papers over why I’m in the hospital again?”

“Because Lucretia’s been up our asses about team work.”

“Where did that little…” Sigfriede looked around her little mapwork of components. “I had a bolt nut in my lap five seconds ago—”

Kophyn reached over and picked up a nut from Sigfriede’s knee. He held it closer to her face.

“Oh,” she blushed. “Thanks. I usually have my glasses when I do this.”

“How bad is your eyesight?”

A smirk crossed her lips, and a mischievous glint filled her eyes; Kophyn would even call it fey-like.
“Imagine,” she said, “what it would be like to have the eyes of a one-hundred-and-fifty-something year-old man.”

“Most men that age that I know have fairly good eyesight.”

Sigfriede’s whole body paused, from her face to the tips of her fingernails. “Oh, I mean human. It’s a joke. My dad and I have the same prescription; I just like to joke about my dad being really old because he technically is. We were both born with just really bad eyes. I really can’t even make out the details of your face when you sit back in the chair, there.”

“Perhaps I should lean in closer, then.”

“This thing is almost put back together, touch me and I’ll shoot your eye out.”

Kophyn chuckled.

“I’m not joking, I’m not your friend.” Sigfriede’s voice became solid and serious. “My parents raised me to nurture curiosity; there is nothing innately wrong with being curious. But just because I show you how my side of our team works doesn’t mean I like you as a person. I respect your want for knowledge, but I don’t respect your limitless ego,” she screwed the final piece of metal together and reassembled the eyepiece. “Words have power, and so do thoughts. You don’t treat friends equally.”

Kophyn leaned back. She couldn’t see his soured expression there. “What do you mean?”

“You’d always sit directly in the middle of your friend group at meal times, Kophyn. There’s a hierarchy in your social life the same way there is in your home world. I don’t like the line you walk with your ideas, Kophyn. I don’t like that you used magic on me to get your way with this situation, and I especially don’t like the way you spoke to my cousin.” She tied new leather to the grip, then started packing in new, dry black powder, fresh bullets, and cocked back the hammer.

“Want to see how it fires?”

Chapter End Notes

Very brief notes this week, since classes have started back up for me! It looks like I'll likely be able to stick to posting on Thursdays, just depends on what time of the day. If I don't post on Thursday one week, I'll probably post on Friday. My car is still in the shop since I'm getting a second opinion on it, but on the bright side I've finally been put in the process to getting antidepressants; things should be looking up soon for me. Thank you guys for leaving your nice comments and everything! I promise I'm okay, I just need that little help not feeling really upset all the time.

Also, that scene with Siggy and Kophyn was probably one of my favorite to write so far. Siggy's a spicy bean.

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for finding a way to beta for a grade while she's also in school! If you guys would be so kind as to share this fic with your other TAZ friends and such, that would be wonderful as well! Be kind to each other, and I'll see you all on Thursday, hopefully.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN-- LUNAR INTERLUDE I, THE WIND PICKS UP

Chapter Summary

The team returns to their home on the moon base after the success of their odd first mission. They learn how the Bureau has kept its old traditions in these new, less secretive times; but when Lady Luck tells Sigfriede to stop lying to herself, tensions in the group reach an all-time high. The latest issue becomes a matter of whether or not personality extremes and philosophical differences will drive the girls apart, or Kophyn out. Kophyn mansplains magic items. Sigfriede has a burst of dissatisfaction. Random tells a spooky story from her childhood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN— LUNAR INTERLUDE I, THE WIND PICKS UP

The team stayed in Beacon for a few days more, aiding the town in making sure their irrigation systems were functioning properly, filing paperwork for mechanical issues and some minor funding. By the end of the week, the town was up and running again, and all the plants looked like they were on the mend. Random called down their checked-out transport pod, entered their team code on it, and they headed back to the moon.

When they returned to the Main Hangar Bay, Avi immediately greeted them with a big smile and some directions.

“Hey, guys!” He beamed, “Glad to see you all made it back alive! How’d the mission go?”

“Good!” Mavis smiled and adjusted her glasses.

“Yeah, it was fine.” Kophyn tugged on the sleeves of his uniform.

Random smiled and waved.

“I lost my glasses,” Sigfriede said. “I can’t fucking see.”

Avi chuckled and started his regular check-in routine. “You got a back-up pair?”

“No. I’ve got the eyepiece on my pistol. That’s got my prescription in it.”

“Don’t think that can replace your glasses, though.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Mavis ripped a loose thread from Sigfriede’s uniform.

“Hey, that’s my ass!”
Mavis scoffed. “I’ve changed your diapers, shut up, Sigfriede.”

Sigfriede went to poke her cheek, but Mavis dodged out of the side and left Sigfriede to stumble forward.

“Oh hey!” Avi turned on his heels and motioned towards the four of them. “Uh, I think the Director wanted you guys to head to her office once you guys got back. I think we’re still doing the same old return system for missions. Y’all can head that way whenever you’re ready.”

Once everyone had cleaned up a bit and grabbed a bite to eat, they headed back to the big dome and into the throne room. They were announced by the regular guard and welcomed into the room. Lucretia stood by her chair, wearing her ornate uniform, this time leaving the ornate robe behind. Standing beside her were four different people, one of which Sigfriede recognized as her halfling boss Cilia Bophil. Sigfriede waved at her. Cilia winked back.

Lucretia smiled at the team as they approached.

“Hello,” she said softly. “Welcome back, the four of you. I take it everything went well?”

The team gave a harmony of affirmation.

“Wonderful! As I’m sure you all are aware, as Bureau of Benevolence employees, everyone is given a baseline salary that’s adjusted to position and seniority. However, for our field missionaries we also offer a small bonus for each mission you complete. The pay rate isn’t really adjusted for much, but its only fair. Your side of the Bureau is integral to ensuring the whole system runs smoothly. Now,” she stepped back and motioned to the four other people behind her. “since Davenport is well out of my reach most of the time I’ve had to redesign the way I handle post-mission rewards. I’m going to need you all to meet up with your department leaders, here, and follow their instructions on filing your closing mission paperwork. They’ve also got your payment, as well as your tokens to the Fantasy Gachapon.”

Sigfriede choked on air. “There’s still a fucking Fantasy Gachapon?”

Lucretia blinked. “Well… Yes, Sigfriede, why would I lay off Leon?”

“Leon still runs it?”

“Sigfriede, what do you think—”

The confusion dropped from Lucretia’s face and was replaced with realization. The shit-eating grin Sigfriede had tried to contain finally broke free, and it took everything Lucretia had in her not to start laughing.

“Sigfriede,” she said. “Sigfriede, I know what you’re thinking, and for the love of God and everything that is holy, please do not do this. Please, Sigfriede, I’m begging you, like I’m seriously begging you to not do the thing you’re thinking about doing to Leon the Artificer, the greatest and hardest working man to ever grace the face of this moon base. The day your uncle left this establishment was the greatest day of Leon’s life, he wouldn’t shut up about it for months, do not do this to him.”

“Don’t do what,” Sigfriede said.

“Sigfriede, you are twenty-two fucking years old, you know how a gachapon works, please don’t
start all of this back up again. It’s only been thirty years since he had to endure such stupidity; to do
this to him would be literal torture and then I’d have to turn you into HR, launch an investigation
into the ethics of your standing as employee and fire you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ma’am.”

“Sig—” Lucretia stifled a laugh and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sigfriede, don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything, Madam Director, I’m just—I’m just standing here in, uh… in my—”
Sigfriede had to keep herself from laughing as well, “in my freshly dry cleaned uniform awaiting
orders and uh, uh… instructions on what I need to do upon the completion of this stupid fucking
mission that definitely didn’t involve an elemental who’s into inflation shit.”

Lucretia couldn’t help it. She let out a string of strangled laughs and had to support herself by
holding onto the arm rest of her throne. Sigfriede started giggling, and soon Mavis and Random
joined in with her. Kophyn stood in place awkwardly, not entirely sure how to handle the
atmosphere. Behind Lucretia, the department heads started chuckling as well. Then Lucretia
inhaled sharply, rubbed her face, and recollected herself.

“Okay,” she said. “Alright. I see. We’re back on this bullshit, aren’t we?”

Sigfriede rubbed her nose and tried to keep a straight face. “You brought this on yourself. There is
no God in this establishment. No one can hear your screams, Lucretia.”

“Alright, alright, seriously, we need to get back on track.”

“I think we’re perfectly on track, if you ask me.”

“Sigfriede, if another word comes out of your mouth I’m calling your mother and she will ground
you.”

“Lup can’t ground me I’m a fucking—”

“I’m getting my stone of farspeech out right now!”

Okay, okay! I’ll shut up, I’m sorry!”

Lucretia took a deep breath, then tried again. “As I was saying, your department heads have your
payment, gachapon coins, and instructions on paperwork. You all can do as you please, and I’m
going to excuse myself to a very isolated quiet place so that Leon can never find me again. Please
leave my office right now before I have the four of you ejected.”

After Cilia explained Sigfriede’s paperwork to her, handed her the payment and gachapon coin, she
gave Sigfriede kudos on lightening the mood of the throne room.

“I don’t think I’ve seen Lucretia crack a smile that big in a long, long time,” she said. “Which isn’t
to say I think she’s still sad, just that there are some things she missed. Keep up the good work,
kiddo.”

After some moon base map consultation, the team found their way to the gachapon, and Sigfriede
had to take a moment to collect herself before she went in.
“You’re really pulling this shit, aren’t you,” Mavis said.

Sigfriede gasped. “Oh my god Mavis you have to get in on this with me, please.”

“Get in on what? My dad never pulled any bullshit with Leon.”

“No no no, please just play dumb with me I swear I’ll give you five gold pieces if you do this with me just… Please, please, please, I’m beggin’ you; I miss our antics as kids so much, it’ll be just like old times.”

“I never pulled anything with you, it was always you and Mookie; I was just along for insurance.”

Kophyn cleared his throat. “Are we going in or not?”

“Mavis are you helping me?”

“I’ll help you by not stopping you.”

“Fair enough!”

Kophyn opened the door. There was a chiming of a bell, and a small gnomish man looked up from an equally small desk. He had tiny round specs sitting on his nose, an unfashionably long white beard, and a huge book resting open on the top of his desk. Different sized items and opened capsuled laid in organized piles on and around the artificer’s desk, and he seemed busy with organizing the piles. Behind him sat a tank with a metal base that, had it not been for the multi-sized capsules resting inside of it, Sigfriede would have called a giant gumball machine. Situated at the bottom of the base, about the proper height for the average arm’s reach for most races, was a properly sized coin slot that looked humorously tiny in comparison to the rest of the machine.

When he saw the foursome walk in, he bounced down from his seat at the desk and ran up to them.

“Ah!” He said. “Welcome! I am Leon the Artificer; come in, come in. I assume the four of you have received gachapon tokens? There’s such a low demand for them nowadays here at the Bureau, we don’t use the same system we used to. Let me guess, Recruiters? Field Missionaries? Interns?”

“Interns?” Sigfriede muttered, “I never got a fucking gachapon coin when I was an intern…”

Leon blinked. “What was that, dear?”

Sigfriede’s mind short circuited. She was supposed to be messing with this guy right? She coughed, forgot to blink, and rolled with it. Sigfriede decided she’d pull a blank stare, purse her lips, and give the white and blue smudge in front of her intense eye contact.

Leon hummed. “Anyway, welcome, welcome! This is exciting! Before each of you get your turn at trying your luck, let me explain how this works now.”

The gnome led Sigfriede and her team over to the supersized machine. He patted the side of the metal base, and spoke again with excited optimism, “Obtaining your magic item works the same way it did before; an employee obtains a gachapon coin from the Director upon completion of a mission, and the coin is turned in here at the Fantasy Gachapon. The item you obtain is still left up to fate, as it were, however the rules are less strict concerning the trade and sale of these items. Since the proper replacement of the light of creation and the defeat of The Hunger, the Bureau no longer needs to keep cheque and balances on the exchange of powerful magics on the base. Therefore, if you are displeased with the items you find fate placing in your hands today, there
shouldn’t be any qualms about the four of you trading with each other or selling with other employees. Any questions so far?"

Sigfriede raised her hand.

“Yes?”

She had to focus on not laughing; if she laughed, she’d give herself up and her whole plan would be ruined. Instead, she moved her focus to her hands and signed, “What do the capsules taste like?”

“Sigfriede,” Mavis sighed.

“Okay, for real,” Kophyn threw his hands up in surrender. “Why does she keep doing this?”

“It’s sign language, Kophyn,” Mavis said. “The whole family knows it because Taako can’t hear out of his left ear, but that doesn’t mean Sigfriede can use it to give people a hard time.”

“Hey!” Sigfriede smacked her cousin’s shoulder quietly, “You said you wouldn’t stop me!”

“Yeah, well…”

Random seemed dumbfounded, “Taako can’t hear out of his left ear?”

“Excuse me,” Leon said. “I’m a little confused here, is there an issue?”

“No,” Sigfriede signed. “I’m mute. This is my cousin Mavis; she’s my interpreter.”

“I’m not—”

Sigfriede shot her a dirty look.

“I’m not… entirely certified, but I know enough sign to make things easier.”

Kophyn coughed. “Is this what the Director meant when she said—”

“Sigfriede was just asking what the capsules tasted like.”

Leon’s smile wavered. “I… wouldn’t know, I’ve never tried to taste one of these bad boys before. Now, can I interest you in trying your hand at luck? I’ll take more questions afterword.”

Sigfriede made sure she kept the intense eye contact. She hoped her scars made it a little more jarring.

“There’s no line, folks, just step right up and slide your coins in. I’m honestly excited to see what you all get, it’s been so long since the Director sent me new employees.”

Random bounced on her heels and bounded forward. “My moms used to tell me about this all the time!”

Without any hesitation, she dropped in her coin and turned the handle. The coin disappeared and the whole machine rumbled as the capsules inside turned and tumbled, until moments later an oblong capsule of medium size popped out. She picked it up, her tail flicking eagerly. She cracked open the capsule and pulled out a dark grey coat with white fur trim. Then she looked down at Leon, who nodded, took the coat, and headed back to his desk.

“Let me see,” he stood on his chair and began flipping through the ginormous tome. “C, c, c…
ahah! The Coat of the Duelist! This is a rather nice one, if I do say so myself; it’s one of a kind! This coat, in addition to providing great warmth in cold weather, allows you to move at regular speed during opportunity attacks in combat, provided you land your attack. Furthermore, if you are only wielding a single weapon with one hand or are wielding no weapon at all, this coat makes it harder for enemies to land an attack on you at any moment. A rather versatile gift you’ve earned yourself there, young lady.”

Random smiled again and gently took the coat back. She held it out at arm’s length, then tried it on for size.

“What do you guys think?” she asked.

“Looks great,” Mavis said.

Sigfriede gave her a big thumbs up with a shit-eating grin.

“Yeah, wonderful,” Kophyn said dismissively. “Who’s next?”

Mavis and Sigfriede shared a glance. Sigfriede shrugged. Mavis leaned forward and looked at Kophyn, who didn’t seem to keen on moving any time soon.

Mavis guessed she really didn’t have much of a choice. “I’ll give it a go.”

She repeated the same steps Random had, inserting her coin and cranking the nob. The same rumbling and tumbling occurred before popping out a small oblong capsule that fit in the palm of her hand. She grunted a curious grunt before breaking the capsule open. Green fabric unfurled from the capsule and fluttered to the ground to produce some gloves.

“Oh,” she said. “Cool!”

Mavis bent down to pick up her new item, then took them over to Leon’s desk.

Leon flipped through his gigantic dictionary again and found the right entry. “Oh,” he hummed. “Lady Luck has treated the pair of you well today. These are the Grasps of Spell Saving; another one of a kind item. No one else will have these gloves. While you wear them, they’re going to aid you in casting ranged spells, as well as increase the damage your spells deal and make it harder for your enemies ranged spells to hit you. Another bonus these will give you is that if you dodge an enemy ranged magical attack or successfully shake off the effects of the same kind of spell, once per day you can regain all the magical energy of one level of spell. It is noted here, however, that there is a limit to how powerful that magical energy you regain can be. Play with these wisely.”

He handed the gloves back to Mavis. She carried them back over to her team and showed them off. They were pretty little things, with three seems resembling vines running down the back of each hand and a little button to clasp the wrist opening together.

“Those are cute,” Sigfriede signed.

“Thanks, Siggy.”

Leon bounced on the balls of his feet. “Who’s next? These have been some wonderful draws today, if I do say so myself.”

Sigfriede and Kophyn exchanged a glance. Kophyn raised a silver eyebrow at Sigfriede. Sigfriede scoffed and examined her nails.
Begrudgingly, Kophyn walked up next. The same steps were repeated, and Kophyn obtained a medium sized, also oblong capsule. He hesitantly took it and placed it on Leon’s desk to open. The two opened it together, and Kophyn pulled out a crossbow.

Leon smiled. “Ahhh, yes, I think I know what this one is. But, tradition is tradition!”

He flipped through his book again, this time with direction and determination, and beamed in a satisfactory manner when he found the correct entry.

“The Very Cross Bow. A wonderful hell spawn of a creation. Also one of a kind; this team appears to have a theme to it! I like it. The Very Cross Bow was the product of a short-lived truce between elven and dwarven engineers; it embodies both sides of the creationists’ traits, with the beauty of elven aesthetics and the sturdiness and prowess of dwarven craftsmanship, while also personifying some of the deep-rooted hatred that traditionalists of each race can hold for each other. It behaves as a normal crossbow until insulted by it’s wielder. Once properly enraged, the crossbow burns with anger and shoots flaming bolts. If the crossbow feels the insult was weak, it simply chooses not to work until the next chance for a fight arises.” Leon looked Kophyn up and down and stifled a chuckle. “Quite an interesting pick for someone like yourself.”

Kophyn sneered. “So… it’s a magic weapon?”

“Yes…”

“I don’t use weapons, though…”

“I don’t deal the items, I just explain them. You’re more than welcome to get it off your hands in any way you like, however. Who’s next?”

“Actually,” Kophyn shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I’m confused. How is it supposed to work if it’s a walking contradiction? I mean, if you think about it, the elven fey magic might save it and give it some functionality, if not beauty, but the dwarven part would probably just… I dunno, make it clunky? Maybe a little inefficient?”

Leon blinked, coughed, and said, “I don’t know, young man, perhaps you should ask your dwarven teammate, here?”

Kophyn looked over to Mavis, who raised an eyebrow at him, but said nothing.

“Oh,” he scoffed. “No, Mavis is fine. Most of the time, at least. I was just under the impression this was sort of a personification of both race’s traits?”

“Then I’d hope it reflects the bad traits in you as much as it reflects the bad traits you see in dwarves. Now, if you don’t mind, your last friend here hasn’t had her turn yet.”

Leon didn’t break eye contact. Kophyn sighed, begrudgingly grabbed his crossbow, and stepped away from Leon’s desk.

Sigfriede stifled her giggles. He looked ridiculous with the thing, but the matter could he handled later. It was her turn now, and she had to come up with something to start antagonizing Leon about. She couldn’t just steal her uncle’s shit, that wasn’t original and there was a change Leon had grown immune to it. Maybe she could swipe something from someone else in the family. Maybe something a little bit jarring? Cryptic even?

Yeah, yeah, cryptic would work. She’d already started the weird eye contact and the “mute” bit with the sign language. That wasn’t the greatest so far, but maybe she could just turn it into a long
haul and take some pointers from her dad.

With a small shrug, Sigfriede pulled out her coin and walked up to the gachapon. She looked it up and down, sucking her teeth. Then she thought of a question to ask.

“Are any of them sour cream flavored?”

Leon blinked. Perhaps she’d signed too fast. “I beg your pardon?”

She repeated her question.

“Sigfriede,” Mavis said. “I can’t—I can’t fucking see what you’re saying.”

Sigfriede kept staring at Leon, but moved her hands so Mavis could see them, “Then come over here.”

Leon’s composure was slipping. His bushy eyebrows furrowed, and his eyes passed between Sigfriede in front of him and Mavis walking up.

Mavis cleared her throat. “What was that, Bean?”

“I want to know if any of them are sour cream flavored,” she signed. “I may have signed too fast for this poor fool.”

There was a pause, then a snort, and a sigh that told Sigfriede her cousin had given in.

“She, uh,” Mavis tried not to smile. “She wants to know if any of them are sour cream flavored.”

Leon let out a nervous laugh and said, “I wouldn’t know, my dear, I’ve never tried to eat anything that comes out of this wonderful fate machine. You can, however if you want, taste the capsule that your item comes in once you retrieve it out of the gachapon by putting your coin in its designated slot and turning the handle to the right. Just right there, right in front of you.”

Sigfriede held up her coin and pointed at it.

“Yes, that coin you have right there.”

She pointed to the slot on the machine.

“Uh huh, just slide that baby right on in there, please, I’m a very busy gnome.”

She mimed cranking the handle to the left.

“No, the opposite direction. Please, I really don’t have time for this.”

Sigfriede turned her attention back to the gachapon and started inspecting it up close. Then she turned back to Mavis, wiggled her eyebrows, and slid her coin in. She turned the handle to the right, as properly instructed, and caught her capsule just as it fell out. It was a small spherical capsule, which she immediately popped in her mouth with too much velocity; it hit the back of her throat, making her hack and choke. She spat the orb out, failed to catch it and let it bounce to the ground.

Leon took a step back. “I’m not picking that up.”

Random covered her mouth as she laughed in the background. Kophyn groaned and hid his face.
“Tastes like death,” she signed.

Mavis translated as such.

Sigfriede picked up the capsule, dried it off with her uniform shirt, and opened it, all while maintaining direct eye contact with Leon. She popped the plastic open and let a tiny, shiny, vintage brooch fall into her palms. Thankfully the brooch was dry, but there was a tingling sensation wherever the metal met her skin. It hummed and buzzed in a way Sigfriede could only describe as similar to that of a hug from her mom. It wasn’t electric, or sharp, or dangerous, but instead warm, fuzzy, and aware. She held it out to Leon, who hesitantly took it from her palm. Then he quietly walked back to his desk, hopped onto his chair, and flipped through the book. Everything seemed to be going as normal at first; he found the entry, read it over quickly for understanding, and opened his mouth to start explaining. Then his voice caught, his mouth shut, and his head tilted. He looked up to Sigfriede with confusion in his eyes.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he said. “But… you don’t appear as a magic user to me.”

Sigfriede’s blank stare shifted to confusion, realization, and then fear. She looked at Mavis, who also seemed slightly confused. Sigfriede felt a tug at her gut, and her fingers itched. She wanted to grip something, something small and delicate. The tug at her gut spread to her lungs and brain, cementing her feet to the ground and making her hands shake. She wanted to say something to Mavis, but her lips felt glued shut. She knew if she tried to sign something, she might short circuit and stumble over the motions; she’d use the wrong letter, or she’d use the sign for “cat” when she’d meant to sign “wand”. Instead, she just shoved her hands into her pockets, looked back at Leon with determination, and shook her head.

“So, you’re not a magic user?” he asked.

She shook her head again.

Leon inhaled sharply and shrugged. “Well, I suppose if this is what you get, it’s what you get. I was only asking because this entry says here that this item is usually only given to different kinds of casters; bards, wizards, sorcerers, the like. But fate works in odd ways, you could say. Uhm, this right here is the Brooch of Po’eur. This diamond encrusted accessory is woven with magical energy the wearer can sense with the slightest touch. It allows you to take extra time when casting one of your most powerful spells to double check your knowledge of the spell; if everything appears to be in order, the energy needed to cast the spell is not taken from your magical abilities, but instead is taken from the brooch. The more powerful the spell, the harder it is to check your information.”

He gingerly handed the item back to Sigfriede, who took it wordlessly. She looked it over intensely, letting the light bounce off the gems in odd colors. Then she pocketed it, nodded at Leon, and left the room.

Mavis looked back at her teammates, who each seemed equally tense and confused. She shrugged, eliciting a returned shrug from Random, but next to no reaction from Kophyn.

“Well,” Leon tried for a smile again. “It really isn’t any of my business but do let her know that I didn’t mean to intrude on anything personal. Perhaps the item was simply a sign of some sorts.”

Mavis adjusted her glasses and smiled back at Leon. “I’m sure she’s fine. She’s got some… socialization… issues… if you can call them that. She may have just been short sighted about something. Don’t take it personally. Thanks for your patience, Leon!”
Sigfriede waited for her friends just down the pathway from the tiny dome.

She picked at the intricate curls of metal, the shimmer of the stones, and pressed her fingertips against the end of the pin. When she heard footsteps approaching, she blew a strand of hair from her face and pocketed the accessory again.

“Well,” she smiled at the three of them. “That was weak as shit. I was gonna start messing with him, but I panicked. I haven’t goofed someone in a long time; I was hoping for something a bit more cryptic, but I guess I’ve been away from Dad for too long… What next? We doing anything else, or can I go eat?”

They stopped in front of her, sharing wayward glances.

“Siggy,” Random said. “Do you wanna see if anyone else wants the brooch? Leon said we can, like, trade and sell them now.”

“What? No, it’s fine. I think it’s pretty; if nothing else, I can wear it just for the shits and giggles, right? And besides, if we’re really keeping this whole Tres Party Babes thing up, I may as well take on the aesthetic role, yeah?”

“Tres Party what?” Kophyn said.

Mavis scratched her head. “I mean, yeah, but that’s kind of a waste of a good magic item. It sounded like that thing would be really useful to someone who needed it.”

“It’s fine Mav, I’ll just give it to my mom.”

Kophyn scoffed. “What’s your mom gonna do with it?”

Sigfriede tilted her head. She was already squinting without her glasses, but now she was just glaring at him. “What do you mean, ‘what’s my mom gonna do with it’? She’s gonna use it? And appreciate how pretty it is? That’s what you guys are being anal about, right? Someone using it?”

“That may be what Random’s getting at, but Mavis and I both know you’re bullshitting your way out of something right now.”

Mavis threw her hands up. “I’m not getting at anything right now, I know when to leave something like this alone with her, Kophyn.”

“Oh, bullshit, you grew up with her, you know as well as I know she can use magic. If that stupid mini game really is controlled by luck or fate or whatever you wanna call it, it’s obvious what the universe is telling us. Sigfriede, where’s your wand?”

“Guys, I’m really confused,” Random said.

“It’s fine, Random,” Mavis grabbed her hand and pulled her past Sigfriede. “If Sigfriede doesn’t want to talk about it yet, she doesn’t have to. Come on, Baby Bear, Tres Party Babes is getting lunch. I’m paying.”

She tried to grab Sigfriede’s hand as well, but Sigfriede pulled it away and held up a finger. She twirled it in a small circle; she was telling Mavis to wait.

“Siggy?”
The two were stuck staring at each other, each with rage and disbelief. Mavis grabbed Sigfriede’s wrist and tugged it again, but she still pulled her hand away. Sigfriede was set on this, the feeling of discomfort, the new kind of rage bubbling up in her stomach that weighed on the back of her mind. Her eyes wouldn’t move from Kophyn’s face, no matter how much the sight of the satisfaction in his eyes made her sick. He got off on this, didn’t he? He got off on the idea of Sigfriede being some sort of rival for him, and she had no idea where it came from. She’d never done anything to him that she could think of; never stolen from him, never accused him of things, never taken a real vendetta against him. Now, the more she thought of it, the more Sigfriede wished she had. He’d never been nice to her, never been authentic to her, never had patience or consideration for her. Not once in their entire time knowing each other, from the first day he invited her to study with him, to her recovery from her electrocution, to the training with HR, to this mission, and all the way up to now. Not once had he ever done anything for her or to her out of the authenticity of his heart. And now that Sigfriede really thought about it, with the things he said in that caravan, she doubted Kophyn had ever really had a heart to begin with. Then she realized it; she was beginning to hate Kophyn.

“You think I’m limiting myself, don’t you?”

Kophyn shrugged. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

Sigfriede inhaled and straightened her posture. She turned to her cousin and signed, “Let’s go. I’m starved.”

The girls made their way along the pathways of the moon base, stopping at different dining locations to weigh their options. No one asked about the brooch. No one waited for Kophyn. Instead, Mavis launched into a story about a time she’d met a timid honey badger once who’d been separated from its parents in the middle of a storm. She let her story take up most of the conversation, figuring it would allow Sigfriede to pull herself together and distract Random from the tension. In no time, Sigfriede had cracked a smile again and Random was relating Mavis’s stories back to her time when she was training to be a barbarian. Soon the girls were back to their regular happy, laughing selves.

Then they came across a little construction site. Chain link fencing kept the mess contained from the rest of the pristine base, and different construction machines and materials littered the area. The signs hanging from the links advertised a division of Miller Enterprises, the Bureau of Benevolence itself and—

“Fantasy IKEA?” Mavis read.

Sigfriede leaned in and squinted to read the blue-and-yellow text. “Huh. Yeah, that definitely says Fantasy IKEA.”

“Well… that’s…”

“Hey, wait!” Random tugged on her bangs excitedly. “I think this used to be the Fantasy Costco! It’s been empty most of my life; the Bureau’s had trouble keeping this area filled. A few other little places have popped up here and there, but for some reason they just can’t keep someone here for too long.”

A silence passed between the girls. Then Sigfriede let out a string of deep, guttural giggles.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she said. “What if Garfield’s spirit haunts this part of the base.”
Random snorted. “Oh my god, yeah! If you listen closely at night, you can hear his high-pitched hum-screams in the wind!”

“Guys,” Mavis said over the girl’s laughter, “we all know Garfield didn’t die. He just vanished into the ether, never to be found in this planar system ever again.”

“Okay, okay,” Sigfriede rubbed her face. “For real though. Aren’t Fantasy IKEAs supposed to have a food court? They have really good meatballs.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello again my dear friends! Things are looking up a bit for me! I finally got my waitressing job I'd been hoping for, classes are looking pretty good right now (I got to make my own oil paint!), and I've decided that there's a car flu going around, because all of my friends cars are having issues, too. So I'm just gonna sit here and wait this shit out. In the meantime, that means I get more free time to write for you guys!

I'm thinking about adding songs special to chapters that inspire big parts of the chapters that I write, and when those songs come into play, I'll leave their titles and performers here. For this chapter, specifically dealing with the gachapon, I used reddit user seanorib1's gachapon table, found here: https://www.reddit.com/r/TheAdventureZone/comments/6k2ostr/fantasy_gachapon_loot_table/. I'll be using this in the future for other gachapon visits as well!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being my beta! She's a great person and I love her very much. I don't really have much else to say. I'll see you guys next Thursday hopefully. Be nice to each other!
The Mid-summer Solstice is here! Tres Party Babes takes the annual day out of the office to spend time with family and each other while Kophyn takes an extended vacation. The end of the week brings timely news, though, and it could bring unease to those that are observant. Sigfriede wins fifteen dollars. Random learns some sign language. Lup shares words of wisdom.

The next few months were odd for the team. No balanced dynamic was ever reached for them. Kophyn always fought for the spotlight, always took over situations for his benefit, and continued to stay oddly close to Sigfriede.

She’d put the brooch on her uniform, but she never used it. She wasn’t ready to. Mavis kept her gloves in her back pocket, and Random kept her coat hanging on her dorm room front door. After one training session with his Very Cross Bow, Kophyn blew it off and handed it to Sigfriede.

“What am I supposed to do with this,” she asked.

“I dunno,” he said. “Use it for that new gun you said you’d make.”

“I never said…”

Kophyn left team training early that day. The girls shared unimpressed glances at each other, shrugged, and started planning their own team moves. Later that day, Sigfriede invited Mavis and Random to her room for a quick pasta dish she’d made too much of in the dorm kitchens. They sat on the floor of Sigfriede’s room, enjoying the quiet time without Sigfriede’s roommate. They had little conversation, and instead enjoyed each other’s quiet company. Sigfriede had made one of her mom’s staple dinner dishes, which was apparently a joint creation between her and Taako, so Random helped herself to an extra serving; she was the tank, anyway. She probably needed to eat more than Sigfriede did.

When she’d reached the bottom of her bowl, Sigfriede started picking at her noodles with her garlic bread. “Have you guys noticed that Kophyn’s been making a lot of friends lately?”

Random’s mouth was full. She looked like a deer in the headlights. Mavis smirked, then waved her off.

“What do you mean, Bean?” She adjusted her glasses.

“I mean…” Sigfriede took a sip of water. “he didn’t really talk to anyone besides us before. But, like, lately he’s just been… I dunno. Slacking? Like leaving training and stuff. And I don’t know if
you’ve noticed it, but he’s just started hanging out with people, and, like, talking to them.”

“Oh, yeah, how dare he have friends, Siggy.”

“No, no,” Random shook her head and held up her hands. “She’s got a point, Mav. He would just hang around us the whole time. He doesn’t do that anymore.”

“I mean,” Mavis shrugged and twirled her hair between her fingers. “Maybe we all just don’t get along. Well, obviously we don’t all get along, but like… he’s not hurting anyone. At least as far as I can tell.”

Sigfriede pursed her lips. She stared down at her knees, and took another bite of her garlic bread.

“Why, Siggy? What are you thinking about?”

“I dunno,” she muttered around her bread. “it’s just… You know I call my parents a lot, right? And… it’s just that after we dealt with that elemental and stuff, I called home. Dad asked me if I was doing okay, and Mom asked if I was eating okay, and all that stuff. And one topic led to another and I ended up telling them what Kophyn said in the caravan… they didn’t seem too upset about it at first, but I was just talking to Dad last night, and he got that tone of voice, you know? Like, that tone he uses when he’s concerned about something but he’s trying to not let anyone on to it? He just started asking me if Kophyn had said anything else lately.”

“And?”

“I mean, he hasn’t, so I didn’t have anything to tell him. But then he asked me if I’d heard of anything from anyone around the base. I hadn’t, so I didn’t have anything to tell him.”

Mavis hummed.

“I don’t mean to be nosy,” Random said, “but can I ask why Sigfriede’s dad asking these questions means anything?”

“My dad’s Barry Bluejeans,” Sigfriede said.

“I know that. Your last names aren’t the most subtle.”

“Just checking,” she winked. “But… I dunno, my dad’s just a smart guy, you know? I don’t know how to explain it…”

Mavis cleared her throat. “Barry’s usually pretty aware of things. I figured it would come from his time as ‘The Red Robe’,” she made air quotes around ‘The Red Robe’. “I’m not entirely sure. The family tries to raise the kids like a normal family. Me, my brother Mookie, Angus after Taako and Kravitz adopted him, Siggy, and now Taako’s girls Eva and Cashmere. They usually don’t talk about their… traits, I guess, unless we ask about it. And usually then they only explain what they’re comfortable with. That doesn’t mean they’re good at hiding it, though—”

“Taako absolutely hates Lucretia,” Sigfriede offered. “And he hates that I work here.”

“Among other things. Long story short, if any of them start asking questions there’s usually good cause for concern…”

Another silence fell between the three girls.

Random tugged on her bangs. “Should we tell Lucretia? About his… are we calling it ‘slacking’?”
Sigfriede shrugged. “She probably already knows.”

“I wouldn’t raise much suspicion of him,” Mavis said. “If Barry’s wary of something, Lucretia probably is, too. At the very least, I’d let him come around to us and see what waters he tests. Then, if we really get concerned about something, we can turn him in to… whoever we think would handle whatever it is best. I dunno, guys, it may as well be nothing.”

At the Mid-summer Solstice Festival, Sigfriede somehow convinced both of her parents and Magnus to come up and visit. Merle came, but he did that on his own volition to see his daughter. But regardless of who convinced who to come up and visit the moon, Tres Party Babes made plans to hang out as friends, then hang out with family for a bit. When the family members inevitably got bored and started doing their own thing, the girls would split off and start their own trouble. Maybe they’d pull harmless pranks on Lucretia all day. Maybe they’d “accidently” deflate the bouncy house. Maybe they’d break into Lucretia’s office and move all the furniture she had two inches to the left, including her big portrait.

Sigfriede woke up early that day and dressed for the weather. She met up with Mavis and Random in the dorm common room, and the three of them headed to the Main Hangar Bay. Sigfriede had made sure that the family knew where they were going; the surface side check in point in Neverwinter, where they’d request a visitation allotment to the base and to be transported via the usual glass canons. She’d signed off on her parents’ and Magnus’ visitation slips, Mavis had signed Merle’s. Random’s parents lived on the moon, so they just planned to meet everyone at one of the concession stands to start the day. Once everyone arrived, hugs were exchanged, complete with wet mom kisses, rough dad back rubs, and Magnus picking up Sigfriede and chucking her over his shoulder like normal. She’d lost all legitimate fear of being dumped in a trash can long ago, but she still screeched for amusement sake. Then everyone fell into line and they went to go meet Carey and Killian.

Barry and Lup kept insisting she’d met Carey and Killian before, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember it at all. She believed them, of course; she remembered early childhood play dates with Random, and Random was clearly their daughter, but she figured her lack of memory came from the fact that she was three and not paying attention to them. She was polite nonetheless.

A few hours before the eclipse was set to start, Sigfriede spotted a group of people around her age, employees, she assumed, gathered in front of a carnival game. It looked like one of those rigged bottle stacking games where you pay for four or five little bean-filled bags that you throw at weighted bottles in hopes of getting a giant stuffed animal. The group was made up of mostly male-presenting people of different races, though given its small size and the way the five joked with each other, Sigfriede figured they were probably another field missionary team. Or they could just be extremely close friends. Either way, they were calling and reaching out to passersby, probably haggling for a bet or a free pass at the game.

Sigfriede smirked. She could probably get Mavis and Random in on this, right? If not them, then definitely her mom.

“Hey, hey, ladies, hold up.” She stopped walking with her parents and reached for Mavis’s hand. “You see those guys over there?”

They glanced in the direction Sigfriede was pointing, then looked back at her expectantly.

“You think we can beat them at a round of that game?”
Random scoffed. “You know those are rigged, right?”

“So? I can probably get my dad to tell me how to beat the rigging. Or at least cast some spells and help us cheat.”

“Has your dad ever won that game before?”

Sigfriede shrugged. “He’s smart, though. He’s got a master’s degree in something at least.”

“Don’t you have a degree?”

“You’re funny.”

The girls watched the other group for a minute while Magnus and Carey took turns equally failing at pick-pocketing random people, then slyly and politely putting the pick-pocketed items back. The boys kept up their failing business before they noticed their observers. At first only one person saw them; he had auburn hair cropped close to his head on the sides. Down the center he had longer, wavy hair that he’d clearly put thought into; there was texture to it, with long fringe that stuck up ever so slightly. He made eye contact with Sigfriede, smirked, and smacked his friend with the back of his hand. Then he waved. Sigfriede waved back.

“Are you gonna go talk to them,” Mavis asked.

“Only if you two come with me.”

Mavis and Random shared a glance, shrugged, and waited for instructions.

“Okay,” Sigfriede said. “Let me go talk to my Dad really quick, and then we can go over.”

“And if they make a bet with us,” Mavis used her best big-sister voice, “and we lose because it’s rigged?”

“We won’t. You and I can teach Random some signs and we’ll, like, secret agent our way out of it. Dad!”

Minutes later Barry had dropped all his carnival knowledge on Sigfriede and turned the other way. Sigfriede headed for the group of boys across the way, waving her friends over with her. She took a moment to pull Random aside and teach her a few signs; “heavy”, “slant”, and “stuck”.

“Oh, look what we have here,” the boy with auburn hair said. Up close she could see he was a half-elf. “I see you all finally decided to say hi.”

“What are you guys doing here?” Sigfriede quipped. “Don’t you know catcalling is rude?”

“We weren’t catcalling, dude. Just seeing if anyone wants to accept a little carnival fun challenge, you know?”

Sigfriede looked past the half-elf and to the human running the milk jug game. She shrugged at Sigfriede helplessly.

“Alright,” Sigfriede adjusted her glasses. “One on one? Your buddies stand aside, and my buddies will stand aside. You and me, whoever knocks over all the jugs takes fifteen bucks.”

The half-elf raised an eyebrow. “Fifteen bucks?”

“Go big or go home. Momma didn’t raise no quitter.”
The half-elf glanced at his friends. One was a dragonborn who looked like he was built like a shit-brick house; very different from Carey. He shrugged, just as the rest of the boys did, and wished their friend luck. Both Sigfriede and her opponent paid their play in gold, took their baseballs, and prepared to through.

“You know what,” Sigfriede said, “I’m feeling generous today. How about you go first?”

The kid looked at her suspiciously. “For real?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got these scars, see? They kind of go all up and down my body; they get tense at times. You go first, and I’ll just stretch my arms out and take my turn.”

Seeing no reason to object, given that Sigfriede’s scars weren’t well hidden by her tank top, he shrugged and began to take aim.

Sigfriede glanced over at Random as she started to “stretch her scars”, who was standing slightly off to the side of the kiosk just as the girls had planned. She could see the side of the jug-pyramid, but made no signs immediately. She simply nodded and smiled.

There was a clatter, the sound of a ball bouncing off wood, and Sigfriede whipped her head around. The half-elf had thrown his ball, and gotten all of them knocked down.

He gave her an award-winning smile. “You want to go next? Best out of three?”

Sigfriede hummed. “Nah. You can take your three goes at once, and I’ll take mine.”

“Alright…”

Sigfriede glanced back at Random as the owner of the game set the cartons back up. After a few moments, Random gently signed back “slant”; the game was rigged so that one jug on the bottom was slightly more forward than the other. That made it hard to knock down both bottom jugs at the same time. Now Sigfriede knew what to plan for.

Her red-headed opponent picked up his second ball. He took the same approach as he had before, standing relatively close to the counter, tossing underhand with gentle force. He got the top and bottom right jugs knocked over, but the left bottom one stood still. He took another try once they were all set up again, and got the same results.

“Damn,” he smiled at Sigfriede again. “Hey, you’ve got a fair shot at it, though.”

She rolled her eyes. This guy was obviously pulling something. She didn’t think it was anything harmful, just some high-level shenanigans on a work holiday.

The way to win these things, Barry had explained, is to always stand about six feet back from the stand, throw overhand with a lot of force, and if you have to, throw from an angle to account for the slanted set up of the jugs. Practice was always a good idea, but given that Sigfriede was never out of practice with her guns, she figured her aim was pretty okay.

First throw, she got all three down. Easy enough. It probably wasn’t slanted that time. The second and third times, Random gave her the same signs, so Sigfriede threw from an angle, just like she’d been shooting before she got glasses again. She didn’t throw powerfully enough the second time, but she nailed it the third time. She crossed her arms and cracked her neck. Sucking her teeth, she walked back up to her opponent, smiled sweetly at him, and held out her hand.

“Best of three,” she said. “Fifteen bucks.”
Scoffs and laughs sounded from behind her back where the half-elves friends were standing. He looked over Sigfriede’s shoulder, which wasn’t hard, since she wasn’t even five feet tall, and this guy was easily nearly six feet tall. He stuck his tongue in his cheek, raised an eyebrow at Sigfriede, then shook his head and pulled out his wallet.

“Alright,” he said. “A deal’s a deal. Fifteen bucks. You good with singles?”

“I don’t care so long as I get my fifteen dollars.”

He pulled out a ten and five singles. Some gold coins jingled as he put the wallet back in his back pocket. Sigfriede counted the money to double check. Fifteen whole dollars. Her mom would be proud.

She pocketed the money and smiled. “Good… game, I guess, dude. You work here?”

“Oh,” he chuckled. “Yeah. I work in Natural Disaster Relief; meteorology division.”

Sigfriede nodded. “Cool. I work here, too.”

A light bulb seemed to go off in the guy’s head. “Oh, yeah! I think I’ve seen you around! Your names, uh… It starts with a C right?”

Sigfriede snorted. “Yeah, sure. Hey, I’ll see you around, alright?

She turned to walk off, but the guy walked after her. “No, for real, though. I swear to god, I’ve seen you before somewhere. What department do you work in?”

“It’s not that big of a deal, dude, the Bureau’s huge. We’ve probably just seen each other in Internal Affairs or something.”

“Yeah, but you just look… familiar.”

Sigfriede stopped walking. Her shoulders slumped, her head dropped, and she sighed. She had a feeling she knew where this was going. She’d get it a lot in college; someone would glance at her and think she was a friend of theirs because they recognized her face shape, or her hair, or her freckles. They didn’t know her, of course, since Sigfriede didn’t talk to a lot of people. But they did recognize some parts of her face because everyone knew what her parents looked like, whether they admitted it or not.

“Nah, kimosabe,” she said. “I just… I got one of those faces, you know?”

Later that day, the whole family had sat down in the food court for some lunch. A small band of bards played some music at the end of the pavilion. It was probably the closest thing to a real family dinner Sigfriede had experienced since she’d started working in the Bureau. Granted, it wasn’t a very long time, maybe half a year at most, but her parents didn’t keep her in the dark. It seemed, the more she thought about it, that they tried everything they could to shine any sort of light on her nowadays. She loved them, missed them as well, but by the time she got to college there was an itching in the back of her mind that made her want to just… go. Go anywhere.

There was one time, when she was about to graduate high school, where Davenport came in for a visit before he started a new voyage that would make him miss her graduation. They held a small little party for her, and at the end of the visit, just before Davenport headed back out, he called her out to the balcony of her parent’s apartment for some tea.
“How are you feeling about this whole wizard thing,” he asked.

“Pretty good!” A big smile spread across her face, crinkling both of her eyes, hiding her freckles. It was easier to smile back then; back when half of her face wasn’t tight with scar tissue. “I’ve gotten a lot of scholarships, so that’s pretty great, I guess.”

“What are you thinking about doing after school?”

“Giving Uncle Taako a run for his money.”

Davenport laughed. “If that’s a viable career…”

She hummed and sipped her tea. “I mean… I dunno. I might be an adventurer or somethin’. I just feel like I wanna go somewhere and do something. See people, you know?”

“Oh,” he chuckled, “believe me, kiddo. I know. Be careful what you wish for, though. For real.”

She hadn’t realized the weight in his eyes until she woke up in the hospital a year later.

Nonetheless, no matter where she went, she always had at least one call a week from both of her parents, though it was often plenty more than that. Every eventful bounty, every time Taako said he missed her, every milestone for Eva and Cashmere, every family dinner got a phone call. And she missed each and every bit of it. Calls and stories weren’t the same as being there.

“Hey, Bean,” Lup threw a napkin across the table. “Besides Mav and Random here, you make any other friends?”

Sigfriede sipped from her empty cup through her straw. “Nah. Everyone kind of minds their own business here nowadays. At least the people we spend or work hours around. Field missionaries are kind of, like, in and out, you know?”

“What about that Kophyn guy you keep telling me and your dad about?”

Sigfriede furrowed her eyebrows. “I dunno. He’s not really… I dunno,” she glanced at Mavis and Random. “would you say he’s on our team anymore, ladies?”

Random shook her head.

“Officially,” Mavis said, “he still is. But we also haven’t been given a mission in a bit, and there’s no obligation for us to work together outside of surface side missions. I have a feeling someone’s gonna put in the request to have him removed soon, though.”

Sigfriede nodded. “Yeah, he’s just… not a great person to chill around.”

Lup hummed and nodded.

Barry cleared his throat. “You gotta make friends eventually, Siggy. Believe me, you don’t want to deal with this shit with only a few other people.”

“Dad…”

“Just sayin’.”

“Yeah, well, it’s kind of hard to socialize when you’re doing paperwork.”

“Paperwork,” Magnus sounded offended. “You guys do paperwork now?”
Sigfriede giggled.

“Who gives you the paperwork,” he continued, “Lucretia? If it’s Lucretia I can punch her now and not have any legal issues afterword.”

“That’s not how it works, Magnus,” Barry said.

“It is in Magnus Land. I know rogue things now, she’ll never see me coming! It’ll be just like the beach year all over again. Keeping all of you on your toes.”

Merle rolled his eyes. “That’s a great idea, Maggie. Cause then you’ll all send me in to heal everyone and then you’ll complain—”

“You can’t heal for shit, old man!”

Sigfriede stared at her dad in desperation. He smiled, grabbed her hand, and patted it. “I know, baby. I know.”

“Hey, hey, Sigfriede,” Random snapped for her attention. “Don’t be That Person, you know? But twelve o’clock, right behind you. Kophyn’s got some new friends.”

She tried not to turn around too suddenly. She almost made eye contact with Kophyn, so she turned back around and looked at her dad.

“Who is he,” he asked.

“The drow. Tallish, silver hair, looks like a bard because he is a bard. He’s got, like, bard garb, you know? But drow bard garb—”

“Yeah, I got it, Bean.”

Barry watched the group Kophyn had with him sit at the table behind theirs. It wasn’t a big group, maybe six or seven people in total, but the dynamic immediately seemed off to Barry. Only one person was talking, and the others seemed completely enraptured in what he had to say. As they went to sit down, the only drow, Kophyn, Barry assumed, sat directly in the middle of the group, with his friends fanned out around him. He kept talking, using his hands as he spoke, but he kept using specific hand motions. Some of his word choice seemed off, oddly specific. After a few moments of observing and listening, Barry cleared his throat and took a sip of his beer.

“Hey, uh, Sigfriede?”

She looked up from her giant turkey leg. She was cleaning it off pretty damn well. “Yeah, Daddy?”

“You said he used a spell on you before, right?”

“Uh, yeah. Our first mission; he came to my room to give me back my pistol. He wanted some personal info out of me and used a charm to get what he wanted.”

Barry pursed his lips. “I think he’s doing it again. It looks like charm magic to me.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “I told you he was a dick, Dad.”

“Yeah, remind me of what he said in that caravan.”

She blinked. She was in the middle of biting her turkey leg, but let it go and put it back down. “I
really don’t remember exactly… Just a bunch of weird stuff about limitations and the light of creation. I don’t care, anymore, really. I’m hungry.”

Barry nodded. He watched the group for a little bit longer as he let his daughter eat, and eventually Lup, Magnus and Merle caught on as well. Those of them who could see him without seeming suspicious watched. At one point, Merle gave up on being sly and straight up turned around to watch. Then he inhaled sharply, shrugged to himself, and adjusted his glasses. After a few moments, he tapped the top of Sigfriede’s hand, then got Mavis and Random’s attention.

“Hey, you girls do a favor for me, yeah? Kophyn’s got six other friends right now. He seems like he’s getting more, and you tell me, okay? You get ahold of any of us and let us know.”

The girls shared nervous glances. Sigfriede was more irritated that she couldn’t eat in peace than she was concerned. Either way, all three of them agreed.

An hour later, the eclipse began. It wasn’t anything particularly special, Sigfriede had seen it before in her life plenty of times. Still, she took the time to watch it with her family, enjoying the time they had together. It happened rather quickly, with no hang ups or mysterious eyes scouting out the planar system. Once it passed, everyone went along their business, and soon Sigfriede could tell the party part of the festival was about to start.

She was trying to decide if she was going to go home for the night or hang out with her parents when she heard a not so pleasant familiar voice call her name. She turned and found Kophyn and one of his friends, a dwarven girl, walking up to her and her parents.

Barry shoved his hands in his pockets and scowled. Lup gripped Sigfriede’s hand a little tighter.

“Siggy,” Kophyn said in his douche bag silk voice. “You brought family! How nice!”

“They aren’t giving autographs, Kophyn. Piss off.”

“Hey, don’t be like that. You know me, I just love talking to people.”

Lup stepped forward and held out a hand. “Kophyn, is it? What a pleasure it is to meet you! You know, my daughter here just can’t stop talking about you when we call her.”

Kophyn seemed thrown off. He hesitated, then shook Lup’s hand. He made eye contact with her, and she stared at him with firey intensity that used to send Sigfriede running to her room without a single word.

“Uh,” he stammered. “Really?”

“Oh, sure,” Lup gave her best over-bearing mom smile and wrapped an arm around Sigfriede’s shoulders. It kind of hurt. “You know, she mentioned some interesting philosophies you’ve got. Real interesting, you know? I was just thinking, like, ‘God, I’d really like to meet this Kophyn person and see what he’s got going on in his life’, you know? But just by the looks of it, it seems like you’re just making quite the little name for yourself around here. If you don’t mind me asking, since my baby girl here is under the impression you didn’t have a lot of friends before, what are you sellin’ that’s just got everyone wrapped around your finger, huh?”

She still had good grip on Sigfriede’s shoulder. “Momma,” she muttered. “Your nails are kind of digging into me…”
“Oh, shit, sorry babe.” She loosened her grip ever so slightly. Then she returned her attention to Kophyn.

Kophyn’s eyebrows furrowed. He chuckled nervously, then glanced at Sigfriede and Barry. Siggy shoved her glasses up her nose and waved. Barry glared him down.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Just, I guess, finding people that I get along with? You know, it’s easier to get along with people who think like you. Sigfriede hasn’t entirely been… She and I just don’t see eye to eye, I guess.”

Lup hummed. “I see.”

There was a pause that Lup used to stare him down again, then ruffled Siggy’s hair and smiled. “Well, it was so nice getting to know you, Kophyn. You know, we were just about to go see if we could find Lucretia and say hi to her. She’s still family, and all. Hey, do me a favor, little man, and if you find yourself wanting, get a therapist.”

Lup turned on her heels and walked off. Sigfriede snorted, looked up at her dad, who shrugged and followed suit.

“I told you, dude,” she said before she left Kophyn and his friend. “No autographs. Have a great day, man.”

A week later, the girls were called into Lucretia’s office again. At this rate, Sigfriede was pretty sure the girls naming their little trio Tres Part Babes was a pretty great idea; they were holding up to the frequent appearances of Tres Horny Boys, and they hadn’t even had their first quarterly review yet.

They all met in the throne room this time, but the girls were instructed that this wasn’t a meeting that would require uniforms. So, Sigfriede went in her dad’s old IPRE trainee shirt and some lounge shorts. By the time she reached the dome, most of the offices were starting to close down. She took that as a sign that this was more of a personal meeting with Lucretia, meaning that she could call her Grandma instead of Madam Director. Great.

“Well, girls,” Lucretia said. “I was hoping this meeting would come earlier in the day, but this topic’s HR paperwork became rather… sticky.”

Sigfriede rested her arm on Mavis’s head. Mavis gently took her hand and moved Sigfriede’s arm off of her head.

“I’m also sure,” Lucretia continued, “after some discussion with different inside and outside sources, this decision doesn’t come as a surprise to you. Yesterday, Kophyn turned in his resignation letter from the field missionary division of the Magics and Sorcery department. In place of that job, he’s asked for a promotion to work with the Board of Visionaries for the Bureau. Whether or not he earns that promotion is a question for another day. But, with this development, it’s my responsibility to call you three in and ask if you have anyone specific in mind to take Kophyn’s place on your team. Usually we keep field missionary groups to four or five employees, but I see no issue keeping your team to just three for future missions until we find a compatible replacement.”

There was a pause. Then the girls caught on and silently agreed.

“I think we’re okay for now,” Random said. “We like working together. I mean, we haven’t had
much of a chance to do big adventure things, but we’ve worked well together on the missions we
have had. We problem solve really well together.”

Lucretia waited for objections. When none arose, she smiled and held out her hands in surrender.

“Alright,” she said. “I can work with that. For now, your team will be confined to the three of you
until we find a good addition. In the meantime, you should all start resting and training extra. I
think I’ve got a new mission coming up for you, and if you’re getting the one I’m thinking of, it’s
going to be hard. Have a good night, girls.”

With no other apparent call to duty, Tres Party Babes headed back to their dorm rooms.

Chapter End Notes

I've been excited to post this chapter because of all the different reactions you guys
have had to Kophyn. Where's he going? What's he doing? Maybe he's just making
friends and doing nothing else.

But that would be a shitty plot, wouldn't it?

Cha'girl got a waitressing job finally. Gonna get those GOOD TIPS! Also made a
doctor's appointment for antidepressants. Hopefully I can get my car back soon. I hope
all's going well for you guys! Thank you for sharing the fic with your friends and
buddies; the story has continued to get a few hits every day throughout the week, now!
That's super exciting. Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for
being the best beta! You guys be nice to each other, and I'll see you next week!
When Sigfriede and Lup told Taako she’d taken a job at the Bureau, Sigfriede could immediately see a difference in the way Taako acted around her. That is to say, he didn’t. Regardless of whether Sigfriede was too busy to visit home, or whether Taako just didn’t want to visit the moon, that was the last call she’d received from her uncle. Of course, Eva, Cashmere, Angus and Kravitz all still called her and kept her in the loop of things, but there was hardly a time anymore where Taako and Sigfriede shared time for a conversation. So, given those circumstances, it was easy to understand Sigfriede’s anxiety when she called him today.

Thankfully, Taako picked up. “Hello?”

“Uncle Taako!” Sigfriede’s voice caught. It’d been forever since she heard his voice. “Hey, hi…”

There was a pause. “Sigfriede?”

“Y-yeah. Sorry I haven’t called lately, I’ve been busy. Lucretia’s sent me and my team out on a lot of little civil cases. Lot’s of mediating, solving problems for towns, and all of that comes with a lot of paperwork…”

“I see…” Taako cleared his throat. “So, uh… What gave you the idea to give your old Uncle Taako a ring, huh?”

“I dunno… It’s just like… I don’t know if Momma’s told you anything at all, but there was this guy on my team a little while ago,”

She didn’t know what came over her, but Sigfriede found herself telling Taako everything he’d missed since she joined the Bureau of Benevolence. She told him about meeting Mavis and Random and Kophyn again. She told him about the power struggle they’d had and all the HR training Lucretia had them go through. She told him about their first field mission, the lack of libraries in Beacon, the kinky water elemental, and the things Kophyn had said in the caravan. Then she shared what happened at the Mid-summer Solstice Festival, and how her mom had
introduced herself to Kophyn.

“And then, like, I guess a week after that,” she said, “he did what we were all expecting and left the team. Aunt Lucretia said that he asked that in place of being a field missionary, he wanted to be promoted to the Board of Visionaries.”

“And what do they do?”

“I don’t really know. If I remember correctly from my internship, they’re this group of people from each department who are kind of like a cabinet to Lucretia; they help her make decisions on how to keep the Bureau moving forward and stuff.”

Taako hummed. “Interesting.”

“I know, right? So, with it being just me, Mavis, and Random now, it got me thinking that we don’t really have a spell caster who can be versatile, you know? Like, Mavis and Random know some magic, but it’s mostly support and utilitarian magic. We don’t have a caster who can, like… abraca-fuck-you and stuff.”

That earned Sigfriede a chuckle. She hadn’t realized how much she missed making Taako laugh.

“You can’t take that from me, Bean,” he said. “I’ll sue you.”

“I know, I know. But I’ve got a point, right? So, I was wondering if you, like, by chance and stuff, still had my wand?”

Silence. Sigfriede rubbed the tip of her ear nervously. Then she heard what sounded like the creaking of a desk chair, and a sigh.

“Did I call you at school? I’m sorry, I should have asked first—”

“No, no, you’re okay, Sigfriede. Everything’s fine, stop stressing yourself. Uh… Are you sure you want it back? Like, really for real sure? Cause when I asked you before, you said you were scared—”

“I know what I said, Taako. But I’ve been really good about staying on top of my anxiety medicine, and we’ve got a really good support system in the Bureau! I know you’re busy, and you don’t like coming to the moon, so I don’t expect you to come and bring it to me or teach me more magic or anything, I don’t even want to be a wizard anymore. I just want to know some good attack spells. Spells I can memorize, so we can have some versatile range. Like, my guns are pretty good, and I’m about to start building a new one, but they’re useless if we get caught with a creature that’s resistant to nonmagic damage.”

“You’re really sure you want to get back into this,” he didn’t sound convinced. “’Cause if you get hurt again…”

There were a lot of implications in that statement: “Don’t say I didn’t warn you”, “I’m not gonna help you again”, “I don’t think I could handle it”.

“I know. But Mom said you have my wand, and I miss you,” Sigfriede’s voice caught in her throat, and she tried not to start crying. “It’s just a job, you know, Taako? I still love you. I just… really, really miss you.”

Pages of a book flipped in the background. There was an inhale, a pause, and Taako said, “I’ve got a few free days next week. Angus is coming by on Wednesday; would you like to come see
When Sigfriede returned from her dinner with Taako, she found herself extremely motivated to move forward with things in life. She’d asked for the day off, and she and Taako spent the day just catching up and hanging out. He handed her the wand as soon as she got in the house, and the first thing they did together was clean the wand up and polish its gems. She’d forgotten how much she loved the look of her wand; long and slim, with carvings of lightning arching across it.

Taako also let her find some books to borrow. She used to have a habit of borrowing books every week while she was a kid, but the older she got, the harder school became and the less time she had for leisure research. She found books on magic, theory of bonds, and the anatomy of the magic plane. Then she found a couple of old school spell books; she was going back to learning magic how she had when she was little: by reading and trying to copy spells. The ones that made sense she’d memorize, and the ones that didn’t she’d just leave and not worry about. So, of course as soon as she got home, she found a new notebook and started her readings. By the end of the month, she’d re-memorized all of her cantrips, including *dancing lights*, *friends*, *chill touch*, and *shocking grasp*; the first two she’d learned accidentally as a kid, one when she fell out of the tree and turned blue, and the second when she had trouble making friends on the playground. The other two were learned in college. Additionally, she rememorized *chromatic orb*, *false life* and *witch bolt*. They were the same spells she’d memorized in college, but they’d do for now.

Once she’d done all of her magic research, she decided her next big project would be a new gun. Her pistol was great, but it only did so much, and if it jammed in the middle of a fight and she was out of spell slots, she’d be useless if she had no back up plans.

First, she had to come up with a concept. Right? In all honesty, Sigfriede had no idea how to start building a brand-new gun; she’d stolen her pistol from Lucas. She hadn’t built it or invented it. She could take it apart and put it all back together until the cows came home, but that didn’t tell her the first thing about actually creating a gun. Where had Lucas sourced his metal from? Where did he get all his small little mechanical parts from? How long did it take to properly balance the firing system?

This justified a visit to her home in Neverwinter. She packed a weekend’s trip change of clothes, her notes on the concepts she had, her pistol, and her tinker’s tools. The first night she visited home, she and Barry sat over the dinner table picking apart her little pistol and taking notes over it.

“Sigfriede,” he said as he unscrewed a tiny lever from the main frame of the firearm. “I’m pretty sure I already know where this came from, but these things aren’t even on the market yet. How the fuck do you have this?”

“I stole it,” she answered flatly.

“How’d you steal it?”

“Sneaky.”

Barry raised an eyebrow. “Who’d you steal it from?”

“Miller.”

Barry stopped what he was doing. He looked her up and down, smiled, and nodded. “Good job.”

“I know.”
Twenty minutes later, they had the whole pistol dismantled, observed, written down, and ready to reverse engineer.

“Okay,” Sigfriede pulled out her concepts notebook. “So, I’ve got two ideas. One is, ideally, supposed to be a kind of better range fire arm. I had this idea of the bullet spinning to increase the damage it does when it enters the body, you know? I don’t know if that’s really possible, though. Nothing particularly special, just if I’m stuck in the back of something and my pistol’s not the greatest option, I can whip this baby out and get a little better damage at longer range.”

Barry nodded.

“The second is a little bit more contrived,” she continued. “You know those grenade things some armies use? And how there’s a chance it could detonate in your hand? I wanted to make something just like my pistol, but instead of firing bullets, it fires grenades before they detonate. Also ranged, but the theory behind it is that when the grenade lands, people around where the grenade lands will have to move away before it explodes and hits them.”

Barry raised an eyebrow. “Is that it?”

“Yeah.”

He hummed and nodded. Then he pointed to her notebook. “Can I take a look at what you’ve got there?”

“Yeah!” She handed the notebook over. “It’s nothing too impressive; just pretty much what I just said to you, with some minor algebra that really didn’t show up any reasonable answers…”

Barry scanned the few pages of work Sigfriede had to show. He picked through them with scrutiny, trying to follow through on her logic and see what he could draw from it.

After a few moments, he said, “I mean, I can’t think of anything that would make what you’ve come up with physically impossible. I mean, if these concepts were physically impossible, I don’t think even Lucas would have been able to make that little pistol work properly at all.”

“It misfires, sometimes.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s to be expected. Sometimes stones of farspeech don’t connect on the first try, it’s all mechanical engineering and physics, baby girl. Especially with all the tiny pieces of machinery in it, of course it’s gonna misfire sometimes. What I’m saying is if this wasn’t possible, it wouldn’t exist. So, there’s absolutely nothing that tells me that we can’t take the concept of just straight out firing a bullet and make it spin as it flies, or even change bullets to hand grenades. We just have to play around with materials and aerodynamics and friction and stuff until we find that good, good sweet spot.”

“You lost me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he winked over the top of his glasses. “You pay for what you need for this and listen to and learn from what I tell you, and I’ll handle the math side of this for you. I just need you to handle the mechanical side.”

Two days and some reverse engineering later, Barry and Sigfriede had a list of materials and tools they’d need for their little projects. They gave Lup little warning, took over the office in the apartment, and started working. Barry first sat Sigfriede down and pulled down a couple text books
he’d taken from his study on the Starblaster. He gave her a crash course in mechanical engineering, aerodynamics, and physics. Then, together they compiled some research data on canons and grenades, cross referenced it with the reverse engineering Barry had done on her pistol, and started on some blueprints. Many cups of tea, plates of sandwiches, and bags of chips later, Barry and Sigfriede ran their ideas by Lup.

“So what we’re thinking,” Sigfriede said excitedly as she spread the blueprints in front of her mother, “is two different designs, one for each concept. The first is like a really long pistol,” she pointed to the first blueprint containing the design for something that if looked at on the plane of thought would have been called a riffle. “Dad came up with the mechanics and stuff for it in terms of how it fires and what the barrels like. I came up with the concept. Essentially, the chamber and loading process works the same as my pistol, right? But the barrel is really long to give me longer range if my pistol jams. It also allows for a spiral to be cut inside the barrel that the bullet has to follow—”

“It locks the bullet into the cut,” Barry said, “and forces the back edge of the bullet to spin along with the spiral cut.”

“Yes,” she continued, “so when the bullet leaves the barrel, it spins in the air. Likewise, it spins as it enters the enemy’s body, tearing skin and tissue with it.”

“Siggy,” Lup smiled. “I love you. You are the light of my life and the, like, second highest up thing that I’ve created in my life that I’m most proud of, but—”

“What’s the first?”

“I really good Pappardelle with sea urchin and fried zucchini. Now, you know that I’m very proud of you and love you with all I have. But I know absolutely nothing about your guns.”

“Well, yeah,” Sigfriede scoffed and adjusted her glasses. “That’s why I’m explaining it to you.”

Barry chuckled. “And that’s also why I’m correcting when she gets something wrong.”

“Hush, Daddy. So, yeah, its essentially a longer, long range pistol that fires the bullet in a spiral. I’m not sure what to call the design yet, but I’m calling this weapon in particular Bad News; I’m only gonna pull it out when my pistol jams or runs out of ammo, which is bad news for me. But I’m also hoping that when I pull it out and the assholes on the other side see it, they think its bad news for them. Intimidation tactics.”

“Mind control,” Lup offered.

“Yes! Okay, my second one is brand new. Brand new concept, brand new design, everything. You know how some people in the military throw grenades?”

“Yes?”

“I want some. But throwing them by hand is really stupid. So instead of throwing them by hand, I’m throwing them by gun.”

Sigfriede pulled out a smaller second blueprint from under Bad News’ blueprint. It showed a small contraption, about half the length in barrel as the pistol, because instead of firing something from the inside, Sigfriede would place a grenade in a mortar shaped bowl at the front of the weapon. Then, through a similar ignition system to Bad News and her pistol, black gunpowder would cause a small explosion and launch the grenade forward at extremely high velocities.
She explained this to her mother and said, “This is supposed to give more accuracy than throwing grenades by hand, because instead of taking aim and chucking your arm back and then forward again, possibly adding a spiral or an angle to your throw, this thing is more of a point-and-chuck-at-your-enemies kind of idea.”

“It could also,” Barry added, “possibly add force to the explosion the grenade gives by using the momentum and velocity of the projectile path it just exited.”

Lup smiled. “You’re so cute when you use your nerd words.”

“Please wait until I leave the room,” Sigfriede said. “But what do you think? Are they good ideas, Momma?”

Lup stared at the blueprints for a few moments, then made eye contact with her daughter and shrugged. “I don’t have a whole lot of ideas to add to this, Baby Bean. I mean, if your dad’s helped you with it so far, I’d trust what the man says.”

“Great!” Sigfriede scooped up her blueprints and turned on her heels. “Call us when dinners ready!”

The paperwork to clear her two new firearms on the Bureau was hell. Bad News got rejected once for a false alarm on magical properties of, quote, “Extremely Alarming Power”, which Sigfriede found offensive and called Lucretia personally to get it taken care of. Her second gun, which she was calling a hand mortar for its shape, go rejected twice because of its ammunition type.

“You know that the last person we let have grenades here,” the Health and Safety representative said, “was Garfield the Deals Warlock. Fantasy Costco lit on fire three times because of how often he played with them.”

“Yeah well do I look like a fucking lasagna cat to you?”

That got Sigfriede’s point across. And just in time, as well, because the day after she returned to the Bureau, Lucretia gave the girls a string of new missions that had piled up quickly. All of them were easy, low combat civilian safety tasks, including, but not limited to, handling tensions between opposing churches, clerics being kidnapped, hoards of zombies ravaging across small towns, cults brainwashing entire villages, and reports of a dragon migration threatening a mountain town. By the time they got a long-standing break, Sigfriede had memorized detect thoughts, scorching ray, blink, fear, lightning bolt, and stinking cloud, and a new cantrip called mage hand, which her family kept telling her was essential to the magic casters repertoire, and kept teasing her until she learned it. She had also realized, when fighting one particularly asshole-ish zombie, that at times, when her emotions were running particularly high, she could take the energy her emotions gave her and turn it into magical energy to cast an extra spell every once in a while. It was taxing, and hard, and drained her more often than not, but useful.

Additionally, once she started learning all of these new things about her magic, she found less need to rely on her guns. They were wonderful for a quick shot to the shoulder if someone was running, or a good finishing move to a hard opponent, but the jams and reload time took up valuable time and space in combat. One time, when she was out of spell slots and energy to remake spell slots, all three of her guns jammed beyond fast repair in combat. She was stuck moving into melee and using a dumb dagger she’d found. They were still great, and she still loved each of her firearms equally, but she put them to the back of her mind until they presented themselves as needed in a situation.
Eventually, like always, the girls were called to the Main Gathering Dome and into the throne room for their next assignment.

Sigfriede called down the throne room corridor as soon as they arrived, “’Sup, Lucretia!”

Lucretia wasn’t facing the doorway as they entered, and there was a split second where she started to turn on her heels, then her brain caught up, her shoulder’s slumped, and she assumed her “Director Pose” as the girls walked up.

“Sigfriede,” she said.

“Hmmm?”

“What have I told you about names and titles during office hours?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sigfriede gave her a blank stare.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Sigfriede, please don’t start pulling this right now.”

Sigfriede snorted and hid her face. “I, uh, I didn’t do anything. I’m just here—”

“Siggy,”

“Madam Director?”

“Thank you.”

There was a pause filled by Sigfriede’s giggles. Then Lucretia inhaled and spoke again.

“Right, girls, if I remember correctly this will be your biggest mission yet. This shouldn’t be anything too… hard. But I wouldn’t put it past it to be odd. There isn’t a lot of clarity in this report but, uh…” she cleared her throat. “it’s all we’ve got girls.

“So,” Lucretia opened the manila folder she had in her hand. “A few months ago, just after the Mid-summer Solstice, citizens all over the Calimshan region of Faerun started filing reports of what appeared to be a green dragon begin a decent into the regions capitol. Promptly after its decent, it began showing signs of aggression, and then the next day it was no where to be found. I was going to send you girls on a mission for this to see if you could help the civilians, but then they started sending in reports that the dragon was no longer an apparent concern. And that would have been the end of that, until a few weeks later, there was a shift in politics. I don’t know how much you all keep up with that stuff, but how much do you know about the different factions of Faerun, girls?”

“Uh,” Random tugged on her bangs. “What?”

Lucretia sighed. “You all do realize that’s part of your job, right? To keep up with politics.”

Mavis scratched the back of her neck. “My dad told me politics is only important to politicians.”

“Yes, Mavis, and finding food and shelter is only important to forest wildlife.”

An uncomfortable silence passed between the girls.

“Nonetheless,” Lucretia continued, “Calimsham and its capitol Calimport were part of the Lord’s
Alliance. Since you probably don’t know, the Lord’s Alliance is a faction in Faerun consisting of towns and regions that believe in a strong defense against the evils of the world by creating an alliance between different cities across Faerun. Many knights and fighters and casters are part of this Alliance, and they usually are sent out on jobs similarly to how you three are here: on order of reports from civilians about evils and perils in the world. Sigfriede, if my memory serves correctly, your dad temporarily joined the Lord’s Alliance in Phandalin as a way to quickly acquire access to Magnus, Merle and Taako. He served as a body guard in that time.”

Sigfriede shrugged. “He doesn’t talk about that time of his life very often.”

“And fairly so. Now, Calimport was Calimsham’s main facet into this Alliance, with other smaller but powerful cities also aligned as such. However, in the weeks following, the entire region of Calimsham withdrew from the Lord’s Alliance. Additionally, many more civilian reports have begun coming in reporting missing persons. And let me tell you girls, this is about as odd as I’ve seen these missing person’s reports come in, because all of them are people who are training to be or are established to be bards.”

“Bards?” Sigfriede repeated.

“Bards,” Lucretia agreed. “Hundreds of missing person’s reports from all different cities in this region, most of them coming in from Calimport, but all of them being for bards. Now, I don’t know if the three of you follow the same form of assuming logic that I do, but…”

“No, that’s definitely odd,” Random said.

“Is it a serial killer?” Sigfriede said.

“Sigfriede, if we knew it were a serial killer I would have told you. Hell, I don’t even think I would have told you because the local authorities would be contacted before the Bureau even got involved.”

“That’s fair.”

“Now,” Lucretia pinched the bridge of her nose. “here’s where it gets complicated. This mission is supposed to run like every other mission for you girls, except for the fact that Calimsham has recently put itself into military lock down; no civilians are being let out, and it’s been very hard getting Bureau scouts in. We’d like to be able to send you into Calimport, but Avi hasn’t had clearance to send you in via our usual canons because there’s recently been a no-fly zone declared over the city. We were able to obtain clearance for your presence in the city, however, despite no clear way to have you arrive there, only through your invite to an upcoming gala the ruler of Calimsham is throwing for the most well known and wealthiest socialites and celebrities in Faerun. We checked the attendance list to see who was all attending, and, uh, girls… I hate to say this, but Taako is the only direct contact any of you have on that list. We can’t send you on this mission unless Taako agrees to escort you to this gala under his exclusive invitation, and given our personal standings, I can’t guarantee this mission can ever start.”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter in the middle of a real bad depression so if its just. Bad. I'm sorry.

I had a whole plot worked out in my head and I was on track and then everything
happened and I looked down and I was SO FAR OFF TRACK for where I wanted to go and I couldn't come up with anything else to make them level up in some big, Balance-arc-like structure cause it's FIVE LEVELS and I just. My brain wasn't working. BUT you get some good scenes between Barry and Siggy, which is a plus because I personally LOVE Dad Mode Barry. Woof.

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being my beta! She knows what's coming up in this next arc and, uh, she and I both thing y'all are gonna love it. If you're a rules stickler, let me know so I can start listing important mechanic things for you guys down here! Be good to each other and I'll see you next Thursday.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE--ADVANTAGE ON PERSUASION CHECKS

Chapter Summary

With no other options to get the mission started, Sigfriede starts to get desperate and test her waters. How much ass-kissing will it take to get a night out on the town? Sigfriede pulls out all the stops. Taako gives in. Random learns proper slang.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE--ADVANTAGE ON PERSUASION CHECKS

Lucretia left the girls to pend the rest of their day just resting. She didn’t suggest they train, she didn’t suggest they try to work on getting any kind of clearance for this sudden military zone; she just suggested the girls take the rest of the day to chill out, and they’d be called back to the throne room at eight in the morning tomorrow to problem solve.

Sigfriede tried to listen. Honestly, she did. This was a tricky situation that she’d never really received official training for. Military coups, for want of a better word, were not what her division of the Bureau. She didn’t even think the Bureau had a division dealing with military coups. Maybe the Non-Combat Evacuation division, but that was the closest thing she could think of. So she stayed in her dorm, tried to read a book, and drank some tea. In the end, it proved worthless.

In the back of her mind, something kept whispering that she should at least try and talk to Taako about it. Sure, she’d only just recently started talking to him regularly again, but they’d just fallen right back into their old dynamic. Taako kept an eye on her, even called her to check if she needed food every once in a while. She’d gone to one of Cashmere’s music recitals, and she’d helped Eva start figuring out what she wanted to do in life (she was leaning towards rogue, which Sigfriede found mildly offensive since she kept sneaking around Sigfriede and sticking her nose in places it shouldn’t be). She’d even taken one of the cats to a vet appointment when Taako had an emergency pop up at his school. Things weren’t as tense anymore. Of course, there were tense moments when Sigfriede would start rambling and the rambling would lead to talking about her job at the Bureau, but she’d gotten better at making sure she didn’t bring that up as much anymore. There really shouldn’t be a cause for him to mind helping the girls out, right?

She pulled her stone of farspeech out of her pocket.

Taako promptly picked up. “Bean!”

“Hey!” She flopped herself down on her bed and sat criss-cross. “Uh, are you busy right now?”

“Nope! Whatcha got for me, pumpkin?”

“Uh, listen, this is a weird question for you, ’cause I know how you feel bout this… stuff? But, but… uh, listen before you answer okay? Uh, so, Lucretia just called me and the girls into the throne room for a mission debriefing, you know? And, we’re being sent out for… a lot of reasons,
but mostly the Bureau’s received a lot of missing persons reports? From all over this region in Faerun, but mostly from it’s capitol, and all of the reports are for bards.”

There was a pause. Then Taako snorted. “Bards?”

“Yes, Uncle Taako. I said bards.”

“Who the fuck kidnaps a hoard of bards?”

“I don’t know, Taako, that’s why I’m being sent on this mission.”

Taako guffawed some more, not seeming to take the issue very seriously. Sigfriede waited patiently, hoping he’d be in a good enough mood after having a good goof to be willing to help her.

When he finally caught his breath, she said, “So, uh, yeah. I’m being sent on a mission to find out who’s kidnaping a hoard of bards. But here’s the issue. Long story short, this region has just put itself into a military lock down, and no one’s being let out. Lucretia said it was really hard getting field scouts into the region, and the capitol that we’re being sent to is in the middle of it. Avi can’t send us in through the canons because there’s a no-fly zone. The only way we’ll get clearance into the region is if we arrive on foot, escorted by you under your exclusive invitation to this gala thing the ruler of this region is throwing.”

No response.

“So what I’m needing from you is your permission to do that. I know you don’t like Lucretia, and you don’t want anything to do with the Bureau, but—”

“Uh, hey, Siggy?” Taako asked, “Hey, I’m, uh… I’m going through a tunnel, babe.”

Sigfriede sighed. “This is the home line, Uncle Taako.”

“Yeah but I’ve got bad—” he faked static noises. Stones of farspeech didn’t get static. “Bad reception. I’ll call you back later, yeah?”

“No, Taako—”

And he hung up.

Sigfriede sighed and tossed her stone onto her bedside table. She threw her body back onto her pillows, and hid her face in her shirt. It just felt bad, the whole situation. Not even just this mission, though clearly hundreds and thousands of missing bards is bad, but more specifically the way her relationship with her closest uncle had changed. She didn’t blame him, it made sense. Taako shouldn’t have to talk about things that make him upset or uncomfortable, but there was a part of her that felt like he’d almost just… abandoned her as a family member. He hadn’t, obviously, since he talked to her and sent her home with food and called her and all of that. But she missed being able to talk to him about anything.

Her eyes stung. Her nose stuffed up. She tried not to get upset about it, but no matter how hard she tried, the spoiled little girl inside of her just desperately wanted attention again. Not only that, but this was the only way she and her friends were going to get this mission started.

There had to be something she could do to convince Taako.

She reached for her stone of farspeech again, and called her mother.
Two weeks passed, and Sigfriede’s nine-to-five office job went from being paperwork over minute things in civilian life like small tornadoes and minor earthquakes to nothing but paperwork sent her way from Internal Affairs over these missing bards. Eventually, Cilla moved Sigfriede from her cubicle in the Natural Disaster Relief division office to a small stationary set up with Mavis and Random in the throne room with Lucretia. It wasn’t exactly going in and finding where all these bards had gone, but it was a start to the mission. They were able to find a pattern in the missing cases, which was to say that the pattern was no pattern at all. The only defining feature between each missing persons report was simply that they were bards; new bards, old bards, bards with big reputation, bards with no reputations at all, small in stature, well built in stature, half elf, human, elf, dwarf, half orc, you name it. Most of them were human, but upon further research into the region it was revealed that most of Calimsham’s population was human, so that didn’t raise cause for much concern.

One day, after Sigfriede had gone through her hundredth missing bard report, she slammed her glasses onto the desk she shared with her teammates and groaned.

“What is it this time,” Lucretia asked coolly.

Sigfriede spoke through her hands, “This is stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Lucretia flipped through another report, “it’s your mission for the time being.”

“No, my missions happen surface side. That’s why, on my titty, my uniform reads ‘Sigfriede Taaco-Bluejeans; Natural Disaster Relief; Field Missionary.”

“Yes, well if you can get a plan on my desk as to how you girls are going to get surface side, I’ll let you do your field work. Until then, keep working on these reports.”

“They’re all the same, though!”

Lucretia didn’t answer.

Sigfriede sighed. She glanced at Mavis and Random, who seemed equally bored but found nothing better to do with their time. She bit her lip, bounced her leg, and stood up.

“Taako keeps avoiding me when I ask for help,” she said.

“I’m not surprised,” Lucretia responded flatly.

There was a pause. Then Sigfriede continued, “Mom thinks I should just show up at his house to ask.”

Lucretia stopped what she was doing. Mavis responded the same way, and with little idea as to what else to do, so did Random.

Mavis cleared her throat. “When he invites you, right?”

Sigfriede shook her head. “This gala thing is only in a week at this point. I don’t have time to wait and be polite. If it’s our only way in, it’s our only way in. And I’m not even asking for him to help us on the actual work concerning the mission, just if he can help us get in. It’s not that big of a deal and I think he’s being stupid about it.”

Mavis shifted her weight in her seat. “Siggy, if he doesn’t want to help, he doesn’t have to.”
“Yeah, well, I’m not gonna drop it until he gives me a straight up answer. Acting like you’re going through a tunnel on the home landline doesn’t count.”

Mavis glanced at Lucretia nervously. She had been slouching in her throne moments ago, but now sat up straight as she listened to Sigfriede. She pursed her lips.

“Well,” there was tension in her voice as she spoke. “I can’t give personal advice on this matter; but, if it’s what you think will move the mission along best…”

“I never said best, Lucretia.”

“Just… don’t make things harder for yourself than they have to be, Sigfriede.”

Taako lived on the outskirts of Neverwinter, in the nicest part of the city that was reserved for the artists and workers that gave Neverwinter its reputation as The City of Skilled Hands. It was funny and obviously a long-haul gag, since he lived in a big, tall, gleaming mansion on a hill that overlooked a small, slightly overgrown grove sitting just adjacent well-kept yards with flowers and shrubbery; that was where she’d spent most of her free time of her youth running around with no shoes and mud-stained toes. The house was absolutely big enough to house the whole family, and often had for family occasions like birthdays and holidays, but now that she thought about it, she and her parents had been the only ones to stay for long periods of time. She’d gathered from her few dinner visits recently that almost nothing had changed, if not for the furniture and decoration fashions, but if Sigfriede remembered correctly, Lup had told her a small pond had been added to the back yard.

She arrived on the front porch out of uniform, with her hair pulled back in a messy bun with the long ends wrapped around the base of the bun. She wore an old t-shirt she’d been given at her university orientation that was a god-awful purple bearing gold letters that were once pristine and glimmering; now, they were chapped, split apart and falling off from the thorough use Sigfriede had gotten out of it. She thought about wearing jeans for goof’s sake, her mom said she looked most like her dad when she wore a t-shirt and jeans with her hair back, but it was too hot. She opted for shorts instead.

Was that considered kissing ass? Yes. But that was the point. She was showing up uninvited, in the middle of the day, looking like a plain old Sigfriede Bean to throw off his scent to the mission so that she could get him relaxed and unguarded. Then, preferably, hopefully, with Kravitz around for back up, she’d press him for a final answer. Was it rude and a little manipulative? Yes. Was it the last resort? Absolutely. But she was tired of camping out in Lucretia’s throne room and getting weird looks from other employees while she dealt with the same missing persons report over and over again.

She rang the doorbell.

Eva opened the door.

Sigfriede blinked. “Eva?”

“No. Cash.”

Sigfriede blinked again. “Eva.”

“No,” they insisted through giggles, “I’m Cashmere.”
“Yeah,” Sigfriede grabbed Eva’s head and shoved her out of the way, “let me in this fuckin’ house, I need to talk to your dad.”

“Which one?”

“Yeah, you’re cute, chica.”

Sigfriede kicked off her shoes and put her keys in the dish by the door. “When’d you get so tall, Eva?”

“I dunno. I think Kravitz is working. Taako might be around here somewhere. You can go look for him if you want. If you can’t find him you can just chill in your old room or somethin’, I don’t really fuckin’ care.”

“Language,”

“Fine, I’ll say it in elvish next time.”

Then they headed back up to their room without much more.

The house was unusually quiet. Even when Sigfriede had visited for dinner recently, there always seemed to be something going on. At the very least, music would be playing somewhere, especially after Cashmere had decided to be a bard. She’d usually be playing some sort of instrument. But that didn’t appear to be the case today. The TV was off in the living room. The dining room was tidied and set. The dishwasher ran in the kitchen, but that produced little to no noise. No one walked along the balcony over the entry room. No footsteps creaked from the second floor. In what was probably the first time ever in her life, Sigfriede was really, truly alone in Taako’s house. It wasn’t creepy, per say. The house was brightly lit. It was kept clean. The furniture didn’t feel old. No paint was chipped. The wallpaper was tasteful. It was just… different. She’d spent her whole life never really seeing this house stand still, and here she was, pulling teeth in a tense situation, learning what that felt like. And it was distant; understated in volume but heavy in presence. The silence held weight, but no animosity.

Sigfriede couldn’t find Taako right off the bat. She checked his office, the small library they had, Kravitz’s office, the bedroom (she knocked first, obviously), and any other places she could think to check. He showed up nowhere, so with a shrug, Sigfriede asked Eva to tell her when dinner was ready, and that she’d be in her old room.

A few hours later, there was a knock on her door.

“Bean?” It was Taako’s voice.

Sigfriede got up and opened the door. “Hey!”

“Hey, kiddo,” he smiled at her. “What brings you to this part of town?”

“Just stoppin’ by, you know? I saw Mom and Dad earlier today and figured I’d give you and Krav and the girls a visit. The missions going really slow, so… Random and Mavis and I have a lot of free time on our hands at the moment…”

Taako hummed. “I see. Eva said you wanted dinner?”

“Yup,” she popped the “p”.

“Why don’t you help me around the kitchen this time, huh? For old time’s sake?”
A huge smile broke across Sigfriede’s face. “I’d love to!”

When the table was set and dinner served, Sigfriede made sure to bide her time. She let Eva and Cashmere carry the conversation. They asked Kravitz what happened at work that day, then talked about what the latest drama at their school was. They asked Taako questions about magic, fought the cats as they jumped onto the table, and teased Sigfriede for how busy she’d been. The girls scarfed down their servings, rushed through their deserts, and left the table early.

“Uh,” Sigfriede laughed nervously, “do they always do that?”

Taako shrugged. “They ask to leave before they do, that’s all I care about.”

“They’ve got their own things they do,” Kravitz said. “Angus was like that for a while, too. I guess we’re just used to it.”

She nodded slowly. “I see…”

A comfortable pause fell over the table.

Then Sigfriede inhaled. “Hey, Uncle Taako?”

“Hmmm?” he hummed into his wine glass.

“You’ve got a gala coming up soon, right? Or a party or something like that?”

Taako had been putting his glass down, but paused and blanked for a moment. “What was that, dear, I can’t hear you?”

“I said,” Sigfriede started signing for clarity, “you’ve got a gala coming up soon, or a party or something. Right?”

Taako never looked at her hands. “Say that again, love?”

“Taako.”

“Yes?”

“Please stop avoiding this question, we need to get this mission started or else a lot of bards may potentially die.”

“What mission, Bean?”

“I’m not playing this game anymore, Taako. I’ve called you and explained to you that a region of Faerun has gone under military lock down and is not allowing Avi to send us in via the usual glass cannon ball. Hundreds of bards have been reported missing and people are facing a financial crisis. The only way the region’s king is letting us in is if you escort us to this gala that’s coming up in a week. And I know for a fact that you’re going because Lucretia got a copy of the attendance list; you’re the only person anyone on my team has ties to, and they aren’t giving invitations out to us. So here’s the part I’m asking you about,” she shoved her plate to the side and leaned forward on the table, “will you please add me, Mavis and Random to your RSVP so we can get in to this fucking city and solve this problem? I’ve spent the last two weeks looking at the same missing persons report for different people, camped out in Lucretia’s throne room with no way to do what I was hired to do, which is field work.”
Taako stared her in the face. Something burned behind his eyes, and wheels turned in his head. He’d heard her and she knew it. They were sitting five feet away from each other, and Sigfriede was not a soft speaker. He squinted, pursed his lips, and sighed.

“Sigfriede,” he mumbled, “you don’t know how I—”

“I know you hate Lucretia. I know you never want to see the Bureau again. I know it sucks every time someone makes you invite her over for Candlenights or whatever. But this isn’t for Lucretia. This isn’t even really for me. This is for a mission concerning the safety of hundreds of people, the friends and family of which are at their wits end and have called for the only help they feel they can rely on, and we can’t even really give that help right now. I’m not stupid, Taako. I wasn’t born yesterday—”

“You were so cute when you were born, Siggy…”

“But now I’m just trying to do my fucking job. That’s all it is anymore, Taako; a job. We don’t live under the threat of all powerful relics destroying society, or nihilism personified destroying the universe. There isn’t just one team of people who can complete this job. There’s no voidfish; Fischer’s old chambers have been turned into an archive center. Listen, you don’t have to even help us on the mission once we get there. Literally all I’m asking you to do is just get us to this fucking city. You can even bring Kravitz and make it a date night, I don’t fucking care. But please, at least stop avoiding the question and give me a solid answer.”

“Sigfriede… Baby Bear, you don’t know everything—”

“I don’t want to know everything!” Sigfriede’s voice caught in her throat. “I just want to stop being ignored! I just want to be able to go home and tell my boss I at least did my part and tried to get this mission going.”

Taako sat back in his chair and hid his face behind the floppy rim of his hat. Kravitz glanced at Sigfriede with a tight smile as she wiped at her cheeks. There was no response, no clicking of silverware on china or giggles of hidden half-drow rogues. The same weighted, knowing silence filled the room; Sigfriede was starting to hate it as much as she hated thunder.

“If you can just get us into this gala,” she said, “we’ll leave you alone as soon as we get there. Then you’ll never hear about anything dealing with my job ever again. I promise. Even from Mavis, I’ll tell her if I have to. We just… we need to find a way to get there. That’s all.”

Another pause. Kravitz leaned forward and took Taako’s hand in his.

“Taako,” he said softly. “she really isn’t asking much of you, love. And this is clearly important to her…”

Taako’s hat moved, looking up at Kravitz with hesitation. Then there was a sigh, and Taako’s face emerged from behind it. It was a weird thing to say for an elf, but in the twenty-three years Sigfriede had been alive, she was finally starting to see Taako age.

“Fine,” he said tightly. “I’ll get you girls in. But I’m not helping you with anything else; you’re all finding your own things to wear or whatever. All I’m doing is adding you to the attendance list and giving you a ride there. As soon as we get in those doors I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night, do you understand me?”

“Oh, thank you!” Sigfriede jumped up from her seat and ran to give Taako the biggest hug she could muster. She threw her arms over his neck and buried her face in his shoulder.
“Yeah, yeah,” he hugged her back with little hesitance. “Don’t go all mushy on me now, the girls might see. And hey, stop crying on me, yeah? You look like your mom, and this shirt was expensive. You’re gonna stain it…”

Sigfriede laughed and sniffed. Then she kissed his cheek and smiled. “Thank you so much, Uncle Taako. And I promise, we’re in the doors and then gone. You’ll never hear about this ever again, I swear on my life.”

“Go put your plate in the sink before I change my mind.”

A week later, Tres Party Babes showed up to Taako’s door step after their last haul of paperwork. They brought their outfits for the gala with them, plus a change of formal uniform and a few extra changes of work uniforms. As soon as they got into Taako’s house, it was just like a group of high school girls getting ready for prom. Mavis grouched the whole time, Random had no idea what was going on with her robes, and Sigfriede let both of them perish. By the end of it, however, both girls had given up, and Sigfriede assigned Taako to braid-duty while she made Mavis wear at least mascara (she had pretty eyes!), and untied Random from the knots she’d put herself in with her sash.

By the time Taako and Kravitz had finished getting ready, Sigfriede had heard it all.

“Sigfriede, I don’t know how to tie this fucking knot.”

“What the fuck do I do with this sash?”

“I can’t fight people in these robes…”

“This outfit is so inefficient.”

She told both of them to can it; this was a formal part of the mission. Fighting and efficiency came after they found their way into the city and started working on the missing bards. She’d pulled teeth, kissed ass and manipulated her way into this damn party. Tonight was supposed to be a night of decoration and celebration. They each wore outfits that represented their places in society per the Syl-Pasha’s required dress code. For example, it was easy to combine human and elvish fashions to show Sigfriede’s existence as a half elf that were decorated in leather and shimmering embroidery for her status as a gunslinger and sorcerer; similarly, Mavis dawned simpler, sturdier materials died in earthy colors with floral accents for her being a dwarven druid, and Random tied up the rear with decoration on her horns, festive markings across her face, and un-died, cool cloth robes. Sigfriede thought it a little dumb to state a need for attention to a tiefling’s features; it was hard to miss a tiefling when you saw one. However, this was the Syl-Pasha’s request, and with so little information given to them from the Bureau, Sigfriede decided to leave her final decisions on the matter until after she’d met the guy.

Still, despite all the bickering and the swatting and whining, when Taako took a last look at the girls (he said he wouldn’t be seen with three badly dressed hooligans again in his life), he couldn’t help but note how proud he was at how the girls cleaned up.

“Yeah,” he said off handedly, “you three look alive enough. Wouldn’t want to drag three corpses around with me all night, eh, Krav?”

He winked at Sigfriede and walked out the front door.
They took a magical means of transportation across the continent. Sigfriede couldn’t tell you for
the life of her what it was, but she knew it was magic because Taako facilitated it out of his
spellbook, and she thought spellbooks were dumb. But it consisted of a circle on the floor and some
drawn symbols. Taako must have either known about the entry issue of the region or just grown
lazy, since the group popped back out of the astral plane just outside of what Sigfriede assumed
was the border of the region.

Military guards stood at attention at ten-foot intervals around the region line. Some had weapons
like daggers and swords and crossbows. Sigfriede didn’t see any bearing firearms. She glanced
down at her hip and tucked her pistol holster under a fold of cloth on her hip.

“How are we supposed to get past these guys,” she asked.

Taako hummed and rummaged through a bag he’d brought. “Krav, did you grab the invitation and
extended invites before we left?”

“No,” Kravitz furrowed his eyebrows. “I thought you got them?”

“Oh, well that’s just all fine and dandy, isn’t it? You know you pulled the same goof at
Cashmere’s last concert…”

A grin spread across Kravitz’s lips as he watched his husband rummage. “Do you want me to—”

“Got them!” Taako stood up straight with five little slips of paper in his hand. “We’ll see if this
works. If it doesn’t, you girls are fucked because I’m going home.”

Taako walked towards the guards with no regard for stealth. He shouted for their attention, waving
the papers (were they invites? Tickets?) frantically, for added drama.

Beyond that point was fairly simple; Taako handed their tickets to a guard, chatted it up a bit, and
then a quick hour’s caravan ride into Calimport was provided. The ride was mostly silent.
Sigfriede could tell that Taako was trying to be civil, but it was clear that he was mildly
uncomfortable. You couldn’t cut the tension with a knife, per say, but it was definitely like a thick
tomato bisque.

So instead, she started talking to Random.

“Oh! I don’t think we did proper introductions,” Sigfriede said. She reached over Mavis’s lap and
grabbed Random’s hand. “Uncle Taako, Kravitz, this is my friend Random Fangbattle. She’s Carey
and Killian’s daughter.”

Random’s eyes grew wide. She stared Sigfriede in the face with a panicked look.

Taako sat up straight. “Random, was it? Nice to meet you. I’m Taako; you know, from TV?”

Sigfriede and Mavis snorted. Random pulled her hand back, but kept staring at Sigfriede.

“Don’t be rude,” Mavis jammed her thumbs into Random’s side. “Say hi.”

“I did in the house, guys, leave me alone.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on Random, you’re only being quiet because you don’t get to
tackle anyone tonight.”

“Hey, I’d like to see you try and pin someone to the ground with your tiny ass. You can barely lift
a moving box.”

“That’s why there’s hold person.”

Kravitz smiled and held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Random. Uh, I’ll warn you,” he nodded at his hand, “it might be a little clammy.”

Random blinked, but forgot to take his hand. “I know.”

He sat there for a few seconds, raised an eyebrow, smirked, and leaned back. “So you’re this third member of, uh, what was it Sigfriede said, Taako? Tres Party Babes?”

Mavis groaned and Sigfriede gagged.

“Kravitz, please,” Mavis muttered.

Sigfriede glared at him. “Never let that fall out of your mouth again, I swear to God.”

The group shared a good chuckle, and it was probably one of the first times she’d seen Taako grin that night. It was nice, even if the idea of the girls simply being there ruining his night made her feel guilty.

“So,” Kravitz continued, “how have these two been treating you?”

Random grinned. “Bad.”

Sigfriede rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up!”

“Hey, hey,” Mavis quipped, “I thought this group was based on a policy of honesty! Let Random speak her mind!”

“No, this group was founded on the fact that Kophyn was a dick to all of us and we hated him.”

Mavis furrowed her eyebrows. “Hate’s a strong word, Bean…”

“Yeah, well… Kophyn was a big dick.”


Sigfriede gasped. “Random, no!”

“What?”

“Please tell me you know what that means.”

“Y-yeah? I think I know what it means…”

“Please tell me you think it means sex appeal. For the love of all things good, do not ruin this for me.”

Random started blushing deep indigo. “No? When has it ever meant sex appeal?”

“Random, you useless lesbian, it’s always meant sex appeal!”

“No, the fuck it doesn’t!” Random started flailing her hands. “That’s Pussy Factor!”

“Oh my god, Random, I hate this. I hate this and I hate you and I want you to just die a terrible
painful death. Kravtiz, arrest her.”

“You can’t arrest me for this! That’s thought crime!”

“No, you want to know what thought crime is? You wanna know that, Random?”

“Yeah, it’s having me arrested for getting a dumb meme wrong!”

“No, Random, thought crime is thinking Big Dick Energy is when someone’s an asshole… I want out of this fucking caravan.”

“I thought it meant someone was just an asshole!”

Sigfriede groaned a painful, death-lust groan. Mavis, caught between the two’s quarrel, and dropped her head in her hands and rested her elbows on her knees. Taako watched the scene unfold from his seat across from the girls with a raised eyebrow. Kravitz looked like he was sorry for carrying a conversation. Sigfriede had pinched the bridge of her nose, here eyes clamped shut and her teeth clenched together.

Then she heard chuckles coming from in front of her. She looked up to see Taako’s face red, his hand over his mouth and glee in his eyes. He studied Sigfriede, her head centimeters away from her hand and her glasses in her lap. Then his giggles turned into snorts as she squinted at him, trying to make out the details of his face.

“What,” she snapped. “Did you think Big Dick Energy meant being an asshole, too? Will Kravitz have to arrest you? Is this whole fucking family falling apart?”

There was another snort. Then the hidden grin behind Taako’s manicured fingers grew to make his eyes crinkle and sparkle. “No, no,” he said. “Its just… You look like your dad when you get mad like that.”

Sigfriede blinked. “What?”

“Barrold, your dad. The man who’s dick you came out of—”

“Yeah, I got that part, thanks, Taako.”

“You look like him. With your eyes all crinkled in and your glasses tossed away like that. It’s funny, because when he and your mom first started dating, Lup and I decided to mess around with him a bit, you know? We’d switch clothes in the middle of the day, and he’d get upset. He was always so nervous about upsetting your mom…”

He trailed off for a moment, just soaking in the sight of Sigfriede’s face. It had changed as she grew up, obviously. She spent her free time as a child in the sun, so the countless freckles she’d been born with had multiplied into countless more. She had the faintest of smile lines. He could see the mischief sitting behind her eyes, the way it glittered and flicked. It was one of the first times he’d checked on the signs of happiness she bore in a while. It shifted something in his chest, and while he’d routinely done the same thing for his own daughters, there was something unique about the energy Sigfriede brought with her. He missed it.

Sigfriede raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Bean,” he leaned forward and patted her knee. “Just know you’re cute, alright?”

The conversation died there. Sigfriede decided it wasn’t worth asking questions, so she replaced
her glasses and watched the scenery pass behind the caravan’s canvas walls. She tried to imagine if this kind of picture frame was familiar to Taako; she could easily see it being so. She thought about different ways it could feel. How would being alone make it feel when compared to being next to someone you loved? It was nice now, dressed to the nines in old stolen elvish robes, decorated leather carrying a special tool tucked between your thigh and the thigh of a person you’ve loved your whole life. But how would that contrast with the idea of being alone? No embroidery to declare your purpose for you, nothing to carry your tools but your bare, cold, calloused hands, no warmth from your right radiating from the subconscious knowledge of trust. Instead, replacing that trust were strangers. People with cold, unimportant faces who only kept you around for your limited skills. How would the warmth Sigfriede had been privileged to compare to the sensation of static on your side?

It was unimaginable.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all I thought I was posting the next chapter and was RUSHING to finish it. Good news is, it’s a longer chapter next week!

What do you guys think the girls are gonna find at the party? How bad do you think it’s gonna get? How are the girls gonna work out without Kophyn on a mission with them? So many new things!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com for being my beta! We’ve both been super busy lately, but she's been doing the best she can! Be kind to each other and I'll see you guys next week.
CHAPTER IMPROBABLE-- 42

Chapter Summary

A series of scenes from Sigfriede's life as a wholly remarkable book keeps finding its way into her existence; the author's way of getting back into writing after a major mental break down and self evaluation, healed up by Douglas Adams' most whimsical series.

Chapter Notes

I have not forgotten about you. I could never forget about you. But life gets hard and shit happens. Depression happens. Paranoia happens. You hit rock bottom, and start to climb back up again.

For all of my readers who have stayed with me through this two-month break, allow me to apologize by showing you something that has healed me through Sigfriede's eyes.

CHAPTER IMPROBIBLE—42

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy was a wholly remarkable book. At least, that’s what *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* said.

Sigfriede had been bored one day during her middle school’s Candlenights break. Her parents left her at home while the whole family went out on a big family event to do present shopping.

“Well, why can’t I come with you,” she propositioned, “I’ve got to get presents for everyone too.”

“No, you don’t, baby,” Lup said, ruffling her daughter’s hair as she finished her eyeliner. “All of your presents are the same ones your father and I give everyone. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“From Barry, Lup, and Sigfriede. Every year. You’re just a kid, baby girl, you’re not expected to spend money and shit.”

Sigfriede blinked. “But I do,” she muttered. “You give me money when I want to buy myself some chewing gum, or a new book when I’ve read all the ones we’ve already got.”

“You do that quite a lot, actually…”

“You only let me buy one new book at a time,” Sigfriede said flatly. “Anytime I finish a brand-new book, I’ve gone right back to having read all the books we’ve already got.”
Lup paused. She pulled the liquid lipstick wand away from her mouth. “Touché…”

At the end of it all, Sigfriede couldn’t convince her parents to let her go shopping with them. They said they were buying her special presents to be opened at home, as well. She said she’d look away while they picked them out. They said they didn’t trust her not to look in the cart after they’d picked them out, or while they were paying the cashier for them. She asked if that meant they thought she was nosey. They said yes. She asked if that made her a bad kid. Barry’s face fell flat, he said no, ruffled her hair just as Lup had done, and swept his wife out the front door.

What a rubbish excuse to leave your twelve-year-old daughter alone.

Sigfriede climbed on to the couch, grabbed the remote for the fantasy TV, found a movie she wanted to watch, and snuggled into the couch blankets.

The movie wasn’t good.

Well, it wasn’t that the movie wasn’t good, it was just that it wasn’t really all that fun anymore. She’d been watching it on repeat whenever her parents would let her. It had quickly become her favorite after seeing it the first time, but she figured she’d just about run her course with it now. She switched it off. She tied her favorite couch blanket (not to be confused with her favorite reading room blanket, her favorite kitchen blanket, or her favorite bedroom blanket), and padded her way to the big bookshelf of the house.

Sigfriede paid no attention to the big bookshelf. She’d read all the books in the house. Instead, she paid attention to a small little mahogany side table with a fat, round, plastic, and hideously pink piggy bank that had the word’s “Bean’s Book Bank” written in black marker on the side. She pulled it off the table, huddled it in towards her chest, held it like a baby, flipped it upside down, and ripped the stomach off it. Really, all she had done was pull out the cork to the thing so she could get her saved up money. Sigfriede liked to pretend she was ripping the thing’s flesh off, though. It made her feel big and strong. Not that she’d ever actually rip the flesh off a living pig, or a dead pig for that matter, or any animal for either of those matters. The only reason she really had a corked piggy bank instead of the classic porcelain ones you had to shatter to get your money from was because her parents originally started Bean’s Book Bank when Sigfriede was very little. The thought of shattering her precious piggy made her cry in hysterics.

Sigfriede sat cross legged with the open piggy bank in her lap. She untied her couch blanket from her neck, and draped it over her knees, creating a little catch-all for the money as it clattered and clanged out of its plastic confines. Once all of the money was out, she gathered up the blanket with the money in it and slung it over her shoulder. She walked out of the reading room and into her bedroom, found a little backpack that she used on days where she went out with her parents, and dumped all of the money inside. She zipped up the pocket, slung the bag across her back, and put on some shoes. Replacing the couch blanket to the couch, Sigfriede grabbed the notepad and pen kept tidily on the coffee table and wrote a note.


The piggy bank simply wished that the kid would just close it back up and replace it on the mahogany table before she left each time. It didn’t like the feeling of the draft in its tummy.

She hadn’t actually hitchhiked. At least, she didn’t think she did. To be completely honest, Sigfriede had no idea what hitchhiking was; she’d just heard her parents use the word a few times, and figured it probably meant something really smart. In the most basic sense of transportation,
Sigfriede walked. Douglas’s Corner Bookstore was just really across the street and down the block from Sigfriede’s downtown apartment building. It was within the range of distance from home she was allowed to travel alone as long as her parents knew, and she’d left the note in a very obvious place. If she didn’t return home by sundown, Barry and Lup usually assumed she’d got caught up in something exciting or infuriating and lost track of time. They’d walk out to Sigfriede’s little free domain and search for her in all the little shops and cafes. There hadn’t been one situation where she never returned home for dinner and bedtime.

Douglas’s Corner Bookstore was somewhat of an odd little Neverwinter staple. That is to say, a Neverwinter staple for people who lived in Neverwinter. Those who simply worked in Neverwinter, or came through Neverwinter to visit family or sight see didn’t know about Douglas’s Corner Bookstore. No one spoke about it unless they knew the person they were talking to lived in town. In Neverwinter’s rise to fame as The City of Skilled Hands, many of the town’s secrets had become not secret anymore. Anyone who came through flooded quaint shops with orders, commissions, complaints, and weird accents. While it boosted the city’s economy greatly, the residents of Neverwinter missed the hideaway places they could go to escape the hustle and bustle of the daily rush of orders, commissions, complaints, and normal accents of people who already lived in Neverwinter because those shops, too, had become filled with orders, commissions, complaints, and weird accents. Thus, some shops closed down, or some people settled down in town, or young entrepreneurs got their business management degrees, got a small loan of a million gold pieces, and bought a small shop in the new noisy downtown division of Neverwinter. In the end, lots of new shops opened up. No one told people with weird accents about these new shops.

But Sigfriede didn’t know that. Sigfriede was a small twelve-year-old blonde half elf with freckles and a love of reading all of the books her parents have already got. This boom in creating new Neverwinter secrets happened long before her parents arrived in this planar system, and thus had no real effects on Sigfriede’s understanding of Neverwinter’s social history. All she knew was that no one told anyone with a strange accent about Douglas’s Corner Bookstore. She was never given a reason as to why, so she created her own. Sigfriede never told anyone about Douglas’s Corner Bookstore because if she did, she’d eventually find someone who also frequented Douglas’s Corner Bookstore, frequently bought books from Douglas’s Corner Bookstore, and frequently bought books from Douglas’s Corner Bookstore that Sigfriede did not like. And, furthermore, just because Sigfriede knew her luck so well, this person who frequently went to and bought books from Douglas’s Corner Bookstore that Sigfriede did not like would actually claim those very books to be their favorites. Sigfriede, since she had no care to control her mouth and stay out of trouble in town, would loudly and profusely ask the person why they thought such trash books deserved the title of “Favorite”, and continue to disrespectfully tear down each of their arguments and defenses. When this person who frequently went to and bought books from Douglas’s Corner Bookstore that Sigfriede did not like would ask Sigfriede who she thought she was, her mouth would run ahead of her conscious and, just as loudly and profusely, tell the person her whole eight syllable name. This, not improbably, would end up with this person dragging Sigfriede by the tiny points of her ears back home to her parents, who, not impossibly, would ground her for pulling the fame card.

No, Sigfriede did not tell anyone about Douglas’s Corner Bookstore. Instead, she saved up any bits of money she found or was given over the course of a few months or so, waited for a day where she was particularly bored, and walked. Perhaps she hitchhiked. She still wasn’t quite sure if she’d gotten the hang of that.

Douglas’s Corner Bookstore was like the bookstore you read about in fantasy novels, or romance novels, or sci-fi novels, or whatever other kind of novel had your favorite bookstore descriptions. A bell chimed above the door as it opened. A cat walked across Sigfriede’s elvish boots, which upset her for the simple fact that she was very allergic to cats, and she’d forgotten to take her
allergy medicine before leaving her apartment. The store spread out before her like an open-air amphitheater, except instead of seats made of concrete set into the side of a hill in some sort of Mediterranean climate, dark wood shelves lined the walls, and the ceiling had whimsical looking lamps all over the place, giving the store a nice, warm, rustic glow. Tables that either matched or didn’t match the shelves, which depended on the table’s mood that day, created winding paths around the front room and prompted you to pick up pretty little pens, or markers you’d never seen before. One time, Sigfriede found a limited-edition collection of hand carved wooden spoons. The one she found that she liked had a little asterisk carved into one side of the round, edgy handle. Something told her Magnus may have made it, but she didn’t bother to ask. She knew Magnus would rather her use it to put sugar into her peppermint tea instead, so she did that. Not shortly after, she started a collection of small tea spoons she’d bought strictly from small, secret bookstores that she visited. She was rather proud of it.

Once you’d picked up your knickknacks and stationary, the bookshelves were more or less divided by genre. Alphabetical order by author’s last name, similar to whether or not a table chose to match a bookshelf, depended on how the bookshelf felt that day. Most days, it didn’t like to be alphabetical. Sigfriede liked it for that. When you’d scanned the shelves for what you’d intended to find, which for Sigfriede had just been a good book on storm sciences, and not found it, you landed in the middle back of the front room. To your right, you had a room filled with couches, tables, chairs at tables, and seats at windows to read whatever the bookshelf that chose you decided it wanted you to buy that day. To your left, if no bookshelves had chosen you, you could walk down three or four rickety steps into a wider, more rectangular room filled with more bookshelves that organized their books by mood. Then, presumptuously, you had probably passed one of the few little coffee or hot chocolate makers in the store, fished around for a couple of silver or copper pieces, deposited it in the funky little Styrofoam cup to the side, and made yourself a nice sip to go with your book. This meant you went back up the rickety steps, through the front room, and to a nice little window seat to soak up some sun with your hot drink and journey through time and space. Sigfriede had done all of that except pay for her hot chocolate.

See, something interesting happens in the universe. Whether or not you, the reader, or listener, or experiencer, or whatever you like to call yourself to keep your disbelief suspended, realize it, all imaginations of how the universe works are correct and incorrect at the same time. Everything you know and understand are limited by your senses, the way your senses sense, how your brain truly experiences those senses, and how your brain relays the data of those senses to your cognitive thoughts, that is, your consciousness, which is to say, you. So, to put it simply, Barry can sit down Sigfriede and show her light shows and magic tricks to visualize the way he perceived and understood the standard planar system on his long, multidimensional journey, and she can understand the words that come out of his mouth and the images he shows her. But that does not mean, however, that she perceives and understands the standard planar system the same way he does. On the flipside of the coin, both of them are wrong. How else have you seen the universe explained? That’s true, and also false.

There’s one particular theory in what can be described as one version of reality that has become widely popular there. This theory states that the universe was created in seven days by an all-powerful guy with a beard. This guy is called God, and the people who made this theory popular (and also happen to be the creatures God made the universe for) are called humans. More specifically, these humans are called Christians, and should not be confused with the kind of humans Barry Bluejeans is related to, nor the humans he lives in an apartment building with. Those are different humans. Christians, just equally so to Barry and Sigfriede, are wholly correct, and wholly wrong.

All of this is to say that no one really, truly understands how the universe works except for the person who makes it work. And that person is no one, but at the same time God, but not God, and
instead The Man Who Runs the Universe, but not him either, and in fact you, yourself, the reader, or listener, or experiencer, or whatever you like to call yourself to keep your disbelief suspended.

In short, Sigfriede had come into Douglas’s Corner Bookstore with her mind preoccupied with whether or not she had hitchhiked to Douglas’s Corner Bookstore. Her cognitive brain, however, was looking for storm science. The universe, in its true, whole knowingness, decided she deserved to have real questions answered instead today.

And it would stay that way for a very, very long time.

Sigfriede finished *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* in a week. It was a rather thick book for a child her age, but she asked Barry to explain the big words and sentences to her, and she got by. It was a good book, with some rather good humor, and it made her think about life, the universe, and everything. She had never heard of Earth, but she thought it sounded like quite the nice place. And if it really was a computer, it was a true shame that it was destroyed. Earth had mice, which gave the novel a sense of relatability to her own planet. Sigfriede knew what mice were, and she agreed that they probably ran the world. There was humor. Sigfriede liked humor. And while she had never wondered what the meaning of life, the universe, and everything was, 42 seemed to be a proper answer for things. It was a shame that those humans would never know the question, though. Sigfriede understood how frustrating answers without questions were.

She wasn’t entirely sure how she came to understand that feeling, but she was entirely sure that she did understand it.

She made herself a peanut butter sandwich to celebrate the ending of a new book.

It was quite a bit of time before Sigfriede thought of the answer to life, the universe, and everything. When she did next, it was such an incoherent thought that she was convinced her text book had said it to her.

“Forty-two,” she muttered to herself, rubbing her eyes.

“What?” her roommate asked.

“What?”

“Did… Did you say something?”

“I don’t think so…”

Sigfriede’s roommate sniffed. “Are you studying maths?”

“No.”

“Then what does forty-two have anything to do with studying?”

“You don’t know that!”

“When has any problem for a wizard been solved by the number forty-two, Sigfriede?”

Sigfriede blinked. Then she looked away from her roommate and back at her text book.
This was awkward.

In all honesty, Sigfriede wasn’t the biggest fan of her roommate. She was sure her roommate wasn’t a big fan of her. But, at the end of the day, they each kept their side of the room clean and kept it nicely decorated.

Maybe Sigfriede could try for a joke to lighten the situation.

“Well,” she said, “I’m sure at this point a forty-two is what I’m gonna get on this exam.”

There was a pause.

Then her roommate looked up again. “What?”

Sigfriede sighed. “Nothing. Sorry. I’ll go to the library.”

Sigfriede used to love libraries. They were full of books with stories and information. There was a section for stories, and a section for information, usually divided vertically by a set of stairs and a balcony. Shortly after she started college, Sigfriede found that was no longer the truth. Sigfriede no longer loved libraries. She especially hated the library at her school because it was full of snotty kids who took their 4.0 GPAs as a sign of superiority that determined your entire worth in life. Sigfriede found that GPAs were an illusion, and at Taakos school it was especially so. Plus, there were no stories in this library. It was practically useless.

After an hour or so of listening to one of these kids berate Sigfriede for never having come to the library before, she gave up, packed her things into her backpack, and wandered around the shelves.

Anyone who spent large appoints of time in their college’s libraries knew that there was always one small fiction section. Sigfriede was not one of these people. She either never had the time to go snooping around the dusty corners of her library or spent the time she did have sleeping.

She wasn’t tired today and had time. With nothing better to do, the dusty corners of her library prepared themselves.

The good news was that this part of the library was actually quiet. It was in its own private room, composed of tables and desks, and what seemed like a crafting station in one corner. Besides that, it was a fairly run-of-the-mill book room in a library. There were tall bookshelves full of books. There were short bookshelves full of books. There were some windows. The lights were on. There were pathways that Sigfriede walked down, lazily scanning the spines of the worn-out paperbacks and cracked spines of the hardbacks. Nothing caught her eye.

The bad news was that she couldn’t study. Sigfriede set up her study station almost immediately after finding nothing of interest, but her focus was broken. There was a nagging at the back of her brain that she couldn’t get rid of. She started feeling this clenching in her toes, and an itch in her knees. Her heels bounced. Her hair kept falling in her face. The ends tickled the tops of her shoulders. Her neck was hot.

Why didn’t she have a hair tie?

Right, this was pointless.

Sigfriede stood up and repacked all of her things. She zipped her backpack shut. Leaving it to stand guard of her seat, she paced the bookshelves again.
“Hey, we can check books out here, right?”

The librarian looked up from his small desk in his small office. “Sorry?”

“We can check books out here, right?” Sigfriede sniffed.

“Well,” the librarian stuttered. “Not right here in my office particularly, but from the library, yes. Do you have your student ID with you?”

Finals ended up being the last thing on Sigfriede’s mind. Her focus had quickly shifted from understanding spell books to understanding how to use her left hand without fits of fiery pain shooting up her arm. She certainly forgot about her library books.

Taako’s school allowed students to check out upwards of twenty books at a time, with all books due back by finals. Sigfriede only checked out one. It sat in her backpack with the rest of her school things, presumably somewhere in her dorm room. She was supposed to come back for next semester; there was no point in moving out.

Right?

“Knock, knock.”

No answer.

“Sigfriede?”

Lucretia heard something like sheets rustling. Sigfriede must have been asleep.

Sigfriede’s little hospital room was surely looking more pleasant than it had when Lucretia had first visited. Granted, Lucretia had only visited when Sigfriede was being emergency emitted, so the bar wasn’t set particularly high. Still, the room smelled nice, like mint had been sewn into the oxygen molecules of the air. Cards and balloons lined the walls next to Sigfriede’s bed. Someone, probably Lup or Taako by the looks of it, had brought in store-bought paintings with little sayings on them, and bright blankets knitted from chunky yarn piled around Sigfriede’s head. Her head, though roughly patched with tangled hair that hadn’t been shaved back to heal the burns and laying on it’s right side so as to not irritate the burns, was cushioned by fluffy, fuzzy, home-smelling throw pillows. The cap Davenport had given Sigfriede sat beside her face. A humidifier sat on the bedside table, spewing away. That must have been where the mint smell was coming from; Sigfriede liked using essential oils to help her allergies.

The sight of it made Lucretia smile. She knew how much Sigfriede hated hospitals. She knew how much Sigfriede hated being in depressing rooms. Lucretia was happy that her niece had so much support while she was away. Of course, Lucretia wasn’t her mother, and it wasn’t her job to worry about her, but she did. It wasn’t her job to feel sorry for time spent apart from each other, but she did. She did when Lup came back, she did when the boys showed up in her office the day Killian found them, and she did when she made her terrible mistake. It was just how she was.

And there, barely visible under all the blankets and pillows, was a meek, pale, burnt out Sigfriede. Her scars looked wonderfully better from when Lucretia had last seen her. They didn’t look good in
general, but they looked better. That’s what was important.

Lucretia sat next to her on the foot of the bed. She let the book rest in her lap; it could wait. Sigfriede was sleeping. She didn’t need to be awoken for some lousy information about school. She especially didn’t need to be awoken for some lousy information about school from Lucretia. Lucretia was not a mom. Lucretia was not Lup. Lucretia was not, more importantly, Barry. Barry would be best for lousy information about school. Lucretia was best for listening and giving books. Of course, this book had to do with lousy information about school, but that wasn’t important. What was important was that Sigfriede had started the book as a way to relieve stress before she tried to sleep. Lucretia found that those books were the most important and should not be left unfinished. So here she was, returning the book as a means to distract Sigfriede from her current predicament. That was probably the most she could do; Magnus said the painkillers weren’t doing very much anyway, so Lucretia doubted the book could properly distract her from that.

Besides, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* seemed like a properly fitting story for someone of Sigfriede’s family. There was probably some humor in the choice Sigfriede made to check it out.

People tend to forget about *Life, the Universe, and Everything*. Sigfriede did, too.

Sigfriede gagged.

Alfie laughed. “What?”

“This is so gross,” she said.

Alfie furrowed his eyebrows. “What is?”

“This book,” she waved the book in the air aimlessly, almost smacking his nose with it. “It’s gross.”

“It can’t be gross! It’s Douglas Adams, it’s too good to be gross.”

“Oh, no,” she tossed some hair over her shoulder. “It’s good. But it’s gross. Arthur’s found a manic pixie dream girl.”

Alfie paused. “Trillian?”

“No, dummy. The movie’s different from the books.”

“I know that; most of them are.”

“Fine. So, anyway, he found a manic pixie dream girl—”

“Trillian.”

“Fenchurch.”

Alfie paused. “That’s an odd name.”

“I told you; manic pixie dream girl.”
“What’s she do?”

“What’s she do?”

“Manic pixie dream girl things.”

“My pixie dream girl things.”

“Oh.”

Sigfriede snuggled back into Alfie’s shoulder.

“The first night,” she said after turning some pages disinterestedly, “she takes him home, right? Sex culture, I guess, whatever. But she takes him home, and she’s got the usual artist-y loft apartment with a wall-less top story. So, she goes upstairs and just lets her titties out, staring him down like some sort of she-beast.”

Alfie snorted. “You sound jealous.”

“Why would I be jealous?”

“I don’t know, Bean, why would you be jealous?”

Sigfriede rammed her elbow into Alfie’s kidneys.

“Oh.”

Alfie ran his fingers through Sigfriede’s hair, careful of the scar tissue hidden in her curls.

“What book is this anyway,” he asked.

Sigfriede blinked. “You just said it’s Douglas Adams. You know what it is.”

“No, all you’ve been reading lately is Douglas Adams. What Douglas Adams book is it?”

“Oh… Dunno. Something about fish.”

It was the worst hurricane in Sword Coast history. That’s not to say the worst storm in Sword Coast history; that spot was taken by the Hunger on its decent over the Prime Material plane five years before Sigfriede had been born. Hurricanes, however, were somewhat of a different storm, and therefore allowed the possibility for this particular hurricane to be the worst one.

No one had seen it coming.

It hadn’t been in the forecasts.

It hadn’t been in any cleric’s visions.

It hadn’t been sensed by any druids.

It was absolutely random and improbable.
And yet, it happened.

“Anything that happens, happens.

Anything that, in happening, causes something else to happen, causes something else to happen.

Anything that, in happening, causes itself to happen again, happens again.

It doesn’t necessarily do it in chronological order, though.”

-Douglas Adams, *Mostly Harmless*.

Earth, if Sigfriede remembered correctly, was not supposed to be as violent as Toril. Earth, if Sigfriede remembered correctly, was not filled with wizards and sorcerers and bards and people set out on destroying the world through magical means. Earth was, if Sigfriede remembered correctly, mostly harmless.

And that was what made her most upset about this whole situation. Why couldn’t her planet be mostly harmless? At the very least, why couldn’t it be harmless enough to not land her on a state of emergency mission, mothering a countless number of temporarily orphaned elvish children older than she was? At the very least, why couldn’t it be harmless enough to not harbor behaviors that certified someone as clinically insane and manically depressed? Why couldn’t it be harmless enough to leave the ocean where it was, leaving the pull of the tide to the natural moon, away from shining cities and powerful kingdoms? Why did Toril have to be full of pessimistic narcissists who destroyed half of an entire continent because most of the other people on Toril didn’t like their idea of what true unlimited power should be?

Why did he have to destroy all the libraries?

Though, in the recent spike of field activity Sigfriede, Mavis, and Random have been given, Sigfriede found little time to go surface side and enjoy the libraries. She still found comfort in just knowing they were there, though. And if this destruction was really as bad as some poorly sourced reports were saying, it wasn’t just the libraries Sigfriede had to be concerned about. It was more than that. It was homes, jobs, restaurants, forgotten moments in people’s lives, friends who could go separate ways for years and still love each other when the other shows up out of nowhere. It was quiet, hidden, secret little spots in bustling cities that the natives never told anyone with a strange accent about. It was Beans Book Bank.

Sigfriede never read *Mostly Harmless*. She did, however, mimic falling asleep to it from some extra-planar rift she’d discovered in Miller’s old lab one night as she floated alone. If she couldn’t hear her family’s voice to settle her down, memories of an old childhood book series would suffice. But if you asked her one day, perhaps after she’d grown up and become a leader, what the book was about, she’d have no idea what to tell you.

“A lot of things,” she might say, should that answer feel right that day.

“Nothing at all,” if she felt contrarily.

“It’s just a book about a broken family trying to mend itself up,” should the day be different, “and failing. It’s about life.”

It didn’t bring her satisfaction. It didn’t make her happy. She related to it, of course, and loved it. It was hard not to, the story had so much to unpack. It intrigued her. It wrapped itself around her cerebral cortex and changed the style of her movements. In a very basic sense, it moved her. It put things in that terrible mission into a perspective that tickled the back of her throat. The tickling,
however slow and subtle, would never stop to make her uncomfortable. It was too honest. It was too real. People die.

Should you find her floating in the living room, sparking and sputtering, its best to leave her there. She’ll come back after a few days. Do not, however, ask her if she’s okay.

Sigfriede had not gotten used to her new office. She hadn’t gotten used to the robes, or the bobby pins, or the paperwork, or the boots. She definitely hadn’t gotten used to the title. In some ways she hated it.

She hadn’t had any warning or training. Well, perhaps she’d had a bit of warning, but there was absolutely no training. She’d been thrown into the most corporate position of her life without so much as a discussion of pay raise. Sure, Davenport helped her adjust for a while, but he had a life to get back to. He was old, and Sigfriede didn’t want him dying in a place that made him tense. There had been too much death already.

In the moments where Sigfriede was caught up on everything, she paced the bookshelves. There were so many books she hadn’t even noticed before. Of course, she hadn’t spent as much time here as Lucretia, but it still amazed Sigfriede just how many books there were.

Most of them she found through notes. Notes that were hidden behind paintings, in desk drawers, on table legs, and so many odd, random, hidden places. They were little notes, in faded, patchy cursive, all signed off in the same way. It wasn’t a secret who had left them, there was no point in being secret about it. Besides, the Bureau was done with secrets now a days. Everything was out in the open. Everything was transparent.

One day, a note led her back to the bookshelves.

It wasn’t anything mystic or enigmatic; just a list of book recommendations.

Bean, it said.

*On days like today, I take it business is slow. This spot is somewhere I’d look for lost paperwork. I never found any.*

*So instead, here’s a list of books I would fill my time with.*

11

36

13

42

*Aunt Lucretia.*

Sigfriede stared at the note.

“Forty-two?”

That seemed pointless.

It wasn’t, of course. None of Lucretia’s notes were. But she’d said book recommendations, not a
random list of numbers. As far as Sigfriede knew, there were no books related to the numbers
eleven, thirty-six, thirteen, or forty—

No books related to the number forty-two, right?

A smell that Sigfriede hadn’t smelled in a very long time filled the room. She remembered little
steps, mismatched tables and shelves, and stolen hot chocolate. Pillows that she didn’t own by
foggy windows that weren’t in her house. Little blanket piles leading to a book room. A plastic
piggy bank with a quark. Hitchhiking to the corner bookstore.

Hours of deep searching every book Lucretia left behind, Sigfriede was sat on the big rug in the
middle of the room, distressed and half insane. She glanced over the pile of books surrounding her,
letting her shoulders droop even more each second. There was no trace of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide
to the Galaxy* anywhere. With a heavy sigh, Sigfriede gathered all the books back up. Each one slid
into it’s spot like perfectly broken in shoes. Each spine was cracked, each page slightly dog eared,
and each cover velvety with wear and tear. And, just for Sigfriede’s own paranoia, each title
reread.

“Uh,” came a voice from behind her, “Ma’am?”

Sigfriede screamed and jumped.

“Sorry,” said the voice. “Sorry, I was just coming to check on you.”

It was Marvin, a young human man she’d recently hired as an intern.

“Marvin,” she sighed, tucking whisps of hair behind her ear. “No, you’re fine. You just startled
me. Do you need help with something?”

“Uh, no, Ma’am. It’s just five o’clock. Is there anything you need me to do before I go home for
the day?”

“Oh. Did you get that project proposal from the board of creative directors?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Okay. How about the copies of the census of—”

“Virdin? Yes, Ma’am.”

“Right…”

Marvin stood still for a moment, then bounced on his heels, pulled something from his bag, and
handed it to Sigfriede.

“The, uh… Humanitarian Resources budget came in today, and this is a list of conventions for that
cancer research thing you told me to research the other day… I think Internal Affairs hit a snag
with their budget, but they’re working with the Financial Business Office about it; the person I
talked to said it should be only a few days more before they can get that turned in…”

“Will it be in before Friday?”

“As far as I know, Ma’am.”
“Right… Good, good. Thank you, Marvin. You have a good night now, alright?”

“Thank you, Ma’am. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Marvin turned around and walked out of the room, back rod-straight and hands clasped behind his back. Sigfriede worried about that boy.

She returned to replacing all the books.

Thank God Marvin didn’t ask about it.

“Oh!” Marvin hissed at himself and turned tail. He ran back up to his boss, palms starting to sweat. This was almost the fifth time he’d forgotten it, and he wasn’t entirely sure the extent of magic Davenport would put on it to ensure its delivery.

“Sorry, Ma’am,” he stuttered. “Uh, this is… um…”

Sigfriede sighed and turned back around. “Yes, Marvin?”

“And Another Thing,” he said.

Sigfriede blinked. “Yes, go on.”

“No, no,” he finally found it. The spine was cracked, and the paperback had started to fuzz in that eclectic way paperback books do. “And Another Thing. That book Mr. Davenport said he’d send in for you. It’s arrived.”

Marvin shoved the book towards her. Sigfriede’s hands were full of books, so she hesitantly returned them to their spots on the bookshelves.

“I, uh… I didn’t know Davenport said he’d send me a book. When did this happen, Marvin?”

“Before I was hired. All I know is that the mail lady handed it to me and said that Davenport said he’d send it in.”

Sigfriede cleared her throat. “Right. And this other thing you had to say,”

Marvin shook his head. “It’s the title of the book, Ma’am. And Another Thing.”

She glanced at the book again. It was slivery, with the image of a ridiculous spaceship on the front. Sigfriede took it. “Thank you, Marvin. Is that all?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Right. Go home, Marvin.”

“Yes, Ma—”

“Just—” Sigfriede inhaled sharply. “Go home, Marvin. You don’t have to be so cordial.”

“I know.” Then he turned tail and left the room just as rigidly he’d entered.

Left alone with the strange book, Sigfriede left the remaining piles to sit in her big throne. She let her robes drape over the arm rests, pulling her feet up to sit criss-cross in the seat. Her fingers ran over the text, feeling the different textures printed on the cover. It smelled good. It smelled like a
And Another Thing, printed in mismatched cursive and block letters, all in patchy neon letters across a red, rusted sign. A galaxy spun behind the sign. And just above that, in thin, yellow capital letters:

DOUGLAS ADAMS’ HITCHHIKER’S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY; PART SIX OF THREE.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO—THE PARTY DON’T START UNTIL THE BARD STARTS FLIRTING

Chapter Summary

Tres Party Babes get the party underway at the great palace of Calimshan! Business as usual takes a bit of a drag when Sigfriede realizes just how little she knows about how flirty she can really be -- how much dignity are you willing to give up for the sake of information? Random chows down. Mavis feels at home. Sigfriede lives out her princess dreams.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO—THE PARTY DON’T START UNTIL THE BARD STARTS FLIRTING

The palace of Calimport was… green. Very, very green. Not the walls themselves, but the garden. It was full, lush and almost overgrown. Flowers littered every bush. Vines climbed walls, letting their vibrant leaves drip to the stone pathways. There were concrete fixtures that fit together like puzzle pieces and held different plants; they were supposed to create clearly defined paths to walk the pavilion through, but the amount of leaves, dead or alive, and flowers just oozing from their confines made the jigsaw walkway fuzzy.

“Wow,” Mavis mused and adjusted her glasses. “That’s so pretty…”

The rest of the group stood around her while Random stumbled out of the caravan, struggling to work her feet and tail around the barbarian’s robes she wore.

Sigfriede offered her hand. “You need help?”

“No,” Random tugged the edge of her sleeve from a snag on the bottom of the canvas frame. “I just… I haven’t worn something like this since I graduated…”

Sigfriede hummed. Random got her sleeve loose, but a few threads were snapped. She inspected her sleeve for a few moments, shrugged, and joined the rest of the group.

Sigfriede couldn’t relate. Sorcerers, like most classes usually taught through some sort of formal schooling, weren’t given their trade’s robes until graduating. And, clearly, Sigfriede hadn’t been gifted that experience.

She put the thought to the side and caught up with her family.

At the entrance to the palace, chaperones where cycling through the entry hall, escorting guests to what Sigfriede figured would be the main party hall. Faint music filled the hallway, matched with chatter and laughter. Leaves hung like curtains from the massive doorway into the palace. Vines slithered along the corners where the floors met the walls. Flowers made tapestries to decorate the
stone walls and overflowed onto the domed ceiling. Sigfriede was fine with all of this until the group made their way inside.

Something about Sigfriede’s childhood that she hadn’t noticed yet: she was raised out of the public eye. Her family all knew it, but she didn’t; everyone just assumes their life is normal. No one ever made a big deal out of her family being famous because she wasn’t exposed to that fame. Maybe her parents had just become really good at deterring fans and curious paparazzi away whenever they had to take Sigfriede out in public, but Sigfriede didn’t know that. All she knew was what her parents explained to her: she was in a very famous family. People would recognize her family members when they went out, and it could be stressful at times, but that stress was not hers to bear. If she ever felt like she was being bugged too much, she was to immediately come back to her mom and dad and tell them. And while she’d always planned to do that if she felt she needed to, Barry and Lup were fairly good at keeping strangers away from her in the first place. By the time she was older, the world seemed to know to just leave her alone. No one, besides Kophyn, prodded her for information about the family. No one asked her questions. No one gave her special treatment. Her family was famous. She was not. Barry and Lup could take the attention they were given, spin it around, and toss it away from any situation involving their daughter before it could reach her radar. They simply didn’t want that energy around her.

Taako took a different stance on it. Of course, when she was younger and still growing up, he listened to Barry and Lup’s wishes and kept Sigfriede out of the public eye and the press as best he could. But now, with Sigfriede as a full-grown adult with a job and her own agenda, Taako took the attention like a champ. Maybe it was old habit from his “Sizzle It Up” days. Maybe it was a front he put on to amuse people. Perhaps it was a combination of the two. But as they walked down the hall towards the main gathering of people, everyone seemed to recognize Taako and Sigfriede, and Taako acted as if he recognized them as well. Sigfriede didn’t recognize any of them. It made her palms sweat. One time someone grabbed her hand as she walked past and waved eagerly at her. She gave a tight smile and stepped closer to Kravitz.

The party was, to put it simply, lavish. Fairy light cantrips had been cast all around the room, giving a soft glow that reminded Sigfriede of city lights reflected off the base of storm clouds. The flora followed them in and thrived. The vines wrapped and pooled around anything they could. Flowers in different states of bloom exuded their sickly perfumes. Tables covered in expensive china and a king’s dinner littered the floor. Some guests sat at the tables, sipping from sparkling goblets of wine, or picking at the tender thigh of a royal pig. The music was louder here. At the front of the room, raised on a long dais, was a quartet of bards playing a waltz. There was a group of party-goers in front of them, performing different dances to the same song. One pair was doing an old elvish dance Sigfriede had seen her parents do from time to time.

Each guest wore a different outfit that told a lot about the person right off the bat. The crowd was a haze of fighters in decorative armor, archers with expensive bracers and bows with no arrows, barefoot druids in robes of moss, wizards in goofy hats. There was even a short, old, gnomeish sorcerer that walked past Sigfriede with a smile. There were a lot of colors, almost too many colors. Humans wore reds and purples, dwarves in greens and browns, elves decked in blues and yellows, tieflings and gnomes and halflings in a mess of rainbows. The chatter, the smells, the colors, the music… it almost sent Sigfriede immediately out of the room with sensory overload.

“Right,” Taako said in a matter-of-fact tone, “Welcome to the party, girls. Y’all can do whatever you want from this point, you’re adults, right? I’m gonna go find the wine station and never leave.”

He ruffled Mavis’ hair and kissed Sigfriede’s head. Then he nodded at Random, spun on his heels,
and disappeared into the crowd.

Kravitz shook his head. “Be careful, alright, girls? As careful as you can in the Bureau.”

Sigfriede nodded. “We’ll try. Let me know that you guys make it home safe, okay?”

He agreed, then disappeared into the crowd with his husband.

The girls stood still for a moment, glancing at each other.

“So, uh,” Random picked at her sash. “What’s the plan from here, Siggy?”

Sigfriede snorted. “I dunno. I didn’t think we’d get this far.”

They stood in awkward silence for a few more moments. Sigfriede watched the quartet of performers on stage to avoid making eye contact.

“Well,” Mavis said after a few moments, “I guess we could just… Party? God that sounds weird coming out of my mouth. But, I mean, the king… uh, what did Lucretia say he was called? Silk Pasta?”

“Syl-Pasha,” Sigfriede corrected.

“Right. The Syl-Pasha has to be around here somewhere. Or, at least, someone who can tell us where to find him might be here.”

“Cool,” Random hummed. “So… party?”

“I think the better word would be socialize.”

“Party,” Sigfriede confirmed. “I’m also going to find the wine.”

“No!” Mavis gave Sigfriede her best big sister glare. “This is a mission. We’re on the clock. No drinking.”

Sigfriede shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

She stepped away from her friends, bracing herself for the rush of people she was walking towards.

The best place to start, Sigfriede figured, was up at the front by the band where she could see everyone, but have an excuse not to hear them talk to her. Colors, textures and faces brushed past her in a flourish, caught up in their own little worlds. No one took particular interest in her, which she took as a gift in her most recent life events. It was hard to blend in with scars across your face and oversized round glasses. It had been a more intentional appearance since leaving school, but Sigfriede looked like a major dork most of the time. Maybe she’d hidden her scars well this time. Or maybe her robes were busy enough to distract away from them. Then again, everyone here was a full-grown adult with social status and claims to fame. Perhaps they were just too wrapped up in their worlds to really pay much attention to Sigfriede, especially since she hadn’t grown up famous.

There was a tap on her shoulder. Sigfriede turned around in almost a full circle before she found the culprit. Standing in front of her, dressed in jester’s garb, was a half elf with frizzy, coily hair and dark skin. He had an eyebrow raised as he stared Sigfriede down.
Sigfriede cleared her throat. “Uh… Can I help you?”

“You’re standing a bit close to the stage,” he said flatly, “The Syl-Pasha has asked me to request that you take a few steps back. We’d hate for something to happen to our bards here; can’t have a party without music, yeah?”

She glanced around to see where the kid had come from. “Oh, uh… y-yeah, I’ll just, uh…”

Well, shit. Where else was she supposed to go?

“So,” the half elf took a step forward, placing his hand on the back of her shoulder and guiding her into the crowd, “have you ever been in the palace before?”

Sigfriede hummed and tried not to bump into people. “No. I’m not from around here.”

“Oh, yeah? Where’re you from?”

“Oh,” she laughed nervously, “Neverwinter.”

“Neverwinter,” he asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. I’m here under, uh… my… uncle’s… invitation?”

He snorted. “Your uncle?”

“Sure.”

There was a pause. He gave Sigfriede side eye, waiting for anything new. When she didn’t say anything else, he moved on.

“So, what brings you around?”

“My uncle.”

The half elf laughed. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “Yeah, no, obviously. I don’t know why I asked. Uh… Alright! Let’s try this: what’s your name?”

Sigfriede raised an eyebrow. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“I’m not allowed to divulge that information until you do.”

“Why?”

The song shifted again as they made their way to the middle of the crowd. It wasn’t exactly a ballad, but it wasn’t a fast-paced song either. He stopped walking and held out a hand.

“Do you dance? Know any traditional ones?”

Sigfriede stared at him.

“Come on,” he smiled at her again. “I’ll lead. Just follow me, keep changing feet. I won’t bite; promise.”

She looked around her, looking for any ways to step out of the situation. There were too many people around. Each pair of dancers that came close had to dance around her, and one woman gave her a dirty glare as she spun past. Seeing no way out, she took her partner’s hand.
“So,” he continued. He started her in on a basic elvish waltz. “Name?”

She smirked. “You can call me Holly if you want.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know that bit. Come on, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Well I’m not going to tell you my name until you tell me yours!”

“I can’t!”

“Bullshit.”

“No, really. I’m part of palace staff. Law states I can’t share my name with people not under Syl-Pasha rule until they’ve shared theirs; it’s a customary thing. It shows diplomacy.”

“Palace staff?” Sigfriede looked him up and down. “Is that why you’re dressed a fool?”

The half elf laughed again. “Well, in part. I’m dressed a fool because I am a fool. I’m part of the Syl-Pasha’s court; I’m his personal jester. He thinks I’m funny. And don’t ask me to tell you a joke, I’m shit on the spot.”

“Isn’t that… the point of being a jester? To be funny on the spot?”

He shrugged. “I guess? But I mean, once you’ve worked for someone long enough and it’s the only job you’ve ever had, you start to learn patterns and things that shape your humor habits. It isn’t so much being funny on the spot as it is just catering to your audience.”

“How long have you worked for the Syl-Pasha?”

“Worked? Maybe six or seven years. Known? My whole life. I grew up in this place. I’m an orphan. I was taken in on a family request, I guess you could call it. I became sort of a royal… civil case? I was raised as one of the members of the family, but given no title status, no claim to heirship. Instead, I was given schooling and shit. I went to a local bardic college for jesters and fools; I learned a little bit of music on the side. Once I’d been trained I was let back into the palace as a member of the court and given a guaranteed job under the Syl-Pasha. It was cool at first, but…”

He trailed off. His lips curled in under his teeth. Then he shrugged, smiled, and said, “Things just change. People get older. Civilians complain. I’ve got a sturdy roof over my head and meals to eat. I don’t have a reason to complain, I guess.”

Sigfriede hummed. She let a few waltz steps pass before she spoke again. “I’m Sigfriede.”

A smile broke across the half elf’s face. “Sigfriede? That’s pretty. What does it mean?”

“Uh…” she drew a blank. “I have no idea… I think my parents told me something a long time ago… I wasn’t paying attention, though.”

“I bet it means something cool. My name is Amadeus.”

“Nice to meet you.”

A few minutes later, Sigfriede and Amadeus had stepped out of the dance floor and back towards the halls of the palace. Sigfriede caught eyes with Random at one point just before they left the
room. Random gave her a questioning look, pointing at Amadeus and gesturing vaguely. Sigfriede glanced at Amadeus, then back at Random and shrugged.

A silence settled in between the pair. Sigfriede was still taken aback by the plants that seemed to make up the structure of the building. The more she studied them, the more she found patterns in them. Tapestries of braided vines and flowers covered the walls. Flowers almost completely covered the ceiling now. The floors grew in a weave pattern, like that of a cotton cloth. How did all of these plants get here? Who was keeping them alive? There wasn’t any sunlight inside; all of the light came from candles and cantrips.

Maybe Amadeus knew.

“Hey,” Sigfriede said, “where’d all these plants come from? How are they alive? Do you guys have a hoard of druids or something?”

“Oh,” Amadeus grinned again; he seemed to almost always be smiling in varying degrees of mischief. “Uh… I don’t know. They just started popping up a few weeks ago. Right around the time—”

He cut himself off. He glanced at Sigfriede nervously, then cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head. “Around the time we started planning for the party, you know?”

Sigfriede wasn’t stupid. She could tell he was covering something up. She wasn’t even surprised about it, either, given what she knew about the region’s issues. There was probably something bigger than just missing bards going on, if she’d learned anything from her past little missions. Someone was usually lying to their boss, or a file in paperwork had been misplaced, occasionally someone would have stolen from someone who didn’t deserve to be stolen from. Sometimes issues were bigger than what the Bureau could help, like failing marriages, or depression, illnesses that a townsperson had yet to share with their neighbors. On the one or two tornado outbreak missions they were sent on, they did all they could for the people that lost their pets and homes, but sometimes information was just missing. Sometimes the roots of the problems were beyond the help they could give with their bare hands. Sometimes people just needed a mediator in a negotiation. And sometimes, not always, Sigfriede hadn’t run into it yet, people were forced into silence.

She let it go, for now. Besides, maybe Amadeus knew some other things.

“Okay,” she nodded. “They showed up as you started planning for the gala… How have you kept them alive?”

“Magic,” Amadeus said tightly.

“Like…” Sigfriede raised an eyebrow. “Like druid magic? Music magic?”

“Mmmm… you could call it that. Druid magic.”

Alright. So magic. Fair enough. Maybe she could get more out of him.

“You said you went to a bardic college? That makes you a bard, right?”

“Ideally.”

“What kind of bard are you?”

“I’m—” he stopped walking and looked at Sigfriede like she’d grown a third eye. “I just told you,
I’m a jester, the king’s fool. That’s a type of bard.”

Sigfriede blinked. “It is?”

Amadeus let out a sharp, dry laugh. “Yeah, it is! I guess you guys don’t have kings and courts out in Neverwinter?”

“Hold a gun to my head and I couldn’t tell you. My parents don’t care about politics and government. It changes too much for them to care.”

“Your family sounds odd.”

“I could say the same about yours; just magically growing plants a few weeks before a gala. I only have one family member who’s this enthusiastic about plants.”

The smile fell off of Amadeus’s face. He winced, and a sadness crept into his eyes. It was almost like it took over his whole body; the colors of his robes were less vibrant; his hair drooped; worry lines creased his brow. It made Sigfriede sad to look at him.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to make fun.”

“No, you didn’t,” he rubbed his forehead. “It’s just… Where exactly from Neverwinter are you from?”

Sigfriede paused. Why was that important? “Uh… my parents and I lived downtown, in the industrial area. Nothing special, just one of those big studio apartments over a bar or something…”

Amadeus hummed. “So… you’re not of noble background?”

Realization flooded over Sigfriede. First, she was confused, then she understood, and then she was embarrassed. Her face burned. She gave a nervous laugh and threw her hands up to put space between her and Amadeus.

“Oh, god, no,” she floundered for the right words. “I wasn’t asking to get to know you like… Like, I just met you, I don’t expect anything like that out of anything we talk about—”

“Geez—” Amadeus took a step back and shook his head fervently. “No, I don’t mean—I didn’t think you were doing that, its just—”

“Okay, good! I mean that would be weird—”

“Yeah, no, I get it.”

“’Cause I’m just this girl from across the continent that just showed up here—”

“No, Sigfriede, really, I get it. I was asking because I can’t share royal issues with people of noble background that come from different regions; especially not people of noble background who come from cities still in the Lord’s Alliance.”

Oh. Oh. Well now she just felt like an idiot. Of course, he wasn’t asking about where she came from because they were flirting. They weren’t even flirting at all. Right? Sigfriede had never been able to tell when people were flirting with her. But, God, what if she had been flirting with him? What if she’d been leading him on and didn’t even realize it? That would be terrible!

“Uh, listen…” Amadeus looked around and smiled at some guests as they trickled in. “This has been a great talk. But, I am technically supposed to be working right now, so—”
“Me, too,” she blurted out.

There was a pause. “Really? But didn’t you say your uncle brought you?”

“It’s a long story, but I came here under my uncle’s invite on a job. I work for this humanitarian group—”

“You’re from the Bureau of Benevolence, aren’t you?”

Tension flared up in Amadeus’s face. He glanced over his shoulder, then stared at the braids of vines on the wall next to them.

Sigfriede cleared her throat. “Yeah, how’d you guess?”

“Listen,” he dropped his voice to a whisper. “I’m not allowed to talk to you. At all. Syl-Pasha’s orders. But if you’re really here from the Bureau, then I’m willing to break some rules. Have you heard about the bards?”

“Y-yeah? Why, what’s going—”

“I live on the east side of the palace; this party’s going to go until the people pass out or leave, that’s how they always go. But I’m off duty at midnight. My room is on the third floor of the staff’s wing. The Syl-Pasha’s name is Ralan el Pesarkhal, he’s an older human with greying hair and a love for history. He usually parties in the throne room, which is down the hall on your left. If you have friends, go talk to him and get a room in the palace, but whatever you do, do not ask about the plants.”

He glanced at a small watch on his wrist.

“What the fuck,” Sigfriede said, “are you talking about?”

“I’ve got to go back to the stage. Just, don’t come back in with me. Get your friends and go to the throne room!” Amadeus started running back towards the party hall.

Sigfriede decided to let the party carry her along for another hour or so. It was pointless to immediately start working on Bureau matters; if she understood the situation well enough, this mission called for some social engineering and stealth. If she got the girls in on her lead immediately that might raise some suspicion. She found Random and Mavis sitting at one of the vine-twisted tables, each with their own plate and cups. Finding nothing better to do, Sigfriede plopped down at the table, helped herself to a small meal, and made casual conversation with her friends. They let party-goers walk in and out of their conversation, keeping their ears open for any leads on their mission. When she found none, Sigfriede sighed and called Mavis and Random out to the hall.

“Did you guys pick up on anything in there?”

Random twirled a vine she’d ripped off the wall on her horns. “Yeah.”

“You did?”

“I picked up on you and your little boyfriend.”

“Random!”
“Hey!” Random flipped her off with both violet middle fingers, “You called me a useless lesbian! Get fucked!”

“You’ve literally called yourself a useless lesbian before!”

“Yeah, for the same reason you call yourself an idiot wizard!”

“Random, I’m a sorcerer, not a wizard!”

“Yeah and I’m not—” Random shut her mouth. She squinted her eyes and pointed at Sigfriede. “Not cool. How dare you almost make me call myself a Straight.”

All three girls broke out into laughs and giggles. When the laughs died down, Sigfriede sniffed and adjusted her glasses.

“For real though,” she said, “did you guys find anything important?”

“I think it’s important that we note how Sigfriede toys with boy’s emotions,” Random continued.

“I wasn’t toying with his emotions!”

“You were dancing,” Mavis said. “And left the party room for, like, twenty minutes.”

“Stop calling me a hoe guys, I don’t flirt with people. I’ve never once flirted with someone; at least not knowingly. And if I was flirting with him, I didn’t mean to. It was like being a spy, I guess. We do that shit in the Bureau, right? And spies flirt with their targets for information, yeah?”

Mavis scratched her freckled nose. “Did you get information out of him?”

“Yes.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“He told me where the throne room is.”

“Oh please,” Mavis rolled her eyes, “anyone could have told you where the throne room is, Siggy. Just admit you had a fling and we can get back to work.”

“No one in this family ever fucking listens to me,” Sigfriede threw her hands up and let them slap back down against her thighs. “Listen, this guy’s name is Amadeus and he works in the Syl-Pasha’s private royal court.”

Sigfriede gave a summary of everything Amadeus had told her. She mentioned his orphan situation, his bardic training, and the way he’d become uncomfortable at the mention of magic and plants. She explained the way he’d shifted his demeanor when she mentioned coming from Neverwinter, and her uncle being her connection here; the tension and urgency that took over his being when he asked if she came from the Bureau, and how he’d run off.

“So,” Random snorted and tugged her bangs. “you got dumped for knowing Lucretia?”

“Fuck off, Random, really,” Sigfriede said. “He told me where his room is; he my help or something.”

Random’s eyes grew to the size of the dinner plates they’d just dined off of. “That doesn’t make it any better!”
Mavis cackled and covered her face with her hands. “You’re not making this any less gross, Sigfriede.”

Sigfriede stomped her foot and wanted to scream. “I’m being serious, guys! Stop fucking around for a minute and fucking listen to me! It doesn’t always have to be goof, goof, dildo! This guy is a direct lead on this case and I found him by myself without either of you helping me! I have a brain! I’ve got smarts and I want them recognized! Fuck!”

The girls stopped giggling. Mavis furrowed her auburn eyebrows up at her cousin. “Are you okay, Sigfriede?”

“Can we please just listen to me for once in my life and go to the fucking throne room. I think Amadeus knows than he can admit publicly, and he wants our help. You don’t know, he might even be the one putting in all the missing person’s reports. I’ve never been right about something like this before; please just fucking go to throne room.”

A tense pause laid over the trio. Sigfriede grabbed the hems of her embroidered robe and tugged it across her body. She hugged her torso tightly. Had her hair not been pulled back in elaborate elvish braids, she would have let it hide her face. She rubbed the scar that ran down her bicep. Mavis and Random glanced at each other.

Mavis cleared her throat. “Uh, yeah. Sure, Bean. But, I have a question.”

Sigfriede’s shoulder’s slumped. “What?”

“So, if I understand correctly, there’s something bigger going on than just people being kidnapped, right? We all see that. And, if that’s true, who’s to say that the Syl-Pasha… what was his name? Ramen?”

“Ralen,” Sigfriede supplied quietly.

“Ralan, right. Who’s to say Syl-Pasha Ralan isn’t behind it? And if Amadeus got tense when you told him you were from the Bureau, maybe Amadeus is in on it, too.”

Random hummed. “Good point. If this kid was raised by him, there’s nothing saying that he wouldn’t either willingly comply with the Syl-Pasha or be forced into compliance.”

Sigfriede sighed. “I don’t know, guys. But it’s clearly all we’ve got. This is a tough job, sometimes we just have to roll with the punches… And, besides, Dad always told me to go with your gut feeling; that’s what he always did when he couldn’t remember things, and it ended up pretty damn well for him. I’ve just got a good feeling about going to the throne room.”

After a few more minute’s discussion over the girl’s limited choices, they decided to ere on the side of optimism and see if they could get a room in the palace while they did their work. If worse came to worst, then they’d be dead and they wouldn’t have to deal with it anymore. So there really wasn’t any losing side to the situation.

Sigfriede did her best to remember Amadeus’ instructions; hall to her left, but she couldn’t recall which doors she was looking for. Syl-Pasha Ralan was a… human? Halfling? It definitely started with an h. Or was she getting that mixed with his love for history? No, the h was definitely his race; history might have been something, but she didn’t think it was what Amadeus mentioned. Maybe it was magic. Or art. Or magic art.
Soon, however, Sigfriede found herself not needing to remember where the throne room was, exactly. The hallway to her left had no doors on either side of her. The deeper the girls went into the hall, the thicker and more colorful the vines and flowers became. Soon, at the very end of the hall, they found a set of big, tall, gold inlaid wooden doors draped with a huge curtain of greenery like a bead curtain. One door was propped slightly open, but the message came across clear as day: not many were welcome here. No music came from this room. No laughter or chatter filled Sigfriede’s ears. Few cantrips or candles were lit down this hall, and the roof seemed to almost disappear entirely. Had Sigfriede not had darkvision, she would have assumed the flora curtain was floating.

Mavis hummed. “Looks like we’re not welcome…”

“Too bad,” Sigfriede immediately marched her way in and slipped through the opening in the doors.

The first thing Sigfriede noticed of the throne room was not any note of how much money this region had, or the great feats their mighty king had performed. There was little to hear or see when compared to just how much she smelled. She almost choked on the intensity and potency of the pollen. It was intoxicating. It flooded her nose and furled up her nostrils, curling in the space around her brain; it felt so similar to having a wild magic surge that Sigfriede almost panicked. It was the colors that grounded her a bit. She saw the most variety of flowers that she’d seen in the palace yet. Hydrangeas, foxgloves, hyacinths, hemlocks, fire lilies, poppies, hundreds and hundreds of poppies, golden dew drops, morning glories, angel’s trumpets, and so many others that she couldn’t identify. They covered the walls completely and hung like chandeliers from the ceiling. Leaves, pollen and petals fell like snow. Sigfriede was encapsulated by it all, fascinated by the colors and smells, how the little flittering cantrip lights created shapes across the shadows.

“Uh, Siggy?” Mavis poked her head around Sigfriede’s hip. “Hey, Siggy, pay attention, please.”

Then Sigfriede heard the silence. Silence was one of the worst things Sigfriede could ever hear; it always came before the worst parts of life. She shut her eyes tight, took a deep breath, and then looked down from the ceiling.

Across the room, on the other side of a rug of grass, was a set up similar to that of the Main Gathering Hall’s throne room; the only difference was this throne room was an actual royal throne room. Lucretia’s may have held distance from Bureau employees at one point, but Sigfriede had never known it as such. It was a show, a prop, a nod to past efforts and future hopes. There were bookshelves and tapestries and paintings. Sometimes Lucretia decorated for holidays. The point was made clear that it was the Bureau “throne room”, but the same could not be said here.

This was a real throne room. There was an order; an expectation of respect. There were no books. There were no holiday decorations for the upcoming Fall Harvest. No tapestries. No doors leading to quaint little offices. It was cold and very, very green. Vines slithered their way from the walls to the floor and up the steps of a flat dais. Sat atop that dais was a stone throne; or at lease Sigfriede would have thought it was stone from what little she could see through the leaves and rose hips that enclosed the seat. A human, middle aged man with leathery skin and salt-and-pepper hair, decked in green and gold, with an emerald encrusted crown, sat in the throne. He held in his hand a goblet, just as gold and emerald encrusted as the crown on his head. He, and the few fancy, upper-class looking folk around him (like a cool-kid posse), stared at Sigfriede with disdainful confusion.

“Oh, shit…” Sigfriede shook her head and sighed. “Uh, hi! How is everyone tonight?”

Stupid. Stupid fucking… adventure. Why did she always do this to herself? She should have listened to Barry when he said she wasn’t allowed in the apartment’s lab, but she did it anyway and
sucked up and got her way out of it by being cute. This is what she got for being a loved kid.

Stupid.

Someone from the socialite group coughed tensely. The middle-aged human, Syl-Pasha Ralan, Sigfriede gathered, took another sip from his cup as he stared down Tres Party Babes.

“Well,” the Syl-Pasha said from behind his goblet. “who do we have here?”

“Well—” Mavis stuttered.

“I’m Sigfriede Holly,” she cut in. “And these are my, uh…”

Fuck. Sigfriede didn’t think they’d get this far. She couldn’t introduce Mavis and Random as her friends, because while it was truthful for Random, that would leave her out on a ledge with no solid relation to her and Taako. She had cause for calling them both her cousins, given that Mavis was her second favorite cousin, and Magnus considered Carey and Killian family. However, Sigfriede barely knew the two of them, and if anything, Random probably stood as more of a second cousin or something, not to mention the clear genetic differences.

Fuck it.

“These are my cousins!” She said, “Random and Mavis, uh…”

“Cousins, you say?” Ralan smirked. “Interesting. What brings you here, ladies?”

“Uh… Party?”

The cool-kid posse giggled and snorted. The Syl-Pasha handed his cup to someone beside him and stood, strolling across the grassy rug with his mossy cape trailing behind him.

“Clearly,” he said. “I mean for what reason? What did you say your name was, miss?”

“Sigfriede Holly.”

“Your last name, dear.”

Fuck. Sigfriede’s shoulders dropped; she hated using her last name. It gave her too much pull over people. And sometimes, depending on what interactions her family has had with people, it didn’t give her enough. She had a sinking feeling that this interaction was going to force her to learn something new about her name.

She stammered, “Taaco-Bluejeans, sir…”

Ralan stopped in front of the girls, just at the edge of the ginormous rug. He hummed and smiled, but it made Sigfriede tense. His smile was warm, but his eyes were cold. She glanced at Mavis and Random, who seemed equally tense.

“Ah!” Ralan held up a finger after a few moments. “Yes, I remember. You’re here under Taako’s invitation. Welcome! It’s such a pleasure to have you three here. I’m sad to inform you that Taako’s invitation, and therefore yours as well, does not extend quite as far to my presence, but since you’re here, why not be a little hospitable? Tell me, what is your favorite drink?”

Sigfriede’s ears started burning. “I like water, and tea.”

“Wine dear,” he said over his shoulder as he walked back to his throne. “You are old enough to
Random snorted and tugged on her bangs. Sigfriede blushed and looked at Mavis.

“I am old enough to drink, right?” she signed.

Mavis rolled her eyes before replying with a sarcastic expression, “No, you aren’t even supposed to be on your own yet.”

Random pushed her way past Sigfriede and Mavis, following the Syl-Pasha to his throne. She took a seat on the steps of the dais, motioning her friends after her. With a shrug, Mavis joined her, and Sigfriede, fearing being left alone, followed suit.

“Tell me,” Ralan said as he retook his throne, “Sigfriede, how did you get those fascinating scars?”

Sigfriede’s voice caught in her throat. Twinges of pain webbed across her skin. Her eyes grew wide, and she glanced at Mavis for reassurance.

“Wait, wait!” He clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously, “Let me guess! They’re a curse. No, no! A freak accident with a storm. That’s got to be it, isn’t it?”

Sigfriede let out a nervous laugh. “Uh, not quite, sir. They’re from a….” she sighed and swallowed her pride. “They’re from a wild magic surge. I’m a wild magic sorcerer; I’ve had little accidents like this since I was really small.”

Any warmth that Ralan may have hid in his face drained away. His fingers went slack. He hummed, tilted his head back, and slouched in his throne.

“Wild magic sorcerer, you say?”

“Yeah?”

“I see…” He reached for his goblet and took a swig. “I’ve heard of your kind. Calimshan has a history with those, you know? Or so I’ve heard. Tell me, do you like stories? I love stories; that’s why I asked about your scars. Everyone has stories, and stories are no more than personal history. Would you girls like anything to eat?”

“Oh,” Mavis smiled warmly, “we just ate, your highness. My apologies.”

“I’ll take some bread,” Random said. “If you have any.”

One of the socialites at Ralan’s side walked off to the left, possibly through a plant hidden door, possibly down a corridor. Sigfriede couldn’t tell.

“Why don’t I tell you girls a story,” Ralan mused. “Just, a little bit of Calimshan’s history. I do love sharing it with new comers. Once, many, many rulers before me, Syl-Pasha Amahl I built the great city of Shoonach to position troops on the edge of the Calimshan boarder.”

Lights in the room dimmed. The flowers on the walls and hanging from the ceilings opened their petals wide. Pollen exploded out from them and gleamed, coming together in a show of glittering illusion between Ralan and the girls. The pollen gathered in a mirage that showcased the skyline of an ancient, magical city with tall castles, sturdy towers, and regal temples.

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grandfather supported the building of the city! So it quickly grew to more than a military base. Markets, homes, and libraries all cropped up, and Calishites flooded to the new city for a chance at new life!"

The illusion shifted to show hoards of people packing up their families and homes, running in droves north of the capital to this new city.

“Of course, Amahl was assassinated, as many of our great Syl-Pashas are. But the people of Calimshan, in their grieving, were unwilling to let this great city of legacy go; so the next Syl-Pasha motioned to keep the city growing. And so it was such. The city thrived, pulsing with life and science, and most importantly: magic. Natural magic. Innate magic. You see, Sigfriede, Shoonach became home to many a great sorcerer, many a wise, knowledgeable sorcerer who understood where their powers came from, how they worked in the real world, and how to control such abilities.”

The socialite came back with a plate of sliced bread for Random. She took it graciously as the mirage changed again, showing a goddess Sigfriede had never seen before. She was tall and shifting. She had no solid form. One moment she was a fair skinned and freckled girl, the next a dark skin and bald-headed warrior, then she was no woman at all and instead a sheet of pure energy.

“Then there was the Spellplague; the greatest unravelling of reality as Toril knew it. The goddess Mystra, in all her magical glory, was struck down by The Mad God and The Mistress of Night. Without magic’s great mother to oversee its order, the great Weave unraveled, wizards were without spells, and sorcerers ran mad.”

As Ralan spoke, the mirage showed the shifting goddess unravel a huge tapestry before her. She watched over it, controlling its ripples, waves and tears. Two figures crept in behind her; one was tall, lanky, and crooked, and the other murky, dark, and shimmering. Sigfriede figured they were The Mad God and The Mistress of Night respectively. They cornered Mystra, tackling her and pinning her down. Mystra struggled, but The Mistress of Night shrouded her in a dark haze, distracting her long enough to let The Mad God raise his dull, crooked blade high in the air. He thrust it down with such a great force that the mirage exploded outward as he struck the goddess, sending the pollen in the girls faces.

They all choked and coughed. Sigfriede blinked violently as she took off her glasses and cleaned the lenses. Mavis sneezed and Random hacked. The girls’ breath grew labored and wheezy. Sigfriede felt like she couldn’t get enough air. Her throat was itchy. Soon she could only take shallow gasps, pounding at her chest and grasping the step to Ralan’s throne in hopes she wouldn’t collapse onto it. Her lungs stung; she was drowning, but there was no water. She was drowning, but there was no Dad to pull her out of her pollenous death. She was drowning, but there was no strength in her arms to push her back up.

“You see, Sigfriede,” Ralan stood. “Before the Spellplague, there were no sorcerers of your kind; no chasms marring my beautiful region’s horizon, and no storms of dissatisfaction raining down tar across the planar systems. When the Weave unraveled, Shoonach’s wise city became rampant with wild magic sorcerers. Its armies could no longer defend the city that was rightfully Calimshan’s. For centuries my great region has fought for our city back, and its magic users like you who keep tearing it from our grasp.”

Sigfriede choked and wheezed. She clutched her glasses as she looked up at the hazy color blocked form of Syl-Pasha Ralan; she didn’t need to see his expression to feel the hate radiate off of him as her vision grew fuzzy. Soon the edges of her sight turned dark, and before she knew it, everything
was black.

Down, below the pollen infested halls, under the carpets of grass and weeds, shielded from the music, the laughter, the clatter of drunken socialite partying, we see a hill. A hill jutting from underneath the foundations of the great Calimshan palace that didn’t belong there, with an even larger, improperly and unwelcomly placed mound sits atop that hill. Somewhere in the center of the mound, a breath stirs and raises a ginormous ribcage. A cave has been dug out from the sub-terrain and poorly lit. It’s impossible to see the depth of the cave; the light cantrips and weak burning candles seem to go on forever. Faces lay half lit, scowling, sobbing, starving for something, anything, besides the dim fate they’ve been forced into the past few weeks. Water and dirt drip down from the dirty roof, which, if it weren’t for the industrial support sized columns of vines, unnaturally placed trees, and untamed shrubs, would have collapsed in long ago. Somewhere, in the midst of the field of bards waiting for their nightly release, a teenager starts to cry.

No one is there to comfort them yet. They’re new. They’re young. Neither of their parents were bards. They’d told them that being a bard would have caused them trouble. They didn’t think they meant this.

Then, back in the quiet halls, we see Amadeus. He leaves his tiny resting quarters, dressed down from his fool’s garb and into a simple shirt and slacks. He has bags under his eyes. His shoulder’s slump. His coils hang over his eyes as he keeps his head down, walking the same path he’s walked since all of these new friends have begun arriving. He wasn’t part of the hoard, officially. Syl-Pasha Ralan hasn’t assigned him under the palace yet. Something in the back of his head tells Amadeus that Ralan would never do that to him, but the wiser, more wary and streetwise part of his mind tells him that part of his stand in father is gone. He carries a violin with him, a different one from the one he performs with lately. The performance one is large, oversized even, and uncomfortable; a flashy piece of stage jewelry. He hated it. But he’d shed himself of that burden and brought with him instead the same petite, simple rosewood violin Syl-Pasha Ralan had trained him with.

He trudges down the hall from the east side of the palace, descending the same spiral staircase, passing the same overgrown curtains and rugs, past the old maid’s chambers, through the kitchen, where he stopped to pack away as much food as he could carry, and out into the courtyard. He weaves his way through the labyrinth of shrubs, out into the royal pasture, to the edge of the grove, and stops at the rock-hidden hole. Heaving a sigh, he readjusts his load so he can climb down. The first time he’d climbed down here, he’d fallen and nearly broken his arm. The second time wasn’t much better. But he’d done this for a while now. He knew how to throw his legs or grip the wet rocks; he made his way to the opening of the unnatural cave more nimbly now. Stealthily, quietly, past the unwanted mound on the unnatural hill, he greeted each face as they gasped and smiled as he passed them. But they were hushed; if they awoke it, there’d be hell to pay. Amadeus wasn’t allowed down here, wasn’t allowed outside of his room at these hours. But so many of his friends, so many of his colleagues and students were down there, alone, frightened and pinned down under the threat of its poison. Amadeus couldn’t bring them jokes, not in these conditions, not in front of the sleeping mound on the unwanted hill, but he could gather everyone to the back of the cave, deep, deep into the terrain where the cold from the retained water underground turned into warmth from the world’s beating heart, and play them a song. A simple song. A battle song. It wasn’t safe to play an original song yet, that wasn’t controlled or understood. They’d become too excited and wake it. But he could play something they all knew. Something that reminded them of the perils the world has faced and the victory cry one of their own had said just barely thirty years ago, just barely
before Amadeus was born. A seven note refrain that could be played all night, until the most anxious and small of them has fallen into a deep, deep, calming sleep.

E-G-G

B-A-B-E

Chapter End Notes

I'mma be real with y'all; this is the last full chapter I have written out. I'm so tired you guys. Like just physically tired. I'm trying to write on this thing and I WANT to, I just don't have time right now. I'm gonna try and just pump the next few chapters out before next week, but I may have to take a bit of a hiatus to get back on track. Good news is that the week after next is fall break, meaning I only have work and no classes. That should open some time for me to just sit down and write. I promise I'm not loosing steam or getting bored; I love Sigfriede and I love you guys and I know how much you guys want to see this story pan out! It's just a matter of getting used to a new schedule.

In other news, this was one of my favorite chapters to write. It took me for-fucking-ever. IT'S SO LONG, GUYS. SO LONG. Definitely the longest chapter in this fic yet. How's about that ending, though, eh? Heheheheheheheheheheheh I love my evil author ways!

Special thanks to Dana at timeforlupsopinion.tumblr.com. Y'all know the deal. Be nice to each other, and I'll (hopefully) see you next week. If I don't see you, assume next chapter isn't finished, but that I'm STILL working on it and I'll have it done by the next week. Love you guys!
Chapter Summary

Author's note updating my readers on the status of this fic, the status of the author, and where I plan to take the story.

This is an author's note. It is not relevant to anything currently happening in the plot, and should not be looked at or read for the purpose of finding out what is happening to Sigfriede and her friends right now.

I am writing this to tell you, once more, what is going on with me and this story. As you guys may already know, I have been struggling with a year long mental break down that I first used for as a way to get back into a daily schedule. I had identified my break down, accepted that it was happening, and planned to get into a new routine to spice up my daily life. Instead of coming home from classes with nothing but homework and stress planned, I'd instead come home, sculpt out time for homework, food, and this fic. It was a different creative outlet that my Bachelor of Fine Arts classes were not giving me, and became a positive feed in my life that I felt professors were not giving me at the time. Unfortunately I still feel the same way with some professors I spend most of my time with. This mainly applies to my painting professor, which really hurts as my focus in my degree is painting. I'm currently going to school for a BFA, Bachelor of Fine Arts, with an emphasis in painting, a minor in Liberal Arts, and Teacher Certification in grades Kindergarten through twelfth grade. My goal is to become an art teacher, but with my minor in Liberal Arts, I could potentially teach any subject. If an art position isn't available, I'd be perfectly fine with history or english, with science and math trailing behind. That's why I take this fic so seriously. I've never actually completed a project of mine. All of my art assignments and writing assignments were unfinished in my mind. I was never proud of or done editing. There were always more details I could have added, more blending I could of done, a scene I could have added for more plot, an integral discussion I had to cut out because of a word or page limit, etc. That routine of restricted creativity and time limits paired with my constant combat with my painting professor about my philosophy of art has made being creative really hard for me lately. I haven't painted for a while now, basically skipping out on all of my classes, not just my art classes, because I have felt unsupported, rejected, ridiculed, and discounted on the whole not only as a student, but also as a professional artist.

There was one particular project I did for the only class I cared to consistently attend called Business of Art. It was taught by one of our two female professors in the Arts and Humanities department. She is an installation and sculpture artists who consistently drives and flies herself out across the country for galleries and lectures. She is an amazingly successful artist who chooses to make teaching her full time job, and works in her projects as a "part-time" gig, if you can call it that with how many weekends she spends away from home. This project I did was assigned by her in this class as a unit on something artists uses a lot called grant proposals. These are essentially papers you write out over a project you've conceived as an artist to a company or board of artists who have offered a budge for a project they will fund for an artist. Typically the ones that get the money from the board are big, mildly expensive projects that have something important to show
the world. Being a painter, many fellow students expected a mural from me. Instead, I did a proposed a big photography project emphasizing the abuse culture in the performance art world, particularly pertaining to the ballet and gymnastics world. I would design costumes of my own inspired by Swan Lake, a well known ballet for it's drama and gorish nature relating to death, love, and especially suicide by lost identity. The project focuses on mocking the pristine beauty of this production by photographing dancers and gymnastics with injuries and torn up, bloodstained, raggedy costumes in physically challenging positions that often lead to injuries. I had a budget planned out, an idea of how big the photo prints were going to be, and how I would showcase costumes in a gallery setting with the photo prints.

The response I received about this project really drove the nail in my creative tree. Nearly all of my classmates deemed the project unprofessional, course, and so improperly executed that the photos and costumes would send the wrong message. No one asked questions about the plans I had for sending messages through imagery, posing, and lighting. However, despite these claims, my project made it through a second round of judging in a selected pile of projects that could potentially receive funding from this grant's "board", which was really just peer grading. I will gladly say, though, that I lost to a wonderful project that was honestly just better thought out than mine on all angles. It was interactive and fun.

For our final in this class, we had to give an Artist's Presentation, which essentially shows and explains your philosophies as an artists, how your projects pertain to your philosophies, who some inspirations are to you, and other things. My presentation was the first time I had opened up with classmates about my experience with the ballet world, how it brought me to painting, and where I am now with my mental health. I closed out by explaining that my art has gone from the whimsical sense that it had in high school to a more serious, self reflective, honest approach that is meant to be a conversation starter about my mental health. I told them this was the reason I hadn't shown up to class, and why I didn't feel I could connect with my classmates as friends, and chose to keep my connections with them as professional, intellectual, artistic connections instead. No one made eye contact, no one interacted with me as I tried to make eye contact with my peers was my professor in this class, who teared up with me and nodded enthusiastically any time I looked at her for reassurance.

So how does this relate to this story?

Sigfriede was created my freshman year of college when I was still bursting with confidence and creativity. She was a stupid ship baby I came up with during a conversation I had with my fiance, in the middle of the night, when I was tired and wrought with baby fever. She never got out of my head after that. I spent a lot of time scouring through boring passages in the Player's Handbook to make her a playable character, but no one was willing to play with a Wild Magic Sorcerer. That's when I made this fic. I threw myself into creating plots that were new to the Balance world but still felt right. That took a lot of thinking and new creative energy. After I found very little support going into the first year of my sophomore class credit count, I became more and more depressed, forgot to take my medication, found myself having anxiety induced hallucinations, and totally shut down. I was not severely dysfunctional enough to be admitted into a mental hospital, so I just hid in my room, afraid to see the people who supposedly supported each other's art but didn't care to ask me about my life and projects the way they did with each other. I cried a lot of the time. My room was a mess. I was buying cheap underwear instead of just washing the nice underwear I liked. That may be a bit TMI but it's the truth. I stopped painting and started sketching Sigfriede instead. Then I stopped doing that. My days at that point became wake up, eat, go to work, and sleep. No writing, no drawing, no painting.

I'm writing a chapter right now that takes a lot of planning for the middle. You know how it has
started, I know how it ends, and neither of us know how we get there. I am in the middle of moving off campus to live with my fiance right now. I'm getting better because I find myself wanting to write. I want to get this chapter done so you can read it. You guys are some of the only people in my life who support this kind of creativity from me. I don't want to disappoint you because you love Siggy as much as I do. We all want to see her grow and thrive. It WILL happen.

I have an Emotional Support Dog now. She wakes me up at seven in the morning to go potty. I always have a morning walk. She's always with me at home. I have started taking my medication again and me and my fiance have our dream apartment in our budget, even if all we have to sit on is a bed. I still work, but I am taking time away from school this summer to take better care of myself. I am going back to school part time in the fall. My fiance and I are going to get a marriage license in the next year.

Is this fic done? Not by a long shot. Am I going to abandon it? No. I just need some time to get happy again. Please have patience. Please don't leave Siggy behind. She's not going anywhere and neither am I. This chapter is almost done and once it's out of the way and I have things figured out I will hopefully be back on my once a week schedule.

I will see you all soon. I love you. I will not lose hope.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE-- JAIL BREAK

Chapter Summary

Tres Party Babes find themselves alone in an unusual predicament for their job description. Alone in their dungeon cells with no apparent proximity to their teammates, each team member must find a way to break out and find each other. But does finding each other mean they can figure out what's happening to those missing bards? Can they unravel the mystery of this kingdom's unusual activity? Will they be fired, or worse, killed? Sigfriede laments her uselessness. Mavis faces a personal fear. Random goes down guns ablaze.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE— JAIL BREAK

Sigfriede woke up to the sound of dripping water. She coughed and retched, hacking up the golden pollen saturating her lungs. Her snot shimmered. She wiped it on her hip, whining at the stain as it smeared on her elvish robes.

Her hands stung. With a hiss, she yanked her hands away from the embroidery to inspect her palms. Red patches of raw skin and exposed flesh riddled the butts of her palms, sides of her wrists and all across her elbows. Sigfriede groaned, babying her hands as she pushed herself off the ground to sit up. She rubbed her eyes gingerly with her knuckles so as to not irritate her raw palms. Her eyes were full of gunk. They watered as she wiped away the dried tears from her eyelashes, making her vision blurry.

The smell of musk and mold filled her nose.

“Oh,” Sigfriede gagged and retched. “Oh, God, no. Please put on some fuckin’ deodorant, my dude.”

No response. Sigfriede’s eyebrows furrowed and her nose scrunched, hiding her freckles. She took a good look around, gathering her wits as her vision cleared up.

First, she noticed her glasses were gone. Which was great, there was absolutely no problem there, especially since she’d just gotten them not even a year ago. But despite her short field of vision, she still had depth perception. The room was dark, which didn’t help her see much beyond that, but she gathered that she was alone. There was a stream of dim, warm light coming from somewhere above her, but it didn’t do much more than glare in her eyes and give her a headache.

Sigfriede groaned, standing up straight and popping her back. The beam of light, now directly in front of her, was just above her eye level. Given the size of the room and her short vision field, she could now see that the light came from a square opening in a wooden door. There seemed to be a fairly simple metal door handle with a series of locks above it. Seeing no other way out of the room, Sigfriede grabbed it and tried to turn the knob.
It didn’t budge.

She turned it the other way.

It didn’t budge.

“Oh, come on,” she muttered.

She tried again, more aggressive this time around.

Nothing.

With nothing else to do, Sigfriede resorted to jostling the handle loudly, banging on the door. She twisted the door knob and hacked at the locks with the butt of her pistol’s grip.

“Hey!” She shouted. “Hey, this isn’t cool! I work for the Bureau of Benevolence! You’re going against the.. uh… fuck…” Sigfriede giggled. “There’s some sort of act or law you’re going against, my dude. Lucretia’s a real smart chick. You’re doing something wrong here, man.”

No response.

Fuck.

Well, this wasn’t optimal. As far as Sigfriede knew, she was alone. Mavis and Random weren’t within ear shot, at least, which meant that teamwork was off the table. Not that teamwork had ever been the girls’ strong point; Kophyn never liked to work with the girls, and this was the first big mission the girls had since Kophyn’s leaving the team. Sure, they’d had smaller missions, but none of them entailed thousands of missing bards and being locked in dungeon cells. They could use team work to get out of tricky social situations, but this? This was new. Sigfriede had to get out of this on her one, with no one to sweet talk or work with. All she had was a pistol and a wand.

Her pistol, while reliable and a great tool, wasn’t something that could break her out of a cell. If she started shooting at the hinges or something, the bullets would probably ricochet and end up lodged in her abdomen. Not optimal.

Her wand, on the other hand, was reliable in and of itself, but her magic was not. Sure, she could probably think of a spell that she knew that could probably get her out. Sure, she was good at magic when her magic worked. But that was the clause, wasn’t it? When her magic worked. Her magic hardly worked. Her magic was sporadic and hateful towards her. If she had a surge in this little, confined room, she’d be fucked.

Mavis woke up like she had only been taking a nap. She didn’t feel good, but she’d had worse. Traveling with a nomad druidic enclave had left her with rations gone, tents robbed, and bones shattered. At least she’d eaten well the night before.

It didn’t take her very long to gather her senses. For one, Mavis was much better than Sigfriede at keeping her glasses on her face. The frames actually fit her face, leaving them to rest on her nose at all times, even when Mavis slept. Sigfriede’s, however, were not as well fitted; they slipped down her nose quite often. The more they slipped, the more they fell, and, with Sigfriede’s luck the more they stretched, bent, disappeared, and dirtied.

Mavis loved her cousin, honestly, but Sigfriede was not the brightest bulb in the box sometimes.
“Sigfriede?”

No response.

Mavis sneezed.

“Siggy? Are you awake?”

Mavis blinked.

Then she looked around.

Where was Sigfriede?

And Random?

“Girls?”

Silence.

Mavis wondered if they hadn’t woken up yet, if that was what had happened to all three of them. The last thing she remembered was their talk with the Syl Pasha, and the story he’d told of the old ruins outside of his domain. She remembered how calm he’d been when the three of them walked in with no announcement and just fell right into his hospitality. Then his voice turned sour, almost venomous, as he went on about the… Spell Plague? Mavis had heard of that a little in her basic schooling, but it was more of a short section in a history book than something to be angry about. Besides, as far as Mavis could tell, it had no lasting effects on today’s Faerun.

But it had apparently landed Mavis in this dungeon cell, with pollen coating her robes and boots. Had the pollen knocked her out? What kind of flowers did Raylan have in his thrown room?

Mavis racked her brain for any visual memory of the florals she’d seen in the palace, but she was so apparently distracted by the party and getting to the bottom of how these flowers had grown through the stone that she hadn’t been paying attention to what kind of flowers they were.

She went to the next best thing. What flowers were poisonous if ingested? Hyacinths, she knew that. Some lilies could be toxic, but not quite enough to cloud someone’s mind so hard. Foxglove, Bleeding Hearts, Bloodroot… all poisonous, yes, but their poison didn’t just knock someone out with golden dusty images. All the more reason to get to the bottom of this.

Technically, Mavis was back at square one from where she was last night. You could even say she was at square zero, and could only get to square one again when she found her teammates. And in order to find her teammates she had to get out of this cell. That wouldn’t be easy of course; nothing ever was for her. There might be guards who know what she and her friends looked like. There might be guards who knew what she and her friends looked like and had a bounty on their heads. They could be caught and thrown back into their cells until the Syl Pasha decided what to do with them. And that was just the least dangerous possibility.

Okay, so she couldn’t bust out of her cell guns ablaze, as Sigfriede would say. That meant she had to take the stealthy route. But Mavis knew she wasn’t the greatest at stealth, especially when she was stressed. And when Mavis got stressed, she got desperate. Her mind started racing through different ideas, but they all came back to her and her friends being separated again, or dead.

Except one that made her skin crawl. Literally.
Well. They say desperate times call for desperate measures.

This was one part of her trade that she wasn’t particularly fond of. It was hard, to say the least, and alienating. It gave her what could only closely be described as vertigo with an out of body experience. It made muscles sore that she didn’t even know she had. Most of the time, if she didn’t get stuck in whatever beast shape she took, she immediately vomited when she came back to her natural dwarven form. Needless to say, Mavis didn’t use it unless she had to. And as it seemed, in her little cell with no knowledge of how dangerous her situation was, Mavis had to use it.

After some complaining, personal debate, and hyping herself up, Mavis began to focus. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Starting from her toes, she began to meditate, focusing on relaxing all of her muscles. The little ones, the big ones, the ones she found became extremely sore after taking a beast shape. She curled and flexed her toes, rolled her weight around the edges of her feet. Mavis’s left instep actually popped, and she relaxed a little bit more. If little places were popping, she was relaxing properly. Maybe it would stop her skin from crawling this time, leaving the crawling to her many little legs. Moving to her ankles, she rolled them, drew letters of the dwarven alphabet in the air with her toes. She bent her knees and straightened them, took walking lunges across her cell, twisted her torso to pop her back, swung her arms, and rolled her neck.

Once everything was popped, rolled, and relaxed, the next steps could be taken. Mavis began thinking about her beast shape, the eight legs, the eight eyes, the barbed hair on the legs, the mandibles, the abdomen, webs with dew, all the creepy crawly things that spiders embodied. She felt herself shrink, the hairs on her arms stood on end, and Mavis felt all her thoughts drain from her mind.

Soon, after she opened her eyes, she found that her perspective had changed. The cell was bigger, the door taller, and the light, if possible, softer. She didn’t have toes anymore; they’d all been turned into separate, angled, hairy legs that carried Mavis’s weight on eight little points connecting to the ground. She tried to bend her knees and found that she could almost flatten herself to the floor. She tried to walk and found herself a bit taller. Her eight little legs worked in a smooth rhythm to let her glide over the floor, and the hairs on each of them took her from the floor to the wall; the wall had become the new floor. The same happened as Mavis’s new spidery body roved across the wall to the door, over the edge of the opening with bars, and down the front of the door.

Part one was a success. All Mavis had to do now was find her way through this huge dungeon prison without being stepped on.

Wonderful odds.

Random was not happy. Not being happy took a lot for Random, seeing as she took it upon herself to be a happy person and count her blessings even when she’d hit rock bottom. But since being thrown in a hostile prison by a hostile king was sort of a new rock bottom in Random’s life and career, she felt like she was allowed to not be happy right now.

She’d woken up earlier than the guards had expected. She estimated that they had gotten half way to her cell by the time she awoke, and that was bad enough as it was. When, and Random did mean when, she broke out of this cell, she already had an upper hand for her escape. Part of the prison was recognizable to her. She could find her way out of that part of it easy. And she already knew that getting past the guards was easy, too. Being a tiefling, Random wasn’t exactly light and tiny like Mavis and Sigfriede. She’d put up a pretty good fight after she’d come to, and when she’d gone limp, forcing the guards to toss her dead weight into her cell, they’d taken post in front of her cell sweaty, bruised, and out of breath.
“How’s your lovely stay going, 8612?”

Random’s ears perked. She’d been studying the cracks in the mortar of the bricks instead of paying the guards attention. It was a time buying tactic that she was dead-set on using until they fell asleep, or something, so she could bust out, throw the guards off to get a combat advantage and knock them out in a similar, albeit more barbaric, way that they had done to her and her friends; more importantly than that, her teammates, who she had been through some terrible situations with. While they weren’t world ending, some of those issues they had been sent on solved some important issues for civilians caught in the middle of things. Water monsters, businesses on the verge of collapse, minor military coops brought on by deranged goblins… all of them solved between the three of them, making life easier for civilians. Now, being completely separated, locked in the dungeon of a clearly deranged human king below an allergy inducing maze of flora and stone, the girls were alone, unable to deal with a real military coop, letting Istus knows how many bards go missing or be killed.

Damn, this job was hard.

“8612?”

Random rolled her eyes.

“Hey!” The voice came again. “Answer me when I’m talking to you, 8612!”

“Who?” Random asked.

“You. Your name is 8612, as in prisoner 8612.”

“Uh, my moms named me Random. You can call me that.”

“No can do,” said the guard, starting to sound more and more like Fantasy John Wayne. “Syl Pasha’s orders. All prisoners are to be given a number to go by until Syl Pasha Raylan comes to a decision of what to do with you. Now, if you don’t mind answering my initial question, how’s your stay going, 8612?”

Random’s tail started to flick angrily. “Can I have some water? My allergies are killing me.”

“We’ll see how soon the Syl Pasha’s court cleric can get to you. He’s a very busy man.”

With a groan, Random flew all of her weight into a weak spot she’d found in the brick mortar. Nothing happened.

“Hey now,” said Fantasy John Wayne, “don’t try any funny business. Meal time is soon! I’d hate for you to make yourself so tired that you can’t eat!”

A light bulb went off in Random’s head. She rushed to the barred opening in her cell door, grabbing the bars and rattling them. She threw her tail into hysterics, letting it slam any little soft spot it could find.

“Did you just say meal time?” she asked.

She could see both guards now. Both were human, tall, and well built. One appeared to be slightly older than the other, with salt and pepper hair and a well-kept mustache. That was probably Fantasy John Wayne. The other was young, with an athletic build, but not as much height as his senior. Both seemed to have some small advantage over Random. Fantasy John Wayne seemed experienced, with his cocky confidence and dry humor, while the other was small. If Random
made one misstep with Fantasy John Wayne and the small guard could run in and take her off her toes. This was going to be tricky.

“Why of course,” the smaller guard answered. “All prisoners are allowed three meal times a day, provided to you by our royal kitchen staff. All meals provide you with all the basic nutrients you need to live.”

“W-well,” Random’s brain began racing. “Where do we go for meal time?”

Fantasy John Wayne rolled his eyes. “You don’t go anywhere. We bring you your meals.”

“Bring us our meals…” Random rested her hands on the opening ledges. “I see.”

Nothing else came from the guards. This might be a good chance. If she could keep them talking, she might be able to keep them talking, she could keep her tail going and use it to loosen some of the rusted hinges on the door. Then she could just bust her way through mid-conversation and take them down. Then it was just running. Pure running until she got out of the dungeon and found her friends.

She decided to try again. “What kind of meals do we get?”

“Hey,” Fantasy John Wayne banged the door with his fist. The door shook, and a rusty screw fell out of the top hinge. “All prisoners must remain silent during down time unless spoken to first.”

“Well—”

“Need I repeat myself, 8612?”

“My name is Random.”

Fantasy John Wayne slammed his fist on the door again, harder and more intimidating. Random took a startled step back. She heard metal hit the floor, but she wasn’t sure what it came from.

“Listen here, 8612,” Fantasy John Wayne sneered. “If I have to tell you to remain silent unless spoken to first, I may have to find different ways of teaching rules to you. We pride ourselves on our humane teaching—”

“I’m a tiefling.”

“Alright,” Fantasy John Wayne grabbed a set of keys from his hip. “Looks like we’ve got a feisty one, Tricam. Let’s go.”

Random heard the keys jingle. A moment later a key was inserted into the cell door lock. The lock turned and clicked, and Random knew what was coming. She played into the chaos she’d sewn, stumbling back and “tripping” on her tail. She “fell” to the ground, putting an arm over her face and fearfully staring at her targets. Both guards came marching into Random’s tiny cell, night sticks in hand, confidence in the shoulders, ready for the second round of action.

“It seems like we have a little damsel in destress, Tricam,” Fantasy John Wayne sing songed.

“Yeah,” the smaller one, Tricam, chuckled. “We’d hate to tear your pretty garb any more than we already have, 8612.”

“Just sit back and listen to your teachers, alright, 8612?”

Random kept playing into it. She scooted herself back into a corner, dropping her arm to the
ground, putting her weight on her hand.

“Hey,” she squeaked. “You can’t treat your prisoners like this. What will Syl Pasha Raylan say?”

“Syl Pasha’s orders,” said Tricam. “If it’s what it takes to make sure order stays in place.”

“Order?”

“Ensuring the prisoners follow prison rules! If you won’t be silent yourself, we have every right to beat the silence out of you.”

Both guards kept advancing, and Random could grab their ankles easily if that needed to be her first move of action. She watched their gait and posture. They weren’t expecting an attack. They thought they had the upper hand. And maybe they did. Random didn’t know what they had beyond the keys on their hips and the nightsticks in their hands. Maybe they had some of that golden dust that put the girls to sleep. Really, she had no idea what these guards had up their sleeves. But Random had two hands, to feet, and one substantial tail. She had training and a head screwed on right. It would be a challenge, but a good one. Random loved a good challenge.

She had to keep them talking, though.

“Y-you can beat me?” she whimpered.

“If that’s what it takes,” said Fantasy John Wayne. “And it’s looking like you still haven’t learned yet.”

“Learned what?”

Fantasy John Wayne took a swing earlier than Random expected. He rammed his nightstick straight into Random’s cheek bone, whipping her head into the wall beside her. Her ears rang, and she tasted blood in her mouth. Turning her head back to see the prison guards, Random watched as Fantasy John Wayne crouched to be on her level. He leaned in close, nearly nose to nose, and Random could smell the sweat drenching his uniform. His eyes gleamed with malicious humor as he stared at Random’s swollen, bruising face.

“Learned your lesson yet?” he asked. “Or is this class just getting in session?”

Random smiled as best she could with a busted lip. “This lesson’s just starting.”

She took her opening. Sliding her weight from her hand to her feet, she sat on the tips of her toes and tossed her whole body weight into her elbow, letting it collide with Fantasy John Wayne’s nose. She heard a crack as he fell on his ass, shouting and holding his face.

“Tricam!” He screamed, with a more nasally sound than before. “Don’t let her get away!”

“Cut with the cliché movie lines, man,” Random mumbled before she pulled herself up from the floor. She took a running start, letting one of her steps land on Fantasy John Wayne’s chest. She barreled into Tricam, tackling him to the ground. His head smacked the floor, and Random’s tail got caught under his boots. She tried to tug it out without letting off of Tricam, but it was too tangled. In her moment of distraction, Tricam rammed his fist into Random’s kidney. She gasped, falling on top of him in a way that was too intimate for her liking. She rolled off of him, yanking her tail along with her.

Tricam took his moment. He got to his feet. Then he lifted one foot. Random rolled over just as his boot was coming down on her ribs. She flinched. Her reflexes kicked in. Her hands flew up with
speed, grabbing the heel of his boot. It took a moment for both of them to realize what had happened. Tricam seemed more unsure than Random was, so she moved her left hand to his calf, and yanked his leg to her right. Tricam went barreling into Fantasy John Wayne, laying there in a tangled, gripping heap.

She took her chance. Random got to her feet and tried to ignore the cries her kidney made. She ran straight for the open door, thanked the guards for their foolishness, and took off through the winding halls of the dungeon.

Chapter End Notes

It's a short chapter. But it was a part of the plot that I had to get out of the way. It took me literally four months to write it. But you all know what's been going on with me lately. I have a good idea of how to start the next chapter, and you'll see plenty of Amadeus from here. And once this arc is done, we get into the real, real meat of the plot. I've only been on my medication for two days since my break from it, but I already notice a difference. I woke up easier this morning, I pumped this chapter out so you guys would have something to read, and now I'm on to the next chapter. I might even make a late mother's day card for my momma, since I didn't get to do that on time. Who knows.

Some things coming up in the near future for Tres Party Babes? Dancing plants, murder mystery, and some Broadway worthy performances from some kids that live downtown.

I'll see you all again real soon, so be nice to each other, okay? And be nice to YOURSELVES, for goodness sake. That's a lesson I had to learn the hard way.
Hey guys. I'm Very Stupid and wrote two versions of the same chapter and published them. The first one was called "Prison Break" and the second one was called "Jail Break". Please ignore "Prison Break", as "Jail Break" is cannon. I'm very, very sorry for any confusion. Parts of "Prison Break" will be used in the chapter I'm finishing up and posting either late tonight or tomorrow. Again, I'm very sorry for this retcon, but the improper chapter has been deleted and everything should be in order now. I'm so fucking sorry.
With Random and Mavis out of their dungeon cells, it's up to them to find a way out of the prison with Sigfriede in tow. But with no known allies in the palace anymore, the stranded duo have no idea who they can trust. They're on a tight time line, having no idea when the next bard is going to go missing or if Syl Pasha Ralan will find them and do worse than throwing them in a dungeon cell. How will they get their team back together and untangle the web of intrigue they've found themselves caught in. Mavis faces finds nooks and crannies to hide in. Random makes a friend. Amadeus hatches a plan.

Mavis scurried her way through the flowers on the palace walls. She was well hidden there. It gave her places to rest, and made a perfect hiding spot to spy and see what information she could get off of passersby.

Unfortunately, with the lack of amazing partying happening in the palace, the halls were empty. Mavis hardly saw anyone she recognized. She’d spent an uncountable amount of time sitting on these pollinated walls, waiting to see if someone, anyone, that she recognized would find their way to her little part of the palace. Granted, Mavis hoped she was in the common hallway, but she couldn’t exactly be sure. Her spider vision didn’t give her as much of a range as her dwarven vision did. For all she knew she could be right up against the Syl Pasha’s private quarters, which was just perfect for her.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. They grew louder, as if they were walking her way. Mavis perked up, crawling out from under the big lily she’d been hiding under. Soon, the source of the footsteps came into view; a young man with a black mop of corkscrew curls contained in a feathered cap. He wore simple, colorful garb with worn leather boots. There appeared to be some sort of book in his hands, but Mavis couldn’t read what it said. Then it hit her; it was Amadeus, the bard they’d met the night before! Hadn’t Sigfriede mentioned that he wanted to meet up with them?

Mavis started spinning a web as fast as her little spinnerets would go. When she had an anchor to the flower, she stopped spinning and gave herself a ride down. Luckily enough for her, Amadeus was just close enough that she could swing her silk rope, detach herself from it, and jump down onto Amadeus’s shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice anything. Good.

Perched on the shoulder of someone Mavis hoped she could call a friend, she could see what was written in his book. It looked like a music book, complete with edits in red ink and scratch marks from too much erasing. She could hear him humming too; a soft, repetitive tune, as if he was repeating the same part of a song over and over again. Mavis couldn’t tell if it was because he liked it, or if he wasn’t sure if one of the notes was in the right place. She wanted to know what the song was called, and if she could help him with any of it, but for one, his hair was so big relative to her spidery size, and for two, she couldn’t speak. If she chose to drop her beast shape now, she could
drop the whole integrity of her mission.

No, she had to ride this out and hope that Amadeus had an office or a room. Maybe she could drop her beast shape then…

Random barreled her way out of the dungeon. It was shockingly easy, since the dungeon appeared to be mostly empty. It was a great possibility that Siggy, Mavis and she were the only prisoners in the castle. That meant one of two things; the Syl Pasha wasn’t kidnapping the bards, and they had the wrong lead; or, it meant that the Syl Pasha was kidnapping the bards and was smart enough not to keep his loot close to him. Either one meant that the girls were no closer to finding them, and that made Random a little angry. Being down in that dungeon was a waste of time, and Random hated wasting time.

Still, through her run around the dungeon, she hadn’t seen any guards, or any sign of her friends. She couldn’t tell if that was good or bad. She hoped for the good. Maybe her friends had already made their way out.

Light much brighter than the torch light of the dungeon flooded Random’s eyes as she busted the door open. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, tangled with different flowers and flora. It took Random a second, but she realized she was in the throne room. All of the same flowers hung from the ceiling and walls the same way they had the night before. None of them seemed to be doing anything spectacular or unusual. Then again, Random hadn’t been paying much attention to them when she was knocked out. All she remembered was being overwhelmed by all the colors and smells, the fancy garb and robes the Syl Pasha and his court had been wearing, and especially the magic show the Syl Pasha had put on to tell his story. Luckily, the room was empty.

Random wanted to stare and smell all of the flowers, but she couldn’t stay in one spot for long. She hadn’t hit her guard’s natural snooze button, so who knew how close behind they were. And she did not want to see Fantasy John Wayne again. For all she knew, the entry into the dungeon was right in the throne room, and she didn’t want His Royal Pain-in-the-Ass to be alerted.

She took off across the royal carpet. The throne room was big, but Random could run well. She cleared the room, kicked the big doors open, and kept running.

Random had no idea where she was going, but she went as far away from the throne room as she could. She bolted down hall way after hallway, all overloaded with flowers and leaves and vines. Some parts of the stone floor had been overrun with grass and weeds, and Random was sure was not the situation the night before. What in the world was fueling these plants?

Random turned down another hallway, smacking her shoulder into the wall corner. That was going to bruise for sure. Still bolting for it, Random checked over her shoulder to see if she was being followed. Just as she turned to look ahead, her body slammed into something with so much force she fell backwards. The wind was knocked from her lungs, and stars floated around her eyes. When she regained her senses, the first thing she noticed were the colorful clothes. She panicked, got back on her feet, and started running the other way.

“Wait!” Came a voice. Random didn’t listen. She kept running; there was no way she was giving up.

“Wait!” Came the voice again. It sounded like it was following her.

“No!” she cried.
“Wait, seriously! You’re one of the girls from the party! I want to help!”

“Prove it!”

No answer. Just pounding footsteps.

Random was scared now. She was sure she’d run into a guard. She’d blown her cover, and there was no way she and her friends could figure this out.

Music started playing. It flooded her ears, and fogged her brain. She felt her footsteps slowing, and eventually she stopped running. Exhaustion tore through her muscles. She heaved for breath. Her knees wobbled, so she leaned against the floral walls and pressed her hands to her knees.

“Calm down,” said the voice again, coming closer. “I promise I want to help you. I met your friend Sigfriede last night, and we had planned to meet after the party.”

The colorful clothes caught up to her, and leaned against the wall beside her. Random could see the persons face now, though most of it was covered by an obscene feathered cap and corkscrew curls. They were holding a violin and bow, but seemed to be putting them up.

“You,” Random huffed, “you’re that guy Sigfriede told us about?”

“Yes,” they said. “My name is Amadeus. I saw you come into the grand hall with her and a smaller girl. I told her to grab her friends and get a room in the palace under the blessing of Syl Pasha Ralan, but I never saw her again. I’m worried. What happened in the throne room?”

Little puzzle pieces started falling into place in Random’s head. She felt her shoulders release, and she realized her tiefling given defensive measures had kicked in. Her fingertips sizzled and relaxed from her side; she’d been subconsciously preparing to cast hellish rebuke. This kid wasn’t a guard; Fantasy John Wayne and Tricam didn’t wear such bright clothes or have such moppy hair. In fact, Random remembered Sigfriede walking out of the party hall by this kid with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh,” she sighed. Her arms collapsed and she bent over. She pulled her weight to stand up straight on an inhale, like a sun salutation, and laughed out an exhale.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I remember you. What’s up, Groove Master?”

Amadeus blinked. “Groove Master?”

“Yeah, you got the uh, music thing. Anyway, Sigfriede brought us to the throne room, right?”

“Uh, sure.”

“And it was pretty cool. Lot’s of flowers. That’s a really interesting décor choice, by the way. Takes away from the rock features. I like rocks myself but that’s besides the point. We get to the Syl Pasha and start introducing ourselves. Ralan starts talking, chatting us up, offering us food and stuff. He starts telling this story… I don’t remember what it was about…”

Amadeus shook his head. “I don’t think that story is very important. Anecdotes aren’t much more for history anymore to him. They’re just signs of how weak you’ll be compared to him. How was he telling the story? Orally? From a book?”

“Orally. And with… his hands?”

“His hands?”
Random nodded. “And there was this golden dust that was making these images in the air; almost like he was controlling it with his hands.”

Amadeus inhaled sharply. “I see. So, the usual story, then. We’ll have to get you and your friends out of here quickly. I know Sigfriede’s name, but can I ask for you and your other friend’s name?”

Random blinked. “What usual story?”

“Please,” Amadeus stood up and glanced over his shoulder. “The castle staff is out on regular patrol. If they see us together, we’ll both be thrown in our own prisons. Walk with me, I’ll explain later. Your names?”

“Where are we going?”

“The kitchen!” Amadeus smiled. “I have a friend there. And besides, he’ll feed you better than the prison guards. Let’s go.”

Mavis was exhausted by the time she made it onto Amadeus’s boot. She’d been thrown off his shoulder when he started running after Random. Thank God he’d stopped to talk, because she’d used that time to tangle herself in between the tongue of his boot and his shoelaces. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but it worked.

“Where exactly are we?” Random said.

“This is the castle’s east wing. It’s where most of the staff lives. My room, the maid’s rooms, the kitchen, it’s all over here. There’s nothing really spectacular. But, it’s the most relaxed part of the palace. We all know we can trust each other, and that’s about all we’ve got left anymore.”

Mavis couldn’t see where they were going, but she trusted Amadeus’s words. It was quieter here; no echoes of guard’s chatter, nothing that could squash her little spidery form. It was darker than the rest of the palace, but Mavis’s spider brain liked that.

Random didn’t say anything until Amadeus stopped her.

“We’re here,” he said. “I’ll warn you, it may be a little messy; Utryn runs the kitchen by himself, and he can get a little enthusiastic.”

Mavis heard a door creak open, followed by the sound of clanging pots and pans, running water, and boisterous, terrible singing.

Amadeus walked through the door way. He stopped to let Random in, and Mavis took her chance to climb out of his boot and up the wall.

“Please,” he said. “Sit down. I’ll let Utryn know we’re here.”

When Mavis reached a good height up the wall, her Big Sister Senses kicked in; she immediately wanted to tidy this whole place up and keep any haywire younglings from running around the room and tackling anyone doing work.

Off to one side of the wide rectangular room was a simple wooden table with four similarly simple wooden chairs. Next to the table and chairs, with maybe just enough room for two people to walk between them, was a countertop that was connected to three other countertops and formed a smaller rectangle of workspace. The counter that was against the back wall, which had a window to
the palace gardens, was where dirty pots and dishes piled around a rusty sink. Cutting boards lined their way across the counters either way. On one end, their march was ceased by the edge of the counter, the other by the stove. One area of the counter space was reserved for plating and serving. Several silver trays were filled with fine dishes that carried mounds of wonderful smelling food, from stews to fish to venison and countless fruits. All had their own sauce bowls with what looked like an assortment of mustards, spreads, and broths. Bread plates were positioned just left of the main dishes, stacked with thick, steaming slices of white bread. Tall glasses accompanied by smaller ceramic pitchers, possibly filled with wine, sat in the top righthand corner of each tray.

These must have been the royal family’s dishes. Mavis wondered what the rest of the staff was served. She’d never seen such a caste-like system of meals. Of course, some kingdoms still saved expensive dishes like swan and peacock for special occasions, particularly those of the wealthy, but as far as she knew most people could afford stews and fish and other meats. White bread was easily accessible, even though most modern parents insisted on their children eating whole wheat bread instead.

Still, as she looked around the room again, she saw that many of the unclean dishes piled around the sink weren’t of fine china, and instead were dull copper. Forks and knives were laid out on the silver trays, but none seemed to be anywhere else in the room. Perhaps the staff had already eaten, and the cooks were left to deal with the mess they brought in while they prepared the meal that seemed to be the most important.

Stuck in the middle of this chaos was a tall, barrel chested, man with his hair cropped short and scaly blue skin. Mavis knew where this man came from; she’d seen many like his kind on her visits to her father’s beach hut.

Tritons. A good hearted, albeit boastful race of people who took pride in their rich aquatic history. They took most pride in their magical history, being one of the oldest creatures to inhabit Toril from another plane. With the Elves, they were responsible for a lot of abnormal things that were taken for normal these days. In fact, tales of sea monsters and krakens came from early civilizations witnessing the Tritons do their militant work from afar. In modern days, many Tritons had a choice of career now. Many stayed below water to serve their time fighting off whatever sea monstrosities reared their ugly heads, but some of them chose to leave the waters and live on land.

Mavis assumed this Triton had left to pursue cooking.

Random took a seat at the table. Amadeus took his feathered cap off and slapped it on the table across from Random. His violin and bow accompanied it before he walked to the counterspace. When he reached the Triton, he immediately began gathering up plates and pans. He placed them in the piles next to the sink and started working his way through the dishes.

The Triton jumped when the running water hit the metal pans. He turned on his heels, then shook his head and finger.

“No, no, no!” He ran over to Amadeus grabbed his arms and shoved him out of the way. “This is my job, boy! You haven’t eaten yet, go sit down.”

Amadeus cracked a smile. “Hello, Utryn. How has your day been?”

“Terrible!” Utryn spoke with a light accent, but Mavis couldn’t tell where it came from. “Syl Pasha is on rampage today. Sending servants down; ‘Utryn, do this!’ ‘Utryn do that!’ Disbelief, that’s what I feel. I am only one cook, Amadeus!” He said Amadeus’ name incompletely, like they “-ay” part of “ahm-ma-DAY-us”. “Look at all these dishes,” he continued. “And he fires all my sous
chefs, ridiculous! I ask for help, I get laughed out the throne room! I swear—"

“So let me help,” Amadeus chuckled.

“No! If Syl Pasha finds out you step out of line, he’ll throw you to the hoard! You’re the one good thing left in this palace, boy; I can’t have you—”

Utryn caught sight of Random sitting awkwardly at the table. His face turned a violent shade of purple, and he slowly turned to face Random head on.

All the nerves in Mavis’ eight-legged body lit on fire. If this man didn’t know how to control his temper, the girls would be in a rough situation that turned their small chances of breaking Sigfriede out to nonexistent.

Random gave a tight smile and a small wave. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “I’m here to try and help.”

Utryn’s face lit up. “New help! Finally! Here, girl, you can start with the dishes. I’ll have you make scrambled eggs after.”

Amadeus snorted. “Close. Utryn, this is my friend, Random. She’s here to help with the, uh, hoard.”

“Oh,” Utryn’s voice fell flat. “I see. So no sous chef today, eh? Hah! I should control my hopes from here on, yes?”

“Geez,” Random tugged her bands. “I’d hope not. I’m paid to let people keep their hopes up, so if I leave here with you depressed, I guess I shouldn’t get that paycheck, huh?”

There was a pause, then a hearty, deep, pure laugh from Utryn.

“Clever girl!” he boomed. “No, I would not give you that paycheck if that is your job. Amadeus says you’re here to help with the hoard? How?”

Random blinked. “I didn’t know there was a hoard. Has the Syl Pasha really isolated this whole region because of a hoarding problem?”

Amadeus kept his giggles hidden behind his hand. Mavis liked the sparkle in his eyes; she wondered if this was the only place in the whole region he could be happy anymore.

“In a way,” Amadeus said. “It isn’t exactly… his hoarding problem. Directly at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. This was a slow thing, you know? Raylan was always so generous and kind. He brought this region into its financial flourish by cutting back on the Royal Budget, I mean…”

Utryn sighed and leaned on the counter, fists balled, and elbows locked against it. “Gave this boy a home. A good home. Taught him everything in his fluffy head. Good leader; he rivaled my own king back home in the ocean.”

Note taken; that was a lot for a person with such pride raised in them.

“Then the… hoarding tendencies, let’s say, started. Then kids started disappearing.”

Random scratched her ear. “Let’s make this a little easier. How about I tell you what I know and
why I was sent here, and you fill me in on what I’m missing. Sound good?”

Amadeus shrugged. “Sure. On one condition.”

“I don’t do conditions.”

“Think of it as a quid pro quo. You tell me what I know, I’ll tell you what I think.”

“You already told me what you think. You agreed.”

“No, no,” Amadeus crossed his arms. “What I think about who sent you here.”

“Smart boy,” Utryn smacked Amadeus on the back. “Call her bluff! Great negotiation skills, eh? He learned that from Syl Pasha!”

“I’m not calling her bluff, Utryn. I am a smart boy, yes. But bluffs are not for boys as smart as me.”

Random had fallen silent. She was confused, Mavis could tell. She’d frozen in place, almost like a cat. Like she was thinking, “If I don’t move, they’ll keep talking and I can punch if I need to”. And Mavis agreed. She started creeping her way down the wall slowly, ready to change back to her dwarven form as soon as possible when needed. As much credit that she gave Random as a tank, Mavis didn’t want to see her friend in a two-to-one battle with a bard and a person raised on militant mindsets. Random was strong, but Utryn was bigger and definitely appeared stronger.

“But,” Amadeus turned back to Random. “It is a fair deal, I think. Assuming you may know more about us than we know about you. I want to help the people of my region as much as you do, but now more than ever I have to watch who I let into this situation. I’m not going to have innocent people hurt or worse if they can’t handle it. Please, this is all I can do in terms of teamwork.”

Damn. The teamwork card. That was hard for anyone from the Bureau to turn down. Not only was teamwork integral to the surface side teams like Mavis’ own, but it was even more important to them to ensure a fast and safe closing of the case. If Random turned down the only lead they had, especially if they were offering help, she’d crawl up to the ceiling, spin some web, slide down it, and web Random’s lungs shut.

Random sighed. “Fine. But you have to go first.”

“Nice,” Amadeus smiled. “One question. Are you from the Bureau of Benevolence?”

Random’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes. Why?”

“So my reports went through? Why did it take so long for you to get down here? How quickly can you guys deal with this? How many of you are there? Are we safe?”

“You said one question, dude.”

“I know, but please, I’m so desperate at this point.”

“I mean… This is a strange case. Hundreds of missing people with a niche profile, complete political and militant withdraw, parties thrown for the top of the top elite of Faerun that wasn’t publicized, advertised, or known about by no one besides the ones who received exclusive invitations. The Bureau hasn’t seen a case like this since the time of the Relics. Of course Lucretia had us approach it with care. We had weeks of camp out in her office combing every report we’d received.”
“Did you see the report about the dragon?”

Random paused. “I- I think so. Yeah, I kind of remember something like that. It was in this region, but long ago enough to just be collected in the timeline but considered unrelated to the disappearances.”

“Oh, it is.”

Utryn let out a tense sigh. “Very related.”


Amadeus nodded. “It did. Under this palace.”

Mavis started crawling down to the floor. This was exactly the intel they needed before they came surface-side. She didn’t want to miss anything Amadeus and Utryn said; it may not be a plan to find Sigfriede, but it was information that could lead to a plan. And if she needed to start asking questions, too, she didn’t want to fall face first off the wall.

Amadeus continued. “I know where it went. I saw it all. It came down from the sky like some sort of alien aircraft. Of course, dragons aren’t a rare threat to Faerun as a whole, but it’s a rare sight here in Calimsham. We were unprepared for battle. All we could do was detain it, strap it down, you know? Then we sent for the Syl Pasha. He took it seriously; he’d read all the historical stories about dragon attacks and wouldn’t want that upon his people. Of course, I went with him. I have a good repour with our people, and we thought it would be a good idea to have me there to comfort them. He visited the dragon himself wanting to just negotiate with it. We wanted the threat gone, but we didn’t want to hurt it. There was a whole plan surrounding the situation: we’d talk with it, find out what it wanted here, figure out a way to give it what it wanted without hurting our people, and see it off. Our military experts said it was impossible, but Ralan was… almost impertinent about it. He said the experts didn’t know as much about history as he did; said that history didn’t have to repeat itself here. He’d already brought this region out of its financial emergency, why couldn’t he do this for his people, too? There was a fight, nothing physical, just words, but eventually we let Ralan have what he wanted and planned a siege if we needed it. Ralan approached it and started talking. He didn’t get any responses at first, so he kept asking questions. Then his eyes glazed over and his head swayed back. Then the dragon turned its head to face him. It stared him down with this flare it its eyes.”

“Did it seem angry?” Random asked.

Amadeus shook his head. “No. I’ve seen rage in a sentient creature’s eyes before. This wasn’t it. It was almost like victory. Like the dragon had already won. There was a pause, then Ralan nodded his head and gave orders to find the best bard in the region. Some of the guards and soldiers came out of their hiding spots and came after me. Ralan panicked and threatened imminent death if anyone touched me.”

“Had he threatened anything like that before?”

Utryn grunted. “No. Syl Pasha has always been very kind. Never ordered a death upon one. I was not there, I was here making lunch for the royal family, making something special for our boy here. He’d run a very great fundraiser for orphans here. Thought he’d like a nice mini cake with his lunch. But from what I heard after Amadeus came back, I became worried. But I’m just a cook. What could I do?”

“That mini cake was pretty awesome, though,” Amadeus said. “I really appreciated it.”
“Good. No one respects you enough, boy.”

“Anyway, there was a royal concert held for any bard in Calimsham for the Syl Pasha. So many people turned up. All of these bards had some insane talent. There were so many songs, so many stories and pieces of artwork. All crafted by people here! I’d never seen such a lively festival. It inspired me so much. There was so much magic in the air that people barely remember the night. Everyone remembers different things that touched them. We were all lost in the conversations, the food made by the cooking staff; that was before Ralan fired all of Utryn’s friends and chefs. When I woke up in the morning and went down to the throne room for my daily chores list, there was a poor family in attendance with Ralan. They seemed so frail. I’d never seen any family as impoverished as them in this region. I mean, I’ve traveled this whole region in my life with Ralan. Everyone seemed so well off, so happy.”

Random scratched her head. “Any thought as to why they might have been so poor?”

“No solid idea,” Amadeus pinched the bridge of his nose. “But I did hear a bit of their story. Their daughter wanted to be a bard. They’d heard about how easy it was to thrive here and the abundance of bardic training here. They explained that they’d moved from a mountain town up north to give their daughter a chance at pursuing her dreams. They let her perform in the festival and make friends. They’d hoped that performing for the Syl Pasha would lead to a stroke of luck and maybe get her an apprenticeship or something. They stayed at the festival as long as they could, but when they started looking for their daughter to go home, they couldn’t find her. They thought that maybe some of the royal staff had seen or heard anything. Ralan said he’d put out a palace statement and sent them home. He promised the quick return of their daughter and see if he could do anything to help their family in their establishment here, but the statement never went out.”

“I see…” Random squinted her eyes and grabbed her chin. “And let me guess, more bards started going missing after that, right?”

“Uh huh. More and more families started having court with Ralan. Different families from different parts of Calimsham. The more families that came in, the better off they seemed to be. Not all of them were parents, though. Some were cousins, aunts, spouses, siblings, found family, anything you can think of. Each inquiring about a missing family member that just so happened to go missing after the festival, or school days, or talent shows, or practice sessions. All bards of different talents. Even dancers started going missing, and they’re some of the most protected by the Royal Military Force. Months of this, homie. Dozens and dozens of concerned families that Ralan would usually bend over backwards for to solve their problems, and nothing. Then, when I couldn’t sleep one night, I decided to walk the gardens. You’ve seen them, right?”

“Partially. We saw the front ones when Taa—I mean our friend brought us in under his invite.”

“The front one’s aren’t even the best part. You have to go out towards the orchards to see the best part. It’s directly behind the palace, but a good few acres back. Ralan would let me ride his horse out to the orchards with him when I was little. Then he let me pick a horse when I turned sixteen, and said I could ride her out anywhere I wanted on the palace grounds. I named her Ella, after Ella Fitzgerald. So when I couldn’t sleep, I went out to the stables, woke up Ella, gave her a good apple as a treat, and rode her out to the orchards. That’s when I saw the cave entrance.”

“Have you eaten today, girl?” Utryn interrupted.

“Oh!” Random sat up straight. “I mean, no. It looks like you’ve got a lot on your hands, though. I can wait, I mean—”

“What do you like? Fish? Soup? Pastries? I’ll make you anything you like. I will not have hungry
children in my kitchen.”

“Uh… A bowl of soup sounds lovely right now, actually. I’ve been in a cold dungeon all night and ran a lot to get out. Thank you, Utryn.”

Utryn grunted and turned to the pantry. He found a few ingredients like tomatoes, fresh basil, some other vegetables, and started working. He found a soup pan, squashed up the tomatoes, added some water and milk, added the seasonings and veggies, then put it on high boil and covered the pan.

“Ten minutes,” he said. “Then you eat before you do anything else, yes? Here, I have spare rolls. Munch on those while you ate.”

The rolls were placed on a small saucer plate and placed in front of Random. She grabbed them and peeled a small part, placing a piece in her mouth.

“So,” she said around the bread. “You said something about a cave entrance, Amadeus?”

“Uh,” Amadeus was smiling again. Mavis assumed this kind of generosity was normal with Utryn, and Amadeus had a special appreciation for it. “Yeah. Cave entrance. I mean, it looked like a cave entrance, I guess. But it seemed to be dug out from the orchard grounds. It wasn’t really raised, just big and deep enough for a large creature to crawl through and go underground. I got curious and decided to go through. It led me down a good way underground, and I eventually reached an older elven man in dirty clothes. And when I say dirty, I don’t mean just dirty from a day’s work. I mean actually dirty; covered in dirt and caked in mud. He was trancing, but it didn’t seem too peaceful. It was easy to wake him up, but he was easily scared.”

“An elf? Easily scared?” Random shoved another piece of bread into her mouth. “I mean, I haven’t met a lot elves in my lifetime, but the ones I do know aren’t easily scared.”

“No,” Amadeus shook his head. “Your right. Elves are a confident people, like Tritons. To see an elvish man of his age so easily startled really concerned me. Long story short, I asked him what was going on, and he begged me to leave. I told him I couldn’t do that, and asked him to show me where this cave went. He pleaded with me more, but when I didn’t give up, he told me to stay silent and follow him. He led me deeper in the cave, but stopped just before the biggest part of it. He told me that he wouldn’t go any further, but I could explore at my own risk.”

Utryn took the pan off the stove and found a ladle and bowl. He scooped some soup into the bowl, then placed it by Random’s bread with a spoon. Random dove into it like a starved orphan.

“And,” she winced as she swallowed the soup. It must’ve been hot, but she didn’t stop.

The soup smelled amazing, and Mavis started to notice she was hungry, too. She crawled down from the wall, across the floor, and up one of the wooden chairs by the table. She started focusing on coming out of her beast shape.

“Sorry,” Random coughed. “What was in the cave?”

“Lots and lots of plants, mainly. Just like the throne room. Then I noticed a small grouping of people sleeping on the floor. They all looked like the elven man, at least in how dirty they were. It was startling. There were at least as many as the families that I’d seen with Ralan, maybe even more. Then I saw the big hill in the middle. It was covered in different kinds of grass and flowers. Big trees and bushes held up the soil roof by the hill. There were so many plants down there, but no sunlight. It was too deep in the cave for sunlight to reach it. Are you seeing what I’m saying?”

Mavis got frustrated with how much Amadeus was talking. It made it hard for her to focus.
Random didn’t answer.

“Uh, hey,” Amadeus said. “I get that Utryn’s a really good cook, but you’re here on a mission.”

“Huh?” Random wiped her mouth. “Oh, sorry. Uh, no. I don’t get what you’re saying.”

Amadeus sighed. “A bunch of bards go missing and I find them in a cave underground on palace grounds. Ralan starts acting really weird. Citizens go neglected. Plants are growing underground where they wouldn’t be able to thrive otherwise. Plants blow up across the whole palace. All of this right after a dragon has a weird conversation with Ralan.”

Random blinked. “Uh huh. I get that.”

Mavis started feeling a little different. She felt her little spider legs start to shrink and her torso start to grow.

“But you don’t get the corolation?”

“No, I see that. It’s definitely weird.”

“Don’t you know anything about dragons?”

“No. But I know a lot about rocks.”

Utryn chuckled and shook his head. “Tell her what was sleeping on the hill, boy.”

“The dragon,” Amadeus said flatly. “The dragon that flew into Calimsham and had the conversation with Ralan is hiding under palace grounds and keeping bards down there. That’s why you’re here. The dragon has taken Ralan’s permission to kidnap bards here.”

Mavis lost her extra six legs and started growing back to her normal size.

“Oh…” Random sniffed and shoveled more soup into her mouth. “Why?”

Amadeus threw up his hands. “I don’t know, man! I’m just a kid adopted by the Syl Pasha. You’re the one sent here by the Bureau of Benevolence. I’ve told you all I know, that was the deal. Now I need your help to figure this out, set those bards free, and get Ralan back to normal. Don’t they teach you mythology or something up there?”

“No,” Random muttered. “They just kind of hire on adventurers and let us solve problems. I like to solve them with my fists. I mean, I could punch the dragon in the nose, if you want.”

Amadeus swung his head down onto the countertop. He started muttering to himself before rubbing his face and sighing.

“I mean,” Random continued. “I’m really the only one from my team right now. If you’re wanting urgency I can go in and put up a good fist fight, but I usually fight better with my teammates. But, we have no idea where they are, so urgency really isn’t on the table right now. Or efficiency for that matter, either. I’m gonna need to find Mavis and Siggy before we can really do anything.”

Random’s bowl fell into her lap as the table shook. There was a bang, and the chair across from Random scooted back violently. A groan came from under the table, and a pair of glasses hit the floor.

“Motherfucker…”
Mavis rubbed the back of her head. She’d smacked it on the edge of the table as she shifted back to a dwarf. She tried to roll over off of her stomach, but forgot that she was on a chair, so she fell onto the floor and smacked her head again.

“Fuck!” She pushed herself up from the floor and rested her head on her knees. “Fucking… I hate this shit! See, this is why I don’t beast shape. I’m always sick after words, and I always end up getting hurt. I try to do one stealthy thing for this team and this is what I get. I swear to Pan I am never doing this again, okay? ‘Don’t split up the team’, Dad said. ‘Use your beast shape to be a good support’ Dad said! It’s bullshit, Random. Complete and utter—”

“Mavis!” Random shot up from her seat and fell to her knees. She hugged Mavis from behind, which was more like a choke hold since Random was so much taller than Mavis. “How did you get here? Did they throw you in a dungeon, too? Where’s Sigfriede?”

“I don’t know,” Mavis choked out. “Let me go before I stab you in the kidneys, kid.”

“Oh! Sorry. I missed you, Mav. Look! I found Amadeus and he says he knows where all those bards are!”

Mavis climbed up to her feet and cradled the sore spot on her head. “Yeah, I’ve been here the whole time. Hey, do you have any of that soup left? I’ve been in a dungeon, too, and beast shape really takes it out of me.”

Amadeus and Utryn stared at Mavis like she was an alien. Which was fair, seeing as she probably just came out of no where to them. So instead of staring them down, she waved.

“Oh, hey. I’m Mavis by the way. I’m a druid. This is Random; she’s a barbarian, I guess. Right? Uh… We have another teammate. Her name is Sigfriede. She’s a… uh… hot mess. But well intended. Random’s right, though. Lucretia put our team together based on our abilities and skills for efficiency. Without Siggy we really can’t fix this as quickly as you’d like. I’m serious about that soup, by the way. I’m begging you.”

Amadeus and Utryn shared a look.

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Amadeus and Utryn shared a look.

“Uh,” Utryn coughed. “Sorry, girl. Where did you come from?”

“The wall.”

No response.

“Oh! I snuck out of my cell by beast shape-ing into a spider. I crawled around the palace for a while until I found Random and Amadeus. I hitched a ride on his boot and came here. I’ve heard the whole thing. From the wall.”

“Like a fly on the wall?” Amadeus asked.

“N-no. Like a spider on the wall.”

“No, like a—Nevermind. It’s a joke I tell the Syl Pasha. He likes puns. But you know Sigfriede, too?”

“Yeah, she’s my cousin. I met her when she was a little refried bean.”

Utryn laughed. “Little refried bean! That’s a good one! Why don’t you tell jokes like that, Amadeus?”
“Hey, am I your personal jester? No. I’m Ralan’s. Find someone else to tell you food puns.”

“Can I have a bowl of soup, please.” Mavis snapped.


He handed Mavis a warm bowl. She took it gratefully and scarfed it down. When she finished her meal, she let out a deep sigh and smiled.

“Thank you. That was very good, Utryn. I appreciate it.”

“Huh,” Random said. “What’s that like, Mav? I can’t relate since you tossed my bowl into my lap!”

“Fuck off, Random I can’t help where my head hits. Where is Sigfriede, anyway?”

No one answered. Everyone glanced at each other like they each thought the other had the answer, but no one did.

“Mavis,” Amadeus said. “Didn’t you say you were in a dungeon cell, too? If two of you were thrown in the dungeons, it may be likely that Ralan already knows who you are and what you’re doing. He might have separated all of you to keep this under wraps.”

“So Sigfriede may be in the dungeon somewhere, too. Random, did you have any of your stuff with you in the cell?”

“Nothing but these stupid robes.”

“Yeah, me neither. I don’t even know where our bags are.”

“Did we leave them with Taako?”

“No. He made sure we took our bags with us. Sigfriede promised as soon as we got here that he wouldn’t hear another thing about this mission, remember?”

“So that means Sigfriede probably doesn’t have her wand or guns with her, either…”

Mavis twirled her hair. “This sucks.”

“Yeah. Major balls.”

There was a pause over the room. The only thing to be heard was the running water from the sink as Utryn started cleaning up.

Then Amadeus cleared his throat. “Well, I may not know where Sigfriede is exactly, but I do know where your bags may have been taken. I mean, I’d rather deal with this dragon issue, but if you really need all three of you and your stuff, I can put it off to give you a little help beforehand.”

Mavis perked up. “Really? Where would our stuff be?”

“The royal treasury. Ralan used to use it as a show room for gifts from our allies in the Lords Alliance. But since this whole thing started, he’s begun using it as a hoarding room for all of the valuables from the bards that have been kidnapped. I’d assume he’d see it fit to throw your stuff in there too.”

“And where would that be?”
“Two stories right above us.”

Random beamed. “That’s great! Why don’t we just go now? Get this show on the road!”

“Because palace security has been out the ass when guests aren’t allowed into the palace. We’ve been on palace lock down for months. There are guards everywhere. We’re going to have to sneak around.”

“God damnit,” It was Mavis’ turn to slam her head on the table. “I’m not turning into a spider again, okay? I just got over the nausea.”

“You shouldn’t have to. I think I know a back way into the treasury. Utryn?”

“Boy?” he answered.

“I’m going to need some help. Can you gather the maids for a secret meeting, please?”

Utryn paused, then let out his deep chested laugh. “Sneaky boy! Get out of my kitchen. I’ll help however I can.”

Amadeus smiled. “Would you hand me my violin please?”
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE— WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE

Chapter Summary

Mavis, Random, and Sigfriede grow closer to weeding out the truth of their sticky situation. But with one third of the party still MIA, Mavis and Random have to improvise with a plan that is less than ideal. With one night already wasted on partying, can Tres Party Babes really afford another night off? Mavis uses her brain power. Random opens up. Sigfriede is loud.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So,” Amadeus shut the door behind him. “The main thing we’ll need to do is keep you two safe. If Ralan has already identified you as threats and sees you walking around the palace, he could throw you lot in the dungeon. Or worse. And if he sees me with you, it may be the last straw for my stay in the palace. So, Jennai here is going to help us a little bit.”

Random kept her hands to herself. Mavis had already started going Big Sister on her, and the last time Random almost touched something, Mavis flipped out. She did not want that anymore, so the new Random Plan of Social Interaction was to keep her hands to herself, but her eyes on everyone and everything.

What Random’s eyes told her was that Amadeus had taken them to a small room in the maid’s quarter filled with folded up clothes in plain colors like white, brown, and black. Most of the folded clothes were in trunks or on shelves, but some hung in closets, too. Those were filled with peasant blouses on hangers, some petticoats, and what looked like the outermost layers of maid’s dresses.

If Random had to put on one more frumpy, excessive outfit she was going to fucking rage.

“I don’t know any magics,” came a feminine voice. “But I do have status among the palace staff. None of them know who the new hires are or when new hire paperwork is filed…”

A halfling woman came stumbling out from the closet with pieces of clothing draped over her little arms. Shutting the door with her hip, she nearly lost her balance. Then she stood up straight and tossed one of the aprons she held across her shoulder. Next, she grabbed a few things from two of the trunks and waddled her way over to the girls. She had so many clothes bundled in her arms that Random couldn’t see her face.

“But I,” the halfling grunted as she tossed the clothes on top of the trunk. “This will be really easy girls. Between me and Amadeus, you should get to your things and your friend relatively quickly. With my knowledge of the servant’s tunnels and Amadeus’s magics, you’ll be fine up until you find your friend. Once you get her out of the dungeon it will be hard for me to cover up a
third new hire, so you’ll be on your own. But I trust you girls are smart enough to go from there. How tall are each of you?”

Mavis said, “Four foot even.”

“Five nine,” Random said. “Sigfriede’s four eleven, though.”

Mavis sighed. “Sigfriede isn’t going to need a maid’s uniform, Random.”

“How tall are each of you?”

“We’re taking the uniforms to get around the palace to our things in the treasury, which includes our Bureau uniforms. We grab our and Siggy’s things, which includes her Bureau uniform, all three of us change, then Amadeus takes us to the dragon’s cave, and we kill this thing.”

Random blinked. “I understand now. Please forgive me, I’ve been punching a lot of things today.”

“Including yourself?”

“No! Someone else hit me…”

Jennai clapped her hands together. “Anyway! These should generally fit you and I could do some quick tailoring to make them fit better. There is a changing closet right on your left; go ahead and get changed.”

Mavis nodded and headed straight for the changing room.

Random stood in place with a blank stare.

“Uh,” she said. “I’m really sorry. I have no idea how to get out of this outfit. Sigfriede tied all the sashes for me. A-and I usually don’t wear clothes like this… I’m a barbarian, so I usually wear really form fitting—”


“Okay!” Random blushed.

Amadeus started retuning his violin, shifting the strings down to a deeper octave. “You don’t get out much, do you, Random?” he asked.

“No!” she answered cheerfully. “I live on the moon. Always have. My moms let me collect rocks there.”

“If you collected all the rocks on the moon, wouldn’t you run out of rocks to collect?”

“Most of the rocks on the moon are lame…”

The changing room door opened. The uniform Mavis wore was fairly simple; there weren’t any fluffy skirts under her dress, so the fabric hung loose and flat. She had a small apron wrapped around her waist.

It was Random’s turn.

Five minutes and a lot of squatting later, Random was in an identical outfit to Mavis’. Both girls were ready to go. When Random and Mavis stepped out of the changing room, Amadeus had finished tuning his violin and had moved on to rehearsing a song.
It was a strange song. It was played in a style Random had never heard before, like it was inspired by a completely different region than the one they were in now. It sounded exotic and mischievous with a fast tempo. He was plucking the strings of his violin furiously, scaling up and down a few notes, but tripped up and scoffed. He shook his head, shook out his hand, and tried again. He tried the same scale four or five times before he got the hang of it, then practiced a few more times to make sure he had the muscle memory down pact. Once he was confident, he looked up from the instrument and smiled.

“You guys look absolutely fabulous,” he smirked. “Ready?”

“Did you write that scale,” Mavis asked.

“Well… yeah. I’m a bard. Bards don’t make a living off of covers of other bards’ songs. And it’s not just a scale, it’s part of a spell. Specifically, a spell that’s going to disguise your faces.”

“So, like a disguise self?”

“Sort of. More like a disguise two idiots who can’t do their jobs right, but I’ve used it a few times to sneak in a few people for private… parties of my own. You wanna hear it?”

“I mean, hearing it is part of the plan so… sing us a song, piano man.”

“I’m not a piano man, Mavis.”

From the beginning, the song was slow. It shifted from a low note to higher ones, then fell back down before shifting again. Then it rose a half octave and repeated the shift and fall. Random’s eyes started to gloss over and fall out of focus. The song spun up the rest of the octave and danced across an eighth note that floated down slightly. Amadeus held out the last note for a moment, then oscillated the next note, rose up a half beat, and suddenly stopped.

Random blinked. She didn’t feel any different besides the longing the stop left hanging in her brain, but Jennai looked impressed from her spot beside Amadeus.

“Very nice,” she said. “You’re improving! Just enough change to make them unrecognizable, but small enough that the spell is out of your control. Good job.”

Amadeus grinned. “Thank you. Now all we have to do is get your stuff and get you to Sigfriede before it drops.”

Random looked down at her hands. Instead of the deep cherry red skin she was used to seeing, she had pale, rosy, white palms. Her arms were just as pale, with thick, blue veins barely peaking out from beneath her wrist’s skin. She rubbed her arms. They didn’t feel any different, just as rough skinned and muscular as before. But they looked completely different. If she focused hard enough, her eyes could just shift out of focus enough to see her real skin. Her vibrant, loud, unashamed tiefling skin.

She looked over at Mavis. Mavis wasn’t any shorter or taller, her spackled freckles hadn’t moved from her cheeks or arms, and her hair was just as fiery red, but she didn’t look as… dwarfish. Her jaw wasn’t as sharply square. Her silhouette wasn’t as blocky; she was small and lithe, like a snack sized athlete built for track racing through burrows. She looked like a gnome.

Random tried to move her vision out of focus again and saw the real Mavis just underneath this compact Mavis she saw before her. Random wasn’t one for magics, but she’d seen plenty of illusions before to know one when she saw one.
“Very well then!” Jennai clapped excitedly. “I love training days! It means I get a day off.”

“Now,” Jennai led the girls through the halls with Amadeus close behind her. “It’s unusual for Amadeus to train with me, but not unheard of. He usually does this when I’m training new personal assistants to the Syl Pasha, so that’s your cover, do you understand?”

Random and Mavis nodded.

“Good. So, what I’m training you to do right now,” she paused as a guard passed them. They didn’t seem to have any reaction, which could have been equally good or bad. Once they had passed, Jennai continued, “is to retrieve personal belongings for the Syl Pasha. That’s our task right now. You’re only to touch what you are told, and if you take anything else, you will be hunted and found and probably killed with how he’s been acting lately. Got it?”

Random and Mavis nodded.

Jennai didn’t say much after that.

She led the girls to the treasury with Amadeus just in front of her. They passed guards, servants, and other people Mavis could only assume were less public figures of the royal family; Jennai and Amadeus bowed as they passed, so the girls decided it was best to follow suit.

When they got to a fairly vacant area of the palace maybe fifteen minutes later, Mavis said, “So where exactly is the treasury?”

“Oh,” Jennai gave a sly smile over her shoulder. “We passed the turn.”

Mavis blinked. “We passed it?”

“Oh huh. But Amadeus’s spell has a shorter life span than we’d like, so I’m taking you through the servant’s quarters. It should get you to the treasury and out to the dungeons to release your friend unnoticed before the spell drops.”

Amadeus said, “It’s better to have these images seen of you more routinely and then fade away unseen than having new faces turn into prisoners right by a guard.”

“Past that you’ll have to wait until morning when Amadeus has more free time to help you.”

“Morning?” Mavis asked, surprised. “Where are we going to stay? We can’t just get to the dungeon and sleep in Sigfriede’s cell!”

“Yeah,” Amadeus said sheepishly. “You’re gonna have to. I have duties after this. We’re on a time crunch today. Did I mention that?”

“No! Why can’t I meet a single person on this planet that covers a whole plan before we start doing things?! This is so unprofessional! I need—”

“Mav,” Random said. “chill. We don’t need you to panic right now. If we’re on a time limit, we’re on a time limit. It’s not that big of a deal. When have we not had a time limit?”

“Uh, literally every other mission we’ve been on.”

Random took a pause. “Okay. Fair point. But, counter point! This just means we get to see Siggy sooner and have a nice little sleep over!”
“We literally live in the same apartment, but sure.”

The group walked a little further. Random started to notice that this hallway had absolutely no doors. There were no doors, no hallway intersections, no staircases, nothing. Just a plain, empty hallway with nothing but torches for light, plants and flowers dripping from the walls, and grass growing through the stonework floors. It was eerie. Maybe if there were more palace residents than just the four of them it would be a little less eerie. Some of the hallways had stretches that looked just as empty as this, but there were people. There was life in them. *Sentient* life. *Social* life. Life that didn’t just sit on walls and produce dangerous smells. Life that didn’t force its way through nooks and crannies to tell you that it was there, taking over everything these people loved.

Random was really starting to miss the moon.

Eventually, they reached the only door in the hallway. It was conveniently placed at the end of the hallway, on the wall right in front of them. It was a simple, old, wooden door with a simple, old, rusty door handle. It was so simple it almost blended into the walls. How many of these doors were across the palace? Were they supposed to be this innocuous?

Jennai pulled out a set of keys from a pocket in her apron. She jangled them around a bit, picking out one key from a tangled mess of several, and unlocked the door. Inside was not a room. Instead, it was a straight shot to a staircase that led up to what Random assumed was the second story of the palace.

Without a word, Amadeus stepped aside, held the door open for Jennai, and waved the girls in after. Once everyone was in, he poked his head out the door, checking if they’d been followed, then quickly shut it.

Random sniffed. “Are these the servant’s passages?”

“Yes,” Jennai answered. “You don’t know about these, okay? These are some of the oldest parts of the palace; they’ve been here for centuries. They made it through the palace expansions when we garnered more land from the region that used to neighbor us. Their government collapsed when the Spell Plague happened and all this other political stuff, I don’t really care. This is just a job to me. The Syl Pasha knows more about it. Maybe if you guys win this, he’ll tell you more about it.”

“If?” Random said. “Jennai, we’re from the Bureau of Benevolence. We don’t do *ifs* on the moon.”

Jennai chuckled. She kept walking in silence.

Amadeus leant forward. “I think you guys will do great.”

Random leaned back. “Thanks, Piano Man.”

The group walked on in silence up flights and flights of stairs. Mavis lost track of how many floors they’d been up on account of the stairs being slightly higher than proportionate for a dwarf, and she needed more brainpower focused on not tripping and falling on her face, not counting. Eventually, Jennai stopped climbing stairs. She walked to a door on the landing, opened it, and ushered the girls through.

“It’s just across the hall,” she said. “Remember, go in, get your things, get to the dungeons through this stair well, just straight down to the bottom landing. Find your friend and wait for Amadeus.”
Don’t go anywhere else in the palace, do you understand?”

Random and Mavis shared a glance.

“Listen,” Random said, “I may be a little stupid, but I know how to follow a plan.”

Mavis nodded. “Good.”

Jennai pulled out her keys again, jangled them and pulled out another key. She unlocked the door, pushed Mavis and Random in, and slammed the door behind them.

The girls were alone.

Across the hall as Jennai said, right in front of them, was a less innocuous door. This door was also wooden, but it had a nice shiny varnish. It stained the wood deep cherry and looked to be applied heavily. The door handle was gold, all shiny and polished. It seemed to be a proud spot of the palace. The entire door seemed spotless. The whole thing gleamed without a speck of dust. There seemed to be twice as many plants growing around this shiny door as any other door in the palace.

“Well.” Random said. “She’s nice!”

Mavis snorted. “I love you, Random. Now where’s our stuff?”

They took a few steps across the hallway, jiggled the door handle, and surprisingly found it unlocked.

Gold littered the room before them. Not just coins and currency, but statues, gold bars, chairs, mirrors, hairbrushes, god damn chests made entirely from gold. There was probably more gold inside the gold chests, too. It seemed like a maze of endless gold, built with layers and layers of gold. Walls of the maze were built by any and all stackable items, with sculptures and picture frames lining them. At firsts glance, Mavis was so overwhelmed, she forgot what she was looking for.

Unlike outside, on the other side of the door, this seemed to be the only room in the palace untouched by the plants.

“Divide and conquer?”

Mavis blinked and shook her head. “Huh?”

“Divide and conquer;” Random smiled. “you know, split up and see if we can find our things sooner.”

“Uh, yeah. Sounds good. Wanna use Marco Polo if we get lost?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

No Marco Polo was needed. As unusually full and seemingly winding as the room was, the girls found their three Bureau duffel bags, each embroidered with their names and, against Lucretia’s protest, their self-given team name of Tres Party Babes. They found the bags at the front of the room, lazily plopped on top of and next to one of several golden chests. Upon inspection, nothing had gone missing. The bags were still zipped, even. All of their uniforms and work boots were still packed, along with Mavis’ back up holly branch focus and Random’s extra work out clothes and ace wraps. Mavis took hers wile Random tossed her own over her shoulder and lugged Sigfriede’s at her side.
The girls made a quick cross back across the hall, into the servant’s passageway, and down the stairs.

“How many more floors do we have to go?”

“I don’t know, Random,” Mavis sighed. “Just keep quiet. We don’t know how soundproof these walls are.”

“Pretty soundproof, given all the plants taking over the walls.”

“Hush!”

Twenty minutes of dark, sweaty walking later, Mavis face planted into a wall.

“Oh!” She rubbed her nose and shoved her glasses up her nose bridge. “Hey, there’s a wall where the stairs should be.”

Random laughed. “Yeah, right. We can’t be at the bottom yet.”

Random came down the last few stairs, turned to go down the next flight of stairs, and ran into the same wall.

Mavis snorted. “Stupid… Are we really at the bottom?”

“Well, there aren’t anymore stairs, so common sense would say so. There’s a door. We should go through it.”

Mavis shot her a dirty look. “No shit…”

On the other side of the door was an equally dark and hot hallway. Mavis knew their illusory disguises had worn off by now, so she really hoped that they were alone. They hadn’t seen anyone in the servant’s passages, and it would be a blessing from Pan if that continued with the guards in the dungeon.

But it didn’t seem that they were in the dungeons just yet. Both girls had been in, what Mavis assumed, two different areas of them. Neither recognized where they were.

They decided to keep walking. Just like the hallway Jennai had taken them down, there were no doors or stairwells. Just the same, bland torches for light. No footsteps echoed except for their own.

“It’s too quiet,” Random said.

“The rest of the palace was just as quiet.”

“No, I mean… you know! You were down here. There should be guards and people around. It’s a dungeon.”

“You had guards?”

“You didn’t?”

Mavis blinked. “No. The area was empty as far as I could tell. I woke up alone.”
“In your cell?”
Mavis nodded.

“How’d you wake up so early?” Mavis asked.

“Dunno,” Random poked her head around the corner when they reached the bottom of the steps. She waved Mavis through. “I guess I didn’t get hit as hard with the pollen as you guys did.”

“You’ve always been a little heartier than Siggy and I…”

A moment’s pause passed between them.

“Mav?”

“Yeah?”

“I hope Siggy doesn’t have guards.”

Mavis hummed. “I don’t think she will.”

“I do. She’s feisty. I don’t know how early she woke up, but I know that if— when she did, she probably wasn’t happy. She probably made a lot of noise. Even if she didn’t have any at first, she may have earned herself some…”

Random sniffed. Then she rubbed her black eye and cleared her throat.

“I uh…” she continued. “I didn’t like being dragged through the hall by a couple of strangers. I panicked. I didn’t know where I was, or where you guys were. I stated thrashing and kicking… throwing fists like I always do, you know? I guess the guards didn’t like that. They seemed as apathetic as Ralan. I think each of us were given prisoner numbers. Maybe because Ralan didn’t share our names, but I told them mine.”

A faint sound floated down the hallway. Random stopped in her tracks, and Mavis did the same.

Mavis whispered, “Did you hear that?”

Random nodded.

They waited for another noise. Nothing followed.

“I guess..” Random tugged her bangs. “It sounded like it came from pretty far away. We could keep walking until we hear something else?”

They kept walking.

“Hey,” Mavis tapped Random’s thigh. “Did the guards give you the black eye?”

Random nodded. “I think I was awake for about a whole day. They gave me three different really shitty ‘meals’. Each time they talked to me they called me 8612. I guess that was my prisoner ID.”
“Were you aggressive after you were thrown in the cell?”

Random shook her head. “I just wanted out. I did a lot of talking and negotiating. But nothing worked. I’d already had my ass handed to me once when they tossed me in. I wasn’t going to initiate it again. But…”

Mavis pursed her lips. She’d heard stories of some guards being brutal to prisoners, but they all came from areas with history of tense racial relations; elves mistreating dwarven prisoners, tritons misunderstanding human divers, humans ganging up on tieflings… As many good things that Mavis found in the world, she found equally bad things. She tried to fix as many as she could, no matter how small. At the very least, when the girls got Ralan back to normal, she wasn’t going to let this be swept under the rug. At the very least the guards should be fired.

Mavis grabbed hold of her friend’s hand. And Random smiled.

Something like a gunshot rang through the air. It sounded closer, and was followed by a guttural scream.

They took off in the sound’s direction. They only knew one person who owned a gun in the palace. And she sounded frustrated.

“God—” Sigfriede slammed the butt of her pistol against the door handle one more time. She’d been firing at the lock for hours now, with no luck loosening it. It was hard to aim in such a dim room with vision so poor it ruined your dark vision. “Damn it!”

She threw herself on the ground again, trying to ignore the squishing sweat between her joints. She’d been in this dark, damp dungeon cell for who knew how long, with no idea where her friends were, and how long she had before everything went to Hell. If she could just figure out where she was hitting and zero in on where she needed to hit…

She clambered to her knees and crawled over to the door, feeling for bullet holes. She found that she was mostly hitting off to the left, meaning she needed to aim further right than what she was already doing. She couldn’t find any correlation between how far above or below the lock she was hitting. She could see the lock clearly up close, but the short field of clear vision she had didn’t make it safe for her to shoot at that distance. She could very easily shoot her eye out if she missed and the bullet ricocheted. And any safe distance for her to stand back at would end up with her shooting point blank again.

Fuck.

Why didn’t life seem to like Sigfriede anymore?

With nothing better to do, she kept firing until she ran out of ammo. Then she screamed.

“What?” came a voice.

Sigfriede’s ears perked up. Was that Random?

“Siggy! Keep shooting, we’re coming!”

Nerves flared up Sigfriede’s chest and nasal passages. She didn’t know if her gunshots had actually found her friends and she was safe, or if there was a very, very skilled wizard with disguise self that was great at mimicking Sigfriede’s friends.
So she chose to shrink into herself and hide in the darkest, dampest corner of her cell and wait. She heard faint footsteps, some light sniffs, and a sigh.

“Siggy…” This voice sounded like Mavis. “I pinky promise it’s just me and Random. There’s no one else in the palace who should have a gun. We can’t find you if you’re not loud.”

Sigfriede squinted her eyes. “Fuck you, maybe I don’t wanna be found.”

The pair of footsteps grew closer. One sounded like their step length was rather short, making for quick little pats against the dusty floor; the other was long and deep, the sound of heavy and excited stomps.

“Sorry, what was that?” Mavis said, with that tinge of sisterly spite at the end, “You don’t wanna be found? ’Cause that’s fine. Random and I can go figure this out and take your third of the party paycheck and tell Lucretia you kicked the bucket.”

Sigfriede scoffed. “You can take my money from my cold dead fuckin’ hands, half pint. At least my dad doesn’t fuck plants.”

“No,” she sounded like she was getting closer. The humor in her voice warmed Sigfriede’s soul and released all the tension in her shoulders. “but at least my dad doesn’t drink black coffee and wear denim.”

“Two cups of black coffee a day is scientifically proven to be good for the human biological function. Get fucked.”

Giggles floated down the hall as the pair of footsteps grew closer. They sounded like they were just to the left of Siggy’s cell. She crept along the wall, staying in the shadows, and listened closely.

“Okay,” Random sniffed. “Two is a very specific number. I haven’t seen much of your parents, but I know for a fact Mr. Bluejeans drinks more than two cups of coffee a day. It’s probably why his eyesight is so bad… and yours too! The coffee fuckin’ soaked into his genetics and set you up for failure. And now you can’t shoot for shit.”

A smirk slid across Sigfriede’s lips. The footsteps were just outside her door. If the girls were caught off guard enough when they were just in front of it…

Sigfriede slammed herself against the prison cell door, pressing her face to the bars, throwing her arms through the spaces as far as they could fit, and raked at the air with clawed hands. She snarled and moaned, making faces and a general fool of herself. Her friends shrieked and jumped back. Mavis pulled her holly branch from her sleeve, her eyebrows furrowed together and her eyes already calculating the best way to protect her teammates. Random swiveled on her heels and swung her arm back. She was halfway through a punch when she realized it was Sigfriede.

“Braaaaaiiiiins,” Sigfriede groaned. “It takes brains to know how to count, Random. Use what little of them you have to get me out of here.”

Random dropped her fist and shook her hand out. She tilted her head to the side and closed her eyes as Mavis pressed her hand to her chest.

“Hey,” Siggy dropped her arms dejectedly, letting them rest against the opening’s ledge. “Where’d you guys get your uniforms from? I want mine. We gotta match, it’s in the contract.”

She took a closer look at her teammates and saw that Random had two duffel bags slung over her
shoulder, and Mavis had one. They each had on their own uniforms, complete with embroidered names, rank, and Bureau logo. They had their work boots and trade tools, plus whatever else they chose to pack with them for what was supposed to be a short mission. Sigfriede could see half of Random’s name embroidered onto one of the duffel bags she had; that had to mean these were the girls’ bags. Sigfriede - furrowed her eyebrows, let out a high-pitched whine, and made grabby hands.

“Gimme!” She stomped her feet and huffed. “If I sweat in these robes any longer, Mom will have my ass on a silver platter. It’s hard to get sweat stains out of elven silk and my clean underwear is in there; give me my bag, Random.”

“The bag won’t fit through the bars, goofus,” Mavis said.

“Yeah, but the clothes will, dingus,” Sigfriede retorted.

Random slid the bag on her right off her shoulder and plopped it to the floor. She unzipped it and started digging around. She pulled out Sigfriede’s uniform top, then the leggings she packed, and finally the paneled skirt she wore over them. As each item was pulled out, Sigfriede kept making grabby hands. Random tossed each item at her haphazardly, and Sigfriede dragged them into her cell like a little goblin.

“Okay,” she started unlacing her fancy boots and untying all of her robe’s sashes. “In the front smaller zipper compartment, that’s where all my clean socks and underwear are. Toss me some of that good, good shit my dude.”

A bundle of socks and undergarments flew through the opening in Sigfriede’s door. She threw her boots, dirty socks and robes off, and quickly slipped into her uniform. She left the top slightly unbuttoned; it was warm in the cell, and she didn’t feel like going through the mission in a sweaty heap the whole time. Despite the grime, dirt, and dried sweat caking her face and stuck underneath her nailbeds, just having clean, fresh, soft fabric against her skin made a world of difference for Sigfriede’s mental state. Her uniform smelled like the apartment back on the moon; crisp and clean, like rain falling down a mountain side, with just a tinge of ozone and searing air torn by the plasma of solar flares and anomalous lightning. It smelled like the moon. It felt like business; everything was right in the world again.

“Hey, Random?” she said.

“Huh?”

“Did I pack any hair ties or bobby pins or hair spray or somethin’?”

“Uh…” Random dug around in Sigfriede’s duffel bag a little bit more while Mavis inspected the lock on Sigfriede’s door. “No, I’m not finding anything like that. But I don’t have a mane of mermaid hair like you do, and we all share one brain cell that I think Mav has right now, so I may just not know what I’m looking for…”

Sigfriede sniffed and settled to tie her hair in a knot around itself. She pulled it back into a ponytail, letting the blonde strands that got tangled in her hands fall to the floor. Then she twisted the ponytail around her left hand, tucked the loose ends of her hair through, and pulled it taught. It wouldn’t stay forever, but it would het her hair out of its tight festive braids and out of her face.

“Get me out of here,” she said.

Mavis wiggled her eyebrows. “We’re trying…”
“How’d y’all get out?” Sigfriede came back to the opening in her door and threaded her arms through again.

The girls were quiet for a moment.

“What? Was I the only one thrown in jail? The fuck did I do? Is this because I can’t cast magic right?”

“No,” Mavis shook her head. “We got tossed in a cell, too. But I used my beast shape to become a spider and sneak out that way. Random used her fists.”

“Oh,” Siggy rubbed her eyes. “So the normal gig, then? You guys have useful shit that can get you out of situations and I’m the group’s damsel in distress. Cool.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Bean. We wouldn’t have found you if you weren’t so loud.”

Sigfriede sighed and stared at her duffel bag. “None of us have thieves’ tools, do we?”

Mavis and Random shook their heads.

“Yeah… didn’t think so.” She tried to reach down and tap Mavis’ head, but Mavis was kneeling in front of the door, and Sigfriede’s arms were pretty short. “Got anything in that nerd brain of yours, Mav?”

Mavis sighed and stood up, stepping away from the door. “I don’t think so. It’s a simple lock system, but druids don’t specialize in magics that would help here. If the plant life had grown down here like it has upstairs, that may have helped, but… I’m no use.”

“I could try to kick the door down,” Random offered.

“Yeah,” Mavis shrugged. “But we don’t know how long we have until guards come down to check on us, or if that will even happen. Plus, Amadeus said we’d need to hang with Siggy down here until he could help us again, and I don’t think mend can fix a completely broken door.”

“You guys met Amadeus?” Sigfriede asked.

“He pinned me to a wall,” Random chided. “You into that sort of thing, Siggy?”

“I got in trouble for being too close to the stage. Then we had a talk about plants.”

“Not before dancing,” Mavis said.

“Social camouflage.”

“Well, social camouflage won’t get us in your cell,” Mavis continued. “Flirting or no, Amadeus can’t help us again until tomorrow.”

Sigfriede furrowed her eyebrows. “What?”

“He’s got palace duties. We’re like war criminals here, we have to do this quietly; Ralan is obviously more hostile than the Bureau understood. If the four of us are caught, we could disappear just as instantly as these bards… or worse.”

“We could stage a coup.”

“With four men. Right, Bean.”
Sigfriede rolled her eyes. With no other ideas cropping up from the group, she started gently banging her head against the bars of her prison door.

Then, by chance, something in the slow, gentle, rattling pattern of it knocked something loose in her brain.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she bounced her hand at the wrist. “Random, dig through my bag again. I brought my guns with me, right?”

Random snorted. “I know I did.”

“Stop it, I mean it. If I brought my guns with me then I must have brought my tinker’s tools. We may be able to get this lock picked with them.”

Random blinked. Then she pursed her lips, tilted her head, opened her mouth slightly to say something, then decided she had nothing better to suggest, and began digging with a shrug.

“What pocket do you keep them in,” she asked.

Sigfriede scoffed, “Don’t be a rock, I’m the least organized person you know. Maybe one of the outside pockets; I rushed to pack for this trip.”

Random pulled her hands from the inside of the bag to the outside pockets; front right, front left. Back right, back left. Right, and then left. The left held a small piece of oil cloth, slimy and dirty, wrapped around differently shaped pieces of metal, tied together with a piece of leather. She pulled the bundle out and showed it to Sigfriede. Sigfriede nodded.

“Get on with it, then,” Sigfriede said. “I’m lonely.”

Random gripped the gathering of tools tightly as she stood up. She took the small steps across the hall and took a seat beside where Mavis stood. The two shared a glance, and then looked down at the bundle in Random’s hand.

“Siggy,” Mavis said, “aren’t these, like… super delicate?”

“Yeah,” Sigfriede said lazily. “Dad can help me make new ones, it’s no biggie.”

“Which ones do we even try to use? These are nothing like lockpicks.”

“I don’t even know what lockpicks are, Mav; I’m a dumb baby. Just pick which ever ones are tiny enough to fit in and go at it like a teenager that doesn’t know what a clit is.”

That was enough to make Mavis’s brain hurt. So she said nothing.

Random began untying the bundle gently, trying not to fumble her calloused fingers and make a mess of the leather string. Then she placed the roll on the floor, laying it flat. She took a moment to observe, found the two smallest and longest screwdrivers, and stuck them in.

Random was not a rogue. Her mom, Carey, said that she had a lot of rogue like abilities, but Carey said that about everyone. She was good at finding those qualities in people. One time, when Random was about five, Carey started giving her little key locks used on lockers to pick. The catch was that she never supplied Random with a set of lockpicks. When Random finally grew fed up, she threw the lock and kitchen knives she’d decided to try that day across the room, and broke one of Killian’s magic items. She didn’t remember which one, but she did remember the talk her parents had with her after the tantrum.
“You can’t just throw things across the room, Random,” Killian said as she pulled the small tiefling to the side of the room. “You’re lucky you didn’t hurt any people with those knives, kid. I’m not mad that you broke my feather duster, but I’m disappointed in your outburst. You’re smarter than that.”

Random tried to squirm out of her mom’s grasp, kicking and clawing her way out. “There’s no point!” she shouted. “How can you expect me to succeed if you don’t set me up for it?”

“Random,” Killian grabbed her daughter’s chubby legs and pulled her back into her lap. “You told me yesterday you wanted to adventure just like me and Mom. You have to learn to problem solve if—”

“I don’t want to!”

“No one does, Rani! But adventuring never sets you up for success, and when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade.”

“I don’t even like lemonade, Mom!”

“Well, tough cookies; lemonade is all you have, and you’re stuck in the desert with no town around for days, and your friends are all dying. You gotta keep going somehow.”

“Why can’t life be easy?” Random started clawing at her mother’s hands again. “I don’t wanna be an adventurer if it’s not fun like home.”

“Home is always the most fun place in the world, kiddo.” Killian grabbed Random’s hands and held each of them in her own. She took a deep breath and calmed her voice. “But sometimes home isn’t safe. Sometimes people use the smarts like yours for not nice things, and they target those not nice things at home. You know that. Think about your lullaby, and all the big, wonderful things it reminds you that Mom and I did to make home safe for you. Think about all those people who wanted to just stay home, too, but they couldn’t because home wasn’t safe. Just like how throwing those knives wasn’t safe. Home isn’t fun if we let not nice people tear it up, huh?”

Random furrowed her eyebrows and huffed. She finally flopped herself into her mother’s lap and hugged her tail.

“You don’t have to adventure, baby. But when life gives you lemons, make lemonade the best way you can. And it’s okay if you don’t make lemonade the way I do, or the way Carey does. Make it in your own way, because when you share that lemonade, you make friends. And what happens when you make friends? You want them to come over, right?”

“Yeah… I wanna show them my moon rocks.”

“Exactly. So we problem solve to make sure you and all your friends have homes to keep their moon rocks. You just gotta find your way of making lemonade. Does that make sense?”

Random thought for a moment, and started sucking the tip of her tail.

“Get that out of your mouth, Rani,” Killian shoved Random’s tail away. “That’s how we make our friends sick.”

“Makes sense,” Random said quietly.

“Okay, good. So, if you don’t want to problem solve how to pick the lock Mommy gave to you, ask for help from your friends who do. That way, you can help get them out of their trap so you can
go on problem solving how to make your lemonade to have when you look at your pretty rocks.”

“Don’t wanna open locks.”

“Then ask a friend.”

“Wanna wrestle.”

“Well, then once your friend is out of their trap, you can wrestle all the not nice people who try to take your moon rocks, yeah?”

Killian started tickling her daughter, and the shrieking laughter that came from her was enough to end the time out. She let Random vault out of her lap. Then she crawled after her to continue her tickle rampage. Carey eventually opened the lock for Random, and Random wrestled Killian at bedtime. Random never saw a lock until she sat there, on that damp dungeon floor, longing for the moon.

She tried to problem solve with her tiny screwdrivers. She heard a few clicks and tried the handle.

Nothing.

She tried again and broke the arm of one of the screwdrivers off.

Yeah. Not good at rogue things. She decided to ask Mavis for help. The girls switched places. Mavis kneeled in front of the lock, said a tiny prayer in her head, and tried with a different set of screw drivers.

Some of the tumblers turned. Then Mavis got a hand cramp and had to shake them out. She squinted her eyes, leaned her ear against the lock, and kept going. The screwdriver on the bottom started to bend and creak, so she adjusted her grip, flipped it over, and kept going. A few moments later, just as she started to shake her head and watch another one of Sigfriede’s delicate tools break, the lock unlatched.

“Holy fuck,” Sigfriede said. “No way, dude.”

“Hurry,” Mavis stepped back from the door and quickly gathered Sigfriede’s tools. “We’ve wasted a lot of time.”

Random rushed into the cell, giving Sigfriede a huge bear hug as she passed her by. Then Mavis slumped in as quickly as her stumpy legs could take her, and hugged her cousin’s leg.

“It’s good to see you guys again,” Sigfriede said. “Well, as best as I can without my glasses. I lost them while I was out.”

Mavis smiled. “This is your one free pass. I won’t give you shit for that. But next time it’s Roast Central for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sigfriede patted her cousin’s head. “So what do we do now?”

“We wait,” Random said. “Amadeus said he’d be back tomorrow.”

“Does he know what cell we’re in?”

Random shrugged. “Sounded like it. I take it we’re the only people being held prisoner that haven’t been thrown to the hoard yet.”
Sigfriede sighed. “Well, he seemed desperate for our help. And we seem a little desperate for his. If there’s no other plan of action, I say we make the best of our situation. I’ve been up for a while and making a lot of noise; you guys are the first to respond to it. So I guess that means I’m not listed as a huge threat right now. How does a poor man’s sleep over sound?”

Random smiled. “Does that include a cuddle pile?”

“Uh,” Sigfriede sucker punched Random’s bicep. “It wouldn’t be any kind of sleep over without a cuddle pile. Have you met my family? Half of my naps as a kid were done in impromptu cuddle piles.”

“I’m fine with a cuddle pile,” Mavis said, “so long as I don’t get squashed to the bottom like I always do.”

“That’s always Mookies fault. Mookie isn’t here, though, is he?”

Mavis blinked. “No. I guess he’s not.”

“I’d like to start the pile right now,” Random insisted. “I’ve had a rough day, and I need my friends.”

So Tres Party Babes problem solved and did what they do best: wasted time.

Chapter End Notes

Is Sadie actually posting a chapter at nine p.m. at night o'clock? Yes. Is Sadie also starting to want to write again? Yes! While life is still not on track for me, I am feeling a lot better. I’ve gotten better jobs, I’m feeling more secure as an Adult, and I’m just really feelin' the Siggy Bean lately. I finished this chapter last night, but was too tired to post then, so I posted it now! I'm probably going to start writing on the next chapter right after I post this. And, if I may be honest, I am tired of the long, drawn out exposition of this arc, and it's not SUPER important to the world building anymore, and I was just beating around the bush dealing with the monster of this arc. Which, fun fact, as a DnD player myself, I HATE the type of monster I'm putting in this chapter; I told myself I would NEVER write in this type of monster in ANY of my fantasy worlds, game play or no. But, the idea that I had was and IS super cool to me, it wraps in a lot of plot ideas that I wanted to include for Sigfriede, and it just makes an expedited way for me to get those ideas put in while still getting to the penultimate arc in a timely manner.

So! I hope you guys are still excited; I hope you still like Tres Party Babes; I hope you still like this story. We've got new characters to be introduced, we've got old characters to come back, we've got a HUGE change in store for Siggy... We've got a lot that I WANT to share. Because I deserve to share my creativity, and you guys deserve to see things that spark creativity in you. And I hope this story does that for you.

I missed you guys. Be nice to each other. I'll see you next time! <3
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!