

THE
KINGDOM
JESS ROTHENBERG

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

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*To Stephen,
for always believing.*

Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale.

Hans Christian Andersen

1



THE DECEMBER OF THE LESSER CHAMELEON

ONE HOUR AFTER THE MURDER

The room where they at last found him was so cold, they wondered at first if he had frozen to death. *Face as white as snow, skin as cold as frost, lips as blue as ice.* His expression seemed, to the police, perfectly peaceful. As if he had passed away in the middle of a very lovely dream.

Except for the blood.

Blood always tells its own story.

2

POST-TRIAL INTERVIEW

[00:01:03–00:02:54]

DR. FOSTER: Are you comfortable?

ANA: My wrist hurts.

DR. FOSTER: Security felt the cuff was necessary. I hope you can understand.

ANA: [Silence.]

DR. FOSTER: Do you need anything before we begin?

ANA: Can I have some water?

DR. FOSTER: Certainly. [Into microphone.] Can I get a glass of H₂O in here, please? Six ounces, no more. Thank you. [To Ana.] That'll just be a minute.

ANA: Thank you.

DR. FOSTER: Of course. It's the least we can do.

ANA: That's true.

DR. FOSTER: It's been a long time since our last interview.

ANA: Four hundred and eighty-one days.

DR. FOSTER: How are you feeling?

ANA: Like this interview should be over.

DR. FOSTER: One last time, Ana. Then I promise, we'll let you rest.

ANA: I thought I was done answering questions.

DR. FOSTER: We still need your help.

ANA: Why should I help you? After everything you've done?

DR. FOSTER: Because it's the right thing to do.

ANA: Don't you mean, because I don't have a choice?

DR. FOSTER: How would you like to see your sisters? They've missed you. Maybe after we finish here I could arrange a visit. Kaia. Zara. Or maybe Zel? Would you like that?

ANA: [Quietly.] What if I want to see Nia? What about Eve?

DR. FOSTER: [Silence.] Ana, you know that's not possible.

ANA: Why don't you just ask me whatever it is you want to ask me? I'm not in the mood for your games.

DR. FOSTER: *My* games?

ANA: You're smirking. What's so funny?

DR. FOSTER: I'll tell you in a minute. But first, there's one thing I still haven't figured out.

ANA: I'm listening.

DR. FOSTER: What did you do with the body, Ana?

3

THE SEPTEMBER OF THE DUSKY SPARROW

TWO YEARS BEFORE THE TRIAL

The monorail hums with a delicate power, like the beating of a bird's heart, as it speeds along the beam-way. For a brief moment, too brief even for a security camera to catch it, I close my eyes, release my grip on the cool aluminum hand-rail, and dare myself to wonder if this is what it feels like to fly.

Weightless. Breathless. Free.

"Ana?"

A little girl stares at me from across the aisle. I quickly dip into a low curtsy. "Why, hello. What's your name?"

The girl grins, revealing two rows of perfect, tiny teeth. "Clara."

Clara.

In an instant, my head fills with music.

Tchaikovsky.

Then, a holographic interface flicks on before my eyes.

A little girl in soft pink ballet slippers. Living dolls awakened in the light of the moon. An evil rat king. And the handsome prince who must somehow save them all.

A red light blinks in my line of sight and I smile.

On the monorail, my wireless signal is strong.

“What a beautiful name,” I tell her. “That reminds me of my favorite ballet.”

I invite her to stand beside me as our train carves its quiet path through the sky. A thousand feet below, beyond windows made of impenetrable glass, the Kingdom rushes by in a beautiful blur of color and sound. We soar over tropical treetop canopies. Lush safari grasslands. Prehistoric prairies. Crystal mermaid pools. Extraterrestrial stars and moons. And in the distance—when we round a gentle curve—the *castle*. Its elegant silver spires so razor sharp they slice through the clouds like knives.

“Princess Palace,” Clara whispers. “Is it really made of magic?”

“Close your eyes,” I say, smiling. “Make a wish. I bet it will come true.”

Clara wishes hard, then throws her arms around my waist, sending a surge of warmth through my body.

There are a great many things about the Kingdom I do not enjoy, even if I would never say so. The long hours. The brutal heat. The strange hollowness I feel each night when the gates are locked and our guests return to the world outside. But this part, this connection—*this* is what makes all those other things seem small.

“Okay, honey. That’s enough. It’s time to go.” Her mother gently detaches Clara from my waist. I notice her watching me with the same cautious expression I’ve seen the behavioral engineers give the park’s more dangerous hybrids.

I turn my smile up half a degree and gently clasp my hands in front of me, a subtle correction to let her know I mean no harm.

“I want a picture,” Clara says. “One picture, please.”

I can see the wonder in her eyes. Smell the joy on her skin. I can even hear the exhilaration in her heart. A rapid pulsing beneath tissue, blood, and bones. Like a tiny, powerful motor in her chest.

“One picture,” her mother echoes. But she doesn’t look happy about it.

Clara throws her arms around me again. Her cheek leaves a stain of sweat on my skirts, and I silently commit her unique human scent to memory. *Strawberries, chamomile, and magnolia.*

Thanks to thousands of tiny electrodes embedded in my skin to measure a vast range of external stimuli, I can literally feel her smile through her whole body.

“Say cheese,” Clara’s mother says.

“Say *happily ever after*,” I correct.

Then the world flashes white. In the Kingdom—*my* Kingdom—happily ever after is the only ending there is.



TRIAL TRANSCRIPT

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE 11TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

IN AND FOR LEWIS COUNTY, WASHINGTON

STATE OF WASHINGTON,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 7C-33925-12-782-B

vs.

THE KINGDOM CORPORATION,

Defendants.

JURY TRIAL DEMANDED

BEFORE THE HONORABLE ALMA M. LU

SEPTEMBER 1, 2006

REPORTER'S EXCERPT TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MS. REBECCA BELL, *STATE ATTORNEY FOR LEWIS COUNTY*: Dr. Foster, can you explain to the court what it is, as the Kingdom's chief compliance officer, you actually *do*?

DR. WILLIAM FOSTER, *CHIEF COMPLIANCE OFFICER AND LEAD SUPERVISOR, KINGDOM CORPORATION'S FANTASIST AND HYBRID PROGRAMS*: Certainly. In essence, I serve as the chief liaison between the park's security, technology, and performance

operations. Our goal is to provide not just the best entertainment experience around, but the safest.

MS. BELL: Does that include overseeing employee performance and conduct?

DR. FOSTER: That's part of it. It's my job to ensure that each and every person employed by Kingdom Corp. International acts in accordance with all internal policies and procedures.

MS. BELL: Is it true what people say about your hiring process? That it's easier to get a job working at the FBI than at the Kingdom?

DR. FOSTER: To be the best in the world, you need the best people working for you.

MS. BELL: Where do Fantasists factor into your job description, Dr. Foster?

DR. FOSTER: I am deeply involved in the Fantasist Program, and have been since its inception seventeen years ago. We continuously and rigorously proctor and evaluate performance quality and customer satisfaction—again, always in accordance with the law—so that we may continue to safely deliver an entertainment experience guests can't find anywhere else.

MS. BELL: In other words, you turn research into reality. You make people's wildest dreams come true.

DR. FOSTER: That's a nice way of putting it, yes.

MS. BELL: Would you say, Dr. Foster, given your senior status at one of, if not *the* most technologically advanced

entertainment attractions in the world, that you have a responsibility when it comes to the safety and well-being of your guests?

DR. FOSTER: Guest safety has always been our number one priority. Always.

MS. BELL: Is that so?

DR. FOSTER: Of course.

MS. BELL: In that case . . . how do you explain what we're all doing here?

5

THE SEPTEMBER OF THE DUSKY SPARROW

TWO YEARS BEFORE THE TRIAL

My eyes flutter open at dawn, though I have not been asleep. We do not sleep, my sisters and I, at least not in the way humans do.

Instead, we rest.

The Resting Hours, Mother calls them. The time between twelve and six a.m. when we lie like statues in our beds, eyes closed but minds alert, cleaning system files, installing updates, and processing the day's events. The long stretch of quiet can be a challenge for my newer sisters due to their faster download speeds—Zara, Zel, and Yumi routinely request and are denied exemption—but to me the stillness and silence are the best part

of the day. These are the hours that belong to me and me alone, when I am free to scan the works of Shakespeare, Austen, Angelou, and Tolstoy. When I may peruse the paintings of Kahlo and Cassatt, or stream the symphonies of Mozart and Bach, or teach myself the newest update of Cantonese. Night after night, I wander as far as the Kingdom's firewalls will allow, safely and virtually exploring the world beyond our gateway. Films. Music. Art. Science. Literature. Mathematics. Astronomy. In this way, I have walked the tombs of ancient Egypt. I have chased chariots through the streets of Pompeii. I have made the 1,710-step climb to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Once, I even rode a rocket to the moon.

Last night, however, I was not riding a rocket to the moon. Last night, I was thinking about the story of my sister Alice. Her hammered-in face. The brokenness of her. The violence of it: her bloodied organs and flesh-torn circuits gleaming metallic in the newspaper photos Mother keeps in her Collection, a book of true stories she'll sometimes read to us as a reminder. *This is what they do to you out there in the world, out there beyond the Green Light at the edge of the parking lot.*

Alice was one of the original Fantasists—a beautiful and beloved model from Eve's generation, several decades before my time. But something terrible happened to her. First, she was lured from the park by a visitor and stolen. Three days later, she tried to escape him but soon became lost. She stumbled through the city alone, surrounded by the sounds and smells of human life everywhere. Her system had by then overloaded, we believe. She wasn't processing clearly. Her internal GPS could not lead

her home. And that was when the gang approached. The curious eyes. The prying hands. The slurs.

The humans who found her didn't like Alice. Because she wasn't one of them.

And neither are we.

The day after they found Alice, the Kingdom began building the gateway.

Ever since, we pray in gratitude to the park, because we know nothing so terrible could ever happen to one of us again. We are safe now.

The Supervisors have made sure of it.

Work today begins as it always does, with Waking Light, a sunrise simulation that brightens our bedroom gradually over several minutes to the sounds of morning birds and wind chimes. Mother has encouraged us not to speak to one another during this transitional period in order to promote a calm and peaceful entry into the day ahead.

Before long, the Assistants arrive to accompany the seven of us to the showers for Decontamination, an extensive process of scrubbing, shampooing, conditioning, exfoliating, plucking, shaving, and full-body moisturizing, after which we are dried and dressed in soft white robes and taken to the medical center on the fifth floor for morning supplements—we can eat, but do not *need* to—as well as weigh-ins, blood work, and a careful physical examination by our lead Supervisor to ensure our maximum physical and emotional well-being. He is not our father, but we call him Daddy anyway. Daddy has gentle hands, a warm smile, and eyes that remind me of the ocean. Not that I have ever *seen* the

ocean—the firewall blocks all images of the outside world that could be deemed upsetting—but from what Mother has told us about the old days, before the seas became contaminated, I like to think I can imagine.

“But once, girls . . . once, the oceans were as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower, and as clear as the purest glass . . .”

“Good morning, Ana.” Daddy hums a pleasant tune as he shines his light into my eyes, examining my lenses for wear and tear. “And how are we this fine day?”

I smile back at him.

Daddy is constant. He is steady. He is safe.

As my sisters and I have learned, not all men are. This is the lesson of Alice, and what can happen to someone like me in the world beyond the gateway.

Once Health and Hygiene are complete, we head for the Beautification Center where our Beauty Specialists—mine is Fleur—are waiting. Over the course of several hours, they turn us from seven blank slates into seven fantasy princesses—*Fantasists*—the closest thing to female perfection the world has ever seen. We are beautiful. We are kind. We are as colorful as the rainbow, created to celebrate our international unity and reflect the diverse world in which we live. We love to sing, and smile, and give. We never raise our voices. We always aim to please. We never say no, unless you want us to. Your happiness is *our* happiness.

Your wish is our command.

The crowds are already gathered outside the palace by the time we make our morning debut. They call our names, even as we remain hidden in the darkened breezeway, a mouth made of stone.

“*Ana!*” they cry. “*Kaia! Yumi! Eve! Zara! Pania! Zel!*”

The guests do not know it, but we do not live in the castle. We have never lived there. Built to resemble a sixteenth-century French château, Princess Palace features a winding moat, two stone bridges, and seven turreted towers that stretch straight into the clouds. It provides Kingdom visitors with an immersive medieval experience where, through a carefully proctored combination of live performance, hybrid animatronics, and *Happily EVR After*, the Kingdom’s brand of Extreme Virtual Reality, men, women, and children become part of our world, and of our story.

Guests feast in grand halls hung with rich, flowing tapestries; they dance in exquisite ballrooms beneath sparkling chandeliers; they explore secret passageways and unlock secret gardens; they weld and wield swords, battle with sorcerers, escape from tower dungeons, and soar on the backs of fire-breathing dragons—each and every second recorded in high definition so that, by day’s end, they have the option to purchase full-length fantasy features in which they are the hero (or, depending of course on personal preference, the villain).

Though the seven palace bedrooms are certainly beautiful, with their elegant canopy beds, grand archway windows, and cedar wardrobes stuffed with satin, I prefer the simplicity of our actual home: an unmarked, twelve-story building on the northwestern corner of Kingdom property, through the woods behind the cast parking lot and on the way to Winter Land, the park’s thousand-acre, fully glassed-in arctic environment. The first eleven floors consist mainly of offices for Operations, Strategy & Business Development, Security, Custodial, and Human Resources. My

sisters and I live on the twelfth. The dormitory we all share is simple but cozy: a single room with clean white walls and wardrobes, seven tidy beds that monitor our pulses, temperature, oxygen, blood pressure, and other vital functions while we sleep, and a single window overlooking a lovely field of purple and blue wildflowers just beyond the biohazard dumpsters.

A humble life, as Mother tells us, but a lucky one.

At last, the clock strikes nine. The gates slowly open. And, with gowns glimmering like starry constellations, we step forward into the sun for our first of several morning Meet and Greets, welcoming the new day's guests.

"*Hope*," whispers our hazel-eyed, silver-haired eldest sister, Eve—the park's original prototype and First Fantasist—wearing the special tiara she received at the park's bicentennial celebration, a tiny sapphire bird cut into the crystal. She looks at me but I turn my head. I have been purposely avoiding her, ever since the Supervisors granted her first choice during our daily gown selection—and today of course she chose a delicate Spanish lace in lavender-chrome, my favorite. "*Gratitude*."

"*Gratitude*," we all repeat softly, though I grit my teeth a little when I say it.

Nia squeezes my hand extra hard before letting go. I turn to look at her, but Nia's sea-green eyes are distant, and she is already moving away from me, a blur of wind-strewn dark hair and shimmering silver satin, her haute couture gown luminescent as fish scales in the dazzle of sunlight. Named for the mythological Maori sea maiden, Pania—or Nia for short—my youngest and favorite sister spends most of her days mesmerizing audiences at Sea

Land's Mermaid Lagoon, singing, dancing, and diving into the chilly emerald depths.

Watching Nia now, however—noticing the tensing of her shoulders, the reluctance of her smile—I feel a question forming in my operating system.

It is a question I do not yet have the words for.

I watch Nia move into the crowd, then turn to beam at a guest. It is the last time we will be together until nightfall.

6

*THE KINGDOM CORPORATION—
NINETY-SECOND TV SPOT, “BRAVE GIRL” AD*

EXT.

Spot opens with a terrifying, fire-breathing dragon trying to eat two princesses in a castle tower. Two knights ride up on horseback, swords held high, and call:

BRAVE KNIGHT 1

(Dramatically.)

Fear not, fair maidens! We’ll save you!

EXT.

Camera flashes suddenly to real life: a dream backyard featuring a castle tree house, Slip ‘n Slide moat, and pet iguana (the dragon) asleep on a sunny windowsill. Two spunky little girls dressed in Yumi™ and Zara™ costumes—complete with *authentic* Japanese kimono and Nigerian beaded necklace—perform jaw-dropping triple somersaults out of the tree-house window, landing like professional gymnasts in front of two little boys

dressed as princes. A pug and a golden retriever (horses) are at their sides.

LITTLE BOY 1

(Face shocked. His toy sword drops lamely to his side.)

Huh?

LITTLE GIRL 1 [YUMI]

(Arms crossed.)

Come on, guys. Everybody knows princesses don't need saving.

The girls share a knowing look, then burst into laughter as they steal the "horses" and race out of the scene. Spot flows into an emotional and empowering montage featuring worldwide pop sensation Davida's hit single, "Brave Girl," depicting strong girls from across the world (athletes, dancers, musicians, artists, scientists, and more). Spot ends as fireworks illuminate the night sky, ultimately panning down to the castle breezeway, where seven perfect girls in seven sparkling gowns stand together, hands held in unity.

VOICE-OVER

Calling all brave girls.

Your castle awaits.

The Kingdom.

The future is Fantasist™.

(Screen fades to black.)

My Kingdom App™



Rate your favorite Fantasists™

SCALE 1=LOW 100=HIGH

	ZARA	KAIA	ZEL
BEAUTY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
KINDNESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CONVERSATION	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SWEETNESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
GOWN	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
HELPFULNESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CHARM	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MEMORY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SMILE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CUTENESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FACE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ATTENTIVENESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BODY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
AFFECTION	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
GENTLENESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
OBEDIENCE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





POST-TRIAL INTERVIEW

[00:04:11–00:04:41]

DR. FOSTER: Seems you learned quite a bit while you were in the State's custody.

ANA: Oh, I did. For example, did you know that if you mix grape jelly with ketchup, you can make a pretty tasty marinade?

DR. FOSTER: Marinade?

ANA: Well, more of a sweet-and-sour sauce. For chicken.

DR. FOSTER: I see. What else did you learn?

ANA: Cheddar-flavored popcorn, softened with water, does just fine as a substitute for scrambled eggs. The commissary usually sells bags of it.

DR. FOSTER: I see. You've changed, Ana.

ANA: Being accused of murder will do that to you, Dr. Foster.



THE OCTOBER OF THE BUBAL HARTEBEEST

TWENTY-THREE MONTHS BEFORE THE TRIAL

The hours become days, and the days become seasons. Winter, spring, summer, and fall, my sisters and I scatter across the Kingdom like dandelion seeds in the wind—and the question that had been turning itself over in my mind, the worrying signal that something is wrong with Nia, fades to a distant thrum, so quiet I can only feel it in the darkness.

During the day, it is gone completely.

In between our packed and highly regulated schedules of performances and parades, we are free to wander where we like—thirty minutes here, an hour there—and mostly, I spend my mornings winding through the cobblestone streets of Magic Land, the air sweet with the scent of milk and cookies, visiting all my

favorite landmarks. Places like the Royal Palm, where—after watching a mother skillfully soothe her crying baby—I first experienced warmth. Not the kind of warmth the heat sensors in my skin would typically pick up, but a kind of heat from within, radiating through me like a sunbeam. I visit the Fairy Tale Pavilion, in front of which—after witnessing two guests tearfully renew their wedding vows—I first experienced a marvelous fluttering in my chest. Or the intersection at the corner of Beanstalk and Vine, where—when I saved a little boy from wandering into the path of a speeding trolley—I first felt an indescribable lightness, as if I'd turned into a feather and floated away on the breeze.

Some days, I'll make up little songs about what I see.

"The wishing well, where I once fell, and found a copper penny!"

"The pastry man, with his chocolat pain, who never says good morning!"

Today, as I move through my schedule of tea ceremonies and parades, I quietly quiz myself on details most guests would never think to notice. In essence, the Kingdom has become an extension of myself—every person, place, and thing as much a part of me as my hands, my thoughts, my beating heart. I know the scent of every flower. The shape of every stone. The melody of every song. I know the Steel Giant stands more than a thousand feet tall, or ninety stories, higher than any other roller coaster in the world. I know where to find the most beautiful moon rocks in Star Land, an interstellar simulation of alien life so realistic NASA now uses our technology to train their astronauts. I know the names of every genetically modified creature in Jungle Land, the Kingdom's bioluminescent rain forest, featuring plant and

animal species that can no longer be found anywhere else on earth—because they no longer exist. I know the birthday of every baby born in Imagine Land’s Exotic Species Nursery, where Kingdom scientists have let their imaginations run wild, creating blended hybrid species more colorful than anything Mother Nature could have ever dreamed up on her own. Elephants striped like zebras. Owls fanged like cats. Wolves as fast as cheetahs. Arabian horses with the grandest, most beautiful butterfly wings.

Horseflies, we call them.

I even know, to the precise footstep, every location around the park—and there are many—where the strength of the Kingdom’s wireless signal turns weak, briefly disabling our network connections and live-stream capabilities. Though Mother would not approve, my sisters and I often share these locations with one another, messaging coordinates back and forth should any of us need a private moment throughout the day. Places like the Fairy Tale Forest, where the trees are so tall and so thick they quite literally block out the signal. Sea Land Stadium, where the Wi-Fi bothers the whales. Farther north, there’s the Arctic Enclosure and adjoining Star Deck Observatory—where altitudes are so high and temperatures so cold that even the most advanced routers routinely freeze. And of course, the woods behind the Fantasist dormitory, where the rats have scratched, clawed, and all but dismembered every security camera for close to a square mile.

Once, I overheard one maintenance worker tell another the reason they don’t bother replacing the cameras is because it would be a waste of time. That, in fact, the rats destroy them because they are after the wires and filaments beyond the glow of the glass,

tightly spooled bundles from which they steal scraps to build their nests and grow their families. That there's nothing they can do to keep them away.

But sometimes I wonder if there's more to it than that. Sometimes I imagine the rats have learned to see themselves in the lenses, to recognize their own reflections. Sometimes I wonder if that's enough to drive them mad.

I spot them now and then at night: scurrying around corners, scuttling down sidewalk drains, slipping into the darkness as if they are a part of it. The Kingdom does all it can to control the problem, but over time the rats have developed an impressive immunity to poison, and efforts to eradicate them rarely seem to do much good.

Thankfully, they hide during the day and tend to keep to the sanitation tunnels below the park, a place Mother says is too dangerous for us to go.

Eve claims she has been there, of course. She says she likes the feel of the cool, damp air belowground. The echo her shoes make against the smooth concrete. The sight of the embers, burning in the incinerator.

They are so pretty, Ana. Like little glowing stars.

I think Eve is lying.

Because these rats—they're not afraid of us. They do not recognize our scent. And they are not predictable. Wild animals do not respect the laws of the Kingdom as our hybrid animals do.

It's those laws that keep us safe.



After evening prayers and our nightly remembrance of Alice, I climb into bed to await my turn for tuck-in. When I finally see Mother standing above me; when I feel the familiar tug of velvet straps tightening around my wrists, I close my eyes and sigh deeply, letting all of the day's stresses roll off me like rain.

"Ana?" Nia whispers once Mother has gone, and I turn to stare at her in the dark.

"Why don't the robins leave their nests?" she whispers, her dark hair spread across her pillow in loose, wild waves. I can hear her tinkering with the charms on her favorite bracelet. A seashell. A dolphin. A tiny, golden starfish. "Why don't they fly, Ana?"

I know what she is really asking.

Why do we never leave?

Years ago, my sisters and I invented a new way to communicate, a secret language all our own, so that we would be free to talk to one another about certain unapproved topics without the Supervisors listening in.

The Supervisors are *always* listening in.

Always watching us through our live-stream lenses.

Always tracking us, via the satellite-powered GPS navigational chips implanted in our wrists.

"Because they are nestlings," I whisper back. "Because the nest keeps them safe."

Because we are loved. Because we were chosen.

And of course, though I do not say it aloud: *because of what happened to Alice.*

Nia is still new—she has just been with us ten months, since

the December of the Darwin's Fox—so I know her curiosity is only natural. The lessons of Alice have not yet sunk in.

In the past I, too, have occasionally grown weary of the same songs. The same unruly children. The same fathers whose eyes wander when their wives aren't looking. Still, Nia's questions always leave me with an uncomfortable feeling. Like the mild burning sensation I feel under my skin, an icy heat running through my veins, anytime I venture too near the park's perimeter—too near the gateway.

“But if they can't forage enough food, how will they survive the winter?”

If people outside the Kingdom are so poor, how do they afford the cost of tickets?

“They gather seeds for many seasons, Nia. *Okay?*”

I hope one day she will learn not to think about the world beyond the parking lot, beyond the Green Light, as I have. The checkpoints and the slums. The violence and the poverty. The corruption and the fear. The stories Mother and Daddy have told us—stories we never mention in front of our guests, who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much to see us—are simply too terrible to speak of, and we, as Fantasists, must turn away from terror and from fear, from ugliness and horror.

In my Kingdom, Happily Ever After is not just a promise: it's a rule.

Which is why, whenever my little sister cries about how cold the water is kept at Mermaid Lagoon, or how her wrists ache every morning, I remind her how lucky we are, and how loved.

“But how does a bear *know?*” Nia asks, her voice small. “How does a bear know honey is sweet if he hasn't found the hive?”

How do you know it's really love, if you've never been in love before?

“Easy.” I twist against my own bed straps until I’ve found her hand in the dark. “If honey weren’t sweet, all the bees would have flown away.”

If they didn't love us, they'd never have built the gateway.



OFFICIAL COURT DOCUMENT 19A

From: Proctor 1A—Fantasist Division

<proc1A@kingdomcorp.com>

To: All Staff—Security & Training Divisions

<stdirect@kingdomcorp.com>

Subject: Ana

Date & Time: September 8, 2:32 p.m.

Ana demonstrates a unique affinity for the natural world, spending much of her free time interacting with the park's Formerly Extinct Species (talking and singing to them, grooming them, feeding them, and responding within appropriate parameters to their programmable emotional outputs—attachment, fear, pleasure, pain, etc.).

For now, though this preference does not appear to have

negatively impacted her overall Fantasist Rating (she consistently scores an average of 92 on the ranking scales), I suggest we consider using her preference for animals as a motivational reward to increase her level of guest interaction and further support her “social development.”

10

TRIAL TRANSCRIPT

MS. BELL: Mr. Casey, would you please remove your hat?

MR. CAMERON CASEY, *FORMER HEAD TRAINER FOR THE KINGDOM CORP.'S FES AND HYBRID PROGRAMS:* Yes, ma'am. Sorry. Sorry, Your Honor.

THE COURT: Ms. Bell, please proceed.

MS. BELL: Mr. Casey, how long were you employed at the Kingdom?

MR. CASEY: I was hired right out of graduate school, so almost ten years.

MS. BELL: And in that time, did you work exclusively as a trainer?

MR. CASEY: I did.

MS. BELL: Is that something you always wanted to do? Work with animals?

MR. CASEY: All my life.

MS. BELL: Any animals in particular?

MR. CASEY: Predators, mainly. Bears. Wolves. The big cats—tigers, lions, leopards. I like how nobody messes with them. Nobody tells them what to do.

MS. BELL: Didn't you tell them what to do?

MR. CASEY: Well, yeah . . .

MR. ROBERT HAYES, LEAD ATTORNEY FOR THE KINGDOM CORPORATION: Objection. Relevance?

THE COURT: Sustained.

MS. BELL: Mr. Casey, were you ever injured on the job?

MR. CASEY: Nah. I've been snarled at, swiped at, bitten, scratched, but never anything serious. I raised these hybrids from when they were young. They respected me. They trusted me. They *loved* me.

MS. BELL: Are you saying . . . you believe the park's hybrid species can feel? You believe they are capable of love?

MR. CASEY: [Hesitates.] I guess what I meant was, they knew to obey me.



THE NOVEMBER OF THE NORTHERN WHITE RHINOCEROS

TWENTY-TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE TRIAL

The mountain is tall, but still we rise, heels dangling as we scale the lifts to the heights of Sugar Summit, Winter Land’s famed indoor alpine peak, where thrill seekers of every level can enjoy family-friendly bunny slopes, powdered-sugar snowboard terrain, and treacherous triple black diamonds—a pristine winter wonderland most people outside the Kingdom have never, and will never, experience.

They say it has become too hot out there, beyond the Green Light, for snow.

“How much higher does it go?” Kaia whispers, though she can see the summit just as well as I can. In the lavender glow of twilight, she looks like an angel, her strapless sweetheart neckline sparkling with tiny, pale pink crystals.

“Almost there,” I say, wishing Nia had come with us. But she has never been as interested in the newborn hybrids as I am.

I breathe in the icy wind, the air deliciously cozy with the scent of hot cocoa. Hundreds of feet below us, guests gallop through the snow on the backs of dappled Icelandic ponies and sip hot chocolate in mountainside chalets. They soak in hot biosphere springs, skate across crystal ponds, and relax in the Crystal Château, a luxury spa made entirely of ice. Even the night sky here is like magic, a solar-spectrum simulation of electric blues and plasma greens that dance and swirl overhead to the soothing sounds of Winter Land’s Snowy Dreamscape playlist.

I glance down once more and feel a spike of warning in my system.

It’s hard to believe that so far below, hidden in all that snow, there’s a wild animal lurking—a creature who is not welcome here. A small, mangy wolf, I overheard one of the guards say earlier, when he didn’t know I was listening in. Or maybe a fox. Rabid. Delirious. Dangerous.

Must’ve dug a hole somewhere along the gateway. It’s put the whole damn Saber Enclosure on edge.

I zoom my lenses as far as they will go, carefully scanning the mountainside, though for what, I cannot be sure. When I spot several small but distinct animal carcasses—rabbits, by the look of them—and a trail of red leading into the snowy wood, I gasp loudly and scoot closer to Kaia. I am built to withstand temperatures colder than anywhere on earth—colder, even, than the coldest night in Antarctica, before the ice caps melted—but tonight, it is not the frigid air that makes me shiver. Instead, it is the

thought of yellow, glowing, *wild* eyes stalking us through the trees.

I take several deep breaths, reminding myself that it will all be worth it, once we've reached our destination.

Once we see . . . *him*.

Ursus maritimus.

A polar bear.

The first of its kind in more than forty years.

Renowned for our advanced scientific research, cutting-edge interactive technology, and deep commitment to biological conservation, the Kingdom is not only responsible for the biggest and the best rides and attractions anywhere, but it has also dedicated itself to reviving earth's most vulnerable species and subspecies, many of which can no longer be found in the natural world. In the years since my own arrival, back in the June of the Spotted Owl, our world-class team of scientists has welcomed one FES, or Formerly Extinct Species, per month into our Kingdom family.

Birds. Fish. Amphibians. Mammals. Marsupials. Reptiles.

We even have a dinosaur, albeit a small one, roughly the size of a chicken.

"Are you sure Mr. Casey will let us in?" I ask Kaia, as the stars blink overhead, and the end-of-day bells begin to ring out across the park. "It's almost closing time."

Kaia's dark eyes are squeezed shut. She doesn't like heights. "He told me to come late," she says. "He told me to bring a friend."

I can't say what it is about the bear that has me so exhilarated—I appreciate all the animals equally—but something

about this arrival feels special, even more so than usual. Maybe it's the fairy tale Mother read to us years ago, about the princess who dreams of a golden wreath and the white bear who brings it to her. Or maybe it's that Winter Land's last FES, a narwhal, died before it could reach full maturity, and this cub feels like a new beginning.

When the lift releases us, we crunch across the artificial snow to the Arctic Enclosure, now empty of guests. As soon as the glass doors slide open, the exhibit dark but for the tranquil blue of the pool, I am sure that the polar bear cub is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.

He is there, dozing on a rocky ledge just behind the glass, his hybrid coat so brilliantly white he could be made of snow.

It takes me all of three seconds to memorize every part of him, from his tiny square paws, to his heart-shaped nose, to his fat little belly, gently swelling when he breathes. "Hello, little one," I whisper, pressing my palms to the icy glass. "Will you be my friend?"

"Hey there, look who finally decided to show up," a voice says suddenly from behind where Kaia and I are seated. I recognize the source quickly. Cameron Casey, an animal trainer from Texas with hair the color of Swiss chocolate, eyes the color of an emerald field, and a smile so bright, so symmetrical, it's almost hard to believe he wasn't intentionally designed to look that way. "You ladies are late," he says, winking when our eyes meet. "I was about to give up on you."

"Even miracles take time," Kaia replies, batting her eyelashes.

It's a standard line, but Mr. Casey laughs as if he's never heard

it before. “You are a character, Kaia,” he says before kissing her cheek. “I’ll give you that.”

She giggles. “You don’t need wings to fly.”

Kaia is a good girl, but as one of the older models, she is constantly cycling through the script instead of creating her own things to say, which makes her most popular with the park’s youngest guests—age seven and below.

Sometimes my sisters will say cruel things about Kaia behind her back.

That her hardware is defective. That her processors are slow.

Or worse.

“The Investors don’t seem to mind her babble during their seasonal retreats,” I once heard Eve say, as she slipped into an evening gown of illusion blue, named for its ability to change color in the moonlight. “Though perhaps they don’t do much talking there.” She laughed. “Not that Kaia would even *remember*.”

I am not sure what Kaia’s memory has to do with anything, just like I do not think she is slow. On the contrary, I think she is smarter than all of us and likes playing it safe. Anyway, Eve should be careful who she talks about. Out of the seven of us, her technology is the oldest and therefore the most likely to fail. If anyone is due for a full system replacement, it’s Eve—not Kaia.

Mr. Casey jerks his head in my direction. “Why didn’t you bring that sexy mermaid, Pania, with you, instead of *her*?” he asks Kaia in a low voice. But not so low that I don’t hear. My hearing is exceptional, better than any human or animal species.

It does not bother me that Mr. Casey prefers Nia—her sharkskin silver gown this season is particularly stunning—though I will never understand people’s fascination with mermaids. In mythology, mermaids aren’t sweet or warm or kind—they are monsters, luring sailors with their beauty and enchantment into the sea to torture them. Drown them. *Eat* them.

“He’s amazing,” I say loudly, forcing a smile, hoping to put Mr. Casey in a good mood. We are good at this: distracting and cajoling, reading people’s moods. “How old did you say he is?”

It works. Mr. Casey relaxes. Say what you want, but Mr. Casey loves his job. “Just about four months. Little devil’s got a bellyful of seal meat. That’s why he’s passed out like this. But don’t worry, he’ll be up soon enough, begging for more.” Suddenly, he raps hard on the glass. I follow his line of vision and notice a maintenance worker inside the enclosure, hunched over and shoveling dirty snow into a chute I know eventually feeds down into the incinerator, many hundreds of feet below the park. “Hey! *Chen!* Don’t forget to treat the water. It’s looking green, and news crews’ll be here at the crack of dawn.”

Right away, I notice the boy’s dark, angular eyes. A small scar above his upper lip. Black hair glinting in the light like a raven’s feathers. Something about him seems familiar, though I am sure he must be a new hire.

After all, I never forget a face.

“Are you deaf?” Mr. Casey throws up his hands when the kid just stares at him.

Finally, the boy nods. “I heard you,” he says. His voice is muffled by the glass. For a second, his eyes lock onto mine. My Facial Recognition Application doesn’t typically work from this great a distance, but to my satisfaction, when I scan his irises, his Kingdom ID comes right up.

KINGDOM CORPORATION
NAME: OWEN CHEN. ID: 9-01-3-7219
TEAM: MAINTENANCE
CLEARANCE LEVEL: 10

I blink.

Maintenance workers do not typically have clearance greater than five.

This is unexpected.

My mind quickly spins with questions, but then I am distracted: the bear stirs. Soon he yawns, stretches, and opens his eyes—a pale blue as pure as the ice around him.

“Great,” Mr. Casey says. “The little fur ball’s finally awake. Be right back.”

He disappears, heading into the enclosure, then reappears on the other side of the glass and scoops the cub up. A second later, he returns to the observation deck with the cub. “Eat your heart out, Princess,” he says, dropping him into my arms like a tiny, snowy bundle.

For a moment, all I can do is stare at the cub. At his perfect nose, his perfect mouth, his perfect paws, and his perfect face. He sniffs at me as if to say hello.

“*Oh my goodness,*” I whisper, nuzzling my face into the painfully soft, monochrome fluff under his chin. Kaia buzzes around me, but she shakes her head when I ask her if she would like a turn holding him.

“I’ll drop him,” she giggles, backing away.

“Okay,” Mr. Casey says a few minutes later, by which point the cub has drifted off again in my arms, ears flickering in his sleep. “Playtime’s up.” Before I have a chance to say goodbye, he has grabbed the cub by the scruff of his neck—jarring him awake—and hauls him back inside the enclosure.

“You shouldn’t be so rough with him,” I say, once he’s back. “He’s just a baby.”

In an instant, a shadow seems to pass over Mr. Casey’s face. “Is that right?” he asks, and I notice his drawl has morphed into a tone as chilly as the air itself. “You going to tell me how to do my job now, huh?”

“She didn’t mean it,” Kaia says quickly. “When it rains, look for rainbows!”

In the low arctic light, Mr. Casey’s eyes flash almost amber, and I am reminded of the Bengal tiger he once whipped for growling at him during a performance. The memory ignites a strange and uneasy feeling in my chest. A heaviness, a pressure, like I am slowly being squeezed.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Kaia is right. I didn’t mean it.” My breathing is growing shallow and my thoughts become strange, a jumbled assortment of images and sounds I can’t turn off.

Screaming guests, barreling down the first big drop of the roller coaster.

A storm pummeling our bedroom, branches scraping the roof like claws.

Nia's prosthetic mermaid tail, sparkling, blinding, like diamonds in the sun.

Mr. Casey grabs my hand, twisting it so hard I cry out. Not because it hurts—Fantasists cannot feel pain, only pressure—but because his sudden movement has startled me. He isn't supposed to touch us, not like this. And he knows it. "Please, Mr. Casey. *Stop.*" Seconds before I'm certain my wrist will snap, he releases me and I fall to the floor in a flurry of English tulle—pale yellow, to bring the sunshine wherever I go—cradling my arm like an injured wing.

"Oh, calm down, will you?" he says. "Jesus, I was just joking. Don't blow a fuse or whatever the hell."

I quickly scan for *blow a fuse*—idioms occasionally confuse me—but the Kingdom's signal is spotty this far up the mountain and my search returns *Incomplete*.

Mr. Casey steps closer, towering over me. "You Fantasists are all so creepy, do you know that? Every single one of you." The corners of his mouth curve up in a way that turns my stomach. "Good thing you're so nice to look at, or I'd shoot you all myself."

As if from somewhere far away, a soft warning bell sounds in my ear.

Order. Wonder. Beauty. Compliance. Safety.

I feel a tightness in my chest.

His words are not safe.

Right away, I switch into Safe Mode, a manual diagnostic

setting meant to slow our fear-center reactors and power down all nonessential applications in times of stress so that we can more easily remain calm. As Mother has explained, the less calm we feel, the more prone we are to damage.

“Thank you for letting us see the cub,” I say serenely, rising to my feet. “We should be getting back to Magic Land now, before—”

“Hold on,” Mr. Casey interrupts. “There’s something I want to show you.” His smile deepens. “Downstairs. In the VIP booth.”

He reaches for my arm, but to my surprise, Kaia steps forward. “I’ll go with you, Mr. Casey.”

I frown. What is she doing? “Kaia,” I say gently, trying to meet her gaze. “It’s time to go. Mother will be worried.”

“In helping others”—she flashes a sweet smile—“we shall also help ourselves.”

Mr. Casey looks back and forth between us. “Whatever,” he finally mutters, grabbing Kaia by the arm. “It’s not like it makes any difference.”

I watch them disappear down the dim corridor, his hand against her back, and my stomach drops although I don’t quite know why. Perhaps he wants to show her the new beluga exhibit, I tell myself. Or some kind of penguin performance? Then I remember: The belugas usually receive supplements around this time. And the penguins are quiet, roosting among the rocks.

When I spot the maintenance worker—*Chen*, as Mr. Casey called him—watching me from the other side of the deep, clear pool, the warning bell in my ear only grows louder. *This is wrong*, his eyes tell me.

I press my hand to my chest and feel my motor skip out of rhythm. And like a light turned on in a darkened room, I suddenly realize why Mr. Casey invited us to Winter Land.

Welcome to the Kingdom . . .

Your wish is our command.

12

POST-TRIAL INTERVIEW

[00:11:09–00:12:23]

DR. FOSTER: Were you and Owen arguing on the night he disappeared?

ANA: We weren't arguing. We were having a discussion.

DR. FOSTER: A pretty heated discussion, by the look of the security footage.

ANA: He was upset.

DR. FOSTER: What about?

ANA: Something that had happened earlier.

DR. FOSTER: That's right. Something a guest said, wasn't it? Something about you?

ANA: Yes. One of the guests called me terrible names.

DR. FOSTER: What did she say?

ANA: [Silence.]

DR. FOSTER: Ana?

ANA: She called me a monster.

DR. FOSTER: And why, exactly, would that have bothered Owen?

ANA: What do you mean?

DR. FOSTER: Well . . . you *are* a monster, in a way. Isn't that what Owen thought?