

*The Break*

By

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The Break

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Thesis	4-182

### Abstract

*The Break* is a Young Adult novel which takes place in a near-future United States. My main goal in writing my thesis was to pay homage to queer, YA, dystopia stories with my own. I drew inspiration from staples of adult literature such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Ready Player One*. I reframed their themes of gender, sexuality, and identity for my Young Adult audience. I played with traditional YA conventions including first-person POV and dead and absent parents, with the goal of defying expectations of readers who are well-versed in the genre. Over the course of writing this novel I became increasingly aware of its political nature, and I eventually chose to confront the danger of conservative Christians in the US within the novel. This thesis is meant to not only entertain, but also highlight the violence conservative views inevitably lead to for queer youth.

Liberal activists would have us believe that sex and gender are in fact two distinctly separate aspects of the self.

They view a person's sex as determined by their biology and say that a person's gender is determined by individual mindsets. They would have us believe that gender is ever-changing and fluid, rather than set before us by nature's will.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2017

## Chapter One

*This is a reminder that all juniors and seniors are required to attend the assembly on Prom etiquette. Students will report with their fourth period classes to the auditorium on the 16<sup>th</sup>.* That single announcement had given Aida hope for almost a week. Anything that kept her out of World Peace History with Mrs. Sanchez was a gift. *Teachers, please check your email for more information.* Aida had never heard any more details, which wasn't a surprise. Mrs. Sanchez was in her final year before retirement and she apparently had better things to do than pay attention to her school email. Or teach.

Aida trailed behind her classmates, bringing up the end of the line of students from the History building. Her two best friends, Camryn and Malorie, were talking to each other about something, but she could only hear snippets of the conversation. She was trying to figure out what was going on from Camryn's wide hand gestures, with little success. The sidewalk was annoyingly narrow, about two and a half people wide. It was *meant* for one line of students on the right and one line on the left, like traffic on a road. It was never used that way.

She gave up on trying to hear her friends when they neared the auditorium. They hadn't even reached the door, but she could already hear the dull roar of students from inside. About half of the school had been updated sometime after the start of The Peace. The new buildings

stood out with their ridged outer walls. Over the summer the school power washed those buildings, making them look brand-new at the beginning of each school year. She'd never been in one of those buildings though, because that was the boys' half of the campus.

The auditorium was like most of the Pre-Break buildings on the girls' side. The structure itself was probably fine, but there weren't many windows and its peeling paint left chunks of exposed sheetrock that seemed to make the building cry out, "Would you just put me out of my misery?" and that was only the outside.

Aida followed her classmates inside the auditorium and instinctively wrinkled her nose. It was like walking into a rotting banana peel. She leaned forward to say as much to Camryn and Malorie but was distracted by the frazzled-looking teacher just past the doorway.

His hair was sticking out in all directions and he was shoving handfuls of papers at each girl that passed him. He wore a red sports coat and a yellow shirt, which made him look like the White Rabbit from that old Alice in Wonderland cartoon. When it was her turn to take the papers, she half expected him to say, "I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!" She was disappointed when he didn't say anything, just waved at everyone to keep moving.

She jogged ahead to catch up to with her friends and nearly tripped on a jutting piece of flooring. The auditorium floors weren't the cracked tile she was used to, instead they were a cheap imitation of wood that curled at the edges and created hazards. She thought it matched the walls, which were covered in a yellow-brown tacky substance. She assumed that at one point it was used to hold up wallpaper. With the paper gone, the sticky walls were able to reach out and grab the less-aware students. Every time someone had to peel themselves off there was a, "shhhhhrrrrrick" sound like tearing Velcro.

She caught up to her friends and smiled when she saw they were talking to Mr. Haber. Aida didn't have a living grandfather, but if she could pick one, it would be Mr. Haber. He had a kind smile and snow-white hair, and he was one of the few teachers who *wanted* to teach in the girl's half of the school. He always said it was because they had open minds, but she suspected it had more to do with the fact that he had raised four sons, and no daughters.

"And now we have all three musketeers!" Mr. Haber said when he spotted her coming up behind her friends. His grin faded a bit and he said, "I'm afraid you won't be able to sit together, girls."

She leaned to the side to look behind Mr. Haber and immediately saw the problem: there were only two empty chairs left in the row.

Camryn looked over her shoulder to Aida and said, "It's okay, right?" Camryn was using *that* voice again. The one that reminded Aida of her kindergarten teacher, who also had a falsely sweet way of asking questions that you were only supposed to answer with, "Yes, ma'am." Aida bit her tongue and forced herself to nod, telling herself that this wasn't worth starting a fight.

"Thank you, Aida," Mr. Haber said. "The assembly will be over before you know it." Mr. Haber was already walking to the next row, so she reluctantly followed.

A group of chattering seniors filed in behind her. She ignored them until a high-pitched squeal made her jump and turn around. The tallest girl was pointing with one hand while using the other to partially cover her smiling, lipstick-covered mouth. A girl beside her was clapping her hands together like a sea lion, and the rest of them were either straightening their uniform blouses or fixing their hair.

Aida reluctantly turned back around. Sure enough, coming in through the opposite set of doors, was a steady stream of boys. Apparently, when the announcement said *all juniors and*

*seniors* it meant the guys too. She hadn't even considered that was what they meant because, like most secondary schools since the start of The Peace, Oakbrook Central High School didn't mix their students.

The campus was carefully arranged so that the girls and boys rarely even saw each other, let alone wound up in the same room. There were separate buildings for subject areas, two History buildings, two Math buildings, and so on. There were even different lunchrooms.

She made her way to the end of the row and sat down, taking a moment to smooth her pleated uniform skirt. Whenever she forgot to do that it would bunch up awkwardly. Camryn referred to it as, "ruffle-butt," and she preferred to avoid that teasing. She glanced back over to the senior girls and rolled her eyes.

A few of the girls were reapplying their makeup and most of them had undone at least the top three buttons on their blouses. *This* was exactly why Aida hated when the students mixed. Most of the girls grumbled about it, saying it was an outdated practice. But she knew all about the trouble that happened when boys and girls were forced into the same classrooms.

West Oakbrook Elementary, home of the Honey Badgers and terrible ideas, had tried something different when she was in third grade. They decided to keep all their students together through the fifth grade, instead of separating them after second.

She spent those years in a near-constant state of frustration, mostly at the teachers. The boys got away with throwing paper wads across the room and literally pulling on girls' pigtails. And, despite what the adults said, they weren't flirting when they did that, they were being jerks. They would even yell out their answers instead of raising their hands, which frustrated Aida to no end.



She could still remember the one time in fourth grade, when she'd gotten tired of her teacher *refusing* to call on her, that she had yelled out the answer to a math problem. Not only did the teacher stop the entire lesson to scold her for her behavior, but the teacher also told her that the next time it happened she would wind up in detention. The teacher never even bothered to tell the class that *her* answer had been right.

She turned her attention to the papers she'd been given and read the header: "OHS Prom: Female Student Dress Code." Below that it said, "The OHS faculty want to help you make appropriate choices becoming of modest, young women. Following the guidelines in these pages will ensure that you enjoy a fun, comfortable, and safe Prom."

On page two there were diagrams of dresses on faceless mannequins and the words, "Criteria #1: Three inches or more! All shoulder straps must be *at least* three inches wide. Most stores will have a tape measure on hand if you ask."

She flipped through the rest of the pages, taking note of the rules as she did. "#4 Formal wear includes footwear! Make sure your shoes have a one-inch heel and compliment your dress. #7 An appropriate dress is a full-length dress! All dresses are expected to reach the wearer's ankles. #10 Long hair is the best hair! While an updo might be tempting for prom, keep your school dress code in mind. All hair must still reach the midriff."

The dull roar of conversation slowly faded to whispers and shushing sounds and Aida looked up to see an adult taking the stage. The woman excitedly waved to the students and called out, "Hello juniors and seniors!" She waited for quiet and only continued when the last of the whispers disappeared. "Just three short months from now, OCHS will host its annual Prom. This assembly will go over the rules and expectations for the dance and make sure we're all on the

same page. Of course, if you're a senior you heard most of this last year but some of it is new so make sure you pay attention!"

Aida had a habit of doing as she was told, so she listened at first. The assembly wasn't going to win any awards for being interesting, but it was better than sitting through another video in class. Besides, she was a junior which meant that this was her first Prom. Camryn and Malorie were excited for it, and she tried her best to join in on their conversations. But if she were honest, her ideal Saturday night out would be spent playing videogames at her favorite Virtual Reality Café: Level Up. She didn't feel like Prom material.

It didn't help that Camryn had spent the last two months talking about how she needed to convince her parents to sign the waiver that would let her dance with a guy at Prom. Not that any of them actually knew any of the guys at school. She kept saying it was, "Just in case someone wants to ask, you know?" Malorie's parents would sign hers of course, but Aida was secretly hoping Camryn's parents would refuse. Just so she'd have someone to hang out with.

Camryn and Malorie were shocked when she'd said she wasn't even going to ask her parents to sign her waiver. They kept telling her that she needed things like that. Dancing at Prom, joining the Monitored Dating Club at her church, or going to mingles at the community center. Their argument was, "You're never going to get along with your husband if you never talk to a guy!"

Personally, she didn't much see the point in those things. If any of them wanted to get married they would just fill out a Spousal Application Form next year. If they found an immediate partner they'd marry after graduation. If not, they still had a window of five years. It didn't matter if you mingled or dated beforehand, all that mattered was compatibility on a piece of paper. Plus, she had no intention of filling out that form.

What if she filled it out and her husband didn't like the idea of her going to college? What if she didn't get paired until she'd already gone to college, but then he wanted her to stay home and have babies? She felt her mouth purse at the thought, like she'd bit into a mental lemon. She didn't want to have kids, so what would the point of marriage even be? Camryn liked to tease her about how she was going to wind up being a crazy cat lady, but honestly, the joke didn't bother her like it probably should.

After listening to the first few slides she realized that the speaker was literally reading from the handout. The woman was going over slides that appeared above her head on a large television screen, all of which appeared to be a mixture of what was in her own packet, and what she guessed had been handed out to the guys. A slide about tuxes, a slide about dresses, a slide about loafers, a slide about heels.

She looked around sea of uniformed students and gave up listening. If she let her vision get fuzzy, it almost seemed like she was sitting in the middle of the sky. The white blouses on this half of the auditorium merged together, creating an endless, puffy cloud.

When she refocused, she realized that most of the students had their phones out and were pointing them at the speaker. At first it seemed like they were just filming the presentation, like they might during a class lecture. But when she took a second look around the room she could see thumbs moving across screens as her classmates sent messages back and forth.

She thought about pulling out hers to talk to Malorie, but if she did then Camryn would be mad she didn't get a text, and that was not an argument she wanted to start. She pulled her bag out from under her chair, and fished around for the flyer she'd put in this morning. She'd picked it up at the game café the week before and had gotten into the habit of looking at it in her spare

time. At this point, she didn't really even need to look at it to know what it said, but when her fingers brushed the thick, smooth paper she pulled it out anyway.

She traced her fingers over the raised letters at the top that said, "Calling all Players!" Underneath that was the image of two characters fighting, their swords crossed with sparks flying out from the impact. The art style was instantly recognizable, the trademark fairy-tale drawings of her favorite virtual reality game: Topia.

The details of the Player Vs. Player tournament were beneath the drawing, listing how you could enter. The main tournament was for singles, but there was a second for teams of two. Unlike Camryn and Malorie, she really enjoyed PVP battles. The problem was that her character was a Mystic who depended on status magic, she didn't have a chance if she went up against someone with a physical weapon.

She'd done a bunch of the battles when she was a lower level, because the playing field was more even then. After level ten though, she'd had to give it up. This would be her chance to give PVP a second shot, if she could convince one of her friends to enter with her. As if that wasn't appealing enough, the winning team was given five *million* Órr, the currency of Topia. She was never able to save up more than a hundred thousand at a time, and she had her eye on a set of robes that cost double that.

The dismissal bell rang, and she tore herself away from the flyer. She packed up her things, carefully sandwiching the flyer between a book and her computer so it wouldn't crease and shoving the dress code packet on top. The speaker's final words of wisdom rang out in the auditorium, "Remember, have fun. Just not too much fun!"

These troubled times are a clear sign to all that the United States needs new, strong guidance. The country has been divided by the opinions of liberals who believe that right and wrong are a matter of opinion. If our nation is to recover, we must elect officials to our government who share our godly values.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2016

## **Chapter Two**

Aida fished around in her bag with one hand, trying to find her keys without looking. Most of her focus was on her phone, where she was trying to respond to Camryn and Malorie's messages. They'd gone to Level Up after school and played for a few hours, but since Camryn and Malorie lived in the opposite direction they walked home together while she waited for the bus. She'd debated just walking home herself, but her mom didn't like her being out after dark.

The sun was just setting when her hand pushed past her can of mace and her finger looped through her key ring. She sent her message with one hand and pulled her keys out with the other. She slid her key into the front door's lock and she immediately heard the fast tip-tap of Sadie's nails on hardwood floor. She smiled the sound and shoved her phone in her back pocket before flinging the door open.

Sadie's tail was wagging so fast it was no more than a brown and white blur. The little Jack Russell was spinning in circles while bouncing, her nails clicking every time her front paws hit the ground. When Sadie finally registered that the door was in fact open, she darted forward, barreling into Aida's legs.

Aida managed to push her way inside and close the door, before dropping her bag on the floor and sitting down with Sadie. The little dog scrambled over her crossed legs and resumed her greeting in earnest. In a break between her own laughter and the little sounds Sadie was making she heard her mom call from the kitchen. "Don't leave your bookbag by the door!"

Her eyes fell on her bag which, sure enough, she'd dropped right in front of the door. When she was a kid, she thought her mom had cameras hidden around the house. She'd spent more than one afternoon looking for tiny cameras in the eyes of her teddy bears or in the pots of plants. She never found one, and eventually decided that it was some mom-oriented superpower, but moments like this were almost enough to make her wonder.

Sadie finally let her stand, and trotted over to the bag for her daily inspection. Her nose wiggled over the backpack, picking up on all the strange scents from the day. Watching Sadie's nose made Aida realize that she her own nose was being teased by Italian spices. She took a deep breath and inhaled tomatoes and garlic, dinner.

Her mom had started spaghetti Fridays back when Aida was in elementary school. It was her favorite food, and when she'd started dreading school in third grade her mom used it as a bribe. Every time she made it through a full week of school without getting in trouble they would have spaghetti for Friday's dinner. Once she was in middle school she'd expected it to stop, but her mom kept it up. Aida picked her backpack up from the floor and dropped it off in a corner of the dining room before heading to the kitchen. If she was quick she might be able to sneak a piece of garlic bread before dinner.

Her mom was trying to strain the water from the pasta when Aida crept into the kitchen. Her mom was teetering precariously in her high heels while bending over the sink. Aida couldn't help but shake her head at her mother's insistence on dressing, "like a lady" at all times. Aida supposed it might be left over from her mom's own strict school dress codes, but after sixteen years of being a stay-at-home mom she might have tried wearing sneakers in the kitchen.

Aida made her way silently across the kitchen while her mother had her back to the door. If she could pull a snatch-and-grab on the bread before her mother turned

around, she'd be rewarded with a piece of bread that melted in her mouth. She reached her hand out and was about to wrap her fingers around the nearest slice when a quick smack fell on the back of her hand.

"You'll ruin your appetite," her mom said before turning back to the pasta. "Could you set the table?" Aida made a face but began taking silverware from the drawer. She made sure to clash the forks together and shut the drawer just a little louder than necessary, which her mom ignored.

Her dad entered the kitchen, holding his glasses in one hand while rubbing the bridge of his nose with the other. He'd been doing that a lot lately, a side effect from the stress of a campaign year. He hadn't been in politics for long, not compared to his time in the military. But a few years ago, he'd gone from the Army to government, and he'd announced late last year that he was running for a spot on Virginia's state council.

He opened his eyes and seemed surprised to see her in the kitchen. "Hey sweet-pea. I didn't hear you come in." He smiled at her before grabbing a piece of garlic bread and taking a bite.

"I just got back," she said with a shrug.

"How does George think the campaign's going?" her mom asked.

Aida made her way to the dining area, leaving her parents to talk about her dad's work. Sadie ventured into the room, carrying her favorite stuffed toy that sort of still resembled an elephant. The toy used to have a noisy squeaker inside, but Sadie had torn that out long ago. Now the only identifying features were one large ear and the remains of a trunk, which Sadie currently had clenched between her smiling teeth. The dog looked up at her and wagged her tail so hard that her entire body shook.

“Dinner first, then we can play,” she promised the eager dog.

“She really loves that thing,” her mom said while setting the large bowl of pasta on the table. “If I didn’t think it would break her heart, I’d replace it.”

“You can’t replace Mr. Elephant,” her dad said, feigning horror. “He’s one of a kind.” He patted Sadie on the head before sitting down and Aida followed suit. Sadie seemed to understand and lay down next to her chair while happily chewing on Mr. Elephant.

“How was school?” her mom asked while passing the basket of garlic bread to her. A peace offering.

“It was alright,” she said. “Mr. Haber told us about our book test.”

“Did Mrs. Sanchez teach today?” her dad asked with a touch of sarcasm, hinting that he knew the answer already.

“Actually, we had an assembly for last period, so she got out of it,” she said. They served their plates in silence and she eventually said, “What do you think of dress codes?”

Her dad paused, spaghetti noodles hanging from the tongs halfway between the serving bowl and his plate. He finally put the noodles on his plate and asked a question of his own. “Are they getting rid of the school uniforms?”

She shook her head, “No, nothing like that. It’s for Prom.”

His shoulders visibly relaxed and he looked over to her mom for help answering.

“I’m sure the school just wants to keep everyone safe,” her mom said. “There need to be rules as to what’s appropriate to wear in what setting. Just like your father dresses differently for work at the office than he does for working from here.”

She thought about the number of pages that had been in the packet and gave a non-committal shrug before saying, “I just thought it was kind of strict.”



Her mom smiled sympathetically. “I know dear, but I promise it’s for the best.”

Her dad nodded. “It’s just to make sure that everyone can have a good time.”

“Did they already give you the dress code?” her mom asked.

“At the assembly, it’s in a huge packet.”

Her mom looked pleased at the news. “When do you want to look for a dress?”

Aida shoved pasta into her mouth and chewed so she could pretend to be thinking before having to answer. She knew her mom meant well but going shopping together was a day-long event. Even if she managed to find the perfect dress as soon as they got to the mall, she knew that her mother would insist on dragging out the process. First looking at everything, then coaxing her into trying on at least half of the potential dresses, and then dragging her to at least three other stores to repeat the process and, “make sure that’s the one,” before giving in and purchasing the first dress.

“Maybe next weekend?” she suggested, hoping it would be soon enough to make her mom happy but far enough away to let her get mentally prepared.

“Of course,” her mom said, looking pleased at the prospect of “girl time.” Aida instantly felt bad. She knew she was the black sheep when it came to shopping, even with Camryn and Malorie. They actually enjoyed going to the mall, at least with each other. The only thing Aida liked shopping for were new VR games, and that was done on her phone.

A sharp ringing broke the silence of the dinner table. “I’m sorry,” her dad apologized while standing and taking his phone from his pocket. Her mom nodded, but her dad was already out the door and answering the phone. “Hey George, I got your message. . .”

Her mom put her fork down and folded her hands in her lap. Aida reluctantly followed her lead, placing her fork on the side of her plate but leaning forward with her elbows on the

table. It was a small victory, being able to protest her hunger with poor table manners, but she'd take it. She already knew from experience that they would wait for her dad to return and then, and only then, would dinner be allowed to continue. According to her parents, dinner time was family time and that should be respected

It wasn't until middle school that she learned that other families didn't do this for meals, especially not the larger families. The first time she'd had dinner with Malorie's family, she'd been surprised to see that there was no waiting, no polite small-talk, and no taking turns telling stories of the day. Instead, Malorie's parents were like dual ringmasters at a circus who were trying, and failing, to keep the lions from eating the audience members.

They'd ordered pizza, which meant there were arguments beforehand over toppings, and arguments once the pizza got there over whose fault it was that there was only cheese or pepperoni. Malorie and her siblings fought to reach the largest first, and when everyone had food the real mess began. There were shouting matches between the siblings over who drank out of whose cup when they weren't paying attention, a few of them trying to be the loudest so they could tell their parents about their day, and all the while Malorie kept telling her that this was, "normal." Aida thought it was the most fun she'd ever had.

"Sorry about that," her dad said when he walked back into the room.

Her mom simply nodded and, once he sat back down, picked up her fork. .

Her dad didn't seem to notice the silence, just launching into an explanation of what was going on. "George found some information on Senator Burns, something that might help us if it's the real deal."

Her mom tilted her head and hummed, encouraging him to continue. Aida focused on her now-cold pasta. She really didn't care about political scandals, even if they *would* help her dad win the election. Honestly, she didn't even really care if he won.

Sure, he'd be excited, but he'd been so busy with his campaign lately he didn't seem to have time for her anymore. If he was actually in office he'd only spend more time working. She only had one more year before going off to college, and she didn't want to waste it with him working.

She tuned back in just in time to hear, "If the woman *is* related somehow, I doubt anyone will vote to re-elect. If the Deviant turns out to be his sister like George thinks, he should pull out of the race."

"Why?" Aida said. The question was out of her mouth before she could process it through her brain.

Silence fell over the table. She nervously spun her fork between her thumb and middle finger, bracing herself for a lecture.

Her dad took a deep breath before saying, "Do you know *why* deviants are so dangerous?"

She shook her head slowly, hoping she could plead ignorance.

"Because it's a disease, a contagious, vicious disease that attacks the mind," he said. "Doctors couldn't even treat it effectively until thirty years ago. Do you know what they did until then?"

She stared at the table, not daring to speak. Of course, she knew. Her middle school health teacher taught a whole unit on the hormone treatments and corrective surgeries. The teacher would launch into long winded lectures at a moment's notice, and

seemed to love putting together slideshows on the dangers of Pre-Break Gender Deviance treatments. Aida didn't think she would *ever* be able to get the pictures of those scarred bodies out of her head.

She looked to her mom for help, but her mom was staring at a spot on the table. She got like this when The Break came up. Her mom remembered when the country shifted from being The United states to being two: The United and The States. Her mom was a child during the civil war that split the country and half, which was hard to remember most of the time.

The videos in History class were always made up of grainy, low-quality footage, and always made Aida think that it was from a hundred years ago at least. In reality it was so recent that her parents remembered it from when they were kids. But while her dad enjoyed talking about it during his campaign speeches, her mom *never* talked about The Break. Instead, she'd get quiet like she was now.

Her dad was making sweeping gestures with one hand, like he was at a podium instead of the dinner table. "When The United Council was first formed it was out of desperation. The population was reaching a critical low, entire countries were collapsing, we were on the brink of chaos. The Council outlawed the old 'cures' and introduced *real* treatments."

He stared Aida in the eye as he said the next bit, "Electing someone who is that close to a Deviant, who *grew up* with a contagious Deviant, could take us back hundreds of years. Is that the world you want Aida?"

"No," she whispered. "It's not."

Her father gave a small smile and said, “It’s alright honey, you just have to be mindful with these things. We either learn from the past and move forward, or we repeat it. That’s why remembering The Break is so important.”

Her mom began to stack empty dishes together and passed Aida’s chair to take them to the kitchen. Her mom paused to lay a hand on her shoulder, “I think it’s time for bed.” Aida blinked back water from her eyes and stood obediently, not wanting to upset her dad again.

Her dad held out his arms and Aida reluctantly let him fold her into a hug.  
“Goodnight, sweet-pea.”

She made her way up the stairs and headed to her room with Sadie fast on her heels, thankful for the chance to be alone with her thoughts. She knew that her parents were right, she’d always been warned about how dangerous Gender Deviance was. So why was it sometimes so hard to remember?

The 2010s were known for their developments in Virtual Technology. In the 2020s it was Brain Controlled Interfaces. But the 2030s were surprisingly stale. Now, Stepping into the 2040s, LeeCorp will finally see these two fields merge to create the ultimate in Virtual Reality: immersive games played with your brain.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2039

### **Chapter Three**

When a day was going poorly, especially at the beginning, Aida would try to change her luck by paying attention to the middle of things. If she was on the bus, she would try to find the middle of the grass medians in the road. Then she would clench her teeth together in the split second that she passed the center point.

If she was walking in the school halls, she would focus on the lines of lockers against the walls. When she passed the center of a row, she would tap the knuckle of her middle finger against the cool metal surface, and she would instantly feel better. Right now, heading to Level Up, her focus was on stepping in the center of every crack that separated the sidewalk squares with the exact middle of her foot; alternating her right and left as she walked.

She paused in the center of a square and checked her phone for new messages. She had texted her friends when she woke up, thirty minutes after her alarm, to tell them she was on her way. She hadn't heard back. Not that she really expected to. She had a habit of being late and it irked both her friends to no end.

She was trying to get better about it, really. She had even managed to be on time the last few Saturdays. It wasn't anything personal either, she didn't enjoy making them wait on her. She'd tried to explain that, but Malorie just pointed out that she was always on time for school. Truthfully, she only ever made it to school on time because she was scared of her mom. Her

mom was the silent, careful type of angry, which Aida thought was worse than people who would confront you.

Malorie got quiet too, but Camryn would normally send her a couple passive-aggressive texts. “It’s fine,” or sometimes she’d send back the current time, as if Aida’s phone didn’t have a clock. She shoved her phone in her back pocket, no messages. She picked up her pace down the sidewalk.

She might have woken up on time if she gone to bed at a decent hour. After dinner she’d been restless, and eventually tried reading her history textbook to make herself sleepy. It hadn’t worked. Instead of lulling her to sleep with dull statistics, like the videos Mrs. Sanchez picked, the book had actually been interesting.

There was a map of what the country looked like back when it was The United States, a solid block of blue between Canada and Mexico. She liked the shape of it, and how it stretched from the Atlantic to Pacific Ocean. But she couldn’t begin to figure out how a single president was supposed to be in charge of all that land and everyone living on it. That seemed like a terrible idea.

Then there were maps at different stages of restructuring during The Break. They were interesting because there were borders drawn for the states that started out in The United, but were later lost in the wars. There were horrifying pictures of charred, barren land for miles. Places like Florida and Kentucky had probably been beautiful when they were first in favor of The United Council, but after the wars they were uninhabitable.

The last map was familiar, stretching from Texas to Virginia, with the Appalachian Mountains serving as a natural barrier from The States. Then there was The Wall, which protected the top of Virginia and picked up again in Georgia on the opposite end of the mountain

range. Even though that map probably should have been comforting, she couldn't help but be even more curious about the earlier maps.

What were the names of the other states? The ones that became part of The States and weren't written on her map? What did their shapes look like? And what did that land look like, were there mountains there too? By the time she closed her textbook, she was more awake than when she'd opened it.

She reached the front door of the game café and paused outside the front door to kick the pollen off her shoes. It was a habit she'd adopted as a kid, thanks to her mom's allergies.

Oakbrook, Virginia was beautiful in the spring. The snow was melted, the weather was warming up, and the dogwoods were getting ready to bloom. The downside was that a fine yellow powder covered absolutely *everything*.

She gave her shoes one last kick and opened the glass door, letting herself into the arcade portion of the café. She made a beeline for Pac-Man Arcade: 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition! It was Malorie's favorite game. Aida cast a wishful glance at the older VR games across the room, they were more her speed. You had to play them standing up, which was weird, and you held controllers in your hands instead of using your thoughts, but they were still fun. Since they predated the LeeTech consoles she used, she tended to think of them as the adorable, clunky grandparents of Topia.

Neither of her friends were by Pac-Man, so she wondered around the rest of the arcade. After going up and down the aisles a few times she pulled out her phone again to check her messages. Maybe they were already in Topia? She walked to the front counter, planning to check the wall screen where names of players using rental devices were displayed. Except the screen was apparently broken, and the guy working the counter was busy playing with his phone.



She walked up to the counter and waited, but he didn't say anything. She shifted her weight and ran a hand through her hair, hoping the movement would register. He shook his phone back and forth, scrolling through what he was reading. She tapped her foot then tapped one finger on the counter and said, "Excuse me?"

The guy lifted his head and leveled her with an unimpressed look. He didn't seem that much older than the guys who went to her school and she found herself irritated by his superiority complex. "Can you tell me who's renting a room?" she said.

He went back to scrolling on his phone. "Screen's broken."

This was why she normally used the self-serve kiosks. "I have eyes," she said. "Could you look up who's in a room?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh and, without looking up, pointed a finger at the wall. She followed the gesture and watched the digital clock tick over to 12:01. "We're closed," he said. "If you have eyes, use 'em."

She felt her cheeks redden and bit her tongue. It wasn't worth it. She spun on her heel and walked away; fists clenched at her sides. She exited the arcade portion and headed around to the back of the building, stopping outside the weathered green door. She took deep breaths and tried to clear her head. When that didn't work, she settled for slapping the brick building as hard as she could.

The nerves in her palm exploded and shot fire up to her shoulder, clearing her head. She waved her hand in the air, trying to cool off the sting of the brick. When it dulled to an ache she gently brushed her palm against her shirt, rubbing the dirt particles off. She shook her head, and walked through the door that, after twelve o'clock, served as the girls entrance.

The hallway was dimly lit and fed into a small room with a single kiosk. She pulled up her Level Up ID on her phone and held it up against the computer screen. A small chime signaled her information had been read, and the screen changed.

She quickly tapped through the map on the screen, checking how many cots were open in each room. There was only one console in use, so she selected the cot across from it. Hopefully, it would be Camryn or Malorie.

The machine spat out an access card to her chosen room, and she made her way down another hall. She swiped herself in, and looked for the other player. She spotted the other girl, already lying on a cot in the corner and wearing her helmet. She didn't react at all when Aida made her way to the opposing cot, so she was probably playing. For a moment Aida thought it might be Camryn, the other girl's brown hair seemed to match. But when she got closer she saw that this girl had taken off her shoes and set them beside the cot, which she'd never seen Camryn do.

She pulled her gamecard app up on her phone and selected the Topia icon before tapping her phone to the nearby game tower. She kept an eye on the helmet, waiting for the blue light that would signal her data had been read. When it finally flashed on she picked up the helmet and laid down on her cot.

She checked her phone one more time for messages, then sent another text to both her friends. She could always find something to do in Topia, that wouldn't be a problem. She was still trying to max out her avatar, which was frustrating since both Camryn and Malorie had already hit level forty-five. They'd both unlocked their final skill sets over a month ago, and they didn't play nearly as much.

If she hadn't made a Mystic she would have maxed by now too. She'd liked the sound of Mystic more than Damsel or Princess, and there hadn't been a lot of information online, so she'd made one. Right after the game launched it was clear that Mystics were the most difficult characters to level because they were the only female class that didn't have a way of getting extra Experience Points on their own.

Camryn's Damsel could create potions and Malorie's Princess could craft items, and they could even sell them to other players for Órr. Mystics could get XP through battling monsters or other players, just like the other classes. But if they partied up with a player in the Hero class while battling they doubled their earned XP per kill.

The problem was that Heroes were one of the male classes, so she'd have to party up with guys she didn't even know. Even if she'd wanted to party with a Hero, she'd read enough in online forums to know that most Heroes didn't feel the need to party with a Mystic.

She moved her hair off her neck and pulled on the VR helmet. Green, flickering letters appeared on the screen in front of her eyes. *DO YOU WISH TO ENTER TOPIA? Y/N*. She tried to select "Yes," but nothing happened. She smacked the helmet with one hand then thought, "Yes." This time the words stilled before being replaced by a loading bar. Once it filled, she closed her eyes and let herself follow the steady pull of a virtual reality dive.

## Chapter Four

The first thing that registers is the smell of salt. I open my eyes to see that I'm standing on a beach and quickly look around for any monsters. I'm normally good about logging out away from danger, but there've been a few times where I've logged in and immediately had to fight something.

The nearest creatures are a group of Selkies about twenty yards away, swimming and sunbathing. We were farming them yesterday for an item they sometimes drop: Selkie Skins. I cast my eyes to the bottom left corner of my vision and focus on the circle that's on my visual overlay. A menu rises from the circle with three icons and I move my eyes to the treasure chest and hover, opening my inventory.

A quick peak inside tells me that I only got one skin yesterday and I frown. The drop rate has gone even lower over the past few months, making them a hot commodity online. Last time I checked they were going for ten thousand Órr a piece, and I need all the money I can get.

I swipe my hand through the screen to close it and look around to get my bearings. I'm mentally running through my options of what other monsters are nearby. Most of them I can't take on my own, even though my level is pretty high. I've had the same staff since I was level twenty-five, so it's power is kind of low. I've gone up over ten levels since then, and still haven't managed to craft anything better.

I move my eyes back to the circle and select the notepad this time, then tap on the screen that appears in front of my eyes. I wrote down the specs for the staff I'm working toward and I'm thinking that it might be better to collect ingredients while I wait instead of battling on my own. There's a weird item I'm missing that's listed as a Ruby Core, and I'm willing to bet I'll have to go up against a dragon for it. I'm not looking forward to that.

The only other things I'm missing at this point are ten Beast Roses. The Beast's castle is a bit far, back on map three. I shift from one foot to another, not really sure if I should head that way or wait here. We all logged out in this area after playing yesterday, but they can't really expect me to stand here waiting, can they?

After a few moments I shake my head and pull up my map. I'm being ridiculous. They'll tell me when they log in, and I'll catch up. I check to see which travel arch is closest, and smile when I see where I'm going. I close out my map screen and start jogging, hoping I'll get there before my friends log in.

Everyone plays Topia differently. Malorie focuses on completing quests, no matter how obscure. She doesn't really care about leveling up, which kind of makes it even more frustrating that she's already maxed out her level, but whatever. I tried to get her to team up with me a few times for Player Vs. Player stuff, because her Princess character can wield swords and I can heal her, but she never really got into the combat part of Topia.

Camryn's thing is unlocking different potions, which is why she made a Damsel in the first place. Lately she only wants to fight monsters if they have an ingredient she needs. Because of her, we tend to travel to obscure parts Topia, so I'm fairly familiar with the arches.

The one I'm heading to right now is in a field right on the corner of my favorite part of Topia, where the Glas spawn. Glas are basically large cows, but they're white with green spots and they have razor sharp hooves. If they get the chance, they'll trample you to death. There are usually players fighting the Glas because of a few quests, plus you can get a few hundred Experience Points per kill. But the draw for me, is the legend. The legend I accidentally started.

I unlocked a new Heal Affinity at level thirty that I can use to fully heal absolutely any player. Until then I could only heal people in my party, so of course I wanted to try it out right

away. The thing is, I don't like talking to players if I don't know them in the real world. My friends tease me about it because they both like meeting new players and talking. But I'm not even good at that type of thing in real life, so I don't want to do it in Topia.

There's a hill on one edge of the Glas field with a huge oak tree on top. I can hide behind the tree but still watch the players fighting Glas down below. If I see a player's Health Points go into the red danger zone, I can cast the spell and heal them. The best part is that the game doesn't tell them what happened. They're surrounded by golden light and their HP is restored, but they don't know it was because of another player. There's no awkward conversations or requests to party with complete strangers, they just think there was a glitch in the game and they're happy it happened to them. I haven't been to the hill in a week or so, but now I have the perfect excuse.

I make it to the tree in under a minute. If I could run like that in the real-world, I'd be a marathon champion. But in Topia it's nothing special since everyone's stamina is supercharged. I jog up the hill and duck behind the oak tree, pulling up my message screen when I'm sure no one can see me. I check if I've missed anything from Camryn or Malorie, but there's nothing yet. I close the screen and peak around the tree.

There are a few players going after the Glas in the field and judging by their armor most of them are lower than me. A party of three Heroes is going after Glas one at a time and they seem to be doing well. I focus my eyes each player long enough to pull up their names and Health Points. Two of them have their names on secret mode, so I can't actually read them, but all of them still have green bars for their HP. There are two more players down there though, going after Glas on their own.

I think the short, blonde one is a Rogue, but at this distance it's a little hard to tell. Rogues are usually players who'd rather go through Topia on their own instead of partying up. If girls could play rogues, I definitely would have made one.

The other one is a Hunter and I can tell that, despite his armor, he's a pretty high level. He's using a *huge*, glowing bow that's bigger than me, and he's taking out the Glas in two arrows or less. He won't need my help. I glance around the field again, hoping I missed someone, but I didn't.

A glint of light catches my eye from the edge of the field, more gifts. I didn't *mean* to start that legend; it just sort of happened. Players started talking to each other in online forums about the glitch and they realized there was a theme: it only happened when someone was fighting the Glas. People were coming up with theories left and right about how to trigger the glitch, but no one could find a pattern that worked every time.

Eventually a legend emerged about, "The Goddess." The idea is that the glitch is really a blessing from a goddess bestowed on lucky players. After the legend took off players started leaving gifts on a nearby large rock with little messages attached. They usually say things like, "To the Goddess" and, "Thanks for the blessing" or, "Now I believe." It's nice that people enjoy it, but I don't particularly like the religious feeling the story has. The reflecting light reminds me that I need to pick those up before the rock runs out of room, again.

While I'm waiting for a player that might need my help I create a new direct message in the group chat I have with Camryn and Malorie. I'm hoping they'll see the alert when they log in.

**A-Day-About:** *hey! im on map 3 DM me when you log in!!*

I've been debating changing my player ID lately, after something Camryn said. I made up my handle back in Middle School, right when I started playing VR games. It was supposed to be a play on my own name. I thought that Aida Abbot sounded out slowly sounded a lot like, "A day about." I used to think it was clever, but last week Camryn said that it doesn't make any sense if you don't know my real name.

I close my messages and look back to the rock. I haven't told either of my friends about the goddess thing. It's not like I avoided telling them on purpose, it's just that it never really came up. By the time I realized I should have said something it had blown up so much that I didn't know what to say. I could still tell them, but I'm not sure they'd believe it was an accident.

I look back down at the field, not holding out much hope for today. The Heroes and the Hunter are gone now, and I focus on the Rogue. Even though he's closer to me now, I'm still having trouble making him out. I thought he was on the small side before, but now I can see that he's probably one of the shortest Rogues I've ever come across. Rogues have pointed ears, I guess it's a salute to Irish Leprechauns. But to avoid actually *looking* like a leprechaun, most Rogues max out their character's height setting. This guy went the complete opposite direction, choosing what was probably the absolute shortest setting. His player ID is ZackAttack20 and paired with his stature, he's a far cry from intimidating.

He's going after Glas two at a time now, taking on one set then another without any time to recover his HP. That's a mistake. He's alone in the field and working his way to the middle of the group, moving in a straight line instead of sticking to the edges where it's safer.

He turns to another pair, riling them up with a Rage Affinity to draw them in close. He ducks when the first Glas charges in and swings its head using its skull like a club. The Glas swings its head back and he ducks again, then launches himself forward, and drives one of his



daggers into the Glas's exposed neck. It's a killing blow and the Glas lets out a cry of digital pain before pixelating and vanishing.

The second Glas lands a hit and now his HP is in the yellow. He's parrying the Glas's hooves with his daggers, but a dip in the earth causes him to lose his footing and the Glas rears up and strikes a devastating blow with both of its front hooves. The rogue manages to get back up, but it's too late to recover the HP, so he runs.

He darts past the respawned Glas, but the movement triggers them into giving chase. He sprints to the edge of the field and right when he reaches the foot of the hill, when he trips. The Glas move like lightning, trampling him into the ground and I hear him cry out. I target the Rogue with my eyes and point my staff toward him with both hands, mentally shouting "Heal!" My staff vibrates softly, telling me the spell is casting and I just hope I was fast enough.

The Rogue's health bar is full again and I make out the quick flash of a dagger. A Glas in the middle of the group pixelates into oblivion and the rogue jumps to his feet, already fighting off the others. When he makes it to the last one, he flips himself up and over the Glas's head, lands on its back, and drives both daggers into either side of its neck. The Glas cries out before disintegrating, and ZackAttack20 is left on his own.

He bends over at the waist, hands on his knees, his shoulders moving up and down with his heavy breaths. Then he stands upright and laughs, his head tilted back so far I can see his open-mouthed grin. He points a dagger to the sky and yells, "Thank you! Thank you, goddess!" before letting out a cheer and collapsing in a heap in the grass.

A ping sounds in my ear and I tear my eyes away from the Rogue. I pull up my chat screen to see a new message from Camryn.

**TrickyApple8:** *we JuST logged in! meet us in AvOndaLe???*

Avondale Woods isn't far from here, so I can take my time.

**A-Day-About:** *im still on 3 but ill get there you guys okay?*

There's a long pause, and I watch the rotating circle by Camryn's name as,

"TrickyApple8" types back a reply.

**TrickyApple8:** *yeah were good*

The circle keeps spinning by her name for a bit, but then it stops. I wait for another message, but nothing shows up. Maybe Camryn changed her mind.

**A-Day-About:** *k im headed to you*

**!ArielOcean!:** *See you soon.*

**TrickyApple8:** *gOod!!*

\*\*\*

It only takes one arch for me to get near Avondale Woods, and I'm thankful. I don't know what it is about the arches, but I always get queasy if I use too many in a row. Modern VR is based on brain waves, not physical motion, so I know I'm not actually moving. But that doesn't stop my brain from feeling like it's been thrown through a blender every time I use a travel arch.

The woods come into view and I spot Camryn and Malorie near the main path. I can always pick them out because we all made our avatars look a lot like us in real life. Malorie kept her curly red hair when she made her character, turning her proudest feature in real life into her avatar's trademark. Camryn kept her taller than average height and she always dyes her armor to her favorite shade of purple. I kept my hair brown and set my height low, but I did make myself a bit thinner.

They're going after some Tree Nymphs, alternating blows to take them out. When the monsters disintegrate, I call their names. They jog up to the path, out of range of the nymphs, and wave me over. I don't speed up.

When I reach them I say, "Where were you guys?"

Camryn quickly says, "We were just running late." She opens her mouth to say something else, but then snaps it shut so hard my teeth hurt in sympathy. It's not like Camryn to be so quiet. I look to Malorie and try to ask her what's wrong with my eyes, but she just stares blankly back at me.

I turn back to Camryn. "Did something happen?"

Camryn frowns. "So, what, we can't be late now? That's kind of hypocritical you know."

I hold up my hands in surrender, there's no point in arguing with Camryn when she gets moody. No one else says anything so eventually I say, "Did you want to fight more Nymphs?"

Camryn looks to Malorie then, and Malorie makes a shooing motion with her hand.

"We have something to tell you," Camryn says.

"But," Malorie says. "But you have to *promise* you won't get mad."

That catches me off guard. because I we don't tend to fight. I usually just keep my mouth shut if they're making me angry, because I know I'll never win an argument against them.

Before I can say anything, Camryn's talking again.

"Yes, yes, actually. You do. We don't want you getting mad."

I chew on my bottom lip, wondering how to answer. "I don't really want to promise that."

Camryn folds her arms over her chest. "You have to," she says. "Or we won't tell you."

I roll my eyes because honestly, she sounds like a five-year-old. I look to Malorie, hoping she'll be the voice of reason here. She's turned to her attention to her fingernails, pretending to pick virtual dirt out from the tips. I let out a sigh. "Yeah, alright. I promise."

Camryn puts one hand on her hip and uses the other to gesture to Malorie. "We were talking about the tournament," she says. "And we're going to enter together."

Her statement hangs in the air between us, both of them looking at me expectantly. I eventually say, "But then I can't enter."

They both cross their arms and Malorie takes over speaking. "You promised, Aida."

"I know, I know," I say. "And I'm not, I'm not mad. But I'm the one who found the flyer, I'm the one who wanted to enter in the first place!"

Camryn waves a hand in the air. "We would have found out about it online," she says. "It's all over the place." She shrugs then. "You can still enter as a single player."

I bark out a laugh. As a Mystic I wouldn't last five minutes on my own, and she knows it. I call her out on it before I can stop myself and they both fall silent.

Malorie's the one who finally speaks. "It's our decision, Aida. You don't have to like it, but you do have to respect it."

She's using the same voice my mother uses when I'm in trouble for something. It irritates me when my mom does it, but right now it makes me so angry that I think I finally understand the phrase, "seeing red." I nod my head sharply, pull up my game menu, and log out.

Proper nurturing of a young woman comes directly from mature female influences. Without a solid, feminine role model, girls may be led astray by society's false teachings. Mothers and fathers should work together to make sure their daughters understand that their natural femininity is God's greatest gift of all.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2018

## **Chapter Five**

Aida made her way down the street, heading to her house. She was sulking, dragging her feet along the sidewalk in an effort to make herself feel better. She had to do something since the weather wasn't cooperating. It was too bright out and even the birds seemed to be against her, with the sparrows chipperly singing while foraging in the brush. She wasn't in the mood for them. She was still mulling the conversation with her friends over in her head.

She'd left Level Up before Camryn and Malorie could log out and talk to her. Assuming they'd even tried to follow her. She'd actually walked home instead of catching her bus back, half-hoping they would chase her and apologize. She continued to drag her feet on the sidewalk, knowing her mother would complain about her scuffed sneakers.

She didn't feel any better by the time she made it home. She wanted to hide in her room, maybe with Sadie. She was halfway up the driveway when she realized there was a strange car in the driveway. She knew it wasn't Dr. Russ, the one her parents simply called George, because his car was a silver, four-door, compact-looking thing. This one was blue, only had two-doors, and looked sporty.

She let herself in through the front door and kicked off her shoes, not wanting to anger her mother by tracking dirt into the house when a guest was over. Her mother appeared in the

front hall. “Aida! Perfect timing come meet our guests.” Her mom turned back to the living area and motioned for Aida to follow.

She trailed into the room behind her mother and saw a man she didn’t recognize sitting on the couch. He was tall, *really* tall. Even though he was sitting down it was the first thing she noticed about him. He had drawn his legs up to make them fit next to the coffee table and the mug he was holding by the handle looked like it could break at any second, a victim of his burly hands.

Her dad saw her and called out, “Hey there sweet pea,” when she entered the room. She walked over to his chair and leaned down to give him a hug. When she pulled back her dad turned to the tall visitor and said, “Dave, this is my daughter Aida. Aida, this is Mr. McCormick, his daughter goes to your school.”

The man nodded and smiled warmly, as if he had been expecting to meet her. He stood, towering over her and her father, then stepped around the coffee table to shake her hand. She returned the handshake, making sure to keep her grip steady, but not forceful, like she had been taught in etiquette at school.

“It’s nice to meet you Aida,” the man said as he took her much smaller hand in his and shook it enthusiastically. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say. She couldn’t say, “same here,” because Mr. McCormick probably knew that wasn’t true. But she also couldn’t ask him who he was or why he was at the house without being rude. She settled on smiling and saying, “Thank you,” instead.

The man returned to his spot on the couch, picking his delicate cup back up from its spot on the table, and looking like a giant attending a little girl's tea party. "Aida," her mom began, "Mr. McCormick's daughter is upstairs in your room. Why don't you go say hi?"

Her eyes widened in horror. Her parents had let a stranger into her room. It wasn't like she had anything to hide, but still. It was *her* room, and she didn't even know the girl! She walked briskly from the room and, when she was out of sight, charged up the stairs two at a time. Who knew what that girl was doing to her stuff!

Aida barreled into her room and froze. The girl inside was sitting on her long, folded legs, wavy blonde hair moving from side to side as she wrestled with Sadie. Emma McCormick was sitting in the middle of Aida's room, laughing, and playing tug-of-war with Sadie and Mr. Elephant. The sound of the door must have caught Sadie's attention, because the dog turned and let go of her toy, which sent Emma toppling backwards, still laughing.

Aida picked up an excited, bouncing Sadie and rubbed the dog's ears, trying to calm herself more than anything else. Emma noticed her for the first time, sat up, and said, "Oh, my bad," looking sheepish. She stood and walked over to where Aida was still frozen in the doorway and started to pet Sadie on the head. Aida took in their extreme height difference, realizing that Emma definitely took after her dad from the way she towered over Aida. "Your parents said I could wait for you in here. I didn't touch anything, honest. Except for your carpet."

"It's okay," Aida began, trying to reassure the older girl. "My parents just forgot to tell me you were coming."

Emma let out a nervous laugh and ran a hand through her hair, pushing her long bangs back over the top of her head. "I kind of figured. Probably took you by surprise huh? Some stranger in your room, playing with your dog?"

Aida laughed her first real laugh of the day. At least Emma realized what her parents had done. “Not really,” said Aida. “But at least I know who you are.” Emma smiled, looking pleased at her answer.

Seeing Emma in her room playing with Sadie and acting so normal was a little hard for Aida to process. Emma always seemed so other-worldly at school. She’d only ever seen the senior girl in the halls or in the lunchroom, but Emma had this air of sophistication around her that made her stand out. Out of her school uniform, Emma looked even like she belonged in a magazine. Aida glanced from her own scruffy jeans and t-shirt to Emma’s blouse and matching, ruffled skirt, and felt entirely underdressed.

“I thought it was you!” Emma said happily, “I wasn’t sure at first, but now I am.”

“You know me?”

Emma laughed. “Of course! *You’re* the freshman who walked into my History class on the second day of school a few years ago, and sat down.” Aida groaned internally and closed her eyes. People still remembered that?

It had been an honest mistake. She’d gone to the bathroom in the middle of class, but on the way back she had gotten turned around and walked straight into the wrong room. By the time she’d realized her mistake, the teacher had already stopped talking and the entire class had been staring at her. She’d run out in such a rush that she’d tripped on a desk and almost face-planted into the door.

Emma must have noticed her discomfort because she said, “Hey, it’s all good, I didn’t mean anything bad.” Aida cautiously looked back up. The other girl *sounded* sincere; she probably hadn’t meant to bring up Aida’s greatest embarrassment from her high school career.

She gave a weak smile and said, “It’s fine, I mean, I *did* go to the wrong class.”



Emma looked confused and held up her hand. “Wait, it wasn’t on purpose?”

“What? No, of course not!”

Emma stared at her for a second, then started to laugh. She actually doubled over, holding her stomach as if she was hearing the best joke in the world. “Oh my god! No! Oh, oh that’s awful, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing.” She regained control of herself and between giggles said, “We thought it was a prank! We thought some gutsy freshman had decided to troll Mrs. Abernathy on their second day of school!”

Aida couldn’t help but smile a little at that one. She didn’t even remember the teacher’s face, let alone name. When she said as much Emma laughed more. “Because she quit that year! She was awful, like really, really mean. Our class started pulling pranks on her after what you did, and she left the school. You’re a legend!”

Aida and Emma fell onto the bed, both laughing too hard to speak. After a few minutes, when they were lying on the bed and catching their breaths, Emma said, “I haven’t laughed that hard in *forever*.” Emma looked over at Aida and said seriously, “You know I’m not going to say anything, right?” Aida was surprised, she hadn’t thought that far ahead. She realized now though, that Emma could easily tell her friends about her mistake, and she would be humiliated all over again. Emma repeated herself, “I’m not, I promise, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Aida smiled. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

The two girls sat on the bed in silence for a while, watching Sadie happily chew on Mr. Elephant in the middle of the floor. Eventually they moved back down to join Sadie on the ground, and Aida showed the other girl how to play the dog’s favorite game of keep-away with the toy.

Her mom appeared in the open doorway a few hours later to tell them that Mr. McCormick thought it was time to be headed home. She realized that she had forgotten about Emma's dad talking to her own parents. She still didn't know how their parents knew each other, or really why Emma had come over.

She reluctantly walked Emma downstairs and they said their goodbyes at the front door. "I'll see you Monday," Emma said before heading out. Aida watched her new friend leave and allowed herself to hope that maybe, just maybe, hanging out this afternoon hadn't been a one-time thing.

A complementarian lifestyle is not only God's perfect will for us, but it is the only way for men and women to be fulfilled. When a man and wife join in a complementarian lifestyle and trust in the innate capabilities of a man to lead his family in a godly fashion, the entire family benefits.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2025

## **Chapter Six**

Aida stifled a yawn and wondered again why church services were held so early in the morning. She felt like the sermon should be wrapping up soon, as long as Pastor William didn't go off on one of his tangents. There had been one time when he'd talked about the dangers of lust for a solid half hour, using a series of colorful euphemisms. That one had been entertaining, but most of them weren't.

Today's sermon was all about being a good bride. According to Pastor William, even the unmarried women in the congregation were brides, because the entire church was the bride of Christ. She couldn't help but wonder what sermon her dad was listening to. She didn't think he was listening to his preacher talk about being a bride of Christ, but she'd never heard the term 'husband of Christ' so maybe he was. Who knew? Her parents used to compare notes on the sermons they heard in the car after church, but that was back before Aida was old enough to sit in on the sermons too.

Pastor William bowed his head and gripped the podium with both hands, letting silence reign over the congregation. "We decided, long ago, that the Bible is the word of God." Pastor William raised his head. "This means, that all instructions put forth in the Bible should guide our every step. There is no debate on what makes a godly woman." His voice picked up in volume

and he started to pound his hand on the podium, emphasizing his words. “There is only one way to be a true woman in the eyes of God, one! And it is written in this book! How you should conduct yourself in your daily life, how to be a good bride of Christ, it is all laid out for you, you must simply obey!”

She used to like church; it was something she’d looked forward to every week. When she’d gone to Sunday school with other girls her age, and half of their time was spent playing with toys, she’d really enjoyed it. Around the time that elementary school got bad, Sunday school stopped being fun. The toys disappeared and the Bible lessons started in earnest, making Sundays almost as bad as a regular school day.

She ducked her head and covered her mouth to yawn. Her mom tapped her thigh sharply. She shifted in the pew; it wasn’t her fault that Pastor William liked the sound of his own voice as much as she liked sleep. She wished that she could check her phone for texts. She’d thought about messaging her friends on the way to church this morning, but she didn’t know what to say. Camryn would still be asleep, her family didn’t do church, but Malorie might’ve replied before going to her own church.

“Remember what it says in the book of Romans. Chapter twelve, verse nine tells us, ‘Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.’” Pastor William raised his bible over his head with one hand, he liked doing that. “In this book, this holy book, God tells us that it is good for wives to, ‘Submit to your own husband as to the Lord.’ He tells us in Ephesians and again in first Peter, and first Corinthians, and over and over again, submit!”

In The United you could practice any religion you wanted, as long as it was Christianity. You could be Baptist, or Catholic, or Lutheran, or any other denomination out there. Her own

family was Baptist, but she knew that her mom had grown up Catholic. When she'd met Aida's dad though, she'd switched over.

Malorie's parents were both Catholic, so Aida had never gone to the same church as her friend. She'd wished for a while after first meeting Malorie that her mom had converted her dad, because church with a friend sounded a lot more bearable.

She bowed her head when Pastor William asked, saying that he would close in a prayer. His voice was a dull hum in the background of her thoughts, but she did her best to at least look respectful. She'd never tell her parents, but she didn't really believe in God anymore. It wasn't anything they had done; it was just that somewhere along the line she'd decided the God her church talked about wasn't a God she particularly cared for.

Her Sunday school teachers loved to talk about God's mercy, but sometimes that 'mercy' took the form of wiping out nearly the entire world's population in a flood. And sure, maybe the people had been bad, but God apparently didn't care about the animals either? Surely they didn't deserve that.

Plus, Pastor William made it sound like everyone needed to constantly beg for forgiveness. It wasn't enough to make a mistake, realize it, and learn. No, you had to, "Bow down before the Lord and repent for your wrongdoings!" She figured that Pastor William's wife Martha probably had to bow down and repent if she accidentally overcooked the Peace Day turkey.

When Aida climbed into the car after church her hands were practically itching. She took her phone out of her dress pocket and hastily checked for messages. Nothing. She bit back a frustrated sigh. Camryn and Malorie didn't even *like* doing the Player Vs. Player battles. She was

always the one who wanted to do them! She'd figured she'd have to bribe one of them into entering the tournament with her, she'd never even considered that they would enter without her.

She changed out of her church clothes at home and headed to Level Up. She'd play for a few hours and then text them both. Maybe after she was able to grind in Topia her head would clear, and everything would make sense again. She pulled on the VR helmet and lay down, letting out a bitter laugh. And maybe she'd sprout wings and tell people she was an angel too.

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Camryn and Malorie were already at their table when she made it to English on Monday. When Malorie glanced up Aida could only get out a mild, "Hey." She hadn't wound up texting either of them, the thought just irritated her each time. Why was she going to have to be the one to break the ice?

Camryn wasn't fazed. She spun around in her chair and waved her phone in greeting. "Wait 'til you see our dresses!" Camryn's eyebrows wagged up and down, drawing attention to her new, wispy eyebrow design. Over the summer Camryn had taken to shaving off her eyebrows and drawing them on instead. She said it was easier than plucking them all the time. Aida kind of got that, she hated doing hers, and she'd been written up more than once for improper attire after letting them get too bushy.

"Dresses for what?" Aida dropped her bag next to her chair and sat, leaning over to look at the pictures on Camryn's phone.

Malorie gave her a weird look, her forehead wrinkling as if she was thinking too hard. "For prom," she said.

"Ah, right," Aida said. She probably should have guessed that.

Camryn was shaking her phone back and forth furiously to sort through her photos. “We found the perfect ones,” she said. She juttred her thumb toward Malorie and said, “She didn’t even get stuck with pink!” Apparently, that had been a concern. Aida thought back, trying to remember *why* pink was an issue, but couldn’t come up with anything. It wasn’t really a surprise though, she tended to zone out whenever they talked about prom.

Camryn slid her phone over and said, “I went with this one.”

The dress she wore in the picture was, oddly enough, pink. When Aida laughed and said as much, Camryn just rolled her eyes and said, “It’s not *pink*, it’s coral.” She reached out for her phone and shook it a few more times before handing it back. “This one’s Malorie’s”

The picture was of a pale yellow dress covered in sparkles and sequins. It looked more like a ball gown than a prom dress and made Aida itchy just looking at it. “I like it,” she said.

Malorie gave her a bright smile and said, “When are you getting yours?”

“Saturday, I guess.”

Camryn frowned. “You, ‘guess?’ Aida, it’s *prom*. You have to be excited for it!”

Aida waved her hands back and forth quickly. “I am, I am! But you know how my mom is with shopping.”

Her friends laughed. Her mom’s shopping habits were a bit of an inside joke with the three of them. Her mom bought the latest designs for her every summer, trying to make her branch out from jeans and T-shirts. She had zero intention of ever giving in.

Camryn shook her head while laughing and said, “You should have just come with us yesterday.”

The bell rang before she could respond to her friend's comment. Mr. Haber started to take roll and she turned to face the front of the room, an unpleasant taste forming in her mouth while she waited to hear her name.

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Lunch at Oakbrook Central High School was usually disappointing. The food was pre-cooked and pre-packaged and arrived in trucks that also functioned as freezers. It had to be thawed out in the mornings before it could be warmed up and given to students. Any flavor the food might have had was long gone by the time it was served.

Today was chicken fingers and French fries. So, the only food that had any appeal was the ketchup. Sometimes Aida and her friends experimented with the condiments, mixing them into new creations that might make the food better. This would either lead to something unexpectedly delicious, or to catastrophic failures. For instance, mixing mayonnaise and ketchup had proved to be a great idea. Mixing soy sauce and mayonnaise had not.

Today there were no new concoctions or laughter. Instead, Aida was trying to get her friends to answer a simple question. Camryn had said something about going into the highest-level dungeons on Friday, which you had to be level forty to enter. So, Aida had said, "Can you guys help me level first?" because she was *so close* to leveling after yesterday.

Camryn and Malorie had given each other a pointed look and Camryn had said, "I don't know," before trailing off.

She probably should have let it go, but instead she'd said, "But you guys promised last week."



Now neither of them would even look at her. Camryn was picking at her food and Malorie was looking somewhere over Aida's shoulder, her jaw clenched like she was literally biting her tongue.

Malorie finally said, "It's not always about *you*, Aida."

Aida looked down at the limp, colorless French fries on her tray and felt her cheeks burn. Was it a crime to want just a little bit of help from her friends? She probably should have known they wouldn't want to waste their time doing something that didn't help them.

She shook her head to clear it and stood up from the table. "I need to go the library," she said. She grabbed her backpack and tray and said, "I'll see you in class," before walking off.

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The girls' library bathroom was the smallest one on campus. It had two stalls, one mirror, and no working hand-dryer. Despite all this, it was Aida's go-to bathroom because it was hardly ever used. There wasn't much time left in the lunch period, but she only needed a few minutes anyway. Just enough to calm down.

She latched the stall door and set her backpack down. She walked over to the sink and washed her hands, just to have something to do. If she was honest with herself, she probably should have seen this whole thing coming. Camryn and Malorie had started leaving her out of things back in August; the tournament was just the latest example. She wasn't sure if either of them were really invested in the tournament, or if it was just to get out of entering with her, but it didn't really matter.

She wasn't sure what had started it all, but she knew she didn't have much in common with them anymore. When they'd been Freshmen, sure. But now? They'd all changed.

The bell rang to dismiss lunch and she grabbed her bag from the floor. Even Mrs. Sanchez's class sounded better than staying here and thinking herself to death. She left the stall and was about to open the bathroom door when it suddenly swung inward.

Another student dashed in while yelling, "Sorry!" and laughing. She recognized the voice and blond hair instantly, Emma. Emma must have realized who she was a second later because she spun back around and said, "Aida! Perfect!" Emma grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the handicapped stall before latching the door. "Stay there," Emma said between bits of laughter before darting to the other end of the stall. Aida was too confused to do anything other than watch as Emma climbed up onto the toilet and crouched down, her feet teetering on the edge and looking like they were going to slip into the bowl.

Aida opened her mouth to ask what was going on, but Emma held a finger to her lips and made a shushing noise, so she didn't. The main door to the bathroom creaked open and she could hear footsteps headed toward the stall. Someone rapped their knuckles on the stall door and said, "That's cheating Emma, you can't lock the door for hide-and-seek."

Aida covered her mouth and stifled her laughter, but Emma was frantically pointing to her to say something. She turned and called out, "I'm not Emma." She glanced back to see Emma giving her two thumbs up. The girl outside apologized quickly, and Emma buried her head in her arms, shoulders shaking with muffled giggles.. The stranger retreated from the bathroom; the door slamming shut behind her.

Emma jumped down from the toilet and wrapped Aida into a tight hug. "That was *perfect!*"

Aida managed to get over her initial shock, and was about to return the hug when Emma pulled back quickly.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean, I mean,” the other girl’s frantic apology came out all jumbled. Emma looked worried, like she had crossed some sort of line.

Aida waved her off. “It’s fine, really. I don’t mind, I’m just not usually a hugger.”

Emma gave her a lopsided smile. “Thanks for that. With Lisbeth I mean. I might win now.”

“Do you guys do this often?” Aida said. “Play hide and seek instead of going to class?”

Emma shrugged. “Only when we’re not doing anything. Mrs. Miller’s done teaching for the year since we took our exams.” Aida had forgotten about that. Seniors took exams in March instead of May like the rest of the school. There had to be enough time for seniors to get their test results and for colleges to make their final decisions, so testing early was important. Emma winked at her and said, “Besides, I want the prize for winning.”

Aida held up a finger. “Wait. Shouldn’t *I* get the prize for covering for you?”

“Alright, alright. How about I split the bragging rights with you?”

Emma backed up to the wall and slid to the floor before motioning for Aida to do the same. “We have to make it to the end of school without being found. If we manage that, we win.”

Aida settled in against the wall and asked, “What do we do ‘til then?”

“Um, I don’t know actually,” Emma said. She looked like she was giving it some serious thought. “I’ve never made it this long actually. But at least I’m not alone!”

Emma sounded delighted at the prospect of spending an entire class period in the bathroom stall with Aida. Oddly enough, she couldn’t help but be more than a little happy with the idea herself. She liked Emma. She was funny, and nice, and Aida had been hoping to hang out with her again. She gave Emma a bright smile, there were worse ways to spend fourth period.

When your daughter inevitably experiences teen drama with her friends you have a unique opportunity for instruction. Use these moments to teach your daughter about the importance of a fulfilling opposite-sex relationship, and explain to her that women on their own are not complete. Encourage her to wait patiently until she is old enough to experience the joys of commitment and marriage and she will be complete.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2020

## Chapter Seven

Aida wasn't a tactile person. She never had been. Her parents used to tell her she was well behaved as a baby, until someone held her for too long. Her dad used to call her, "Kitten," because she'd be fine one minute, and the next she'd be screaming until she was put down.

The weird behavior had worried her parents enough to take her to several doctors before she was a year old. Their theory was that there might be something wrong with her nerve endings or maybe her brain, but they never found anything. They told her parents to give it time and see if she grew out of it, and she kind of did.

She was better about it now. She could shake hands, she hugged her parents regularly, and she didn't mind causal touches from her friends. But if she had a choice, she wouldn't do any of those things. So, it was weird that she wanted to go back and return Emma's hug. What had happened in the bathroom clearly bothered the other girl. Walking down the narrow library steps now, Emma was visibly putting effort into making sure they didn't even brush arms.

When they reached the sidewalk Emma turned to ask, "Where are you headed?"

Aida grimaced. "The front gate I guess." She'd told Emma all about the argument when they were hiding out. Emma seemed to get what was going on, or at least she hadn't told Aida she was overreacting. She kicked at a rock in her path and groaned. "I probably need to apologize."

Emma grabbed her arm and Aida faltered mid-step. She regained her balance and looked at Emma. She had drawn herself to her full height and was looking down at Aida. It should have been intimidating, but she was just relieved for the contact on her arm.

“No, you don’t,” Emma said. She relaxed her grip and continued in a gentler tone. “Sorry, I just,” she looked at the ground and her shoulders slumped. “You’re allowed to have emotions Aida. You don’t need to apologize for that. Even if people don’t like it.” Aida was too surprised to say anything. Emma let go and ran her hand through her hair, tugging sharply on the ends. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you upset,”

Aida ran through possible things to say, “It’s okay,” or “No worries,” or, “It’s cool.” But everything sounded shallow.

Emma was looking at her, but the other girl’s eyes were focused on something far away. Her lips were drawn into a thin line like she was trying to stop herself from speaking. It was a familiar expression, because Aida’s mom had the same look whenever The Break was mentioned. Emma finally muttered, “I just don’t think anyone should have to apologize for something they can’t control.”

Aida waited, but Emma just shook her head. “But I mean, they’re your friends. It’s okay if you want to fix things.” Emma finished with a weak smile, as if she was trying to convince herself more than Aida.

Aida shrugged and looked at the ground, digging her sneaker into a crack in the sidewalk. “But,” Emma said. “If you wanted to be distracted from all that, you could just come over.”

Aida debated that for a moment. She wasn’t sure if she should really put off talking with her friends for another day. When she looked up, fully intending to refuse, Emma was shifting

her weight back and forth while looking at the ground. It occurred to Aida that she didn't really know anything about Emma. She still thought of her as the confident and put-together senior she'd envied from a distance. But the girl in front of her was nervous about inviting someone over.

Aida managed to catch her friend's eye and smiled. "I'd love to come over."

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Aida wasn't sure what type of house she'd expected Emma to live in, but it hadn't been a castle. Okay, maybe, "castle," was overstating things, but just barely. Mansion, that was a better word for it. The house was two stories, like hers, but that was all they had in common. Aida's was the same as all the other houses in her neighborhood: a uniform rectangle built out of the same ribbed paneling that was used on the newer buildings at school.

Emma's house on the other hand was definitely Pre-Break. It was mostly brick but there was a wooden porch that jutted out on the left of the house and wrapped around to the slightly protruding right corner. There was a small tower jutting out on the left side and white trim outlining every feature of the house. It looked more like a gingerbread castle than a place where people lived.

They walked to the front door and Emma asked, "Are you hungry? We can probably find something in the kitchen if you want."

Aida suddenly realized that she hadn't eaten all day. She never had time to eat breakfast in the mornings, and she'd barely touched her food at lunch. "That would be great," she said.

She followed Emma to the kitchen, trying to take in each room as they went through the house. There were tall ceilings, decorative chandeliers, and lush carpets decorating the rooms, and absolutely everything was color-coordinated. Despite the beauty of the house, she couldn't

help feeling like the whole place was impersonal. There were no family photos on the walls, no shoes left behind in a room to show that people lived there, no jackets slung over the backs of chairs. She'd stayed in hotels on vacation that felt more at home.

In the kitchen Emma started going through the cupboards. "Let's see, we have chips, cookies, pretzels, granola bars, trail mix, popcorn." She glanced over to Aida, "Any of those sound good?"

"Popcorn." In Aida's humble opinion, popcorn was the ideal snack food. It was crunchy, salty, buttery, and it was even better if you mixed in M&Ms. Her mother on the other hand didn't approve of snack foods.

"I was hoping you would say that." Emma grinned at her before saying, "Kettle corn, lime, cheddar, or butter?"

"What?"

"Those are our options," Emma said. "It's my favorite snack, so my dad buys all kinds."

Aida scratched at her arm. "Oh, um. I've only ever had the kind at the movies."

Emma's eyes widened and for a moment Aida was worried she'd said something wrong. Then, Emma put a hand over her heart and, in a tone of mock horror said, "That is a tragedy! I don't know how you've survived this long." She tossed her hair behind her shoulder and went back to the cabinet. She started taking down a number of boxes, "We'll just pop one of each!"

An hour later Aida was lying on Emma's bedroom floor with her friend, where they were surrounded by half-empty bowls of popcorn. Not only had Emma been true to her word and popped one of each type, she'd also grabbed different popcorn seasonings and declared that Aida had to try them all to get, "The full popcorn experience." Aida thought that *she* liked popcorn, but Emma was dedicated.

“Ugh, I can’t move,” Emma groaned. “I may have overdone it on the cheddar one.”

Aida did her best to nod, but the motion made her stomach hurt so she settled for a groan.

Emma turned to her and smiled, “worth it?”

Aida smiled back, “So worth it.”

Aida managed to sit up again, and took a moment to look around the room. She’d been so carried away by Emma’s enthusiasm that she hadn’t really looked at anything in her friend’s bedroom. It was a lot like the rest of the house in that the furniture all matched and her curtains coordinated to her bedspread and pillows. Emma’s bed was also made perfectly, unlike the tangled mess of bedsheets that Aida was familiar with. She supposed she was lucky in that her mom’s need for neatness didn’t extend to her own room.

She slowly surveyed the room and noticed a VR setup on her friend’s desk. It was similar to what Level Up had at their café, with a game tower and a helmet, but this gear was noticeably newer. LeeTech prided themselves on making affordable VR gear, but “affordable,” was subjective and Aida knew that the cheapest set of LeeTech were still hundreds of dollars when they were sold used. Even though it would be cheaper in the long run than going to Level Up, she hadn’t managed to convince her parents that it was a good investment.

Emma must have noticed her stare because she suddenly said, “Oh yeah, that was my birthday gift last year.”

Aida turned back to her friend. “Do you play Topia?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I do.” Emma said slowly. “I mean, I just play on my own, I don’t do PVP or anything.”



“Do you maybe want to party up sometime?” Aida couldn’t help the hopefulness that sneaked its way into her voice, it just happened. “I don’t think Camryn and Malorie will want me tagging along for a while, but I can’t do a lot on my own.”

Emma was drawing patterns in the carpet with her finger, decidedly not making eye contact. Maybe she’d overstepped? Maybe that was too much? But she wasn’t sure why playing videogames would be off limits when Emma had already invited her over to her house.

“I don’t really party with anyone,” Emma said, and it seemed like she was choosing her words. “My characters only level thirty, so I might hold you back.” Emma stopped moving her finger in the carpet, but still didn’t look up.

“We don’t have to,” Aida said, hoping she sounded reassuring. “It was just an idea. I’m a little higher, but I don’t think you realize how useless Mystics are at fighting.”

Emma looked up suddenly. “I didn’t think anyone had gotten a Mystic that high.” Aida couldn’t help but preen a little. She’d worked hard to get there, and it wasn’t often that she got to show off her effort.

“Yeah. I mean, I party up with Camryn and Malorie on weekends, but I’ve played a lot on my own too.”

Emma nodded and seemed to make up her mind on something. “Well if you’re sure you want to party up, we can.”

“Really? Yes! Definitely, yes.”

Aida was so excited she almost didn’t hear Emma say, “One condition.” Emma took a deep breath. “I can’t give you my screen name. And if you don’t want to party up after we meet that’s fine, but you can’t tell *anyone* about my character. Okay?”

It would be harder to figure out which avatar was Emma's without knowing her character's name, but Emma was still looking at her with a serious expression, so she said,

"Okay, no problem."

"Promise?" Emma asked.

"I won't say anything," Aida said. She crossed her heart in an "X" to show she meant it, but Emma held out a fist with her little finger extended. Aida smiled and wrapped her own pinky around her friend's finger.

If your child experiences a falling out with their friends they may seek to find new friendships with the opposite gender. The danger here is that this often leads to a denial of their natural identity. Parents should, in these cases, encourage their child's cultivation of new, same-sex friendships as a positive reinforcement of their child's gender.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2023

## **Chapter Eight**

Aida was dragging her feet, literally. Her mother would have definitely taken issue with it if she were here. As it was, Aida was scuffing her shoes to the point that she was going to hear about it when she got home. She couldn't bring herself to care.

English class was dragging. She'd already gotten a drink of water once then used it as an excuse to go the bathroom twice. The last time Mr. Haber had raised an eyebrow at her before telling her to hurry back. She should have been worried about disappointing her favorite teacher, but she wasn't.

She reached the door and stared at the knob; this was where it got tricky. She put her hand out, extending her fingers completely until they formed a weird sort of tunnel, like the archaic claw machines at Level Up. She reached for the doorknob and did her best to put an equal amount of pressure on each finger. She failed spectacularly.

She tried again, too much pressure on her thumb. She tried three more times, and pulled back after each one, this was getting ridiculous. It was another one of her weird habits, like finding the middle of things, that she fell back on when she was stressed. She'd been getting stuck outside of doors for two days now. She shook out her hand and stretched her fingers. One more time.

She formed her claw and reached out for the doorknob, moving her arm slowly until she reached the handle, perfect. She gently squeezed all of her fingers at the same time and turned the knob, sneaking the door open just enough to slip inside. Safely in the room she shut the door with her shoulder, not willing to use the handle when she had an audience.

She sat down and picked up her copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which was cracked open, face down on her desk. It was really just to make it look like she was following along with the lesson. She didn't really get what Mr. Haber was talking about.

"What you have to understand ladies," Mr. Haber said, "is that Elizabeth Bennett is timeless."

Camryn waved her hand wildly above her head and didn't even wait to be called on. "But she's *old*." Most of the class giggled. Camryn grinned. "And nothing even really happens. She just meets a guy, hates him, changes her mind, and marries him. It's like," Camryn flipped to the back of her book. "Four-hundred and thirty pages to say that she got the wrong impression!" There were quite a few nods from the class when Camryn finished.

Mr. Haber chuckled a little. "How many of you spend time online?" he said. Every hand in the room slowly went up. "And how many of you like meeting people online? Maybe even people who live in a different state than you do?" Hands went up again and Aida was surprised to see that only a few of her classmates kept their hands down like she did.

"Do you ever meet someone and decide you don't like them, that they have a bad attitude, or they don't seem friendly?"

Camryn started to giggle. "Yeah, her name's Aida." Malorie covered her mouth with her hands to muffle her laughter and Aida felt her cheeks burn.

Mr. Haber just smiled. “But we all know that’s not accurate right? Aida is very friendly and has a good attitude, or you wouldn’t be her friend.” He held up his copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in one hand, giving Aida a feeling of déjà vu that she was looking at Pastor William and his bible. “If Elizabeth Bennet were a modern-day character there’s a good chance she’d have met Mr. Darcy online. He’d give her a terrible first impression, but time and time again they would meet, and they would grow to love each other.”

“But when I say that Elizabeth is timeless I don’t just mean her storyline is timeless. Elizabeth Bennett not only lives, she *thrives* as a woman.” Mr. Haber picked up a whiteboard marker and began writing. “2040 to 2048. What happened then?”

The class chorused back, “The Break.”

“Right. We all know about it; you’ve probably been hearing those dates since you first learned to read. What isn’t talked about so much is how dangerous the world became right before The Break. People didn’t know who to trust, there was so much disinformation out online, even scientists were telling people that Deviances like homosexuality and the desire to become the other sex were natural.”

Mr. Haber shook his head a little too violently, and Aida couldn’t help thinking he was probably trying to physically shake the memories out of his mind. “The country was in a recession, we were at war overseas, and within the country violence and crime were rampant. The United party proposed a way to end all of this: a thorough upheaval of our entire nation and a return to God. We finally had hope again, but The States refused to change. In 2040 the wars started, wars that most of your parents probably remember.”

“By the end of it all The States separated, and the barriers were erected. Every time you look at the mountains out those windows,” he pointed to the classroom windows where Aida could clearly see mountains on the skyline. “You’re looking at the divide between life and death. Just on the other side of that range are horrors you can’t even imagine, all because people lost sight of who they were meant to be.”

“When I say that Elizabeth is timeless, I mean that she doesn’t have this problem. She never betrays who she is. She chooses marriage because Elizabeth realizes that marrying Mr. Darcy is the only way she can be true to herself. All of you are lucky in that if you apply for marriage you won’t have to worry about incompatibility, like Elizabeth does in the beginning. The Virginia Marriage Commission will place you with a compatible husband if that’s your calling. Or maybe you’ll choose a career, like teaching or being a secretary.”

“So yes, Camryn, Elizabeth *is* old,” Mr. Haber winked theatrically, making the class laugh. “But she is still timeless.” He clapped his hands suddenly. “Alright ladies, essay topics!” The class let out a collective groan, but Mr. Haber acted as if he hadn’t heard them. He grabbed tapped the board with his marker. “We’re going to need three options, three different essay topics to choose from.”

Aida closed her book and stared at the table. Mr. Haber apparently hadn’t noticed the venom when Camryn said her name, but she’d heard it. Yesterday, before she saw Camryn and Malorie, she’d figured things would start out a little awkward. She hadn’t thought either of them would be outright mean to her though.

She didn’t actually have any other friends, unless she counted Emma. She hadn’t thought it was really a problem because she had Camryn and Malorie. Now was starting to think she may

have accidentally made herself an easy target. It was just that she'd never been good at making friends, and their school was so big it was easy to go unnoticed by most people.

"One more ladies. We need one more," Mr. Haber said. "Any ideas?"

She looked up and made the mistake of making eye contact with Mr. Haber. "Aida?" he said. "Any ideas for an essay?"

"Um," she said. Someone snorted softly and Aida clenched her teeth. Her eyes darted to the side and she saw Camryn smiling to herself. She bit her lip, then looked back at Mr. Haber and said, "What about how Elizabeth thinks Whitcomb is a good person, but then she finds out she was wrong?"

Mr. Haber smiled and said, "Good, yes." He turned to write on the board and said, "I think any case of misperception would make an excellent essay."

She could feel Camryn's glare, but she refused to look anywhere other than her notebook as she copied down the essay options. She didn't need to; she already knew which one she'd be writing.

The bell rang and she started shoving things in her backpack. She accidentally elbowed her book off the table and had to crawl on the ground to reach it. By the time she managed to scoot back out from under the table, Camryn and Malorie were gone.

## Chapter Nine

I never pay attention to where I am in Topia when I log out. I'll do a quick check for nearby monsters, since I've logged into a spawn more than once, but that's all. It drives Camryn and Malorie *crazy*.

They always want to plan where they're going the next time they log in, which means we always end early on Fridays so they can teleport to where they want to be. I get why they want to, really. But I don't do so well with planning ahead, so I just wing it.

But today I know exactly where I am: The Village. It doesn't sound that exciting, until you realize that it's Belle's hometown. Every map is different in its layout, but there's always a main city: and it's always based on a major fairy tale. The Village is the biggest city on this map, and it's always busy. I didn't want to risk being late to meet Emma, so I made sure to log out near the library yesterday.

The library sells scrolls, tomes, and other books that you can use to level up attributes fast. The problem is they're super expensive, and you have to convince the librarian to sell it to you. Plus, the NPC only ever has like 10 books at a time, so it's hard to find one you need in stock. Since it's not a big attraction I logged out there yesterday, but now I need to head to the fountain. It's in the middle of The Village and it doubles as an arch.

Teleportation arches take all different forms in Topia, from ancient ruins and elaborate shrines to random literal arches in the middle of fields or more subtle arches that blend into the scenery. The one here in The Village is supposed to water the flowers that grow around it. It's totally bogus of course, since plants in Topia don't *need* water, but it makes for a nice story.



The clock that hovers in the corner of my vision at all times tells me that Emma should be here any minute. I start walking through the maze of buildings and players, making my way to the center of The Village.

The further in I get, the more I have to weave around other players. Most are headed away from the fountain, which makes me feel like a fish going upstream. When I turn the last corner around Belle's house, I run headlong into a solid wall and ricochet off before landing flat on my back.

"Watch it!" the wall says.

I open my mouth to say something, but I wind up gasping instead. Then I realize I can't breathe. The world is blurry, and I'm still trying to get some air so I can apologize when I hear someone say, "*You* watch it dude!" I roll onto my hands and knees, and finally take a raspy breath, thank god.

"She hit me, man," says the wall.

"And you're twice her size, I think you'll be fine."

The wall grumbles something about how this is bullshit and stomps away, loudly. A pair of black boots make their way over, stopping short of my hands. The other player crouches down and says, "You okay?"

I take a final, steadying breath and say, "Yeah, I'm good." The other player offers me their hand, and I accept it. I don't think I could stand on my own right now. They stand, pulling me up with them, and when the world stops spinning, I look up to thank the other player.

The words die in my throat when I realize the other player's a guy. I drop his hand like it's burning my skin. It might be virtual, but that's the most contact I've had with a guy my age. He shouldn't have offered his hand in the first place, and I definitely shouldn't have taken it.

I'm fighting off internal panic, but the guy's just looking past me. He's probably making sure the wall isn't coming back. It's almost laughable, this guy doesn't look big enough to do much damage, and it's not like my magic will do much to defend us, we'd both get our butts kicked. I hover my eyes on his head to peak at his screen name: ZackAttack20.

"Thanks for helping me out," I say.

"No worries," he says. He turns to look at me for the first time. His eyes widen and he opens and closes his mouth a few times, doing his best impersonation of a goldfish. He shifts his feet and gestures over his shoulder with his free hand and says, "Fountain?"

"Yeah," I say. "I'm meeting my friend."

He nods along, and does the weird fish open mouth close mouth thing again. I take a closer look at him.

When you play your first game on the LeeTech App, whatever VR helmet you're using scans your face. The gear fits kind of like a motorcycle helmet, covering your head completely, so it can scan all of your features. It only takes a few seconds, then a computer algorithm looks at the scan and makes your default avatar for all LeeTech games.

When you install something like Topia, you can customize it a bit, but nothing drastic. This means that while you don't look *exactly* like your avatar, it's still close enough that if you run into someone in-game that you know in the real world, you should be able to recognize them.

ZackAttack20 looks familiar, *really* familiar. "I'd better go," I say after I realize I'm staring.

I move to go around him, and his head whips up as I pass. "Wait," he says. I keep walking, hoping I can lose him in the stream of players leaving the fountain. I hear him calling

after me and I start walking faster. The fountain's dead ahead, and I frantically look for Emma. The guy's still calling for me to wait, and I'm starting to panic when he yells, "Aida, wait!"

I turn around slowly, not really sure what to expect at this point. I see the guy trying to make his way through a cluster of players, jumping up to get a better look and waving frantically when he spots me. He disappears again, then suddenly darts out from the side of the group. He weaves through a couple more players and then he's standing in front of me.

"Hey," he says.

"Who are you?" I say. I know it's rude, I just don't really care. I'm worried I have a stalker at this point, and I'm actually debating just logging out to lose him.

"Aida, it's me." He says it softly, looking up at me through his eyelashes like he can't quite look me in the eye. His shoulders are hunched, and he looks like he's trying to brace himself for something terrible. He mumbles something low and I barely hear, "It's Emma."

He's rubbing the back of his neck with one hand and has a half-smile on his face.

"How?" I ask.

He looks at the ground and shrugs. For a moment, I don't think he's going to answer my question, but then he gestures vaguely with one hand and says, "I hacked my gear." And he has the nerve to sound casual about this!

I'm about to say something terrible when I get jostled by a group of players. I take a step to catch myself, and I see Emma get knocked in the shoulder by the same group. I take a deep breath and rub the bridge of my nose before saying, "Maybe we should talk somewhere else."

Emma nods and says, "Yeah, we could jump to The Garden?"

"Sure."

Emma levels me with a stare, "Are you actually agreeing, or are you just saying that?"

I start to walk away but call back over my shoulder, “I’m agreeing.”

I can hear Emma jogging to catch up, and I feel her fall into step behind me as we close in on the arch, but she doesn’t say anything. We reach the fountain and I pull up my map. I select where I want to go, and a message box pops up asking *DO YOU WISH TO TELEPORT? Y/N*. I think, “Yes,” and out of the corner of my eye I see Emma do the same. I start walking before she can say anything, going straight through the wall of water and disappearing into darkness.

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Teleportation arches work like this: you select the arch closest to where you want to go on the map, you walk through the arch closest to you, then you pixelate away, and you spawn at the arch you picked on the map. It gets more expensive the further you travel, because there’s a charge for each arch that’s between you and your destination.

Everyone figured out pretty quickly that if you just *use* all the arches that are between your start and end points, you can travel anywhere for free. I have a habit of traveling that way because I have other things I’d rather spend my Órr on, even if using more than three makes me too dizzy to stand.

While Topia loads the next arch I’m in a dimly lit loading room. The walls, floor, and ceiling are the same shade of dark grey, and you can’t move around the room. You can still walk if you want to, but it won’t take you anywhere. An arch of light appears and suddenly I’m able to move forward again. I walk through the light and spawn in front of a brick arch.

This one is actually the entrance to The Gardens of The Beast, which is always covered in snow. I move out of the way and wait for Emma, my feet crunching the snow as I walk. I’m wondering what I should even say to her. My brain feels empty, like it can’t process what I’ve seen.

The only thing that keeps running through my head is my dad. When he gets carried away talking about his job, he tends to quote gender deviance awareness brochures. Right now, his voice is going over a list of, “potential warning signs” like, “your child expresses interest in activities that are becoming of the opposite gender,” and “your child spends their free time pretending to have a job suitable only for the opposite gender.”

ZackAttack20 pixelates into existence a few seconds later and he looks around. When he sees me his shoulders relax, and he smiles. He really didn’t think I’d be here. I’m still processing in my head whether I should be using “she” or “he” when I think about this character, but I’m too nervous to ask that.

Instead I ask, “Where do you want to go?” I’m aiming for casual, like I hang out with potential criminals all the time. Because that’s what I’m doing now. Emma’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday can’t be too far away, and if she gets caught doing this and hanging out with a minor she might be charged with child endangerment. If she’s lucky she’ll just wind up at a treatment center, but I’m also worried about me.

If Emma tells anyone that I *knew* she was ZackAttack20, I could get sent away too.

“There’s a bench further that way,” Emma says. She’s pointing to a corner of The Garden that’s overgrown with wild roses. I hesitate, because I know the bench she’s talking about, and it’s literally surrounded by The Beast’s menacing statues. I say as much to Emma and she says, “They won’t attack. Unless you pick a rose.” I know she’s right, and I don’t want to seem like a coward, so I agree.

When we get to the bench I try to avoid looking at the statues. They’re all hideously contorted, with mouths full of sharp fangs looking like they’re mid-scream. It’s pure nightmare

fuel. Emma sits on the bench sideways so we can look at each other and I freeze for a moment, trying to figure out how much distance I should put between us.

She waits patiently and I finally sit down, tucking my leg underneath me so I can face her. It's closer than I should sit with a boy, but no one's around and I don't want her to think I'm weirded out. Even though I am.

"So, where did 'Zack' come from?" I ask.

She says, "I was trying to sound 'cool.'" I can hear the quotes in his voice, and I can't help but smile. "It sounded like something a guy would come up with if he was trying too hard." She chuckles. "I thought it was funny, but then I had to try a bunch of different numbers because so many other players had the same name!"

"It definitely worked," I say, and I mean it. Between the name, and the look of Emma's avatar, he seems like a guy. Emma's eyebrows are furrowed, like she's trying to figure out if I mean that in a good way or not. I don't clarify because I'm not sure. "Should I call you Zack in here?"

His lips draw into a thin line for a moment. He finally says, "You don't *have* to." I just now that there's going to be a 'but' to this. "I mean, I don't plan on calling you 'A' But maybe just call me 'Em?'"

He's looking at me sideways now, like he's dreading my answer. I just say, "And the gear hack?" I really do want that one explained. No matter how I think about it, I can't figure out how Em could have fooled the tech, I've never heard of anyone being able to do that. Although, if there are other players using this hack, the threat of getting arrested is a good reason to hide it.

“Oh that,” Em says. He starts moving his boot in circles, moving snow, and drawing in the dirt underneath. After a while he says, “There used to be this software, a long time ago, that would let you see what you looked like if you were born as the other gender.”

This is the first I’m hearing of anything like that, and I’m not surprised. It sounds like something from before The Break. “That seems dangerous.”

“It’s not,” he says, a little too quickly. “It’s,” he pauses and motions with a hand vaguely. “It’s nice. It’s like trying on clothes you don’t plan on buying. It’s just fun to pretend for a little bit.”

I consider that for a moment. “Like Halloween,” I say.

He nods and seems serious when he says, “Yes, exactly like that.” He shrugs and says, “I found the program on my dad’s computer and it made a 3D model of what I would look like as a guy.” He motions to his face, “Apparently, I’d look like this. Minus the pointed ears.” I can’t help but laugh, and it seems to break the tension.

He looks me in the eye for the first time since sitting down and tries to smile. “It was more of a joke really. When I got the gear for my birthday I loaded Topia on a cheap store phone and instead of scanning my face I used the photo option.”

I’ve actually heard of that feature, but it’s pretty new. Since I already have my avatar, I haven’t had a reason to try it out. Basically, you have to upload a *bunch* of pictures of yourself, like a hundred or something, and the LeeTech creates an avatar from that. It seems like a lot of effort to go through for a joke. “So, you don’t think you’re a guy?”

I don’t know if I really want to hear the answer. If she feels like a guy then she needs help, but the only way she could get it is if someone reports her avatar. But if *I* do that then she’d definitely be charged, and I don’t want her to go to jail because of me.

“No,” he says firmly. “I know I’m not a guy.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” I say. I smile at him. “I like Halloween too.”

The grin he gives me then tells me I’ve said the right thing. “Thank you,” he says. “I knew you’d get it. I just knew.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him that I don’t think I get it.



## Chapter Ten

History class was always the worst on Fridays. At the end of the week the class was Aida's final obstacle before her weekend of freedom, the last hurdle she had to clear before she could head to Level Up. She was supposed to meet up with Emma again after school, and Aida was looking forward to it.

Wednesday had been weird when she was trying to get used to seeing her friend as a male avatar. After a while she'd managed to stop overthinking it so much and just focus on playing the game. She was hoping that today she would skip over the awkward part and just have fun with her friend.

She turned a page in her notebook to a clean sheet of paper and began to doodle, trying to recreate her Topia staff from memory. Mrs. Sanchez had put in a video at the beginning of class and told them to take notes, which was the teaching method she used most days. Aida did take notes, although they weren't the type she could ever use to study.

She liked to call them her, "Thought Notes," because they were really just her reactions to different lines. She'd write down a quote from the movie, something like, "Women's desires for independence before The Break led to incomprehensible disasters." Then she would write her own reaction, "But what's worse, an independent woman or a tornado?" It was a good way to cope with the absurdity of the films. She'd flip back through them sometimes for a laugh, but she'd never be able to show them to anyone. The last thing she wanted was anyone getting the wrong idea and thinking she was Deviant.

Today's video was one of the ones where she couldn't even take Thought Notes though. The movie was all about the dangers of Gender Deviance Disorder. It wasn't even one of those over-the-top films they would show in girl's assemblies back in middle school, the ones that

everyone made fun of. Her entire grade had spent months laughing about danger signs like having, “An uncontrollable desire to cut your hair.” Her classmates would burst into giggles when scissors were brought out in art class, and some of them would pantomime cutting their friends’ hair in the halls between classes.

Those videos were safe to make fun of, and the teachers seemed to expect it. But today’s video didn’t have bad child actors pretending at sleep overs like the middle school films. This one had scientists and doctors, and they were serious when the camera was on them.

A voice from the video caught her attention and tore her away from her doodle. “The problem with Gender Deviance,” the voice said. “Is that it’s linked to nearly every other mental illness. Some of them are obvious. For example, it makes sense that Deviants would also be homosexuals or exhibit sociopathic behavior.” The speaker was wearing a white lab coat over a suit, and there was a microscope on a table in the background. According to the text on the screen he was Humphrey Lancaster, PhD.

She couldn’t help but think he looked like a Humphrey. He had a circular face, a small, fuzzy mustache, and balding head he’d tried to hide under a thin combover. Between sentences Humphrey was wetting his lips with his tongue, which made him look like a slimy toad.

“But others are unexpected. A study published in 2036 examined college campuses across the country examining rates of Gender Deviance Disorder, although it wasn’t called GDD at the time. The research showed that schools with high rates of Deviance also had a higher population of students with schizophrenia, mood disorders, and females with eating disorders.”

Aida had heard this type of thing before, her dad liked to use statistics from studies like that in his speeches. He loved talking about studies conducted before The Break, but what really got him riled up were all the studies done after. He could talk for hours about, “The gradual

decline in GDD over the years,” and “The path to ensure the curve continues on its current trajectory.”

Humphrey was still talking, his voice taking on the tone of someone who’s letting you know how important they are. “Conversely, Christian colleges nationwide had remarkably low numbers of students struggling with any of these disorders. Once the research started, it quickly became clear that GDD was the root cause of these mental illness manifestations.”

“Since the end of The Break in 2048, The United Council has taken steps to ensure that Gender Deviance is detected early. Those who suffer from this disease are separated from the rest of the population for treatment. This is critical because Gender Deviance is one of the fastest spreading diseases in existence.”

The screen had shifted again when Aida looked up, changing over to a picture diagram. There were blue stick figures lined up across the screen and Humphrey was still speaking. “Say you have ten healthy subjects who live together in a college dorm.” The blue stick figures shifted to the left and a red stick figure joined them. “If you introduce a known sufferer of GDD to the group, you have a controlled variable.”

Words like “Behavior,” “Speech,” and “Appearance” appeared around the red stick figure. “The stimulus this Deviant brings can take many forms, but their nonconformity to gender is always present.” Five of the blue stick figures turned red. “And suddenly, we start to see these same nonconforming behaviors in subjects which previously had no symptoms of Gender Deviance Disorder.”

The camera pulled back, letting more and more rows of blue figures surround the original row. “Now you put that in the context of an entire college, or a large city.” All over the screen,

blue figures started to turn red. “And pretty soon we have an epidemic, just like what was happening before The Break.”

A wadded-up piece of paper hit Aida on the leg and fell next to her shoe. She debated leaving it, but after a moment pushed her pencil off her desk. It landed with a clatter next to the paper ball and she bent down to pick them both up in one hand. She righted herself then looked over to Camryn and Malorie before opening the paper.

They were doing their best to seem like they were taking notes on the video. Camryn kept looking at the screen then back at her notes, her pen moving furiously across the paper. But Aida knew from experience that Camryn never actually took notes on anything, let alone one of Mrs. Sanchez’s videos.

Malorie was a little more convincing. She wasn’t looking at the screen at all, only at her notebook in front of her, like she was listening and taking notes at the same time. But when she went to write something with her pen, she realized she was holding it upside down, and had to flip it around.

Aida couldn’t help it, she started to giggle. She ducked her head and let her hair fall in front of her face like a curtain, hoping Mrs. Sanchez didn’t hear her. She carefully flattened out the paper wad on her desk, trying not to make any more noise.

There was a drawing inside done in red and blue pen. It looked like the video, with a bunch of little blue stick people in a line, then one red stick person to the side. But this little red person had her own name written above it. She recognized Camryn’s loopy handwriting instantly.

Aida balled the note back up and took it and her pencil over to the front corner of the room. She turned to look Camryn in the eye and made a show out of dropping the note in the trashcan, before turning to use the pencil sharpener.

When she sat back down in her desk she focused back on the video. Humphrey had a smile on his face and was smoothing his tie with one hand, like it was a pet. “The United has made excellent progress in the way of Gender Deviance. After The Break ended, nearly seven percent of the population was sequestered in treatment facilities.” The camera changed to a shot of a long white hallway and she could practically smell the antiseptic through the video.

“As of 2070 only two percent of children entering First Grade are identified as Gender Deviant, and only one and a half percent of The United’s entire population are in long-term treatment facilities. This year, 2080, marked the third year in a row in which The United has had no cases of Gender Deviance appearing in children older than eight. This shows us conclusively that the best treatment, for the entire population, is early detection.”

The bell rang and drowned out Humphrey Lancaster’s final words of wisdom. Aida hurried to shove her essay and pencils back in her bag. If the bell said she could get away from this guy, she was running as far as physically possible.

The true danger in society's current mindset, lies with our children. We all want our young sons and daughters to live up to their full potential, something that cannot happen if we as parents do not address the current situation.

How is a young girl to grow into a woman if society tells her she can choose to be a boy?

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2019

## Chapter Eleven

Aida stared into her second cup of coffee and willed herself to feel human. It wasn't often that her mom let her have coffee at all, let alone this much. She was too tired to appreciate the special occasion. Her mom had lured her out of bed with the promise of coffee at 8 o'clock on a Saturday, for shopping. Prom. Dress. Shopping.

Somewhere between dealing with whatever was going on with Camryn and Malorie and then the thing with Emma on Wednesday, she'd managed to forget about her deal with her mom. As soon as she'd walked into the kitchen her mom said, "Where do you want to start?" Aida nearly groaned out loud.

She thought about trying to get out of it, she *really* thought about it. But her mom just looked so happy. In the end, she couldn't bring herself to say anything at all. She shrugged, but her mom didn't seem to notice. She started outlining their itinerary for the morning, and it was obvious that she'd given this a lot thought.

"And then there's that new shop on the south side of the mall. I keep meaning to go in," her mom said. "Do you have the dress code? We probably need to take that with us."

She nodded along with her mom's ideas and kept nodding when she asked questions, almost nodding straight into her mug. She wasn't willing to open her mouth unless it involved taking in more caffeine.

She probably shouldn't have stayed out so late last night, but she'd lost track of time in Topia. She'd partied with Zack again and he had a quest he was trying to complete. Once that was done he'd asked what *she* wanted to do, and she may have gotten carried away. She'd always just tagged along with whatever Camryn and Malorie had planned, so it was nice to be in charge a bit. She hadn't logged out until after nine.

Her dad had immediately started one of his lectures about responsibility when she got home, but her mom stepped in to smooth things over. She'd been so relieved that she'd just escaped to her room, silently thanking her mother. She felt like a moron for not realizing *why* her mother wouldn't want her to be grounded over the weekend.

"You should probably get dressed honey," her mom said. Aida downed the last of her coffee and put her mug in the sink. She trudged out of the kitchen, then paused when she heard her mom call after her. "And Aida? Make sure to wear a good bra!" She felt her cheeks burn and bolted to the stairs, taking them two at a time and fully awake.

Four attempts of finding an approved outfit later, they were on a bus and heading to the mall. Any other day, her dad probably would have driven them, but she knew he was still upset with her.

She kept shifting in her seat, occasionally tugging at her pants, causing her mom to shoo her hands away periodically. Even though the pants fit around her waist, they were cartoonishly baggy around her thighs. When she sat down the pants bunched up around her knees, so now she was self-conscious *and* uncomfortable.

Most of her classmates had gone through that awkward middle school phase of looking like a mash-up of body proportions, but she felt like she'd been *particularly* unlucky. Arms that

were too long, a head that was too big, and hips that meant she couldn't get clothes in the kids' section anymore.

And then, just to add insult to injury, most of her classmates had grown into their bodies by the end of sophomore year. She hadn't been so lucky. She was a few short months away from the end of her third year, and she *still* had that weird, disconnected feeling every time she looked in a mirror.

It wasn't that she was particularly ugly. Everyone said she looked like her mom, and her mom was pretty! But her body still felt *wrong*. She didn't feel all that big, but when she looked in a mirror her reflection seemed bigger than it should.

It didn't help that Malorie had never even gone through that phase. Camryn said Malorie had somehow managed to go from a cute little girl to a beautiful young woman, all overnight. Camryn used to complain about how it wasn't fair, that Malorie should have at least had acne to make things even. She was willing to bet that Emma had been like that too, adorable one minute and stunning the next.

She stopped her fidgeting when her mom gave her another look, clasping her hands together on her lap. It was weird how well yesterday had gone. After the shock had worn off on Wednesday, something changed when they were going after Hags. She'd stopped seeing a *guy*, and started seeing her friend. After that, playing together had been fun.

The bus pulled in front of the mall, and she rose to follow her mom. Another girl bumped her shoulder squeezing past, and turned to glare at Aida, like she'd been at fault. This was why she hated shopping: other people sucked.

They started with a department store, which struck her as odd. Her mom was more of a small-boutique shopper and constantly talked about things that were, "one of a kind!" But when



they reached the banner that said, “All Of Your Favorite PROM Styles Sold Here” she realized why.

Her mom walked up to a seemingly random dress rack and said, “Let’s just figure out your size first.” Her mom picked through the dresses, looking at each tag and occasionally handing one over for Aida to hold. When her mom was apparently satisfied with the selection she said, “Try those on and let me see how they fit.”

The next few hours were a whirlwind of questions, dress changes, and intense scrutiny. It was as if her mom had started speaking a different language. “Do you want a ball gown or an A-line? Maybe you should try this mermaid? Sweetheart or V-neck? Do you like the chiffon or would you rather do satin?” The thing was, she recognized most of those words, but when they were said in that order she had no idea what they meant. It didn’t help that she’d seen over a hundred different dresses at this point, and they were all really starting to look the same,

It seemed like hours had passed by the time her mom clapped her hands together and said, “Okay! I think we’re ready!”

“For what?” Aida said. She didn’t think they’d picked anything out, but at this point she was willing to buy any dress her mom threw her way. Besides, it had to be getting close to noon, and then they’d only be able to go to approved stores for female shoppers, which was a pain.

Her mom just looked at her with a furrowed brow and said, “For the boutique.”

She couldn’t help it, she groaned. *Loudly*. What had she done to deserve this? She could think of literally hundreds of better ways to spend a Saturday. Getting all of her teeth pulled was at the top of the list. This, this was hell. She’d died in her sleep, and gone straight to hell.

Just as her thoughts were spiraling even further down she heard a voice calling, “Aida!” She turned to see Emma running over, looking for all the world like a white knight rushing in to save the day.

Before her brain could catch up with her body, Aida tackled her friend in a hug. Emma laughed and wrapped her arms around Aida to keep her balance, and Aida clung on for dear life. “Save me!” She whispered in her friend’s ear.

Emma pulled back a bit and looked at her with a raised an eyebrow. Emma took the time to greet her mother who then asked, “Are you shopping for a prom dress too?”

Emma gave her a knowing smile, but Aida just looked at her friend with wide eyes and mouthed, “Help,” before finally releasing her friend from the hug.

“Oh no, I’ve already picked mine out.” Emma slung an arm around Aida’s shoulder and leaned on her. “I just wish my mom had been there you know? To help me pick one.”

Aida nearly choked on air. She stared at her friend, the same friend who had never even once mentioned her mother before. She looked to her mom, and saw she had pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips and looked like she might cry.

“Oh sweetheart,” her mom said. “Why don’t you help us pick out Aida’s?”

Emma looked up, eyes wide and hopeful, but said, “Are you, I mean, are you sure? Is that okay?” Emma turned and looked at Aida, with impossibly wide eyes. “Could I?”

Aida felt like she was having an out of body experience. She nodded and said, “Of course.” Emma responded by bouncing on her toes and hugging her again. She spared a glance to her mom, who was now holding a hand to her heart and smiling softly.

They headed straight for the boutique her mom wanted to check out. Aida looked on as Emma chatted easily with her mother, explaining that she’d just come to the mall to hang out

with friends but spotted them when she was leaving. They threw around some of the earlier dress words too, discussing what might be a good look for Aida. It was weird to watch the same friend that she'd watched slay a hundred Banshees talk about fashion trends with her mother.

She trailed behind on their way to the store, trying to mentally prepare herself for more questions. Mostly she was just thankful that Emma was keeping her mother's attention somewhere else. Her mom suddenly pointed to a store front in the distance and said, "Oh that's the name, I couldn't remember!"

She followed her mother's finger and read the fancy lettering above the windows, No Dress Regrets. She caught Emma's eye and had to fake a coughing fit to cover her laughter. Emma dropped back and started to pat her between her shoulder blades, giving her a wicked grin the whole time. When the coughing subsided Emma said, "Are you okay? What *happened*?"

She punched Emma in the arm and whispered, "Oh shut up." Emma just laughed and gave her a one-armed hug.

A chipper saleswoman greeted them at the door, asking if they needed any help and if they'd ever been in before. Aida's mom immediately engaged the woman, launching into a detailed list of what they were apparently looking for. Aida hung back and did her best not to look as awkward as she felt. Emma came to her rescue, grabbing her hand and dragging her over to a display,

"I'm so sorry," Aida said.

Emma's eyebrows drew together. "For what?" she said.

Aida waived her hand vaguely at the store. "For ruining your weekend?"

"I can think of a lot of worse things to be doing right now," Emma said.

“Worse than *this*?”

Emma shook her head. “It doesn’t really matter what you’re doing when the company’s good.”

Aida didn’t really know how to respond. Before she could figure out what to say, her mom walked over.

“Let’s start over at the kiosks,” her mom said. Aida dutifully followed, getting her ID out. She was about to tap the card to the chip reader, but her mom waved her off. “Oh no honey,” her mom said. “We’ll never find anything that way.”

Her mom tapped her own ID to the reader and the screen prompted, “Who are you shopping for? Select ONE: Margaret Abbot, Kenneth Abbot, Aida Abbot.” When she tapped Aida’s name the screen changed again. “What occasion are you shopping for? Select ONE: Wedding Dress, Bridesmaid Dress, Prom Dress, Other Special Occasion.”

When it said, “Would you like to import your shopping history?” her mom of *course* hit, “Yes.” Everything that her mom had ever purchased for her was now going to be factored into the dress recommendations. She suddenly felt like she was having a vision of the future; it was *lacier* than expected.

The questions continued and her mom kept answering, never bothering to ask for input. Finally, a screen came up that said, “Thank you. Calculating your dress needs.” After a few seconds it spat out a slip of paper, which her mom snatched up quickly.

The saleswoman from earlier suddenly appeared again and said, “Would you like me to pull your list?” Her mom handed the receipt over and the woman scurried away. Aida glared daggers at her retreating back, traitor.

Within minutes she found herself repeating the cycle from earlier. Try on a dress, let mom take a picture, listen to what mom thinks, repeat with next dress. The only thing that made it bearable was Emma.

Her friend had started out by giving encouraging nods or thumbs-ups while her mom took the picture. Emma had changed tactics after the third dress, and was now making funny faces to get her to smile. While the dresses were arguably getting more and more frilly, Emma’s faces were getting more and more ridiculous.

She changed out of the last dress and returned to her mom, unsure of what to expect. Her mom was flipping through the pictures on her phone, pointing to some of them and talking to Emma. When she joined them, her mom didn’t miss a beat. Her mom angled the phone and said, “What about this one?”

She checked to make sure it wasn’t one of the lacier dresses before she agreed to it, but it was. Before she could figure out how to put her opinion tactfully, Emma rescued her. “The lighter colors really washed her out,” she said. Her mom nodded, like this made sense to her too.

Her mom shook her phone to shuffle through a few of the pictures. “Wasn’t there that green one?” she said to herself. When her mom found the dress she was looking for she tilted the phone back to Aida. “This one was so pretty.”

Aida looked at the picture, and was immediately surprised to see which dress her mom was talking about. By her mom’s standards it was understated, no lace or excessive layers. It did

have enough beading to make it a possible weapon, but that almost made it cool. She gave her mom her best winning smile. “I really liked that one.”

Within minutes her mom was checking out and she was waiting off to the side with Emma. “Thank you,” she whispered to her friend. “You saved me.”

Emma shrugged and said, “I had fun. And the dress *does* look good on you.”

She felt her cheeks coloring and started to fidget with a nearby jewelry display. The saleswoman from before came over and handed over a piece of paper. “This is your certificate honey.” She must have looked as confused as she felt because the woman explained, “Each dress has a code for our partner store. Give this to your date, and he can use it there to get an exact color match to your dress.”

Before she could mutter out an apology Emma took the certificate and told the woman, “Thank you *so* much, that’s perfect!”

Once the woman was gone Emma said, “Do you have a date?”

Aida shook her head and stared at the floor. “I was planning to go with friends, but. . .” she trailed off, gesturing vaguely in the air.

Emma squeezed her arm. “Would you maybe want to go with me and my friends?”

Aida finally looked up. “Yeah?” She’d kind of assumed that Emma would have a date. She was pretty and popular, and seemed like perfect date material.

Emma nodded. “Dates are overrated. I had one last year, never doing that again.” She couldn’t help but laugh at her friend’s expression, which only encouraged Emma. “Oh, I’m

serious. It was basically a hostage situation.” She shuddered theatrically and said, “I still get flashbacks.”

Aida tried to stifle her laughter, but wound up snorting instead, which only made Emma laugh too. By the time her mom walked over, she and Emma were getting dirty looks from the other customers.

As recently as The Dover Panda Trial in 2005 Christians have been persecuted in the courts and shunned from the schools which our own children attend. We must look to God for guidance as we prepare our children to fight the devil as he presents himself in their very classrooms, masquerading as Science and teaching the godless theory of evolution.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2010

## **Chapter Twelve**

Aida found the concept of other religions fascinating. For a long time, she hadn't known that there had ever been any religions outside of Christianity, or that there had once been churches dedicated to other gods. But she could still remember when she first realized that both had been around before The Break. She was sitting in Sunday school, sometime in the third grade, and her teacher was giving a lesson about false idols.

As her teacher explained it, false idols were anything that you thought about more often than God. Aida's initial reaction had been surprise, because she hadn't gone out of her way to have any false idols, but she did. She thought about a lot of things more than she thought about God, and she immediately realized that she spent most of her time thinking about school. But how was she supposed to think about God more if she only spent one day a week at church and five days at school? It didn't make sense.

Then her teacher told the class about how before The Break a bunch of religions were allowed, and that made it hard for people to know what was real. Aida asked what the other religions were, but her teacher hadn't answered the question. Probably her teacher realized they were dangerously off-topic, but the damage had been done. After the lesson she started spending



more time thinking about what other religions might be like than she spent thinking about a God she should have been worshipping.

Listening to Pastor William now, her thoughts went to the religions she'd made up on her own. She'd thought of a bunch of different ones for her different stuffed animals, based on what type of animals they were. Her dogs worshipped their god The Milk Bone and her cats prayed to their god Bowl of Cream. Her stuffed rabbits put carrots in the collection plates and her bears sang hymns about honey. Her make-believe religions were innocent enough at the time, but after entering high school she hadn't been able to see them the same way.

Pastor William had given one of his sermons of warning, one of the ones that meant he yelled at everyone for half an hour, and it kind of ruined things. He'd gone on and on about the dangers of other religions, and afterward she couldn't think about her made up ones without feeling guilty. Her mom hated those sermons too, and after that particular one they'd both ridden home in near silence, only answering direct questions from her dad. Pastor William hadn't done one of his yelling sermons in a while, so it probably shouldn't be surprising that today he'd broken his streak of calm. To make things worse, he'd apparently reread his notes on the dangers of different religions.

Right now, he was again ranting about how during The Break other religions fought back against The United Council, leading to a bloody war. "Make no mistake," he said. "The Break was not just a time of change for politics, it was a crusade to reclaim our land for the glory of God." He held his worn bible above his head and waved it around. "The first book of John told us, 'every spirit that does not confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.' Yet for hundreds of years, we lost sight of this truth."

Someone coughed quietly in the room, and Aida half expected for Pastor William to hurl the bible at the offender. As it was he slammed the book back on the podium and, even though she saw it coming, the loud bang made her jump. “It was for one reason, and one reason only. The spirit of the antichrist was in our nation, taking the form of other religions. His goal was to put doubt in our minds and hate in our hearts. The wars of The Break showed us one thing, that God, our one, true God, is great. Through him we were able to wage a holy war in this land, and bring glory to his name with our victory.”

She glanced over to her mom, and saw a line of tension in her mom’s jaw from where she had it clenched. Her breathing looked shallow, and it hadn’t been for a small movement in her chest, Aida would have thought she was holding it. “Of course, such a war will always have a price.” Pastor William’s voice finally dropped below a yell. “After The Break ended, before the barrier was erected between us, The States launched terrorist attacks on our land.” He let a beat of silence hang in the air. “Many of God’s brave warriors were lost in those years. It is a heavy loss many families still feel today. The barrier’s construction paved the way for our peace and freedom, and we should always be grateful for this.”

He held his right hand above his head, “As you go from here I tell you to be ready. Be ready for the time when you are tested by God as we were once tested by other religions. Make sure your faith is steadfast, and that nothing may shake you from your trust in God.” He bowed his head and Aida followed suit, not really listening to the prayer he was giving. Her thoughts were already on Topia and how she was meeting up with Zack again. Of course, Pastor William would probably say that thinking about the game so much made it a false idol. She didn’t really care.

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Zack is waiting for me when I reach Kinhurst, the mortal city on this map. He's sitting on a bench and tossing bits of bread to some birds nearby, and doesn't seem to hear me walking up. I stop when I reach the bench and he looks up at me, a smile on his face. "I thought you might not come," he says.

I shake my head. "Church ran late."

He tosses the last bit of bread to the birds and they dive toward it. He stands and brushes his hands on his pants, dusting crumbs to the ground. "So where were you thinking?" he says.

"What about the woods? With all the wolves?" I say. The woods aren't far from here, so we wouldn't need an arch. Plus, the wolves I'm talking about have a quick respawn rate, so we won't run out of targets. Zach likes the suggestion and after he checks his weapons inventory we head in that direction.

During our walk Zach says, "Anything new with your friends?"

I lean my head to the side. "Kind of," I say.

"And?" he says. He pauses to laugh. "I asked because I want to know Aida."

I shrug. "It's kind of weird to explain. I'm not sure what's going on."

Zach is a really good listener, and I'm still getting used to that. I've been friends with Camryn and Malorie since Freshman year, but they've never listened like he does. I tell Zach about class on Wednesday, and how I've been avoiding them ever since.

"I mean I still sit at the same table in English, and we still have History together. But I haven't actually spoken to them in days." I say.

Zach shakes his head, "I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to talk to them either."

I kick a stone on the path. "I don't really know what to do though, it's just awkward at this point."

“You could always confront them,” he says.

I laugh. “Yeah, no. I’m not that brave.”

“But you could be.”

I think about that for a minute. “I don’t know what I would say.” That’s at least true. I’m not even sure what I *want* to say.

He nods. “Maybe write down what you’re thinking,” he says. “It might help you sort it out.”

We reach the edge of the woods before I have to answer, a small mercy. We stop just out of range and I pull up my items menu. I don’t walk around with my staff equipped, it’s too bulky for that. I scope out the wolves and try to decide if I need to put on my better armor.

There are always a bunch of wolves here, which I guess makes sense. I mean, there are enough fairy tales with wolves that having an area for them works. But they probably won’t get close enough to me to land a hit since I have Zack to attack them. My finger hovers over the armor and I eventually press it. Better safe than sorry.

We aren’t fighting for more than ten minutes when I’m glad I put on the armor. Zack’s able to take them out fairly easily, making quick work of them while I heal from a distance. But when he goes too far and I follow to stay in range, another wolf turns and charges at me, teeth bared, and I shout.

Zack must hear because he yells my name. I can’t hear what he says after that, because the wolf’s practically on top of me and I’m running for my life. I know I’m not going to make it, so I stop, prepared to at least get in a few hits before it kills me. I hear a howl of pain and when I turn around I’m just in time to see the wolf pixelate away. Zack turns and gives me a sheepish grin. “My bad,” he says.

I shake my head, “I’m just glad I don’t have to pay up.” There’s a resurrection fee in Topia, and it increases based on what level you are and how many times you’ve died. The first time you die it might be less than a hundred Órr to respawn. But when I died last time I was level thirty-six, and it cost me over a thousand. I don’t want to know what the price is now.

We go back to the wolves and settle into a groove of fighting. Zack is more careful, making sure that I’m out of range of the wolves attacking from then on. It’s nice, and I want to keep playing, but when it’s been a few hours I tell him I have to head out.

“I have an essay,” I say. “And it might be due tomorrow.”

He tilts his head. “You haven’t started, have you?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Thanks for calling me out.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” he says.

We say our goodbyes, and when I’m logging out I can’t help but think of how lucky I am that our dad’s know each other.

The American Psychological Association no longer views a person's belief that they are the opposite gender as a mental disorder. Instead, this group has joined other secular organizations who advocate "treatments" such as social and legal transitions to living as the opposite gender. Those of us who put our faith in God know that this is no solution, it is only furthering the post-fall condition of humanity.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2017

### Chapter Thirteen

Walking to the English room Aida could practically feel her stomach fill with dread. She'd spent a fair amount of time Sunday imagining her next encounter with ~~her friends~~ Camryn and Malorie. In her boldest moments she thought Emma might be right, and that she should confront them.

When she walked into the room all her bravery took a flying leap out the classroom window, and fell to its death. Camryn and Malorie were sitting in their usual seats at their usual table, but someone had joined them, and was sitting in *her* chair.

Even from the doorway she could tell that it was Heather Hampton, the girl's poorly highlighted hair giving it away. It was unmistakably straw-like, and it made her look like a renegade scarecrow. When Heather had shown up with those highlights at the beginning of the semester, Camryn spent a week laughing about it. Malorie had been worse, telling Heather that she liked her new look, only to mouth, "not really" behind her back. But apparently, Heather was her replacement.

Aida managed to get her feet moving again and went to the back of the room, taking Heather's chair near the air conditioning unit. Her classmates trickled in and she made a silent plea to the universe for no one to mention her new seat.

The girl who sat down to her left, Kendall? Kendra? Something with a K, did a double take when she realized her tablemate had changed. She narrowed her eyes and started to say something, but the dull tone of the bell sounded through the intercoms and cut her off.

Mr. Haber moved from his desk to the front of the room, and K-girl looked like she might still say something, so Aida pointedly looked straight ahead. K-girl got the message and turned away while muttering something about, “rude transfer students.”

Aida glanced toward her old seat, and locked eyes with Camryn. She quickly refocused on Mr. Haber and made sure to answer, “Here,” when he called her name. Her eyes flicked back out of a morbid curiosity. Now Camryn was grinning at her.

Aida turned her entire head and pointedly stared back, keeping her features schooled into what she hoped was a challenging look. Camryn’s grin faltered for a beat before she made a show of rolling her eyes and turning back around. Aida let herself smile a bit at her victory before opening her book.

When the bell rang for lunch she took her time packing up. She’d spent the last few lunch periods in the library, but she’d forgotten to pack a lunch this morning. She fished her wallet out of her bag and was happily surprised when she found enough coins for the vending machine.

She made her way to the history building which had the closest machines and was halfway down the hall when she spotted Emma. She was putting coins in the machine slowly, like she was less than thrilled with her lunch choices.

It was a strange sight because Emma was almost always surrounded by people at school. She couldn’t imagine that Emma didn’t have anyone to sit with at lunch. Maybe her friends were out sick? All of them?

She walked up and leaned against the machine, aiming for lighthearted as she said, “I see you’re also a fan of fine dining.”

Emma didn’t miss a beat. “Having a sophisticated palate is such a curse.” She looked at the machine with narrowed eyes. “Now, what form do I want my sodium to take?”

“You should splurge.” Aida said before joining Emma in front of the machine. “The sour cream and onion are ruffled, so they’re obviously superior.”

Emma grinned and punched numbers in on the machine. The machine whirled to life, pushing the bag of chips forward and dropping it to the bottom of the machine. Emma leaned down to get her bag and said, “And what will you be having?”

Aida pushed her coins into the machine while looking at her options. “I think I want the most for my money, so salt and vinegar.” She pressed A1 on the keypad and waited.

Emma shot her a quizzical look and held up her own chips, “But I thought you just said?” She trailed off as Aida grabbed her bag from the machine.

“Well, yeah. But these were on the top row.” Aida stood and opened her chips. “So that handful of chips fell, and now I have all of these!” She showed Emma the broken remains of salt and vinegar chips.

Emma looked back up, and promptly burst out laughing. She doubled over at the waist, holding her stomach as she cackled. Aida smiled and popped a chip in her mouth. \$1.75 well spent.

When Emma regained control over her breathing she straightened back up and grinned at Aida. “Thank you for that,” she said.

“Any time.”



Emma wiped at her eyes and said, “Are you busy? Or can I convince you to listen to my sob story?”

Aida shook her head, “You don’t have to convince me of anything. I’m listening, but do you want to go somewhere else?”

Emma nodded and started walking. Aida followed, staying silent in the hopes that Emma wouldn’t feel pressured to say anything right away.

“Do you know what my dad does?” Emma asked suddenly.

It was a strange lead in, but to each their own. “Does he do something with the government?” Aida had thought about it briefly after Emma was at her house. She figured whatever their dads were meeting about it had to do with their jobs.

Emma shook her head. “He’s in psychotherapy.” Emma opened her bag of chips and glanced over to check her reaction.

“Ah. That makes sense.” And it did make sense to her. Her dad’s bid to run for congress next year meant that he would need supporters. Someone with a reputation like that could influence public opinion and help her dad win.

Emma nodded. “He has a lot of money.” She sounded sad when she said it, but Aida just let her continue. “I tried to cover it up after middle school, the money I mean. But at the end of last year a bunch of my friends kept wanting to hang out and saying that they’d never come over to my house.” She shook her head and said, “I was so stupid.”

She popped a chip in her mouth and chewed slowly before saying, “Things got weird after they found out. They started teasing me about it, saying I lived in a mansion and asking if I really wanted to hang out with ‘commoners like them’ and stuff like that.”

Emma fell silent and Aida looked over to check on her. Emma's brow was furrowed, and her lips were pursed, like the memory put a bad taste in her mouth. "I can take jokes, I can. But they started doing other stuff too. They started doing things for me, then asking for stuff in return. Or like, Lizabeth had a birthday in December, and she kept dropping hints about what she wanted around me. And then when I didn't get her what she hinted at she got pissy."

She paused in her story and tipped the chip bag to her mouth, leaning her head back to get the rest of the pieces. "And I guess we've been drifting since then, all of us. Or, me and all of them. Last week Lizabeth told me that I've been acting like I'm too good for them and then Saturday I was supposed to hang out at the mall with them, but they ditched me." She balled up her chip bag and threw it into a trash can as they passed.

Aida dropped hers in as Emma said, "None of them answered any of my texts or calls all weekend. And then I got to school this morning and they won't talk to me. I try to talk to them, and they just look at each other and go, 'did you hear something?' and that kind of thing."

They reached the steps for the library and started up. "And it just sucks because now it's too late for me to find other friends. I spent four years hanging out with them, and they won't even look at me or tell me what I did wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Aida said before she could help herself.

Emma sighed and said, "Yeah. I know." They reached the top of the stairs, but instead of heading inside Emma walked to the balcony railing and sat down. "It still sucks though."

Aida sank down across from her friend, sitting on her backpack instead of the hot cement. She didn't really know what to say so she just said, "You've got me though."

Emma looked up and gave a small smile, "Yeah?" she said.

“Yeah.” They sat in silence for a minute until something occurred to Aida. “Why did you invite me over that day?”

“Oh, that.” Emma looked a bit sheepish. “I kind of thought that if you were going to judge me it would be better to find out early on. Everything else was falling apart so I just sort of, yeah.”

Aida nodded, “I get it.”

“I am sorry though,” Emma said. “For thinking you might be like them I mean.”

Aida shrugged, “It’s cool. I was worried you would be like my friends.” She tried to give Emma a reassuring smile and said, “Really, it’s okay.” Emma finally smiled back.

“So, what did you do all weekend? Did you play Topia at all?” Emma said.

Aida groaned and closed her eyes, “Not a bit. My parents got an email from my Math teacher and I may have been on restriction after that.” She looked back at Emma. “What about you?”

Emma shook her head. “But I did go on some forums, have you seen that stuff about the goddess?”

Aida had seen a lot about the goddess rumor on Sunday. Some of it was pretty normal, with people trying to figure out how to get the goddess’s blessing, other people suggesting things to try, that kind of thing. But there had been something else strange happening too.

There was an image making its way around, a plain green square with an elaborate gold cross. It wouldn’t have stood out at all except for the fact that it was showing up across different sites, and then disappeared within an hour of being posted. Aida hadn’t seen it personally, but she’d seen a screenshot.

“Do you believe in her?” Emma asked.

Aida pressed her lips together and thought about how to answer. “I know other people believe in her,” she said. “So, in a way, she seems real.”

“I believe in her.” Emma said immediately, and with such conviction that Aida was taken aback. Emma laughed and said, “I know, it’s a silly internet thing right?” Emma kept talking before Aida could respond. “But there was this day, weeks ago now, and I thought I was going to die, but then there was this beam of healing light. It was awesome.” Emma shook her head but was smiling when she looked over said, “I didn’t believe in her until I got her blessing, so it’s okay if you don’t believe me.”

“It’s not that,” Aida said. “It’s just,” she steeled herself before continuing. “It’s just that I know the truth behind the goddess.” Emma’s eyes widened but Aida kept going, “I can show you if you want, next time we’re in Topia.”

Emma nodded so hard it looked like she was giving herself whiplash. “Yes!” She leaned forward, grabbed Aida’s shoulders, and shook her as she said, “Please show me!”

Aida couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay! Okay, I will. Emma!” Her friend was still shaking her shoulders, but now she was grinning.

Aida reached out and started to tickle her friend’s side to get her off. Emma shrieked and let go while bursting into a fit of high-pitched giggles. “You fight dirty!”

Recent developments in Virtual Reality technology have many practical applications. Never before have so many young people readily offered up their minds for monitoring. If The Council is able to purchase these companies we will have access to the younger generation in an unprecedented manner.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2035

## **Chapter Fourteen**

After school Tuesday, Aida found herself waiting for the bus that would take her to Level Up. Without anyone to walk with, she'd started using her transportation allowance. Walking gave her too much time to be alone with her thoughts.

The bus pulled up to the stop, its engine grinding and breaks squealing, par for the course with city transportation. The doors creaked open, a loud shriek of metal cutting through the music pumping through her earbuds, and she reluctantly climbed aboard. Even though the city buses were well-known for routinely breaking down, she had been lucky enough to avoid it so far. She tried to mentally psyche the bus up, sending positive energy its way like she had any control over when its engine would give out.

The driver didn't even look at her when she tapped her phone to the payment console. He just stared straight ahead and grunted with the effort of pulling a lever to close the bus doors. She walked down the aisle, starting the song on her phone over and sinking into an empty seat in the middle of the bus.

At this time of the day buses were usually pretty empty. Most girls her age would be riding home on a standard school bus or walking downtown with friends. She shrugged her backpack off and put it in the seat next to her, at least it wouldn't have to go on the floor.

One woman got off at the stop in front of the library, leaving her alone with a woman who looked even older than Mr. Haber. The bus started to move again and Aida locked eyes with the woman. Aida gave her a small nod and smile, her mom's voice about respecting the elderly playing in her head.

The woman smiled back and said something, so Aida took out her ear buds and said, "I'm so sorry, what was that?"

The woman chuckled and said, "I just asked where you were headed."

"Oh! A game café, I'm meeting my friend." Aida said. She braced herself for the woman's reaction, expecting some criticism over her choice.

But the woman smiled broadly and said, "Oh that sounds lovely." Her eyes took on a wistful quality and she said, "I do miss videogames sometimes."

"You played?" Aida was stunned, she didn't know *any* women who used to play. Most of the time, girls stopped playing after high school or, at the latest, college. They either wound up getting jobs or getting married, neither of which really let you keep your old hobbies. Women who worked were too busy for videogames, and married women didn't need to go to those types of places.

The woman nodded and said, "Oh yes, but not those fancy VR games, I never did like them." She shook her head and said, "You know how it started right?"

Aida nodded; she knew a lot about it. The forerunner of full-dive VR games was actually Pre-Break medical technology. It was developed for paralyzed patients who couldn't communicate verbally. They would be linked up to a machine with a screen and have to move a cursor with their mind to answer yes or no questions.

It wasn't long before videogame companies got their hands on it and turned the cursor into a character and added a simple game that you played just by thinking. The technology kept advancing, and after a few decades, full-dive technology emerged.

The woman moved to the seat across from Aida and whispered, "I never did trust it, using technology that reads your brain, but no one listened to me. Not until all those players disappeared."

"What?" Aida was leaning forward at this point, trying to hear the woman over the grinding gears of the bus.

The woman raised an eyebrow and her voice dropped even lower. "It happened right after The United formed. Players started logging out of games for good. One day they'd be playing online and the next they were gone. No one ever heard from them again."

Aida could hear her heart pounding in her ears. She took a deep breath and said, "What happened to them?"

The woman leaned across the aisle and motioned for Aida to come closer. She moved to the edge of her seat, practically touching knees with the older woman, and bent her head close. The woman whispered in her ear, "They were Deviants. I don't know how they did it, but The United used those games to find them."

Aida felt her breath catch. The air felt thick, like she was underwater. She leaned back and looked at the woman, hoping to see something that told her it was a lie. The woman had a small frown and her eyes were unfocused, as if she were reliving a bad memory.

The bus stopped and the sound of the doors broke the spell. A well-dressed woman in high heels stepped onto the bus and sat down a few seats away, pointedly looking straight ahead.

The older woman gave her a small nod and leaned back, signaling the end of their conversation. Aida slid back in her seat and tilted her head back against the cool window, willing herself to calm down. When the bus stopped again she grabbed her backpack and stood. She glanced to the older woman to say something. When she couldn't get any words out the woman gave her a sad smile, and Aida fled the bus.

As soon as her feet hit the sidewalk her brain came back online. What the woman said *couldn't* have been true. A bunch of Deviants probably did log out, but that was because they were in treatment and getting help. Not logging into an old account wasn't the same as disappearing, players lost interest in games all the time. Besides, you'd have to be another level of paranoid to think that The United was even *able* to spy like that, let alone doing it!

She shrugged her backpack onto both shoulders and started walking. Level Up wasn't that far from the bus stop so she'd probably be able to log in before Emma even got home. But honestly, she wasn't sure that was a good thing.

She kind of regretted telling Emma that she'd show her the truth about the goddess. There was a point, early on, that she'd wanted to tell Camryn and Malorie too, and now she was glad she hadn't. What if she and Emma had a falling out later? Would she use this to get even?

She pulled open the door to Level up and walked over to the automated kiosks. She spared a glance for the television with player IDs, and groaned internally when she saw TrickyApple8 and !ArielOcean! on the screen.

She walked the final few steps with purpose, and started tapping on the screen. There were two empty rooms for female players, so she selected the one furthest from Camryn and Malorie. She'd just have to cross her fingers that she wouldn't see them in the hall.



She tapped her phone to pay and grabbed the access key the machine spit out. She hurried down the hall and swiped the key, just as she heard a door open. She dashed inside and slammed the door behind her before letting out a shaky laugh. What was she *doing*? The lady on the bus had really freaked her out.

She shook her head and pulled up her games on her phone. She tapped the icon for Topia and let the LeeTech scan her code before pulling on the helmet and lying down.

*DO YOU WISH TO ENTER TOPIA?*

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I told Emma that we should meet at the arch closest to the Glas valley. It's one that's literal arch, made completely out of bricks, but it looks bizarre because it's in the middle of an empty field. I arch jump my way there, and by the time I step out of the final arch my head is spinning. One of these days, I'm going to splurge and just pay the fee, so I don't have to suffer like this.

I teeter away from the arch and let myself collapse in the grass. The sun feels *wonderful* on my face, and just when I'm thinking that I might need a nap to recover, my notification bell chimes.

I groan, and reluctantly pull up my messages, expecting to see one from Zack. After a minute of staring at a blank screen, I realize that the bell must have been for an invite, not a message. I'm intrigued, because I've never gotten an invite before, but over on the left of my screen is the invitation, envelope icon, and it has a little blue dot to show an unread message.

I open it up and read quickly. The message is short, but I know *exactly* who sent this. The message is marked as Anonymous and says, "YoU ShOUld Check ThIs Out!!!" The hyperlink

that's included reads, <https://www.topia.com/pvp/tournament/entry-form>. I close the invite with an angry swipe. Does she think I'm an idiot?

Immediately, there's another bell, and I pull up my messages to send Camryn a nasty response, but the new message isn't from her.

**ZackAttack20:** *hey mage! I just logged in and im headed to the arch! You still good to meet?*

I can't help it; I smile at the screen. There's something about Zack's message that stops my anger in its tracks, and I type back a quick reply.

**Mirage\_of\_Mage:** *ready and waiting!*

Zack sends back a thumbs up and I close the window. My head finally feels better but my nerves are starting to come back. I stand up and shake out my hands, trying to will the tingly feeling away. The portal whirs to life a few yards away, and Zack steps out.

"Hey!" I say and wave. He turns and jogs over. He's grinning from ear to ear, and when he gets to me he can't seem to stand still. He reminds me of Sadie. I smile at the thought and say, "I guess you're ready then?"

He nods enthusiastically and says, "Yeeeees!" the "Es" going up and down with his head as he draws them out.

I try to laugh, but it gets caught in my throat and I swallow it instead. I point to the giant oak tree on the hill a few hundred yards ahead and say, "That's our spot."

He cocks his head, looking like Sadie again, but then he just says, "Alright," so I start jogging.

Zack stays on my heels the entire way and when we reach the tree he stands to the side, patiently waiting for me to explain. I watch the players in the Glas valley, taking stock of what

we have. There are a handful of players, mostly guys, going after some of the beasts. I spy the one I want early on: L!ghtninFaaast. He's got to be in the 20s, and even though he's taking on the Glas one at a time, he's going to be in trouble soon because he's not recovering enough HP between fights.

"It'll be that one," I say to Zack and point to the player I've picked out. He nods seriously and watches the player with an intensity I've never seen from him before.

We don't have to wait long before L!ghtning lets his HP dip into the yellow. He's mid-battle with a Glas and I adjust my grip on my staff, my palms are starting to sweat. I flick my eyes to my spell menu and pull up the one I'm going to need.

His HP falls into the red and I notice that Zack's leaning so far forward that it looks like he's going to topple head-first down the hill. One of the other players is running over to L!ghtning, but I know he won't get there in time. I target the player and summon my magic. "Sana!" I say, and heal him easily.

When the light fades I put my staff back in my inventory, not willing to look at Zack yet. I fidget with the screen for longer than necessary, and finally turn to him when I run out of ways to stall. He's looking at me with wide eyes and a gaping mouth and standing perfectly still.

"It's you," he whispers. He sounds awed, and when I release a heavy breath I didn't realize I was holding; I realize that I was expecting him to be angry. I nod in response and his face slowly breaks into a wide grin. "Oh my god!" He practically yells the words before lightly punching me on the arm. "No wonder you didn't believe!" He's cackling like a maniac now, as if I've let told him something hilarious.

When he finally calms down his eyes start to dart around, and I know he's pulled up a menu. I quickly say, "You can't tell anyone." And he stops what he was doing to look at me.

“Oh god no!” he says. “That would ruin the fun.” He’s doing something on a menu again and after a moment he holds out his hands and an item bag materializes in his palms. “Here,” he says, beckoning me over with a jerk of his head. “This is for you.”

I take the item and a message window pops up when I pick it up. It reads, “Thank you for thinking I was worth saving ~~godless~~ goddess Aida.” I can’t help the chuckle that escapes but I shake my head and try to hand it back, “No, no, I’m not taking your stuff.”

Zack shoves his hands under his armpits and says, “I *want* you to take it, now more than ever.”

I try to hand it back a few more times and finally grumble, “Fine,” before opening the bag. Inside are a dozen Beast Roses.

Knowledge in the wrong hands is a dangerous tool. Those who are poorly equipped to handle information would be better off simply being denied access to the material. The benevolent vision of the United Council is a world where citizens are given free access to the data that will cultivate a perfect understanding of their specific role.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2025

## Chapter Fifteen

After school on Thursday, Aida found herself riding the bus again. She had her earbuds in and was resolutely avoiding eye contact with any of the other passengers. There were a few girls she had class with just a few seats away, but they were caught up in their own whispered

conversation, which was fine. She was texting Emma about meeting up in Topia over the weekend, hoping her friend would be free tomorrow.

She'd recently found herself looking forward to playing Topia even more than when she was playing with Camryn and Malorie. Teaming up with Zack was fun because he didn't mind doing quests to help her out. She'd gotten through more of her quests in two days of playing, than she'd *ever* gotten through with the others. Zach had actually leveled up twice on Tuesday, just from completing some of her own quests. If they played all weekend, he'd probably level up enough that they could try for the last craft item she needed for that staff.

When the bus pulled up in front of the library she let the other group pass her to get off before standing up. She slung her backpack on a shoulder and kept her head down while walking past the other passengers. She started up the library steps, keeping a fair bit of distance from her classmates.

The other girls were all in her Pre-Peace History class, and probably had the same idea when Mrs. Sanchez assigned the essay during last period. They were supposed to write a ten-page essay on the dangers of a job that women were able to have before the peace. You could choose whatever job you wanted, but being able to get ten pages out of *anything* was going to be difficult.

She was hoping that she could just go to the pre-break section of the library and figure out what jobs were mentioned in most of the books, then kind of stretch it into ten pages. Mrs. Sanchez didn't tend to read in-depth anyway. As long as your first and last pages were halfway decent, and you didn't plagiarize, you passed.

Aida reached the top of the stairs and followed her classmates on the small sidewalk that wrapped around to the back of the building. The main entrance to the library was only for guys at

this time of day and required you to scan your library card to get in. This was the only branch open for women all day, but after 12 o'clock there were restrictions.

The main entrance was all glass, with sliding doors that swooshed open to welcome you in. The women's entrance behind the building was a basic, green door, with chipped paint and a brass knob, like you would see on a room of those cheap hotels that still used keys. Luckily, this door unlocked with your library card.

She hung back on the sidewalk and waited for her classmates to scan their cards and go through the door one at a time, which was the library's rule. Once they were inside she tapped her own card to the chip reader and waited for the click of the door's lock. She made a beeline for the computers, but when she rounded the corner she saw that her classmates had taken both of them.

She groaned and headed to the book stacks to browse instead. If she waited until the weekend she could just go to the main section of the library which had plenty of computers, but she had come this far and didn't want it to be for nothing. So, she started to browse. She began walking aimlessly up and down the rows of books, stopping on occasion to scan titles.

She'd heard that you should never judge a book by its cover, but she liked judging books by their titles. She'd found one of her favorite books of all time that way, browsing a display of fairy folklore. *Goblinproofing One's Chickencoop* had been so hilariously entertaining that her own copy now had a featured spot on the bookshelf in her room. She didn't think she'd find anything that wonderful today, but it was still a good start.

After a bit of wondering the titles started to change from things like *Understanding Alcott: Little Women and Our Era* over to *The Geography of the West*. She walked a little

further, looking more intently at the shelves and feeling like she was getting close. Sure enough, just a bit further down titles started to pop out at her as promising sources.

She pulled a few off the shelves one at a time and flipped through them if they seemed promising. The first few pages of *From Spinster to Seamstress* made it clear that book wouldn't work out. Similarly, *Life and Times of a Career Woman* focused on jobs that women held *now* as opposed to during The Break. Frustrated, she shelved it and walked a bit further.

The next book she found was *From Physics to Biology: Women in the Sciences*. Intrigued, she pulled it down and started to read the jacket. "Lise Meitner and Rosalind Franklin have more in common than their scientific backgrounds. Neither the physicist (Meitner) nor the chemist (Franklin) were ever able to marry. *From Physics to Biology* traces these and other women's stories of plight through a time when women were expected to behave as men, and culminates with The United States Biological Studies which established the 50 approved careers for women."

She slammed the book shut and shoved it back on the shelf. She didn't need the reminder that her favorite subject held virtually no options. She could study nutrition sciences, and maybe become a nutritionist's assistant or a dietician's aid, but that was about it. Those options weren't even a little bit appealing, but she hadn't figured out an alternative. She did still have a bit of time.

She crouched down to get a better look at the bottom shelves, and hit the jackpot. The bottom two rows were *filled* with books about women in the military before The Break. She spent a while flipping through them, and by the time she left the library she was feeling a bit better about the project. Maybe she couldn't be a scientist, but she wasn't in any danger of

having to go to war. She couldn't even imagine a time where women joined the military, it was a completely foreign idea.

Her dad had served once, before she had been born. Her mom had traveled with him after they were married, living in different places around The United before his tour was over and he went into politics.

On the bus ride home, she tried to picture a world where her *mom* was military, and her dad stayed at home to take care of her. She started to laugh at the image of her mom in a military uniform, and had to quickly cover her mouth. She ducked her head to avoid the eyes of other passengers but continued to laugh. Pre-Break society had been *strange*.

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Aida made her way up to her room after dinner with her parents. Sadie was hot on her heels, taking the stairs as fast as her short legs would let her. The little dog made a beeline for the bed, making herself right at home by claiming the pillow. Aida shook her head at the dog and scratched her behind the ear. She glanced at the small stack of library books on her desk, and briefly felt guilty for not doing any homework before dinner, but it would still be there Saturday.

She changed into her pajamas and climbed into bed, moving Sadie down to the end. The dog immediately shuffled her way back up the bed and laid her head down on Aida's stomach, apparently pleased with her new pillow. Aida couldn't help but smile and started to stroke the dog's head while scrolling through Topia forums on her phone, their little bedtime ritual.

That image with the cross had started showing up even more over the past few days, and other people had started to take note. There were theories of course, with the most common being that it was simply some user's latest attempt to get the goddess's blessing. Despite the chatter, no one seemed to own up to doing it. Maybe she should talk to Emma about it.



She checked her messages again, hoping she'd missed one from her friend. She hadn't. She closed her eyes and sighed. Emma had been down at lunch, apparently the thing with her group of friends was getting worse. They'd gone from ignoring her to starting rumors about her, and her classmates seemed to believe everything the other girls were saying.

The thing was, she didn't know how to help Emma. She wasn't exactly a role model for friendships, and Emma hadn't exactly *asked* for help, so she didn't want to butt in. She'd tried distracting Emma with Topia plans, hoping that if they could play over the weekend it might make Emma feel better. She'd seemed like she wanted to, but then when they were texting times to meet up Emma was vague.

A yawn escaped suddenly, so she closed her apps and put her phone on its charging disk. She pulled the covers up over her shoulders and rolled onto her side, making sure to keep a free hand out to touch Sadie. Sadie gave her hand a few licks before snuggling into her side and letting out a huff of air. Within minutes, Aida was asleep.

A wet sensation on her cheek woke her up what felt like minutes later. She groggily opened her eyes enough to see Sadie's wet tongue head straight for her eyes. She pushed the small dog to the side and tried to cover her face with her pillow. Sadie began to whine and dig the covers, then finally shoved her head under the pillow and stuck her wet nose into Aida's ear. Aida yelped and sat straight up, fully awake. She rubbed at her ear with the heel of her hand and glared at the dog, who had the *nerve* to look unfazed.

Sadie hopped off the bed, spun in a circle, and sat in the middle of the floor. Aida reluctantly heaved the covers aside and got up. She walked over to the bedroom door and opened it, then waited for Sadie to leave. The dog didn't move, but she started to whine. "I don't know what you want from me," Aida said.

A blinking light on the nightstand caught her attention and after a minute, she realized it was her phone. She closed the door again and grabbed the phone, expecting to finally see a text from Emma. Instead, she saw that she had missed a call. She had missed a *lot* of calls, all from Emma.

The last one was only a few minutes old, so she quickly hit the redial button. She raised the phone to her ear with a shaking arm, and realized that she was shivering all over, as if she were cold. She sat on the edge of her bed and Sadie hopped up next to her. Aida started to stroke the dog's soft fur, her heart pounding faster with each unanswered ring.

Just when she thought the phone would go to voicemail, there was a click on the other end. "Emma?" she said. "Are you there?" A loud sob broke through the phone and Aida jumped up from the bed. "Where are you?" She asked. She frantically searched her messy floor for a pair of shoes, grabbing a jacket as looked.

There was another sob, a bit quieter than the first, and Emma's voice broke when she said, "I'm at home."

Aida nodded even though the other girl couldn't see her. "Good, stay there, I'm on my way." She shoved her feet in a pair of rain boots, not even caring that the insides were still a bit damp. She opened the door and glanced at her parent's bedroom. Their light was off, but she'd still have to be quiet.

She ducked into the hall and whispered. "Are you hurt?"

Emma was still crying, but she seemed to be breathing easier. "No," she said.

Aida crept down the stairs, thankful for the carpet that was cushioning her steps. "Are you in danger? Should I call 911?"

“No! You ca-” Emma’s voice came through the phone so strong that Aida clasped the phone to her chest, as if she could muffle the sound. She stared up the stairs, half expecting her mom to appear.

When nothing happened, she brought the phone to her ear again. “Okay, I won’t call anyone.” She grabbed her keys from their peg and headed to the back door. “Will you be alright until I get there?” She eased the door open just enough to slip out, then shut it softly behind her.

“Yeah.”

She grabbed her bike by the handlebars and started to wheel it through the grass. “I have to hang up, but I’m coming, okay?”

Emma’s voice was so small that Aida could barely hear her say, “Promise?”

Aida reached the sidewalk and cast a glance back at her house, all the lights were still off. “I promise, open your window for me okay?”

There was a shuffling sound on the other end, like she was moving somewhere. “Okay.”

Emma sounded like she believed her, and Aida would take it. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.” She hung up the phone and shoved it into her jacket pocket before jumping on her bike and peddling into the night.

The mental health of young adults who identify as, "Transgender" is notably worse than those who do not. "Transgender" youth have a higher suicide rate, are more likely to self-harm, and have high levels of depression. Somehow, secular doctors look at these statistics and conclude that the best course of action is to allow young adults to "transition." This refusal to treat the main illness is not only harmful, but can be deadly in the end.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2017

## Chapter Sixteen

Aida's legs were aching by the time Emma's house came into view. She was more out of practice than she thought. She hopped off her bike when she reached the driveway, then wheeled it through the grass to the back of the house. She leaned the bike against the large tree outside Emma's window before starting the climb up to her friend's room.

Emma had been right; the climb *was* easy. There were so many branches that she had her pick of pathways, and in no time she was poking her head through Emma's open window. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark room, but she was eventually able to make out a huddled figure near the closet.

"Emma," she whispered, trying to get her friend's attention before climbing in.

Emma lifted her head slowly and whispered her name in disbelief. It almost broke Aida's heart.

"I told you I was coming," she said. She awkwardly shuffled around on the branch, so her feet were able to go through the window first. She slid herself into the room slowly, wincing when the windowsill dug into her spine.

Emma didn't move from her spot on the floor, so Aida went to her. She kneeled down beside her friend and said, "What's going on?"

Emma refused to meet her eyes, focusing on a spot near her foot instead. Aida followed her friend's gaze and took a deep breath when she saw a trickle of blood making its way down her friend's left ankle.

She slowly reached her hand out to Emma's pajama pant leg, checking her friend's reaction as she did. When Emma didn't pull away, she gently rolled the pant leg up, and inhaled sharply when she saw the mess of blood on her friend's leg.

"Did you do this?" she said. She couldn't look away from the cuts. There were just so many.

When Emma finally said, "Yes," it was so soft that she almost missed it.

"We have to clean this up," Aida said. "Can you stand?"

Emma nodded and Aida helped her friend up, catching the way she winced when her pant leg fell back down, brushing over the open wounds.

They made their way to Emma's bathroom, and Aida said a silent prayer of thanks that it was attached. This would be more than a little awkward to explain to her dad if he caught them. She had Emma sit on the edge of tub and started to run warm water to fill the bottom.

She searched for a washcloth, and found one near the sink. She was relieved to see that it was black and would hide the blood, until another thought intruded. Had Emma chosen black towels for that very reason?

She sat beside Emma on the edge of the tub and gently rolled her friend's pant leg up to her knee. The cuts looked even worse in the bathroom light. She moved Emma's leg into the tub and wet the washcloth before rubbing a bar of soap on it.

"This might sting," she said before pressing the cloth to Emma's cuts. Emma inhaled a little deeper through her nose, but she didn't move away.

After most of the blood was washed away Emma finally spoke. "I'm sorry," she said.

Aida didn't say anything, she just hummed softly, hoping that it would encourage Emma to keep talking.

"I didn't want you to find out like this," she said. "I just do it sometimes. When I can't take it anymore."

"Take what?" Aida said.

Emma seemed to think for a moment. "Everything," she said. "When I get stressed about school, or my friends, or-" She paused for a moment, like the words had gotten stuck in her throat. "Or who I am."

Aida nodded, hoping Emma wouldn't ask if she understood. She finally said, "Why did you call me?"

The silence stretched on as Aida cleaned her friend's leg. When the blood was mostly gone, and the cuts had stopped bleeding freely, she looked up at her friend again. Emma was crying. Tears were running freely down her face, but Emma was almost completely silent, as if she wasn't even aware she was crying.

She finally said, "I wanted to say goodbye."

Aida could feel herself go cold, as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water into her veins. "Where were you going?" she said, even though she was fairly sure she knew the answer.

"Away," Emma said with a shrug. Then she slumped forward and wrapped her arms around herself. "But I wasn't brave enough."

Aida dropped the cloth into the water and wrapped her arms around Emma.

“I tried to; I really did.” Emma was crying freely now, leaning into Aida’s chest, and shaking as she spoke. “But when I went to cut there, on my wrist, I chickened out. I just couldn’t.”

Heavy sobs wracked Emma’s body and she buried her face in Aida’s shirt. Aida gently rubbed her friend’s back and made little shushing sounds, trying to tell her friend that everything was going to be okay.

When Emma seemed to run out of tears she lifted her head and wiped furiously at her eyes. “Thanks,” she said.

She still couldn’t find the words she wanted, so Aida just said, “Of course.” She rubbed Emma’s back a few more times before dropping her hand. “Do you have bandages?”

Emma nodded. “Under the sink,” she said.

When Aida checked the cabinet she found antiseptic spray, bundles of gauze, medical tape, and a few worn bandages. She grabbed all of it and went back to Emma. Her friend had turned on the tub, so her feet were out of the water, and pulled the plug to let it drain. The red-tinted water was slowly circling the drain, erasing all traces of what Emma had done.

Aida grabbed one the bath towels on Emma’s rack, black again, and tried to be gentle while drying her friend’s leg. When she was satisfied she shook the can of antiseptic, uncapped it, and sprayed a generous amount to Emma’s leg.

Emma’s leg shook a bit, and when Aida looked up at her she just said, “Cold.”

Aida smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way, before unwrapping the bundles of gauze. She pressed the squares to her friend’s leg until all of the cuts were covered. Then she gently wrapped a bandage around the gauze to keep it in place. “Tell me if it’s too tight,” she said.

When she finished she tore off a few pieces of the tape and secured the bandage, then leaned back on her heels to inspect her work. When she was satisfied, she put the leftover supplies away and turned back to Emma. Her friend had tugged her pant leg down, but Aida could see the red stains on the side of her pajama pants.

“Do you want to change?” she said.

Emma nodded before leaving the bathroom. Aida waited until Emma reappeared at the door, new pajamas in hand before awkwardly shuffling around to switch places with her friend.

“I’ll be right out,” Emma said. She closed the bathroom door, leaving Aida alone in the darkened bedroom.

Finally, alone, Aida let herself cry. She had no idea things were this bad. She should have *known*; she should have *done* something before it came to this. She ran her fingers over the VR gear on Emma’s desk, remembering how happy Zach had seemed on Tuesday. She’d sort of thought of Emma as having a double life before, with Zach, but now she knew that Emma had more than one dark secret. How many lives did she have? Emma at school, Emma at home, Zach, and who knows who else?

She heard the click of the bathroom doorknob and hurriedly wiped at her eyes. She didn’t want Emma to feel guilty. She turned and tried to smile at her friend, but her mouth wouldn’t cooperate. Luckily, Emma was looking down at her feet and missed it.

“Thanks,” Emma said. She walked toward the closet and tossed the bundle of pajamas she was carrying into the hamper. With her arms at her sides, Emma opened and closed her hands, like she was trying to make sure they were still working.

Aida made her way over and stopped just behind her friend. “Do you want to talk about it?”



Emma shook her head, then tilted it to the side and wrapped her arms around herself. “Maybe,” she said. She walked over to the bed and sat on the floor, leaning her back against the cushion and drawing her knees up to her chest. Aida followed suit and mirrored the position next to her friend. Emma scooted closer, until their shoulders were brushing and seemed to relax at the contact.

When Emma didn’t say anything Aida said, “Was tonight because of your friends?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders a bit and said, “Sort of, yeah.” She sighed and rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand, like she was trying to get rid of a headache. “They started telling people I’m deviant.”

Aida inhaled sharply. Rumors like that circulated every school. It was a pretty common way to turn someone into an outcast, even if there wasn’t any truth to it. Of course, if anyone *actually* investigated Emma, there could be trouble.

Before she could say anything Emma answered her question. “No one’s taking it seriously,” she said. “They think it’s just gossip. My dad doesn’t even know.”

Aida breathed a sigh of relief, but then thought about it more. “Wait,” she said. “Then what happened tonight?”

Emma started to twist her fingers together, wrapping them around each other and squeezing them tight. “Even if no one really believes it, it’s still true,” she said. “I am deviant.”

Aida paused for a moment. “But you don’t think you’re a guy,” she said.

“No,” Emma let the ‘o’ drag out in that way that said, “Well I yes I said that but...”

Emma finally looked at her out of the side of her eye, but she would take it. Aida nodded, hoping her friend would continue.

Emma let the silence drag before she said, “I don’t think I’m a girl either. I don’t feel like either one.”

“Then what do you feel like?” Aida said.

Emma seemed to consider the question for a moment. “Like, something in between,” she said. “Maybe a little of both? But neither of them feel right.” Emma glanced over and said, “There used to be a name for it, but The United got rid of it.”

“What was it called?” Aida said.

Emma finally looked her in the eye. “Non-binary,” she said. “It was sort of a third gender, or it was the absence of gender. It depends on the book you read.”

Aida shook her head, “Where did you get a book like that?”

Emma gave a half smile and said, “My dad has a bunch of books from before The Break in his office, and I know the code to get in.”

“Can I read it sometime?” Aida said. The question was out before she could even think it through. Emma’s wide eyes seemed to say that she was just as surprised by the question. “It might help me get it; you know?” She wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince at this point. Part of her *did* think that it might help, and part of her was morbidly curious about a book like that. What kinds of things did the Pre-Break United States put into their books? She’d only ever read ones that were “appropriate” for women. A book like that definitely wasn’t. She shivered at the thought.

Emma was finally smiling though, a tentative thing, like she couldn’t quite believe what she’d heard. “You really want to?” she said.

Aida nodded and said, "I do. I don't get it right now, but I want to." That part was true. This was something that had almost taken her friend away, she *needed* to understand it. She just wanted to help Emma, but she wasn't quite sure what that meant anymore.

Studies funded by the United Council show that children struggling with their identity greatly benefit from virtual reality games where they are able to play avatars of their own gender. It is possible that this recovery process would be even more successful if therapists had control over aspects of these games, including tailoring gender-appropriate story lines.

Document recovered from the Pre-Break archives; Published 2030

## Chapter Seventeen

Aida peddled her bike as fast as she could make her legs move. Her mom would be waking up soon, and she still had to sneak back up the stairs and into her room. Her house came into view around the corner and she used a hidden burst of speed to jump from the road to the sidewalk, almost safe.

In her front yard she hopped off the bike and wheeled it as silently as possible to the back porch. When she had the bike back where it belonged she slipped into the house through the back door and made sure to lock it behind her. She slipped out of her rainboots and pinched the leg holes between her fingers to carry them up the stairs.

She was just shutting her door when she heard her parent's room door open. She pressed the door shut and dove into her bed, pulling the covers up to her chin and squeezing her eyes shut. Sadie let out a huff of annoyance at being displaced, but Aida didn't dare move.

A few moments later she could hear her door open quietly. She willed her breathing to slow and her heart to stop pounding. Sadie jumped off the bed, using Aida as a springboard to the floor. Aida let out a low groan and pulled the covers over her head, trying to really sell it.

"Come on girl," her mom whispered.

The door shut again and after what felt like ages Aida moved the covers down. She quickly tugged her jacket off and tossed it across the room to where she'd dropped the rainboots.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and texted Emma that she'd made it home in time before putting the phone back on its charging disk. She had about an hour before she'd have to get ready for school, and she intended to sleep every second she could.

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It was too soon when her phone alarm went off, screaming at her from the nightstand. She smacked the phone in a half-hearted attempt to make it stop, and wound up sending it tumbling to the floor instead. She groaned and rolled out of the bed, onto the floor, and grabbed her phone in one movement. She swiped an angry thumb across the screen, telling it to: Shut. Up.

She rubbed the heels of her hands into her closed eyes while hunching forward, as if she could recapture the dream she'd been having. She thought Emma might have been in it, but she couldn't be sure now. She remembered the feeling though, that she'd been so happy, so content with the world. When she pulled her hands away the dim light from the window seemed to send the last of the good feelings running.

A knock at her door sent a spike of anger through her, she *hated* when her mom did that. The quick rapping of knuckles stopped, and she heard her mom say, "Aida? Are you up?"

She bit back a sarcastic retort and just said, "Yeah."

"Are you dressed?"

She let her head fall back on her mattress and closed her eyes. Maybe she could fool herself into thinking this was all a horrible dream. "Getting there," she said.

Her mom seemed satisfied with this and she could hear her mom's footsteps leading away from the door. Ten seconds, that was it, then she would get up. She slowly counted in her

head from one, steadily building up. When she hit ‘ten’ she opened her eyes and flung herself toward her closet.

A few minutes later she was running out the front door, backpack slung over her shoulders and hair flying in a ponytail behind her. She didn’t have time to deal with it today. She could see the bus stop at the corner of the road where a few of her classmates were milling about. She jogged to the corner and managed to get there just as the bus pulled up. Climbing aboard, she couldn’t help but wonder if she would see Emma at school. When she’d left her friend’s house Emma had told her she’d be there, but would Emma have changed her mind? She wouldn’t blame her, but she crossed her fingers that she’d see her friend at lunch anyway.

Classes passed in a blur, and before she knew what was happening she was on her way to English. She slid into her new seat, ignoring her ex-best friends across the room. She pulled her books out of her bag, trying to distract herself from the chatter of her classmates. She dropped her pencil pouch and leaned down to grab it. When she straightened back up she jumped in surprise, Camryn and Malorie had snuck up on her.

“Hey Aida,” Camryn said. Her voice was practically a purr, it did that when she was being fake. Camryn seemed to think that it made her sound trustworthy, but Aida thought she just sounded stupid.

Aida didn’t even bother to hide her eye roll before she said, “What do you want?”

“Aida,” Malorie said. “Don’t be like that.”

She’d heard the expression, “making your blood boil” before, but she’d never really understood it. This was the first time that it made perfect sense. Malorie and Camryn had gone out of their way to ignore her and make her as isolated as possible, and now they were offended by *her* manners? That was rich.

“What. Do. You. Want?”

Camryn still had that simpering tone when she said, “We just wanted to know if we’d see you in the tournament.” She was grinning like she already knew the answer, and Aida wanted nothing more than to wipe that stupid smile off her face.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said. “If you last long enough.”

Camryn visibly reeled backwards, and Aida couldn’t help but smirk a little. It was just so satisfying.

“You’re entering?” Malorie said.

She looked Malorie straight in the eye and said, “Yeah, I am.”

Camryn bounced a little on her toes and said, “Uh, okay. Cool.”

They scurried back to their table and Aida allowed herself to have a small moment of triumph before the worry started. How was she going to enter? She fought the urge to put her head down on the desk and groan, but only because she didn’t want *them* to get any satisfaction from it.

She ducked her head behind the table and busied herself by pulling out her binder and pens. *Pride and Prejudice* was over, but Mr. Haber hadn’t said what their next unit would be on yet. Whatever it was, hopefully it would be better than Austen. It wasn’t that she’d disliked the book per say, it was just that she couldn’t really relate to it. Even after Mr. Haber’s speech, Elizabeth Bennett wasn’t a character she really saw herself in. Plus, the language had been a bit much.

After taking roll, Mr. Haber rubbed his hands together and gave the class a wide smile. “Brothers, Europe, and magic. What do these three things have in common?” When no one answered, he turned his back on the class and picked up a black marker on the sill of the

whiteboard. He wrote the three words in capital letters. BROTHERS, EUROPE, MAGIC, and turned around again. He spread his hands and looked around the class. “Anyone? Any guesses?”

When silence continued to reign in the classroom he tapped a finger to the first word. “Do the Grimm brothers ring any bells?”

A collective, “Ohhhh,” rose in the room. Aida looked down at her desk, not willing to meet Mr. Haber’s eyes. She should have gotten that.

“But we’re not only going to study Grimm fairy tales,” Mr. Haber said. “We’ll be looking at fairy tales from all of Europe.” He picked up a bucket and shook around what was inside.

“You’re each going to come up here and draw a piece of paper with your first assigned fairy tale. You’ll have to read it on your own and write a paper about what can be learned from the story.”



While competition should be encouraged in boys and young men, the competitive nature of their female counterparts must be closely monitored. It is suitable for young girls to have a drive to fulfill their own potential, but it should be made clear that teamwork and the ability to follow strong leaders are more valuable traits for the softer sex.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2028

## Chapter Eighteen

Aida made her way to the library after English class. She'd started meeting Emma there after that day at the vending machines, and now it was something she looked forward to. Lately, she found herself wishing that she had been born a year earlier, that she'd met Emma years ago and had classes with her. As it was, Emma would go to college next year, and she'd be left behind. If she was lucky, she'd still get to play Topia with Zack, but it wouldn't be the same.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor and tapped her student ID to the card reader at the door. The only librarian who worked in the girl's library was an elderly woman, who looked like she'd been eighty for the past hundred years. When Aida passed the woman's desk she kept her eyes down, but couldn't miss the woman's glare. They'd only been loud the one time, and it was just them laughing a little louder than a whisper. But the woman was apparently going for a record on holding a grudge.

She sat at their table in the corner and dropped her bookbag at her feet before resting her head on the table. She was just so tired after this morning. Maybe she could sleep until Emma made it.

Her eyes were still closed when she heard heavy footsteps approaching. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath, willing the person to keep walking. When she heard the chair across from her being pulled out she smiled to herself and lifted her head.

Sure enough, Emma was sitting down across from her, but it was a brunette Emma. Her wavy blond hair had been flat ironed straight, trimmed, and dyed dark brown. She looked good, but the shock still made Aida's jaw drop. She shook her head a little and gave Emma a smile. "I like it," she said.

"Yeah?" Emma said. When she nodded back Emma said, "I thought a change might be nice."

"How much did you cut off?" Aida said.

Emma's lips flattened into a line and she leaned forward across the table to whisper her answer. "Sixteen inches," she said.

Aida sat back and looked at her friend. Emma had longer hair before, she knew that. But there was no way she'd cut sixteen inches off. Unless, "Is that a wig?" she said.

The librarian passed by at that moment, clearing her throat and looking pointedly at both of them. Aida ducked her head and Emma leaned across the table, dropping her voice to an even lower whisper. "Yeah, but no one else knows. Not even my dad." She grinned wider and tugged on a brown strand of hair. "This was from Halloween."

Aida nodded and tried to smile, but she could tell it was unconvincing. "What if you get caught?" she said.

Emma shrugged and moved some of the hair behind her shoulders. "Then I'll just say I got gum in it or something." She made the motion of snapping her fingers then, but didn't make the noise. "Before I forget, I was thinking about the tournament."

Aida groaned and closed her eyes. "You too?" She heard her friend laugh quietly and opened one eye to glare at her. "I think the universe hates me."

Emma patted her hand on the table. “There, there,” she said. “But after your done with your conspiracy theory, can you tell me how we enter?”

Aida sat up straight at that. “You’d want to?” she said.

Emma gave her a wicked smile and said, “They won’t know what hit them.” The bell rang then, signaling the end of their lunch period. Aida gathered up her bag and walked with Emma to the History building.

Outside her classroom, Aida turned to her friend and said, “Are we playing today?”

Emma tilted her head to the side “You’re not too tired?”

“Suddenly, not so much,” Aida said.

Emma laughed and shook her head, then brushed her bangs to the side, out of her eyes. “Then sure, why not?” Emma gave a half salute before spinning on her heel and heading down the hall.

When Emma disappeared around the corner, Aida finally entered the classroom. Mrs. Sanchez was in her usual spot, sitting at her desk and tapping away on her computer. A few of her classmates were milling about around their desks, but it was still early.

She made her way to her seat, catching snippets of conversations as she walked. Camryn and Malorie were just two rows of desks away, their alphabetical seating putting them closer than she would have liked. She sat down and pulled her notebook and pencils out of her bag, preparing to take notes on whatever video Mrs. Sanchez had picked out.

A group of classmates walked in then but stopped in the doorway. Aida could feel eyes on her, so she looked up. Sure enough, the three girls in the doorway were staring straight at her. The one in the middle, Jenny, sat in front of her, but she wasn’t sure about the other two. The

group noticed her looking then and they immediately looked away, then moved to a desk near Camryn and Malorie.

Camryn leaned across the aisle and whispered something to Jenny, who immediately waved her other two friends in too. The group of five formed a little circle and kept up the whispering. Aida strained to hear what they were saying, but more and more of her classmates were coming in and keeping up their own conversations, making it impossible.

The scraping of metal disrupted her thoughts then, and she turned. The girl who sat to her left had stood again and moved her desk a good foot further away. The girl looked over pointedly before sitting back down.

Aida's eyes narrowed and she turned back to look at Camryn and Malorie again. Malorie was talking to one of the other girls, but Camryn was looking straight back at Aida with a grin on her face. Camryn turned to Jenny and said, "I wouldn't be able to sit there, I don't know how you do it."

Jenny shot a look over at Aida before saying, "It's not fair, I don't want to sit there."

Camryn nodded and said, "It's okay, it's only a matter of time until they get her."

Aida stood and made her way over to the group. She crossed her arms and said, "Get me for what?"

Jenny's eyes widened and she stepped back until she hit a desk. The other two girls she was with scurried away, but Camryn and Malorie held their ground.

Camryn gave her a simpering smile. "Oh Aida," she said. "You don't have to pretend anymore, we all know." When she didn't respond Camryn dropped her voice into a fake whisper. "That you're Deviant honey, it's so obvious."

Aida felt her fists clench but forced herself to stay silent. Heather walked into the room then and joined the group. She looked back and forth between Camryn and Malorie, then Aida, a confused look on her face.

Aida caught Heather's eye. "Careful with these two. They like to stick knives in your back when you're not looking." She turned and went back to her desk, carefully ignoring the looks from her classmates.

The bell rang and sent everyone scrambling for their seats. Mrs. Sanchez took role by desk, and it was well-known that if you weren't sitting down you got marked absent. Mrs. Sanchez lumbered up to the front of the room where she messed with the buttons on the TV.

"Make sure you take notes," she said before starting the film.

Aida opened her notebook to a half-filled page so she could look like she was paying attention. Mrs. Sanchez made her way back to her desk and started tapping on her computer again. Aida started doodling in the margin of her notebook, half-listening to the monotone narrator talk about the tragedy that was women's lives before *The Peace*.

She was struggling to draw a rose, the petals were proving tricky, when a piece of paper bounced off her forearm. She turned to see Camryn pointing at the paper wad that had landed on her desk. She reluctantly opened the paper ball and looked at the scrawled note. *The tournament's not for Deviants!*

She wrote her own note at the bottom, then wadded it back up and threw it back, aiming for Camryn's head. She ducked, and it bounced off Heather instead. She'd take it. Camryn glared before snatching the paper wad off the floor. She turned back to her drawing and ignored Camryn's reaction to her question. *Scared?*



Religion provides an important foundation for The United Council, setting forth principles and values that are important to our way of life. False idols and worship are to be adamantly discouraged, both in real life and in fictional media. Anyone found to be spreading falsehoods should be dealt with firmly and swiftly, for the good and prosperity of The United Council.

Document recovered from Pre-Break archives; Published 2022

## Chapter Nineteen

Zack and I are meeting up in Duncloch, one of the large Immortal cities in Topia. It's actually one of my favorites just because of how it looks. It's more of a fortress than a traditional city, and it's carved into the face of a mountain. It's so high up that in the real world the air would be too thin, but luckily this is Topia.

The only way to get to Duncloch is on a feral goat, which you of course have to capture, temporarily tame, and then ride to the top of the mountain. You can't keep the goat, which is too bad because it would make traveling around Topia a lot easier. They're as big as a horse in real life, and they're *fast* but apparently only the male avatars are skilled enough to tame a goat for good. For the rest of us as soon as you try to leave the mountain the goat bucks like a madman until you're thrown.

I dismount the goat at the entrance of Duncloch, slipping off the left side easily. I have to ride sideways because of my robes, which is kind of a pain, but I'm pretty used to it. I pat the goat on the head and feed him an apple, which he crunches down noisily. He lets out a bleat and nuzzles my shoulder before turning and trotting back down the mountain, ignoring the path we just used in favor of his goat instincts.

Malorie never really got why I would feed animals after riding them, the goats here or the water horses on map four, I even feed the mice near Cinder Castle after they're transformed back. Malorie would tsk her tongue at me, saying that it's a waste because the animals still don't remember you the next time you need their help, and you have to start all over anyway. But I like rewarding them like this, it's like giving Sadie treats when she sits and stays. Besides, they're cute!

I duck through the large wooden gates and immediately head to the right. I squeeze into a corner between a house and a tree and swipe up for my messages. I send a quick message to Zack, letting him know where I am, and settle in to people watch.

It's not long before I hear a little chime, and I pull up my messages.

**ZackAttack20:** *almost to you!!*

I don't even want to know how he's typing while riding a goat, I could never do that.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a stream of green, and I can't help but look up. A line of female players are walking down the main street, coming in through the open gate single file. They're a mixture of druids and archers, some immortal others mortal. There doesn't seem to be a common theme aside from what they're wearing. The druids have long tunics and flowing fur-lined cloaks, while the archers are wearing short, loose tunics and capelets. That's normal. What's *not* normal is that every single piece of clothing is green and gold.

In Topia you can customize the color of your clothes, with almost infinite possibilities. So why in the world have all these players, about ten it looks like, picked the exact same shades of green and gold? They pass by slowly, apparently not in a hurry but also not talking to anyone as they walk. They wind down the road and disappear around a corner, drawing looks as they go. I'm so distracted by them that I miss Zack coming in through the gate.



“What’s up with them?” He says.

I shake my head slowly, still unsure of what we’ve just seen. “Ready?” I say. He nods and we head to the arena, a few levels up in Duncloch. It’s used for player vs player battles and tournaments, and its where we need to go to sign up for the one next month. I did some more research online, and it looks like most people entering have maxed out their levels. I’ve made a lot of progress with Zack, but if we’re going to have a chance we need to hit 45 soon.

We walk into the arena lobby and head for the Non-Player Character who runs it. He takes one look at us and says, “You’re not serious are you?”

I frown, but before I can say anything Zack says, “Oh yes, do you have the scroll?”

The NPC rolls his eyes and gives a long-suffering sigh, but he reaches under the counter and pulls out a lengthy scroll and a quill. Zack plucks the quill out of his hand and offers it to me. I take it and sign my name on the scroll, under Player One then hand it back to Zack so he can do the same. He writes his name next to mine under Player Two. We watch as our names glow gold, then pixelate away, leaving the scroll blank once more.

A chime sounds in my ear and I pull up my notification screen. The message reads, *You have just signed up for the Topia PVP tournament on April 26<sup>th</sup> with your teammate ZackAttack20. You will receive more information in the coming weeks regarding the elimination rounds.* I glance over to Zack and see that he’s reading a message too, before closing out my screen. The NPC puts the scroll and quill back under the counter and says, “Good luck,” to dismiss us.

We head back out and Zack pulls up one of his screens, stares at it for a moment, then spins it around for me to see. It takes me a minute to figure out what I’m looking at, but then I

realize it's the public Topia chat log. I hardly ever look at it since it's mostly used to advertise if you're selling something. But right now, all anyone is talking about is a sermon.

I look back to Zack who says, "Want to check it out?"

I debate for a moment, religion is a tricky issue in Topia, it's tricky everywhere actually. There's no law that you *have* to be a Christian in The United, but there is a law that it's the only allowed religion. You can either practice Christianity, or you don't practice anything. I've heard that in the past it was almost a requirement for government officials to be Christians, but people like my dad are trying to change that. Eventually I say, "As long as we're careful."

We head to the town center, where the sermon is apparently happening. It's obvious we're in the right place because there's a large crowd already there. There's a garden in the center, with stones lining the perimeter of the flowerbeds, and a male avatar is standing on the ledge to look out over the crowd. He's dressed in a flowing white tunic with green trim and a large gold cross hangs around his neck. The group of female avatars from earlier are standing around him, clasping their hands together in front of their chests like they're praying.

"Come! Come closer!" the male avatar is saying to the crowd. "Come and receive the good news of our Goddess!" He holds his hands up over his head, and a hush falls over the crowd. Zack and I hang back behind the crowd, but we still have a clear view of the speaker and his followers. "I am Father Patrick," he says. "And I bring you a message from The Goddess. We are told, 'hate what is evil; cling to what is good.' In this world, The Goddess *is* good!"

I glance over to Zack, trying to gauge his reaction to all this. He's gawking, that's the only word I can think to describe him. His mouth is actually open, like he's forgotten how to close it, and his eyes are open wide, as if someone snuck up and surprised him from behind. He

must feel me watching him after a minute because he slowly turns to look at me and raises an eyebrow, as if to say, “Are you hearing this?”

I lean over and whisper in his ear, “This could be bad.”

He nods. “We should get out of here,” he says.

We back away from the crowd, Father Patrick still going strong about how The Goddess’s blessing is open to all who come to her with an open mind and a pure soul. We reach the edge of the town square and I lead Zack down a side street at random, not caring where it leads as long as we get away from the sermon. It won’t be long before game moderators hear about what’s going on, and I don’t need my account getting suspended while I’m trying to train for the tournament.

We wind up in a deserted, narrow alleyway, where the buildings block out most of the overhead sun and cast dark shadows instead. “Well, that was fun,” I say.

Zack laughs and shakes his head. “So, you’re probably going to be getting a lot more gifts now,” he says.

I groan at first, but then I say, “Maybe I can spread a rumor that the goddess wants a ruby core.” I’m only halfway joking.

Zack snaps his fingers and says, “Oh! I did some digging on that, we can get it from a quest!”

I clap my hands together before I can stop myself, it’s a habit from when I was younger. My mom hates it, she says it makes me look like a seal. “When can we do it?” I say.

Zack tilts his head and rubs his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Well,” he says. “I’m not doing anything now so. . .” He trails off and smiles at me. “Want to?”

I know from my own research that what I'm looking for right now isn't actually a Ruby Core, it's a Large Pure Ruby. Once I have that I'll have to find a jewel crafter that can turn it *into* a Ruby Core. Of course, I wish I'd known this two months ago when I started scouring the internet trying to find the drop for a Ruby Core, but whatever.

Zack leads the way to The Village arch, then up a hill to a little house. From there we take a dirt path for what seems like miles, winding through the woods before a clearing comes into view with a well in the middle. Zack stops at the edge of the trees and gestures to the clearing. "It's supposed to spawn here but I'm not sure how we trigger it."

We take a moment to change equipment, making sure we're wearing our strongest armor and Zack switches out his daggers for a pair of dual swords that he got last week. We circle the field, checking to see if there are any traps set. When nothing happens, we make are way to the well.

A lot of the higher-level monsters in Topia only spawn under certain conditions. Sometimes it's something as simple as the time of day or number of people in your party, but other times there's a small puzzle to solve. Apparently there wasn't a whole lot of information about this one online, but that's not exactly a surprise. When it comes to rare items like this, the people who are able to solve the puzzle like to keep it a secret. That way they can farm the item as much as possible and sell it off to players who haven't been able to figure it out themselves.

The first thought I have is to make a wish. I mean, it's a fairy tale right? I grab a coin from my inventory and say, "I wish for a ruby." I toss the coin into the well and after a few seconds there's a faint splash. I grip my staff and brace for something to happen, but nothing does.

Zack starts messing with the handle on the side of the well's pully system, lowering the bucket, then raising it when it's full of water. He peers into the bucket when it reaches the top again. "Do you think we have to drink it?"

I look into the bucket and scrunch my nose when I see the murky water. It hardly looks refreshing. "I guess we could try."

Zack sticks his tongue out. "I was worried you'd say that." He unhooks the bucket and sets it on the side of the well, splashing a bit as he does. I watch him shake his arms out and flex his hands, like he's trying to psych himself up for this, and can't help but smile. He leans down, then tips the bucket to his lips and drinks. He pulls away quickly, spluttering and coughing while wiping at his tongue.

I laugh and say, "That good huh?"

He glares at me and holds out the bucket. "Your turn."

I lean my staff against the well and use both hands to take the bucket. I take a deep breath and hold it while gulping down a mouthful of the water. It's so gritty I feel like it's scraping my throat as it goes down. I start to cough too and Zack thumps me on the back, which actually seems to make it worse.

There's a loud crack behind us and I grab my staff, spinning around to see what's happened. A giant, slime-oozing toad the size of a house is lumbering toward us. Before I can register what's happening its tongue shoots out and wraps itself around Zack's boot. The toad pulls its tongue back and tugs Zack's leg, sending him on his back.

I dart forward and smack the tongue with my staff, hoping that it's enough to make the toad let go. The toad lets out a guttural cry that sounds almost like someone gurgling water, but its tongue loosens enough for Zack to pull his leg free. I pull him up and immediately start

casting every defensive spell I can over him along with powering up his attack and speed. The toad is taking huge steps toward us, lifting its giant, webbed feet above our heads before crashing them back down to the earth.

I retreat, one hit from those feet and I'll probably be dead, even in my best armor. Zack goes the opposite way, darting between the toads front legs and drawing his swords. He spins and slices its front, left leg clean through and sends the toad crashing to the earth. A chunk of its health bar disappears, and I let out a cheer.

I switch from booster spells to attacking the toad's stats, lowering its defenses as much as I can. I cast a spell to poison it and yell in frustration when it has no effect. "It's poisonous!" I yell to Zack, hoping he can hear me over the toad's cries.

"How?" he yells back.

I'm looking all over the toad, but I can't see where the poison is. Most of the time its snakes and bugs, things with venom that are poisonous. My mind is racing, and I circle around the well while casting a spell that I *hope* will give the toad a burn. It works, and the toad's HP starts to disappear a fraction at a time.

The toad rights itself on its remaining three legs and looks down, searching for Zack. It turns its body to the left and its glistening, warty hide makes something click into place. "The ooze!" I say. "The poison's on its skin!"

"Got it!" Zack yells, darting out from behind the toad. He heads for the other left leg and swings both swords. Instead of going through the leg he only manages to cut into part of it, angering the toad more than anything. He jumps to the side and avoids the tongue the toad shoots back at him, spinning around and bringing a sword down to slice the tongue clean through.

The toad's HP is over halfway gone, and I switch back to a barrage of healing spells on Zack, keeping his health bar filled as he goes under the toad and drives both swords into its stomach. The toad lets out a final, strangled cry before pixelating and disappearing and I run to where Zack is lying on the ground.

Before I can reach him he's up on his knees, raising a sword over his head and yelling. "We got it!"

I can't help but laugh in relief, the toad was definitely stronger than anything we've taken on before, but neither of us died or got poisoned so it's definitely a win. I reach a hand down to him and pull him to his feet and into a hug. He's still grinning when I pull back and he sheaths his swords before pulling up his inventory. I do the same, mentally crossing my fingers for what I hope has appeared. I sort by time, but the most recent addition is a bag of gold and three vials labeled Poisonous Toad Extract.

I let out a groan of frustration and close my screen, I'm not looking forward to going through that again. A tap on my shoulder makes me turn. Zack has a giant, red gemstone outstretched toward me and a grin on his face when he says, "I believe this is yours."

The demands of Gender Deviants over the years to be given equal attention by the media, to have their perverse mentalities taught in schools as "alternative lifestyles, and to be given access to spaces reserved for the opposite gender show us that Deviants refuse to exist on their own. Their antagonistic decisions must be met with decisive action if we are to recover as a nation.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2041

## Chapter Twenty

Saturday afternoon found Aida staring at a blank computer screen, trying to wrap her head around Mr. Haber's assignment. She blinked a few times then typed out a message to Emma on her phone. *Why is the first sentence ALWAYS the hardest???* She set the phone down and touched her computer screen to switch her view.

The first few hours homework had been easy. She searched a few different versions of *The Little Mermaid* and read them while taking notes. Now she had half a dozen highlighted and marked-up tabs on her computer, and no idea of how to put them together in an essay.

Her phone lit up and she tapped on Emma's icon to read the message. *Just write the Happy Birthday lyrics. That's what I do!* She sent back three question marks. Emma had the weirdest homework habits. She'd barely put her phone back on her desk when a new message came in. *You can delete it once your essay is done. It's better than looking at a blank screen! Trust me!* Aida rolled her eyes and typed out, *okayyyyyy...* She went back to her essay tab and typed out the lyrics, wondering if Emma was just messing with her at this point.

A few hours later she typed out the final words of her essay, and vowed to apologize to Emma. She went back to the first page and deleted the first few typed lines, then sent the finished essay to the printer in her dad's office. She shoved her feet in a pair of sneakers and grabbed her



phone on her way out the door. She tapped out a message to Emma about meeting up in Topia, and smiled when her friend immediately typed back, *heck yes!!*

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Zack and I have exactly two weeks to get ready for the tournament. Two weeks for him to go up two levels and for me to go up four. It shouldn't be a problem for him, but I'm starting to worry that I won't hit 45 before the tournament.

Today we're meeting up to take on a dragon that spawns at the top of a hill. It's a huge black and blue beast, with seven heads and talons the size of my body. Of course, it breathes fire too, because why not? Personally, I'm not sure we can take it. We tried about a week ago, and it literally ate Zack. He had to pay the resurrection fee, and I had to run for it.

We're meeting up at the abandoned town that sits at the foot of the hill. It's kind of creepy, because there are tattered curtains in all the windows and torn black flags that fly at the town entrance. The cobblestone roads are overgrown with weeds, and the only clue to what happened are some parchment flyers that drift through the town. They talk about sacrificing the town's maidens to the dragon to keep its wrath at bay, but I guess that only worked for so long.

I jog through the woods in the general direction of the town, looking for the knife in the tree. This whole area is from the Grimm story The Two Brothers, and you have to find the knife left by the brothers to get into the town. It's kind of annoying, because everyone has to get a copy of the knife on their own, no parties allowed, and the knife spawns in random trees. Plus, after Zack and I lost the first time, the knife disappeared from our inventories.

I finally spot it and grab the hilt, then pull the rusted blade from the tree. I stick in my inventory and head for the road that leads to the town. I make it out of the forest and spot Zack leaning on one of the flag poles near the old iron fence that surrounds the town. He waves and

I'm relieved to see that his avatar's appearance hasn't changed. I like Emma's haircut, I do. I'm just not sure I could take it if she'd given Zack an overhaul too.

"Ready to be deep-fried?" he says.

I shake my head. "More like I'm ready to roast some dragon."

He pumps his fist and says, "Yes!" He rubs his chin between his forefinger and thumb. "I wonder how dragon tastes with ketchup..."

I scrunch up my nose and stick out my tongue, which only makes him laugh. Dragon meat is mainly used for crafting in Topia. It goes into some of the stronger resist-magic potions, but you don't eat dragon meat unless you're desperate. It'll give you a little bit of health back in a pinch, but it smells like death and it tastes like leather brussels sprouts.

.We make our way to the foot of the hill where the dragon will spawn and get our gear ready. Zack cracks his neck from side to side and adjusts his grip on his sword. He holds his left hand out to me, palm up. I smack it with my open hand as hard as I can, and we both have to shake our hands out a little from the sting. It's just for good luck, something we did yesterday after the toad went down.

He gives me a lopsided grin and says, "Here goes nothing," before letting out a cry and charging headlong up the hill.

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Aida toed off her shoes just inside the front door and kicked them against the wall so no one would trip over them. She'd only gotten a virtual workout, but she still felt like she needed to stretch her feet and wriggle her toes.

Somehow Zack's strategy, if it could even be called that, had worked. Oh, he'd nearly died a dozen times after running straight for the dragon like a madman. The dragon had actually nearly spawned on top of him and ended the fight before it had a chance to really start. But he'd gotten out of the way at the last minute, and she'd managed to heal him every time he was roasted within an inch of his life. They'd gotten enough XP that she'd hit 42 and Zack nearly leveled up too. So,

it was worth it, but she didn't necessarily want to go up against the dragon again anytime soon.

"Aida," her mom called from the other room. "Could you come in here?"

She pulled out her phone to text Emma that she'd made it back home, and was tapping away when she entered the dining room. She hit the send button and looked up to see both her parents sitting at the dining room table. Her dad had some papers in front of him and his hands were laced together on top of the stack. Her mom was sitting across from him, her hands in her lap and her back as straight as a board.

She slid her phone slowly back into her pocket and waited.

"Have a seat Aida," her dad said. He gestured with his hand to her chair and she reluctantly walked forward.

She pulled her chair out from the table and let her eyes fall on the papers. The top line read, "The Dangers of Marriage." It was her essay.

Her dad tapped a finger to the page and said, "I think we need to talk about this."

She glanced to her mom, who still sat rigid in her chair. She turned back to her dad and gave a small nod, not entirely sure yet where he was going with this.

She'd known that her essay might be a bit controversial, but the fairy tale itself was pretty radical. Most of the fairy tales Mr. Haber raffled out had happier endings than this one. Even *Hansel and Gretel* had a better ending, and those kids were nearly cooked alive! So yeah, it was a bit radical because she didn't say that marriage was the answer, but that was the fairytale's fault!

"Is this really what you think marriage means?" her dad said. "That by pursuing a relationship you might lose yourself?"

She fought the urge to look at her mother. Her mother who looked so vibrant in pictures from her childhood, the same pictures that her mother hid in a shoebox on the top shelf of her closet. She shrugged.

Her dad took a deep breath and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table, and trapping the essay as if it was a prisoner. "Marriage is complicated," he said. "It's a calling, just like any job. Marriage is not to be taken lightly. But," he paused and waited for her to meet his eyes before continuing. "It should also not be easily dismissed."

"Marriage is about bettering yourself, about living up to your full potential Aida." He spread his hands palm side up and said, "All of this, this house, your clothes, your allowance, even you Aida. All of it is only here because your mother and I felt a calling to marriage, and we both answered."

He tapped his finger to the essay. "I read this, all of it, and I was disappointed to say the least. We taught you better than this. Didn't we?"

Aida shrugged her shoulders again and said, "I didn't mean anything by it."

Her mom spoke up then, her voice soft but clear. "What was the assignment Aida?"

She looked up from the table then and met her mom's gaze. "It was just an essay. We were supposed to say what it meant, what it means now, for us."

Her mom nodded and said, "And since the mermaid doesn't get married, you thought it meant you shouldn't either."

She nodded aggressively, grateful that her mother understood.

Her dad leaned back in his chair and said, "Oh Aida, I think you missed the point of the story." His voice was gentler now, his words didn't have the same bite as earlier. She looked over at him and was relieved to see that his eyes were more relaxed and the tight lines that happened when he clenched his jaw were gone. "If the mermaid knows that marriage is her true calling, how do you think she feels when she can't marry the man she loves?"

She knew an out when she heard it. "Sad," she said. "She'd be depressed."

Her dad nodded and said, "I think a better title might be, 'The Importance of Marriage.' Don't you?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry."

Her dad folded the papers in half and creased the side before standing. He held the folded stack in one hand and tapped his left palm with them as he said, "I want you to redo the assignment. But this time I want you to think about what we've said. Okay?"

She pushed her chair back from the table and stood, forcing herself to look her dad in the eye when she said, "I will. I promise." When he nodded she took it as a dismissal, and ran up the stairs to her room.

Nearly aspect of our culture has been infiltrated by the dangerous teachings of Gender Deviants, The only way to proceed from here is to look back to God's holy word and see his plans for our lives. A return to a biblical lifestyle is our only hope to bring families back from the edge of destruction where the liberals of The States have led us.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2041

### Chapter Twenty-One

Aida had never really experienced déjà vu, until Sunday afternoon. She had yet another blank document on her computer screen, her phone on her desk, and was still trying to figure out what to write. The main difference was that instead of planning her essay, she was mentally writing and rewriting a message for Emma. They were supposed to meet in Topia in an hour, which was never going to happen, but she hadn't gotten up the nerve to cancel.

She stared at her half-typed message again and chewed on her bottom lip. She'd been doing that a lot today, and was probably going to have to relocate her winter Chapstick if she kept it up much longer. She punched out a different, simpler message and hit send before she could think about it any longer. *I have to bail, don't hate me?*

She stared at her phone screen until it went black from not being touched. She kept her eyes trained on the screen, waiting for it to light up with Emma's response. Seconds later, Emma's profile picture, a bucket of popcorn, took up the entire screen, telling her she had an incoming call.

She bit her lip hard but instinctively answered the call, faintly aware of the taste of blood when she said, "Hey."

“Are you sick?” Emma said on the other end. She sounded worried and Aida immediately felt two inches tall.

“No, I just messed up.” she said. Emma hummed a noise on the line, one of those little sounds that lets you know the other person is listening and waiting. She let out a sigh and it was as if a dam broke. The whole story spilled out of her, how she had been proud of the essay when it was finished, but then got in trouble for not writing about the “real” message.

If she was honest, that was what still irked her about the essay. She’d never really been any good at English; analyzing whole novels usually went over her head. But fairy tales she knew, and knew well. She spent most of her free time in an entire world of fairy tales for crying out loud! Sure, some of them she didn’t know before playing Topia, but now she could name nearly every story in the game.

So of course, she’d been excited about an English assignment for once in her life, then actually been happy with how the essay turned out, only to have the whole thing blow up in her face. When she finished telling Emma the sordid tale, she fell silent, unsure of what her friend would think.

Her friend chuckled and said, “You have *got* to learn to lie better.” She was confused for a moment, but Emma continued. “You can think whatever you want. You just can’t say it, or write it.”

She dropped her head to her desk with a loud *thunk* and reveled in the moment of clarity the pain brought. “How do you do it?” she finally said.

Emma hummed for a moment, as if she was thinking about her answer. “Practice,” she said. “I’ve been practicing for more than a decade, so I’d better be good at it by now.”

Aida nodded, that made sense. Then she remembered that Emma couldn't actually see her, so she said, "Maybe Malorie was right." When Emma wasn't sure what she meant by that she explained, "They're saying I'm Deviant too. I don't know if I was before, but maybe I caught it?"

Emma's voice was carefully controlled when she said, "How would you catch it Aida?" It sounded like she was measuring out her words before saying them, like she had some type of verbal scale to make sure they didn't weigh too much.

Aida lifted her head and leaned back in her chair, shrugging when she said. "You know, it spreads like that. Since I've been around you I've been thinking about weird things, like what it would be like if I had been born before The Break. Or what it would be like if my future wasn't either marrying some guy or working at a job I hate, what it would be like if I could-" She cut off that train of thought and snapped her mouth shut. What had she been about to say? She shook her head and said, "You know, that stuff."

They sat in silence for a while, her thoughts hanging in air between them. 'what it would be like if I could be with someone like Zack.' That was what she almost said. But *why*? Zack was her friend, sure, but he wasn't even really a guy, he was Emma! 'what it would be like if I could be with you.' That was what it meant. Did she want *that* kind of thing from Emma? To be more than a friend?

Before she could think about it more Emma broke through her thoughts. "Are you serious?" Emma's voice was ice cold, like it could actually freeze the blood in your veins. Aida actually jumped at her tone, sitting up straight, and trying to listen. "You think this is my fault? You think that I did this to you?" Emma started to laugh, but it was a dark, empty laugh, and it



chilled Aida to the bone. “That’s great, that’s just great. Good luck with your essay Aida, I’m sure you’ll figure out how to make it all about you.” The line went dead.

Aida stared at the black screen of her phone, eyes wide and bottom lip firmly clenched between her teeth. That wasn’t what she meant to do at all. In a split second she went from a statue to frantically tapping at her computer screen to shut it down. She separated the keyboard from the screen and pushed them both into her small carrying case. She then shoved the case, and her library books, unceremoniously into her backpack, not bothering to zip it shut.

She took the stairs two at a time and called out to her mom as she raced to the door. “Emma’s going to help me with my essay!” she said. She danced around Sadie at the front door. The poor dog was holding her leash in her mouth and wagging her tail fast enough that it was a hazard. A thought burst into her head and she quickly clipped Sadie’s leash to her collar.

Her mom came into the hall then, drying her hands on a dish towel and nodding her head in Sadie’s direction. “Make sure you’re back for dinner,” she said.

Sadie was thrilled to bits at having gotten her way, and set a grueling pace for the walk to Emma’s. It was more of a run, and by the time Emma’s house came into view she was panting hard. She couldn’t actually remember the last time she’d run outside of Topia, and she was paying for it.

She knocked on Emma’s front door and took deep breaths in through her nose, trying to steady herself. She glanced down to Sadie, who was completely splayed out on the sidewalk, her tongue lolling out of her mouth and looking as if she’d had the time of her life. Aida couldn’t help but smile at her, and was still grinning when the door opened.

Emma’s dad towered in the doorway, his large frame taking up the entire space and blocking her view into the house. “Hello there,” he said. She stepped back a bit at his voice,

having forgotten how loud it was. “You’re Keith’s girl aren’t you?” He said it like a question, but she could tell he knew the answer.

He stepped back and motioned for her to come in. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said. She tugged at Sadie’s leash and the dog obediently trotted inside, following her lead. Emma’s dad crouched down and held his hand out to Sadie, waiting for her to sniff and lick it before scratching her ears. “Emma’s been pretty down all day. Maybe you can get her out of it.” He stood and gave her a half-smile

Sadie followed her up the stairs and patiently sat at Emma’s door when Aida knocked. It took a few tries, but eventually she heard the creak of Emma’s bed and stepped back from the door. The doorknob slowly turned and opened a crack, just enough to see one of Emma’s eyes on the other side.

“What do you want?” Emma said.

Aida shrugged and said, “I’m here to say sorry.” Sadie let out a whine and shoved her nose into the crack of the door, huffing loudly when she couldn’t make it through.

Emma looked down at the dog and sighed. “Come on,” she said, opening the door.

They sat in silence on Emma’s floor for a bit. Sadie laid her head in Emma’s lap and melted into her touch. Aida watched them both, unsure of what she should say.

“Do you know why I got mad?” Emma said.

Aida nodded and said, “Because I blamed you.”

Emma tilted her head back and forth, like she was mentally sorting through possible answers. “Yes, but also no,” she said. “I got mad because you go from being supportive one minute, to making this my fault the next.” Emma lifted her head and looked her in the eye when

she said, “This isn’t my fault, because I didn’t have a choice. I didn’t just wake up one day and decide to be a Deviant, and I definitely didn’t make you one.”

Aida thought about that one for a minute. There was some truth to that at least. She’d never been a ‘normal’ girl like her friends. She didn’t obsess over different guys at school like they did, or even just the idea of being able to date after high school like she would sometimes overhear her classmates talk about. If she were honest, she’d been frustrated with that for a long time, long before meeting Emma.

She groaned and pressed her palms to her eyes. “I’m an idiot,” she said. She could hear Emma chuckle, and groaned louder. She dropped her hands and looked at her friend. “I’m not Gender Deviant though, I know I’m a girl.” Emma nodded but stayed silent. “I just don’t want to be, you know, *that* type of girl.”

Emma gave her a sad smile. “Aida,” she said. “If you don’t want to be the type of girl The United thinks you should be, then you *are* Deviant.”

The left would have you believe that The United Council is trying to reverse "progress." The true goal of The United Council is to save our great nation from its path of self-destruction. Our refusal to give in to the demands of Gender Deviants has been called, "prejudicial" and "problematic." The left wants us to renounce our dearly held beliefs and values, all in an effort to be politically correct.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2043

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Aida spent the rest of the week playing the part of a good, well-mannered, United girl in class, and then venting her frustrations to Emma after school. It turned out that once she started letting herself voice the thoughts that had always danced around in the back of her mind, it was hard to stop talking about them. Why couldn't she live in a world where she could be a doctor? Or a scientist? Or an astronaut? Or whatever else she wanted.

At first Emma would smirk her way through Aida's rants, looking like maybe she wanted to say something but was holding herself back. But after the first few days, Emma opened up too. She told Aida about how she'd grown up knowing she was different, that there was something about her that she couldn't let other people see.

Emma told her about how she'd grown her hair long and worn frilly dresses as a child, putting bows in her hair and playing the game with the best of them. She told Aida about faking an interest in boys in Middle school, picking her "crushes" almost at random and gossiping with her friends. But Emma told her about the bad stuff too.

Emma told her about how in Middle school she realized she had a crush on her friend Bethany, and how she'd never told anyone. Emma told her about how the first time she wanted

to die was when her dad took her shopping for her first bra. She still couldn't think about it without her whole body shaking at the memory of her dad awkwardly explaining to the sales lady why they were at the mall. Emma told her about staring in a mirror when her body started to change, and how she'd picked up a knife once in frustration, and how she'd never been able to put it down.

Then, she spent the night at Emma's for a 'tutoring' session. She knew her parents weren't convinced by that cover story; she'd only been allowed to sleep over on a school night because they'd started to worry about her. Her mom kept asking if she was gaming with anyone and who she was hanging out with at school. She was toeing the line lately on half-truths and lies. Yes, she was gaming with friends; no, she didn't know them in real life. Yes, she had friends in class, no you haven't met them.

Emma whispered something when Aida was drifting off, so soft that she almost missed it. "I just don't feel like an 'Emma,'" she said. "There's nothing wrong with the name or anything. It's just that it's for a girl, you know?" She pointed to her head of short hair. "And I'm, me."

When her friend had taken off the wig before they changed for bed, Aida was shocked to see how short it was. Emma's blond hair was cut longer on the top and close to her scalp on the sides, making her cheek bones more defined and her eyebrows more prominent.

Aida's response was, "Do you feel like a Zack?"

Emma seemed to think about it for a minute, but she eventually said no. "It's too much of a guy's name," she said. "Besides, I kind of like you calling me 'Em' in Topia."

And that was how Aida wound up wide awake again, searching on her phone for names that started with “E-M,” and reading them out loud to her friend. Names like Emanuella and Emmanouil made Emma laugh and say, “Oh god, no.” But Emersyn and Emir made her hum a little and say, “Maybe, that’s a maybe.”

When they got to Emry though Aida could practically hear her friend’s brain kick into overdrive. “That’s it,” she said. “I love it.” And that was that.

It should have been harder, Aida thought, to think of her friend by a new name. And sure, it was a little weird to use “Emma” at school or to her parents, but Emry when she was with her friend. But Emry beamed the first time he’d heard it and she vowed to put that smile on his face every chance she could.

On Thursday she got the paper that had caused so many problems back from Mr. Haber. He’d scrawled, “Well done!” at the top of her essay and given her an A. Only a week ago, a note like that would have been exciting. But now that she’d stopped lying to herself about what growing up in The United really meant, little moments like this were taking their toll.

She took the essay out in History class, after she’d lost interest in the video. She had taken her dad’s suggestion and titled it, “The Importance of Marriage.” It got a laugh out of Emry, who said that marriage in The United wasn’t much better than indentured servitude.

She flipped through the pages, glancing over the messy notes in the margins. Most of them were just circled sentences with some corrections. She abused commas, and from the beginning of the year Mr. Haber made it his mission to stop them from appearing in every sentence. The lack of red on the page told her she was making progress.

Some of his notes were more in depth. He'd underlined some parts and written things like, "Good attention to how earlier societies knew the importance of marriage," and "Correlation to similar biblical stories is well thought-out." They were supposed to be compliments, but she couldn't help but grimace at how positive the feedback was.

A paper had landed in the middle of her desk, breaking Aida out of her thoughts. Camryn and Malorie's aims were steadily improving. They had taken turns lobbing notes at her for weeks now, ever since that first one with the stick figures. If she wanted to, she could probably fill an entire notebook at this point. She'd kept some of the ones from English and a few from History too. They started out as souvenirs that she'd gotten under their skin so much. But then they started throwing more and more at her and leaving notes in her locker.

She hardly ever went to her locker in the first place, but she'd needed her spare uniform shirt the other day and she had to wade through a sea of notes to pull it out. She'd thrown all the notes away after reading a few. They were always the same: messages that she was being reported for being Deviant unless she left the school, that she needed to withdraw from the tournament, and comments about her weight. She'd come across one with unfamiliar handwriting, which she assumed was from Heather. It only said two words, "Get Out." It was the nicest note yet.

She couldn't help but have some sympathy for Heather. She knew firsthand that Camryn and Malorie were fun to be around. She knew how Camryn's jokes could make you feel like you were in an exclusive club; how when Malorie put her focus on you it felt like you were the center of the universe. So, she didn't really blame Heather for joining in. The poor thing thought that she'd finally found some friends, and Aida couldn't fault the girl for that.

The bell rang before Aida could decide whether or not to open the newest note, a small mercy. She shoved her essay back in her bag, along with the paper wad. She dashed from the room as fast as she could, eager to meet up with Emry in Topia.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Emry and I decide to take on banshees today. They're a pretty common monster, and they spawn in at least one spot on every map. I guess it's because there are so many different Irish stories about banshees, kind of like Europe and their obsession with fairy godmothers or helpful older women. Of course, there's no place in Topia where you can collect items and Órr by slaying fairy godmothers, so I guess they filled all those spots with banshees instead.

We're in a forest right now, Emry taking on three banshees at a time and me healing them from a safe distance. In this particular area there's a constant rainstorm going, which makes it even better. I've always enjoyed rainstorms, and I enjoy being out in them even more. It used to drive my mom nuts, because any time it rained I would run outside to play in it. She would have to drag me back into the house, and then I'd have to take a bath. That part I hated, which, I guess doesn't make much sense.

In Topia though, you dry off faster than the real world. We already have plans after we level up to head to the oak tree. Hopefully, I'll get to heal some players while we dry out, it's a win-win.

Emry's Health Points dip into the yellow again so I cast another full-heal spell. The banshees are an easy kill for them at this point, they only have one more level until they max out. They should hit 45 before the weekend is over, but I'm still nervous. I've only leveled once since the weekend, and the closer the tournament gets the more I'm thinking I'll have to spring for some upgrades to my armor. I'd rather stock up on potions, but if the upgrades keep me alive longer it might be worth it.

They finish off the three banshees nearby, then jog over to me. "How you feeling?" I ask.

They're panting at this point, so their stamina must have gotten pretty low. Still, they sound upbeat when they says, "Peachy, I was just worried you were bored."

I shake my head, “No, I’m good.”

They have their hands on their knees at this point, and they didn’t even bother sheathing their sword, just dropped it on the wet grass. They look up at me. “You know, I was trying not admit I needed a break.” They collapse on their back and I start to laugh. They lift one hand in the air and wave it at me, “I’m good, just give me a minute.”

I sit down beside them, my armor’s already pretty drenched at this point so no harm. “We could be done for the day you know.”

They turn their head toward me and point with a finger. “I want you to level though.” They drop their hand and look back at the treetops. “How far away are you anyway?”

I check my Experience Points in the corner of my vision. “About a hundred thousand.” They groan and cover their eyes with one arm. I reach out and pat them on the shoulder. “I’m serious, we can end here. I’ll level up tomorrow.”

They take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, deal.” I stand and they reach one hand toward me. I grab it and pull, helping them to their feet. They pick up their sword and put it away. I cup my hand and gather some water, then lob it at them while they’re distracted. It hits Emry in the cheek, and they yelp, before turning to look at me. I do my best to look innocent, but they’re not buying it. They flick water at me from their fingers and say, “Thanks for that, very refreshing.”

One quick run and two teleportation arches later, we’re sitting under the giant oak tree. No one’s fighting the Glas, but I’m keeping an eye open just in case. Emry is on their back, their eyes closed, like a cat stretched out in a sunbeam. I feel like if I put my ear to their chest I’d hear them purr.

I've been having weird thoughts like that lately, and when it enters my head I have to look away from Emry. I'm worried they're going to catch on, and I don't want them to think I'm being a creep. I pick at blades of grass and tear them into small pieces, trying to keep my hands busy.

I have a crush on Emry, I finally get that. I had a small crisis over it on Monday, and now I'm good. Really. And when Emry told me that they like girls, that they've always liked girls, I got really happy. But then they told me about all of their crushes, and I wasn't one of them. And I mean, maybe they wouldn't because they're not sure how I'll react, but I don't think that's it.

Emry pointed out two of them in the halls at school. They were both: tall, blonde, and gorgeous. They wore makeup and had their hair styled, and somehow actually made the school uniforms look good. I know I'm not Emry's type, and I know there's no point in hoping. But that doesn't stop me from wishing we could be something more.

Emry rolls over on their stomach and props their head up on one hand. "You ever think about leaving?" they say.

The question catches me off guard, and I'm not entirely sure what they mean. I settle on saying, "I'd never leave you."

They laugh and push themselves up, crossing their legs and facing me. "Not me, The United."

I shake my head, "Where would we even go?"

"The States," they say.

Now it's my turn to laugh. "We'd never get past the barrier."

They shrug. "We wouldn't have to," they say. "We'd use the mountains."

I take a moment to study Emry's face. I think they're serious about this, but I want to make sure. They're looking up at the sky and squinting into the sun, and they don't look like they're joking.

"I wouldn't know how to get over the mountains," I say eventually.

They nod and say, "Yeah, you're probably right."

I let the silence hang for a minute then ask, "Do you know how to get over the mountains?"

They look at me then and say, "Not over, but through." I can feel my eyes widen, but they continue. "There used to be roads that cut through the mountains. When the barrier was put up The United dumped tons and tons of rocks on them so no trucks or anything could get though from The States." I nod, because I know that part, they teach it in History. "But that means you could still walk there; you'd just have to keep the road in sight and follow it there."

I bite my lip. "It's probably still really hard," I say.

He gives me a small smile and says, "Most things, if they're worthwhile, are."

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Aida made it to the bus stop just in time, flinging herself up the steps of the bus as the driver slid the doors shut. He took the time to glare at her when she didn't have her app ready to pay. Her thumbs felt big and bulky under his stare, and she nearly dropped the phone entirely when she moved it to the payment console. Mercifully, the payment went through, and she made her way to the back of the bus.

She collapsed in the seat and leaned her head back against the window, the cool glass felt refreshing after her impromptu workout. Her thoughts drifted along with the steady sound of the bus's motor. The motor made her think of the narrator from the History video, which seemed so

far away now. She hadn't thought about the testing they did on First Graders in a long, long time. But Humphrey Lancaster PhD had reminded her of it, and she tried to remember her own test.

She remembered that it was in the Fun Room, that's what the school called it. Of course, it was just to make the testing seem like a game, and it kind of had been fun. There'd been toys in the room, like dolls and stuffed animals, but also action figures and different sports balls. She remembered that only First Graders got to go to the Fun Room, and that you never knew when you were going there. She'd been pulled out of class one day and told it was her turn.

The teacher had been someone she didn't know; she wasn't sure if they even worked at the school or if they were only there to test the students. But the woman had told Aida she could pick any toy she wanted to help her take the test. She'd been so excited, because her teacher never let her have a toy on her desk during schoolwork.

There'd been a stuffed dog, she remembered that. It was a Jack Russel, just like Jack, the dog her parents had at the time. Her six-year-old brain decided that it was Jack's way of being there to help her on the test, so she'd picked him up without even looking at the rest of the toys. She remembered the lady smiling when she saw who she'd picked out, and she remembered the lady writing something on her clipboard.

She'd been given paper and crayons, and the lady asked her to draw different things. Draw a house, draw some flowers next to the house, draw a family standing in the flowers. Draw a boy, draw a girl, draw yourself.

There'd been questions she'd had to answer too, and most of them had to do with pictures the woman brought with her. She'd been shown groups of families and the lady had asked her which family she'd want to read about. She'd picked the one that looked like her own family, with a mom and a dad and a little girl, because that made sense right? And she remembered that

the lady kept smiling at all of her answers, and she kept nodding like she'd gotten everything right.

But then the lady had shown her a picture of a boy and a picture of a girl, and asked her which one she would want to marry. And she couldn't really explain why she did it, but she pointed at the girl. For the first time, the lady didn't nod, and she didn't smile at that answer. Her face had gotten serious and she said, "Why's that?"

And Aida panicked then, because she wanted to do well, she wanted to get it right. So, she'd just said, "Because boys are gross," and hoped she'd gotten that right. And the lady laughed a little bit and said, "Well maybe so." But she remembered being careful after that, and thinking about what the right answer would be, even if she didn't want to answer the question that way. So, at the end, when the lady gave her a picture of two girls with a heart above their heads and asked her if it was a good picture, she said no.

It is the responsibility of The United to ensure the safety of each and every citizen. Any threat to the good of our nation must be dealt with decisively, whether it comes from the outside of our country or from within.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2045

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

“I need to duck in here,” Emry says, jutting a thumb toward the store next to us. “It’ll just take a minute.”

I nod and follow them inside, glancing at the sign above the door before entering. They didn’t mention stopping at an accessory shop before, but maybe they forgot. There’s a line at the counter but Emry just adds themselves to the end and I follow.

Emry’s the one who had a list, so they picked the city: Waterlin. The Immortal city is exactly what it sounds like: an entire city built on the water. I’m not a big fan, because I’ve accidentally fallen into the water before. Twice. I don’t visit often.

We’re standing behind a cluster of girls in color-coordinated armor, something that’s been gaining popularity recently. Their armor isn’t very elaborate, most of it looks to be level eleven or twelve tops. But one of them stands out as a Mystic and I hope she hasn’t fallen behind her friends yet. I mentally wish her luck and turn to Emry.

“What are you looking for?”

“I just want to see what they have,” they say. “The clerk sometimes has rare items if you talk to them.”

One of the girls in front of us must overhear because she looks back toward us, then leans to whisper something to the girl next to her. There's a chain reaction as the girls turn their heads around, cast their eyes from me to Emry, and then whisper to the next one. It happens sometimes, but usually people aren't this obvious about it.

"I'm going to wait outside," I say. Emry gives me a small nod and I practically run from the shop.

I find a bench not too far from the shop and sit down, pulling up my inventory while I wait. I'm not really looking for anything, I just don't want anyone talking to me. I sold off most of my extra items a few shops back, trying to get as much Órr as possible before the tournament. I'm holding off on buying the armor upgrades though in case I manage to max out in time. When Camryn and Malorie maxed, they unlocked a bunch of new items, armor included. Best case scenario is I'll be able to buy potions and a new set of armor, but we'll see.

I see Emry out of the corner of my eye and close my window before standing. They're carrying a small brown package and grinning. When they get close enough I say, "Find something good?"

"Take a look," they say and hand me the package.

Whatever it is, it's super lightweight. I untie the twine and fold back the brown paper. Inside is a gold necklace with a single sapphire stone. I tap my finger to it twice to pull up its properties and read the name: Necklace of Magic Regeneration. I look up at Emry and see that they're shifting their weight back and forth and fiddling with their gloves.

I don't want to assume it's for me, so I ask if it is.



They smile a little and say, “Do you like it?”

I grin and immediately equip the necklace. “I love it,” I say. “How much do I owe you?”

“What? No, nothing,” they say. “It’s a gift.” It must be obvious I’m about to protest because they speak up again. “I’m the one who’s going to need your magic in the tournament, so it’s only fair.”

I laugh and make sure they’re looking at me before saying, “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

We head back to Waterlin’s main entrance, talking about nothing on our way. When we pass the town’s center we see familiar gold and green robes. Mother Rebecca is mid-sermon and a few of her acolytes are passing out pamphlets to everyone. The main difference from the last sermon we saw is that now everyone is wearing a cloak, with the hood pulled down to their noses so you can’t see what they look like.

I let my eyes focus on one of them to see if their names are hidden too, and sure enough I can’t get their avatar name to appear above their head. We’re too far to make out what Mother Rebecca is saying, but she has one hand above her head as she talks, something I’ve seen Pastor William do a hundred times.

Emry smirks at me and says, “Want to hear what your followers have to say?”

I give them my best withering glare, which only makes them toss their head back and laugh. They were right about the gifts increasing after the first sermon, I’ve had to go there more often just to clear out the rock. Some of it’s really good stuff too, rare items that I could sell for a hefty price. It doesn’t feel right though, so I’ve been dropping off my own gifts at random spots.

Emry's about to say something else but a wall of white is coming straight for us. Moderators. They stand out because their avatars all have white hair and wear white suits, not Topia gear. They don't play the game; they make sure no one cheats, or breaks conduct rules. I've never actually seen a MOD in person, only heard about them in forums. And I've never heard of more than one MOD showing up anywhere.

Emry grabs my hand and pulls me into a nearby store, tearing me out of my daze. We rush to the store's side window and luckily we have a direct view of the town center. One of the pamphlet passers is the first to see what's about to happen and she shouts, "MODs!" It's absolute chaos outside.

Mother Rebecca instantly vanishes into a sea of pixels, but some of her followers run instead, which is a bad idea. All a MOD needs to shut down your account is your username, and I doubt hiding your name works on them. The ones who don't run frantically try to log out, and some of them disappear but others are grabbed by MODs.

There are more MODs herding all the players who were listening further and further into the middle of the square. There's a circular brick wall in the center of the square lined with benches and when everyone's blocked off a MOD stands on one of the benches. This one has black hair and is wearing a black suit and as players see him a hush falls over the square. At this point everyone who was in the store is pressed up against the windows and watching, even the NPC who runs the place.

"You have all been listening to the teachings of a madman," he says. "Mother Rebecca is not a woman of God. She does not have your best interests at heart. Both she and her followers

are treacherous snakes, bent on destruction.” The MOD makes a beckoning motion to his right and five of the hooded figures are brought in front of him by other MODs.

“Rest assured that those who are not here will also be dealt with. But for now,” he says. “Let these serve as a reminder of how we will deal with those who join Mother Rebecca.” He snaps his fingers and one by one down the line the players hoods are ripped backward.” One of the girls is openly crying, I can see her shoulders shake even from here. The others are staring defiantly ahead, and I notice that their hands are being held behind their backs.

The MOD in black snaps his fingers again and all five girls go limp, their bodies dropping to the ground. I grab Emry’s hand without thinking, I’ve never seen anything like this. “From this moment on,” the MOD says. “All who associate with Mother Rebecca and her seditious followers are equally guilty. Consider this a warning.”

All the MODs pixelate away in sync, leaving the square full only of players. A few players are brave enough to get closer to the crumpled avatars left behind. A Knight pokes his steel boot at one of the girl’s arms, before stepping back and shaking his head. After a few seconds, the five girls start to disappear too, a dissolving stream of data.

Emry turns their head to me slowly and whispers, “What just happened?”

I shake my head and look back out the window. One of the flyers the players were handing out blows up against the store window then, plastering itself to the glass. The title catches my eye and I inhale shakily. Cling to What is Good.

It is now a matter of time before The States realize they can never overtake the greatness of The United. As we take these next steps to ensure that The United rises above, we must look for new ways to teach our youth the importance of gender. If our girls are to grow into young women, and if our boys are to grow into men, we must be open to new possible teaching methods.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2048

### **Chapter Twenty-Five**

Emry and I are taking on Fuathan by the river when we get the message. Emry's having a hard time, because a Fuath is essentially an Irish water spirit. In Topia they start with a physical form, but after the first hit their bodies change to water vapor. After that only magic works on them. Emry said they'd be the target and distract the Fuathan while I poison them, and it's mostly working. It's just that it takes longer this way, and I have to keep healing Emry. But thanks to my new necklace, I have Magic Points to spare.

Emry has one Fuath giving them a beating when a ping sounds in my ear. I'm distracted for a moment, so I don't notice Emry's HP turn yellow. Emry lets out a shout and I yell, "Sorry!" then heal them as fast as I can. After a few more seconds the Fuath's HP runs out and they let out a shriek. When the Fuath finally pixelates away Emry jogs over to me, out of range of the other Fuathan.

"Did you hear it too?" they say.

I'm already pulling up my inbox and checking for new messages. Sure enough, there's an alert from Topia Admin right at the top. Emry's pulled up their screen too so I quickly read over the message.

This is to inform **A-Day-About** that you have been entered with your teammate **ZackAttack20** in tomorrow's Elimination Round 1C. If you wish to compete you must *both* present your attached tickets to the Duncloch clerk at least 5 minutes prior to start of the round. The clerk will start accepting tickets at 4 o'clock Topia Standard Time. Elimination Round 1C will begin promptly at 5:30. Please read through the online rules for PVP tournaments if this is your first time competing or if you need a refresher on our guidelines.

At the bottom of the message is a picture of a bronze ticket. I tap it twice with my finger, then select "Hold Item." The window closes out on its own and I'm left holding the ticket in my hands. I look over at Emry and see that they've done the same thing. They're grinning at me and tap me on the nose with their ticket. "Are you ready?"

I glance in the upper left corner of my vision, and see my level. I've managed to reach 43, so it could be worse. Emry must see me looking because they put their hand on my shoulder and say, "Hey, no worries. You'll max out before the final round. That's when it really matters."

I chew on my bottom lip and nod. It's easy for them to say that, they'll hit 45 before the end of the day.

Emry claps their hands together and says, "Can we fight something else now? I'm getting my butt kicked out there!" They cross their eyes and stick their tongue out, and I can't help but laugh.

"Yeah, let's go somewhere else."

We wind up back near Waterlin, in a small clearing that's on the edge of the woods. Wolves spawn here and even though they're pretty difficult, the XP you get is worth it. We don't

have to fight for long before Emry levels up for a final time. They finish off a wolf and then they're surrounded by green light. It spirals around them before shooting straight up in the air and exploding into fireworks.

Emry jogs over to me and we head out of range of the wolves. When we're hidden by the trees Emry pulls up their in-game menu and starts tapping on the screen. I'm bouncing on my toes and it takes all of my self-control to not start pestering them with questions. They glance up at me and give a half grin before saying, "Do you want to look too?"

I barely wait for them to finish their question before I run around the screen and hover over their shoulder so I can see too. "What ability did you unlock?" I ask. Whenever a player maxes out their level they unlock their class's final ability. For Damsels it's a royalty attribute and they can turn into the Princess class at will. When Malorie maxed her Princess, she unlocked the Queen ability, which lets her buy items from shops for a serious discount. I could have looked up what Rogues get online of course, but I wanted to be surprised.

"I think it was sneak attack," Emry says. They tap a few icons then point to their screen. "Stealth attack, that was it!"

I lean in closer to read the screen and rest a hand on Emry's shoulder. If I'm understanding this, it looks like Emry will be able to turn temporarily invisible to attack now. After their first hit they'll be visible again, but it's still a huge advantage. It occurs to me now that I should definitely look up what abilities the Heroes and Hunters will have if they're maxed out.

I say as much to Emry and they nod. "We don't need to be caught off guard." They click around a few more screens, looking at everything new. From the looks of it they'll be able to carry more items in their inventory and also equip more gear, which could be a big help. As far

as items go though, they'll have to visit individual shops to see what they've unlocked for purchasing.

"Did you want to go get armor now?" I say. Earlier they mentioned saving Órr in case they managed to max out today.

Emry shakes their head though and says, "I'd better not. It's nearly time for my dad to get home."

A quick glance at my clock tells me I should be heading home too. We agree on a time for tomorrow and I pull up my menu. "Make sure you sleep well," I say. Emry salutes and I press the Log Out button, waving to Emry as I pixelate away.

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Aida blinked her eyes and focused on the green letters in front of her eyes. *YOU HAVE LOGGED OUT OF TOPIA*. She pulled the VR helmet off and sat up, rolling her shoulders, and trying to stretch her tight muscles.

"What round are you in?" said a familiar voice. Aida closed her eyes and fought the urge to groan. Maybe Camryn wasn't talking to her. She swung her legs over the side of the cot and stood, then walked the helmet over to its spot on the desk unit. "Aida," Camryn said. "What round are you in?"

Aida put the helmet down then turned back around, crossing her arms over her chest. "What round are *you* in?" she said.

Camryn standing by the far wall, with Malorie at her side. Camryn tossed her hair over her shoulder and said, "I asked first."

Aida picked up her bookbag from where she'd dropped it next to her cot and slung it over her shoulder. She looked Camryn in the eye and said, "Then I guess you'll have to find out

tomorrow.” She spun on her heel and marched from the room, not bothering to turn around when Malorie yelled her name.



It was only a matter of time before a second Civil War broke out in our country. The fact that it is happening now should surely be seen as a reflection of the times. As we fight to return our nation to God, we must already plan how to teach our children about this period. Surely if we are to avoid such a conflict arising again in the future we must take steps to ensure that reconciliation is always an option.

Document recovered from The Break archives; Published 2040

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Aida hadn't run late a single time for meeting Emry in Topia. It was nothing short of a miracle that she'd gone so many weeks, and she was grateful. Of course, it couldn't last. And since she had the worst luck in the world, the morning of round one was when she broke her streak. She'd sent a message to Emry when she'd left her house late, but she hadn't gotten a reply.

She'd actually turned on her phone's volume for the first time she could remember. It was still set to the factory default tone that was three shrill beeps. It was irritating at best, but she'd been hoping to hear it at least once before reaching Level Up.

The entire bus ride in she'd stared at her phone's black screen, waiting for a new message. Which, if she thought about it, did kind of make turning her volume on a little pointless. She wasn't sure if the silence from Emry was better or worse than getting one of Camryn's angry messages. The difference was that while those just irritated her, the lack of reply was making her queasy.

As soon as the bus began to slow for her stop she was up and out of her seat. She ignored the dirty look from the bus driver, but gripped the back of a nearby seat to keep her balance when he brought the bus up short. The doors slowly creaked open and she was down the steps in a

flash, pushing the doors out of her way as she left. “Hey!” the driver yelled. But she took off running toward Level Up and didn’t look back.

The game café wasn’t far from the bus stop, and before long Level Up’s red roof was looming overhead. She rushed to the back of the building and went through the weathered green door, barely slowing down once she was inside. If she hurried she should still be able to meet up with Emry in Duncloch, but they’d be cutting it close to turn in their tickets. She pulled up her payment with one hand and tapped through the computer screen prompts with the other to reserve a cot.

She tapped her phone to the payment console and tapped her foot quickly, as if it would speed up the machine. She grabbed her keycard as soon as the machine spat it out, and made a beeline for the room. She pulled up Topia and sent another message to Emry just in case. “I’m logging in now!” Thirty seconds later familiar words were in front of her eyes, *DO YOU WISH TO ENTER TOPIA? Y/N.*

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I open my eyes and immediately pull up my chats. I breathe in relief when I see three new messages from Emry and open the latest one.

**ZackAttack20:** *Hey, hope you’re okay. I’ll wait at Duncloch in case you can make it... If not, I’ll text you when I log out. You’re not mad right?*

I type out a quick message and hit send, before making a beeline to the nearest arch. Teleporting straight to Emry is going to cost me thousands of Órr, but I can’t risk not making it. Luckily Waterlin has an arch right on the edge of the city, and I can see it from here.

I run and pull up my map at the same time, selecting the arch I need on my map. I trip on a root in the ground and stumble, but manage to catch myself before I fall. I still push my map window to the side so I can see where I'm going. I can take a hint.

No one else is using the arch so I'm able to run straight through. It's a little disorienting because I run into pitch-black darkness. I slow down, then stop moving altogether. Even though my feet are flat, it doesn't really feel like I'm standing on anything. Instead it's this weird suspended feeling, as if I'm floating on a cloud.

After a few seconds Topia catches up and I feel myself being propelled forward. An archway of light appears in front of me and I start walking again. It won't actually get me through the arch any faster, but it's a habit. When I finally materialize in Topia again I'm at the base of the mountain that leads to Duncloch and I take off up the pathway, in search of a feral goat.

I hear the goats before I see them and slow to a creeping walk. I can hear their guttural bleats just up ahead and go off the trail. I round a cluster of trees and see a herd of goats in a clearing, some bucking in apparent happiness and others grazing on bunches of grass. There's one a few feet away munching down on the grass, head down and not paying much attention to the others.

I creep up behind it as quietly as I can manage and as soon as I'm close enough I leap onto its back and grab its massive horns. The goat rears up in shock and lets out a cry of anger before taking off at full speed. I barely stay on its back when we barrel through the group of goats that seconds ago were completely carefree. The rest of the goats scatter in all directions and I hear a ping in my ear, Emry. I ignore the message though and focus on holding onto the goat's horns.

For the first thirty seconds I'm clinging on for dear life. But after that the goat slows its breakneck pace and I manage to pat it every now and then. The goat then starts to shake its head from side to side, asking for more pats from my hand. I rub the goat's neck and try to make my voice soothing when I say, "You're doing so well!" luckily the goat has been charging uphill this whole time, getting me closer to Duncloch on a fluke. I spot the path and urge it that direction, turning the goat's head by its horns.

The goat listens easily and even picks up the pace when I click my tongue. Now that I'm fairly sure the goat won't kill me when it gets a chance, I pull up my message from Emry.

**ZackAttack20:** *I'll wait for you at the arena!!*

I type back, "K!" but don't risk anything else. The goat might not hate me now, but the last thing I need to do is fall off because I was being stupid.

The main gate of Duncloch comes into view and I ready myself for the stop. When we reach the entrance I hop down, grab an apple from my inventory, and hurriedly thank the goat. I give it a quick pat on the head and the goat licks the apple juice from my hand before letting out a bleat and trotting down the mountainside.

I take off through the gate and weave in and out of the crowds of people. I can see the arena where Emry and I need to turn in our tickets and spot Emry outside. They see me then because they wave their hand above their head and jump up and down a few times. They're smiling when I stop in front of them. "I'm so, so, so sorry," I say.

Emry just shakes their head and grabs my wrist instead, pulling me inside the building. "Hey, you made it," they say. "That's what matters." We step off to the side and Emry pulls up their menu, then taps a few buttons on their screen. A window pops up in front of my eyes: *Party with ZackAttack20? Y/N*

I quickly hit “Yes,” and the screen disappears. We rush to the shopkeeper’s desk and stop in front of the same NPC that had the scroll for signups. He raises an eyebrow when he sees our tickets. “Cutting it a bit close aren’t we?” But he stills holds his hand out. Our tickets dissolve into pixels when they touch his hand and the NPC nods. “Step inside,” he says while motioning to the doorway behind him. “Round 1C starts in six minutes.”

When we walk through the doorway I’m caught off guard by the number of players inside. There’s definitely some fancy programming going on in this building. From the outside the arena looks like it might be the size of the baseball field at Oakbrook High. Now that I’m inside though I realize that it’s so big I can’t even see the opposite wall.

I’m so caught up in looking around that it takes me longer than it should to realize that another clock has been added to my overlay. Right below the Topia Standard Time clock is a countdown timer. A little under six minutes is on the clock, ticking down to the start of the round.

I follow Emry as they weave through groups of players. At first I try to count them, just to get an idea of how many teams we’re up against. I’m guessing there are at least three hundred players in here and suddenly I’m not so sure we’ll make it through this round. Emry leans over and says, “Breathe, Aida.” They grin at me then jut their chin toward a cluster of players nearby. “I don’t think many of them are really competition.”

I look at the nearby players more closely, and realize that they’re right. Most of these players are wearing armor that’s pretty plain compared to what Emry and I are wearing. I’m guessing most of them are below level thirty. That doesn’t mean it’ll be easy to make it past this round, but we might have a chance.

We find an open spot near the wall and I pull up my menu. I quickly make sure I'm wearing the right equipment and have the right staff strapped to my back, even though I haven't changed it in over a week. Emry's doing the same, and I suddenly realize that they're wearing new armor.

"Is that what you unlocked?" I ask, motioning at their gear.

Emry nods enthusiastically and says, "Isn't it awesome?" I have to agree, it looks really cool. They've still dyed their armor black and navy, but it has silver embellishments on the belt and jerkin. It looks similar to their other armor: a tunic, pants, armored gauntlets, and boots. But this armor has more leather detailing and it also has a short, hooded cloak. Emry pulls the hood up and wraps the cloak around their arms. "I feel like an assassin in this," they say.

I laugh and shake my head. "I hope so! You're going to get your chance in. . ." I check the countdown timer. "Less than two minutes."

They smile and toss their hood back. They're looking across the room when they say, "So what happened this morning?"

I scuff my shoe against the ground and say, "I overslept. I'm really sorry."

To my surprise Emry throws their head back and laughs at that. "Oh, thank god!" they say. "I really thought I'd done something."

"What? No! Definitely not."

They shrug but finally look at me. "Well, I'm glad."

I smile at them. "Thanks for not being mad."

"Why on earth would I be mad at you for sleeping?" Emry's scrunched up their face like they're extremely confused by this.

I wave a hand in the air and say, "Camryn and Malorie. They used to-"

“They suck,” Emry says, cutting me off.

I double over laughing at that and just nod until I can catch my breath. “Kind of.”

Emry grins at me and rubs their hands together. “Are you ready?”

I look up at the timer, ten seconds left. I grab my staff off my back and ready it. “We’ve got this,” I say. I’m still not sure that’s true, but maybe I can convince the universe it’s true by saying it.

Emry smiles and grabs the hilt of their sword. “We do.”

I look out at the room and realize that most of the players are doing the same, readying their weapons for battle. I look over to Emry again but before I can say anything else we’re all dissolving in a sea of pixels.