

Shifting Snow

Magic and mayhem in sunny North Dakota.

When a woman who looks just like her shows up in the middle of a major snow storm, Constance confirms what she always knew: something about her life is wrong. But it turns out she's not the only one with secrets to uncover. The Minnesotan housewife down the street is also a fairy, and one causing a lot of trouble at that. Even Midwest-Nice North Dakota has dangerous creatures lurking in its small cities, baking brownies and brewing up apocalyptic storms.

Approximately 9,200 words.

*Originally published in Darklight & Daydreams (2018),
a limited-run charity anthology to raise funds for Puerto Rico hurricane disaster relief.*

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If you're not from North Dakota, you can be forgiven for not being able to tell the difference between the standard don't-go-outside-or-you'll-freeze-to-death-in-five-minutes snow storm and the holy-shit-the-world-is-ending magical variety. The key differences, from what I can tell so far, are speed, duration, and smell. Your standard death storm comes in fast – the winds here can drop the temperature by forty degrees in a matter of hours – but the holy-shit magic storms show up before you can even drive the ten minutes it takes to get to the grocery store across town for supplies. They also last a hell of a lot longer, and the snow smells like sewer water. Storm magic is not happy magic, and angry magic smells like shit.

Sorry if that's a bit blunt, but I've had a rough few days, and the rougher my day, the less effort I put into my filter.

My first magic storm wasn't that long ago. You probably saw it on the news too. You know, that big blizzard that hit Hel, North Dakota out of nowhere. I was a little spooked at first by how quickly it came on, but I had my emergency kit and a full charge on two laptop batteries, so I was prepared to hunker down and play video games under a blanket fort for several hours if the power went out. Until then, I thought I'd make myself some hot tea and watch some cheesy reruns while the microwave and internet still worked. But I never got that far. Five minutes after the white-out started, one of my adoptive sisters, Cho, called me in a panic.

"Constance." Her normally relaxed voice was high-pitched and fast-paced. "Constance, this is bad."

My stomach instantly dropped. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Mom and Dad. They were driving out to the lake." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "The storm wasn't anywhere on the forecast. Why wasn't it on the forecast!?"

"But they've got their winter kit in the car, right? I mean, they always do. They'll be okay... won't they?" Cho made an exasperated noise. I didn't believe myself either. A winter kit is enough to hold you over till a tow truck gets to you in clear but freezing weather. It's not enough to hold you through an entire storm, even though we all like to pretend it is. Still, have you ever had to face the possibility of your parents' imminent death? It's not easy to acknowledge when you see it. "I know, I know," I finally said. "I'll toss whatever supplies I can carry in the car and see if I can spot them. You and Calandre are already doing the same, I assume?"

"Connie." She only ever called me that when I annoyed her. She knew I hated it. "Have you even looked out the window yet?"

"It's snowing, I get it," I pulled back the corner of a curtain absentmindedly and glanced at the parking lot full of mini garages. "But there's more snow in the air than on the ground so far. I think I'll be okay. Besides, there's only one road from their house to the lake. It's not like I have a lot of ground to cover."

Cho let out a small nervous laugh. "What are you talking about? There's like, three feet of snow on the ground already. I don't care how many supplies you bring. You won't make it from your place to theirs, let alone to the lake."

I glanced at the mostly bare parking lot again. Sure, all the swirling snow made seeing anything more than a bus-length distance away difficult, but I'd driven in these conditions before. And I certainly didn't see any three-foot snow drifts on this side of town yet. "I think I'll be okay. I'll call you after I find their truck, or in an hour, whichever comes first."

I hung up, and grabbed an extra first-aid kit and as many heat packs as I could carry, then ran out the door, leaving the hot cup of water still sitting in the microwave, waiting for its tea bag.

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It was actually one of the more pleasant storms I've ever driven in, at least at that point. I drove by plenty of people stuck in drifts in their neighborhoods, being dug out by neighbors and first responders, but every time I turned down a road, the wind shifted in such a way as to blow the snow out of my path and pile another few inches against the bumper of some other poor schmuck driving around trying to get to safety. That should've been my first clue that something was wonky, but the wind in North Dakota is always kind of bizarre, so I just chalked it up to luck and kept going.

I found their truck just a few miles outside of city limits, which was basically the middle of nowhere. There was a hell of a lot more snow and ice on the road out there, but I still managed to inch along with my wipers on full blast. I practically felt my heart crack my sternum from beating so fast while I tried to ease my red compact SUV off the road without spinning out myself. My fingers hurt from white-knuckling the steering wheel, and I had to take a few deep, centering breaths as I jerked on the emergency break and punched the emergency lights button.

Their old blue pickup was buried up past its wheel well covers, and the windows were either fogged up or iced up too much for me to be able to see in from where I was at. I immediately jumped out of the car, bundled from head to toe, and waded my way through the snow to their driver's side door. The windows were iced, not fogged, which wasn't a good sign. Fog meant the inside was warm. Ice meant, well... it meant I didn't have time to call and touch base with my sisters. I banged on the door a few times, but Dad - it was always Dad on the driver's side - didn't open it. The handle wouldn't budge from my side either, so it must've been locked or frozen shut. I turned to trudge back to my car for my window-breaker hammer, and that's when I first saw her.

She was standing there, knee-deep in the snow and wearing nothing more than a gray hoodie and leggings, digging through the contents of my car. I couldn't see the details of her face well through the glass of my open door and the driving snow, but she was long and lanky except for her wide hips, built like a bean-pole, the phrase my parents always used to describe me. She even had the same twisty brown braid that whipped around her hips in the storm, and the same cool white skin that looked almost gray in certain lights. I had to consciously force myself to inhale, and as soon as I was breathing again, I felt a wave of irrational anger sweep over me - anger not because she was stealing my stuff, but because I felt like my world was about to shatter whenever I looked at her.

"Hey!" I finally, stupidly, yelled. It was all I could get out, and I was sure the words had been swallowed up by the wind, but she slowly turned to look at me, as if I was the most uninteresting thing in the world. And that's when my knees went out. No amount of glass or snow could hide the familiarity in her face anymore, not with her staring straight at me. The pale hazel eyes, the full lips and straight Roman-looking nose, even the bright shock of dyed blue bangs - I was staring at an exact copy of myself.

I closed my eyes and dug the heels of my hands into the sockets to squeeze them shut even further. I felt like I was losing my mind. I forced another breath, opened my eyes, and slowly slid my hands from my face. She was gone. My car door was closed. She hadn't even left any footprints in the snow. Shakily, I got back to my feet, using my parent's truck to help me stand. I'd have to figure out what the hell had just happened later, after I saved them.

I ran, as well as you can run in deep snow, to my SUV and yanked the door open. My duffle bag of extra supplies sat in the passenger's seat, right where I left it. But I knew before I even unzipped it that the hammer was gone and I was royally screwed. What I didn't expect was for my cell to have no signal. The storm had apparently gotten to the towers in the area, and now I couldn't call for backup. And even if the snow hadn't reached my car's own wheel wells in the five minutes since I'd parked, I don't think I could've torn myself away from my parents to drive back into town for what would essentially be a body retrieval by the time we returned.

I sat in my car and hyperventilated for a minute. Briefly, I considered punching the dashboard. That wasn't going to help anyone though, so I slowly started rocking back and forth at the waist, forcing my breathing and heart rate to find some semblance of normalcy again. I let my right hand twitch and sway in the air beside me at its own speed, shaking off some of the nervous energy from the adrenaline pumping through my system. I gently closed my eyes, inhaled deeply, and when I opened them again, I was ready to face whatever was ahead.

My nose was still red and cold and about to fall off from being outside the first time, but I refused to leave their frozen door, trying everything I could think of. I pulled until the muscles in my forearms burned. I slammed my body against it, trying to crack the coating of ice, until my shoulder went numb. I used my little plastic ice scraper to try to chip away at the seams. Nothing worked. Nothing. Worked. I knew if I didn't get them out in the next few minutes, I'd lose the only family who had ever wanted me. So I pulled on the door one last time and, just when I thought my muscles were finally going to give out, they changed instead.

That same feeling I got when I saw my doppelganger washed over me, supreme dread, like the world was ending. My biceps ached and spasmed and then doubled in size. I screamed, more out of surprise than pain, and my wrist flexors were the next muscles to balloon. There was a horrible ripping sound, which at first I thought was me, but thankfully turned out to be the truck door peeling off its hinges like a piece of fruit.

I flung the scrap of metal to the side and started to unbuckle my father without missing a beat. I could figure out what had just happened once my parents were safe. The jostling of his seat belt stirred him enough to make him open his eyes halfway. His gaze looped around the cab, trying to orient itself. He had a pretty nasty gash in the sun-wrinkled skin of his forehead, and there was blood on the steering wheel. He must've hit it when they spun out. Mom was out cold too, but I didn't see any blood on her. I hoped that was a good sign.

"Connie?" Dad squinted and looked at my grotesque arms, but it didn't quite register. "What are you doing here?"

"It's okay, pops. Just a little bad weather is all. We're going to get you home soon."

He smiled and nodded, and then the wind shifted direction and punched me in the face with a foot of snow and ice all at once. I stumbled back, but quickly regained my footing. My father yelled as the snow drift forced its way on top of him, slowly sealing up the truck cab all over again.

I frantically started digging to get him out, knowing my shovel wouldn't be where I left it in the car, and I remember thinking how ridiculous I felt, how small and ineffectual my hands seemed next to my ginormous arms, and then the dread came, and my fingers melted together, and I choked back vomit at the sight of melting flesh, and I just kept on digging. And damn if those new shovel-scoop hands weren't a hell of a lot more efficient at removing snow. As soon as I'd gotten through enough snow to pull my father out, my hands and arms softened again and fell back into their original shapes. Dad's eyes were closed again by the time I got he and Mom buckled into my SUV, but I couldn't be sure if he'd seen anything. I'd find out when he woke up though.

I popped the car into reverse and drove away as fast as I could. The snow that had previously buried my wheels was completely gone.

* * *

"Get out of my house." My father's face was red and his whole body shook in a way that made him seem even older than he was. He'd woken up part of the way home, as had my mother - a little warmth does miracles - but he'd stayed completely silent until I'd gotten the both of them situated on their overstuffed floral couch in the living room, covered in three layers of afghans for extra warmth.

"Liam!" My mother put her hand on his leg and gave it an admonishing pat. "What are you saying? Maybe we should get that bump on your head checked out at the hospital after all."

He wouldn't make eye contact with me. He looked off in a corner of the room, pretending to be interested by my mother's kitschy collection of porcelain turtles. Clearly, he'd seen more than I thought. When he finally spoke again, his voice didn't waver. "That freak is not my daughter."

And there it was, without any of the fanfare or drama I'd always expected, the thing every adoptive kid dreads they'll hear someday - "not mine" - paired so easily with the thing every autistic kid fears they'll hear - "that freak". Not that I was a kid anymore. But you never fully stop expecting it, and it doesn't hurt to hear it any less as an adult. Especially not when you're thinking it might be true yourself. You know, like when you've just turned your hands into shovels and ripped a truck door off its hinges.

Mom's eyes widened, and she quickly looked at me, embarrassed. "Honey, he doesn't mean that. Something's not right with his head. Help me get the doctor on the phone, will you?"

I reached for the landline on the small wooden side table, but Dad snapped and pulled it out of my reach before I could get to it. "God damnit, Adelle, there's nothing wrong with my head!" He finally turned his eyes to me and kept them locked on mine. He snarled, like I was some stranger who had broken into his house. "I said get out!" Spit flew from his lips as he yelled the words. "Out!"

The room went quiet. Mom didn't know what to say. She just sat there, shocked, worried about me, worried about him. Every muscle in my body vibrated. My legs felt like jelly. And as soon as I thought that, I knew it was a mistake. Because I felt something grinding in my knees, and that now familiar dread, and everything went into slow motion as I sunk closer to the floor, legs folding in on themselves, inch by inch. Why did I have to put it that way? I thought. Why did I have to think that stupid, specific thought? Which is

ridiculous, of course, because no one can control every stray thought and, anyways, how was I supposed to know I'd start melting again just from thinking about it? I'm sure I'd had that exact same thought dozens of times in my life and nothing had ever previously turned to jelly. But it was like now that this transformation thing had started, it was all I could do to keep my molecules coherent after a light sneeze.

Long story short, Mom screamed, Dad yelled some more, and I dragged myself out to my car, frantically willing my legs to function again, which they eventually did, just in time for me to drive home before someone started throwing things at me.

Like I said, it's been a rough couple of days. But that was really just the beginning.

* * *

When I panic, I research. Okay, I eat whatever is vegan, gluten free, and chocolate, and then I research, but I still research. So my limbs spontaneously transmogrifying and my adoptive parents kicking me out of their house meant I was determined to stay at the keyboard until I died if necessary, though preferably just till I found something, anything that would create order out of all the life-exploding chaos I'd just been through. I was in hour three of my research binge and, though I'd read a billion articles on crisis management and family dynamics, I couldn't find anything scientific to explain what the hell had happened to my body. Even the fringe medical theory groups seemed tame in comparison. I found an awful lot about magic though: shapeshifters, trickster gods, alchemy, and other stuff that I assumed was bullshit at the time. My whole body ached from the tension I carried, but I didn't dare try to stretch out my muscles or do anything remotely physical, in case weird shit started happening again.

Cho had provided a brief distraction around hour two, when she called to ask why Mom wouldn't stop sobbing and Dad just kept staring off into space. I didn't remember even texting her that I'd gotten them home, but I must have, because she and Calandre had braved the storm enough to grab Cha'risa from her sleepover and take her back to Mom and Dad's duplex. (I feel like this is a good place to acknowledge that, yes, we are that weird family where all the kids have names that start with the same letter. And yes, our parents are that well-meaning older couple that wanted to help "the less fortunate" and so ended up collecting us like dolls: an African American kid, an Asian American kid, a Native American kid, and a Caucasian kid with a disability. We like to tease them about it if they ever really piss us off, which is usually always around the holidays funnily enough, but I'm getting way off track here.) I told Cho I didn't know anything, which was a lie, and I hate lying, but I can only take so much, you know? Then I got back to the computer and tried to forget the old by learning the new.

And it worked, for about an hour. But then I hit hour three, and my landlady, Maris Marlow, knocked on the door. I swallowed a groan when I saw her through the peep hole. Swallowed it, because one time I had groaned aloud, assuming, reasonably I think, that a door should be thick enough to block such a sound. Spoiler alert, it is not. Either that, or Mrs. Marlow has supernaturally good hearing, because she also can tell when I'm just pretending not to be home. So I put on my best fake smile - I'm not very good at them, but I do try - and opened the door to get her to go away.

She was holding a tray of traditional brownies that would turn me into a snotty mess if I ate them, but it was still sweet of her to bring them. It didn't strike me as odd at the time, but I should've paid attention to what she was wearing: off-white high waters and a blue button-up blouse, slip-on shoes, not boots - no sign of winter gear on her short and stocky frame, which was definitely weird, because she lived in one of the

standalones down the street, not in the apartment building itself. Her short dark brown hair swished just above her shoulders as she sashayed straight into my kitchen and set the tray down with a sympathetic smile. Clearly, she'd heard that something had gone down in the Karlsson residence. The whole town had probably heard at that point. "So," she said, a twinge of Minnesota lengthening her vowels, "How are you doing, dear?"

"Mrs. Marlow, this is really nice of you, but I-"

"I hear you had a visitor today." She smiled in a very mom-like way, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

"I'm sorry, who do you..." She couldn't know about the mirror me, right? As far as I knew, Dad hadn't seen that part at least.

Slowly, hands clasped behind her back, she circled around me, smiling the whole time. I felt like a ship in some sci fi show being scanned by the enemy. When she got back to my front she stood on her tip toes and got her eyes as close to mine as she could. I'm nearly a foot taller than her, but I felt about an inch high in that moment. Before I could figure out what might possibly be the proper way to respond to this strange intensity, she leaned back onto her heels, nodded as if satisfied, and turned to go.

"Let me know if you get any more visitors, dear," she called behind her as she closed the door.

I blinked and stared at the tray of brownies, completely out of processing bandwidth and not sure whether to laugh or cry. I gripped the edge of the counter and squeezed, just to feel some sensation that might yank me out of my rapidly spiraling thoughts. Another deep breath, and as I turned to lock the door behind her, I came face to face with myself instead.

"Your landlady is very nosy." She headed straight for the sweets on the counter and started picking at them, as if searching for a hidden razor blade. "We'll have to do something about that."

I sat down on the nearest chair, harder than I'd intended to. Just looking at her made me want to vomit, like it was cosmically *wrong* for both of us to be in the same room. "What... Who are you?"

"I'm the person you're pretending to be. And I want my life back."

* * *

Her name was Amandine, and it turns out all those bullshit internet theories about magic weren't so farfetched after all.

"So you're saying I'm a... changeling? The identical copies that fairies make when they want to steal a human baby?"

"That's what I said." She nibbled on the pile of broken brownies now that she'd deemed them safe.

"But that makes no sense." I found myself rocking, trying to soothe the rising anxiety. "If fairies can make human-looking babies all on their own, why would they want to steal someone else's?"

She smiled and shrugged as if to say, isn't life funny? "Some people will spend a fortune on designer handbags, even knowing they could get a perfectly good knockoff for a fraction of the price." She certainly knew a lot about the human world for someone who'd been held against her will for over two decades,

including how to deliver a perfect backhanded compliment. Maybe that part's not exclusive to humans though. "Now are you done asking questions?" She faked a yawn. "I'm getting bored."

"So-rry." I tried not to glare at her. As annoying as she was, I was finally getting some answers. Ridiculous-sounding answers, but still. Magic starts to seem vaguely plausible when you're staring your doppelganger in the face. "This is all just a little... difficult to process." I could feel my cheeks turning red, despite my efforts to stay calm. "I mean, who believes in fairies anymore?"

"Magic doesn't need you to believe in it for it to be real." She might as well have added in a *duh!* "But I'm sure you'll get used to it once you get back to the fairy realm."

"Uhm, excuse me?" I managed to get back to my feet, trying very hard not to think of my knees as jelly. "I'm not going anywhere."

She actually laughed at me then, and I thought, do I laugh like that? God, I hope not.

"Oh, come on!" she said. "Do you really think you can stay here after what happened today? There's no place in the human world for a freak like you."

There was that word again, freak. "Don't call me that."

"Oh, no?" She stopped leaning against the counter, straightened her spine, but kept that horrible smile. "Don't like being reminded that you were never supposed to be here in the first place, do you?"

My throat tightened with anxiety. I wanted to respond, but I couldn't make anything come out. She walked closer, slowly, deliberately. I had to start stumbling backwards or she'd have run right over me.

"You might look human, you might act human, but you aren't human. People around you can tell. There's always been something off about you." She gave my chest a gentle shove, testing how much resistance I'd put up. I felt a burning through my shirt where her hand had been. "You've known your whole life you don't belong here."

A couple tears escaped, hot on my face, making me even more embarrassed and afraid. I hate crying in front of others, which is a problem, because I'm no good at hiding my emotions. When I bumped up against the closed window, the storm still raging outside, I lost it and started full-on sobbing. She hovered over me, keeping me pinned there. The closer she got to me, the more I felt that dread welling up inside. I worried I'd dissolve out of existence if our skin touched.

As she stared me down, the wind rattled the window so hard I thought the glass would shatter. Instead, it flew open, curtains billowing. She leaned in closer and I could feel her breath on my exposed neck. Despite the howling wind, I could hear her whisper clearly. "Now get out," she said, and the wind sucked me off my feet and into the cold.

I couldn't even scream.

* * *

I woke up to a curved tan ceiling and the smell of a wood fire burning. Leaves, twigs, wool, and other things that should've made me break out in hives, but somehow didn't, poked out of the simple mattress at various points. It took a few minutes to orient myself, but I remembered what had happened well enough -

falling from a third story window, crashing into a snow bank, somehow falling *through* the ground, warmer and wetter than I would've imagined in the winter, landing on my ass outside the small dwelling I now assumed I was in, and then promptly passing out. I sat up gingerly, expecting pain, but none came. The room was filled with ferns and flowers and all things green, so I should've been sneezing my head off, but again, nothing. In fact, I felt pretty relaxed, considering the circumstances.

And then Amandine's mother walked in.

You know how you can tell when two people are related, just by the way they walk or talk? Sure, most people just look for the same tilt in the eyes or the same curve of the nose, but when you're adopted, you have to find something other than the physical to latch on to. For instance, I know I laugh just like my mother and argue just like my father. Maybe that's a bit subtle, but I'm sure you've noticed something similar, especially when the mannerism in question is supremely obnoxious.

This pale, blonde goddess of a woman looked nothing like Amandine - for one thing, she had to be at least seven feet tall, with long, paper-thin wings folded down her back like the train on a wedding veil - but she kept her chin tilted up just a smidge too high, just like her daughter, that same self-satisfied smile plastered on her face.

"Darling, you're home!" She blew me a kiss and bent to dig through an ornate treasure box peeking out of one of the fern planters. "I do wish you would stop mucking about upstairs. I always worry that you won't come home again."

"Ah, er, uh," I eloquently added to the conversation.

She straightened up slowly and turned to stare me down. Her bright purple eyes glittered from the firelight, but I saw more danger than beauty there. In just a few moves of her long legs, she had crossed the room to flutter in front of my face. If I'd still had any doubts as to who had raised my double, they vanished in that moment.

Her eyes narrowed and her voice lowered considerably. "*You* are not my daughter." This was apparently a catch phrase I would have to get used to.

"I guess not," I replied, not really sure what else I could say, not even sure if that was true. Surely I had biological parents around there somewhere? That is, if fairies reproduced the same way humans do.

She turned back to her ferns, completely disinterested in me any further, and waved toward the door. "Go see the Queen of Night then. I'm sure she'll get you back on whatever shelf you fell off of." When I hesitated, she added, "Shoo!" and an invisible force swept me out the door like unwanted dust. I landed on the porch, on my feet thankfully, and the door slammed behind me. A bright purple arrow glowed on the ground in front of me. Message received.

I followed the strange overlay that moved through the dirt ahead of me, past more curvy dwellings and plants the size of skyscrapers. Unusual beings flitted about, some impossibly tall and slender like trees, others small and round like berries. Most of them carried what looked to be weapons of some kind - thick twigs with glowing spearheads, bolas made of smooth stone and twisted vines - so I kept my head down and just focused on the arrow. Focused so well, in fact, that I managed to run into someone I should've seen coming. It's not the first time that sort of thing has happened either, but it was the first time I'd ever banged my head on royalty.

The purple light dissipated around the feet of the woman I'd just battering-rammed. "Oh god, I'm so sorry!" I stammered out, and peeked up, half expecting to be eaten alive by a terrifying creature of the night.

But I have to say, she was just lovely.

My head came to her shoulders - another of those lanky types - which were draped with dozens of elegant black braids, decorated from crown to tip in natural cut gems and flowers. Her bodice and shorts looked to be sewn out of brilliant white jasmine flowers, contrasting against the deep black of her skin. She bent down and smiled at me - a real smile, not a creepy fairy one - and patted my head. "You must be Constance."

I nodded, in awe.

She beamed at me again. "Well then, welcome home."

At those words, I crumpled into a snotty mess. She scooped me up and held me tight, and I let Night envelop me.

* * *

Later, after I'd let all the stress of the day pour out of me, we sat in her parlor sipping mint tea. Night-blooming jasmine pushed its way in-between every crack and crevice in the modest wooden building, and it smelled lovely.

"So it's true, all of it. She's not really my doppelganger. I'm hers."

Inanna - that was her name - nodded and set her cup down on a small bush beside her chair. "Does that surprise you?"

"No." I was shocked to realize I meant it. "I've always known I was different. So I guess this means I'm not really autistic, either, right? I just process and react to everything differently because I'm a fairy?"

She tilted her head to the side and clasped her slender fingers around a knee, bringing it to her chest to sit casually. "Oh no, you process and react to everything the way you do because you are you!" She laughed. "You met Radella, Amandine's mother? She is certainly not a person anyone would describe as sensitive to, well, anything." She added a wink for good measure. "But that is okay. Fairies are just as varied as humans, you see. Perhaps more so."

"Oh." I tried to hide my disappointment. "I see."

"Why does this bother you, little one?" She leaned forward, really listening. Maybe that's what gave me the courage to be totally honest with her. Every ounce of her body language sang safety.

"I just... I just thought that all this horribleness would at least give me answers," I said, and the rest all came spilling out. "That I'd finally feel normal. Normal in an entirely different context, different culture, sure, but normal somewhere. But now I find out I'm still different, even here." My shoulders slumped forward, and I tried to soothe myself with the warm cup between my hands. I'd already cried enough in front of this total stranger.

"Ah, well that is the difference between humans and fairies." She slowed down her speech, chose her words carefully. "For humans, difference is danger. No matter how many TV screens a human has in their house, they are still tribal inside. Fairies though, we are nature. We *are* nature, you understand? Variety is key to nature's survival as a whole. Individual species may come or go, but nature itself does not fear difference, nor death. The planet will always remain in one form or another, until the final nova takes us, and even then, we are still energy." Confident I understood, she leaned back in her chair and returned to her tea cup. "And that is why," she added almost as an afterthought, "many of the fairies have decided the humans must go."

"Excuse me?" My own self-doubts suddenly felt very small. "You don't mean..."

"Extinction, yes. Poof!" She nodded. "Myself, I am on the fence. But I can understand why the others prepare for war, why the storm fairies whose portals have been destroyed by pollution and greed start to fight back."

I waved my hands in front of me, frantic for her to pause and back up, and nearly sloshed tea everywhere. "Whoa, overload. Wait up. War? Portals? Storm fairies? Gotta fill in the gaps for me."

"Mmhmm." She took another sip of tea. "Portals between down here and upstairs. Places of symmetry in nature, like the fairy circle you fell into this afternoon. Many of the fairies who watch over the weather are finding it harder to travel between upstairs for work and downstairs for love, and that pisses them right off." She cursed with such elegance, I almost missed it. "Like your friend, the Storm Hag. I believe she goes by Maris upstairs. Such a lovely choice. It means the sea, you know."

"Wait. Mrs. *Marlow*? My *landlady*!?"

"Ah, is that what she does for human currency? Then yes, your lady of the land. I understand she has decided to take out the oil drillers who polluted her lakes quite soon."

"But that's like, half the town!" I stood up, knocking over my teacup. A vine from the bush near my chair snaked out and cleaned it up. "I've got to stop her. I've got to get home, now! How do I get out of here?"

"The same way you got here, through symmetry in nature. There is a fairy circle, a ring of stones, not far from here that should take you near your town."

"*Near* my town? How do I get the rest of the way? In the middle of a snow storm, without a coat no less! Don't you have some kind of magical charm or something?" I was starting to hyperventilate.

"You don't need a talisman, youngling! You can change yourself into whatever you wish. Fly, roll, or swim. It will not take very long for you to figure it out. I can tell you are a quick learner. Perhaps that is part of your uniqueness, hmm? I would hurry though, if you do want to save the humans. The storm is gathering strength."

I nodded and sprinted for the door, calling out my thanks behind me. I hoped with every atom in my being that she was right, that I could find some way to save them all.

* * *

I ended up falling out of the sky about twenty minutes outside of town. Apparently, regardless of whether I traveled upstairs or downstairs, as the fairies put it, there would be falling involved. I made a mental note to try to find a way to cushion my fall next time.

It took a little trial and error, and much shivering in the storm while I practiced, but eventually I was able to thicken my skin and elongate my legs, so that I could cover ground much quicker and without freezing to death in the process. I felt like a giant tank on spider legs, which was actually kind of cool, come to think of it. So it didn't take long for me to reach Mrs. Marlowe's house. Thankfully everyone in town was hiding out indoors from the storm, and the white-out conditions made it hard for anyone looking out a window to see much of anything, or else one of our local military reservists and/or hunters would've surely tried to take me out on the way there.

She was standing on her porch in the middle of the blizzard, grilling chicken on a small circular barbecue. Nothing about her seemed particularly fairy-like, or particularly angry for that matter. I never would've guessed she was behind the deadly white swirl surrounding us.

"Oh hi there, dear." She didn't look up from her task, but shouted cheerily so I could hear her from atop my long legs. "Are you hungry? I've made plenty. I figured I'd have at least a little company for the big show. Game day's always better with company!"

Unsure what to make of her cheer, I hesitated. I'm not very good at it, but I know that other people can pretend to be friendly when they're anything but. I also tend to see the best in others, and it's gotten me in trouble more than once. Still, I didn't want to battle if there was another way around this. (Psh, did I just say *battle*, like I'm some kind of Spartan warrior? Ignore me. It's hard not to get swept up in the drama when recounting a nearly world-ending event.)

So I decided to take a chance. I focused and shrunk my legs back to normal size, or as close as I could get. I'm convinced I was off by a few inches, because I had a little trouble getting up the porch steps, like my feet weren't landing where I expected them to. I did keep the extra thick skin though, just in case she took a swipe at me - plus it was still freezing out. Mrs. Marlowe motioned for me to take a seat on one of the partially snow-covered deck chairs, and I didn't want to seem rude, so I did.

"How do you like your chicken there, Connie? Crispy on the outside or nice and tender?"

"I uhm, don't actually eat meat, but thank you. I came to talk."

She nodded, and took the meat off the grill, piling it on a shiny blue platter. "I figured you would. Here about your trouble-making twin, are ya?"

"No, actually." The truth is, I'd almost forgotten about that completely, which I think is a pretty good indicator of how anxious I was about the whole snowpocalypse situation. "I'm here to ask you not to kill the oil drillers."

"Uff da!" She held the grill skewer to her heart, like I'd wounded her. "How can you be on their side, now that you finally know what you really are? If nature dies, we die, ya know. I'm doing what has to be done to save the planet."

"The Queen of Night said nature never dies, not really." I brushed some accumulating snow off my hardened legs and tried to keep my voice steady.

"So that's who's been in your head." She swallowed a whole chicken breast in one bite. Had her nails been quite so pointy a minute before? "Madam Night is a good ruler, by fairy standards, and one heck of a sculptor," she waved in my direction, as if that related to me in some way, and continued, "But she's older than all of us combined. Her frame of reference for acceptable loss is... much larger than for you or me." Another chicken breast down the hatch. Those nails were definitely dripping with something other than chicken juice, something noxious. "It's like the humans say: a generational divide. She just doesn't relate to us *youngsters* anymore." She laughed and winked, cracking herself up. "I'm sure you understand." Then she calmed just as quickly and stretched her elbow out at an unnatural angle, her arms seemingly made of rubber, to nudge me in the shoulder conspiratorially. "Besides, how can you stand up for humans after the way they've treated you your whole life? All they do is damage everything and everyone they touch. You know exactly what I mean, more than most I think."

I couldn't deny that. I've gotten... a lot of scars from people I thought I could trust. But I've also received a lot of love from people too. I thought of my sisters - they certainly didn't deserve to be collateral damage when Mrs. Marlowe wiped the tiny town of Hel off the map. So I straightened my back and continued to push my luck debating the survival of the human race with a creature I was starting to suspect was much, much stronger than she looked. "You're right," I started carefully. "Humans cause a lot of damage. But sometimes they fix things too. Sometimes, they're the only ones who *can* fix the kind of damage they cause. And sometimes, rarely, sure, but sometimes they even make things better than they were at the beginning." She appraised me carefully as I spoke and stopped eating the chicken entirely, which made me even more nervous. I'd rather she be full than hungry, to be honest. Still, I pressed on. "Don't they deserve a chance to at least try to fix what they've done? Isn't that possibility worth taking the long, slow path to peace, rather than the quick, bloody one to annihilation?"

"And in this scenario," she interjected, "you assume that the long, slow path is not bloody?"

"Well, I-"

"What about the destruction of my lakes?" The snow stirred ever faster around us. "What about the destruction of the fish and the plants that live inside them? What about the destruction of the humans' own siblings who live near my waters?" It swirled so quickly that I couldn't see past the porch any longer. She and I were encased in a tiny bubble of calm amid winds that could tear your arms off at the shoulder. "All that blood is spilled, and more, while we wait for the well-intentioned but murderous human destroyers to wake up and understand that they are killing themselves as well as us. Is it not more merciful to end the bloodshed swiftly?" Her voice boomed, daring me to contradict her now, when I could not run.

I was trapped, and I didn't have many choices. I could either fight her or agree with her, or... or maybe find another option. Maybe just try to keep talking. She might swipe my head off where I sat, but if it worked...

"I don't have the answers." My voice came out weak, but I wouldn't give up. "I know it doesn't make sense. People will die either way. We can't control that. But we can decide. Will we destroy, like they do?" I clenched my hands in my lap and took a deep breath. "Or will we try to find another way, even if it's imperfect?" My hands shook, my whole body vibrated with tension. I slowly released the focus on my thick skin, choosing to believe she wouldn't tear my heart out with her claws. "I want to keep searching for a better solution. Do you?" I looked her in the eye, held my breath, and waited.

Slowly, her nails shrunk back to normal and her arms regained some of their structure. The storm still whirled wildly beyond the porch rails, and something inhuman still shone behind her eyes, but she looked more Minnesota housewife than Storm Hag at last. "If I agree to wait a little longer," she said, "will you agree to take responsibility for turning this town around?"

"Yes ma'am, of course," I blurted out faster than I'd intended. I didn't have a clue how I was going to get a town full of people whose livelihoods depended on drilling to hug a bunch of trees and dance like flower children, but there would be time later to figure it out. All that mattered in that moment was saving lives.

"Well okay then." Just like that, the long vowels of her Minnesota accent returned. "Let me just get this storm under control and then we can chat about the particulars over a cup of cocoa, hmm?" She smiled, closed her eyes, and inhaled long and deep, like she was sucking all the wind back into her lungs. The storm fluctuated for a moment, allowing for a brief patch of clear sky, but then came back on even stronger than before. She opened her eyes. She looked angry again.

"What's wrong?" I shouted over the howling wind.

"It's that damn sister of yours." She glared at the snow blowing sideways around the porch.

"My sister?" I couldn't figure out what any of them could have to do with this.

"What else do you call a twin? That Amandine! She stole my storm, the little bugger."

"Stole it? I don't understand. I thought she was human."

"Oh, she's human alright. But she grew up downstairs. She might not have any magic of her own, but she sure knows how to use the magic around her. Why do you think your own powers slipped out of their chains as soon as she got to town? No coincidence, you bet!" It was getting harder to hear her over the howling wind, but she pointed down the street toward my parents' house. "You want this storm to stop, you're going to have to stop her first. It's time to go get your family back, kid."

She snapped her fingers, and the gale reached into our little bubble and sucked me back out with it. In no time at all, I was standing on my parent's porch, right where I'd been kicked out on my ass less than twenty-four hours before. Mrs. Marlowe's house disappeared into the storm behind me, and with it, any chance of help.

* * *

It took a while to figure out how to get into the house. I didn't want to make a habit of going around ripping doors off their hinges, like a superhero who never has to pay for damages. After all, I'd already ruined my parents' truck - it'd be kind of an asshole move to destroy their house too, as long as there were other options. Eventually, I settled on sneaking in through the cracks under the door, thankful that Dad hadn't gotten around to repairing the weather stripping yet. Flattening myself like a pancake gave me a nasty case of reverse-vertigo, but physically, being pudding was actually pretty relaxing. Flowing along the baseboards until I could assess the full situation in the house, I finally understood why Mom wanted us to help her dust so often. I vowed never to groan about it again.

I stopped and peeked into the dining room. My vision was pretty distorted in that form, but it looked like everyone - Mom, Dad, my sisters - were all sitting around the table, calmly eating supper, which I

thought was pretty weird, considering the chaos earlier that morning. I slid back around the corner and reconstructed my body as quietly as possible, hoping to be able to get some information without causing another freak out. But before I could casually insert myself into the scene, Amandine stepped out of the kitchen and set a large cheesy potato hotdish on the table.

"You can come out now, Constance," she called to me. "Come see for yourself that you aren't wanted here anymore, and then maybe you'll stop bothering me."

Face red, I stepped out just as she took her place at the head of the table. Now that my eyes weren't goopy anymore, I could tell that something was way off with my family. They all just stared *past* each other across the table rather than making real eye contact, and they had on those vacant fake smiles I hate so much. It made my skin crawl.

"See how happy everyone is without you, *Connie*?" Amandine sneered, as she plopped a big scoop of the casserole on a porcelain plate and then passed it to the left. "Now your parents have what they've always wanted: a normal, human daughter. They don't need anyone else, not in this house, not in this town. So why don't you see yourself out?"

"I'm not going anywhere." I sounded a lot braver than I felt just then. Still, I moved forward, one step at a time, heart slamming against my rib cage. "Not until you stop hurting my family. Then, if they still want me to leave, I will. But not before."

"Hurting?" She laughed and served up another plate with a splat. "I'm not hurting anyone. They *love* me."

"You're wrong." A little waver in my voice, but not too shabby still. One step closer. Then another. "This isn't love. Love isn't forcing someone to be with you. Real love is being wanted, and wanting in return." My face stayed red, though from anger now rather than fear. I almost let all that rage spill out, almost told her my family didn't want her either. It would've felt powerful to be the one saying it for a change, to watch someone else's face crumple with that deep-in-your-gut pain. Because I knew then, as soon as I saw her playing house and using my family like rag dolls, that she wanted to belong here just as much as I always had. In that moment, I knew how to really hurt her. And it scared me that I wanted to so badly.

But I caught myself, used all my willpower to swallow the urge. Instead, I looked her in the eyes and said, "You haven't given them a chance to want you yet." Now I was close enough to touch the table. "You haven't given me a chance to want you yet."

She didn't have a snappy comeback for that one. I could see her struggling with the same rage I had. I saw that good in her, that potential to find room for all of us. But when she finally spoke, she simply whispered the word, "No," and all my hope dissolved away.

"No," she said again, louder this time. "No!" I don't think even she knew what she was saying no to anymore, but it didn't matter. She snapped her head toward my family, pointed a finger sharply at me, and shouted, "I can't stand to look at this freak anymore! Kill her!"

Every muscle in my body tensed. Faced with the decision to fight my family to the death or let the rest of the town be wiped out by a temper-tantrum of a storm, I couldn't act. I froze, right when it all depended on me. I froze, and it still haunts me to this day.

Then Calandre's hand twitched, and I had visions of my oldest sister driving a butter knife into my eye. She didn't do that though. I mean, obviously. I still have both my eyes - though maybe changelings can regrow organs? God, I hope I never find that out. No. No, instead, she wrapped her fingers around a salad fork and stabbed Amandine in the hand.

Amandine screamed, all hell broke loose.

One by one, my family broke free from the spell - the directive to kill me apparently too big and abhorrent a command to carry out - and they dog-piled on top of my other self, until even little five-foot-nothing Cha'risa was beating her over the head with a serving spoon.

I cried with relief, until I realized they'd absolutely kill her if I didn't step in and pull them off her. By the time I got to her, she was unconscious, and the sky outside was starting to clear. My family sat around on the linoleum floor, their own spell-dizzy heads slowly clearing. Dad looked up at me, smiled and asked, in a stoned sort of way, "What's Maris doing here?"

"Oh don't mind me, Liam," Mrs. Marlow beamed. "I'm just here to take Amandine home."

"Isn't that nice, honey?" Mom sounded like she did when she had too much nog at Christmas. "That's why I love North Dakota. We have such personable neighbors."

* * *

That night, I dreamed of Inanna.

"I hear you had quite the adventure today. Hammered out a truce with the Storm Hag, brought a lost child home. Very impressive."

"To be honest, I don't feel like I did much of anything. I didn't have any big drop-dead, drag-out fight like a hero. It's my family that did all the heavy lifting."

"Garnering the love and admiration of others is a power in itself. Do you not agree?"

"I'd never thought of it that way."

"Well keep it in mind the next time. If you manage to bring lasting peace to the Storm Hag's lands, you may be called on to create similar truces elsewhere. The planet needs a lot of healing."

"Let's just stick to one impossible task at a time, eh?"

"Hmm, yes. But I think I will keep an eye on you either way. After all, you were the most interesting sculpture I ever worked on."

And then I woke up.