

PSION OMEGA

by Jacob Gowans

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young.
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

*They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.*

—“For the Fallen” by Laurence Binyon

Tuesday, November 11, 2087

A bitter stench emanated off Sammy and Jeffie's clothes and hair. Scents that would never wash off. Mingled with the smells of death—blood and urine and other things, worse things—it was all unbearable. On Sammy's left, a dying Thirteen [HYBRID?] moaned, the sound of its last breath rattling in its throat. Jeffie put a bullet in his head, and the sound stopped. Then she squeezed Sammy's gloved hand tightly, and Sammy returned the gesture.

They sat on the floor of a room that had once been as white as a blank sheet of paper. Now the stains of blood, brain, and other bits of human that were supposed to stay inside the body covered the walls, floor and their zero suits. Sammy wished he could enjoy the quiet a little longer, but he knew what was coming—who was coming.

"What do you think is happening out there?" Jeffie asked with a tremor in her voice that told Sammy she was fighting back tears. "I hope it's working. I don't—don't want it to be for nothing."

Sammy glanced at his watch and licked his lips, but his tongue was too dry to offer any moisture. "Are you ready?"

Jeffie took a breath that seemed to stretch on for minutes. She was tired to the core.

Sammy could feel it, too, deep in his bones. But they weren't done yet. The time was almost ripe. *So much depends on us.*

Jeffie rested her head on his shoulder. Sammy stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm fine ... really."

"I know you are."

"I'm ready—really, I'm ready." She wiped her eyes and nose. "How much time do we have?"

"Twenty minutes."

"How are you so calm?"

Sammy wasn't calm. He was exhausted, yet some reservoir of restless energy made him twitchy. He dreaded what was to come, but deep down sensed his own resolve... and acceptance. He pulled her closer and savored her. *How many of these moments do I have left?* Perhaps none. His mouth was close to her ear, and he whispered, "I'm terrified."

Jeffie hugged him fiercely and began to shake again. "I don't want—"

"Shh," Sammy told her. "I know. It's okay. You can go back. You don't have—"

"I do!" she shouted. "I'm not letting you do this alone."

"I can do it by myself. If I just use it—"

"We can't risk failure. Two of us increases the odds by—"

Sammy let her go. "I know all that. I'm just saying ..."

"Then stop saying." Jeffie regained her composure quickly. "I'm all right."

"Okay."

"Are you, though? Remember your promise, Sammy."

A flash of rage passed through Sammy, but he suppressed it and let it go. Releasing the rage was like watching a train pass by and observing the faces inside, frightening, monstrous, and alluring all at the same time. He was getting better at doing it. *Makes no difference now, does it?*

Not true. It makes a difference to her. "I remember."

Sammy checked his watch again. *Nineteen minutes*. Then they would finish it. Finish it all.

And at the end, if everyone did everything correctly, Jeffie's fears would be realized. They would die.

Chapter One - Pretender

Thursday, March 13, 2053

“I pledge my loyalty to the flag of the New World Government. And to the welfare and advancement of mankind, for which it stands, one world, united and indivisible, with freedom and justice for all.”

“Take your seats,” said Mrs. Hepworth in her strained, croaking voice, “and set your desk screens to lecture mode. I won’t tolerate any messaging during class today. Understand, Katie?”

Katie Carpenter blushed as her classmates glanced at her, some with glee, others with expressions of condolence. Just yesterday she had been written up for messaging her friends during Mrs. Hepworth’s lecture on the Industrial Revolution. Immediately her desk screen lit up with messages from her four best friends.

Priyanka Patel: Heppy hates you more than she hates her anti-wrinkle cream.

Courtney Marzban: What a stupid [censored] [censored]!

Rachel Linn: Can’t stand that moled cow.

Vivian Wu: Why does she single you out?

Katie sniggered, but then hurried to clear the messages before Mrs. Hepworth caught her and froze her desk. Unfortunately, she wasn’t quick enough. She tried to swipe them away, but nothing moved. Katie grimaced as she slowly brought her gaze up from the screen to her teacher’s face. Mrs. Hepworth’s wrinkled, sagging cheeks turned red as she glared at Katie. The redness highlighted her moles like big black ants on a red picnic blanket.

“You,” Mrs. Hepworth’s voice sounded more strained than ever as she stared Katie down. “And you, Miss Patel, and you, Misses Marzban, Wu, and Linn ... all of you will serve detention today and tomorrow with me.”

Katie rolled her eyes and looked out the window. *This place is a prison.* She hadn’t done anything wrong. It was her friends who had sent the messages. *Except Mrs. Hepworth is too stupid and bitter too see it.*

Courtney’s auburn hair practically glowed from the sunlight streaming in through the window behind her. The gleam caught Katie’s eye.

“Sorry,” Courtney mouthed to her.

Katie didn’t respond. Behind Courtney, a flock of geese flew above the tree line. They went wherever they wanted. No one stopped them. No one put them in detention. *I am less than a goose.*

She yawned and rubbed her eyes, then rested her head in her arms on top of her desk while Mrs. Hepworth droned on about how royalty in England affected the Industrial Revolution. Her eyelids felt heavy. Katie hadn’t slept well lately. Dark nightmares haunted her. She wanted to talk to someone about them, but couldn’t. The school counselor would tell her parents. Her parents would make her see a therapist. Her friends would think she was a freak. And if people thought she was a freak, her chances of winning Prom Queen for the third year in a row were over.

Last night's dream had been the worst yet. She'd taken a bath in blood, human blood. She knew it was human because of all the bodies lying around the basin—faceless corpses that looked like crash test dummies. Then she'd been transported to a forest in the dead of night. She walked a few steps forward, wet leaves squishing underneath her bare feet, sinking between her toes. The soles of her feet grew uncomfortably cold.

You can be free, a voice said.

Katie paused and looked around until she saw a shadow, so faint and thin she almost didn't notice it. The shadow belonged to her, but it didn't behave as shadows should. It had a three-dimensional form and the closer it drew the more detail she saw in it. It stood next to her and walked alongside her. Every time she moved, it followed. She tried to run away, but the shadow stayed with her step for step. Finally Katie had no more breath to run. Gasping with her hands on her knees the shadow stepped in front of her.

Don't run from your destiny.

"What is my destiny?" she asked breathlessly.

To be the greatest. The Queen of All.

"What do you mean?"

You were born to be free, not in chains. Free yourself in the cave.

Katie took her hands off her knees and stood up straight. The shadow was exactly her height, looked exactly like her, but all in black. When it smiled with its black teeth and black eyes, Katie screamed and woke.

When her history class ended, Katie grabbed her bag and walked up the aisle to her teacher's desk. Mrs. Hepworth pretended not to notice her until the other students had left the room. "What can I do for you, Miss Carpenter?" she asked without looking up.

"I don't deserve detention."

"Oh, you don't?"

"No. I didn't write those things. I tried to erase them. I can't control the actions of my friends."

"You can't?"

Katie found Hepworth's answer-questions annoying. "Are you serious? Of course I can't."

"You are the reigning prom queen, Miss Carpenter. You started a film club. You are on the varsity basketball squad. You organize the pep rallies. You have more friends and admirers than some B-list celebrities. You know that. Everyone knows that. That makes you a leader. You influence other girls. The way they talk, think, act ... all of it stems from you."

"I didn't tell them to say those things!" Katie protested.

Mrs. Hepworth finally looked at Katie. Her expression was one of utter loathing. "Was I born yesterday? Miss Carpenter, I became a teacher because of people like you. People who think they're superior and special simply because they have a gift for athletics, a clear complexion, straight teeth, the right clothes, or a symmetrical face. It's bad enough to watch you diminish girls your own age, but to put me down ... in my own classroom ... *I think not.*"

"You're right," Katie responded. Her frankness made Mrs. Hepworth pause. "The things my friends wrote were rude. But I didn't write them. I don't say those things about you. And I don't treat other girls badly."

Katie's last two statements weren't entirely true. She *had* said rude things about Mrs. Hepworth to her friends. In fact, she'd said nasty things about all her teachers at one time or another, even ones she liked. But those comments stemmed from frustration, not malice. And as for the other girls in her class, she only despised the girls who despised her. She hadn't started any gossip wars; she ended them in brutal fashion.

"Katie, you rule this school like a queen whether you see it or not. You will serve detention. You will take responsibility for your influence over your friends."

"What if I can get my friends to do something good?"

"Like what?" Hepworth fixed Katie with a skeptical look.

"I don't know. I haven't thought of anything yet."

"If you want to get out of detention, you'd better impress me."

Katie nodded. She glanced at her teacher, then quickly looked away. Seeing all those moles on her teacher's face up close made her sick.

"By the end of the school day," Hepworth added.

Katie hurried to find her friends. They had to come up with something good. Anyone who received five days of detention or more was ineligible for prom queen, and Katie had already served two. The two that Hepworth had just assigned her would put her dangerously close to five.

Her next class, Home Tech, was her favorite. Sewing, cooking, woodworking, and repairing small appliances, her parents had suggested she take it to learn valuable "life skills." Katie instead signed up for Intro to Nursing, but got squeamish when told they'd have to volunteer at a nursing home, changing elderly people's diapers. Her Home Tech teacher, Mr. Cooley, caught her and her friend, Priyanka, at the door two minutes before the bell.

"Did you bring the knife?" he asked.

Katie nodded and dug in her backpack. "My mom will kill me if she finds out I borrowed it. She won't even tell me how much it cost."

"That's because they're so expensive." Mr. Cooley gasped audibly and dramatically when she showed it to him. "Look at this elegant grip. Balanced shank and cutting point. Perfectly tuned cutting ability. Pulsing wavelengths render the laser incapable of cutting human flesh, but slices through any fabric ... like butter."

He turned the device over in his hand, groaning and admiring it the same way Katie and her friends would a particularly handsome celebrity. Priyanka glanced at Katie with wide eyes and mouthed, "What a freak!"

"I'm going to test this out," Mr. Cooley continued, "show it to my department head and see if I can fit one into our budget for next semester." He lowered his voice. "You'll pick it up after school, right? And even though it's not a weapon, do not show it around. You could—maybe, potentially, possibly, and *probably*—get in trouble."

Suddenly Katie was pushed from behind as she stood in the doorway of the room. A massive figure walked by holding a hat above his head. "Bobby John loves you!" he called out as he waddled down the hall, laughing hysterically.

Mr. Cooley pressed the knife back into Katie's palm and leaned past her through the doorway so he could yell, "Watch where you're going, Bobby John! You almost hurt somebody!"

"Ew," Priyanka griped, "he touched me. He's so gross!"

Several other kids around Katie and Priyanka laughed, but this gave Katie an idea. She knew exactly how she could get out of detention.

* * * * *

Saturday, April 26, 2087

In the conference room of the fox's penthouse, the holographic images of several men and women appeared around a large table. At the head sat the Queen, glowering at them. They represented some of the most powerful individuals in the CAG, each deeply ensconced in government, media, or business. For over three decades, the fox had collected them, a group known only as the Council.

The Queen wore a zero suit as she sat in the middle of a hologram projected around her body. The zero suit prevented her body from interacting with the hologram, letting her move freely and undetected so long as she didn't break the holographic cylinder the projector cast around her. To all cameras trained on her, she looked like the fox. The microphone she used transformed her voice into the fox's by using sound wave manipulation. She'd performed the ruse successfully for over three months now.

"You forget an important point," said one woman in her typical terse tone. She served as Chief of Staff to President Newberry, leader of the CAG. Her focus was on the Chief Operating Officer of CAG's largest media group, America Media Network, who had argued that the public was tiring of war coverage. "Your time spent advocating the cause is far more effective than anything the President's administration can do alone. It has to be together with the three-pronged effort we have long advocated."

"Polls show our goals are currently not within reach," a CFO of a giant banking corporation stated. "Public opinion—"

"Polls are no reason to waiver in our commitment," the Chief of Staff responded. "They rise and fall like the tide. Ignore them."

"Ironic, those words coming from a politician," said another media mogul down the table.

"Yes, we knew the war would be unpopular," the COO said in a drawling, almost bored voice, "but this data is detrimental. Despite our efforts, the public believes the war shows no sign of ending. We need to consider other options in case public support continues to plummet."

"Such a pessimistic view," the Queen said in the fox's voice. Using her incredible memory, she mimicked the fox's tones and mannerisms to perfection. The holograph surrounding her duplicated her movements. "I do not think the war is likely to last longer than a few months. We've increased clone production, fortified our factories against insurgent attacks, and have crippling offensive strikes planned within the next three weeks. The war could be over by the end of May, I think."

"The NWG forces have shown more resiliency than you initially believed, fox," the CFO stated flatly. "What makes you think you're not overestimating them again?"

"Let me remind you, Mr. Valdez," the Queen responded coldly, "that *our* plans were not built on guesses. You know better. What some of you are experiencing, I think, is unfounded buyer's remorse. We will win this war if we stay the course. Once we win, the public will be forgiving as we usher in an era of peace, stability, and prosperity unlike

anything they have ever seen. Newberry will be re-elected for life, if we wish it. Businesses loyal to our cause will prosper while the rest fall by the wayside.”

Around the table several nodded their heads in agreement. The Queen noted the few who did not. “Meeting adjourned,” she announced.

Despite all her experience with the fox, she had no idea he spent so much time in meetings: meetings with the Council, meetings with the CEO of N Corp, meetings with so many puppets and yes-men that they never ended. The fox had transformed himself into nothing more than a shadow, but everyone who knew him were strings attached to his fingers.

Even I was a string.

The Queen deactivated the hologram and stripped from her zero suit. Naked, she left the room and crossed the penthouse. She paused at a mirror to examine her reflection. Her eyes showed small crinkles at the corners, and the skin on her cheeks and jaw had a noticeable sag. *When did this happen?* She touched her face lightly, her breath caught in her throat. *I look eighty.* Her hands covered her eyes briefly but when she moved them away and saw her face again, it looked as young as ever. She stared closer, making sure this wasn't a trick of the light.

I need more sleep.

Turning her back on the mirror, the Queen went to the smallest of the three bedrooms. Voice, thumb, and eye were required to enter. Once it opened, she heard the beeps coming from monitors surrounding a hospital bed. Confined to the bed was a man, talking to himself again, mumbling something she couldn't quite hear. All she caught was the word *parameters*.

“Do I need to remove your vocal box too?” she asked in a sweet voice. “It would be a pity. I do so enjoy our conversations.”

The fox's thighs ended abruptly in short fleshy stubs. Instead of arms, he had a few inches of lumpy, pink masses that ended five centimeters beyond the shoulders. The Queen had performed the amputations herself. He had been awake while she did it. He had been given no anesthesia. The surgery had been a glorious event. Liberating and beautiful.

Years ago, he had been her savior, her mentor, her lover. She had adored him with a reverence she'd shown no one else. He'd treated her like she was a treasure. While all the other Thirteens and Aegis had been made to drink the *solution*, it had not been so with the Queen. He had offered her a unique freedom, and she soared like the phoenix she always imagined herself to be. Then she made a single mistake, and he took her freedom away. He made her drink the bitter cup. That act had been unforgivable. She stepped next to the bed and surveyed his pitiful body while his eyes rested on her face, cold in fury, but impotent.

“The meeting went well,” she told him. “A few have doubts, but I set them straight. The war will not end as soon as they hope, but it will not last as long as they fear, either.”

The fox smiled. “Doubts will undermine you, Katie.”

Before he could say another word, the Queen grabbed a scalpel off the bedside table and held it to his face. “Call me Katie again, and I'll do so much carving that you'll make Diego look handsome.”

“My apologies, but I stand by my statement. Doubts are diseases. You must eradicate them with swift and extreme prejudice.”

“I have taken care of it. The Council is strong.”

“Not without me leading it.”

The Queen laughed. “You are leading it.”

“How long?” the fox asked after a notable pause. Pain filled his eyes. “How much longer will you keep me like this? You don’t wish to kill me, I think, yet you don’t trust me. What options remain?”

The Queen’s laughter turned into rage. She bared her teeth at him. “Until you learn what it means to be imprisoned. You have no idea what you did to me by making me drink the solution.” She grabbed his nose and twisted it until it nearly broke. “Don’t you get it?”

“Then end it. You’ll never have to worry about me again.” He took a deep breath and sighed as though even living was a chore. “Take the scalpel and draw it across my neck. Do it now.”

The Queen already had a scalpel in hand when she noted his use of voice inflection. Crippled, grotesque, and unable to move anything but his head, the fox could still be persuasive. “You taught me too well to recognize the subtleties of your talent,” she said as she set down the blade.

“It must be torture for you,” the fox continued. “The Anomaly Eleven is different for everyone. For some it makes them mathematical or literary geniuses. Others tactical. For me ... it lets me read people and manipulate them to near perfection, I think. But what about you? What does it do for you?”

The Queen did not answer.

“Has Anomaly Eleven restored your ability to feel emotions? If so, what has it been like to feel revulsion, remorse, fear, and joy again for the first time?”

A tear threatened to fall from the Queen’s eye, but she pretended as though she had an itch there, and scratched it away. When the fox noticed this, the corners of his mouth twitched. “Don’t be ashamed of your emotions. They make you stronger. The pain, the fear, the regret ...”

“Shut up,” she whispered.

“Embrace the remorse,” the fox said softly. “Listen to your conscience or it will torture you. I have begun to do the same. I’ve realized now that I was drunk with power. Thinking that I could change and save humanity. Let’s end this mad—”

Laughter burst from the Queen’s gut. She hadn’t so much as sniggered in weeks. This felt good. She laughed hysterically at the fox and his foolishness. *How did I ever think you were anything but a fool?*

“You mentioned torture ... I can only imagine what torture you’re experiencing,” she told the fox. “Your quality of life is forever diminished. It must be maddening. And to think that it all could have been prevented by simply asking for my forgiveness. Such a thought must be like a splinter in your mind.”

“The cave.” The fox said the two words very simply, but they jarred the Queen’s mind and spirit. Her head jerked back to look at him.

“What cave?”

The fox’s eyes told the Queen that he knew she was lying.

“You cry out in your sleep,” the fox stated in a perfectly even tone. “Have you been experiencing bad dreams?”

“Are you experiencing phantom pain in your limbs?”

“Not at the moment,” the fox replied. “But I do. Sometimes it becomes so intense that I shiver and tremble because all my mind wants to do is itch and rub the spots, and it can’t. And sometimes, more often than you would think, I forget that I can’t move at all.”

The Queen shivered as she experienced a distant, faint version of what the fox described. A trickle of hot discomfort ran up her spine to her neck. She pulled at her collar. The fox observed this passively.

The pains are getting worse. They had started the day she removed the fox’s arms and legs, a mild but real aching in her own limbs each time she cut and he screamed.

“What is going in your head?” the fox asked her. “Tell me about it. What harm can I do?” He laughed weakly. “I certainly can’t walk away or plug my ears.”

Again he inflected his voice. He did it so masterfully that the Queen wanted to confide in him. Yet he had to know she was aware of it. *What game is he playing?* He was no stranger to her innermost thoughts, but she recognized the danger of letting him have influence over her. *I’ll give him a small amount of information just to see how he uses it.*

“I have begun to feel pain again. My body is growing accustomed to it, however.”

“I told you before of the great irony associated with the Anomaly Thirteen. The Thirteens think their resistance to pain and most emotions is a strength, but now you see that is not the case. Your mind must also learn to cope with fear that comes from a realization of mortality.”

“I have no fear,” the Queen responded.

“Perhaps you never will. Who am I to say? I have never been a Thirteen.”

The Queen had heard enough of the fox’s nonsense. She left the room and turned off the light. As she closed the door behind her, she stared at the fox, a lump of wasted flesh. A small stitch of pain grew in her chest. She slammed the door shut to the fox’s room. *Not again. Go away!* Even with her eyes squeezed tightly shut, she saw the faces again in the dark recesses of her mind. Dozens of faces. Thanks to her Anomaly Eleven, she recalled each face perfectly.

She recalled them because she had killed each one. She even remembered the ways she had done them: guns, bombs, knives, acid, strangulation, electrocution ... If she focused on one person too much, the sensations returned.

Yes, her body, her mind, something inside her wanted her to feel this remorse, this empathy, this primitive, pathetic emotion, but she would not. Instead she smiled and pictured herself killing them, reveling in their blood and death. Slowly, the emotion subsided until it vanished. *I am stronger than you think, fox.*

The Queen gritted her teeth and walked onward. *Ignore anything long enough and it will go away.* Work needed to be done. She still had to find Sammy and the resistance before they caused any more problems. Even as she walked away, her thoughts went to the fox, to his wretched body. His mutilated form. The pain started to blossom again. Before it could gain any traction, the Queen found a tube of cream which she kept in a drawer in her bedside table. The tube had only one word printed on it: Fire.

She squeezed some of it onto a gloved hand and applied it to her thighs and calves. Her breaths turned ragged as the warmth crept into her skin, growing in intensity

like an electric stovetop. As her legs burned, the emotional torment dissipated. In the height of the agony, she got up and stumbled out of the room. It was time to get back to work. She could not waste precious moments on petty feelings. The fire would purge them from her.

It was almost two hours before the effects of the cream fully wore off, but the Queen's sense of clarity returned. *Sammy*. He was the goal. She needed everything on him. Every scrap of data, video, idea, theory, or thought the fox had ever collected on the boy. Nothing could go undetected or overlooked. Where the fox had failed, she would succeed. The amount of data collected on him was impressive.

Know thine enemy.

Hours into the research, her attention went to Sammy's days in Rio, particularly the days he'd spent in custody, and under the care of the man Sammy had called Stripe. She watched the recordings, paying careful attention to the things he muttered and moaned during his most agonizing moments. Then she viewed them a second time. During one of the pain sessions, there was an interruption. A second Aegis barged into the room talking about how another prisoner was ready for extraction.

Extraction. What does that mean? Why have I never heard it before?

After hours of searching through video and transportation files, she discovered that orders for extraction from Diego were always followed by a delivery to Mexico City. Not to the Mexico City Thirteen cell like she expected, but to a different building.

What are you hiding there, fox? What happened to the prisoners—the anomalies—who were extracted? Was it the fox's fancy term for death? Did he take their DNA? She tried to shift her focus back to Sammy, but the problem gnawed at her brain. She dug deeper, examined closer, but the answers still eluded her.

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Mrs. Hepworth wore an expression of distinct disdain as Katie returned to her classroom after school. Katie tried her best to ignore it and slid into the chair nearest to Mrs. Hepworth's desk. Hepworth tapped her fingers on the wooden surface in front of her, her lips twisted as though she'd sucked on a lemon.

"So?" she asked with her eyebrows tickling her widow's peak. "What brilliant plan did you come up with to save your bid for prom queen?"

Katie took a deep breath and began. "Okay, so I wanted to do something that would be meaningful and make a difference to people. You know, like something to change lives, but I didn't know what to do until I saw Bobby John."

"Mmm hmm ..." Katie noted the mixture of disbelief and curiosity in her teacher's tone.

Bobby John was one of the eight kids at school with special needs. Everyone knew Bobby John because of his old, tattered, red Razorbacks cap which he lifted off his head every time he passed a girl in the hall. Sometimes, between classes, he walked to and from class with his hat hovering above his head, a large smile on his face as he nodded to each girl.

"Bobby John loves you," he'd say to every girl with whom he made eye contact.

"I asked Bobby John to be my date to prom," Katie said.

“Ah—” Mrs. Hepworth didn’t finish what she planned to say. Clearly she hadn’t expected this. Her mouth hung open and her eyes wandered over Katie’s face as though they’d never met.

Katie took this as an invitation to continue. “And I asked my friends to invite the other special students. I’ve seen those kids get bullied and teased. Hopefully that won’t happen anymore if they’re seen with some of the popular kids. Plus, you know, everyone deserves to go dancing for one night, right?”

Mrs. Hepworth cleared her throat and turned her face away from Katie and wiped her eyes.

“Are you okay, Mrs. Hepworth?”

“Fine,” the older woman croaked. She cleared her throat a second time and then faced Katie with a smile. “You know why I hated school so much, Katie?”

“Um, homework?”

“No, I actually liked homework. Try again.”

Katie grew braver and ventured the answer she believed to be true. “Your moles?”

Mrs. Hepworth actually laughed. “They didn’t develop until I was in my thirties. It was Marybeth. My little sister. She suffered from Trisomy 21. A very mild case, and she was one of the last to have it before doctors found a cure. But the other students, girls and boys, were so mean to her. So cruel. I could tell you stories, but I won’t. It broke my heart to see my sister smile even while people called her names. That was all she knew to do ... smile back. She wouldn’t cry until after we were in bed. She didn’t want our parents to know. And you know what I did, Katie?”

Katie shook her head. No teacher had ever been so personal with her before; she wasn’t sure what to do or say.

“I watched. I stored it all away. And I promised that I’d never let anyone bully or tease one of my students.”

“Okay,” Katie finally said. “So that was a good idea then?”

“No, Katie,” Mrs. Hepworth responded, dabbing her eyes again. “It’s a wonderful idea. If someone had done that for Marybeth ... it might have changed everything.”

That night at dinner, Katie’s mom grabbed Katie’s hand, beaming. “Rachel’s mom told me what you and your friends are planning to do for prom,” her mom said. “I think it’s incredible.”

Katie grinned sheepishly. “Thanks.”

“What gave you the idea?” her dad asked.

Katie’s response was a shrug. The truth, however, was much darker. Five nights ago she’d had a dream where she’d killed Bobby John, stuffing his hat into his mouth while he screamed, “Bobby John loves you.” The dream had stuck with her, and she cringed each time she thought of it. The pain and terror in Bobby John’s eyes had made her stomach ache.

“Won’t it hurt your chances of becoming prom queen?” her dad teased.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What about Mark?” Katie’s mom asked.

“He doesn’t mind.” Mark Newcomer, Katie’s boyfriend, had even agreed to take Meagan Horn, another one of the special needs kids, although he was less enthusiastic about the idea than Katie.

“All four years,” her dad continued, “that was your goal.”

“It still is. I can win prom queen and still take Bobby John to the prom.”

“Is it safe?” his mother asked. “I mean, is he safe?”

“Gosh, mom.” Katie rolled her eyes. “He’s like the sweetest guy I know. Everything’s already worked out with his parents.”

Katie’s dad put his hand on hers. “I’m speechless, Queen. I really am. I can’t believe you came up with this all on your own.”

“Okay ... thanks.” She looked to her mom, not understanding why her dad was making such a big deal out of it. Her mom’s only response was to keep smiling.

“It’s days like this I wish we could have had more kids,” her father said.

Katie got up and began clearing the table. *Don’t take the comment as an insult*, she told herself. *He means it as a compliment.*

She turned the water on as hot as she could stand it as she soaked the dishes. Her father’s occasional comments didn’t feel like compliments. They felt like accusations. Like she wasn’t enough for them.

Her father took her hand out of the water and drew her attention to his face. Cupping her chin, he kissed her nose. “Queen, I’m proud of you. You’re great. You’re special. Someday you’re gonna change the world.”

Katie forced herself to smile. “Okay.”

She hurried to finish her chores and then ran upstairs. A message waited for her on her watchphone. The text hovered in the air just above the device. It was from Courtney Marzban:

Priyanka thinks you’re trying to make her look bad because she has a THING about special needs kids creeping her out. She’s pissed and on a warpath. WATCH OUT.