New Kids on the Block

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by Vlden

Summary

A Blind Pokemon Ultra Moon Nuzlocke Gijinka Story. When Sunny moves to Alola, she fears her dreams of an amazing summer vacation are over. The reality? Summer vacation's just begun. A non-traditional nuzlocke story; gameplay events interpreted loosely.
Alolabound

Summer vacation is, without a doubt, the best part of any kid’s life. No rules (well, unless your parents are LAME), no homework, and best of all, the grownups still have work, which means adults leave you in the hands of unwitting big kids out for some extra cash. And big kids only care about boyfriends, girlfriends, phone calls and suntans, and most definitely not us. That means we—uh, that is, us kids a long ways out from high school—run the world as soon as the bell rings at 3:00 P.M. on May 22nd until the day after Labor Day.

Unless you’re me, and you’re moving away from all your friends and favorite arcades and Frosty Freezes to a tiny country halfway across the frikken world where they don’t even HAVE official Little League Baseball! The whole region! I was gonna make the All Stars this year, too!

Now I’ve gotta live in a place full of a bunch of baseball-ignorant HEATHENS.

“Your face is going to get stuck like that, you know.” Mom’s not even looking at me, but she’s got that weird momma voodoo and she just knows things. Though I guess I haven’t exactly been pretending I’m happy about moving to Alola (more like ALAMELA), I wish she would just stop talkin’ about it. Like geez, I get it, you got a cool new job, you don’t wanna stay here anymore because dad’s not here, blah blah! Drama queen. I don’t wanna stay here either, but I don’t get why we gotta move so far.

But I’m already folding my arms and pouting, “Good, I think it makes me look tough. King of the Hill.”

“Sunny,” She’s looking at me but I’ve already decided to not look at her, so I’m staring out the car window and imagining a little Arcanine (my favorite baseball mascot) running along the barrier beside the road. There’s a long pause. Mom’s sly--it’s where I get it-- so she’s trying to smooth out the conversation. “I think Alola will be a lot of fun.”

“For you, maybe.” I keep my eyes on my imaginary Arcanine.

Mom sighs this time, “It’s not going to be easy for either of us. But you know, in Alola it’s practically summer all year.”

The Arcanine disappears, “Really?” I sound way too excited. Frick. All it does is make Mom smile.

“Yes, and we’re going to be right by the beach. Don’t you remember? We talked about this already.” There’s a slight laugh, but she looks at me with a little disappointment. I probably hadn’t paid attention when she said it before. I’m not exactly thrilled about the move, living by the beach or not.

I have my elbow propped on the car window, and I grind my face against the palm of my hand a little harder when I see the airport signs popping up more and more down the Kanto R-5 freeway. Soon I’d be shoved into a plane seat by some stinky old lady who wants to talk to me about school and all the things grownups should just know to never ask kids, and then mom would probably give me a Benadryl to knock me flat out for the majority of the plane ride, and I’d wake up and be somewhere, ocean locked, friendless…

And worst of all, entertainmentless. What was I going to do for a whole summer in a new place, where all the kids already got their friends and a new kid’s just well, as my mom says when she thinks I can’t hear, S.O.L.
“We’re here, Sunny.” My mom’s hand is a soft touch pressing softer shirt fabric to my skin. I sigh, grab my backpack, and let my mom handle all the boring logistics of getting our entire lives moved to another region. She’s good at that stuff. It doesn’t take her long, either, before she’s leading me through the airport like I’m five.

Although maybe I am, with all the new things I’m seeing. Most people stay in their birth region forever and ever, and like them I’d never been out of Kanto. There were all kinds of restaurants with junk food like Unovan hamburgers and fries, or Kalos-style coffee (yuck) and pastries (heck yes), and I wanted to try it all.

Mom read my mind and got me the best burger ever, one that only a teenage boy should’ve been able to finish. I ate it all because I’m invincible.

I notice for the first time there, too, while we’re waiting near our terminal and I’m shoving a burger the size of the whole dang world down my face, that my mom’s eyes look a little brighter while she’s watching me. She’s laughing for real, not the kind of laugh that she’s been doing to make me think everything’s okay, after Dad and all (I know it’s not, but I’m pretending for her). It makes me feel good, maybe like the good that is in the heart and is a warm, fuzzy kind of feeling...or that’s probably just the fries. I burp about two seconds later. It’s definitely the fries.

She ruffles my hair, “You look like you’re having fun. See, it won’t be so bad, just the two of us. We’ll get to go try all kinds of new food and spend all afternoon together at the beach, just you wait and see.”

It’s my turn to fake a smile. Mom tries really hard sometimes, but I know she’ll be pretty busy with her new job.

But Mom can tell when I’m faking, too.

“Sunny,” She starts a serious sentence that I’m dreading, but the angels also known as flight attendants started calling for boarding. Mom pauses and we gather up our things.

She hasn’t forgotten what she wanted to talk about by the time we’ve gone through the ordeal of getting seats, bumping into people, smelling things no human should have to smell, ever, and by the time we’re buckled and she’s handing me The One Hit K.O. of all medicines, she holds my hand and looks down at me with a mom face that you can’t ignore.

“I know that I don’t always get to spend as much time with you as we’d both like. And I know that you’re scared, but I promise everything will be just fine. I…” Mom has another light in her eye, though. She’s been holding out on me! “My new boss, Dr. Kukui, told me about a huge summer camp program that’s right by our new home. So...I may have already signed you up. It’s only a day camp, but I thought,” Her shoulders tense for a minute, but then her body, even her face, which has been scrunched up with worry, relaxes, “I thought it would be a good way for you to make friends early.”

I take the Benadryl. I’m not sure what else to say or do, so I nod, “Okay…” And I let it sink in. A summer camp. Most of the time that would mean a parent was trying to get rid of a kid all summer--we all knew what happened to those poor suckers who told you on the last day of school they were ‘going to camp’--but if it was only a day camp...

I smile big and lopsided at Mom--I can tell she sees it’s a little evil because she raises her eyebrows. “Well, I guess I can go to camp. These Alola kids will never know what hit ‘em!”

“You’ll promise to behave?”
My hand is on my chest in a mock ‘me?, never!’ pose, “Since when have I misbehaved, ever?”

“Where do I start listing, from before your birth?” Mom gets me that time, and I laugh.

“All I’m saying,” I bite back a yawn--why does Benadryl work so fast? “Is that they better be ready for the new kid on the block.”
Dr. Kukui is really young to be a doctor. He’s really big and muscley and wears a ball cap all the time, even in his work clothes, but I know he’s young because of the way he greets me when he comes to visit our house for the first time.

“Howzit, little sister?” He offers his fist to bump with mine. After a minute, I give him a rough and tumble gal’s best fistbump, and he grins with big, white teeth at me. “You look just like your mom, you know that?”

It’s a compliment, so I puff my chest out and grin, “Sure do.” We have the same brown hair and blue eyes, so everyone aims straight for that. Most people’ve never seen photos of my dad, so they don’t know that I have his nose, or his smile. Or at least, that’s what Mom says they are.

Still, I like this Kukui guy, and Mom looks relieved.

“So, Heather,” Kukui’s voice shifts to adult mode, “I’m really glad you decided to take the offer. It’s great to finally meet you in person!” He must be the most relaxed boss ever, because he opens his arms in an invitation for a brief hug rather than a handshake.

She hugs him and smiles, kinda shy, which isn’t like Mom. “I’m really glad for the opportunity, sir—”

“Woah, woah!” Kukui holds his hands up, “None of that ‘sir’ nonsense—we’re family at our office, alright? Just call me Kukui, or Dr. Kukui if you have to be formal.” He grins and tilts his cap up, “Better that way, wouldn’t you say, Sunny?”

Mom must’ve told him my name before. “Uh, yes, s—Doc?”

He grins, “Great! Anyway, I actually wanted to come invite you to dinner with me and my wife, Lola, tonight, as a sort of ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ thing before work tomorrow. Would you be interested?”

I’m starving, so I look at Mom with the ravenous, empty stare of a hunting sharpedo. She rolls her eyes at me and nods, “We haven’t had time to hit the grocery store, so we...really appreciate it, Dr. Kukui.”

“No problem, Heather! It’s really our pleasure to have guests at the house. You guys get ready, I’ll hang out outside and walk you to my place.” He waves a tan arm at us and sees himself out.

Kukui’s house is on the beach. It’s a small white house, two stories and otherwise nothing too special. The front step is broken, and Kukui has to warn me so I don’t trip (like I was gonna, anyway, I’ve got Teenage Mutant Ninja Squirtle reflexes!)
His wife is young like he is, and pretty, with slightly permed and bleached out hair—going for the in-fashion I saw from all the older girls in town before we moved—and she smiles and greets my mom in the same kind of way Kukui did, all warm and excited and friendly, gives me some friendly generic nonsense that I’m ignoring because I’ve made eye contact with a pair of blue eyes shyly hiding out just behind the lady introduced to me as Dr. Lola Burnet.

She can’t be older than me, but she’s pale, and blonde and skinny, hiding her face a bit behind a big hat that doesn’t even make sense to wear inside (but I guess since she’s so pale she’d need it just to exist in Alola).

I decide she will be my friend, because I have no idea how else I’m going to make them, and she’s basically served up on a silver platter!

“Oh, Sunny, how rude of me,” Burnet smiles, “This is Lillie. She’s about your age.” She leans in conspiratorially to me, “But she’s a little shy.” I nod like that matters.

Lillie sits beside me at dinner, but we don’t really say anything. For one, I’m stuffing myself full of this awesome pulled pork, and two, Lillie is definitely avoiding eye contact with me. Still, I’m not bothered; food is numero uno for me right now.

But after dinner, when the adults are doing weird adulty things like drinking coffee and chatting about work or life, I get up and walk over to where she’s planted herself on the couch.

“Hey. I’m Sunny.” I offer my hand to her, brown to her white, and she gently tries to shake it. I’m a poor attempt at an adult, and shake her hand a bit too hard before I shrug, “Sorry. I’m bored. Let’s go outside.”

She looks somewhat interested and nods, “Okay. H-how do you like it here in Alola so far, Sunny?”

We walk to the door before I answer, “It’s okay. I like the beach a lot.”

“It is pretty.” The porch looks out over the white sand and the waves, tinted orange like feraligatrade in the sunset. I squint at it and nod.

“Yes, it is. So, what kind of stuff do you kids do for fun around here? Just swim?” I put my hands on my hips in the alpha stance—Lillie is a definite follower kid, so I take the executive decision to make myself the leader of our little party.

She chews her lip, “Um...I don’t really know. I don’t go to the summer camp right now, o-or anything.” Lillie looks back to the house, like she’s left something behind. I raise my eyebrows at her.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to go find something to do ourselves.” I take Lillie’s hand in mine and we march out across the sand, back towards my house.

It’s when we see the little hilly ledges leading from the upper parts of the neighborhood down to the beach that I get my idea for fun. “Let’s climb up the ledges! We can play adventure or something, like Indigo Jones!” I was going to climb that rock, and it would be amazing. Adventure-playing was just in case Lillie was a pansy who needed to play pretend to have a good time roughhousing with the wilderness.

Lillie pauses, “Um, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“What? Of course it’s a good idea! I used to do this all the time at home!”
I’m already climbing, and in only a couple of minutes of totally bad-a climbing I turn around to sit on the edge of the tallest ledge, the one nearest to my house without even being close at all. I flex my arms to show off my athletic ability.

“B-but what if you fall? Wouldn’t you get hurt?”

“From a fall? No way, this bluff is tiny!” I’m on my feet now, and I grin, “I’ll jump off just to show you!”

Lillie looks horrified; I can’t believe she’s such a sissy! I would just have to show her how to be tough, and so I’m stepping back to make my amazing leap, midway in the air when my shirt collar gets snagged by something and I’m flying back onto the ledge.

I hit my back hard and cough, and while I’m blinking the daze away an older girl--a teenager--appears above me. She’s got cotton candy blue hair done up in a long, super intense perm and probably some of the biggest bazongas I’ve ever seen on a teenager, and she looks like one of those girls probably always talking to or about boys. She’s scowling at me, and it’s hard to take her seriously with the attempted grownup face compared to the teenage swimsuit look.

“Why’d you do that? I was totally going to nail that landing!”

“What’s your damage?” She has a girly voice that rings in my ears when I sit up. “Are you just trying to get yourself killed? You’d break a leg at best!”

“Oh! Chris! Thank goodness!” Lillie’s voice is full of relief. I look between the two--Chris, the older girl, and Lillie, the sissy--in total disbelief. They KNEW each other? No wonder Lillie was such a weenie. Hanging out with teenagers made even the best kids go soft.

“Chris! I see you met Sunny!” And now all of a sudden it seems like everyone is here to ruin my moment of triumph over the ledges; Kukui is waving at us as he walks over. “She’s going to be in your camp group starting tomorrow.”

We look at each other in disgust.

“What?” It’s a simultaneous statement. We look at each other again.

“Yeah!” Kukui is closer, so he doesn’t have to yell anymore, “You’re joining the girl’s troop, Sunny! Chris is the head counselor over your troop, so it’s a good thing you guys already met!”

Chris is standing now--geez, she’s tall--and points at me, “This little mani--” She cuts herself short, “She’s coming to camp tomorrow?”

Kukui grins as I smirk at her and say, “I sure am. We’re just gonna have a swell time, Chris. I can’t wait.” She gives me a look that says murder in a way only angstlords can.

“And she’s just in time for the Koko Cup!”

What’s that? I look to Kukui with my eyes wide, excited.

He reads my mind, “You’ll just have to wait and see! But I’m sure you really will have a ton of fun tomorrow.” But then he motions to me and Lillie, “It’s time for us to head back to the house, though.”

Fun Police Chris escorts me around to the road, the normal way down the hill and we meet Kukui about halfway between where I was going to establish my supreme dominance over the land and all
the children therein and his house. She passes me off to the good doc without a second glance, waves hello and goodbye to Lillie, and swaggers off to the beach.

“Chris loves to swim,” Lillie confided in me like it was important.

I give her a look, “I mean, kinda obvious, I guess.”

When we get back, Lillie climbs up a ladder to a loft bedroom, barely acknowledging anyone or saying goodbye.

That one would be a project for sure.

My mom tilts her head down at me, “You’re already filthy. How can you do that in less than an hour?”

“Talent, Mom.”

Burnet laughs and excuses herself to go check in on Lillie. It’s probably for the best; there are weird sounds like animal yipping and barking coming from up there.

Mom puts her hand on my shoulder, “Well, it was a treat. Thank you so much for dinner.”

She doesn’t even have to squeeze my arm to prompt, “Thank you, Dr. Kukui! I really enjoyed the food.” As if my devouring didn’t make it obvious.

Kukui is happy-looking as ever with that response, “It was our pleasure! Oh, and Sunny, I forgot one thing. I have a welcome gift for you.”

He disappears into the room behind his living room, rustling around for what seems like forever.

Then he’s back with a little box in his hand. It’s plasticy and shiny and my arms are outstretched to take it before it’s even voluntary on my part. He drops the box into my palms and it’s heavy, heavier than I thought.

Kukui lowers himself to my eye level, “I know it’s real hard to move away from everyone and be the new kid. So if you ever need any advice, you can always come to me, or your mom--but if you need some advice for kid stuff…” He winks at me. Kukui gets it for real. “Well, this is something I thought might help you while you’re here in Alola with us.”

I open the box when I get home and I’m in my room. I want it to be a special moment, just me and the gift, and I also don’t want anyone to see if I’m disappointed by it.

It’s a Magic 8 Ball. But it’s red, and has inky blue water inside of it. I grin; Kukui is a really funny guy.

It seems like the move might not be so bad. Mom seems happy. The camp would probably suck, especially since I had the worst counselor already, but…

“He did say you would have advice for kid stuff.” I look at the Magic 8 Ball, as if it can actually understand me. “Is this summer going to suck?”

I shake the ball and wait.

The water clears as the little ‘magic’ panel shows up.

“This summer will be totally tubular, kid!”
“Hey!”

There’s this kinda round boy with darkish hair pulled into a bun on the top of his head waving at me like crazy when my mom is walking me to the entrance of the camp. He’s wearing baggy clothes—black shirt, orange shorts—and a big, tall teenager is accompanying him. He’s really broad for a teenage dude and is wearing a shirt that says Melemele High Wrestling Club. I figure he’s the boy’s counselor, but I’m not gonna lie—he was intimidating as heck! He had big, thick eyebrows and a square face that looked way too old to just be a highschooler, and even when he was smiling it looked like some kind of tiger or something, looking like he’d eat you first and say hey second.

The boy is bounding up to me in the meantime and skids to a stop just in front of me.

“Uh, hey.” I say, a little confused by the friendly greeting.

“It’s really great to finally meet you! Everyone was talking about someone new coming to camp, and even if we’re on rival teams, we should hang out! We live in the same neighborhood here!”

My mom and I share a look. The kid talks about ten miles a minute and is somehow already going over the speed limit.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.” I offer my hand and he offers a fist for a fist bump—I oblige—and continue, “I’m Sunny.”

“Hau!”

What the heck kinda name is How? Maybe it’s short for Howie. I just nod along like I get it. He’s greeting my mom in the meantime when the counselor finally interrupts.

“Come on, Hau. We need to go warm up!” He winks at my mom and puts his hand on the kid’s shoulder. “And uh, ma’am, Chris should be right here. She had to go pick up one of her campers.”

They turn around and head back up to the center of the campsite when I see the blue perm and white and blue swimsuit coverup. Chris is coming up the wooden stairs that lead from the neighborhood up to the center of the campgrounds, where there’s a big wooden stage and a path that leads into the woods where some spooky old stuff is.

But Chris isn’t alone—a girl my age with short, puffy (like one of those white cheddar Chee-to puffs) white-blonde hair is skipping a crazy kind of happiness that screams having fun in the sun. Her skin is tan and I can already tell she’s the kind of kid I want to be around—I know a rough-n-tumble when I see one. She has real green eyes and she’s grinning while Chris talks to her.

“Hi, Miss Heather,” Chris waves shortly and motions to me, “I’m good to take Sunny now. We’ve got to go pick up one more camper, and then we’ll be heading up to play the Koko Cup.”

The name gets my skin all tingly again—it sounds exciting, electrifying. Competition is my middle name!

Mom nods and smiles at me, “Now, behave, okay, kiddo?”

“Really, Mom, do I have to keep asking when I’ve ever misbehaved?” I give her The Look and she rolls her eyes with an unmistakable smile.
“Just be good for Miss Chris, okay?” She’s waving goodbye and walking towards Kukui’s lab before I know it. I feel a little weird being left alone, but someone tugs on the strap of my Indigo Legends tank top. I turn and find myself face to face with puff-hair girl.

“Hey! I’m Charlie!” She’s grinning, all blazing white teeth and bubbling energy, “What’s your name?”

“Sunny! It’s nice to meet ya, Charlie.”

Chris gives a small puff of a sigh and pinches the bridge of her scoop nose, “You two are going to feed off each other like Pixilate Sticks and Mountain Dew. Great.”

“Don’t be a killjoy,” My smart mouth is already running before I think. “I’m making new friends, ain’t that a good thing?”

She looks down at me, casting me in the shadow of the monstrous curly perm. “It depends. Anyway, girls, we need to go pick up Fae.”

We --that is, Charlie and I--walk behind Chris as she takes us beyond the campsite and closer to town. I look at Charlie and an idea springs to mind.

“You know what the Koko Cup is, right? No one will tell me anything about it!”

Charlie flashes that huge smile again, “Oh, man, you’re gonna love it! It’s a big game of capture the flag, only you’re getting a special ‘totem’ from the place they call the Ruins, past the camp. It’s totally spooky and dangerous. I think a kid dies every year!”

“Charlie.” Chris must think that’s going to scare me. I think it’s the coolest thing ever.

“So we have to go in teams?”

“First ones to bring it back to the middle of camp wins, yeah!”

“Do you think we’ll win?”

This time Chris chimes in with the first non-hostile thing I’ve ever heard her say to me, “Well, we can certainly try our best. It’s the first time I’ve ever had two remotely athletic kids, so maybe we’ll beat Oliver this year.”

Of course my counselor is the loser in multiple ways.

Charlie is pretty cool, though. She likes to talk, and she’s animated, so she entertains me the whole way to where Chris was taking us: the local school. I feel my face curl up as soon as we get close. The smell of suffering and desperation lingers even when school’s out, like gym socks left out in the sun. Well, maybe some of that was literally happening, too. We’re close to the gym anyway, and Chris keeps dragging us deeper into the pit of despair. We wind up at the library, and a very skinny, short girl is sitting there with her head shoved into a book.

She has black hair and a big purple ribbon tying it back, and somehow the ribbon looks like a pair of hilarious, oversized ears. Her glasses are the biggest I’ve ever seen, too, making her light-brown eyes super wide and freaky. She snaps up from her book--something called The Pawn of Prophecy--and it’s an instant that I know she’s probably an insufferable nerd.

“Miss Chris!” She squeaks and Charlie’s making a bit of a face, like it hurt her ears. I tilt my head as she continues, “‘ow are you today?” She has a bit of a weird accent, like it’s not entirely foreign but
not quite right, either.

“Are you from somewhere else?” I blurt it out to get it off my chest. It’s a terrible first impression, but she’s totally a beta anyway, so it’s not like it’ll matter in the end.

“Oh, yeah!” She sounds normal for a second before she continues and her voice dips again, “I was born in Kalos, so I ‘ave a bit of an accent!” She pushes her glasses up. “You are the new girl, right?”

“Yeah, I’m Sunny.”

“And I am Fae!”

“Think you could find an apostrophe somewhere?” Charlie says with that same troublemaking smile. Geez, these guys were making weird nerd jokes. I squinted a little at Charlie and she shrugged, like she didn’t give a heck about anything at all, including having outed herself as someone who made school jokes in summer.

Chris is watching us all interact with a vague look of dismay and she finally says, “Okay, so you’ve all met Sunny. She’s our new troop member, and she moved all the way from Kanto, so let’s all...just play nice. What are you reading today, Fae?”

The nerd brightens up and brings the book up to her face, covering her mouth a bit, “Oh! It is from a series called the Belgariad! But it does not really ‘ave dragons in it, so…”

“Aw,” Chris is totally faking it, “Well, maybe the next one will. You ready to go?”

“Sure!” Fae turns around and puts the book in her backpack, which is...decorated with dragons on it. “I can not wait to be at camp, I love making new friends!”

Oh man, a nerd obsessed with dragons, too? With an even nerdier idea of instant friendship? This was too much. I shake my head, “Alright, Falkor.”

Charlie snickers beside me, “Oh, Falkor, that’s the perfect nickname for you, Fae.”

Falkor flushes but says nothing, “W-well, I like the book and the movie, so that does not even insult me!”

“You two better behave. No name calling.” Chris is starting to look frustrated and frazzled by the banter, her oddly fair skin flushed.

“It’s just a nickname, Chris, don’t twist your bikini,” I roll my eyes, “Look, are we going to do this Koko Cup thing or are we all gonna stand around and do nothing?”

“What a novel idea, doing nothing--I didn’t think you little sh--snots,” She catches herself, but Charlie smirks at her. Chris exhales and continues, “Were capable of doing nothing. So yeah, we’re going, like, now.”

The hike back to the campground was mostly Charlie psyching everyone up with the various gruesome deaths of campers in the past--totally fake, but totally hilarious! Falkor doesn’t seem amused by it, going so far as to hide her face in her hands a few times as Charlie described a monster chicken made of static electricity (like, how could that even be scary?) chasing children to their doom. Chris has to make her stop, but I’m laughing so hard I can’t see straight.
This Koko Cup sounds amazing, and I know for a fact that I’m going to win it.

There is an old man waiting for us when we get back, with a weird top knot ponytail and sort of a round beer belly. He’s a big guy and he’s got a way too serious face to be standing up in the middle of that stage. It makes me feel like I’m going to be in trouble, or at least witness someone get eaten alive.

“Well, now that our last troop is here, we can start the opening ceremony for the Koko Cup!” He has the loudest voice I’ve ever heard, but excitement starts rushing through me. First day at camp and it’s actually fun! No kumbaya, no macaroni art, just good old-fashioned sports and competition!

“Who’s the old dude?” I whisper to Charlie.

Falkor answers, “That is Mr. Hala. He is the mayor, but he is Hau’s grandfather, so he often comes to camp events.” She tries harder than Lillie to talk like a grownup.

And speaking of Lillie, I see her in the crowd! She’s clutching a big white purse--more like a duffel bag--and watching Hala talk about good sportsmanship and all that obligatory wholesome garbage no honest kid cares about with wide eyes and white knuckles.

I wave to her, and she sees me and nods back. She actually smiles a little, and I grin. I’m too excited to care about how much of a sissy she is--all I know is she and everyone else will see that I’m the best, like no one ever will be in this game again!

“...And so in the good spirit of competition, remember the rules: No kicking, pushing, biting, crying, pinching. No camping out near the ruins to steal from other players--the first one to reach the Totem and bring it back wins. Now, counselors, give your campers their flags!”

Chris hands us each a little blue flag to tie around our pants loosely. I don’t really get what the purpose was, but Hala quickly corrected that.

“Anyone whose flag is pulled off will have to give up the Totem if they have it, and will have to sit out the rest of the race. No flag pulling until the game is properly started, do you understand?”

Everyone gives the affirmative and I’m bouncing off the rails by now, adrenaline and sugar from my morning Coke sending me into a state of pure kiddish euphoria.

We walk to the starting line at the edge of the trees. There’s a big hill leading up to where these mysterious ‘ruins’ are and I can already tell that some of these kids around me won’t make it. Hau’s group looks the worst, but if counselors are allowed to compete their ginormous counselor probably could carry them all single-handed. He stands way over the rest of his troop and he flashes Chris a cheeky grin.

I hear her scoff under her breath, “Asshole.” Chris probably didn’t think anyone could hear her, but I had a feeling she was a potty mouth from the start.

Hala comes up with a flag and shouts, “Are you ready, campers?”

“Yeah!” It’s a roar that makes my ears start to drum like a rock song on the 8-track.

He stands straight and lifts the flag. “Then ready!”

We crouch into a running stance as one mindless unit.
“Set!”

I’m going to be the winner. No one knows it yet, but I really am.

“Go!”

I’m the first person out of the pack—I take my baseball practice pretty seriously—but in just a few seconds Charlie is easily outpacing me. Her legs are really long, although I don’t know why it took me so long to figure that out. Even though she’s on my team, I take a few puffy breaths in frustration and step up the pace as we race up the long hill.

We’re the first to the top and I stop for a minute to take in the scenery. It’s beyond amazing here with all the trees, and the waterfall, and the giant, rickety bridge crossing between them.

“How many kids died here?” I grin at Charlie, who stopped just a few steps ahead to look back. I can hear footsteps, but they aren’t terribly close.

“Oh, y’know, only like, twenty, I think?” She taps her chin and then winks before taking off again. The bridge bounces under her feet as she bounds across and I make myself ignore the fact that she might not be lying about the bridge killing people to bound after her.

“You two need to slow down!” I hear Chris’s voice behind me and run faster on purpose.

“They’ll need all the speed they can get, Chrissy, just you wait!” It’s a teenager’s voice, a dude—probably the scary counselor.

Now I run faster because the last thing I want is to be defeated by a teenager.

We cross into the woods and there’s a dirt trail. Charlie has obviously done the Cup before, so I stick close to her as we follow the winding path into vine-covered rocks and weird symbols before we hit the main part of the ruins. It’s a bunch of crumbled rock and a weird, creaky wooden walkway that’s more modern than the rest. I guess it got added for when they made up this game, but I stop thinking as soon as I see the yellow and orange and black painted block of wood sitting on a little pedestal in the center.

Charlie whoops, “Aw, yeah! We did it, Sunny! Let’s go!” We run to the totem and Charlie lets me take it with a big, fake bow.

I hear footsteps behind us and we both turn, ready to bolt.

It’s Chris and Falkor, thank goodness, and Falkor beams and even Chris smiles when they see we have the totem.

“Look! We’ve got this!” I’m bouncing now and Chris motions for us to hurry.

“They’re not far behind, come on, don’t be a couple of slowpokes!”

We take offense to that and charge off. The totem is clutched to my chest, heavy and smooth in my grip.

It’s a blur now that we’re back out into the woods and running for the bridge. I see Hau, his face red from running as hard as his round little body could carry him, but I slide under him like I’m going for home and stumble up, and I hear Charlie screech in anger and a loud laugh—a kid with spiky blond hair has her flag in hand and she’s gripping his in what had to be a retaliatory theft.
And that’s when I see the big guy coming for me. His running form is like he’s from the friggin Olympics and he’s fast and big and now I’m running like I’m about to get murdered. The blue perm I’d been following whipped around and Chris ran back by, pretending to take the totem from me.

“Sunny, keep going!” Chris is encouraging me, Chris of all people! “Hurry, I’ll distract them, go and win it!” And I hear her call the teenage counselor, and somehow he turns around and I’m in the clear, no Hau, no counselor, just me, Falkor running ahead to keep shouting the coast was clear, and I’m almost to the bridge, and--

“Nebby! Get back here!!” Lillie’s shout is shrill and I stop right in front of the bridge. She’s standing on the other side, legs wobbling from even being close to the rickety thing, trying really hard to walk across to get to…

A kitten.

It’s really small, meowing and clutching a bouncing board like it hadn’t done that to itself. It has the weirdest curly blueish gray fur I’ve ever seen, and a splash of black fur on its face. It’s stupidly cute and clearly in danger of falling off.

“Sunny!” Lillie yells, “Sunny, please help! The birds, they’ll--” And there’s a cawing sound all around us. The food chain was seriously brutal. I look at the kitten, up at the sky, and back down.

I take off running across the bridge and these brown and white birds swoop at me, shrieking and trying to claw at me as I run for the now yowling kitten, Lillie yelling for me to go, Falkor yelling for me to stop, Chris shouting in the background, but too far, or at least maybe my adrenaline was too high to hear. The ropes on the bridge are sounding creakier and creakier as I run and crouch down as a bird swoops simultaneously. They’re huge up close, hooked beaks and big claws--hawks!--and they mean business when they whoosh past my face.

My hands close around soft, curly fur and a small body. There’s a thunk of wood hitting wood, rolling, and a tremendous splash after a bit of delay. I’d dropped the totem, but I stumbled up to keep going, kitten clutched to my chest in its place. It dug its claws into my shirt and my skin but I just kept going, this thing was too cute to let birds eat!

The bridge groaned again and I heard something snap as I stumbled over the side and rolled across the grass at Lillie’s feet.

There’s the sound of falling wood and I look over to see the other kids and counselors standing with their jaws dropped at the now broken bridge.

“Pew?” The kitten has a weird half-purr of a meow and it’s standing on my chest, nose close to mine.

Lillie bends over and snatches the kitten away, “Nebby! Don’t ever scare me that way again! And Sunny, you almost gave me a heart attack! You both could’ve died!”

Yeah, I could have. I could’ve done a lot of things then and there. But I lived! Hah!

I’m laughing all of a sudden, “Haha! Yeah!”

“It’s not funny!”

“That. was. AWESOME!”

I wound up winning the Koko Cup.
The Shining (of Flashlights)

Chris won’t let me build a fire on the beach.

“How are we supposed to tell ghost stories without a campfire?”

It takes a solid minute of giving her the Look of all big-eyed, adorable children in want of something before she sighs, “Look, like, just take this?” And tosses a big flashlight to me.

“Woohoo!” I hoist my prize in the air like Lucario Skywalker and his lightsaber for Falkor, Lillie and Charlie to see, and they look thrilled—or well, Charlie and Falkor do, Lillie looks a little pale. The wimp.

I take off towards the ocean, Chris reluctantly trailing along behind us. It’s getting late, and we’re supposed to be going home, but I already checked with my mom and Falkor and Charlie are both staying over for the night because she’s awesome. Other campers and counselors are lingering on the beach; everyone is celebrating the end of the Cup, even if they’re losers. Not like, losers losers, but losers.

There’s a moment where I pause as we sit on the sand with light little thumps and I can’t stop smiling. I have a new, specially made Alolan bracelet with a cool black and yellow pattern on it that I got for winning the Koko Cup, and I’ve made two friends in one day, and I was even, like, a hero or something! It prompts me to look over at Lillie for a moment.

Lillie is holding her weird pet kitten like it might disappear into thin air any moment. She won’t say much about what Nebby is, but I like the kitten, and Nebby seems to like me since I saved it. She’s been real quiet after the bridge, but maybe she’s just tired.

Chris is sitting closer to the water, but close enough to watch us and listen. I ignore her with extra super on purposeness and turn to the group and flick the light on under my chin, squinting a little because it hurts more than I expected.

“So, who wants to go first?” The flashlight is a grim yellow in the purples and oranges all around us in the sand and my smile is exactly like those rated-R murder-guy smiles that my mom doesn’t know I’ve seen.

Charlie’s hand shoots up, light hair bouncing with her motions, “Oo, oo! Let me! I know a really good one!”

I toss her the flashlight and she beams at me like I gave her an ice cream cone.

“So!” She starts, holding the flashlight under her chin, “Everyone knew that this house on Ten Carat Hill was haunted. And like, there was this old dude who didn’t believe in things being haunted, so he totally laughed whenever anyone got spooked out!”

Charlie is the worst storyteller.

“But this other dude in town dared the old dude that he’d buy him an entire cart of watermelons if he stayed in the spooky house overnight, and the old dude was like ‘Haha, yeah, sure, I can totally do that’ and goes to the house,” But now it seems like something’s going to happen, because Charlie
keeps stopping every few words to make herself stop giggling like a goofball, and she finally gets it together to continue after snickering into her hand. “S-so, he’s in the house and he’s got this fire going, and like--heehee--everything’s cool, and he’s just minding his business with the newspaper when this voice goes ‘Looks like it’s just you and me tonight’ and it’s this MONSTER!”

She says it like it’s supposed to terrify all of us, but not even Lillie looks scared. Charlie doesn’t notice and keeps going, “And so the old dude is like ‘well,’” Charlie starts laughing again with a little snort, “Well, it’s about to be just you in here’–hahah–and he runs away! And the monster is li-haha–like chasing him, and he just runs even faster until he passes the guy who dares him and yells ‘NEVERMIND ABOUT THEM WATERMELONS!’”

Charlie’s completely lost it at this point, and all of us kinda look around at each other. Falkor looks almost disgusted with the story; given that she’s been clutching a book to her chest for a while tonight I figure she’s probably going to tell the best story, but we have to wait for a little bit before Charlie can compose herself enough, wipe some tears out of her eyes and offer the flashlight back to me.

“Wasn’t that great?” Charlie wheezes at us.

“It was kinda stupid,” I say, expecting to deflate her.

“I know!” She’s cackling again and I regret everything.

“May I ‘ave a turn?” Falkor looks at me with big eyes behind big glasses.

“Uhhhh,” I’m not sure if this is a good idea anymore. Charlie’s story was so abominable, even Chris is stifling laughs of pure pain and suffering, and I wasn’t certain I had it in me to listen to another watermelon adventure.

“Pleaaaase?”

Chris turns around, “Sunny, be fair to the troop. Everyone gets a turn.”

“Who died and made you my mom?” I stick my tongue out at her and see her dark blue eyes light up with fire.

“Your mom made me your--babysitter, so until you’re under your roof with her, you have to be good and do what I say.”

“Bleh,” I grimace and hand over the flashlight into Falkor’s pale hands.

That’s when she starts, “There was a little boy who could see things other people couldn’t see. Everyone said that it was a way of him dealing with the fact that his parents made him move to a faraway place where there weren’t really any kids, and maybe to deal with the fact that his daddy hurt him sometimes.”

I swallow despite myself. “Um…”

“Shhh,” Falkor puts a finger to her lips, “Normally these things he sees are nice friends, or so he thinks, but now that he lives in this new place, a hotel where his dad works, they start getting meaner and meaner. They make wasps crawl all over him, they show up with bloody faces and ugly nails and claw at him and make his dad do crazy things...like try to kill them--”
Wait a minute. Falkor’s going on and on, really on a roll, but something in my brain is flagging this weird little story she’s telling as something I’ve heard of before.

Then it hits me.

“HEEEEEEREEDDDDEEEE’S SUNNY!” I’m shouting and all the girls shriek--except Chris--and Lillie buries her face in Nebby’s fur, “You totally stole that from the Shining!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did--”

Chris intervened, “Wait. Your moms let you watch or read the Shining??” Her mouth drops a little in horror; judging by the goosebumps she was remembering the movie and how scary it was (it really was scary).

Falkor and I stop fighting and stare at each other. We’d been found out.

“No.” We say simultaneously. I have a new respect for Falkor now that I know she reads stuff she’s not supposed to read and I give her a look of ‘I’ll never tell’. She nods at me with a small smile.

“Do you want to hear a real ghost story?” A young guy’s voice comes from behind us and we all jump, even Chris.

“Ilima,” Our counselor is standing up and dusting off her white swimsuit coverup, “where’d you come from?”

“Oh, Pazu,” (He must’ve been the other counselor, a gangly kid who wore a hoodie and khaki shorts even in the heat), “brought us here because we were going to make…” I turn to look at the guy, tuning out the inevitable discussion about how his group was making macaroni art the next day and needed some inspiration, so I could get a better look at him. He has weird light red hair, so light it was almost pink in the almost dark, and soft brown eyes.

And he wears a friggin’ beret.

“So you said you have a ghost story? A real one?” I don’t want another ripoff. I love being ‘scared’--I’ve snuck into so many scary movies that my mom would probably put me under house arrest if she knew--and I feel disappointed in my friends in this moment for not living up to at least giving me a little spook beyond remembering a Stephen King story.

Ilima smiles and it’s a sort of creepy-too-nice one, “You bet I do. Do you guys want to hear it?”

Lillie squeaks for the first time since we started, “I-I don’t k-know…”

Chris frowns, “It’s getting kinda late for that, don’t you think?”

“C’mon, Chris,” He insists and everyone, including me--well, everyone except Lillie--echoes him. She looks at us, arms folded across her chest, sighs, and gives Ilima a bratty look.

“Make it good, Lima Bean.”

“So,” He says with a dramatic flourish of his hands, “Has Chris ever told you guys,” He’s looking more at Charlie and Falkor than he is at me, “How she became a camp counselor?”
Chris is on her feet again, “Ilima, everyone knows that story isn’t true--”

“You said I’d get to tell my story, so I am. It’s totally true, anyway, we all know it.”

I raise my eyebrows. Now this sounds like a story.

“Before Chris and Oliver and Pazu were the big bad teens on the grounds, there were three other counselors, Samantha, Ted and Jake. For the most part, camp was great; we could run wild, eat candy and play all day...They had only one rule: campers were never allowed in the cave on the top of the hill, but they never told us why.” He’s got the hook--a cave on a hill? Forbidden? That sounds like my kind of place.

"But no one is going to follow rules, so one night, a few campers snuck out to check out the cave... and didn’t come back that night. The counselors woke up the next day, saw they were missing some of their troops, and realized what had happened. Still, the cave was so dark, so scary, that even they couldn’t just go in. So they drew straws for who would go in first--and Samantha got the short stick.”

Chris looks like she wants to interrupt with how much of the story is a total fake, but she closes her mouth and gives us a look of ‘don’t believe a word.’ It’s too late; Charlie has her nails in her mouth, Falkor is on the edge of her seat--or well, she’s sitting up a bit on her knees. Lillie’s lips are quivering...which is a little extreme for a camp story.

"Samantha didn’t have her flashlight, but everyone says she called and called for the kids as she made her way through the dark cave. Ted and Jake didn’t follow her--they thought it was some prank all along--but finally there was a noise, a little squeaky cry. Samantha thought it was one of the kids, so she went towards it, only to find…it.”

Ilima pauses for a long second, as though he’s either trying to decide what ‘it’ is or to go for the suspense.

“It is a giant monster, all black with huge fangs, and a slimy, skin tail surrounded by--”

“But how do you know?” I say. It’s sort of weird if he’s able to tell the story like he was there, and I have a feeling it’s pretty fake, even if it’s convincing.

“Well, because, I was one of the kids who snuck off and got stuck in the cave with it,” Ilima grinned, “And you see, Samantha was very brave, and she yelled at the monster and it chased her into the cave...so we could get away. And she was never seen again...Ted and Jake couldn’t handle how chicken they’d been, and they left camp shortly after it all went down...the kids survived, scarred by the experience...Some say the monster is still there, waiting for campers to sneak down into their untimely doom…….” He finally ends the story and stands there, hands on his hips, proud of the story as he basks in Lillie’s terror and Falkor’s...curiosity, maybe. Charlie is asleep on the sand, fluffy hair covered in the grainy stuff.

Chris sighs, “She never said there was a monster, just that you guys got scared in the dark down there. Those three graduated and went to college, and no one got hurt. No one believed you guys the first time, okay?”

Ilima shrugs, “Suit yourself, Chris, but it was real, I swear!”

We finish our ghost stories and Chris is walking us to my house for the night. Lillie leaves off at Kukui’s with a little wave, and when she thinks no one is looking she darts into the house like something might come after her in the night.

My mom is thrilled that we have guests over, and she makes a big fuss about dinner, except we still
don’t have groceries, so we get fast food for dinner—some Unovan style burgers and ice cream.

Falkor is pretty quiet, but Charlie is energized after her impromptu nap on the beach and she’s chatting away to my mom about the day.

Normally I’d be bragging to Mom nonstop about how awesome and brave I was today, but I can’t stop thinking about the cave. Chris says there’s no monster, Ilima says there is. I almost doubt it’s real, but…

It only hits me when the moon is coming through the window and across my bed. Falkor and Charlie are piled into the blankets with me and all our knees and elbows are in the perfect places to be annoying for each other and comfortable for us. I’m looking out the window because I can’t sleep. Everything from the day is still sinking in and Ilima’s ghost story bothers me most of all. It wasn’t scary, really, but I want to know what’s in that cave. I can’t stand lying kids who think that they can tell a good story with exaggerating and swagging around—and Ilima seems like one of those types.

“Well…there’s only one way to find out.” I whisper and sit up, disrupting Charlie and Falkor. They both wake up and Falkor fumbles around for her glasses, which are on my nightstand. She slips them on as Charlie rolls off the bed in her confusion.

“Sunny? What are you doing?”

I’ve already got my tennis shoes and I slip them on without socks, “I’m going to the cave, duh.”

“Really?” Charlie perks up, “This late?”

“What, you’ve never snuck out before?”

I haven’t either, but an alpha has to know when to bluff.

Falkor whispers all fast and hushed, “Are you sure? We’ll get in trouble…”

“If that’s all that’s stopping you from wanting to go, then yeah, we’re doing this. Or well,” I pause, “I’m doing this anyway, whether or not you guys come with me.”

Charlie is scrambling for her shoes as well, and after a long moment Falkor gets up, finding Charlie’s shoes and hers simultaneously. Charlie huffs as I dig out the flashlight my mom bought me for when storms knocked out the power at our old house and open my window.

The night is cool and humid simultaneously, like a weird wet towel that’s gotten cold after you get out of a swimming pool. My pajamas aren’t very thick, and I shiver, although I swear it’s more in anticipation of the cave. It’s a bit of a hike through the neighborhood, past the campgrounds, where the main cabin light is still on.

I don’t stop sweating until we’ve gotten out of any line of sight of someone who might be able to stop us from our goal.

“Imagine how mad Chris would be if she knew about this,” I say to Falkor and Charlie, who have been sneaking along behind me like dutiful friends.

“She’ll knock her perm out,” Charlie giggles, “It’ll be great.”

“You two should be nicer to Chris…but she will be pretty mad,” Falkor sounds amused and resigned.

It’s a bit of a walk up a hill to get to the cave, but we see it all the way from the bottom and it’s...huge. Big mounds of green moss are all over the sides and the sky is dark but the mouth of the
cave is darker, a tv screen turned off.

When we stand at the entrance there’s a breeze pushing us inside. I look to Falkor and to Charlie and nod. The flashlight flicks on and rocks of all shapes and sizes pop up in our vision.

Because I’m the boss, I take the first step inside.

We stick close together, Falkor’s arm around mine and Charlie clinging to my shoulders and my heart starts beating in time with the little drip-drips of water coming off the roof of the cave. I’m not afraid, it’s just like a drumbeat in a Journey song, that’s all.

Eventually, the tunnel opens out into a wide area with a hole through the top. The moon and my flashlight are the only two things making this place have any kind of brightness.

My heart is beating faster because I hear a sound from behind us.

“D-did you hear that?” I don’t mean to stutter, but my mouth is getting dry.

Charlie gulps, “Um..Falkor, did you kick a rock?”

The sound is like a spider skittering on a wall. And it’s closer.

Falkor shakes her head violently, “N-no, I did not. We--we should leave!”

“Y-yeah,” I nod, “Ilima w-was totally a liar! There’s nothing in heeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

We turn around right into a pair of dumb red eyes and too-big yellow teeth. The rat comes to our knees and squeaks at us, angry, or something, and I fall back on my butt and Charlie runs back and Falkor trips after a couple of steps. The rat keeps coming at me, only at me, as if it knows that it’s my fault we’re in its house and I scramble away, flashlight gripped in my hands like a sword.

“H-he was right! Ilima was right!” Falkor yelps.

We’re going to get eaten, and it’s my fault. Some leader of the pack I am. I’ve never been so afraid, I can practically smell the stink from the fur and dirty, hot, wet animal breath as the rat gets closer and closer. My back is to the cave wall now and this is it, this is how it ends for me--

A sandaled foot connects to the soft belly of the rat and sends it flying. The foot connects to long legs in a swimsuit cover up to a teenager with long, blue, permed curls.

“Chris?!”

She looks mad enough to bite through metal as she delivers another sound kick to the giant rat, leaving it squeaking and scampering away into the darkness. She spins around on the three of us.

“Are you guys INSANE?”

“Th-the monster was REAL!” I point, “It was REAL, Chris!”

“It’s a fu--freaking RAT, Sunny!”

“It was HUGE!” Charlie waves her arms in a panic, “Chris, how did it get so BIG?”

“Eating idiots like us,” Falkor’s hands are shaking too, although none of them are shaking as hard as I am.
I don’t like to be scared. I’m not scared of anything, and it was just a stupid rat! I’m fine, and totally grounded.

Chris sighs at us, “You guys could’ve gotten really hurt! What if I hadn’t shown up, huh? You could’ve tripped and broken a leg and been stuck in here! You could’ve hit your head, and you’re too concerned about a stupid rat “monster”! Come on, guys!” She puts her face in her hand and exhales harder this time, “I was really worried that you three would try something like this.”

I chew on my lip for a second and say, “It was all my idea, Chris. These two were just along for the ride.”

“Sunny, if you think owning up to it is going to lighten your punishment, then…”

Oh, yikes. She’s gonna tell Mom, and then I’m going to be grounded, and then summer camp’s going to be over before it even gets started.

“I know, I know,” I’m familiar enough with being grounded to know the speech. “Still shouldn’t have done it. But go easy on these guys.”

Charlie shakes her head, “No way, I totally wanted to come! If Sunny hadn’t suggested it, I was gonna!”

Falkor nods, “I-I was also going to say that we should check it out. It would be like experiencing one of my favorite books!”

They’re both lying for me. I feel my eyes go wide as I look at them and back to Chris, who looks just as dumbfounded, if not more.

“You three…” The teenager puts her hands on her hips and thinks for a long moment, “Look, no more funny business, okay? We’re marching straight home, you’re going to bed, and when I see you all tomorrow it better be in one piece. Capiche?”

“Capiche…” We say it all at once with embarrassed, ducked heads. The punishment to come would be from our parents. Sneaking out always got the house-arrest points.

But Chris helps us sneak back in my window. With a finger to her lips, she closes the window as I leap back onto my bedroom floor. Chris disappears in the moonlight.

Chapter End Notes

And there’s the first trial!
He’s the most annoying kid I’ve ever met. His name is Dodger, and no matter what I do, I can’t seem to dodge him. He’s a real scrawny kid, and his hair is weird, almost brown red, and he’s always got a sly smile like he knows a joke no one else knows.

And he won’t stop following me around.

“...and so, like, I was all ‘woah! How am I gonna avoid that shark eating me while I’m on this totally awesome wave’, but at the last second it hits me that I just need to catch some air to get away from it jumping out at me, and I went flying up so high in the air on the surfboard that I did THREE backflips!” Dodger puffs out his chest. He’s been telling totally bullcrap stories like this all morning, and I’m gonna lose it if I have to put up with any more of these. I’m about to say something when he continues, “And I stuck the wave!”

“Get lost, Dodger,” Charlie’s voice comes from my left and I turn my head to see a missing smile and a face looking as sour as BounsweetTarts. I blink and turn back to Dodger, whose smile is still bright and shiny and obnoxious.

He’s had us trapped at our table in the main cabin all morning. The rain’s kept us all inside, stuck playing cards and board (more like BORED) games, and the counselors are all sitting around being losers and gossips. Sometimes there’s a “No way” or a “Can you believe he/she said that?” coming from the circle of Chris and the other two head counselors, Pazu and Oliver. That round kid, Hau, is staring out the window with the saddest look on his face, like it’s the worst thing in the world that we’re stuck here. For once, I wish Chris could come rescue us again. This might actually be a worse fate than being eaten by a giant rat.

Dodger sticks his tongue out at Charlie and says, “Why don’t YOU get lost, Cheeto-head!” There’s a tiny gasp at the insult from Falkor, who’s been trying to hide behind a book the whole time.

“Hey, cut it out, guys.” Chris’s voice comes out louder than a lifeguard calling for their precious adult swim. “No arguing.”

And just as I was going to chime in and tell Dodger to get lost, times two! I’m tired and irritable from staying up too late the night before, and I finally stand up and look at Dodger.

“No one believes you, dude.”
He looks a little crestfallen, “B-but it’s true! I totally escaped a deadly shark attack!”

“Maybe you got away from a jellyfish in the shallow part of the water,” I’m all but making a nasty face at this point, “But a shark? Come on! Just because I’m the new kid doesn’t mean I’m the dumb kid.”

Dodger rolls his eyes, “Well, we’ll see! I’ve got plenty more awesome stories to tell you!!”

Charlie is practically growling, “You can tell them never.” I want to know what the beef between these two is and how it started, but there’s no way I’m asking when Dodger’s still lurking around.

He shrugs, and his smile comes back without a hitch, “Just give me a second to get a new Capri Sun and I’ll tell you guys about the time I jumped the entire gully during the Koko Cup.”

Falkor squeaked, “That never happened.”

“It was before you came to camp!”

“Ugh, just go get your Capri Sun and can it, dude.” I snap. Dodger almost looks hurt, but then he skips off, as though suddenly we’ll come around. I mean, he’s stealing my heroics from like, a couple of days ago! What a jerk.

Charlie huffs as he leaves, “Man, I’m sorry, Sunny. He always does this when a new kid comes to camp. Last year, he followed me around and tried to tell me about how he rode a huge sea monster at the lake! It’s always monsters with these weirdos.” She squints her eyes, as if struggling with some kind of out-there thought, but comes back with a little more pep in her step. “I just hope this rain clears up. I’m going crazy in here!”

Falkor offers a small smile, “Well, I don’t know. I kind of like having a quiet day.”

“I’m with Charlie,” I point my thumb at my chest, “This is totally the worst. If we have to play another game of Clue, I’m going to make it real life. Sunny, in the cabin, with a straw.” I take my now shriveled Capri Sun (the counselors had gotten a big cooler of it to tide over the rampaging children loitering in the cabin) and remove the straw, waving it around before I fake stab myself in
the neck. The girls laugh, but it’s just as tired as mine, and Falkor has to stifle a yawn.

We really kicked ourselves in the butt last night.

“So, you’re the new kid.” A voice I’ve never heard before makes me jump almost completely out of my skin. I turn around so fast in my seat that I teeter for a moment and have to juggle my weight to keep the chair from tipping.

She’s really tall for someone my age, even with her kind of lazy looking slouch. Her hair is in thick looking dreadlocks that are really dark, and she’s got soft eyes and brown skin. She’s got her hands shoved in the pockets of her short overalls, and under them she’s got on some kind of orange t-shirt. She’s almost kind of dumpy looking, if it wasn’t for the fact that under the kind of chill vibe she looks like she could pop my neck out of my shoulders with her bare arms.

“Uh, yeah.” I sound really stupid when I say it. “I’m Sunny.” I chance a glance to either side and see Falkor and Charlie staring wide-eyed. I don’t know if they know this girl, but she seems just as intimidating to them, so I have to put on a brave face for my troop. “Who are you?”

“Hey, Amalthea!” Dodger does her the honor by popping up, drink in hand--and a spare one for me, I’m guessing--and beaming.

Amalthea looks down at him and her soft eyes turn to the kind of eyes you see before a cartoon character whoops someone senseless, standing up to her full height. “Don’t. Call. Me. That.” My eyes go wide. She is seriously the tallest kid I’ve ever seen, and might contend for the scariest, next to me, of course.

Dodger shrinks. “Sorry!”

“It’s Thea,” She turns to me and offers her ginormous hand. I shake it, real strong, like my mom always said to do, and in exchange offer her a tentative fistbump. Her knuckles collide with mine like a bat to a baseball and I try not to wince. “What are you even doing, Dodger?”

“I was just telling Sunny about the time I jumped--”

“Out of your pants scared when you had to cross the bridge to the ruins?” Thea’s voice is quiet, but Dodger still looks like she just screamed at him.
“No way!” He sputters, “I-uh, what I was going to say was the time I saw--”

“It was a boat, Dodger.”

Dodger’s face is beet red and he huffs, “Whatever, Thea! You’re no fun. I’m going to go tell the counselors that you’re a big bully!”

Thea shrugs as Dodger stalks off. “He was in my troop last year.” Somehow, I think that’s her way of explaining why she can get rid of him like magic.

Charlie says, “That was so cool. Also, how tall are you?”

“Five-Five.” She looks pretty proud of that. That’s a whole seven inches taller than me! I feel my eyes squinting.

“You really like milk, huh?” I say.

“Yeah.” Thea nods. She’s really matter of fact, and every statement from her sounds like a full on speech, even though it’s just one word.

There’s an awkward silence except for the flipping page of Falkor’s book.

“I’m joining your troop.” Thea says after a dubious pause. “So I wanted to say hi.”

“Oh, cool!” Charlie bounces, “That’s awesome!! Why’d you switch?”

“‘Cause.” That was that.

I point to the chair across from me, “Do you want to sit with us?”
Thea nods, sits down with a hard thud, and joins us for a round of Hungry Hungry Hippowdowns. We’re all tapping away at the little levers for a while, but like all bored games, it gets old pretty fast. I find myself drifting away to listen to any other conversation that might be going on, since Charlie is too focused on winning to talk, and Thea doesn’t say anything, and Falkor is only sometimes bopping her Hippowdon between the pages of her book.

“I hope the rain lets up enough so we can do the boat building contest….” It’s the short (she’s shorter than me, even!) little blue-haired girl, talking to another camper with big, green pigtails.

Boat building contest? My hand misses the lever completely. “What contest?” I’m practically vibrating with excitement at the word.

The girl looks up from her table, “Um, we build cardboard boats and try to sail out to an island on the lake!”

This camp sure does like competitions. Which means I like this camp more and more by the day.

“What’s your name?”

“Lana.” She says with a small smile, “I’m the reigning champion of the boat contest. I’ve made it out to the island.” Lana smirks at me with that. “So you’re in for some tough competition, New Kid.”

“I sure haven’t seen her make it out there,” Falkor whispers to me. “But who knows, she’s been here for a few years.”

Well, even if SHE hasn’t, I definitely want to figure out how. An island would be so cool to explore!

I grin at Lana, “Well, we’ll see about that. The name’s Sunny, by the way.”

“Alright, Sunny.” She looks out the window. “I guess we’re going to see soon enough.”

The sun, as if on cue, is peeking through the clouds.
The Dread Pirates

The air is sticky and heavy from the rain, but the sunlight coming through the thinning dark clouds reflects off the lake until it’s like a mirror of crystal clear water, so white and shiny that I feel like my eyes are going to burn off. Everyone is drenched in enough sweat that we could’ve been standing in the rain.

Everything was supposed to be cancelled today for bad weather, but with the sun as nice as it is, all of us kids gather around the lake shore and wait expectantly for Chris, Pazu and Oliver to arrive.

Lana is the first to bound up to the three when they make it, “Are we going to still have our boat building and race today?”

Chris frowns and looks at the other two teenagers. Of course they’re not gonna let us--it’s too much effort on their part to bother, and if teenagers could avoid having to work, they would. The ultimate form of laziness in a human being is a teenager.

“I don’t know…” Chris finally says, “The weather might be better tomorrow.”

The disappointment is heavier than the air. I can feel my chest hurt a little--I had to stay stuck inside with Dodger all morning for nothing? I’m not the only kid who feels this way; Charlie is complaining loudly about it being too hot to not swim, and Hau is practically leaping up and down.

“That’s not what camp’s about!” Hau exclaims, “We’re supposed to work together to have fun, rain or shine--and there’s a lot of shine right now!” I’m not sure I follow his logic--it’s a little cartoony, the kind of Care Bewears love and friendship stuff no one really believes is real...not that I watch Care Bewears--but it motivates the rest us gathered kids.

There is a chorus of whining, my voice included, and with great reluctance the counselors agree to let us do the boat contest.

The rules were pretty easy--the three troops take cardboard boxes and duct tape and make a floatable boat to go as far into the lake as we can. We all have to wear life vests--safe and therefore lame--and Chris trades out her signature two-piece and coverup for a faded red one-piece with a lifeguard symbol on it.

“I didn’t know you were a lifeguard,” Falkor looks amazed, like the fact that Chris suddenly wears a different swimsuit and carries around a big red floatie makes her some kind of superhero.

“Someone has to be,” Chris says. I can hear the dead-inside quality of her voice. “Just don’t build yourselves something that will tip, okay?”

The rest of the groups are already frantically throwing together their cardboard. I look at the pile, look to Charlie, Falkor and Thea, look back to the pile, and sigh.

“How exactly are we supposed to build something that won’t sink?”

We spend a good chunk of time trying to draw out logic sticks--lalastics--long--

“Hey Chris,” I ask, “What’s the word for organizing people and things that sounds like LEGO sticks?”

“Logistics.” She replies.
We draw the log-is-tics...in the dirt. We first design a sleek rocket ship type thing, but decide it would take too long and would be too round to stay afloat or even be possible to build. I come up with a viking ship, next, but we don’t have enough cardboard to make it possible.

And I look over to see Lana and the rest of Pazu’s troop putting together a large, round boat. With their paddles resting on the sides, it looks like a gigantic water spider. Lana is looking triumphant already as she plasters tape all along a seam on the boat.

“Thea, do you have any ideas?” The newest member of our troop says nothing. She looks at me with her sleepy eyes for a long moment before shaking her head.

“I don’t swim.”

“Oh.” That puts us at a major disadvantage. It might as well be like a baseball team without a key baseman—if we don’t have more people to paddle, we’re gonna get throttled!

Maybe this stupid contest could’ve waited till tomorrow. I can’t say that I’m not a sore loser—I hate losing more than I hate brussel sprouts, and I hate brussel sprouts the most out of anything. Well, anything except being a loser.

My fists are clenched. Falkor and Charlie look at me with these weird expressions as I stomp around our pile of cardboard and huff and puff and wish I could blow down the other boats. It shouldn’t be this hard! I’m plenty smart! And I have--

“Falkor, you’re creative!” I sigh, “Don’t you have any better ideas?”

“We cannot build a dragon, so what’s the point?” Her reply is instant and I drop to my knees. It feels like someone pushed me down and knocked the wind out of me. This nerd. This nerd is going to kill me.

“Charlie?”

“Uh, well, the rocket ship was the best I had,” She shrugs, her hair—puffier than ever in the humidity—bouncing alongside the motion.

I want to scream, and the urge grows as Chris pipes in that we don’t exactly have the most time. Thea nods like she’s being helpful. What a lump.

Dang it, I’ll freakin’ swim.

A shadow merges with mine. “Why not build a plain old raft?” It’s an older voice, not as old as Chris, but not as young as Charlie or Falkor or as deep as Thea.

I turn my head to meet an unfamiliar face. She’s not super tall, maybe in her first year of high school; the most impressive thing about her is her mane of gold-blonde hair. Her blue t-shirt is way too big, tied up like a crooked tail in the back. She’s got on yellow and blue matching shorts that hurt my eyes.

“What?” I ask, hearing my voice raise with a little hostility. Who was this kid, this almost teenager? What did she know?

“Well, rafts are kinda flat, and if you build it right it can hold your weight and won’t tip. One person can sit on each corner and paddle. It’s easy.” She shrugs.

Charlie tilts her head to the side, “I dunno, that sounds kinda dumb. Wouldn’t it just sink in the
middle?"

I nod, “Yeah, how is it supposed to stay up?”

“You make little buoys for it underneath. Like I said, it’s pretty simple.” The strange girl folds her arms behind her back, “I can help, if you want.” Her brown eyes have an orange-red hint to them as they catch the light. I meet her gaze and the challenge like the boss I am.

“Well, it seems like it won’t take long,” I fold my arms over my chest and act like I’m allowing it only because I’m gracious, “So I guess we could let you help. Whose troop are you in, anyway?”

“No one’s.” She replies, “I’m Buttercup, by the way.” Her eyes are looking behind me--at where Chris must be standing, because I can hear the teenager chewing out some kids for doing something dangerous like diving headfirst into the shallow part of the lakeshore.

How could she be at the campsite if she wasn’t in any troop? Is it like an older kid thing? I frown, but she’s helping us, so I don’t question it.

“I’m Sunny.” I point to Charlie and Falkor and introduce them, too, and Buttercup smiles at us with genuine excitement.

“Thanks for letting me help,” She brings her hands from behind her and fiddles with her fingertips, “Let’s get started.”

Building the raft isn’t as hard as I think--it’s a big square boat with boxes taped hard underneath. They balance the boat as we test our weight on it--it holds me, Falkor and Charlie easy, but Thea shakes her head as we motion for her to join us. It’s almost time for the race to start--Chris, Pazu and Oliver are calling the three groups together for our mad dash.

“How’s swim, remember?” She shrugs her shoulders and steps away from the water like it will suck her up at any second.

“Gosh-Dangit-Heckfire-Buttmunch,” I spit at her, “Why join our troop if you’re not gonna help?”

“I’ll help later. Just not gonna swim.” Thea crosses her arms stubbornly and doesn’t back down when I stare at her.

“Let me,” Buttercup hops onto the boat like a bolt of lightning--she’s fast--and motions like she’s paddling, “I’m really good. No one’s faster than me at anything!”

Falkor speaks up, “I can still beat you, Buttercup.”

“You wish, Fae.”

Wait. They knew each other? I look between them, confused. Why hadn’t Falkor said anything earlier? I’m frowning as they exchange bigger and bigger grins. It’s even more confusing that Falkor is bragging about being fast. She doesn’t exactly look athletic to me.

“Guys!” Chris’s voice snaps me out of the Tetris puzzle moving in my brain. “Come on, it’s time for everyone to line up.”

Hau’s boat is a little traditional-looking canoe thing. Lana and her pigtail friend head the ginormous spider-beast, and our raft looks a little dumpy compared to the elaborate beast. I gulp. Maybe Lana wasn’t totally just talking out of her butt when she said she was the reigning champ.
“Alright, you guys,” Chris waves to everyone as we file to the edge of the lake, “Whoever makes it the longest way out wins, keep your life vests on, and don’t make me come out there to get you, okay?”

People must not make it very far at all if Chris didn’t seem concerned about people swimming back from the island. Lana was definitely talking straight out of her buttcheeks!

I frickin’ hate liars. I’m shooting her a dirty look, fantasizing about the look on her face when we crush Lana and her friends and their stupid way-too-fancy boat, when suddenly Charlie’s elbowing my ribs.

“Pay attention, Sunny, we’re about to shove off!!”

Buttercup flashes me an encouraging smile, “Don’t mind Lana.”

Oh, I mind, but I just shake my head and stare straight ahead. Winning is the only thing on my mind again, the heart-pounding excitement overtaking the anger. The wind is going to be in my face, the water surging underneath, the open sea wide on the horizon…or well, the broad, shiny lake and the heavy jungle-like forest on the other side waiting for us, at least.

I’m so deep in my winning fantasy that I miss Chris call for us to go, stumbling forward as my two friends and Buttercup push the raft hard into the lake. I catch up quickly, throwing my weight into the water before leaping up, paddle scooped into my white-knuckled fists.

The water is not surging with epic waves, and the sting of the air just comes from the sun beating down on us, and not the salty sea, but all the same the placid lake is alive and the wind is roaring in my ears as we paddle with everything we have in us. The raft lurches and bucks a bit, cardboard a little unsteady against how hard we’re urging it forward. The taping Buttercup did seems to work, though, and it stays balanced and slowly evens out as I glance to the side and see Hau’s little canoe sinking behind us. He’s laughing hard as his troop-mates all clamber out of the shipwreck, not at all fazed by losing. How could he be so carefree? Didn’t it bother him that he was in last place?

Something looms over the side of the raft, blocking out my vision of the last place gang.

“Hot Sauce on Christmas cookies!” Charlie yelps, “Guys, guys--watch out, they’re gonna hit us!”

The raft swerves with expert skill, lightning quick again. I jerk my head to where Buttercup is now standing, digging the paddle in hard to the water. Wow, does she know what she’s doing! Her face is determined, but she’s beaming like a pirate after treasure as Lana’s boat cruises by.

“Paddle harder! They’re gonna get ahead of us!” Falkor shouts as she desperately throws her scrawny arms into the motion and I follow suit, imagining the water as a baseball and my paddle as the bat, striking and twisting and feeling the wind pick up more as our little raft begins to sail like it’s something real. My eyes are wide as we even out with Lana’s boat, and she gives me a look of equal surprise.

“Not bad, new girl!” She shouts, “But check this out--guys, cut them off!” She turns her paddle a weird way and the pigtail girl grins and does the same--Ilima is another camper I recognize from their troop, and suddenly the inner tube-spider-monstrosity is coming towards us and threatens to tip us over.

“Sunny,” Buttercup says, “They’re totally going to lose balance. Everyone, push your paddles back so we stop!”

It’s like digging into the dirt with my heels: my whole body lurches with the water as somehow our
paddles force the raft to a sloshing, would-be screeching halt. The water swirls around us, the momentum of our stop rippling out through the lake. The air is electric and I’m holding my breath as the bigger boat curves by us, so close that there’s a tiny brush of air on my face. The breath I’m holding slips out as a gasp.

And it’s like I rocked the boat. The turn is too much for the unwieldy spider and it tips in slow motion. Every face aboard it lights up with fear, and Lana and I make eye contact.

I smirk as she hits the water with a splash. I won, you liar.

The spider beast ship capsizes and I look to Falkor, to Charlie, and finally to Buttercup. The older girl is grinning, a big, blinding smile of all white teeth against tan skin and I’m smiling back just as big in seconds.

We paddle forward together and make it across to the island.

It’s a little disappointing, but we don’t actually leave the raft—we have to paddle all the way back to the lakeshore, where Chris is waving at us up and down. I can’t tell if she’s mad or excited, but what I can tell is that the wind is out of our sails as we struggle to paddle back to the shore. We’re tired.

Why did we think staying up so late was a good idea?

Charlie is the first off the raft when we make it back, flopping onto the sandy dirt with her arms in the air, “My arms are DEAD, I tell you! DEAD!” She’s such a drama queen, I think.

Before I can turn to give Falkor and Buttercup a Look, we’re surrounded by Hau and the other campers and the counselors. Thea gives us a solemn nod. Chris is actually smiling at us! Chris! Smiling!

It doesn’t last long. She sees something she doesn’t like and that really babysittery look sneaks its way across her face, joy-killing already working its way to her mouth as her lips form a frowny ‘o’ shape.

I follow her eyes to Buttercup.

Uh oh.

Buttercup just stares back at Chris, unafraid. There’s nothing said between them as the noise starts to die down. Hau and I chat for a few minutes, and he congratulates me and says he’ll see me tomorrow before bounding away to hang off his counselor’s arm.

After a minute it’s just my troop and Buttercup and a very angry looking Chris.

“What are you doing back here? I thought you were ‘too cool’ for camp.” Chris says, folding her arms under her chest. It’s an attempted grownup move. Buttercup isn’t impressed.

The weirdest part about being the new kid is coming in on these people who already know each other, and dislike each other, and having no idea whose side is right or if there’s even a side to be on. As much as Chris is a teenager, she did stick up for us last night when she could’ve turned us all in—but Buttercup is the hero of the day, the reason why I’m practically unable to stop smiling even in the air that’s so thick with stress and discomfort that Falkor and Charlie both are eyeing me with the ‘hey, let’s go’ look.

I’m too nosy to back off.
“I changed my mind.” Buttercup looks down at her feet, all the cool confidence and smiles fading away. “I’m sorry, Chris.”

“What, Plumeria isn’t the babysitter she’s cracked up to be?” Chris snorts and tosses her perm.

“It’s...not about that.” Buttercup is dodging the question a little, rubbing the fabric of her sleeves against her arm, “It’s just that...look, I said I’m sorry, okay? I want to come back. It wasn’t what I thought. Camp’s...not stupid.”

I’m confused, but I keep my mouth shut. The drama is like one of the soap operas my mom doesn’t know I know she watches.

Chris’s hands are on her hips, and for a long moment I think that she’s about to drop a crushing victory of doom on Buttercup, who now looks close to tears. Buttercup’s magnificent mane hides her face as she ducks behind it like a shield.

“I’ll have to talk to Olivia.” The teenager’s voice has gone all soft again. “Now--don’t think you’re getting off easy, but she might just say yes.”

Who’s Olivia? Whoever she is, she must be important, because Buttercup’s head snaps up and she’s blinking out tears.

“You’ll talk to her, really?”

“Really.” Chris rolls her eyes, “It’s not like, because I think you deserve it or anything. I just hate seeing kids cry, okay? Now stop sniffling. Come see me tomorrow.” The teenager dismissively waves for us to follow her. “It’s time to head home, you three.”

I wait behind for a minute to smile at Buttercup.

“See you tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

I fish into my pocket and feel for a familiar weight--Crazy 8’s, the gift Kukui gave me--and shake the red ball in my hand. Buttercup tilts her head to the side in question.

“Hey, Crazy 8’s,” I say, “Will I see Buttercup tomorrow?”

There’s a pause as the water settles in the Magic 8 Ball.

“Unsure. Have Buttercup ask again tomorrow.”

I show Buttercup the ball. “See you tomorrow!”

She smiles.
“So, how come you stay with Dr. Kukui, anyway?”

Lillie and I are walking along the beach in front of Kukui’s house. It’s quiet except the water, some birds and the shifting footsteps of Lillie’s shoes against the sand.

“M-my mother is out of town,” She says, her voice squeaky and shaking with nerves. She’s what an adult would call ‘high strung’. I think. “S-so, the Kukui family has very kindly let me stay with them.” Lillie looks away and out over the water. I try to follow, but all I see are waves. She must be seeing something else, because she looks totally spaced.

“Oh, alright.” Lillie doesn’t like talking about her mom, much, which makes it awkward to talk about mine. Still, it’s related to our conversation, and I figure it might take away some of the weird atmosphere that pops up whenever I try to talk to Lillie about anything other than her freaky cat. “...Anyway, Mom is taking us to play putt-putt in town later, and I wanted to invite you along.”

Lillie turns to me, eyes wide and mouth falling open. Is it really that surprising? I like Lillie, even if she’s a bit of a snitch and a weenie.

“Really?” She asks, and I can’t believe she’s making me repeat myself.

“Yeah, really.” I put my hand on my hip, “It’ll be fun, c’mon!”

Lillie smiles, ducking her head down and looking away for a second. I smile back.

“I need to get some money from my bag at the house,” She says, “What time are we leaving?”

“We can go get your stuff now! Maybe you could spend the night, too!” I feel great – I love having friends over – and it feels like I’m finally making progress on my friendship with Lillie, who is so shy and quiet that it seems impossible for us to get over our differences sometimes. But not today!

“Oh, maybe.” Lillie fiddles with her hands, “We’ll see if it’s okay with your mom first. I wouldn’t want to intrude…”

I start to say that she wouldn’t be intruding, but as we approach Kukui’s house I hear a thundering splash of sand under heavy feet and panting and suddenly a wall of tan and grey and black hits me and sends me straight onto the sand. Hot, muggy, stinky breath fogs all over my face before a fat pink tongue slides from my chin to my hair. I’m absolutely covered with slobber.

“Null!” A boy’s voice comes from somewhere beyond the ginormous beast sitting on me and covering my face with slobbery kisses. “Null, get off! Down, Null!”

Suddenly I can breathe and see the precious light of the sun again. I blink, wipe my face – YUCK – and sit up to see one of the biggest...dogs? I’ve ever seen.

It’s got a tan face and grey and black fur, big paws and even bigger jaws. Its weapon of choice, the bright pink tongue, is lolling from the side of its face in a happy smile, fat tail wagging like a propeller. The urge to reach up and pet the dog is there, but I notice it has a red vest on.

Service Dog (In Training!)

Well, I can’t pet a dog on the job.
“Null, come on.” The boy’s voice is insistent and I look past Null the Service Dog and see a boy with bright blond hair sprinting up. He’s wearing all black, even in the sun that’s leaving wavy lines all across the sand, and his hair is sort of in a near-edgy mullet.

As he comes closer, something about him reminds me of someone I know. His face is familiar, even if it’s difficult to tell whose face is behind his super mad face. He looks ridiculously grumpy, like he’s having to try to look pissy. It’s worse than Chris! And he doesn’t even look like a fully-fledged teenager!

The boy slides to a stop, spraying sand everywhere, and hooks his hand on the handle of Null’s vest. “Bad dog! Why’d you go jumping on a kid like that?”

Lillie says with uncharacteristic familiarity, “Because she’s a twelve year old girl. Dogs love those.”

I turn back to look at Lillie, who kicks her foot in the sand and looks down, away from me and the guy. She finally looks back up.

“Um, why are you here, Gladion?”

The wannabe teenager – Gladion? – frowns, “Uh, just, checking in on you – not like it was my choice,” He adds, as wannabe teens are wont to do, with as much tough-guy as his voice can muster without cracking, “Mom called and wanted to make sure you were doing okay, and stuff.”

“She could just ask Dr. Kukui.” Lillie starts to roll her eyes (Lillie! Rolling her eyes!) and continues, “But I guess it’s pretty good to see you.”

“You know this guy?” I point to Gladion and Null licks my hand.

“He’s... my older brother,” Lillie ducks her head again, “And...um...why don’t we just go get our stuff?” She looks back at Gladion, “Don’t you have somewhere to be with your ‘cool’ friends?”

Ouch. So this is what it’s like to have siblings? I count myself lucky to be a natural born loner. Or well, that my parents decided to leave me as a natural born loner. Gladion doesn’t look hurt – or at least, not that I can tell, given that from the two minutes I’ve met the guy he looks kinda like everything hurts him.

“I might,” He says, hand running down Null’s fluffy head to scratch behind short, triangular ears. The dog seems appreciative of the gesture and leans in while Gladion searches for words, and I feel lost and left out of the loop again. Why would Lillie’s older brother just show up? Is this what brothers did? I frown, stand and knock the sand off my butt in one smooth, cool kid motion, just so that this Gladion guy doesn’t think I’m some clod.

I clear my throat and look at Lillie. She jumps as our eyes meet and scrambles to be polite, “A-and this is Sunny. She’s one of Kukui’s neighbors, and she just moved here.”

Gladion looks down at me with his best teenager impression, but after being stared down by Chris, it’s pretty weak, and obviously an act. The guy’s a total softie, I bet my entire baseball card collection on it.

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“Uh, it’s nice to meet you?” I have my hands on my hips as I fill the silence Gladion’s awkwardness created.

“Right.” His face scrunches up kinda funny, like he’s sizing me up, or judging me, or both. I feel my brow furrow and I squint back at him. “Well, I do actually have plans. I just – I mean, Mother just wanted to make sure you were alright. C’mom, Null.”
Lillie folds her arms across her chest as we watch him walk off, sweating and struggling to control his ginormous ‘service dog’ (in training!) as Null pulls him along the sand.

“That was weird,” I say, “Why doesn’t he stay with Kukui?”

“He’s old enough to stay home alone,” Lillie replies, “But Mother doesn’t trust him to babysit me. She says he’s going through a phase.”

“Huh.” Adults and their ideas. Granted, some kids did go through phases...like those Ponyta girls. Not that there’s anything wrong with liking Ponyta, of course. Some kids just...are obsessed. What kind of phase Gladion was going through was lost on me – he just seemed like the typical kind of kid wanting to be a teenager before it was his time.

Lillie shrugs, a tiny, somehow polite one, and says, “I’ve never been putt-putting before.”

She wanted to change the subject? That was fine, because her statement baffles me. Never played putt-putt? Never experienced the power of a hole-in-one? This kid was deprived, neglected!

I take her hand, “Well, we better hurry up and get your stuff! Daylight’s burnin’!”

Mom is waiting for us at our house when I arrive with Lillie in tow. It took everything I had to convince her not to bring Nebby along, but finally I was able to separate Lillie from her kitten and get to my house in time to see Charlie and Falkor skipping down the driveway.

“Hi!” Charlie waves, “Thanks again for taking us, Mrs. Heather! I’m so excited! I can’t wait to play the volcano hole!!” Lillie tilts her head to the side.

Falkor nods and bobs in a near curtsy to my mom, “I’m very grateful for the invitation, Mrs. Heather.”

Jeez, she always sounds like such a nerd. I give her arm a light punch and grin, “You won’t be grateful when you see how good I am at putt-putt!”

Charlie puffs out her chest, “You think you’re good? Wait until you see my sweet trick shots.”

Our banter even makes Lillie crack a smile, but somewhere in the laughter a quiet voice says, “Sorry I’m late.”

Thea actually came! The tall kid is holding a purse that looks way too small for her freakishly large hands.

“Thanks.” She says to my mom as she ushers us into the car. It carries the politeness of Falkor and the enthusiasm of Charlie in a single, monotone word.

Mom’s back seat barely fits the four of them – Charlie rides in the middle, her gangly legs tucked up to her chest. She looks like an awkward frog. Thea has herself pushed to the window, and she stares out of it with her calm, no-nonsense expression. Falkor and Lillie cram into the other side, long hair in each other’s faces and little ‘oofs’ as the car jostles us out of the driveway marking elbows and knees bumping uncomfortably.

The ride is smooth after that, despite the car being over capacity. It’s my first time really seeing the town properly; I’ve only been to the grocery store, which passes by quickly. The rest of town is cool! Still on the beach, with lots of shops and apartments. The people walking around are stylish, and traffic isn’t too bad. The putt-putt park is on us before we know it.
Mount Wela Park Putt-Putt is a sprawling expanse of plastic and fake putting greens, with exciting locations like a lake with a giant sea monster and a jungle with a giant mantis-thing swiping at unsuspecting golf balls. But I can see the crown jewel of the place as we pull in: a gigantic volcano, sticking out from the gimmicks and games like a double scoop of triple fudge chocolate chunk ice cream among kiddie cones. Man, I’m craving ice cream.

“Woah,” is all I can manage as my mom pulls into the parking lot. We file out of the car and it’s everything we can do not to take off running to the entry booth.

It feels like forever before my mom rounds up everyone, the money and gets us our coveted putters. Charlie is spinning hers in her hands like a baton, while Falkor and Lillie politely hold theirs. Thea has hers resting over her shoulder.

I give my putter an experimental twirl, testing the weight like I would a baseball bat. “Well. I guess we better get started!”

“Not without me, I hope!”

I turn to the voice – it’s Buttercup! She had mentioned that she would meet us here, but in my excitement I had...kinda forgotten. Oops. Like Thea, she carries her putter on her shoulder.

“You ready to lose?” I grin at her, and she gives me her best mysterious smile in return. Buttercup was interesting, and a lot of fun to hang around, even if she never talked about her weird history with Chris and the rest of the camp.

The game starts and it’s pretty normal. Thea is really good; Lillie not so much, and Charlie hits the ball way too hard and Falkor hits the ball just shy almost every time. Buttercup seems pretty relaxed about playing, so she doesn’t really score poorly or well, either. I’m somewhere in the middle – but I keep the confident act up and do my best to give Thea a run for her money. We’re pretty even by the time we reach the volcano, Mount Wela.

But as we walk to the green, two kids are arguing.

The first one is a really dark skinned kid with dark hair and wild eyebrows, wearing red shorts. He, like Charlie, is all-but spinning his putter in his hands while he says, “Look, you gotta go get the ball. Them’s the breaks.”

He’s arguing with a black-haired kid wearing a backwards baseball cap and a baggy shirt with a skeleton on it. The kid has his arms folded, and a puff of hair sticks out from the hole in what would normally be the back of the cap.

“No way,” Baseball Cap replies, “I’m not the one who hit it into the pond from here. You go get it.”

“You’re just jealous!” Red Shorts spins the putter to make his point.

“That doesn’t even make sense! Like, you hit the ball, you go get it. I’m not the one who tried to fricken drive the ball into the top of the volcano!”

“It was totally cool!”

“It was totally trash!”

“The rule was whoever got the lowest score had to go get the ball.”

“Yeah, which is you.”
“Your score is one point lower than mine!”

I look at everyone, and they look just as baffled and confused as I feel. Why is this even worth arguing over? I mean, trick shots are cool and all, but what was the point of fighting over who has to go pick up a ball from a tiny, fake lake?

“I’m gonna say something,” I growl, “They’re hogging the green!”

Lillie touches my arm and I look back at her as she says, “Maybe we should just wait, it seems sort of rude—”

“Yes,” Falkor adds, “We don’t want to get involved, anyway. They seem like jerks.”

Charlie and Thea, on the other hand, are on my side.

“Hey.” Thea’s voice carries despite how quiet she is. Her voice makes me feel like I’m about to get pummeled.

“Yeah, HEY,” Charlie puts her hands on her hips, “Are you guys gonna act like teenage girls and argue over who’s prettier or are you gonna get out of the way and let the rest of us have a turn?”

She takes the words right out of my mouth. And then she takes the words right out of the boys’ mouths. They both shut up and turn to face us, mouths hanging half open in surprise and probably anger.

“What’s it to you?” Red Shorts points at us with his putter, “We’re in the middle of something.”

“Yeah, middle of Stupidville, population you.” I say, feeling a smirk on my face before I can even think to do anything about appearing neutral.

Baseball Cap snorts, “Yeah, well, we gotta finish our game, but someone is holding it up.”

“Why not just do another shot for it?” I roll my eyes. The solution is so easy. “Whoever gets the best score on this course doesn’t have to get the ball.”

The two look at each other and then back to me. “You be the judge of who has the coolest shot,” Red Shorts says, “And we’ll see. I’m gonna get a hole in one!”

While Red Shorts sets up, borrowing a spare ball from one of us, Baseball Cap sidles up beside me.

“I’m Maurice, by the way,” He adjusts his hat.

“Sunny,” We all exchange introductions, and Maurice grins at us.

“Kiawe’s totally gonna choke.” He leans on his putter, “He always tries too hard.”

“He’s beating you right now, though.” I say, and Maurice blushes a little.

Kiawe – Red Shorts – takes his stance at the head of the green. The park falls silent – the laughter of other kids and teenagers playing behind us disappears, the wind comes to a stop, removing the smell of salt and ocean that was blowing in from the shore across the street. The felt moves under his feet as he widens his legs and grips the putter tightly.

For all the setup, as he takes his swing, he hits the ball too hard, and it rolls down the green with too much force, bouncing off the entrance to the volcano pathetically and ricocheting out of bounds. Ouch. That’s an automatic penalty; he’s on his third shot.
He takes another swing, and this time makes it into the volcano. His face is flustered and angry, but he still turns around, points at Maurice, and says, “Good luck topping that.”

“Yeah,” Maurice says with nothing but sarcasm, “I’ll never be able to beat that level of suck.”

This earns a collection of tiny “ooos” from our gathered girl posse.

Before Maurice goes up to the red line to make his putt, Thea takes his arm.

“You want to aim a little crooked,” She says, offering no other explanation. Maurice tilts his head to the side, but after a moment he nods. What does she even mean? I find myself crossing my arms as I try to figure out why you’d aim in a weird way. Was it something about the felt?

It had to be.

Maurice licks his lips as he steps up to the red line, ball teetering precariously close to the slope.

Everything stops again as we wait.

He cuts the ball funny, like Thea said, and we watch as the ball curves down the green and straight into the hole in the side of the volcano, where the ball gets locked in and a gigantic plume of fire spits out of the top.

“That is so cool.” I hear Charlie say behind me.

Kiawe groans, “No fair! You cheated! You got help.”

“I still hit the ball, you dummy,” Maurice rolls his eyes, “So go get your stupid ball and stop complaining.”

“That was some nice shootin’, Tex,” Buttercup laughs as Kiawe stalks away to the pond fairway. Maurice scratches the back of his neck and shrugs away the praise.

I add, “It was pretty cool.” Normally, I might act tough and try to show up the stranger with a sick trickshot of my own, but I have a feeling it would go wrong. Besides, there’s a fine line to walk between being a try-hard and actually having a good time, and I’m not about to ruin the mood that my friends and I have over winning, for once.

It would just feel wrong to put that pressure on everyone, and for the first time, I think I might not care if Thea beats me, because I’ve never had so many friends, never had this much fun. Maurice winds up hanging out with us for the rest of the night; he’s funny, and he likes baseball! And my mom bought us all ice cream! I got triple-fudge chocolate chunk.

This really might be the best summer of my life.
Alolan Roller Coaster Ride

Chapter Summary

A brief dip into Chris's point of view (:)

I may not be the best at my job. I can be like, totally a jerk, if I’m being honest. Kids can be as frustrating as they are cute...and the paperwork is a drag. Not to mention the fact that I’m stubborn, a know-it-all, impatient, vain and too competitive for my own good—there’s barely a reason why I should be a camp counselor in the first place.

But there’s one place I can be where I forget that I’m working a shitty summer job I’m shitty at.

My fingers brush water clearer than a Neutrogena soap bar as salty spray speckles my face and body. Balancing on the wave comes easy, and it’s a total bomb, anyway—all the waves today have been off the hook—and I know I can carve out some seriously mad moves before I hit the shore. It feels good with the ocean air flipping my hair back, going fins out for a minute as I slide off the top of the wave.

There’s no place better than a wave. There’s no time to think about anything when there’s a deck to stay on and the water wants you to wipe out for a good swim. I’ve been on the waves for as long as I can remember—hell, I think I was like, surfing before I was walking.

But the wave knows I’ve been stalling, and I have to pump a bit before I pick my speed back up or risk having to bail (and again, it’s a total bomb, so why would I do that?)

I blink water from my eyes as I ride the wave out. The ocean is clear, but the sands are white as glass in the sun. Shielding my eyes, I look out over the shore.

A weight drops in my stomach, worse than if I’d been thrown in the wash cycle of a wave.

Sitting on the beach, her tan little arms folded across her knees, is Sunny.

The smart part of my brain knows she’s not here to like, ruin my day or anything. She lives near the beach, too. The dumb part of my brain, the tired part, the teenage angst that gets me up in the morning part of my brain, only has one thing to repeat over and over again:

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit.

In the middle of my panicking I go too far forward on the board and the tip hits the water. The next thing I know I’m flipping head over heels and into the salty spray. I come up spluttering and swearing, and have to duck under the water again to avoid getting bonked in the head by my board.

“God--dam--dang it,” I catch myself as I come up closer to the shore, where Sunny is avidly watching me. When I stumble onto the beach, dragging my board by the leash, I hear my voice snap before I stop myself, “What are you doing here?”

“I live here, duh,” The kid replies with that constant sass that’s practically too old for her actual age.

“Where’s your mom?”
“At work.”

“And she let you come out to the beach alone?” I highly doubt it, but I have to ask anyway. Stupid kids—and Sunny is especially prone to rash, crazy and stupid decisions—can get seriously hurt near the water, and as much as she might get on my nerves, I’m not letting her do anything like that.

Sunny pauses, “Uh, no, technically I’m supposed to be at Kukui’s house, but…”

I roll my eyes, “You snuck off because you were bored.”

She brightens, “Yeah!”

Sighing, I put my hand on my hip in my best authoritative stance (as if Sunny would respond to authority) and point back in the direction of Kukui’s beachside bungalow, “Well, you shouldn’t be out here on your own.”

“I’m not on my own, I’m with you!”

Checkmate, the kid’s eyes say, glittering with their dark hazel evil.

“I’m busy.”

“Yeah, busy wiping out.”

I snarl, “I wouldn’t have wiped out if you hadn’t distracted me!” Sunny almost flinches, but the kid sticks her chin out at me instead.

“Well,” She says, “I didn’t think real surfers got distracted. Gotta stay focused, right?”

“What would you know about real surfing? I’ve been on the water since before you were born.” I can hear the annoyance creeping deep into my voice. This kid gets to me so much. She’s like, totally a troublemaker and totally an evil genius at the same time. Sunny’s able to rally her fellow campers against the “evil teenagers” like no other brat I’ve ever seen before. It’s almost hard to not be impressed by her, but it’s frustrating all the same when all she does is cause trouble for me. She’s gonna give me gray hairs, and ruin my perm.

Sunny shrugs, “I dunno, prove it, then.”

I look out to the water. The waves are still looking rad, so I glance back down at Sunny, back at the water, and down to my board. “Alright. Check this out, squirt.”

The wave I use to show off is incredible. There’s nothing that can’t be done on it; I’ve got the perfect bottom turn, my roundhouse cutback is gorgeous—a flawless figure-eight and a full speed return to the curl—and I end on a closeout, cutting perfectly on the lip of the wave. It sounds cheesy, but in the moment I’m one with the wave and my board, a perfect balance of weight and water. It feels amazing.

Sunny’s face is different when I come back to the beach. There’s a fierce light in her eyes...is that awe I see? And she swallows a little when I lean on the board.

“Well, how about that?” I grin at her, although it might be more teeth and smugness than a smile.

She clenches her fists in front of her chest, “That…” I bristle in anticipation of whatever smartassed comment she has ready, “Was awesome!”

I blink. Did she just compliment me? I think Sunny just complimented me. Sunny!
“Would you teach me?”

“What.”

She shakes her head earnestly, as though she can’t believe she’s asking me at all, “Yeah, I want to surf like that! I’ve never seen anything like it. Can you show me?”

I laugh despite myself. This. This is unbelievable, unfathomable, absolutely ridiculous and at the same time I feel a weird bloom of heat in my chest. I look to the side and then back at Sunny. She’s still beaming with an intense energy and her eyes now have a soft, begging undertone that makes my heart twinge with some kind of instinctual drive to give in to the whims of the resident uber-brat. All because of some melting ‘pretty please with a cherry on top’ eyes, I find myself sighing after a moment.

“It’s not that easy, you know.”

“Well, duh.” Sunny rolls her eyes, the previous near-tears of desperation snapped away in an instant, back to the calculating, mischievous expression that defined the little gremlin for me in more ways than one. “I didn’t become an all-star ball player overnight, either. But can you show me?”

I put my hand on my hip, a classic teen in authority move I can’t seem to escape, “Duh, I guess.”

Sunny is a smart kid, and she’s a hell of an athlete. She picks up pop-ups on the beach like a natural, but once we start playing some in the water, she’s over ambitious and tries to pop up before she’s even just let a wave carry her to shore. I laugh hard as she comes up spluttering, her thick twin braids a mess around her face.

“It’s not funny!”

“It’s totally funny,” I say, “Look, just try to ride a few waves on your stomach. Just let them carry you in, so you can get an idea of paddling.”

Reluctantly, Sunny tries it, and the resulting delighted look on her face as she adjusts more to the balance of her borrowed board makes me smile in return. I take it for granted, I realize with a bit of a tweak in the heart-place. Surfing makes me happy, and yet somehow I can hardly imagine the kind of thrill it must be to surf for the first time. It’s always been part of my life, and seeing the look on Sunny’s face as she just experiences a little wind in her hair and the dip of the ocean as she rides the whitewater home to the beach makes me glad it’s always been there.

But it makes me feel glad for her, too--glad that I’m able to share it with someone. I offer my hand for a high-five when she stumbles out of the surf.

“Nice one. You’re getting the hang of it.”

Sunny eyes my hand dubiously, but then smacks her wet palm to mine, “Well, you’re not a bad teacher, I guess.”

“You guess?” I stick my tongue out at her like she’d normally do to me, “I’ve practically got you popping up on the waves!”

She fixes her braids while she contemplates what I said. “Okay, you’re pretty good. Can we try again?”

I look at the sky. We’ve spent so much time practicing and taking baby steps that I’ve let the day pass. Sunset is rolling in in subtle oranges and yellows that cast the waves a new shade of turquoise--
now maybe more accurate to say Neutrogena clear.

“It’s getting pretty late.”

Sunny looks crestfallen as her eyes trail down to her tan toes, “That’s fair. I was hoping to try one more time, y’know?”

Instead of letting her go solo, I reach for my board. If there’s one thing I’m not going to let fly, it’s having a good day of surfing go to waste, and letting this kid leave feeling disappointed.

What can I say? I’m a softie.

“I have a better idea,” I say. “Come on.”

Tandem surfing is by no means easy. In competitions I’ve been to, I’ve seen duos pulling stunts like crazy, acrobatic as hell and way cooler than what I was planning on doing. With Sunny sitting at the nose of my board, I paddle us out in the water. She’s looking back at me with a huge grin.

“You think this is going to work?”

“Well, we’ll have an awesome wipe if it doesn’t,” I reply with a grin setting onto my face. I have dimples when I genuinely smile, and somehow I get the feeling that Sunny’s getting a faceful of them.

I return my focus to paddling. It’s a little harder with the slight addition of Sunny’s weight, but soon enough we’re far out and I can feel the wave behind us. With the heavier board, as I pop up, we teeter uneasily. I take a steadying breath, and it’s a moment like watching the drop from a roller coaster.

“Hold on!”

We ride the wave. While I can’t do as many of my usual tricks, I still give the kid a good time--she’s even a natural at helping me stay on balance, keeping her weight centralized and flowing with the board--and she never even comes close to tipping us.

So as the wave rolls over and makes a barrel, there’s only one thing to do to really sell the moment as magic. Sunset sparkles over the white foam and I jet us straight into the barrel, dragging my fingers along the water with it. Sunny whoops and hollers from sheer thrill and I hear my own excited laugh as we shoot out of the barrel and I cut us out to ride the wave out to shore. Sunny looks back up at me, beaming.

“That. Was. AWESOME.”

“Pretty much,” I strike a pose on the board.

Sunny laughs at me, but it’s not mocking, for once. There’s something charming about her when she’s like this, something that gives me a glimmer of insight into why the other kids seem to flock to her. She’s...well, she lives up to her name.

“Teach me Chrissy-wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope!”

I snort, “You’ve much to learn, young padawan.”

“That’s like, Yoda, but it works,” She leans back on the board as the waves lap against it, “...you know, you’re pretty cool, Chris.”
Hardly.

But I smile at her anyway, “You’re not so bad yourself, twerp.”

She sticks her tongue out at me, “Don’t get friendly on me.”

I roll my eyes and shove her by her head into the water. “How’s that for friendly?”

As she comes back up, she spits water out in my direction, “There’s the teenager I know and love!”

“Love, huh?”

“T-that’s not what I meant!” Sunny makes a disgusted face, “Tolerate. Tolerate is the word I was going for.”

I find myself smiling. I pretend to tolerate the kids, too, but deep down, maybe I do what I do because I love the smiles and the little moments, the barrel waves we make as we have our daily misadventures and memories. Maybe I’m not so much of a jerk as I think I am. Maybe I care about the kids.

And the paycheck.

...Definitely the paycheck. I’m not that soft.
Let the record show that I did NOT throw the first scoop of mashed potatoes.

We never meant for anyone to get hurt.

The mess hall at camp is a pretty standard cabin-lookin’ thing. It’s got a bunch of long tables with hard, butt pain-inducing benches for a kid to sit on while chowing down on surprisingly tasty food. I’ll be honest, I haven’t had a bad meal my entire time here.

Today is chicken nugget day, which includes a fat stack of mashed potatoes and some green beans with it, coupled with snickerdoodle cookies that are freshly made, as far as I can tell.

I’m sitting with Maurice, Charlie, Buttercup, Thea and Falkor at one of the middle benches. Maurice is pretty swell; not only do we have a lot in common, he’s actually a cool kid. He wears his baseball cap backwards and everything! I wear mine forwards because I’m a traditionalist--I think that’s the word--but we both are fans of the same best team in Kanto (the Indigo Plateau Legends).

We’re all chatting about silly things: the dodgeball game we played earlier that morning, my recent adventure surfing with Chris (which no one believes), Falkor’s latest book, Charlie’s got another one of her silly stories, and Thea is quieter than a mouse, only grunting here and there in what I guess is her best laugh.

Buttercup is as mysterious as ever, talking about her weekend with barely any comment, directing the conversation back to everyone else any time something comes up about her. It’s a pretty adult tactic, and I only catch it because I’ve seen my mom do it before when she’s sad.

“So,” Maurice says, “You’re a shortstop?”

“Yeah, how’d you guess?” I blink at him.

“'Cause you’re short,” He snickers louder than a snicker in a snickerdoodle cookie and I feel my face get hot.
“I’m not short! I’m still growing, is all!”

No comment on the fact that I’m by far the smallest person at the table. I make a face at them all as each of my friends quirks a signature grin in my direction—Charlie’s all white teeth and a bark of laughter, Falkor ducks her head down to avoid being seen.

An arm goes around my shoulder. Buttercup gives me a sweet smile, “It’s okay, Sunny. Yoda’s short, and he’s a total badbutt.”

I consider this for a moment. It’s true. “Yeah, I guess…”

Maurice grinned, “Wouldn’t it be sweet to have a baseball bat lightsaber?”

The table erupts into conversation about the latest Star Wars movie and I sit back and enjoy the madness for a little while. I’m the Yoda, huh? Guess that makes sense—I am the wise and powerful leader of our little troop. I mean, I’d rather be like, Princess Leia, if I’m being honest—just because she’s a princess doesn’t mean she’s not awesome—but I laugh when, predictably, Maurice compares himself to Han Solo. Falkor pushes up her glasses as she makes fake robot sounds.

Maybe when the next movie comes out, we can all go see it together.

I’m almost back into the conversation when my ears pick up a pouty voice over the sound of Hau’s bubbly and super loud laugh:

“She thinks she’s so cool, hanging out with those jerks and then thinking she can just come back and do whatever.”

“They definitely cheated letting her on, I mean, you totally would’ve won that race if the new kid wasn’t dumb enough to bring on a traitor like her.”

I feel my cheeks burn. Me? Dumb? Like...like hell I’m dumb! I whip my head around and see Lana, whose attitude is earning her the title of my arch nemesis, talking to a tall girl with long pigtails, way longer than my own double braids. I narrow my eyes at them, hoping they sense it, but they’re too wrapped up in their mean conversation to get burned.
“Hey, Buttercup,” I ask, “How come everyone is so mean to you?”

She’s silent for a long moment, “I don’t know what you mean. You guys aren’t.”

Turning my head to her, I frown, “But like, everyone calls you a traitor and a bunch of mean stuff. Why?”

Buttercup chews her lip. Hard. “I…well,” She sighs, “I used to be friends with a lot of people at camp, but…”

“But what? You’re friends with us, yeah?”

Falkor nods, “I don’t hold it against you, Buttercup. They were totally jerks to you.”

It? What’s it? “What do you mean?” I ask.

Sighing, Buttercup puts her head in her hands, “Look, it’s not that big of a deal. I just left the camp for a while, and my new friends...well, they weren’t--aren’t--exactly popular. Can we drop it?”

Woah. Talk about some drama. Buttercup was a secret bad girl! No wonder stuck-up Chris got mad at her trying to sneak in on some camp action. I rub my chin in my best ‘thoughtful’ gesture.

“I mean, I guess. It just makes me want to know more, but…”

“Please?”

Falkor, who’s on my left side, nudges me with her elbow. I cough, “Yeah, sure.”

They overhear us.
“Too embarrassed to talk about it?” Lana sneers from behind me. I turn my head at them now and feel my teeth baring. The short kid has her hands on her hips, “It’s no surprise you came crawling back with your tail stuck between your legs! Even those Skull wannabes didn’t want you around!”

Woah. Why so much hostility? And who’s Skull? I look between Lana and Buttercup. Buttercup’s face is flushed.

Charlie pipes up, “Hey, back off, Lana! We’re tryn’a eat here!”

The pigtail girl raises her eyebrows, “Dunno why you’d want to eat with a jerk like her.” She’s looking at me.

I clench my fists, “What’s your damage?” I can hear Chris in my voice, but it’s worth it in the moment.

“You’re a cheater, and you get way too much slack because you’re the new kid, and everyone feels sorry for you.”

“Let me repeat: what the heck is your freaking damage?” I start to stand up, but Buttercup and Falkor both grab my arms. “You that mad that you had to take a swim?”

Lana steps back from me, “I--I’m mad because you sweep in and suddenly everything is all about you! You win the Koko Cup, you win the boat race, you won dodgeball this morning! No one wins all the time, so you must be cheating!”

“I didn’t win the boat race!” I snap, “My friends and I won the boat race.”

“Hey, Lana, maybe this isn’t a good idea,” The green-haired girl puts her hand in front of Lana. Lana slaps it down with a ‘Shut up, Mallow’.

“Well, your choice of friends sucks!”

I jump up, “You take that back!”
“You stop cheating and maybe I will!”

Somehow the adults haven’t caught on to our argument in the absolute chaos of a swarm of kids eating in the same room, but the other kids have. There’s a slowly growing air of silence, until the laughter and excitement dies without any kind of announcement. Lana and I are just staring each other down. Thea has somehow gotten in between us at some point, and the pigtailed girl is in front of Lana.

“I’m. Not. A. Cheater. And. My. Friends. Don’t. Suck.” I can barely hear or recognize my own voice--it sounds like I’m underwater, far away, bubbling with anger.

Lana makes a face at me, “That’s something a loser would say.”

I’m about to snap something back when a glob of something flies past me and smacks Lana square in her face with an impressive splat. I turn my head to see Maurice snarling, mashed potatoes still caking his fingers.

“Back off, shrimp!” He hollers, “Or I’ll smack you with the beans!”

The green haired girl reacts quickly, and reaches for my plate, taking a fistful of my precious chicken nuggets and hurling them as hard as she can at Maurice, who ducks out of the way with athletic heroism. I’m dumbstruck for a minute before the chaos sets in.

Charlie screeches, “FOOD FIGHT!” and the room explodes in shrieks. I duck under the table with Falkor and Thea, narrowly avoiding getting plastered by projectile potatoes. I pick up a crumbling snickerdoodle cookie and throw it from between the bench and table, plonking Mallow on the back of her head as she’s aiming for Maurice, who’s flying from plate to plate, hurling mashed potatoes like a pitcher straight out of the major leagues. Kids are getting caught in the crossfire, and chipping in--it’s an uproar, tables are turning over, I’m yelling, everyone’s yelling, and --

There’s a grisly--grisly is a word, right? It’s a gross word, and I need a gross word--crunching sound, and a shriek of agonizing pain, pain that makes my stomach twist and everyone stop what they’re doing to turn to the source.

It’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen. My stomach twists harder, hard enough that it’s everything I can do not to throw up on the spot. A kid with wooly, white-blond hair is writhing on
the floor, clutching an arm that’s so clearly broken it’s not funny. While the bone hasn’t broken skin, it’s obviously pushing out in a way that—gah, I can’t go any deeper in the deets, or I’m gonna hurl all over the floor.

No one says a word. There’s the sometimes plink and plop of green beans and mashed potatoes falling from upturned tables and slack fingers, but other than the sobs from the wounded kid, no one makes a peep, no one’s even breathing.

“What happened? What’s going on in here?” A woman’s voice booms out, hard as stone. The mess hall doors burst open and she walks in, short brown hair and dark skin illuminated by the sun behind her. She’s tall and all curves. I’ve never seen her before, but she carries herself with a lot of authority, and I find myself automatically flinching away from her gaze as she scans the entire room before rushing to broken-arm-kid.

“I-I fell and--and,” The kid cries out as he tries to move. The woman shushes him gently and helps him to his feet.

“We’ll get you to the nurse, and then to the hospital once we call your parents. Chris!” She snaps, “Pazu! Oliver! One of you get in here and take him.”

Chris is the first on the scene, all-but running with a slightly panicked look on her typically pouty face. She makes eye contact with me with a defined, “What the HECK?” shifting over her face before she turns her back, guiding the kid outside and away from the warzone.

I swallow as the woman surveys everyone again and fire lights in her eyes. She’s stone still for a minute before she turns to everyone, pausing here and there to make eye contact until finally, she says, “Who’s responsible for this mess?”

No one says a word. I look out of the corner of my eye and see Maurice start to shift uncomfortably.

But I stand up straight. He did it for me. He was defending me from Lana, doing what any solid friend would do.

So I swallow hard and say, “I did.”

The woman whirls on me and says, “Did you, now?” Her eyes bore into me, demanding, intense, as
if she knows I’m not telling the entire truth.

“Yeah.” I puff my chest out, “It’s my fault.”

She points to the door, “Come with me, young lady.”

I march out the door with a long look back at my friends. Charlie looks near tears, and Falkor gives me a small wave. Thea is unreadable, and Maurice mouths a single “thanks”. Buttercup just shakes her head, looking down at the floor.

Talk about taking one for the team.

Chapter End Notes

The first death of the run! It was a fairly unimportant mareep that died as soon as I caught him. His name was Jen.
“What you did was completely unacceptable, Sunny.” Olivia says. She’s the tall woman who dragged me to the Administrative Office—an office out of the main cabin. Turns out she’s in charge of camp activities, although I haven’t seen her around. I guess she’s a busy woman.

But the busy woman has me sitting in a seat across from her desk. My legs dangle limply. I don’t look away from her. If I’m owning up to this fight—which really is my fault, kinda—I’m not backing down from it.

“I know.” I make a scrunched up face, “But no one tells me my friends suck.”

“Someone got seriously injured because of what you did. You’ll be lucky if you’re allowed to come back to camp.”

A smooth, extremely lady-like voice slips in from behind me, “‘If?’ There’s no ‘if.’ In my camp, there will be no ‘if’ for such disgraceful behavior.”

I turn my head to see one of the most beautiful women—like, supermodel pretty—standing in the doorway. Her hair is super blonde, she’s tall, all legs, like a stork, only not weird looking, and her eyes are intense, full of an emotion I can only describe as disgust as she looks down at me from behind long eyelashes.

Sticking my chin out at her, I give her my best ‘bring it’ face. As much as it hits me in the chest to hear that I might not be coming back to camp, no way am I betraying my friends. This fight was on me, and that’s the story I’m sticking with.

“Lusamine,” Olivia says, voice uncertain, “I believe camp matters like this are my business.”

“My dear,” Lusamine’s hand appears in my peripheral vision, clenching the top of the chair with perfectly manicured nails. My mom never has her nails done like that. “This is my camp. And for a situation this extreme, I see no reason why I shouldn’t have a say in the punishment of this...young...lady.”

I give Olivia a look. She blinks at me, and looks back up at Lusamine, dark eyes going hard, “I was thinking a three day suspension, but I was waiting for her mother to arrive.”

“Oh, excellent.” Lusamine says, “A little parent-counselor conference sounds wonderful.” She puts a hand gently on my shoulder. Her hands are cold. “Young lady?”

“Sunny.” My voice is confident, unafraid.

“Sunny,” Lusamine’s voice is fake, syrupy sweet, “Why don’t you have a seat outside? The grownups need to have a discussion about your...behavior.”

I jump out of the chair and step out. I consider just bailing now and making a break for freedom, but that’s the coward’s way out. Like a brave warrior, I take a seat and try my best to eavesdrop. Lusamine’s voice is only a drizzle of honey behind the wooden door. Olivia’s is sharp here and there, but I can’t make anything out.

There’s a gentle set of footsteps from the doorway that distracts me from trying to listen in on the adults. I glance up to see Lillie, clutching her little purse as always, giving me a confusing look. It’s sad and a little fiery, not at all like her.
“Why did you…” She starts, and I shake my head, cutting her off.

“’Cause Maurice did it for me.”

“I thought you hated liars.” Lillie twists the strap of her bag as she glances down at her feet and back up at me.

I make a face at her, “It’s not a lie; Maurice wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t started the whole thing.”

Her face shifts into something deadly serious. It’s a grown-up face. “That was very noble of you.”

“I mean, I don’t see how that makes me royalty.”

Lillie puts her palm to her forehead, “I meant that it was brave of you.”

Oh. I grin, “Probably just stupid. I’m gonna get kicked out of camp.”

She bristles at that, “What?”

“Yeah, this Lusamine lady, she seems pretty like…set on it.”

At the name ‘Lusamine’, Lillie stiffens, stiller than a statue and then some. Her pale skin is even paler, and she looks like she ate something wrong, like her stomach hurts bad.

“Really?” She chokes, “That’s…” Lillie pauses for a long moment, getting herself back together before she comes over and gives me a slow, unsteady hug. I pat her back awkwardly.

“I deserve it,” I finally say, “I got a kid’s arm broken.”

Lillie frowns. “…I...um, hate seeing people get hurt. And I can’t stand seeing people hurt other people...but it’s not like you did it on purpose. It’s not like you did it at all!” She raises her voice into a harder whisper. “You’re not going to get hurt because of it, either.”

It’s like she knows leaving camp would...well, crush me. I fake a smile.

“It’s okay.”

“No...I….I have to go.” Lillie swallows and darts for the door--not the door out of the main cabin, but the door into Olivia’s office. She knocks, all timid, no spunk, and lets herself in.

I can’t hear anything, so I just kick my legs and stare down at the floor for a while, until more footsteps draw my attention.

“Sunny…” Mom. She looks so tired as she steps into the administrative office. Mom’s eyes have never looked so worn down...so disappointed.

Now I duck my head. “Mom...I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think I’m the one you owe an apology, but we’ll see.” She puts a hand on my hair and ruffles it a little bit, but the energy, the humor, is missing from the motion. Mom knocks on the door and lets herself in.

“Miss Sanchez,” Lusamine purrs, “It’s such a pleasure to meet you, although I wish it were under better circumstances.”
Lillie darts out a few minutes later and all but runs away, not making eye contact with me. What had she been up to? Her face is flushed. The door closes behind her again without any special notice.

My execution awaits.

While I look down at my feet again, I hear yet another bump from across the way. Looking up, I see a stack of faces pressed on the administrative office door, first and foremost Charlie’s devastated frown. She presses her cheek on the glass.

When the door opens, she almost tumbles onto the floor in a heap.

“What are you guys doing?” I hiss, “Do you want me to get in more trouble, or do you idiots want to get in trouble, too?”

“You’re doomed,” Charlie whisper-wails, “Doomed, Sunny--Miss Lusamine is literally Satan.”

Buttercup frowns from where she’s leaning on the door. “I wouldn’t go that far, but if the camp owner is involved…” She whispers, “You’re in serious trouble.”

“Why did you do it?” Falkor’s hands are clutched to her chest, as if her heart hurts, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I started it!” Maurice is wringing his hat in his hands. Thea only nods in agreement.

“No,” I shake my head as I whisper back, “If I hadn’t gotten into the argument with Lana, none of this would’ve happened. You guys don’t deserve to get in trouble. This is my responsibility.”

“O fearless leader,” Buttercup sighs, “I hope they let you come back to camp.”

Don’t remind me, I think. It feels like someone punches me in the stomach every time the thought rolls around. A summer going so well, a summer where I make friends, and have a good time, and feel like I’m on top of the world, and I have to go and ruin it. I’ll be all alone. Grounded for life.

“You think that’s going to cut it? We don’t tolerate that kind of behavior here, Heather,” Lusamine snaps too loudly. We all turn to face the door. My stomach drops more, and I swallow.

“It was nice knowing you guys,” I say.

Charlie whimpers, “We won’t forget you. I’ll come visit, I swear!”

I hear someone’s hand on the door handle, and I motion for my friends to scram, skedaddle, whatever words for running the heck away I can think of. They bolt in a scramble of gangly kid arms and legs. Charlie gives me a sad look. She’s probably my best friend. We were gonna have so much fun together.

“Let’s go, Sunny.” Mom puts her hand on my shoulder. Nails short, untrimmed. Her hand doesn’t dig into my arm. It’s gentle, more of a light touch than anything. But her voice is tight, frustrated. Even more...disappointed.

I hop up and walk beside her. I see my friends outside the cabin as we leave, so I put my head up, even if my stomach hurts and I feel...like crying.

We get into the car in silence. It’s a short drive home, so I figure it’s going to be quiet the whole way. I’m still waiting for the bomb to drop.

“You’re grounded.” Mom says.
I shrug, “Figured.”

More silence. Mom speaks again, “And you’re suspended from camp for three days.”

What? I snap my head to the side, “I--three days?”

“You’re lucky you have such a good friend,” Mom says softly, “She really stood up for you.”

Lillie...shy, sissy Lillie...stood up for me? Against that lady who intimidated the ever-calm, mysterious Buttercup and the obliviously cheerful Charlie? She shouldn’t have stood a chance.

“So...how long am I grounded?”

Mom gives me a look, “Three days and the weekend. No friends. No beach.”

I should feel bad, I really should. But my heart is beating so fast, so happy, so, so, SO happy that I can barely see straight. I don’t care that I’m grounded. It sucks, but the real issue, the real worry, is all behind me.

All because of Lillie. I owe her. I owe her big time.

As we pull into the driveway, I blink away tears.

They’re happy ones.
As You Wish

“So...I owe you.” Buttercup says softly as she leans against my windowsill. She’s supremely stealthy; crept into my backyard like a ghost before she’d knocked on my window with light, urgent taps. I’m leaning on the other side, window open just enough so we can communicate in secret. Mom is gone to work, but there’s always the chance that she comes in at a bad time--that’s how it always works in the movies.

“It’s alright,” I reply. The look on Buttercup’s face says otherwise.

“No, I owe you.” She takes a deep breath, “So I wanted to tell you about...why no one likes me. What I did.”

Oh. I hope my face doesn’t betray my excitement.

Buttercup leans down a little from where she’s propped herself up on her arms. Her eyelashes cover her intense eyes for a moment before she looks at me and says, “There are these kids who don’t fit in, like me. Back when I first was at camp, I started out okay, and made a few friends. Falkor was one. But people don’t like quiet kids. I…” She pauses. “I hate trying to explain this stuff. It makes me sound pathetic.”

I shake my head, “Nah, people don’t like quiet kids. You gotta watch out for the quiet ones. That’s why Thea is so scary.”

She offers me an amused grin, “Right. Well, there were some kids, the most popular--you know them, Lana and Mallow and their friends--who...well, I guess you could call it bullying…’bullied me’. Made fun of me for being quiet, for being older, for whatever they could figure out.” Buttercup shrugs, “It doesn’t bother me anymore, but then it did.”

Nodding, I urge her to continue, waving my hand.

“So I met this kid named Guzma. Well, his real name's Gus, but everyone calls him Guzma. And he and his babysitter--her name is Plumeria--were really nice. They made me feel like someone wanted me around, like I could fit in somewhere.” She takes a deep breath, unsteadily collecting her thoughts for what seems like an eternity. I’m hooked.

“There’s a whole gang of them, kids in town who can’t go to camp or don’t want to go to camp or left camp, who just...ganged up with Guzma. They call themselves the Skull Kids. It’s totally dorky, but...well, we had fun for a while.”

“What happened?” I lean in closer.

Buttercup looks away. “They’re no better. Bullies, trying to make up for not being wanted. I didn’t want to be like that anymore. So I tried to come back. Olivia let me back in, somehow, even if I was a brat when I blew up at my parents for ‘making me’ go to the camp. I had to beg them to let me go back, too, but I think they were happier that I wasn’t spending anymore time with Guzma and his friends.”

Her face changes to a smile, “But then I met you. You’ve always been good to me, and when you stood up for me in front of Lana...it meant a lot.”

“But bullies suck,” I say somberly. Somehow, I feel touched that Buttercup is sharing this about herself, sharing her history as a bullied turned bully turned ex-bully--that’s what I figured she was getting at, at least--and I try to give her a smile. It’s not the first time I’ve heard of or seen bullying. No kid’s been mean to me, because I don’t take that off people. Mom taught me to stand up for myself, and I
do it even if it’s stupid, even if it gets me in trouble.

When Buttercup giggles at my statement, I know that I’d start the food fight a hundred times if it meant never letting anyone talk smack at my friends again. They make me happy, even though it’s only been a couple of weeks of getting to know them all. It feels like we’ve been friends forever, stuck in an endless, amazing summer.

Even being grounded doesn’t matter, knowing that I’ve got friends who appreciate what I did. It’s kind of cool that...people stood up for me, too. That Lillie had barreled into a room of adults for me, that Buttercup was sneaking over to keep me company while I was trapped alone, that Charlie had tried and gotten busted--Falkor had sent me a book through her, too--and that everyone was...yeah. It’s sappy, it’s stupid, but I’ve never been happier.

Buttercup finally fills the odd silence that followed my thinking too hard. “So yeah. Now you know. I may have bullied them back. It was wrong. But I’m trying to do better now. I fit in somewhere, finally.”

“Well,” I say, “I think you’re pretty cool.”

She smiles again.

I continue, “But how come I’ve never seen these kids around? I mean, not even in town?”

Buttercup shrugs, “They don’t show up often. Even for bullies, most of them are chicken. The last thing they did was try to beat up this kid named Dodger, but he just pantsed them and made off.”

Hah, that’s pretty funny. I try to imagine Dodger outwitting a pair of goons with his annoying personality--they must be pretty dumb to fall for his gig.

“Well, I’d like to see them try to mess with me,” I joke, smacking my fist into my palm, “‘Cause I’d get ‘em real good.”

“You’re funny,” Buttercup says. We fall back into silence. I figure she’ll probably leave soon and go back to whatever it is she does when she’s not at camp, but after a minute, she asks, “What was Kanto like?”

I blink. She’s the first person who’s ever asked about Kanto, about home. It hits me for the first time since I’ve moved that I still don’t really view Alola as [i]home[/i]. It feels like a dream world, just a place we’re visiting before we go home and everything goes back to normal like it was before Dad… yeah.

“Different.” I shrug. “Sports are way bigger, especially baseball--it’s my favorite, I used to be on a really good team. I was one of the best players.” I point to a trophy sitting on a shelf, “Got that for being the MVP!”

Buttercup smiles, “Pretty cool. We surf here.”

“I know!” I stop trying to think about how the heck to explain Kanto to Buttercup to remember the rush of water and wind when Chris took me out surfing. “Chris is a really good surfer.”

“She actually competes, so she’s like you. Big into the sports,” Buttercup has a quick, goofy grin on her face. “But what else? There’s gotta be more than just baseball.”

I crinkle my nose, “Ugh, it’s just...so serious compared to here. Everything feels so happy here, but like, at school and stuff, the teachers were soooo strict.” Practically flopping on the windowsill with
the horrible memories of beating chalkboard erasers in detention and mounds of math homework, I continue, “School is really important in Kanto. Your scores matter a lot in high school and stuff. It sucks. Mom made me study so much before we found out we were moving.” It was relieving, really, not having to worry about getting into the ‘best’ middle school in Viridian. I had a feeling schools in Alola would be more laid back.

“You, studying?” Buttercup snickers.

“What?” I say, a little offended, “I can work really hard, if I want to.”

“Sure you can.”

My face flushes, but I can tell there’s no real meanness in what Buttercup is saying. I see it in the flash of her eyes and the lopsided smile that’s different from her normal one--more purposeful, less subdued.

“So why’d you move?” She makes a motion with her hand to urge me on, the same one I’d used on her earlier to get her to open up.

This is where I don’t want to go. I shrug and look down, “‘Cause of Mom’s work, is all. She wanted a new job.”

Buttercup tilts her head to the side, “Yeah? That’s all? Most people don’t just move countries. What about your house and stuff? Wouldn’t it be hard to leave that all?”

She’s so stupidly mature for her age, asking all the wrong questions. My face heats up, “My house was awesome, yeah, but Mom didn’t want to stay there anymore. She wanted to leave.”

“How come?”

“Just because, okay?” My fists clench. I don’t want to think about this.

Buttercup is smart because she drops it for a minute. “Why don’t you want to talk about it? Because you miss home?”

Of course it’s because I miss home, I feel myself trying to say, but what comes out is, “Because I miss my Dad, okay? I miss him so much, and I’ll never get to see him again!” My voice is practically a shout. I don’t think about Dad. I do my best to ignore it and never remind myself that he’s gone. He’s the reason I love baseball, always came to my games, was always there, and now it’s just me, and Mom and the cat that doesn’t like me, anyway. But I can’t say any of that. My hands are just shaking.

I feel hot streaks of tears trailing my cheeks. I wipe them away with one angry fist and sniff, “Just because, okay?”

“Just because.” Buttercup’s voice is very soft. “I’m sorry, Sunny.”

“Sorry doesn’t change what happened.”

“But I’m still sorry. I shouldn’t have been so pushy.” She shifts awkwardly on one foot and looks down at her shoes, one arm folded across her chest.

Sniffing, I shrug and put my toughest face back on. It sucks that she saw, is seeing me, like this, but I take a deep breath and exhale. It’s shaky. “It’s fine.”
There’s a very awkward silence that follows while I get myself back together.

“I think…” Buttercup taps her finger on her chin, “I forgot to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

She looks up, as if she’s having trouble putting her finger on it, “Well…oh! We’re having a field trip at camp! When are you done being grounded?”

“I’ll be back at camp on Monday,” I say.

Buttercup’s face beams, “You’ll be back in time, then! Olivia’s taking us to town to visit the shopping mall!”

I feel myself perk back up. “Cool!” There was a big mall in Celadon back home, but where I was from there were only small shops and chain supermarkets. From what I’ve seen of the outskirts of Hau’oli, it’s a real big place with a lot more stuff on the beachfront. Mom’s been too busy to take me, but she said at some point we’d check it out.

Looks like I was getting the opportunity early.

“I can’t wait,” I say. After a second, I pause, “And uh, Buttercup?”

She tilts her head to the side, “Yeah?”

“Can you, uh…” I struggle to form the right words, making a face as I do so, “Can you not mention this to anyone? I…I’d rather not kill the mood being the weird sad kid.”

Buttercup arches her eyebrow, “Mention what? I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I know is you’re the best baseball player this side of Alola.”

“Thanks,” I say.

She’s about to say something else when the telltale sound of tires hitting the gravel driveway snap our eyes to the door of my room. Buttercup salutes me and when I blink, she’s gone, faster than lightning. She could probably run every base every time she hits the ball--she’s that fast.

And she’s an even faster friend.
The neon and pixel sound of arcade game music almost drowns Olivia out as she calls us from the entrance to the Hau’oli Mall’s glorious video game paradise:

“I’m going to come back at five! Mind your counselors, and don’t break anything.”

It feels good to be back.

The arcade is so much bigger than the one back home, the endless aisles of machines all bright and flashing lights against the otherwise dim lighting that’s hiding some stains on the carpet. They have it all: Super Mareep Bros., Mankey Kong, Galaga, Ms. Pac Man—they even have the Star Wars game; name it, and it’s lined up somewhere in the magic alleys of blue lit screens.

Chris looks down at us, “Okay, go nuts.”

That was it? I jingle the money Mom donated to me for tokens and take off to exchange them. Charlie bounces along beside me, chatting all the way about how excited she is to show off her ‘mad skills’.

We exchange money for tokens and gather around in a circle. Maurice has the most.

“I’ve been saving up all my allowance money for one good arcade run. There’s a prize I really want—a real Lucario Skywalker action figure!” He clenches his golden coins in one energized fist. “I’m gonna totally get it this time!”

I grin, “Cool! I didn’t know they had such awesome prizes. Back home, it was like...little stretchy, goooey hands and trash like that.”

“Well, they don’t play here,” Falkor says, “Or well, they do play, but this arcade takes prizes seriously. I’m still trying to get this plush Dragonite!”

I take a look back at the prize counter; there’s nothing in particular I want, but I see Lillie, who’s tagged along, looking at a soft, blue-white plush of an animal I’ve never seen before—it kind of looks like a Vulpix, only softer. I turn away from the group and trot over to her.

“Hey.” I say.

“Oh, hello.” Lillie turns to me with a shy smile. “I’m glad to see you back, Sunny.”

“I never got the chance to say thanks.”

She looks away, a bit of pink rising to her cheeks, “Um, you don’t have to thank me.”

I shake my head and reply, “No, I really do. You saved my butt, big time.”

Giggling nervously, she changes the subject, “Do you see any prizes you want? They have so many to choose between.”

I take my time to look them over. They have tremendous plushes, action figures, toys of all variety, awesome lunch tins of all the popular cartoon and movie characters, but I don’t see anything that catches my eye, so I shrug.

“Nah. What about you?”
“Oh,” Lillie says, “I don’t play games. I’m awful at them, so I just like to look.” She casts a long glance over at the big white Vulpix—it’s definitely a Vulpix, now that I give it a good look, just a weird one—but turns her eyes back to me. “But you’re missing out on game time. What are you going to play?”

I fold my arms across my chest and think for a long minute. “Well...I’m pretty good at Ms. Pac Man, but they have Super Mareep Bros. here, so I was thinking about playing that. They didn’t have it at the arcade I went to back home--back in Kanto, I mean.”

“Can I watch?”

“Sure!”

I’m totally going to win her that plush. Just as a thank you.

As I turn around, I bump into a chunky kid with dark eyes and a shock of bright orange hair—not quite as intense a color as Buttercup’s, but pretty close. He’s wearing a plain white shirt with an orange logo I don’t recognize on it, baggy cargo shorts and bright green shoes that don’t match the rest of his outfit.

“Ah, sorry,” I step back from him with a quick pivot.

He raises his hands, “I’m sorry! I was just coming to see if the prizes I wanted were still here. I wasn’t paying any attention.”

I get a funny feeling in my stomach as I blurt out, “Prizes? What prizes do you want?”

The kid grins, chubby cheeks making him look particularly happy, “Oh, I want this new Lucario Skywalker action figure--”

Crud.

“And there’s this stuffed animal I really wanted to win for this girl--er, for a friend.” His eyes move noticeably towards the plush I want for Lillie.

Double crud.

He was after our goods! I try to keep my jaw from dropping at the bad luck, and instead say, “Uh, good luck. My name’s Sunny, by the way.”

The kid sticks out his hand, “Sophocles.”

What kind of name is that? I shake his hand anyway, trying to appear like a good sport before a competition. He doesn’t realize it, but he’s just agreed to one heck of a match against me and the rest of the gang—I was going to make sure Maurice got his action figure and that I got that plush for Lillie.

I all but dart away from Sophocles (and Lillie, by accident) as he goes to the counter to fully examine all the prizes, running at my best indoor speed to Maurice, who is deeply engrossed in a game of Galaga. I pause to watch him play for a moment.

Wow, he’s good.

He’s got his tongue half sticking out of his lips as his dark eyebrows lower in focus, maneuvering his ship across the screen with the speed of someone who’s practiced way too much. He’s going and
going, shooting perfectly aimed laser bullets like he’s a real space pilot and never missing a beat. I watch in silence as Maurice’s score climbs and climbs and climbs, not wanting to interrupt but needing to tell him the bad news all the same.

“There’s a kid after your prize,” I whisper, “His name’s Sophocles. And uh, how do you win prizes, exactly?”

“You get the best score on one of the games and show it to one of the workers,” Maurice says, gaze never leaving the screen. The reflection of pixel-space lights up his eyes, “It’s really easy.” After another minute, my words seem to register and his hands go stiff from their previously relaxed grip on the game controls. I hear the telltale explosion of a Game Over and he turns to me, face dropped into a serious frown that looks all the more intense from the backlight of game-screen blue.

“Did you say Sophocles?”

“Uh,” I say, “Yeah. Why?”

He points to the screen. Above multiple abbreviated names is an unspeakably high score belonging to a player named SOPH. The name under it? An abbreviation that can only belong to Maurice—still a good number short of what had to be Sophocles’s score.

We were in trouble.

“What do we do?” I look around to see where the other kids are. Charlie is intently watching Thea lay into a round of Super Mareep Bros., and Falkor is, stereotypically, playing a round of Double Dragonite II, glasses reflecting the game for everyone to see. Buttercup isn’t playing anything, instead choosing to talk to Chris, who’s leaned against the prize counter with an obviously teenaged kind of boredom. Guess Buttercup isn’t good at the games, or something.

I pull out all my tokens and look at Maurice, “I think it’s just us.”

He pulls his tokens out as well. Between the two of us, we had enough to play what could amount to infinite rounds of games in order to beat out the high scores.

“We just have to pool what we’ve got together and go for broke. I’m really good at Ms. Pac Man,” I say, “And you look like you’re awesome at Galaga. Maybe if we work together at least one of us can get the high score to win a prize?”

Maurice frowns, “But the thing is, Sunny...this kid’s a legend. He’s got the high score on practically every machine in here.”

My jaw drops a little. “You’re kidding me right now.”

“Serious. Totally, completely serious right now. No jokes. If he wants our prizes, he’s going to win them. He’s the only one who can beat his high scores.” He kicks his foot and mumbles, “Trust me, I’ve been trying for weeks to top one.”

I clench my fists, “With that attitude, yeah he is. Come on, Maurice. I really want to win this stupid stuffed animal.”

He laughs at me, “What? You, wanting a stuffed animal?”

I shove his shoulder, “Hey! It’s not for me, it’s...it’s for Lillie.” My voice drops into a whisper as I say it. “You know, to say thanks and all. She looks like a kid who likes stuffed animals.”
“Suuuuure,” Maurice’s voice is all but a giggle. I stick my tongue out at him.

“This is serious, Maurice. We’re gonna get totally screwed over if we don’t find a way to beat him!”

Maurice tilts his head to the side, lost in thought for a long moment. “I guess all we can do is keep trying on one machine each.”

I nod vigorously. “Okay, we can do this.”

A good hour later, I come back to where Maurice is still intensely playing Galaga, “I can’t do this.”

My eyes hurt, my feet hurt, my HANDS hurt from all the gripping and wiggling the joystick to make that stupid bow-wearing cheese wheel eat until it imploded. Even going on an almost infinite streak hadn’t been enough to top an impossibly high score set by the dreaded SOPH, who was chugging away at some new fighting game.

Maurice blinks at me, “You’re telling me? I’m going to run out of tokens before I even come close, and I’ve beaten my own high score at least five times!”

“Let’s take a break,” I grimace as Sophocles leaves the fighting game to some other machine, wanting desperately to check his new high score. “Maybe we should see what record he set on the fighting game.”

“Okay.”

There’s no real scorekeeper on the game--explains why Sophocles abandoned it--but Maurice and I deposit some tokens to play each other instead. Even though we’ve never touched the controls before, Maurice is a natural, comboing off on me like a total maniac and absolutely obliterating me in the process.

We get a little distracted from our goal in our intense sparring matches, going round after round and laughing all the while. It’s fun, even if I’m losing horribly, because Maurice is such a good sport and never trash talks more than he should. I snort as he gets a massive special attack off and blasts my character to pieces in true cheesy kung-fu glory.

A quiet voice behind us says, “Wow, you’re really good.”

Maurice and I turn to see Sophocles standing behind us, avidly watching the screen with a light in his eyes.

“It’s a pretty fun game,” I say, “But the combos are really hard.”

Sophocles nods, “It is a lot of fun. They just installed it, too, so it’s the only game here that I’m not really familiar with, you know? I really like a new challenge. There’s even a couple of characters I can’t beat!”

Maurice smirks, “Oh yeah? Let’s play!”

Maurice and Sophocles insert tokens and select their characters. I watch as they square up and Maurice dives in for the opening salvo--Sophocles blocks it expertly, way faster than I could, almost like he’s predicting what Maurice is going to do. Maurice predicts him back, firing off these amazing mix ups. They go back and forth for a while; the timer ticks down rapidly as neither of them make real headway on damaging each other.

That is, until Maurice has enough “energy” to unleash his special combo.
At that moment, he sets it off and destroys Sophocles’s character in one violent swoop. The kid stares in disbelief, turns to Maurice, and says, “Wow.”

“I know, right?” He grins, “That character has the coolest moves.”

“I can’t believe you beat me.”

Maurice gives me a look and then shrugs, “I just really like games like this, man. No hard feelings?”

“No, but I want to play again. You’ve got to show me how you pulled that off!”

As they’re about to insert their next tokens, an idea comes to me. “Wait a second. So uh, Sophocles…” How to phrase this? I bite my lip as he looks at me, “We really want the Lucario Skywalker action figure that you’re after...and I kind of have an idea to make it fun, if you want.”

He tilts his head to the side, “Uh, go on?”

“Well, what if we asked the workers if they’d let us have a tournament for you and Maurice on this game. You’re both really good, and maybe the winner--best of five?--takes home the prize?”

Sophocles scratches his chin, not saying anything for a long time. I swallow; he’s not going to buy into it, and our prizes are gone. I didn’t mention the plush for Lillie, but I could always work my way back up in Ms. Pac Man (I had gotten pretty close before I just got discouraged and impatient. Seeing Maurice disappointed over an unbeatable high score like that just bums me out, though)...”

“Actually,” He says, finally, “It gets pretty boring having the highest score all the time. I can win whatever I want...I like the idea of a real challenge, for once. Maurice, Sunny, you’re on.”

I jump in excitement, “Woohoo! Let’s go talk to the workers!”

Both pimple-faced boys at the counter roll their eyes at the prospect, tell us it’s ‘against the rules’ and shoo us off.

But I’m not so easily dissuaded. I look around for Chris and Buttercup and find them watching Charlie fail catastrophically at Mankey Kong. So much for ‘mad skills’.

“Hey, Chris?” I tug on her sleeve. She looks down at me, raising an eyebrow.

“What’s up, squirt?”

Ugh. I hate that she calls me that, now. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Depends. I’m not cheating at the basketball game for you.”

“No, no, sheesh. Like I’d need to cheat to win, anyway.” I roll my eyes at her and motion to the counter, “We want to have a tournament of this fighting game for a prize, but they won’t let us. Do you think you could convince them that it’s a good idea? It’s for Maurice.”

Chris blinks at me, “What? Why do you need me to do it?”

I roll my eyes again, “I might be twelve, but I’m not stupid. You’re a girl, they’ll do whatever you say.”

She bursts out laughing, “You’re a little monster, you know that?”

“So will you do it, or are we going to have to take more drastic measures and have Thea threaten to
beat them up?"

Her hand waves, “Whatever, whatever, you gremlin. Give me a sec.”

Chris swaggers with complete and utter confidence to the counter, leans against it and motions over to me every now and again. I turn to watch Charlie, trying to ease off my nerves by watching some seriously poor moves. Charlie just laughs whenever she messes up.

“Is this your favorite?” I lean over her shoulder (a tough task when she’s so much taller) and watch as she dies yet again.

“Yeah,” Charlie grins, “It’s so much fun, even though I’m like, so totally bad.”

By the time Charlie’s died three more times in game, Chris returns, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Okay, they’ll let you guys play.”

Without thinking, I throw my arms around Chris’s waist and grin, “Thanks!”

I realize what I’m doing a second later and throw myself off of her, dusting my clothes off with disgust. “I mean, er, thanks, I guess.”

Chris rolls her eyes, “Yeah, yeah. What’s so important about this, anyway?”

“Like I said, it’s for Maurice.” I turn to go back to where Sophocles and Maurice are waiting at the game.

Standing between them, hands on my hips, I give them each a look. At this point, our display has attracted the attention of all the kids in the arcade—even Charlie and Chris and Buttercup have abandoned Mankey Kong to come see what we’re planning.

Maurice nods at me, confidence lighting up his eyes. Even though he beat Sophocles once, I get the feeling that he’ll have to really fight for his coveted action figure. Still, watching him knock down the resident gaming champion a peg or five would be well worth it.

“So here’re the rules,” I point to the console, “Whoever wins the most out of five games takes home the Lucario Skywalker action figure. You gotta play the same character every game, and keep it clean, boys.”

They shake hands and put their tokens into the machine.

The first round is intense. I know it signals the sign of a fierce battle for victory, a real showdown that would put a Jackie Chan movie to shame. Maurice is aggressive, Sophocles defensive. They both calculate moves and blocks and play a complicated game that’s hard to follow, maneuvering their characters from low to the ground to full on aerial combat, from wall to wall on the fighting stage, neither making headway on the other’s HP bar.

That is, until Sophocles sees his opening when Maurice makes one misfire in a stream of otherwise flawless attacks.

Maurice can’t recover from the momentum lost off the misplay and Sophocles’s character thrashes him thoroughly. The game dings that “Player Two wins!” and Maurice’s fists clench the joysticks in frustration.

The next game falls into Maurice’s hands swiftly, pushed along by his anger and need to succeed.
Sophocles can’t do anything, and quickly falls in the third game as well. It’s two-one in favor of Maurice.

He just needs to win one more game.

But of course, things can’t be so easy. Sophocles turns a game on its head and gives Maurice a thumping. It brings it to a two-two match.

The crowd at this point has turned into the entire freaking camp. Everyone is whispering excitedly at the action, cheering and chanting names as the boys fight for dominance. Chris and the other counselors are trying to fake being disinterested, but they’re obviously invested in the stakes.

It’s becoming more than a tournament for a prize. It’s a matter of bragging rights, of pride, of dominance. This is Maurice’s opportunity to put himself as top dog of the arcade.

I want Maurice to win so much.

As each boy takes out a token, they look at each other for a long moment, nod, and drop it into the machine with a satisfying kerchunk.

Maurice selects his character, Sophocles his.

The crowd goes dead silent. Maurice licks his lips and Sophocles sucks in a sharp breath as the timer goes down.

Three.

Two.

One.

FIGHT!

It stops being the characters as soon as the match starts. The guys are the people they’re playing: Maurice is a totally bad-butt ninja and Sophocles is playing some buff kung-fu guy. Maurice makes the first moves, testing Sophocles’s defenses. Neither want to commit to the action quite yet, poking at each other with a constant back and forth that makes my stomach hurt to see. It could go wrong at any moment, or it could go so, so right.

Maurice starts up a sick combo move and takes a fair chunk out of Sophocles’s health, knocking him back into the wall. Picking up the pace off his new momentum, Maurice goes in for a wall combo and starts with an easy pattern: low kick to knock Sophocles in the air, middle punch, high kick--

Sophocles reads it flawlessly and blocks the combo into a nasty rebound that takes Maurice completely by surprise. Tick by tick, Maurice’s health falls into dangerous levels, lower than Sophocles. Still, not to be outdone, Maurice comes back with another round of kicks and punches, performing a complex aerial combo.

Sophocles blocks it.

The health gap is mounting--after that initial early chip, Sophocles has taken barely any damage--and Maurice starts to get frustrated. It shows in how he plays; a few clumsy throws, a missed grab.

Suddenly his health isn’t so good. One or two good rounds would do Maurice in for good, and seal his fate as someone who choked under pressure, who couldn’t beat the arcade king in his kingdom
even when all the stars aligned in his favor. Another attack seals it as a no brainer: one more good swing could end it all.

“Come on, Maurice,” I whisper, “You still got this.”

Then, Sophocles makes his move. Maurice barely blocks out the vicious strikes, but I see where it’s leading: Sophocles’s energy bar is steadily climbing into the green. He’s planning on finishing Maurice off like Maurice had done to me: with a signature move.

The bar hits green and I recognize a bright light striking Maurice’s eyes. He knows what Sophocles is doing, but there’s no defeat in his expression. There’s only a new, intense energy, almost anger, burning through. His hands stop their slight shaking and I see him take in a deep breath as Sophocles fires off the special.

I want to close my eyes, but I can’t stop looking. The screen lights up in a violent white light as Sophocles’s character fires off a massive stream of attacks at Maurice.

He blocks it.

Blinking, I look back at the screen. Maurice blocks the special attack. It’s more than a block: it’s a freaking parry. At least, I think that’s the right word for it. Every kick and punch is met perfectly with a matching move, and Maurice takes no damage from the insane special.

He grabs Sophocles in a throw move and regains his ground, comboing off the momentum and the shock. Everyone is shouting now, cheering, hollering, whatever you want to call it; we’re loud. Maurice thrives off the energy and Sophocles’s health bar chips down and down and down until the screen flashes again.

This time, it’s Maurice’s combo that makes the final blow.

A big, fat-lettered K.O. goes across the screen and everyone, and I mean everyone flips out. I even see Lillie clapping and Chris laughing and taking a slip of cash from one of the other counselors. Wow, the teenagers had been betting on their kids. Ain’t that something? The noise is so deafening that the workers try, and fail, to get us to quiet down.

I jump on Maurice’s back and the rest of our friends follow suit, dogpiling him with shouts of pure excitement.

“You did it! That was AWESOME!” I can barely hear my own voice over the chaos.

Everyone settles down as Maurice walks to the counter to get his prize, and eventually the crowd disperses back into normalcy for an arcade, back to the pixelated sounds of level-ups, victories and defeats.

It’s not too long after that that Olivia arrives at the entrance, calling for all of the camp kids to gather back around. I start to walk away from the counter, where Maurice had been showing me the mint condition of his newest prized possession, when someone tugs on my sleeve.

I turn to see Sophocles shyly standing behind me, hand jerking away as quickly as he had grabbed my shirt.

“Hi, Sunny,” He says, swallowing away what looks like nerves.

“Heya, Soph,” I can hear my tone being warier than it probably should be; what could he want? He had been a really good sport about the loss, all things considered, but I could feel myself gearing up
for another argument with someone.

Something fluffy and white abruptly takes up my vision. I raise my hands into soft, plush fake fur and look around the plush--the very plush I was going to win for Lillie--saying stupidly, “huh?”

Sophocles kicks his foot, “I uh, just think you’re cool, you know?”

“Thanks.” I don’t know what else to say, but I hold the plush against my cheek. It’s so soft that I can’t help but lean into it. “You’re pretty cool, too, Soph.”

He beams at me.

I leave the arcade confused, and up a stuffed animal.
“There’s no way you really believe in ghosts,” Falkor folds her arms as she looks at the dark-haired girl sitting with us.

The girl, Acerola, lifts her hands and says, “No, I swear, it’s really haunted!”

“Prove it,” Thea grunts.

The conversation devolves quickly from what it had originally been: another round of ghost stories. Acerola isn’t new to the camp, but she’s sitting with us to introduce herself properly ‘to the new girl’. She has the face of a prankster, always looking a bit like she has some kind of practical joke in the works, with sleepy eyes betrayed by a spark of playful energy. Her mouth has a crooked smile that’s likable and untrustworthy at the same time.

“Look, I’m telling you again, that place is totally haunted.”

“It’s a convenience store,” Charlie says, her voice questioning, “How could a [i]convenience[/i] store become haunted?”

Acerola taps her finger on her chin, “Well...my uncle says that there was this really bad storm that tore up a bunch of stuff, and the store got abandoned...so I guess the ghosts just wanted a place to live?”

“That’s silly,” I say, “You just don’t really know if it’s haunted.”

Acerola is quick to correct herself, “Of course I know, I’ve been there before.”

I narrow my eyes, but keep my mouth shut for a minute. We’re sitting at a round table outside, faces and hands sticky from s’mores. It’s early in the evening, close to when we’ll have to go home, but today was s’mores day, so we’re allowed to be here a little later than usual. It feels like everyone is staring at me, waiting for a response, so when I don’t answer, Acerola continues:

“What, you’re not too chicken to find out, are you?”

Blinking, I reply without hesitation, “Of course I’m not.”

There’s a flash of memory: dark cave, stinky rat breath, damp stone and dirt, and I feel chills raise on my skin involuntarily. There’s no denying I’m a little nervous at the thought of “[i]ghosts[/i]” after that incident, but at the same time, what kind of feral animals would be in a convenience store?

“You’ve got goosebumps,” Acerola teases, “You’re totally scared.”

“Of what, a wild Slurpee machine?” I say, voice full of alpha-kid confidence, “Just a cool breeze, that’s all!”

Charlie and Falkor share an expression that makes it clear they know otherwise. Still, I won’t let anyone think I’m scared, especially not of an abandoned store where the worst things around were probably rust and rotting candy.

“If you’re not afraid, spend the night there!” She gets right to the point, not pulling any punches. It provides a few problems: namely, sneaking out, getting to the place, and not getting scared out of my pants at every noise (not that that would happen).
Maurice whispers, “You don’t gotta prove anything, Sunny.”

But it’s Thea who speaks up for me, “No problem.”

I look over at her and raise my eyebrows. Thea said more than one word in a sentence! And [i]she[/i] wanted to take on the dare? I’m surprised, but I nod at her confidently. She nods back.

Acerola smirks. I know she’s just trying to pull a prank, and that the scariest thing tonight would be dealing with her trying to make it a real snipe hunt, but it’s a dare, and if there’s one thing I don’t do, it’s back down. Especially not in front of my friends.

It’s why I get into so much trouble.

“If you guys are so tough, then, you have to stay until sunrise, and I’ll be waiting! No trying to sneak out or anything,” Acerola presses her finger to her lips, “I’ll definitely know if you try to cheat!”

Yeah, it’s going to be a snipe hunt for sure. I try not to make a face at her and shrug instead.

“We’re not cheaters.”

“See you at sunrise, then, Sunny,” Acerola winks at me, gets up from the table, and practically floats away. “Or well, I guess if I don’t, we’ll know you were too chicken to show!”

I take a deep breath and look at my gathered friends. “Well, who’s in?”

Falkor tips her glasses (a nervous habit) and looks over at Charlie, whose smiling face breaks for a second into a grimace.

“I don’t think so, Sunny. Not after what happened last time.” Charlie makes an apologetic expression for a split second before smiling, “Besides, I’ve got some family stuff going on tonight, so I wouldn’t be able to go over to anyone’s house.”

Buttercup shakes her head next, “I’m not going to. Last time I snuck out I got in big trouble, and I’m still on some...um, thin ice with my folks for being in the food fight.”

Looks like I wasn’t the only one who’d gotten into it for the incident. It feels pretty dinky, though, just me and Thea and…

“Can’t,” Maurice sighs, “I uh, yeah. I can’t.”

“You’re afraid!” I accuse, watching Maurice’s face turn pink.

“No way! Just uh, busy,” He scowls at me, but the truth is obvious: my friends don’t want any part of this escapade. It’s not like I can back down, though. My heart sinks low into my stomach, thumping with a steady dread.

“I’m in.” Thea replies shortly, giving me an even look that says she means business, says way more than even her spoken words. She folds her arms and nods with the look as well, adding more weight.

Having Thea at my back makes things suddenly less nerve-wracking. I don’t know much about Thea, but she seems cool, and she’s always kind of just there. Quiet kids like her were intimidating, but Thea also respects my leadership of the group, even if she dwarfs every single one of us.

I grin at Thea, “Really? So, what’s the plan?”

“Spend the night with me.” Thea says, tone blunt.
When our parents come to pick us up, Thea and I ask if we can have a sleepover; Thea’s parents seem really thrilled by the idea of Thea having a friend come over, and my mom releases me into the wild after a brief talk with them and a stop to the house to pick up my overnight bag. I slip my storm flashlight in the bag for good measure, checking to make sure I have fresh batteries.

Thea’s parents drive us to her house, a nice place in a neighborhood way closer to the city. It’s a big place, but I guess since Thea’s parents are also giants, it only makes sense that they’d have a big house. A basketball... goal takes up a good part of their driveway.

Thea leads me inside and I look around, impressed as heck. There’s a huge staircase leading upstairs right as we walk inside, and all the ceilings are tall and the rooms are brightly lit. The place reminds me of a house in the movies, all perfect and massive and kind of magical. I turn around and get a full view of my surroundings.

So, Thea’s a rich kid. You learn so much spending the night with someone.

Her parents introduce me to her older brothers, two positively ginormous teenagers who both obviously play more sports than I’ve even heard of in my life. They’re nice, although they tease Thea a little.

“Yo, sis, since when do you have sleepovers?” One of them says when they see me.

Thea just stares at him. I watch the exchange, feeling awkward and out of place as the brothers ruffle Thea’s thick braids and offer me some high-fives.

“They’re dumb.” Thea says as the boys leave, “Teenagers.”

“Teenagers are the worst,” I agree. Thea nods, face serious, and then she leads me up to her room.

Thea’s room is the last thing I’m expecting. I wasn’t anticipating girly frills or tomboyish anything...heck, I guess I don’t know what I was expecting to see, but it wasn’t what we walked into. It’s a pretty clean space--obvious that someone slept and lived in there in general, but way cleaner than my room--but the coolest thing about it is that she has her own TV... and an Atari! In her room!

Her furniture is wooden and her bedding is bright, happy orange. It’s a big contrast compared to how serious she is--and there are a few stuffed horses strewn on the covers, a small bit of softness that I would never have expected from someone like Thea. She takes them off the bed and tosses them on a small chair, giving me a look that says ‘we never speak of this outside of the room’.

It was kid code; no one had to know she played with stuffed horses. I nod to show I understand.

“It’s really cool that you have an Atari!” I say instead, “What games do you like best?”

Thea walks over to the television and picks up a case, offering it to me. “Q*bert,” She says. “Ever played it?”

“Nuh-uh,” I reply. “Show me?”

We have to kill time until we can sneak out, anyway.

Thea spends some time showing me the elite strategy of Q*bert play, but I find myself getting fuzzy, too comfortable on the soft, plush orange bedspread, and slowly but surely my eyes close and I doze off in a comfortable haze to the sound of pixel jumps and garbled Q*bert speech.
I don’t know what time it is when Thea’s hand gently shakes me awake.

“It’s time.” Is all she says, pointing to the bag she’s prepared for our stealth journey out. We set the bed up to look like we’re tucked away, slip out of the room and into the giant, dark house.

Sneaking out makes my mouth go dry and my heart beat hard; every step we step on seems to creak too much, and there’s the sound of the HBO sign-off coming from the living room as we pass by--so it’s just after midnight. I worry that we’ll run into Thea’s parents, but she sighs as we get to the front door.

“They always fall asleep watching TV on Friday,” She explains, “It’s tradition.”

So by some miracle, we escape the house without notice. Thea’s house is pretty close to the abandoned convenience store, and as we walk along the streets, both of us gripping a flashlight, I find myself uncomfortable in the silence that stretches over us and the warm midnight air, heavy, like it’s going to storm sometime soon.

“I like your house,” I say, trying to fill in the quiet.

“Thanks.” Thea replies and says nothing else. She’s some conversationalist.

I continue, “Have you guys always lived here?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.” I don’t know what else to say, so we walk the rest of the way to the store in complete and total silence.

We explore along the weed-crusted sidewalk around the front of the store, looking for a way in. Thea points out that the front door is slightly ajar, and we force it open together and stumble inside. I flip my flashlight on and bring a flood of white-hot light across a dusty, but still gleaming check out counter. There are shelves overturned into a few of the aisles.

I had kinda figured that people would’ve cleaned the place up after whatever happened to it, but it seems like everyone really just left this place abandoned.

That isn’t a good sign.

Thea steps into the light, her own flashlight clicking on and brightening a patch of the store adjacent to my own.

“Creepy.” She says.

“Yeah,” I look around, “Let’s walk around and see what we can find!”

Thea nods and I lead her through the store--we pass broken, empty freezers, overturned aisle shelves and scattered displays. Some ancient cans are still strewn across the floor, and we have to watch out for broken glass. It’s dark and difficult to move around all the junk, but we make a full circle around the place and come to the same conclusion:

“Not haunted.” Thea sighs, “Now we just have to wait.”

“I brought a pack of cards,” I fish them out of my little bag, “What games do you like to play?”
We’re through a few rounds of go-fish when it happens for the first time.

Thea and I look up, wide-eyed, as the lights flicker on and off, blinding us for a brief second. My heart jumps into my throat. “Wow. Weird, right?”

“Bad wiring,” Thea offers—it sounds like an adult solution to the problem, so I nod. Sure, bad wiring. I can buy it. Still, I swallow hard and look up at the lights as they go dark again. When they don’t flicker again, I look back down at Thea.

“What time is it, exactly?”

Thea looks at her little sports watch and sighs, “Three.”

Well, that sucks. The sun wouldn’t rise for another three hours. I look back down to my cards.

“So, uh, got any...fours?”

“Go fish.” She says.

After what feels like a few hours later (but was only another hour, maybe less), the lights flip on and off again, more violently this time.

And with it comes a quiet laugh. Or at least, part of my brain says it’s a laugh—it’s got to be something else, just a stray can rolling across the ground, something normal and definitely not spooky. Besides, the monster in the cave was only a wild animal. Ghosts aren’t real—

Thea sits up straight at the sound, too, as it grows louder and louder. I turn to look behind me and swallow.

“You hear that?”

Thea doesn’t answer me for a second, but finally she says, “Yeah. Just our imaginations.”

“Or maybe,” I grin, “It’s just Acerola playing tricks on us. Trying to make us think something’s really here.”

Right. Just someone playing tricks. Just a snipe hunt. I look down at our flashlights, propped up to make a makeshift campfire against the cold tile floor. At least we have a little bit of security in the small pool of light that they generate. Not that I need the security, at all. I’m not afraid, since it’s just a snipe hunt, like I said. We go back to trying to play cards, but our hearts just aren’t in it.

It’s when I see my breath that I really know something is wrong.

“It’s cold in here, isn’t it?” I rub my arms. It wasn’t this cold when we got in, but as the night goes on, I feel my skin prickling with goosebumps.

Thea shivers and nods. We sit in silence again for a while, too cold and focused—not scared—to play cards anymore. It’s just the two of us against the entire store. The entire store full of not-ghosts.

The lights flicker on and stay on.

I jump up too quickly, “What the heck?” My voice is high pitched, nervous. One time, bad wiring. The lights doing this twice so quickly? It feels wrong. The entire room feels wrong, cold and humid at the same time, like the way a wet towel feels when it’s wrapped around you in the air conditioned car on your way home from the pool. It just feels plain gross, and I see Thea’s face shift into something resembling discomfort. Mine probably isn’t far off from that kind of expression.
Suddenly, several cans of food [i]lift up off the ground[/i]—no, I’m not making it up, not imagining it, they’re really floating—and come at Thea and me like they’ve been shot out of a pitching machine. We jump in two different directions and hear the clatter of cans against tile. I look back at where the cans were and grab my flashlight, shining it in the spot.

Nothing.

The cackling laugh sounds off again.

“This isn’t funny, Acerola!” I shout.

The stupid jerkface doesn’t answer. The laugh comes again, this time deeper. Too deep to be Acerola.

I swallow.

The third time the laugh happens, it comes from behind us, and I grab a can and hurl it at the air.

It collides with something with a splatter, and the old beef stew spills all over something. [i]Something[/i].

It’s a floating creature, kind of shaped like a stuffed cat, with long, floppy ears. The stew drips down what looks like a little sheet covering stumpy paws.

We’re being haunted by the ghost of the dumpster cat. Or something.

But it takes me a second to realize that it’s not Acerola playing a trick. The thing, the ghost, giggles again and Thea and I run for it, towards the back of the store.

As I duck into an aisle a shelf comes crashing down on top of me. I only avoid getting crushed because, well, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m small. I stumble out of the aisle and look for Thea, who shines her flashlight in my face.

“What do we do?” She asks.

“We gotta get out of here!” I yell.

Thea is in the middle of nodding at me when another round of cans flies into the freezer, shattering more glass. I shield myself with my arms, feeling little, sharp pin-pricks as glass hits me and clinks to the floor.

The weird cat-ghost comes flying at us next, gleefully laughing and making the ugliest noise imaginable—it’s not a laugh or a scream, it’s not even in between it. It makes [i]the Shining[/i] look tame! I stumble to the side and see grey light coming through the windowed front.

“Thea!” I point to a cart, “We gotta get out of here, maybe we can use that as a shield!”

She runs and grabs the cart and makes a sprint towards me. I run behind her, barely able to keep up. Like I hoped, the cart does its job blocking the ghost’s attacks.

What I don’t expect is Thea smashing into the ghost full throttle with the cart, slamming it into the wall with a weird, goopy crash. It yelps, and Thea drives into it harder.

The cans fall while the ghost is struggling.
“Let’s go!” I grab Thea’s arm and we sprint for the finish, Thea’s long strides outpacing mine quickly.

Still, we both stumble out of the door and fall flat onto the asphalt in the cracked, weed-ridden parking lot.

A belly laugh makes us look up.

“You should [i]see[/i] your faces right now,” Acerola says, clutching her hands to her stomach.

I look up at the sky. The sun is peeking out of the grey morning. “Whatever, we did it! And the stupid place is really haunted! If you’d ever been in there, you would know!”

“Oh, puh-leeze,” Acerola makes a motion with her hand, dismissing us, “You did it, but you are totally chicken.”

“You go in there for a night and see what happens!”

She looks like she’s about to retort, but a crashing sound interrupts her. A can sails over our heads and lands right at Acerola’s feet. I turn my head to look back and see the lights flickering on and off, on and off.

Her jaw drops.

“Definitely haunted,” Thea says.

I get up and dust my knees, “Yeah, you jerk--”

“Hey!” A loud man’s voice calls, “What are you kids doing out here?”

He looks very tired as he approaches, wearing a dark cop uniform that matches the circles under his eyes.

“Uncle Nanu, w-what are you doing here?” Acerola folds her hands behind her back, face still pale.

“I just asked you that question, Acerola.”

“We were just on a dare,” I fill in.

“Uncle” Nanu looks down at me. His cheeks are lined hard, but a slight smile softens his expression. “I see. Did you win?”

“Duh.”

“Don’t tell, Uncle,” Acerola begs, “We were just having some fun!”

The cop looks like he’s considering it for a long moment, and I feel my stomach start to churn. Grounding number two, here we come. House arrest for real this time!

“I’m taking you all home, but I better not catch you out here again, y’hear?”

We all three sigh in relief.

I see Nanu look back at the building, where the lights still are flickering. “Damn faulty wiring,” He mutters, thinking we can’t hear him.
Mother doesn’t look at me as she says, “I wish you wouldn’t hang out with those ruffians.”

I look down at my breakfast. She made it for me as a special surprise, since it’s the first meal we’ve had together in a long time. It’s a pancake breakfast, the fluffy kind that Bisquick commercials sell as the tried and true baseline of good mothers everywhere.

But my mother would never use Bisquick. She had to make them from scratch. They’re good, too. Everything she does is good, perfect.

Of course, no one would see the burned pancakes that she threw away, not even worthy of being fed to my brother’s drooling dog.

They’re not ruffians, I want to say. I only hum instead, and carefully cut into the plush, fluffy exterior of the pancake. She’s still angry with me for begging to let Sunny stay at camp, although she will never admit she’s angry. It comes across as short sentences instead, and a tense quiet that on the surface could be as peaceful as the lake in the morning.

“Thank you for letting me stay with Uncle Kukui,” I say instead. “I had a lot of fun.”

She offers me a careful smile and goes back to cleaning up her awful mess from the pancakes. In a little bit, the kitchen would be so clean it would look like no one lived or cooked or breathed in it. The house was always like that. Sterile, I think is the right word for it. I think about Sunny’s house. Warm, messy, still half unpacked from their move. Cat hair strewn across the furniture and clothes.

Nebby and Null’s fur is always perfectly cleaned and brushed and swept and vacuumed up.

I’m almost done eating my breakfast when Gladion comes downstairs, dressed for his day doing whatever he does with the kids who call themselves the Skull gang. Silly, and weird that someone as ‘cool’ as he is bothers to hang around with them. He takes a pancake from the platter where the extras are sitting and shoves it in his mouth, no butter or syrup to doctor it up.

I only watch in silence as he takes a couple of more, slips one to Null, and proceeds to walk towards the front door with his trusty companion in tow.

Mother pauses him with a single word.

“Gladion,” She says, turning her head slightly, “Why don’t you eat breakfast with your family?”

“Got stuff to do,” He grunts, an edge in his voice that Sunny would call “typical” of a teenager. My brother has a great deal of angst, which is why Mother let him have the dog in the first place.

Well, I suppose he was also jealous of the fact that I had gotten a kitten, and Mother was nothing if not fair.

She purses her lips at Gladion’s sentence, though, and continues cleaning the countertop. Finally, she says, “We’ll talk later.” And Gladion leaves with a dramatic eye-roll.

[We’ll talk later]. I know that Gladion is in for one of her calm, patient talks. The kind that leaves
you feeling guilty and tired and disappointing because she knows best.

[i]She’d said the same thing to me after the food fight.[/i]

And I knew that our talk would begin any minute now. I finished my pancakes and put my plate away into the dishwasher and return to the breakfast nook table.

It takes me a minute to work up the nerve to ask, “May I be excused?”

Mother looks at me and says, “You know it’s rude to interrupt adults when they’re having a conversation.”

That was a no. I look down at my hands, folded neatly against the table. I can’t make eye contact. I only manage to mumble.

“Yes ma’am.”

Chapter End Notes

A Lillie POV chapter, very short.
Po, Pitiful Me (& Lillie)

“They took Nebby!”

Lillie’s voice is hysterical, choked. I put the phone to my other ear, look furtively at Mom, who is doing her polite ‘ignore the conversation’ face from the couch, and ask:

“Who took Nebby?”

“S-s-skull.” She sniffs, not fully crying, but definitely not [i]not[/i] crying.

Woah. I wonder for a moment how they could manage that, but Lillie supplies me with an answer. “I-I was leaving the house to go to Kukui’s a-and…they...ambushed me!”

I look outside. It’s raining, pouring even, which is why I’m home today. Why would Lillie be going to Kukui’s? I guess it’s not my business, and I ask, “So what are you going to do about it?”

“W-what?”

“What are you going to do about it?” I repeat, “You’re not just going to let them get away with it, are you?”

I can practically hear her making a face of pure terror, “I-I don’t know what to do!”

“You do.” I say.

There’s a long pause on the line. “Can I come over?” Lillie asks, voice quiet.

I put my hand over the mouth of the phone, “Hey Mom, can Lillie come over?”

“Sure,” She says without looking away from the T.V.

“Sure,” I say to Lillie. I can hear her sigh in relief.

“See you in a few minutes.” She must be at Kukui’s house--it takes her way longer to go anywhere from her actual house, with it being like, a castle in the clouds and all.

Lillie arrives, soaked and in different clothes than usual. She’s wearing a white sweatshirt and tennis skirt. I tilt my head at her and she turns pink.

“What?”

“I’ve just never seen you in anything but a dress before.”

“You don’t like it?”

What a weird question to ask. It’s definitely a change, and I don’t know why it happened, but my reply matches my thoughts perfectly, “No, I think it’s pretty cool, actually. I like your shoes.”

They’re big, white tennis shoes, and somehow sparkling clean despite the dirt and mud. I hope that I said the right thing; Lillie’s face lighting up says that I did. I don’t know much about clothes or stuff, but it seems important to Lillie.

“Thanks,” She murmurs. I let her in the house and we go to my room.
“So what’s the plan?” I ask as she sits on my bed, legs dangling off the side and kicking ever so slightly, nervously.

“Um,” Lillie looks down, “I was hoping you would know.”

“Come on,” I say, “you know we have to go get Nebby back! But he’s your cat, you gotta take charge!”

Lillie swallows and makes the briefest flicker of eye contact before she looks away again, “I don’t know! Of course we have to get him back, but I don’t know how, I don’t know if I can! They’re so...they’re so [i]awful.[/i]”

“So what? You can’t let them win.”

“Will you go with me?”

I fold my arms, “Of course I’ll go with you.” That wasn’t even a question: my friend was in trouble, but she needed to make the decision to go on her own. I’m not going to hold Lillie’s hand.

But Lillie takes my hand in both of hers and squeezes it tightly, “Thank you, Sunny.”

“Do you know how to get there?” If we’re going out in that rain, I'll need my raincoat, and I go start looking for it in my mess of a closet.

She nods, “Gladion hangs out there sometimes.”

I make a face, “Your brother hangs around with bullies like that?”

“He kind of does, and kind of doesn’t. They don’t like him very much, but he sticks around to hang out with this girl named Plumeria.” She twists the strings of her sweatshirt, “I don’t know why, though. But I do know how to get to Po Town.”

Po Town ends up being a huge amusement park that’s long since been abandoned. I wonder why, but Lillie doesn’t know--something to ask Buttercup or Falkor or Chris later, I think. There are weeds growing everywhere, grass pushing up through spray-paint covered, cracked asphalt. A rotting wooden roller coaster marks the place in the skyline alongside a rusted ferris wheel.

“There’s a mansion in the center,” She says, “Where they had the mascot of the park live. That’s where they hang out.”

I nod and pull my raincoat closer. It’s kind of chilly in the rain, and I finally have the smart idea to zip it up as we come to the chain link gate separating us from the Skull hideout. There’s a hole in the fence where kids have obviously come and gone. A tuft of grey fur waves in a snag in the fence. Gladion’s dog, probably.

We make our way inside, carefully threading through the gate, and sneak through the empty place. It’s got abandoned game stalls, a drop tower, those tunnels of love and terror, all the rides imaginable. It’s really strange to me how it’s closed, but we keep going until we see some kids hanging out in a stall.

“Yo!” One of them shouts, “You’re not supposed to be here. No trespassers, didn’t you see the sign?” Both of the kids are wearing black tank tops and white bandanas around their necks, a weird tough-kid look that doesn’t match the pale and scrawny arms placed on skinny kid hips.

I shout back, “The only sign I see says ‘This way to loserville, population stupid’! We’re looking for
the mayor!"

“Don’t dis our boss like that, jerk!” Aha! I hit a nerve—bullies didn’t like people standing up to them at all. The kid jumps over the counter of the abandoned game booth and stomps towards me.

Standing my ground, I cross my arms and say, “Or what? You’re gonna go cry to him about how someone called you guys losers?”

“Or I’ll pound you, Tiny!” The other kid snaps, fist balled. “Stranger danger, so get lost, before the stranger gets put in danger.”

“Oooo, I’m so scared of Noodle Arm One and Noodle Arm Two,” I stick out my tongue.

“Sunny,” Lillie whispers, stepping a bit behind me, “We can’t possibly fight them.”

“They won’t do anything,” I roll my eyes.

She’s shaking, “If you’re s-sure.”

“Take me to your leader, and no one gets hurt,” I point to the kids. They pause and burst out laughing. My face gets hot on its own. No one laughs at me.

“You think,” Noodle Arm One says, “That you can handle Guzma? As if! He’d beat your scrawny butt into next Tuesday!”

“Yeah,” Noodle Arm Two adds on, “A couple of sissy girls like y’all wouldn’t stand a chance.”

I put on a big, fake laugh. I’m not afraid of any bully, so I make it clear and put my hands on my hips, “Why don’t you prove it, then? Show us where this Guzma is. If you don’t, you’re just scared he’ll get pounded by a couple of ‘sissies’.”

That gets them thinking. Both of the boys stop their trek towards us and stand still, rain dripping down on all four of us. It pours in little waterfalls from their baseball caps. I clench my fists. Lillie’s hand is on my shoulder, gripped tight until her knuckles are white. This was going to work.

“I say we just pound you now.”

Lillie squeaks. She was a sissy, for sure, but I wasn’t. “Your boss is that much of a loser that he has to have other people do the fighting for him?”

“He’s not a loser!”

“Sounds like it to me,” I wave my hand, “Get out of my way, dorkzillas.”

Noodle Arm Two goes red in the face, “Alright, you asked for it—”

Lillie’s voice cracks and she’s shaking, but I turn my head a bit to see her eyebrows lowered, face intense. “How would you like it if I called Gladion on you? A-and, if you think my brother is bad, I-I’ll show you I’m ten times worse!”

I grin. Now it was two on two for real. The Skull kids look surprised and almost terrified.

“You’re Gladion’s sister? W-why didn’t you say so? We’ll take you to Guzma. Follow us.”

“You couldn’t have done that sooner?”
Lillie twiddles with the strings of her damp sweatshirt again, “I-I couldn’t think of what to say for the longest time. I don’t know how you come up with so many smart comebacks, Sunny.”

“I get it from my dad,” I answer automatically, and then wince as Lillie tilts her head curiously. I regret saying anything about Dad, [i]thinking[/i] anything about Dad. I didn’t need that drama right now, anyway--I had a kitten to rescue.

The kids lead us to a huge mansion--obviously one built for fun and play and fake amusement park magic--and let us inside. We pass by several more kids sporting white bandanas, the sign of their club, I guess, all of them staring and making faces at Lillie and me. It would be hard to escape a crowd like this without trouble, but at least I run fast.

Of course, that might mean leaving Lillie behind, and I couldn’t do that, so I put on my toughest face and stomp into the mansion behind the Noodle Arms. They lead us up the main staircase and into what must be the ‘throne room’ of the Po Town Amusement Park Castle/Mansion.

I scan the room as we step inside, looking at the scattered number of of kids lounging around and watching us, wary. All of us are wary; me, Lillie, and the other kids.

The only one who seems comfortable in the room is sitting at the chair at the peak of the room. He’s a pretty big kid for our age, tall like Thea, but broader, made bigger by his baggy shirt and jacket and shorts. His hair is a mess of blonde so bright it’s actually white, and a pair of sunglasses sitting on his head makes it floppy around them. Sitting in his lap is Nebby.

“What are y’all doin’?” He folds his arms across his chest.

Lillie’s hand slips into mine and gives me a hard squeeze. “Nebby.” It’s almost a whisper, but her shaking voice still carries in the big room.

“What?” The kid tilts his head to the side.

“The cat, stupid.” I point at Nebby, “You catnapped him!”

Guzma busts out laughing, “Catnapped? That’s what you’re gonna sell it as?” He leans forward, startling Nebby, who lets out an annoyed, uncomfortable yowl. I grit my teeth as Guzma points at Lillie, “Poooooor little rich girl doesn’t even deserve to keep the thing if she can’t even come solve her own problems! Fight your own battles, skinny!”

Lillie’s knees are practically clacking together. I hate to admit that Guzma’s right in some ways, but he is: Lillie was hiding behind her brother’s reputation earlier, and she was hiding behind me now. If she wanted Nebby, she was going to have to take charge.

As much as I don’t want to admit it, I’m useless here.

“What,” Guzma says, “Got nothin’ to say to that, crybaby? Just gonna cry again and run to big bro or shortstop” --ugh, why does EVERYONE call me that?? -- “here?”

Lillie bites her lip before replying, “N-no, I...I, um, want Nebby back. Please.”

“Please? Is that the best you got?”

I stick my finger out at him, “Give us the cat, or else!”

It’s like being in a movie, surrounded by enemies on all corners, the damsel--kitten--in distress, deep in the clutches of the big bad. I can feel the eyes of the Skull gang on all of us, and it’s...impossible. I’ve walked us into an impossible situation.

Lillie makes a face that combines pain and determination and something close to anger and asks, “Did Gladion put you up to this? Well, it’s not--it’s not funny!”

“Psh,” Guzma says, “Gladion doesn’t know jack! But you can thank him for giving us the idea. I can’t stand seeing rich kids like y’all getting whatever you want, while the rest of us get nothin’ but what we can earn or make.” The Skull kids start laughing and jeering at us, making ugly sounds and mocking gestures.

She stomps her foot at him, “I-I can earn...I can, I can earn him! Watch me!”

The room goes silent as Guzma raises his eyebrows. One hand thoughtfully runs down Nebby’s back as the other holds the kitten in place.

“Oh really?” He leans back in his throne, “You’d do anything to get him back, wouldn’t you?”

Lillie’s face is turning redder by the second, but she nods.

Guzma stands up, still clutching his squirming hostage, and points towards a ragged window, “Then I dare you to climb up to the top of the Super Slide. Prove you can talk the talk, blondie.”

She doesn’t hesitate, “O-okay.”

Guzma and his posse lead us to the Super Slide. Normally, it wouldn’t be that intimidating in an amusement park -- just the kind of slide at the fair that was gigantic and tall and...

Oh. It’s really tall. And the rain and time since the park’s closing left the climb to the top slippery and crumbling and creaky, obvious even from the base of the stairs.

Before, maybe it was just a kiddie ride that you’d pretend you didn’t want to ride because it was ‘for weenies’ but liked anyway because hey, big slides are fun. But now? Now, it was a giant death trap.

Lillie’s face is whiter than a fresh bedsheet, just as pressed and smooth, tight as her expression was with pure fear.

“You sure about this?” I whisper.

“No...but I have to be.”

I sigh, “I could go first if you want.”

“No you’re not,” Guzma interrupts, apparently having overheard our conversation, “Shortie, you’re staying right here with us! This is all on you, [i]Lillie[/i].”

She freezes. Stiller than a statue kind of frozen, and the look on her face is torn between terror from before and the look of a hero. The terror is winning out, big time, but even if she’s scared, she looks Guzma straight in his eyes. There’s an intensity that bleeds through, her eyes wide and nostrils flared.

Then Lillie gives my hand a squeeze, turns around, and puts her first foot unsteadily on the creaking first step of the Super Slide. It groans a little. Maybe it’s my imagination, but I can swear I see the entire thing wobble.

Lillie takes another step up, and another. She makes slow, steady progress, legs locked here and
there as she tries her hardest to get past whatever phobia she was showing who was boss at the moment. The rain pelts down harder on us and I have to shield my eyes to keep the water from stinging straight into my eyes. Guzma mimics me to watch Lillie continue her climb, now hunched over the railing, shivering.

She’s made it about halfway up when a stair comes out from under her. She manages to leap, barely, and skims her knee on the stair she lands on. The fallen stair creaks and whines from where it hangs limply by a stray screw. I’m holding my breath so hard my chest is going to explode if I don’t remember to breathe; I do, and then resume holding my breath yet again as Lillie keeps climbing.

She’s got nowhere to go but up.

There’s silence among the once snickering kids—even Guzma looks...impressed?—as we all watch Lillie make her epic climb in the pouring rain. It’s like the scene in E.T. where the cops surround the kids and then suddenly they’re flying, a moment of complete and total surprise and awesomeness that is stronger than her fear as she stumbles and tests every step, avoiding shaky, bad ones and firmly grasping the railing to control her still shaking legs. As she reaches the top step I see from the distance that her face is locked into an expression of pure guts and glory, fear and excitement and relief all in one as one foot and then the next makes it onto the rickety platform. There’s the clunk of tennis shoes on the metal as Lillie stands victorious at the top of the slide.

She comes down like a bullet, scooting to an ungraceful stop at the base. Lillie staggers up and stumbles and steps all the way back to us, where I’m already running to meet her.

“That was AMAZING!” I throw my arms around her neck and we dance around, totally uncool, but totally worth it to celebrate Lillie’s moment of being a total boss! She laughs and dances back with me before we both remember why we’re here:

Nebby.

I turn with Lillie to face Guzma, whose expression is less than impressed.

“So, you did it, blondie.” He puts the hand that isn’t cradling the soaking wet Nebby on his hip. “I’m pretty impressed, I guess.”

“Give him back, Guzma.” Lillie holds out her hands as she steps forward.

Guzma steps back and looks like he’s thinking for a long minute. “I never said I’d give him back.”

Lillie pauses, her face automatically falling, “W-w-what?”

“Yeah, I never [i]said[/i] I’d do it.”

I feel my blood boil hot and before I’m thinking I’m shouting: “Hey! Hey [i]Gus[/i], how about you stop being a jerk and give the cat back!”

But I don’t give him the option to say anything smart back to me. I jump at him, feeling a scream tear out of my throat—how DARE he make Lillie do something that was actually dangerous and then go behind her back all the while, how dare he!—as we collide. Nebby screeches and yowls and wiggles free as I pin Guzma—Gus—to the ground and pull my fist back. He avoids it and my hand pounds into the mud by his face, splashing it everywhere up my arm and across his skin. Gus bares his teeth at me and takes a swing back.

I roll with the blow and grab Gus by his shirt, pulling him into a roll with me—both of us are in full tangle now, fists and nails and hair and shoes connecting wherever they can find purchase. I’m
shouting things I know I shouldn’t say, and so’s Gus, and it’s only when a hand grips the back of my shirt and yanks me back that I realize that I’d been...actually fighting someone.

My stomach aches as I look up, dazed. Gladion and a panting dog look down at me. He has a frown on his face that looks just like Lillie’s when she’s all concerned about someone doing something stupid. I can see Lillie hiding behind him, cradling her precious Nebby in her arms.

“You’re gonna pay for that, you--” Gus struggles his way up to his knees but coughs, holding his ribs where I’d giving him a solid thud with my fist. My hands hurt from how hard I had been throwing punches.

I had never actually gotten mad enough to physically fight someone before...what was I going to do? What would I tell Mom? There’s no way I looked any good. My stomach hurt more and more by the second. I groan as Gladion puts a hand out to stop Gus.

“Hold up, hoss,” He says. “She’s not worth your time.”

“Like Hell I’m letting her get away with that!” Gus/Guzma snarls at Gladion, voice ripping up with the end of his sentence.

Null snuffles my hair and snorts as Gladion continues, “Yeah, yeah, we won’t. Let me handle her. I’ll give her to my mom, that’ll show her. I’ll tell her she tried to beat up Lillie, and she’ll be toast. Mom will destroy her, you know how she is.”

Gus-ma considers it for a moment. “I guess…”

“She’d never be able to hang out with Lillie again. Gets her banned from the camp, too, I bet.” Gladion shrugs, “Oh, and it’s not like you’d ever let her join us cool kids, y’know? She’s a goner.”

“Take her to Ms. Lusamine, then,” Guzma starts to laugh, but he winces about halfway through it and grabs his side again. Take that, jerk.

The words take a moment to sink in. Lusamine was Gladion’s mom--was Lillie’s mom, too--and he was going to, to take me to her? No, no that was bad.

I start to get up, but Null puts a paw down on my chest until Gladion nods at Gus and motions for me to stand. He grabs my arm to help me up and jerks me around like I’m a prisoner.

“You look awful,” He says as we get out of earshot of Gus and the rest of his bloodthirsty kids.

“I feel awful,” I say, hearing it come out more as a groan than as words.

Lillie clutches Nebby close to her chest, “You...you did that for me. Why did you do that?”

I offer her a lopsided grin, “Because I hate liars. Duh.” Smiling hurts a little, and I dab at my lip and come away to find it bleeding. Augh. How stupid was I, exactly? I look down at myself. I’m covered in mud, bleeding a little, scraped elbows and ruined clothes and all.

Gladion gives me a look that comes off as annoyed, but his tone is soft, “You’re crazy, that’s what you are. Come on, let’s get you to the house.”

“You’re not really taking her, to--are you?” Lillie steps in front of Gladion, blocking him and me and Null from moving forward.

The teenager freezes, looks behind him--we’ve moved far enough away that Gus and friends are
pretty far off, now, barely visible in the downpour—and says, “I am.”

“You’re not!” Lillie stomps her foot, “She doesn’t like Sunny enough as it is, and I’m n-not letting
you ruin a friend of mine like—”

“It’s not what you think, Lillie!” Gladion puts a hand on his small sister’s shoulder.

I get that their mom must be evil (I mean, she did try to kick me out of camp) but it still feels surreal,
out of place, almost illegal somehow to see siblings fighting about their parents in front of me. I
cough.

“Don’t I have any say in this?”

“You’re hurt,” Gladion and Lillie say simultaneously.

“Then let me go home?”

“Our house is closer,” Gladion insists. Lillie clutches Nebby so tight I hear the kitten squeak, but
Gladion continues, “I heard that you got off the hook with Mother” --odd that he called her “Mother”
now that he wasn’t in front of the other kids-- “, and that she doesn’t like you, but you did sort of
just….take on the leader of the resident kiddie thugs in the name of...whatever. Look, just trust me on
this.”

I look down at my scrapes and cuts from the ground and nails and sigh, “I guess I don’t have a
choice, the way you’re talking.”
An Understanding

Lusamine answers the front door to the absolutely massive white house where Lillie and Gladion live--a castle in the clouds, for real--gives me a look of disgust and horror, and promptly looks to her children with a flash of something angry and out of her character.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Lillie jumps in between us, “S-She, she--um,” her voice cracks under a particularly heated moment of eye contact.

Gladion’s hand is on my shoulder as Null leans into my side, making me stumble. My stomach hurts harder than from where Gus smacked me and I can hear my heart beating in my ears, which burn a little from shame. This lady makes me feel dirty, somehow, dirtier than I already am, muddy and bloody on her front porch.


Lillie whirls on him, nostrils flared in surprise. She mouths “what” at him, but turns quickly around as Lusamine clears her throat.

“W-well, Mother...when I went out to walk to Kukui’s house, th-t-these kids came up--you know Gus Osmond? He and his friends pushed me around, and...and Sunny helped me!”

A little twist on the truth, I think, but I watch Lillie’s shaking legs steadily shake harder as Lusamine arches an eyebrow. It’s a small change in her face, so small I almost miss it. Her eyes harden, but not at me. She’s staring out, far out.

“Those Osmond boys are out of control,” She murmurs first, before continuing at a volume we’re meant to hear, “Helped you how?”

Lillie ducks her head, “W-well, they took Nebby, and she--she wasn’t afraid of Gus, even when he tried to bully her, too. Can we, um, give her a Band-Aid, and, um, help her?” There’s a shaking in Lillie’s voice as she offers out the last sentence.

Lusamine folds her arms across her chest, “IF you think--”

There’s a stomping sound as Lillie’s foot collides with the pristine porch, “I DO think!”

Silence. Rain drips down from the gutters and into the perfect landscaping in front of the house. I can only stare as Lillie actually stands up straighter and straighter, between me and her mother. I don’t understand what’s happening, but Lillie continues after a moment in the stunned quiet.

“S-she’s a good friend, Mother. She helped me when those….those kids tried to hurt me and Nebby.”

Lusamine starts to settle down from her initial bristling, “They tried to hurt [i]you[/i]?”

Oh. So I can bleed all over the pristine white porch, but the minute she hears Lillie was in danger...

“What b-bad,” Lillie gulps, “J-just--”

“I’m going to speak with the Osmonds, just you wait--” Lusamine exhales sharply, cutting herself off, and gives me another once-over. “...Let’s clean up your friend.” She tilts her head, half-smiles at
me in a way that’s not entirely welcoming, “I suppose she is rather adorable to stand up for you like that.” Then, with a long flick of blonde hair, she spins and goes into the wide-open front door.

Even if I’m twelve, I know that she’s tolerating me for Lillie, like how my mom is to me watching Power Rangers. I know she doesn’t like it, but she puts on a brave face when it comes on TV. Lusamine is putting on a face for me. For Lillie.

Lillie goes inside first. Gladion grips my shoulder before I follow.

“I didn’t think the kid had it in her,” He admits to me, “But you’re a good friend. You guys will be okay.” Something changes in his expression, though, and he grimaces, “Look, Sunny, there’s something I need to warn you about. You, uh, you’re going to need to be careful.”

“Why?” I ask, “I’m not afraid of Gus. He’s a total loser, and he won’t mess with me again. I established dominance.”

“You don’t understand.” Gladion exhales, “It’s not Gus you need to be afraid of. It’s his older brother, Nick. Nick Osmond.”

I raise my eyebrows, “Why should I? He’s just some dumb--”

Gladion stops me, “He’s not, Sunny. You need to watch your back, okay? Nick doesn’t like people messing with his brother. Being a little kid won’t save you. Not from him. Just... watch yourself, alright?”

He lets go to walk away, but I grab his arm.

“Why do you hang out with them?” It feels like the billionth ‘why’ question I’ve thrown at Gladion, but I have to know. It just doesn’t make sense for a softie like him to be part of a group of aggressive wannabe bullies.

Gladion’s face turns hot, “I--I uh. One of my friends babysits Gus sometimes, it’s uh, y-yeah.”

Oh. There was totally a girl involved. I roll my eyes.

“Go inside...and stop making that face,” Gladion gives me a hard shove, playful all the same, and sends me to the door.

When I turn around, he’s having to walk fast--not running, because that’s not cool--away from me, Null tagging along loyally at his side. He’s flushed all the way to his ears.

“Aren’t you coming in?” Lillie asks.

I kick off my shoes before I come into the cleanest, swankiest house I’ve ever seen in my life. Lillie picks them up and sits them in a cabinet by the door, where other shoes are neatly organized. Nothing is out of place, nothing is dirty, or lived in, even. I could eat off these floors and they’d still be cleaner than my room.

“You live here?” I hear how ridiculous I sound, but the surprise in my voice matches the surprise I feel that any living being could possibly live in this space. It’s just...like...Thea’s house was big, but this...wow. The ceilings are tall and point up--there’s a fancy grown up word for how they look, I’m sure--and as I pad across the wooden floor I can’t help but stare at the walls. They’re decked out with expensive portraits of Lillie and her family, and some random animal paintings too; all of them are really pretty. Like, really pretty. As we cross the entryway, we come into the living room.
And here I am, bloody and covered in mud. I can’t think of a better way for me to officially come over to Lillie’s house. It really just shows the difference between us; the house is cold and I miss the immediate warmth and familiarity of my own house. Even if it’s new, my mom is there, her dumb cat is there, and it’s different. Welcoming. I understand now why Lillie wants to come over all the time. My house is great. There’s junk food and laughs and a blaring TV, there’s my mom and even without Dad, it’s really a home.

This place just feels empty.
“...Sunny can’t come because she caught a cold,” Charlie says as we shuffle into a booth at the Hau’oli City Diner. What a shame. Sunny would’ve really liked the diner. It’s cute, and the food is really good, too--so good that even I don’t mind chowing down on fries and milkshakes, even if my mom wouldn’t approve of all the junk I consume when I’m at camp.

“That’s a bummer,” Maurice and I say simultaneously. He gives me a grin.

“Jinx, Falkor.”

“No, we’re not doing that ‘jinx’ thing. Besides,” I kick my legs off the booth, “Chris is paying with camp money, so I don’t owe you anything.”

“You act like such a teenager,” Charlie’s eyes light up with laughter--she doesn’t mean it. Maybe I do act like a teenager, maybe I don’t.

I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’m different from the other kids--that’s what weird kids say to feel special--but I know that there are things about me that I don’t share with the others.

And it’s not reading. All of us like to read; it’s just that we like to read different things. I just don’t get why people have assumed that my friends are stupid or don’t like to read. I just like to read more than they do! Charlie even borrows books from me, sometimes.

It’s hard to put a phrase to it, really. Maybe it’s that I’m quiet? Maybe it’s that I already speak two languages and I’m only twelve?

Maybe I am just the weird kid.

But I’m not so different that I can’t get along, and I laugh anyway when Charlie accuses me of being a teenager.

“You’ll see that I really am one when I start babysitting you Looney Tunes next year.”

She makes a face at me. “In your dreams, nerdface.”

“No calling people nerdface, Cheeto-head.” Chris’s hand comes down in Charlie’s puffy, wild white hair and aggressively ruffles it. Chris is really cool, with her big permed hair and her makeup and her surfing--and I find myself wishing I could be that cool. I’ve found myself wishing that a lot, actually.

Even though I’m me, and I’m probably never going to be that cool, or as cool as any of my friends. Maurice is cool, Buttercup is really cool, and Sunny? Sunny is the coolest kid I know. And somehow, they all let me hang out with them, even though my only cool factor is that I do karate. And they don’t even know about that.

“What do you guys want?” Chris leans over the booth and points at the menus. We all grab them and start perusing, but it’s only for show. It takes about two-point-five seconds for us to all shout out our orders in a loud mess of kid voices.

“I want one of those Sprites with cherry and cheese fries!” Charlie vibrates in her seat in excitement. She’s never been able to sit still, but the thought of sugar and fries visibly drives her hyperactivity so hard she could go back to the future faster than Marty McFlygon!
Maurice scratches his chin, like he’s thinking really hard, but he says, “I want a Grapico and chili cheese fries and a burger with everything!”

Boys! They’ll eat until they explode! Sunny’s the only girl I’ve ever met who could out-eat a boy. She would’ve ordered the double cheeseburger and the chili fries--I’d bet my allowance on it!

I hear my voice, higher and with that stupid accent, last, “Chocolate milkshake and plain fries, please.”

“Are you on the menu? Because that’s what I want.”

We all freeze, excitement dead on the impact of the last sentence. Chris is the only one whose face shows any recognition of the weird voice, which is freaky deep even for the teenage boy it’s coming from. Her face turns mean.

“Ugh, go to Hell,” Her eyes dart to us and she tries to save herself from her cursing. “--heck--no, go to Hell, Nick.”

Nick is a really tall guy with black hair all slicked back like he thinks he’s the greatest thing since sliced bread. He’s wearing a leather jacket and acid washed jeans and heavy Doc Martens. He’s got a familiar looking face, but it’s not very pleasant and he’s a little too edgy and intense looking.

Now he really acts like a total teenager. What a wannabe edgy loser! I mean, maybe he really is edgy, but he just screams like he’s trying way too hard to be an angisting sufferer to the injustice of ‘the man’. Everyone knows Nick is Gus Osmond’s horrible brother--a huge bully at the high school, a terror to children at all the hangouts--but even I didn’t know he was so gross! Granted, I haven’t seen him in person, before...but he really does look like his brother, only sharper, more wicked. Like a cartoon villain.

He folds his arms and laughs, “Been, babe, it’s great.”

Eeeewwww

Chris makes a face, “Go away, for real. I’m working right now.”

“You know, I’m babysitting some little dweebs, too. Plumeria couldn’t make it today, so my bro and his pals are getting some snacks.”

He jerks his thumb over to a booth across the way, where Gus Osmond--Guzma--is ungracefully shoving French fries and chicken strips in his mouth like some kind of--as Sunny would say--heathen. I’ve only ever run into him once, and it was enough. He’s in that awful in-between stage of being a kid and a teen, and he’s a real piece of work. A jerk.

“That’s totally like, interesting and all,” Chris sneers, “But why don’t you go annoy someone who thinks you’re worth talking to?”

“No one else is as hot as you, why else do you think?”

Super gag me. I’m not even Chris and I’m cringing!

“Screw off, barf breath,” Charlie--oh, no, Charlie, no!--mutters to herself. Oh, please tell me he didn’t hear that.

I elbow her and she gives me a look of annoyance before she realizes Nick is glowering, easy smile replaced by a dark frown that ought to be lit up by a flashlight underneath his chin.
Her dark tan pales.

“But I almost forgot why I’m here,” He growls, “Where’s that other little brat kid of yours, Chrissie?”

“I have a few ‘other little brat kids’, so you’ll have to be specific.”

“Gus told me she was short. Brown skin, twin braids.”

“All kids are short, jackass--jack--damn--DANG it,” Chris puts her hand over her face.

Uh oh. Short? Brown? Twin braids? He was talking about Sunny! What did legendary bully Nick Osmond want with Sunny?

What happened over the weekend?

Nick jeers at her, “Yeah, but I don’t see any kids with twin braids, here. So where is she?”

“Like I’d tell you. What on earth could a creep like you have to do with a twelve-year-old?”

“Personal business. Guzma and I need to have a word.”

I exchange looks with Charlie and Maurice. Their faces say the same: Sunny is in trouble. Big trouble.

Nick is pretty up on the times. I remember my mom talking about ‘discrimination’ at work, and it seems like if Nick’s job is being a bully, he’s definitely not someone who discriminates based on the ages of his victims. And knowing what I know about Nick, about how he’s beaten up people for so much as breathing in Gus’s direction, if he wants something to do with Sunny, then she must have done something to really piss Guzma off. Er, tick him off. I’m not supposed to curse, I think, even if Chris does it way more often than she realizes, and Chris is cool. Of course, Mom says swearing isn’t cool...even if she and Dad do it, too. Usually in Kalosian. Which they forget I’m fluent in.

But my brain flies everywhere as I try to think of an action plan. We have to warn Sunny.

I take a deep breath and slide out from the booth, “I’m going to the bathroom, excuse me.”

My eyes dart to Maurice, whose eyes dart to Charlie, whose eyes meet mine in a triangle of understanding. They slip out after me as I walk towards the restroom but ultimately just want to hide from Nick to discuss my plans as he continues to pester Chris, who now launches herself into a full thrown curse-fest that she thinks we can’t hear. My ears turn a little pink. What does...what does that even...I don’t even want to know.

Charlie whispers in my ear as we stand just outside the bathroom door, “What does that butthead want with Sunny? We gotta let her know she’s in trouble!”

Maurice is at my other ear instantly, “Yeah, we have to protect her! I saw Nick beat up a dude once while I was getting off the bus. He doesn’t give two kinds of hecks what he does to someone!”

“Yeah, and I’m sure he won’t give any more shits to add three more wannabe heroes to his list.” A third voice raises the hair on the back of my neck and we all three spin to see Gus Osmond, hands on his hips, lips curled in a jeering smile. “That Sunny punk has it coming.”

I stand up straighter. What would Sunny do?

Stare him down and tell him to back off. “For what?” My voice doesn’t tremble, but I hear my accent
But if I sound nervous, Gus doesn’t seem to notice. He looks down at me—I’m much shorter than he is, although I’m not as short as Sunny—and I jerk my chin up and meet his eyes. Can’t show him fear. Can’t let him know I want to run. I’ve never had to confront someone like this in my life. Everyone else makes it look so easy—Sunny just stands up to people like it means nothing! Chris doesn’t back down when someone looks at her the wrong way; I can STILL hear her giving Nick an earful even though the blood is rushing to my ears. I feel Charlie and Maurice stand closer to me, taller and stronger but at my back. I feel stronger and I take a step towards Gus.

“What’d she do,” I finally hear my voice come from a clenched throat, “Beat you till you peed your pants?”

His face turns bright red.

“Oh wow,” Maurice drawls, “I can’t believe the big bad bully boss is a pants pisser!”

“Ohooo,” Charlie snickers, “Beat up by a little girl! And you can’t even deal with her yourself? Gotta have big brother do all the hard work? What a lamer.”

The bright red starts to turn purple, and his eyes say murder. More than murder. Redrum.

He charges and I shout, “RUN!”

We scramble in a mess of legs still mid-growth spurt and Gus barrels down the diner aisle, stumbling from his overexertion of force. He whirls on us, nostrils flared, as the dining staff catch our commotion and start towards us with hands held out like we’re feral animals they want to calm before we mangle them.

“Out the door, hurry!” I drag Maurice and Charlie by their t-shirt sleeves and we sprint away, towards the entrance of the diner. I hear Gus swearing at us but I don’t look back and I slam the doors open out into the pouring rain. Lightning flashes.

I feel like one of my novel protagonists. A race against time to save a beloved character from a great evil. The villain’s right hand man, more powerful than us, at our heels. I soak my tennis shoes in a puddle as we make it halfway out the parking lot before Gus catches up to us.

He tackles Maurice into the pavement and I hear the wheeze of air knocked completely out of a chest before he can even cry out. Gus stumbles up and goes for Charlie, next, and she darts away with a sassy ballerina twirl before he catches her by a swift kick to the shins—she crumples in a howl of agony.

How is he so fast? And he’s so much bigger, so much stronger! I step back, but I bump into the bodies of his two friends, both middle school boys and way up on me in weight class.

Oh, no.

“I’ll show you a pants pisser,” Guzma snarls at me.

“Yeah, your own--” Maurice coughs as he catches Guzma by the ankle and makes him stumble in his reach for me. I turn and he has me by my hair ribbon.

It loosens. It’s over.

But would Sunny give up? Would any of my friends want me to give up?
I’m not helpless.

I have a hidden weapon.

I close my eyes and I’m in the dojo. This is just like karate class. That’s what I tell myself. Just like karate class.

The ribbon comes free of my hair and I spin with a loud cry, just like my sensei taught me. It adds more force to the blow I deliver to Guzma’s stomach with a side snap kick, and while he doesn’t fly back like the villain in a kung-fu movie, he stumbles with an audible grunt of pain. His friends reach to grab me and I dance out of their rain-slick grasps with expert blocks. I may only be twelve, but I have a junior black belt and these would-be bullies are no match for my years of practice. My parents had wanted me to do a sport. They’d settled for an art.

But it wasn’t fingerpainting. I could hurt people. I could be as cool as Jackie Chan. I could be Bruce Lee.

How had I forgotten that?

My hair flies all over my face as I spin again and land in power stance, driving my fist straight into the stomach—oops, I missed, I hit a few inches lower—of Gus Osmond. He screams, voice pitching up one, two, three octaves higher. He lands on the ground knees first, hands clutching at where I’d just delivered a blow so brutal I could hear the impact. I hear Maurice whimper and Charlie whoop simultaneously as he falls.

I’m still holding my stance, hands curled into fists, as the other Skull kids back away.

“What does Nick want with Sunny?” I’m high on an adrenaline rush, and my voice is confident, soaring. Assertive. Not shy, not nerdy. I sound like a total badass...I mean badbutt.

“He’s gonna kill that stupid little brat. And then...he’s going...to kill you.”

I look to Maurice and Charlie and motion for them to run.

“Fat chance. The bigger they come, the harder they fall.” I say as I follow my friends.

Sunny is in big trouble.

“Dude, Falkor, what the heck was that?” Maurice sputters as he turns to me, eyes wide. Is that awe? It looks like awe.

I twirl, still riding the thrill, “I’m a black belt in karate.”

Charlie gapes, “You’re a what? How come you never told us that? That’s so cool! The coolest! You’re like, amazing! You were all Enter the Dragon on those jerks!” Her voice is going ten thousand miles a minute, stumbling each sentence on top of itself like a big trainwreck of words as her babbling becomes incoherent. “I thought we were goners, but no, you were all blam, wham, kazam! Nailed him right in his ‘nads!”

Maurice winces, “It looked really cool, Falkor.”

Cool.

I was cool.

But I couldn’t let it get to my head. Sunny is in trouble. Nick is looking for her. We have to warn
her.

I might be a black belt, but even my fake confidence that I could beat Nick earlier wavers at the thought. He’s a full-grown teenager!

And we’re just a bunch of kids...
Bad Reputation

I feel like a goldfish trapped in a bowl of blankets and cold medicine.

Mom puts the back of her hand to my forehead and makes a slight ‘tsking’ sound with her tongue, “Still a little warm.”

“You’re the one who named me Sunny,” I croak, “Of course I’m warm.”

“Don’t be a smart aleck.” She grins at me all the same and I grin back. I’m feeling better than I did earlier, but what a waste of a couple of days! Having to be stuck in bed or on the couch, with the cat trying to smother me while I come in and out of a fever sleep, has me feeling antsy. I want to go back outside. The rain from earlier in the afternoon is finally gone and it’s nice out, sunny--hah--and hot and perfect summery weather. Mom leaves me to walk out to the back porch, her favorite new place to sit and read when she’s not at work.

Being stuck at home has reminded me of how close the summer is to ending, and as I shuffle out onto the back porch for a moment, following Mom, the day even feels like summer knows it’s almost over, heavy and kinda final, in a way. It makes my chest hurt.

Well, that’s probably my cough, too. I rub my eyes as I lean into Mom for a minute.

“School’s starting in a couple of weeks,” She says, putting her arm around my shoulders, “We need to go do some shopping for clothes. You’re getting so big.”

I groan, “Uugh, can’t I just wear shorts and tees and call it a day?”

“You need some good jeans, too, you know. What if the classrooms are cold? And you’re going to need a training bra.”

“MOM!” I shove away from her and walk down the porch a little. Folding my arms, I lean into the porch railing and look out over the backyard. It’s sticky out, and the grass glistens with still evaporating--that’s the term, right? I’m sure I remember the water cycle right--rainwater. Moms could be so freaking embarrassing.

I don’t want summer to end like this. With a cold, stuck in the house, away from my friends. I want to go out with a bang, dang it.

“Oh,” Mom adds, “Your little friend, Fae? She came by earlier while you were asleep. Said it was important. Maybe you should call her?”

I all but dash to the phone, knocking myself into a coughing fit as I scramble back inside, shouting, “Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“You needed your rest!” Mom calls back as I yank the phone off the hook and quickly dial Falkor’s number.

“‘Allo?” A man’s voice, unfamiliar, picks up the phone.

“Hi, I’m calling to speak to Fal--Fae? This is her friend, Sunny, Sunny Sanchez?”

“One moment,” He says, and I hear him call out in another language that sounds like where Falkor’s accent belongs. There’s the quick padding of socked feet on hardwoods audible through the speaker
and then Falkor’s voice.

“‘Allo?” She sounds almost like the man as she picks up.

“Hey, Falkor!” I can hear the strain excitement puts on my voice and I wheeze a little, “Mom said you stopped by earlier? What’s up?”

There’s an uncomfortable shuffle, “I need to tell you that...um...Sunny, you’re in trouble.”

“What’d I do?”

“I don’t know,” She sounds stressed. “But I do know that there’s this guy, his name is Nick, and he’s um, he’s looking for you?”

Gladion’s voice echoes in my mind instantly. “You don’t understand. It’s not Gus you need to be afraid of. It’s his older brother, Nick. Nick Osmond.”

“So what?” I put on some of my best confidence and fold my arms, glancing back to see if Mom is listening. She doesn’t look any different than she did before, still just relaxing on the back porch, watching the backyard.

“He means business, Sunny. You’re going to have to be careful!”

“Don’t worry about it, Falkor. Thanks for being concerned and all, but it’s all good. I’ll be fine.”

She hums, “I guess...um, did you hear about the concert that this local band is having to kick off the end of camp?”

“All I’ve heard for the past couple of days are my own snores,” I roll my eyes at myself, mostly.

She laughs at that. Something about Falkor sounds a little different. More confident? I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s no hesitation or shyness in her tone as she continues, “Well, Chris was telling me about her friend Ryuki, who has her own band, and Dr. Kukui agreed to let them play for the camp this weekend!”

I start to laugh, which turns into a cough, so I hold the phone away from my face for a minute until my chest clears up, “Really? I mean, how good could some teen band be?”

“Chris says she’s really good,” Falkor is shrugging—I can practically hear it across the line—before she continues, “But it’s still a free rock concert! I mean, would your mom let you go to a real Def Liepard concert? She’ll probably just play covers the whole time, anyway.”

“Hm,” I say, “I guess that doesn’t sound so bad. I’ll do some begging and see if mom’ll let me out of the house...and um, Falkor?” I’m curious about something, and while I don’t know that she’ll tell me, I still plan to ask.

“Yes?” She asks.

“How did you find out about Nick? You’re not the only person who’s told me to watch out for him.”

“Geez, Sunny, what did you do?”

I wince at that and try to think of how to explain it, “I uh, got into it with Gus. It’s a long story.”

“Funny coincidence,” She says, sounding a little far away, “I got into it with Gus today, too.”
Woah. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, actually.” She sounds cheerful, now, “Never better! But you shouldn’t do anything alone. You should probably stick close to Chris when we go to the concert on Friday night.”

“What makes you so sure I’m going?” I grin at her, even though she can’t see it.

“Just ask your mom, Sunny.” She sounds fake-annoyed with me, and I can hear the laugh curling the edge of her sentences. “But seriously, don’t go anywhere by yourself. This guy is really bad news.”

We hang up the phone at the same time. I’m not afraid of this Nick jerk, but everyone else sure seems to be. It’s kind of annoying, first Gladion, a know-it-all teen, and now my own friend? It’s just another teenager. He’s got nothing on me, anyway, and there’s no way a stupid teenager could catch me in the first place!

I walk back over to Mom and tug on her sleeve, “Falkor—I mean Fae—says there’s going to be a rock concert at the end of camp this Friday. Can I go?”

She makes a very serious face, one where she is obviously thinking too hard on purpose to make me laugh. Mom tugs on my braid playfully while she says, “Hm…I don’t know…”

“Mooooom,” I whine, all fake, and she laughs at me and puts her hand again to my forehead.

“If your fever goes down, you can go.”

“Yes! Thanks, Mom!” My face breaks into a stupid smile as I pump my fist with a little too much enthusiasm. Being trapped in a house does things to ya.

On Friday, my first steps onto the campgrounds are interrupted quickly by two pairs of quick footsteps. Charlie jumps on me first, tackling me to the ground by accident in a big hug. I grin and shove her off—it’s not cool to get tackle hugged, after all, even if I appreciate it.

“I thought you were a GONER,” Charlie wails, “Our fearless leader, DEAD to the camp plague!”

“But she never told us this,” Maurice, followed by Thea, joins the small gang gathering around me, “But she’s a black belt.”

Woah, woah, woah—“Woah, woah woah!” I put my hand on Charlie’s shoulder to slow her down, “Say what, now? Our Falkor? Coke bottle glasses, hair ribbon?”

“No more ribbon,” Falkor says as she skips up to us. She’s wearing her long hair down. It makes her look older, but not too much older. Just less like a little, little kid.

“She never told us this,” Maurice, followed by Thea, joins the small gang gathering around me, “But she’s a black belt.”

“Woaaah,” I feel my face splitting into a stupid smile at Falkor, “That is so awesome.

She’s blushing, but she still smiles wide at me as she adjusts her glasses, “Well, thank you.”

I feel my grin hiccup for a moment as I look at all my new friends, who are excited and happy that...
I’m returning to camp. I’ve had friends before, I’m no antisocial slouch, but these guys are special. My friends back in Kanto wouldn’t have broken into an abandoned convenience store with me, or gone into a dark cave late at night, or started food fights, or come to see me in secret when I’m grounded. These guys are different.

And our summer together is almost over.

“What’s wrong, Sunny?” Charlie’s eyebrows scrunch up.

“Oh, uh, just…” I don’t like to lie, so I say, “I’m just sad that camp is going to be over.”

Buttercup smiles, although it’s a little sad, too, “We’re all going to go to the same school. It’s okay.”

“But then we have to do homework!”

Thea puts a hand on my shoulder, “Let’s…enjoy our last day at camp.”

I think that’s the most I’ve heard Thea say all summer.

While the day is probably mostly free, we still go to find Chris to let her know I’m here.

She’s talking to a girl almost as tall as she is, with cool silver hair cut in a punk style. Chris’s friend has on a grey leather jacket and tight looking pants and boots, and she radiates cooler than everyone vibes.

“Yeah, I’m excited.” The friend says in a raspy voice, “I’m going to play a couple of songs I wrote!”

“Really?” Chris sounds genuine for once as she’s speaking, “That’s great! You guys sounded so good at the last practice I saw.”

Smiling, Chris’s friend starts to say something before she looks down and sees the gathered kids slowly surrounding Chris. She takes a step back. “Uh, you’ve got company, I think?”

Chris looks down at us, and in an odd turn of events, smiles at me. Chris, smiling, at me? What kind of weird dream am I in?

“Hey squirt,” She says, “Welcome back.”

“Ugh, don’t call me that!” I roll my eyes at her and then look to her friend, “Who’re you?”

“Ryuki!” She offers her fist to bump like some kind of ‘in with the cool kids’ handshake. I try not to be too rude, so I bump her fist back and she does a weird little explosion with her hand opening up and wiggling her fingers. It’s not like I’m eight or something, so it doesn’t impress me much.

“Ryuki’s the lead singer and guitarist of the band that’s playing tonight.” Chris adds.

I feel my face scrunch up before I can control it, and I say, “I hope you’re good.”

Chris pushes my head and snaps, “Hey, be nice. Ryuki’s a rock star in the making.”

“You only say that because you’re my best friend,” The ‘rock star in the making’ laughs. “I’ll just have to prove it to ya, kid.”

We say goodbye to Chris and spend the day running free around camp, playing capture the flag and sock wars and all manner of games—including a brutal round of kickball that ends with Thea absolutely destroying all of us with a punt so hard the ball loses some of its air—but it goes by too
quickly. It feels only like minutes until the sun starts to set, washing the entire world in the kind of orange that only exists here in Alola. It’s warm, still, and as Chris gathers us all up to escort us to where the concert will be, the same place where the mayor Hala stood and gave us the rules for the Koko Cup (what feels like ages ago), and I can’t help but feel my heart start to sink lower and lower into my stomach. I can’t even feel excited for live music.

The mood of the group sinks lower as the gathered kids try to be excited for the show and fail miserably. No one wants summer to be over, even if the grownups are trying to make it exciting for us by ending with some kind of ‘bang’. But it’s not the kind of heroic ending to the summer I envisioned. No bad guys to thwart in the final minutes of the movie. No epic winning plays to win the final game of the season.

Just a bunch of hot, sweaty kids gathered around a stage where a group of awkward teenagers shuffle into place. I sigh and resign myself to faking my way through the concert.

And then Ryuki gets on stage and smiles, bright and energetic. There’s a fire in her eyes that sets a sizzle over the mood, like someone turned on the stove and the skillet where Mom makes eggs gets all hot. The temperature rises.

“Hey, campers! I have one question for you!” She grabs the microphone by the stand and swings it closer to her, “Do you wanna rock?”

There’s silence, then awkward murmurs and shuffling. Ryuki stomps her foot on the wooden stage and yells again:

“I said do you wanna rock?”

A ripple of energy comes through us. I feel it in my chest as Ryuki grins wider and shouts out in perfect melody to the start of Twisted Scizor’s sweet jam, “Because I WANNA ROCK!”

And her band starts playing, and the sadness dies away, and their awkwardness goes away, and suddenly they’re a real rock band, not a bunch of wannabe teens. They’re good.

They play mostly covers for the first few songs of the concert, and it’s really fun. At least, it’s supposed to be fun. I try to hop around and join Charlie and Buttercup in a bit of bouncing and dancing, but my heart’s not in it.

I’m going to be in middle school next year.

That’s not fun. That’s just sad.

This is my last year as a kid.

What’s going to change?

I feel the stupid smile on my face go away as quickly as it had come when Ryuki’s band had started playing my favorite Def Leppard song.

“What’s wrong?” Falkor shouts over the music.

“I uh, just need to run to the bathroom. I’ll be back!”

I need to get away from all the noise for a minute.

I weave my way out of the crowd of kids, bumping a few in the shoulders with quickly mumbled
I find a rock and sit down on it with a heavy sigh. I shouldn’t be so sad, but I can’t help but worry about the year to come. It’s been hovering over me for a week, now, ever since I’ve been sick. Ever since Lusamine off-handedly mentioned being glad school was almost back in session when I had been at Lillie’s house.

Now it’s all I can think about.

There’s a set of thudding footsteps that pulls my attention away from my angst—oh, no, I’m angsting—and I look up to see a teenager in a black leather jacket and slicked back dark hair standing just a few feet shy of me.

“Found you,” He grins. It’s not a nice smile. It’s not friendly. The hair on the back of my neck raises.

“Chill out, shortstop. I just wanna talk.”

I recognize him not because I’ve seen him, but because I’ve seen someone who kind of looks like him. The pieces fall into place. The stupid, too-wide grin reminds me of Gus Osmond.

“You’re Nick.” I jump from the rock. He’s supposed to be trouble, but he looks a little clumsy, a real gangly guy who’s still growing into how tall he’s going to be. I could probably outrun him.

He gives me an even wickeder smile and nods. “That’s right. So you must be Sunny.”

I squint my eyes at him, “You already knew who I was when you called me shortstop. What do you want?”

“Well, I heard you and my brother got a problem,” He cracks his neck, a gross sound that makes me flinch. It sounds like every bone in his body shattered with the sound. “And if you got a problem with my bro, you got a problem with me.” Nick starts walking towards me, slow and steady, Michael Myers like—another movie I’m not supposed to have watched—and I tense.

My heart starts beating faster, even though I’m not scared. I can’t be scared.

Ryuki’s voice makes us both jump, distant as it is, “And now one of my favorites—I heard this song a couple of years back, and we just had to make it our own. Are you ready?!?”

And as the guitar riff starts playing, Nick jumps for me.

“I saw him dancing there by the record machine…”

I manage to dip out of his way and he staggers forward, Doc Martens scuffing hard in the dirt. He curses at me worse than Chris could even dream and I have to duck and roll as he takes another swing at me. I take off running towards camp, towards the noise, towards the music.

“Singin’ I love rock n’ roll! Put another dime in the jukebox, baby!”

But as the chorus kicks in, I feel a strong hand grab the back of my shirt and lift me straight into the air. It takes only a second for me to be thrown back, skidding across the dirt; I don’t weigh much, so it’s not like it’s hard for someone to toss me like that. My elbows sting from where they scraped the ground.

I kick straight up at Nick as he looms over me, smashing him right in his ‘nads. He yelps in pain and...
doubles over, giving me time to scramble back to my feet and try to run again, but even in his pain, anger wins over in his eyes and he snatches me by my upper arm, slinging me back again. I stumble and land hard on my butt. Before I can get back up, Nick’s fist clenches around the front of my t-shirt and lifts me straight off the ground. I dig my nails into his hand and wrist and kick and start to shout, nonsense stuff and words my mom would ground me for saying.

Then Nick pulls his arm back and all I see are stars and all I feel is sharp, burning pain that spreads from my nose to under my eyes, all through my face. Hot blood streams down from my nose to my chin in a thick dribble, tears joining it soon enough—not because I’m scared, but because it hurts so badly. I cry out and he pulls his fist back again, barely visible with my blurred vision.

“Hey, jerk!” A familiar voice, but not one I immediately recognize, since I’m so dizzy, comes from the night. “Put her down or else!”

Nick turns his head and smirks, “Hey, look, shortstop: a little wannabe hero! Just like you!”

He lifts me just enough that I can see…

Dodger.

Of all the people who could come to rescue me, it had to be Dodger.

I might as well just accept that I’m going to die now.

He jerks his chin up and points at me, “I said put her down!”

Nick takes a step to the side, turning so he’s got me in one fist and that he’s just in arm’s reach of Dodger.

“I can’t wait to crack your stupid skulls together, brats.”

“I’d like to see you try!” Dodger hollers and then ducks as Nick swings for him with his free hand. “GUYS!”

And as Dodger dives into Nick, grabbing him by the waist, my friends pour out of the path and charge at the teenager—all of them.

Charlie joins the dogpile first, taller than Dodger, shoving her elbow straight into Nick’s gut. As he’s losing breath, Falkor delivers a sharp kick to his shins, and then as he drops me to the ground, Thea jumps straight on his back, bringing him almost to the ground with her weight. Buttercup is at my side in seconds, and Maurice and Dodger grin at each other and then take Nick’s jeans on either side of him.

And they pants him, revealing Princess Leia boxers as his jeans fly free.

“So come on take the time and DANCE WITH ME!”

Silence rushes in where the music’s harsh echoes stop as suddenly as they’d started.

Buttercup helps me up as Nick falls to the ground, groaning as Thea still sits on his back in triumphant victory. Dodger gives him a good kick in the side and then grins sheepishly at me. I’m holding my nose, but I try to grin back. It hurts to smile, and I feel that my lip is split.

“Sorry it took me a minute to help you,” He says, scratching the back of his head, “I had to get everyone first.”
I feel tears well up in my eyes. It’s because I’m hurt, but there’s an overwhelming sense of everything that fries my brain like it’s been dropped in a deep fryer and the tears start coming down more. Buttercup gives me a close side hug, and then Charlie, and then Falkor, and even Thea join in, each telling me that I’ll be okay, and that they’re sorry. But what do they have to be sorry for?

“N-no,” I sniffle, “Just…thank you guys. I thought I was a goner…that was…really awesome of you, Dodger…” His cheeks turn pink.

“What the f—freak is going on?” Chris’s voice, stumbling over a curse as it is, is a welcome sound and all of us look up from where Nick is still on the ground.

We point in unison at him, but Chris’s eyes are on me, and she shoves past all the kids and puts her hands on my face, concern flitting across her usually deadpan expression as she turns my head from side to side, examining the damage.

“Oh my GOD, Sunny, oh my God—Oh my God, are you okay? Did he do this to you?” She turns and her eyes, blue like water, start to burn as she glares at Nick.

“Yeah,” I say. I hate liars, after all.

She swears full on this time, not bothering to cover her mouth as she lets me go and spins on Nick, foot reared back like she’s going to join in on kicking him straight in the face. I take her arm and pull her back.

“He’s not worth it,” I don’t want her to get in trouble, too—because I can hear grownup voice coming up the path.

Chris puts her foot back down and glares in a fury down at him. “Yes, he is.”

“What happened here?” A voice I recognize as Olivia’s stops Chris from kicking him, anyway.

“This as—jerk!” Chris points at Nick, “Just beat up one of my campers! Look at her!” She grabs me by the shoulders and presents me to Olivia, whose expression shifts from neutral curiosity to dawning horror. I’m suddenly surrounded by adults, asking to know who my mother is and what her number is and if I’m okay and as I’m ushered away by Olivia’s arm around my shoulder, I look back at my gathered friends who stand sheepishly behind Chris. Dodger gives me an enthusiastic wave.

Looks like my summer was going out with a bang after all.
“You’re going to be late!” Mom calls from behind my closed door as I shove my legs into jeans—her orders—and my favorite baseball shirt. I rub my eyes and stumble out to the bathroom, where I brush my teeth and comb my hair before loosely braiding it into my twin pigtails. Mom hovers all the while, impatiently looking at her watch and gesturing at me to hurry without ever saying it.

I roll my eyes and take my time on purpose.

Summer vacation is, without a doubt, the best part of any kid’s life.

School starting back is arguably the worst.

But… I can’t help but feel just a little twinge of excitement as Mom hands me my new backpack and scoots me out the door and into the car. It’s been a whole week since I’ve seen my friends after what happened with Nick.

I hope no one thinks I’m pathetic for that.

The ride to the school isn’t as long as I thought it would be, and as we pull up to the high school—for grades six through twelve—I see an absolute army of kids milling around in front of the school, taking their time getting to their classes, looking at schedules, getting lost. I feel my face turning into a frown and my stomach churns. There are so many, and they all seem to know each other…

Mom laughs, “Your face is going to get stuck like that, you know.”

My frown cracks as I retort, “Good, it makes me look tough. King of the Hill. These kids won’t know what hit ‘em.”

She shoves my head playfully as the car door opens, “Get out of here, you. Do you need me to walk you in?”

“Hey, Sunny!” Charlie’s voice carries instantly across the schoolyard and my frown completely disappears.

“I'm glad to see you’re laughing,” Falkor is at my right side, peeking out through her thick glasses. While Charlie and I are wearing jeans and t-shirts, Falkor is dressed to impress in a nice, girly dress.
As we walk towards the front of the school, I see a gaggle of boys—including the red shorts guy from putt-putt—all huddled around a boy with his baseball cap on backwards and a skull on his shirt as he lays down his final Uno card against the red shorts boy. As he does, they all start yelling and shouting, but he sees me and his smile of victory turns brighter. He’s up and sprinting in seconds.

“Sunny! Falkor! Charlie!” Maurice skids to a stop in front of us, “Where’s your homeroom??”

“Ummmm,” We all look at our schedules.

“Oh! Miss Olivia!”

It’s all the same. I feel my face splitting wider into a stupid smile. We were all going to be in the same first class of the day!

We find Thea being dropped off by her tall parents with a kiss on the forehead from each one, and a lovingly homemade lunch gripped in her big hands. Thea gives them a small smile and wave and then her eyes light up as she sees us.

“Hi. Miss Olivia’s class?” She asks.

Things just keep getting better and better.

We’re all walking towards the front of the school when we meet up with Buttercup—she’s a grade older—and she waves at us from a group of seventh graders before joining up with our posse.

“It’s good to see you, Sunny!”

“Good to see you, too, Buttercup!”

“I was wondering,” She says, “Do you all want to go to the diner after school?”

“Surely you’re not going without your camp counselor,” Chris’s voice makes us all turn.

It’s weird to see her without her swimsuit and cover-up on, changed out for a pair of cool jeans and a crop top, her perm wildly thrown over one of her shoulders. But she still looks cooler than all the other teens around her, with her tan and relaxed posture.

“Surely you don’t wanna hang out with a bunch of twerps,” I retort and see her smirk.

“Well, I don’t trust you all not to get into trouble. And besides, I already talked to your mom, Sunny. Guess who needs a babysitter?”

“No way!” I gasp, “I’m almost thirteen! I don’t need no babysitter!”

“Tough, shortstop. What your mom says goes.”

I roll my eyes at her, but she’s still grinning as she invites everyone to come along with us at the end of school.

Okay, maybe getting to spend the afternoon with everyone, even Chris, won’t be so bad.

Chris says her goodbyes as she heads to the upperclassman hallway, and Buttercup splits off shortly after. The rest of us shuffle our way into Miss Olivia’s classroom and take up a chunk of desks in the middle. The rest of the kids file in until the bell rings.

Summer’s over. My stomach twists in a bittersweet feeling, like the time I tried Mom’s coffee before
I was ready for it.

My mouth tastes the same as it did then.

Olivia stands up in front of the classroom and beams at us. “Good morning, class.”

“Good morning!” We all say in one echoing kid voice.

“Before we get started, I want to introduce a couple of our new students. Please welcome Sunny Sanchez from Kanto…”

The door opens and Lillie walks in.

“Ah, and there she is! Our other new student, Lillie Aether! We’re so glad to have you both.”

I point to the empty desk to my right and frantically wave Lillie over. Her pained expression lightens immediately and she scurries to the desk, shoving her backpack at her knees.

“Hi Sunny,” She whispers, “It’s good to see you.”

“I thought your mom wouldn’t let you go to public school,” I whisper back.

“She changed her mind. Something about…”

“Ahem.” Olivia interrupts us, “If you all don’t mind, you can whisper when we go to recess. It’s time to go over your schedules, everyone—you’re in sixth grade now, so things are going to be different…”

She starts to drone on and on, and my mind wanders.

I’m in a classroom with all my friends. It’s a beautiful day outside, but I almost don’t mind that I’m inside.

The dread of the day starts to fade as Maurice makes a face at me from the desk to my left and Charlie passes me a note with a crude drawing of Nick on it. I have to keep myself from laughing as I pass it up to Falkor, who is attentively taking notes already. There’s something magical settling into the room, a little whisper of the past weeks that comes in with the warm breeze from the open windows and lingers around us all, something that says it’s all going to be okay. That it’s not over.

I’m still counting the days, hours and minutes until summer starts again, but maybe, just maybe, it won’t be so bad being the new kid on the block.

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