

The Enchantment
A Collection of Stories
By Destiny Hankerson
May 4, 2024

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE ENCHANTMENT

First edition. June 7, 2025.

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Written by Destiny Hankerson.

With a little seed of imagination you can grow a field of hope. - African Proverb

Introduction

These stories are a collection from my imagination. Some of them delve into the emotions of the people of everyday life, finding a way through their problems and recognizing the depth of the beauty of each day. Others explore the realms of fantasy and worlds far removed from our own. Each story has a unique inspiration, and I hope the reader enjoys them all.



To Be Someone Else



Dayrin gazed out at the ocean as he stood on the lonely beach. It was a nippy day, the kind of day where you wished the sun would peek out from behind the clouds to warm you up. Dayrin gazed longingly up at the sky, hoping that he would see the sunlight, but for now the sun was still hiding behind the clouds.

He was a tall, gangly youngster with long black hair, and his eyes were dark and curious. Most of the time, he was friendly to talk with, but he had a mysterious air that also seemed slightly melancholy. He was the oldest in the Markinson family, and he sometimes wished he were the younger brother because he felt he would have an easier time.

His younger brother, Len, was a child prodigy, and his parents doted on his every move. Len had already won three major prizes in advanced mathematics, and Mr and Mrs. Markinson hoped the teenager would become a genius professor one day. To Dayrin, who was often left behind out of his parents' devotion to Len's academic prowess, Len had everything he ever wanted. It made Dayrin feel a little envious and left out. He wanted to be supported, too.

"If only I were Len," he thought wistfully.

Dayrin, who was adopted by the Markinson family, always felt like the outsider. The chatty, sociable Markinsons were miles away from his quiet, broody personality, and he felt as distant as a man from another planet would feel if he visited the earth. For years, Mr and Mrs. Markinson tried to dissolve the wall of solitude that seemed to surround Dayrin, but Dayrin liked to be alone. He only wished that he could somehow fit in better with the family. In a way, he felt that he didn't belong with them and needed to be somewhere else.

Dayrin kicked a pebble along the beach. He watched it skip into the ocean. Then he breathed a peaceful sigh. When he was in nature, he felt serene.

At that moment, he saw Len. Len was gazing at the ocean, and his eyes looked desperate. For a split second, he glanced at Dayrin, and then Len quickly walked onward.

"Hmm, I wonder what's going on with him and why he didn't say hello," Dayrin thought.

Then Dayrin gasped as he watched Len leap into the ocean. For a moment, the waves seemed to ripple away from him, as if they were recoiling from the self-destructive action Len wanted to take, but then they quickly enveloped the young boy. Dayrin forgot about himself and his own safety; his only concern was Len, and he leaped into the ocean to try to save the boy from drowning.

Dayrin was a strong swimmer, and soon his arms were wrapped around Len, hauling his younger brother to the shore. Len gasped and sputtered, almost out of breath already.

When they were on the beach, Dayrin yelled, "Len, whatever came over you? What were you trying to do, kill yourself?"

Len, looking embarrassed and ashamed, nodded.

Dayrin was distraught. He wanted to keep shouting, but then he realized this would only make his younger brother feel even more distressed. Dayrin managed to calm himself and wrapped his arm around Len.

"Why, Len? You have your whole life ahead of you. You're not like me – I'm the one who's got no purpose. You have everything. You're a mathematical genius. Why do you want to take your own life?"

"I'm exhausted," Len admitted, and tears came into his eyes. "I'm trying to keep up but it's just too much."

Dayrin felt a wave of empathy come over him. He hugged Len and said, "Talk with me about it. I'm here to listen."

Len started pouring out a torrent of words, talking about his challenges in academics and how he felt overwhelmed by his parents' wishes for him to become an accomplished professor. Dayrin learned that Len studied for hours at night in an effort to get high grades on every test; barely slept to keep up with math competitions; and faced the constant burden of his teachers' expectations for him to become a stellar genius in everything he did.

"I'm just so scared to mess up," Len said. "One mistake and I feel I've ruined everything."

Dayrin nodded his head. "I can understand why it would be so hard to try to be perfect in everything you do," he agreed.

"I know," Len sighed. "Sometimes I just wish I could be like you."

Dayrin jerked in astonishment. "Me?" he said, with an ironic laugh. "You wouldn't want to be me. I don't have anything going on in my life."

"I don't think you understand, though, Dayrin," said Len thoughtfully. "You see, you still have a lot of life ahead of you, too. And at least you can make your life what you want it to be. You're free. You don't have to be a super genius. You can just live and explore and make mistakes in life."

Dayrin hadn't really thought of his life in that way before. He stopped his sardonic laughing and started thinking more deeply. In a way, it was true that he was free to do a lot of things that Len couldn't experience – he could use his own time, as he often did, to explore his own interests, such as astronomy and the arts. Although his adoptive parents certainly were fond of him and took care of him, they never placed the huge expectations on his shoulders that Len had to face everyday. Dayrin began to realize he needed to have more gratitude for the life he had in the present moment, even if he couldn't always understand why things were the way they were.

At the same time, he felt that Len had so much more potential than what he could see....It was not time to end everything yet.

"Len, I understand how you feel," said Dayrin softly. "But you mustn't end everything. Your life is precious! It matters. Even if you don't understand why you're going through all these chal-

lenges, there's light at the end of the tunnel. Things won't seem so hard as you grow up, and it's okay for you to make mistakes. Promise me you'll stay with us, okay? And remember, you don't have to be perfect for me."

Len fell onto Dayrin's shoulder, crying again, but this time in tears of relief. Dayrin felt the damp tears on his shirt sleeve and nearly wanted to cry himself.

"Thank you, Dayrin," said Len. "That means everything to me."

Dayrin hugged Len again. And at that moment, he understood that his life did have a purpose, and there was a reason for him to exist. He was able to help his younger brother feel less alone and overwhelmed by all the challenges in his life, and that alone was enough reason to keep on living and finding a meaning in each day that came. There was no need for him to be someone else; in the universe, he had a place in it as himself, someone that was irreplaceable to his younger brother Len.



May 2024



Ocean Heart



An illustration for "To Be Someone Else"



Never Aging



May gazed in the mirror at her wrinkles and heaved a deep sigh. She was 45 years old, and the pressures and stresses of life had already etched some deep lines onto her face. It was difficult for her to look in the mirror and see her aging face staring back at her.

She flipped through the fashion magazine that came in the mail yesterday. Page after page showed glamorous photos of women who had not a single wrinkle on their faces. She wished that she could look like these flawless women.

Her friend, Amy, suggested that May go to the plastic surgeon and get some Botox. “Everyone’s doing it,” Amy said, “and you won’t have to deal with your wrinkles anymore. You might as well say good-bye to them now!”

But May still felt unsure. After all, going under the knife was a procedure that took time and effort, as well as lots of money. Nonetheless, she felt that it was only through plastic surgery that she could truly get rid of the unsightly wrinkles on her face.

She drove to the plastic surgery clinic to see what kinds of treatments were available. As she stepped into the clinic, she saw a surging crowd of women of all ages. She was surprised to see so many young women, anxiously looking at pictures of influencers on social media. “I wonder why they are here,” she thought. In her twenties, plastic surgery was the farthest thing from her mind.

May spotted one young woman arguing with a plastic surgeon. “I have to get this brow lift and some preventative Botox,” the young woman snapped. “I need to stop the wrinkles before they start!”

The plastic surgeon was sighing and shaking her head. “It would be irresponsible of me to do this when you’re so young,” she countered. “Your face is still developing and you could permanently damage your features if I operate too much.”

But another surgeon said chirpily, “Oh, why are you discouraging her? It’s self-care! She’s doing the right thing!” The young woman beamed approvingly.

“*That’s* the surgeon I want,” she said, and she headed off with the surgeon who agreed with her choice.

May felt confused and disturbed by the scene. She glanced at the dissenting plastic surgeon and said, “I guess you can’t always stop it from happening, right?”

The plastic surgeon sighed again. “That’s right,” she admitted. “A lot of these young woman come to me and want plastic surgery long before they ever need it. I keep telling them it’s unnecessary, but they want to follow these trends to prevent the wrinkles. There’s only so much I can do to keep them from going through with operations they don’t need.”

May looked thoughtful. She wondered if the pressure on the young women would not be so great if they were not constantly comparing themselves to artificial photos of glamorous women on the internet. But then May remembered the magazines, and how she compared herself to the pictures of the women in them, too.

"I guess it can't be helped," she thought.

Nonetheless, a vague sense of unease was continuing to linger within her. She felt that it was strange to put her entire worth in her physical appearance. After all, no matter how many operations she did, no matter how many surgeries she obtained, it would never be perfect. She could never live up to this artificial image of beauty that was pushed upon her.

May abruptly said, "I think I'd like to wait a bit before I get another appointment here."

The plastic surgeon nodded. "I understand," she said. "It's best to take your time before you make a decision."

As May walked home, she continued her reverie about physical appearances and plastic surgery. Where did the idea that we had to hide our wrinkles and crow's feet come from, she wondered? And was there a way to move beyond the shame of aging and accept it as a natural part of life?

As these thoughts whirled around in her head, she spotted an older woman tending the flowers in her garden. The older lady had many more wrinkles than May ever had, and her hair was gray. But the smile on the old lady's face was as bright as the sunshine, and peace emanated from her.

"Hello," said May, waving in a friendly way to the old lady.

"Hi," replied the old lady, continuing to beam.

"It's a beautiful day. Oh, what kinds of flowers are those?" asked May curiously, pointing to the flowers.

"Magnolias," replied the old lady. "I love magnolia flowers the most."

"Wow, how long have you been growing them?" asked May.

"Hmm, I started this garden when I was 28, when I first moved to this town," said the old lady thoughtfully. "So for over 20 years, I've been growing these flowers."

"Wow! That is really amazing," said May in awe. "They grew with you!"

"That's right," replied the old lady. "Over the years, they've been my constant companions."

As May watched the old lady watering the flowers with her blue watering can, May felt a sense of peace fill her heart. The old lady was one with nature, and her wrinkles did not detract from her lovely, sweet face. They were the signs and mark of the passing years, and each one seemed to tell the story of all the smiles and laughter she experienced throughout her life.

May knew one day she herself would grow old, too. It was happening day by day. But as she watched the older woman, she realized there was nothing to fear. It was all natural after all. Just as the flowers bloomed into their maturity, and lost none of their beauty over the years, May knew she herself would bloom into her older age.

"Every year is a blessing," said the old lady. "So appreciate them."

“That’s right,” May agreed, and she smiled.

When May reached her house, she called the plastic surgeon and canceled her appointment. Then she looked into the mirror and smiled, feeling gratitude that wisdom and the passage of time left its meaningful mark on her face.



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Maze



I: The Stage

The crowd was cheering as Maze finished his final song before leaving the stage. As he walked away, thousands of fans were screaming his name and shouting for his autograph. But Maze, feeling a little dizzy, didn't stay around to sign the papers and notebooks that people held out for him. He rushed behind the stage and sat down on a chair, breathing heavily.

Maze was a world famous singer, and his latest hit single, "You Know I Love You" was topping the charts all around the world. Wherever he went, adoring fans followed him around, begging for autographs or even a lock of his curly hair. He was a superstar in the music industry, and managers and agents battled each other to obtain the coveted role of being a part of his entourage. And yet Maze still felt a deep sense of loneliness and emptiness as he huddled behind the stage, trying to find a moment of quiet away from the audience.

He was 27 years old, and his birth name was Karin Jones, but he chose the stage name "Maze", because he felt that his journey to the top of pop superstardom was a maze to navigate. He never told anyone how he felt about the challenges of fame, however; he felt other people wouldn't understand.

After 5 long years of releasing song after song, hoping that one of them would become a hit, Maze finally achieved success at the age of 22 after a talent agent spotted him in a club. After listening to Maze's music, and noticing the young singer's attractive looks, the talent agent signed him onto a major record label. Maze then found himself in a veritable machine of celebrity – managers, agents, songwriters, and publicists all worked together to boost his fame and make him a star. At the time, it was the most exciting experience for him to be taking each step that led him closer to stardom.

But now, he felt a chilling emptiness after each sold-out concert, and he shuddered when he found fans standing outside his hotel room, screaming towards his window and shouting his name. Fame, which he once thought would give him complete comfort and satisfaction, only led him to an isolated existence, where he was never sure if people loved him for himself or for his stardom.

As Maze's agent led him back to the limousine that would take him to his hotel room, the agent smiled and said, "Another great show! Keep it up!"

"Thanks," said Maze with a wan smile.

As the limousine drove along the darkening streets, Maze gazed out the window and watched the moon start to rise. He finally felt a small sense of peace as he looked at the tranquil moonlight. For just a moment, there was peace and quiet between him and the moon.

His thoughts drifted back to his childhood, when he used to gaze at the moon with his mother, who would hold him in her lap. His mother's nervous eyes finally seemed to relax whenever she was able to watch the moon rise.

In those days, his life was fraught with difficulty as he dealt with his mother and father's tumultuous marriage. His mother cowered under the domineering, angry ways of his father, and her only solace was the silent nights when he was away at work and she could gaze at the moon.

Before she married his father, Maze's mother was an aspiring astronomer. She still was fond of looking at the stars and spotting the constellations, but her great dreams were dashed after she married her husband. Her husband gradually took control over her entire life, leading her to drop out of college, where she once studied astronomy and physics. A few short months later, she was pregnant with their first child, and all her days became devoted to raising her son. Her husband forbade her to leave home without his permission, and he wouldn't let her work or make any money on her own, so she was forced to stay with him until he passed away at age 44 from cancer.

When Maze asked his mother why she stayed with her husband for so long, his mother replied ruefully, "I thought it was love. He said he cared about me and he didn't want me to have to work for anything. I really believed it was because he loved me that he did those things."

Ever since then, Maze's childhood became filled with dreams of becoming a superstar to rescue his mother from her dire situation. He felt that once he was famous, he could have enough power to take her away with him and bring her to live with him in his mansion. After all, his father couldn't say no to a superstar!

And although Maze's mother was ultimately freed from her marriage through her husband's death, Maze's dreams didn't go away. The dream began to morph into his everyday life as well, becoming more than just a wistful hope. Whenever he was bullied or teased by his classmates for his skinny figure and awkward stammer, he imagined he was a successful singer on the world stage, where all his fans adored him and no one said a single cruel word to him. He felt all his pain would disappear if he could become a star.

And now it was no longer a dream; it was real! Maze was a world famous singer and star, just as he had hoped. Legions of fans supported him and cheered him on. Sponsors of popular brands wanted him as their mascot. He seemed to have everything he ever wanted.

But the feeling of emptiness continued to haunt him as he reached his hotel room. He hadn't seen his mother in several years. He was so busy touring and promoting his hit singles, he really did not have the time to visit her as much as he wanted. His agents were always pressuring him to perform and keep the popularity simmering around his music. Maze often felt burned out and exhausted, but he obeyed his agents anyway. There was always the fear he had that if he didn't do what they wanted, they would drop him and start building up and promoting another young artist. He had seen it happen too many times.

As Maze settled down in his hotel room, he glanced at his phone. He had received a phone call from his girlfriend, Lucille. Lucille was a popular singer, too, and one of the darlings of the media.

Although Maze was African-American, and Lucille was white, he felt they could bond over having similar careers and challenges. Lucille was popular right now, but she knew, like anyone else in the entertainment industry, that fame was fickle; one wrong move, and she too could become yesterday's news and today's laughing stock.

Maze picked up the phone and said, "Lucille? Hey, what's up?"

Lucille's low, rather raspy voice came through on the other end. Years of overuse from singing had given her voice some slight vocal damage, but she managed to keep on performing despite the pain she would feel.

"Maze, where have you been? I thought we were supposed to go on an outing in New York City. Then I turn on the TV and find you're in California! How are we ever going to have a relationship if you never show up?" she snapped.

Maze felt embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Lucille," he replied apologetically. "But my agents said I had to do this concert to promote the new single. If I don't get on stage, I don't get paid and I could lose fans. I really didn't mean to miss our outing, but I was so overwhelmed with all the concerts I have to do, I forgot about it."

It was true; Maze rarely had time for much of anything in his personal life because he was always on tour for his music. But the icy silence of Lucille gave him a feeling of foreboding. It was clear she still wasn't pleased.

After a pause, she went on quietly, "Maze, I don't think this is going to work out."

Maze froze. He hated to be so dependent on someone else, but the truth was that he felt Lucille was his only lifeline to a normal world. He had hoped they could be married one day, and the relationship he had with her, as fractured and challenging as it was, was the only one he ever experienced that lasted longer than a year. He couldn't bear to lose her.

"Please stay with me, Lucille," he begged. "I'll try to make some more time for us, okay? I promise! Just don't leave me!"

Lucille softened. After all, she knew how difficult it was to be a famous star. She was a celebrity herself, and she rarely could catch a break to have some time for her private life, too.

"Okay, Maze," she said. "I'll give you one more chance. It's not like you're ignoring me on purpose."

Maze heaved a deep sigh of relief. "Thanks so much. I won't do it again, I promise," he vowed.

Lucille smiled. "Good-bye, sweetie," she said affectionately.

After the phone call, Maze glanced at his calendar. He was grateful that there was a whole week off before his next concert. That would give him ample time to make things up with Lucille. This time, he knew he wouldn't miss out on the precious time he could spend with her.

II: Rose

When Maze arrived in New York City, where he would meet Lucille at their apartment, he was nervous but grateful. He was nervous because he wondered if Lucille would still be angry with him, but he was grateful that he hadn't completely lost his relationship with her. As unhealthy as it may have been, he clung to her like a baby clings to his mother. When he felt no one saw him as simply a human being like anyone else, Lucille gave him at least some of the normality he always wished for.

A few fans came up to him in New York City and asked for his autograph. They gushed, "Maze, you're the best singer ever!"

Maze flushed. "Aw, I don't think so, but thanks anyway," he said modestly.

"No, it's true! You really are the best!" the fans exclaimed.

One fan even began to cry as Maze signed her autograph. The crying made Maze feel a little uncomfortable. He hastily walked away, but waved good-bye to be polite to the fans.

As Maze walked on, he wondered if he would ever be able to live a simple, private life again. He could not help but long for the days when he could walk down the streets uninterrupted, with none of the fanfare that inevitably came with his fame.

Then Maze spotted a familiar person walking down the street. It was Rose, his childhood friend. Rose was a tall, sprightly woman with curly black hair in an Afro. She was one of the few kids who never teased him in school, and in fact she was his staunch defender. "Don't mess with that boy!" she always yelled.

He remembered her as a tough, almost tomboyish kind of girl as a child, but that was the very thing he liked about her. They would play baseball or kickball, and she would dare him to kick harder or hit harder than her! It was always a lot of fun hanging out with her.

Now, she was older, but she still sported her short, stylish Afro as she did when she was young.

"Hey, Rose!" Maze called.

Rose looked at him in astonishment. Then she ran up to him and began to shout, "Oh wow, it's you, Karin!"

Maze felt relieved that Rose called him by his first name instead of his stage name.

"How are you, Rose?" he asked.

"I'm doing good! I'm a journalist and writer," she replied. "And you, you're Maze on stage!"

Maze grimaced a little. "Yeah," he muttered. He hoped the conversation wouldn't turn to how famous he was and what his life was like as a superstar. He really didn't want to talk about it all the time.

Fortunately, Rose instantly noticed the grimace on his face. She went on more quietly, "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

"Oh no, it's no problem," said Maze, with his wan smile.

"No really, I shouldn't bring up stuff that makes you uncomfortable. I've written a couple of articles about the lives of celebrities. Trust me, it really isn't always an easy life, so I understand the challenges of it, and why they don't always want to talk about it. After all, everywhere you

go, you get all this attention and money and fame, and we're taught that's what makes life meaningful. That's what's supposed to make you happy, right? So when it doesn't do that, you feel lost. You don't know who to turn to about your problems, because fame is supposed to take all of your problems away. Maybe that's why famous folks come up to me and talk with me sometimes. I'll just listen and I won't right a tabloid article about it. I'll just write what they want to say," said Rose.

Maze nodded. "That's great that you don't make it hard for them..." he said thoughtfully. "You just listen and try to understand."

"Exactly. At the end of the day, they deserve their privacy, too," Rose said.

Maze felt comfortable talking with Rose. It had been many years since they had seen each other, but the friendship they had was still just as strong as it was in their childhood.

"Hey, I'll try to keep in touch with you, Rose. Maybe we can even play kickball again," he said with a grin.

"I bet I could beat you," Rose responded, a twinkle in her eyes.

Maze laughed. "We'll find out," he said. "But I think I'm better at it than you!"

Rose laughed, too. "Aw man, it was nice seeing you again, Karin. We'll definitely play some kickball the next time we meet!" she said.

As Rose walked away, Maze gazed thoughtfully after her. He was grateful to see his friend again, and he realized he had actually missed Rose a lot during his years away from her. Because of his busy touring schedule as a singer, he didn't often have time to take a break and spend time with the people he cared about, so he was grateful he happened to run into Rose again.

III: The Troubled Relationship

Maze was eager to make up for the missed outing with Lucille. As he hurried to her apartment, he was already rehearsing his sincere apology for missing their previous chance to spend time together as a couple. He hoped that Lucille would accept his apology.

He knocked on the door of their apartment and waited for her response. After a few minutes, the door opened, and Lucille, her blonde hair in bedraggled curls, appeared in the doorway. She looked cross and tired.

“Who the hell are you?” she snapped. Then, recognizing Maze a few seconds later, she flushed and said, “Oh I’m sorry, it’s you, Maze! I didn’t mean to yell at you. I thought you were one of the paparazzi for a moment. They’ve been bothering me lately. They’re always trying to catch me in a bad moment.”

Maze laid his hand on Lucille’s shoulder and said in commiseration, “I’m sorry to hear that, Lucille. It’s like they never leave want to leave us in peace. I’ve dealt with them, too.”

Lucille quickly shut the door. “At least we can still spend some private time together,” she said hurriedly. “They won’t bother us if they don’t know about our relationship.”

“I know,” Maze said, looking thoughtful. “But how long can I keep it a secret? It’s hard to keep the world from knowing. I’m so famous everywhere, it will only be a matter of time before the media realizes we’re a couple.”

Lucille frowned. “Well, I know it will be tough, but for the sake of this relationship, try to keep it a secret for as long as possible. I really don’t know how we can handle the media commenting on our every move if it goes public. Plus, you know they’ll always try to manufacture some kind of rivalry with someone else,” she said.

“Yes, I guess you’re right,” Maze admitted. “It’s best to keep things private for as long as we can.”

They decided to go to the quietest, most secluded park they knew of in New York City. As they surreptitiously left the apartment and walked to the park, Maze glanced nervously behind him, hoping that no one with cameras was trying to follow him and take a picture. To his relief, the busy crowds of New York City seemed to help him and Lucille blend in with the rest of the passersby.

Eventually, they reached the park. Maze and Lucille wandered among the rose bushes and the trees, feeling a brief sense of peace in the quiet park. It was nice to be able to walk along without dealing with paparazzi or fans trying to get an autograph. Sometimes, both of the singers needed a moment of peace and quiet, a moment to themselves.

But Maze found himself unable to think of much to talk about with Lucille. Unlike with Rose, where he felt it was natural to talk with her about anything, he and Lucille’s only common point was their shared musical careers. In every other way, they were vastly different. While Maze grew up as a poor youngster struggling with his parents’ troubled marriage, and sought stardom and fame as an escape from his and his mother’s troubles, Lucille was born to wealthy parents who were also famous musicians. She had never known poverty and was well-acquainted with

the social circles of the rich and famous. Although she sometimes told Maze that she longed for a private, more simple life, she seemed reluctant to give up the financial perks and attention-grabbing rewards that came with her fame. Maze, on the other hand, knew that as soon as he could get a chance to retire from the music industry, he would instantly seek out a life away from the spotlight.

These conflicts sometimes came up in their conversations. Lucille, deeply attached to fame despite the challenges she faced from it, never liked to hear Maze talk about the dreams he had for a peaceful future as a man living a quiet life after fame.

“Why be a regular person?” she countered. “Without fame, we’d just be nobodies!”

Maze was puzzled by Lucille’s perspective. He still felt he would have a worthwhile life even if the cameras never turned his way again, and he was no longer a musical idol for his fans.

Now, he felt the silence between them seemed to speak to the gulf in their viewpoints. He tried to break the silence.

“So are you ever thinking of taking a break from the spotlight one day?” he asked.

Lucille, looking anxious, shook her head. “No,” she replied. “There are things I don’t like about it, but I just can’t imagine myself being an everyday person. My life wouldn’t mean anything without fame in it.”

Maze sighed. “But at some point, doesn’t it become a little tiring?” he said. “I would give a lot to be able to just live a simple life again.”

Lucille shook her head again. “I know, I know, it can be tiring, but we also are so much better than regular people. We live a much better life. We get tons of money and attention. And we don’t have to deal with problems,” she said.

“No, we still have to deal with problems,” Maze disagreed. “They’re just different kinds of problems. And we’re not better than everyday people.”

“Let’s not argue about it,” Lucille sighed. “We just think differently about these things...”

At that moment, Rose walked by in the park. Maze waved to her, and Rose smiled and waved back. She remained discreet, however, and didn’t draw attention to him. She continued to quickly walk on in the park.

“Who was that you waved to?” asked Lucille.

“That was my friend, Rose. I knew her since I was a kid,” Maze replied. “Before I got famous, we hung out sometimes.”

Lucille frowned. “Are you still friends with her?” she demanded suspiciously.

“Why, yes, we are still friends,” Maze said, a little startled by Lucille’s sudden change in demeanor. “But that’s all we are,” he continued hastily.

“That’s all you need to be, too,” Lucille said, folding her arms. “I don’t like being in second place. I’m the only one you need.”

Maze felt uncomfortable, but he tried to hide it. It was hard dealing with Lucille’s jealous side. Despite her fame, and the constant adoration she received from the media, she was deeply insecure and often feared losing him. Her jealousy could become so intense that she sometimes

demanding to know where he was at every moment of the day. Although it was exhausting to constantly report his whereabouts to her, and assure her continually that he would not leave her, Maze still put up with it to keep the relationship alive.

Nonetheless, he felt the relationship he had with Lucille was troubled. It was like a turbulent day at sea, where the unpredictable waves made navigation difficult. There were times when he longed for the relative peace that came with being single again, although he hated to think of the loneliness that could come with it.

After their walk, they returned to Lucille's apartment. But for some reason, Maze could not get Rose out of his mind. His thoughts returned to her and their innocent childhood friendship, and how she had now grown up, but was still probably the dearest friend he had.

"I need to see her again," he thought to himself. He did not want their friendship to die.

IV: A Quiet Moment

"It's been ages since we've been able to just be together," said Rose thoughtfully as she sipped some tea. "I really missed you, Karin! But I'm glad your career is going well as a singer."

Rose and Maze had met up at Rose's house, and for about an hour the two friends had played kickball for fun. It was just like their childhood days, when they both had a blast kicking the ball around and chasing each other. For a moment, Maze forgot his fame and all the challenges that came with it, and he was just able to be in the present moment, enjoying a game of kickball with Rose.

Rose was still just as athletic and tough as she was when she was a child, and Maze marveled at how she still managed to kick the ball past him even now. "You could have been a soccer player!" he said admiringly.

"Yeah, soccer is tough on your knees, though!" Rose responded.

Now Rose and Maze were sitting outside on the deck, and Rose's iced tea was refreshing to drink. Maze gulped down his tea and grinned.

"It's wonderful to just be myself with you," he admitted. "I feel like I can just be free as a bird here. No cameras watching me."

Rose smiled and gently placed her hand on his shoulder. "I want you to be comfortable, Karin," she said. "You go through a lot. This can be your quiet space, at least for a moment."

"Thanks for being so understanding, Rose," said Maze gratefully.

"You're welcome!" said Rose.

As the sun began to set, Maze felt grateful for having a quiet moment away from the spotlight. He hadn't realized just how much of his life revolved around touring and being on stage until he spent some time playing kickball and living an everyday life again. Although he adored music, he was beginning to see that spending all that time in the world of the entertainment industry was draining for him. He realized he would be more content just making music for the love of it, instead of constantly trying to promote himself and prop up his fame.

"It's something to think about," he thought. "I could just leave the entertainment industry and create music away from the spotlight." But then he thought of how all his fans, his agents, and his managers all wanted him to continue his star-studded career, and he felt there was no way to end it all and escape it. After all, he would disappoint so many people....

But at least now, with Rose, there was peace. He didn't feel judged or pressured by her in any way; he could have a moment to simply be himself, and he cherished every minute of it.

"Maybe one day, when you have the time, you can visit me and my mom in North Carolina," said Rose. "I'm sure she'd really like to see you again."

"That's right, I remember your mom! She always made me hot chocolate when I was little," said Maze, smiling as the memory returned to him. "She would put it in the blue mug."

"Yeah, and she'd put my hot chocolate in the pink one for me," laughed Rose. "But yeah, she still remembers you! She wants to see you again."

"I'd be happy to visit her," said Maze. "How about this Christmas? I should have some time off then."

"That sounds excellent!" Rose said. "I'll definitely let her know about it. That will make her so happy."

Maze smiled. He liked to do things that cheered people up, especially for the people he cared about.

The rest of the day was a serene one. Maze watched as Rose began writing notes for her next novel; when he asked her what it was about, she replied that it would be about a girl who wanted to travel far away to an island, where she could live in peace and no one would bother her. Maze thought the plot was interesting, and it reminded him a little of his own life, and how he might live far away from the glare of the spotlight if he could, on a remote island where there was peace and quiet.

"I probably would miss everybody I know, though," he thought.

Then he glanced at his watch. "Wow, it's nearly nightfall!" he said. "I had better go back home. Otherwise my girlfriend will be worried about me..."

"Oh, I didn't mean to hold you up!" Rose cried, knitting her eyebrows. "I'm sorry!"

"Oh, it's not your fault, Rose. It's me, I lost track of time," said Maze. He gave her a quick hug and added, "I'll try to meet you again next time... that is, if I have the time..."

Rose smiled wistfully. She waved good-bye as Maze walked down the street. Soon he was out of sight.

But as Maze walked away, he thought he saw a camera flash. For a moment, he whirled around, looking back with an expression of suspicion and alarm in his eyes. But he couldn't see anyone beyond the dense trees by Rose's yard. He shrugged, heaved a sigh, and walked quickly away. It was already getting late and he knew he needed to return home soon.

V: Lucille's Jealousy



ALTHOUGH MAZE TRIED his best to reassure his girlfriend, Lucille, that he would always stay with her, Lucille's jealousy was difficult to soothe. Like a burning flame, it constantly crackled with the intensity of envy. Lucille would often compare herself to other famous female singers in Maze's orbit, fearing that she could never be as attractive as them, and she constantly questioned him about any other women he knew.

Every time, Maze would try to lessen her anxiety and jealousy. "I won't just leave you," he said. "You don't have to worry about me abandoning you."

But Lucille constantly fretted about Maze giving up on their relationship. In particular, she was starting to harbor some resentment towards his childhood friend, Rose, for simply existing and taking some of his attention away from her.

To help Lucille feel less insecure, Maze tried to stay away from Rose, even though she often came to his mind whenever he felt lonely or depressed. But whatever he did to assuage Lucille's fears never seemed to be enough, and the exhausting relationship was taking a toll on him.

Then one day, Lucille held up a tabloid magazine, and she pointed at the front page, looking distraught. The magazine had the headline: "Complicated Relationship: Maze's Girlfriend Lucille May Be Second Best." Maze was surprised and alarmed to see pages of gossip columns about himself and his friend, Rose.

"What is this?" he exclaimed.

"I knew you didn't care about me!" Lucille was yelling. "You just lied to hide how much you want to be with Rose!"

"I wasn't lying!" Maze protested. "You can't believe the tabloid just because it says that headline. It doesn't mean that's what is really happening in my life. You of all people should know that!"

Then Maze remembered something; as a journalist and writer, Rose herself was often in the public eye. He realized that on one of his visits to Rose, it was likely that paparazzi were following him, hoping to catch a photograph of him or pick up on a situation that could lead to a scandalous headline for the tabloids. It was like living in a fishbowl where every eye was always upon him; there was no privacy anywhere.

Lucille did not look convinced by Maze's response. She slumped into a chair and began to scream and cry, as she often did when jealousy overtook her. She knew it looked terribly manipulative, but she couldn't resist resorting to passionate emotional displays which she knew would have a deep effect on Maze. Sure enough, Maze hurried to her side and tried to comfort her, assuring her that once again he would not leave her.

But in his heart, Maze felt exhausted by the constant stress of dealing with Lucille's turbulent emotions. He imagined himself being free to simply live on his own, without dealing with all the

chaotic outbursts from Lucille. It seemed like a distant dream, but despite his fear of loneliness, he was now longing to be free from the painful relationship he was in.

Soon, however, his life was filled with his busy touring schedule, and he had to appear in concerts around the world. The time he had to spend away from Lucille only made her more fearful that he was going to abandon her, and she jealously read every article and tabloid entry about him to see if he was spending any time with another woman.

Maze felt a sense of relief when he was on tour, however, even though it could be a tiring experience. When he had good days, he could forget about all his troubles and lose himself into the music he loved to create. Those were his greatest performances, when he could completely express himself in every note he sang. In those moments, he forgot about the pressures of fame and the challenges in his life, and he could be completely free.

VI: The Visit

Once the tour was finished, Maze hurried back to New York City, where Lucille was anxiously awaiting him. Then for a while, there was some peace between them again; she was relieved that he was right next to him and not out of her sight, and he did his best to assuage her concerns about being left behind.

But Maze, being a good friend, still felt he ought to fulfill his visit to Rose's mother as Christmas time was approaching, and he decided to tell Lucille about it. He hoped that she would accept his idea for the two of them to go together to North Carolina, where Rose's mother, Mrs. Marie Maple, lived.

At first, Lucille frowned and felt reluctant. But in the end, she felt that it would be best to stifle her anxieties about the visit, and she said, "Okay, we can visit Rose and her mother together."

Maze grinned in relief. "Thanks, Lucille! I really appreciate it! I just couldn't let them down, you know?"

The journey down to Florida was a long one for Maze and Lucille, who spent most of their time in New York City. Maze wanted to take an airplane at first, but Lucille thought a road trip would be more exciting, so they hopped into their car and made the long journey down to the sunny state of North Carolina. Along the way, they saw their surroundings gradually transform from the busy, crowded cities to the lush and grassy land of the country. When Maze saw the horses and the cows roaming on some of the farms, he looked in awe at them. And there were so many huge trees, too!

Away from the spotlight, Lucille was gradually feeling calmer about a lot of things. As she reflected on the life she lived as a celebrity, she thought about the nature of fame and pondered about whether she truly needed it to be happy. When she was able to simply enjoy the adventure of traveling down to a new state she had never been to before, she was not thinking of being the most attractive starlet or competing against the other famous singers in the entertainment industry. "How peaceful it is to just be me," she thought.

Maze, too, was grateful for a respite from the famous lifestyle. As the sun began to set, and he drove the car into the parking lot of Rose's mother's home, many childhood memories began to return to him. This was the home he often visited, an escape from his tyrannical father, and when he was there, Rose's mother always happily greeted him with her hot chocolate and homemade cookies. The house was blue with little speckles of white paint on it – someone who had painted the window ledges accidentally splashed a few drops onto the rest of the house, giving it a polka-dotty effect.

Rose's mother was sitting on the porch, rocking in her rocking chair. When she spotted Maze, she cried, "Hallelujah! It's so good to see you!"

Maze laughed. "Hello, Mrs. Maple!" he called.

"Bless you! You're all grown up now!" exclaimed Mrs. Maple.

Her daughter, Rose, raced out the front door to greet the visitors. "Hi!" she cried excitedly. "It's so good to see you!"

"This is my girlfriend, Lucille," said Maze, politely introducing Lucille to Mrs. Maple and Rose.

"Nice to meet you," said Rose, shaking Lucille's hand.

"It's nice to meet you, too," said Lucille, although she tried to hide the frown that was creeping onto her face.

"We're going to have chicken and rice for dinner. You're welcome to join us," said Mrs. Maple.

"Thanks! I'm hungry as a horse!" said Maze, eagerly sitting at the dinner table.

Soon the house was full of the smell of delicious food. Mrs. Maple was an excellent cook, and she brought the steaming plates of chicken, rice, and collard greens to the table. After they all said grace, Maze, Mrs. Maple, Rose, and Lucille dug into their meal with gusto.

While they were eating, Mrs. Maple asked Maze about his career. "What is your life like now? It seems like you're doing really well," she said.

"Well, to be honest, it is great in some ways, but in other ways it is really difficult," Maze admitted. "Being in the spotlight all the time is really exhausting. I feel like I could use a break."

"Maybe you should take a break then," Rose suggested. "After all, how you feel about it matters!"

"But I couldn't do that," Maze said worriedly. "I mean, my managers and agents might get mad at me...."

Mrs. Maple gazed at him with a reflective look in her eyes. She felt empathy for Maze, who always felt like her adopted son in a way, because she looked after him as he was growing up. "I think you should make the choice that's right for you," she finally said. "Your life is your own, and taking a break doesn't mean you have to give up music entirely. It just could give you a chance to recover from the stressful part of it all."

"That's a good point," Maze said. "At the end of the day, it really is my life. And I don't want to spend it in stress and worry all the time."

That evening, Maze gazed up into the night sky again. In the country, he could see the moon very clearly, much more clearly than when he lived in the city. It was a bright, full moon, and as he gazed at it, he remembered again how he and his mother used to watch the moon at night. His mother, trapped in a marriage that felt like a deep, dark prison, still found hope in gazing at the moonlight, watching the order and harmony of the cosmos. Maze, too, felt a sense of hope as he looked at the moon. Perhaps, like the moon transitioning to another phase, he was at the beginning of a new transition in his life, one that would lead him out of the pain of the past and into a better future.

VII: The Rejuvenation

After the end of the visit at Rose's house, however, Maze soon had to return to the world of celebrities that he was a prominent part of, and Lucille came with him. Once she was among her familiar, famous inner circle again, she reverted back to her old ways, constantly trying to remain relevant as a celebrity. She spent most of her days gazing in front of the mirror, frantically applying make-up and trying to appear more attractive than the next star who could take her place.

Maze, on the other hand, felt that he wanted to finally leave the entertainment industry and the world of fame. He could see a better life ahead, one where he wasn't hounded by his money-hungry agents and managers, and where he could be free. The peace that he experienced after he visited Rose and her mother had a deep effect on him, and he wanted to leave behind his former life, and start a new beginning.

He had already received a rather threatening phone call from one of his agents, Sharpsky, who was angry that he wasn't performing as many shows this year. When Maze explained he wanted to take a break, Sharpsky sounded furious.

"You have to do what we want you to do," he retorted. "If you don't keep touring, people will forget about you and you won't keep selling hits."

"But I've already been touring for most of the year!" Maze protested. "I have to take a break."

Despite Sharpsky's insistence, Maze stayed resolute. He put down the phone and refused to continue performing.

He also began to stay out of the music industry parties that he used to frequent at the beginning of his career. Although he once was bedazzled by the parties, where celebrities in their finest clothes congregated and ate delicacies, he was tired of them now. The fake smiles, the aimless conversations, and the glitzy, glamorous appearance of the venue no longer impressed him.

Even his latest hit song, "You Know I Love You", was not a song he wrote, and was a typical pop song with its banal lyrics. He wanted to write more meaningful work now, and with his free time, he began to write his own lyrics again, about his life and about the emotions he felt throughout the different experiences he had.

Lucille noticed Maze gradually fading away from the famous lifestyle they once shared, and it upset her deeply. She felt he was abandoning her and the future they could have had as a celebrity couple. Despite the difficulties that came with her fame, she found it impossible to give it up. She often argued with him about his increasing reclusiveness, and she would slam the door and cry when he tried to explain he no longer wanted to continue the life he lived before.

At that point, the extreme possessiveness she once showed towards him gradually began to fade away. Instead of the fire of jealousy, there was a growing, cold indifference from Lucille that began to haunt him. She spoke in brief, curt sentences to him, and often turned away when he tried to speak with her.

Then one day, Maze came back from a walk in the park, where he had gone to clear his head after another argument with Lucille, and he found the apartment that they shared was empty. In alarm, he dashed around the room, calling, "Lucille, Lucille? Where are you?"

He flung open the closet doors and found all of her dresses, coats, and shoes were gone. A small note was on the floor of the closet, and he hurriedly picked it up. He saw these words on the note:

It's clear you don't care about me enough anymore, and the life we could have had. Why do you want to be a regular person? You don't have any idea of what you are doing... But anyway, I'm going away and this relationship is at its end. Have a good life, if you can find one without me and the world we knew.

Maze laid the note down. He heaved a deep sigh and gazed into space. For a moment, he couldn't believe that Lucille left him. Hadn't she always wanted him to stay in her life? Hadn't she been afraid to lose him? But there was the note, implacably showing him that at this point, there was no turning back, and Lucille was out of his life.

Maze sat down on the bed in the dim, lonely apartment, and tears filled his eyes. They were tears of both relief and sadness. The relationship was over, the one that confused him so much and the one he felt he couldn't live without. He remembered his mother and how she was entrapped by his father, and he recognized that the relationship with Lucille was so similar in its confusion and dysfunction. Now, he saw clearly how in a way, he had repeated the story of his mother's life, always trying to find fulfillment in other people, believing only they had the keys to true love and happiness.

He picked up the phone and called his mother. It had been a long time since he had had the chance to speak with her.

"Mom?" he asked, tentatively. "Are you there?"

After a short pause, he heard his mother's familiar, deep voice. She had a beautiful contralto, although her husband had mocked it and called it "the voice of a man".

"Hello, Karin," she said, "how are you, son?"

Maze, hearing his real name again, felt a wave of reassurance come over him. "I'm... going through a lot, Mom, but I will definitely see you again. I'll try to visit you next week. It's been so long! We can talk more then. I want to see your face again."

His mother sounded completely joyful. "Thank God!" she cried. "It's been so long since I've been able to hug you. You've been so far away."

"I know, I know," said Maze, "but finally I'm free. I can see you again."

After he put down the phone, he closed his eyes, deep in thought. The future felt a little frightening, but also adventurous. There was nothing holding him back now, and he knew it would open up to him in ways he could never anticipate.

VIII: Home Again

It was a cold, wintry day as Maze drove his car to his mother's house. He was bundled up in a thick coat, hoping that he would not catch a cold from the chilly air. But he was happy to see the snow falling and hoped it would be a beautiful winter.

As he made his way to his mother's home, he felt hopeful about the chance to see her again. When he parked his car in the driveway, he saw his mother walk out the front door to greet him. Her long, graying hair blew in the wind, and a smile shone on her face.

"Karin, I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed, and soon Karin was hugging his mother.

"Mom, it's been ages since I've seen you!" he shouted. "I missed you a lot!"

"I missed you, too, son," she said, fondly tousling his hair. "How is everything?"

"Well... a lot has happened. I've been through some difficult times," Maze admitted.

They sat down in the living room, and he told his mother everything about the challenges he faced in his life because of his fame, the end of his painful relationship with Lucille, and the choice he was making to gradually leave the entertainment industry. His mother listened carefully, nodding her head.

As he spoke, he looked around the living room and noticed star charts on the walls, and a telescope in the corner.

"So you're doing astronomy!" he said suddenly.

"That's right," said his mother. "I didn't give it up. I wanted to return to it, so I did. I still love studying the sky and watching the constellations and planets."

"It's really admirable of you to do that," said Maze, looking thoughtful. "I... I know it wasn't easy. Dad was a lot to handle."

His mother, remembering her difficult past marriage, nodded. "Yes," she said quietly.

Maze saw the silent determination of his mother, who never gave up her life's greatest joy, astronomy. It touched his heart, and reminded him that in the most challenging of situations, there could still be hope if you held onto doing what you loved. His mother didn't break under the domination and abuse of her husband; now she was rebuilding her life, reigniting herself and her passion for astronomy, and finding peace beyond her painful past.

"I'm glad you didn't give up, Mom," he said in a soft voice.

"I'm glad, too," his mother said, thoughtfully gazing up at the ceiling. "He couldn't hold me back forever. Things had to change."

Maze knew his own life would change, too.

But for now, he was home again, with his beloved mother. The house was soon full of their laughter as they recalled happy, funny memories of the time they spent together, when his mother was raising him. And his mother showed him her new astronomy books, and pointed at the planets and stars in them with excitement glowing in her eyes.

By the time Maze left home, he had a feeling of serenity in his heart. He felt a presentiment of a joyous future awaiting him, and the past no longer weighed on him with as much heaviness.

IX: The Final Note

"I'm glad you all came to see me," said Maze in the microphone, with a grateful smile. "Thank you so much. It is the last time. But it won't be the end of everything."

Maze performed his final concert in the city of Trenton. His fans were full of gratitude, too, for the last chance to see the incredible singer perform. During the show, Maze gave his most heartfelt performance, bringing some of his own songs to the concert for the first time. Although the songs were different from his earlier, more pop-oriented hit singles, the music was deeply personal and sincere. He sang from his heart, delving into lyrics that described the emotions he experienced during his hardest times, and the hope that he had for the future. And his fans related to the authentic music he created.

Now he was going to leave the entertainment industry to strike out on his own in the music world. He already had ideas for his independent record label, and he read books about managing companies to help him understand the business side of the venture. He was excited to finally free himself from Sharpsky and the other agents that often hounded him to do concerts. Maze was beginning to realize that many of them were unscrupulous and took advantage of him in so many situations; and although the future was uncertain, he had faith that he could find a much better life free from the industry that had drained his spirit.

As he sang his final note on stage, some of the audience began to cry. Maze felt a little teary-eyed, too. He knew that the fans, and the music lovers, would miss him a lot, but he knew he would see them again in a much better way, where he could be free to create music he truly believed in.

When he left the stage, he noticed that the moon was in the night sky. It was a full moon again, and he smiled when he saw it. It was the beacon of hope, and he felt it was a sign that the future would be just as bright as the lovely moon.



August 2024



The Underground Ones



I

Myda frowned as the harsh, loud voice of the announcer filled her radio. It was one of the politicians of the Artik Government, making his daily, long-winded speech. He was talking about how great life was in the city of Terra, where she and a thousand other people lived. According to him, there was no better place in the world to be.

Myda, however, felt skeptical of the glowing praises of the politician. The city where she lived was overflowing with garbage and trash, making it difficult to walk on the sidewalks. People huddled around in old, torn clothes, or slept on the streets if they had no house to live in. There was none of the wealth and prosperity that the announcer so glowingly spoke of in his speech.

She sighed as the announcer continued talking on and on. Then she looked at her mother, who was reading a newspaper.

“Mother, isn’t there another world beyond this one? I remember my grandmother used to talk about it. She said there was a world on the surface, and in that world, you could see the sunlight. It shone on every living thing,” she said.

Her mother frowned disapprovingly, and said, “Now Myda, remember that we talked about this before. No one should explore the surface – it’s too dangerous out there. Your grandmother was a rebel without a cause. She was always talking about the surface because she hoped you and I would want to go there one day... but I would never go.”

Myda’s grandmother, who had passed away a few years ago, was an unusual woman by Artik standards. She was tall, curious, and immensely intelligent, and her deepest wonders were about the world beyond Artik, the underground city where she and so many others lived. She was one of the few people who lived on the surface of the planet Kazar, before she was forced to go underground when the dictator, Harshen Artik, took over the planet. Harshen named the new government and society he lorded over after himself, and he built an underground community that he said was shielded from the harm of the outside world. Most of the citizens of Artik trusted him without question, and constantly disparaged anyone who was curious about exploring the world beyond their underground home.

For most of her life, Myda’s grandmother, Lorren, was deeply unhappy about being trapped underground. Remembering a life from before Harshen’s dominance always reminded her there was more than the poorly run and lonely city underground. Although many of Lorren’s relatives made fun of her, Myda listened with compassion to Lorren’s tales of the life on the surface, and how she used to go to libraries and shops, having fun and enjoying life.

Like her grandmother, Myda was an intensely curious person who couldn't help wondering about life on the surface. What was beyond the dilapidated city where she lived? How would it feel to be able to see the sunlight?

But Myda's mother did not share her curiosity. She was convinced that everything Harshen said about how wonderful the underground city was, despite its obviously terrible conditions, was true. Myda no longer tried to persuade her of the opposite.

Instead, she heaved a sigh and gazed out the dusty window. She wiped it clean with her shirt sleeve and watched the city's residents walking by.

As she watched them striding along the city streets, a deep feeling of loneliness came over her. She felt alienated from the other people in the city, who had no dreams about exploring the surface. They all were followers of Harshen, never questioning his rule over them, or the fact that they never saw the sunlight and lived completely underground. It seemed as though she were the only person in the world who longed to discover what life was like beyond the underground city.

"One day I have to find out," she thought. "I have to see what is out there, beyond the underground. There must be something more!"

II

Myda was searching for the old writings that her grandmother left behind. Lorren was a prolific writer, recording many of her thoughts in handwritten journals, and Myda was hoping to find some clues to discover the world beyond the underground.

As her black, curly hair blew in the breeze from the open window, Myda's dark brown hands riffled through the old family papers. Some of the things were not what she was searching for, such as old receipts, maps, and other unnecessary items, and for a while she wondered if her search was in vain.

Just when she was about to give up, however, Myda gasped. She found an old red notebook, with a little ribbon around it. On the notebook was the title, "Lorren's Thoughts".

"Thank goodness!" thought Myda, feeling relieved that she found at least one of her grandmother's journals. She felt it was her key to the world of the surface.

As she opened the book and flipped through the pages, Myda saw her grandmother kept notes about various things. Sometimes she wrote about how she was feeling, such as her thoughts about living under the domineering rule of Harshen, and it was clear she despised the dictator. In other pages, she wrote of her fear of being discovered as a traitor to the ideals of the Artik society. Most of the citizens of Artik believed that Harshen was irreproachable, and no one could ever show dissent against him, or they would be shunned and severely punished.

Then Myda noticed a page titled, "How to Reach the Surface". In excitement, she quickly read it.

On the page, her grandmother wrote:

I decided to build a tunnel that leads to the surface of the planet Kazar. I found a man willing to help me who eventually has become my friend. He said he was a dissident of Harshen's rule as well, but he told me not to tell anyone else about it. I promised to protect his privacy, and together we built one of the only tunnels in the city that leads to the outer world.

Marder – that's his name – said he believed Harshen was running a cult. How else could so many people be convinced to abandon their hope to live beyond his demands? Among the many things that Harshen wanted was complete control over people, so he said the outside world was dangerous and that the only way to be safe was to stay underground. Whole families broke up over his ultimatums, and while some stayed on the surface, many in the city of Artik stayed underground for decades.

I hope to one day tell my daughter about this tunnel when she grows up. Hopefully she will try to find life beyond Harshen's control.

Myda felt a wave of sadness come over her as she read the page. Why hadn't her mother tried to explore the surface? "Surely my grandmother must have told her about it," she thought. But then she realized it was so hard for her mother to break free of the mental conditioning she experienced under Harshen's authoritarian rule. Her mother truly believed the outside world was completely unsafe, and so it was better to live underground, even if her life was limited.

“I’m going to find the tunnel to the outside world,” Myda thought.

As she flipped through her grandmother’s journal, she saw a hand-drawn map that her grandmother made many years ago. The map detailed her way to the underground tunnel, and Myda was grateful to discover it as a guide for her journey.

That night, she gazed up at the ceiling in her room, deep in thought about her quest to explore the outside world, the world on the surface of the planet. She felt both excited and nervous. After all, she had spent most of her life underground, and now she was going to discover a world beyond the one she had lived in for so many decades. She was eager, however, to break free from the dull world she and so many other citizens lived in for so long. And she hoped that if she could live a free life on the surface of Kazar, she could inspire her mother and her other family members to forge a life for themselves away from the underground city of Artik, too.

“There could be a whole new world out there,” Myda thought, and her eyes shone with anticipation.

III

Down the dark tunnel Myda went, carefully following the instructions in her grandmother's notebook. She was only a few minutes away from discovering the world of the surface.

As she made her way down the tunnel and up to the door that led to the surface, Myda shivered with excitement and anxiety. On the one hand, she was deeply curious about the world beyond her underground city, but she was also afraid that she might never be able to adjust to life on the surface of the planet. She also feared that Harshen might somehow catch her and severely punish her for her disobedience, but she shouldered on.

At last, she was near the surface. On the map, there was a mark signifying where the door to the outer world existed. She carefully opened the door and climbed to the surface of the planet.

On the surface, Myda was astonished to see a busy little town, full of people gathering at shops, libraries, and parks. She could see the people laughing and talking with each other, and none of them had the gaunt, dismal appearance of the citizens of her own underground city. Everyone in the town looked healthy and happy, and she saw there was a bright sky overhead, with two suns shining down upon the joyful people.

"Oh my, oh my!" thought Myda, amazed by the scene.

She began to walk along the paths of the town, and the people smiled at her and waved hello. It was refreshing to see their open, cheerful attitudes, and Myda smiled and waved back at them. She was not accustomed to these kind displays of friendliness and warmth, but she deeply appreciated them.

She finally stopped at the park and gazed in awe at the trees and flowers. In amazement, she touched one of them, and felt the soft petals of the flowers in the fields. It had been many years since she had been in nature.

A young man looked at her curiously and inquired, "Have you ever been here before?" He noticed that she was entranced by the flowers and trees, as if she had never seen them before.

"This is my first time here," Myda admitted. She added quickly, knitting her eyebrows, "I hope I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Oh no, you are welcome to explore the park," replied the young man in a friendly manner. "I come here all the time. I was just wondering because it looks like you haven't been here before."

Myda smiled. She was relieved that the young man wasn't angry with her for exploring her surroundings.

Eventually, the evening began to come, and the suns began to set. Myda, who had been so engrossed in exploring the park that she didn't notice how time was flying by, realized that she needed to return home. Her mother would be very worried if she spent too much time away from her city.

Although Myda didn't want to leave the glorious park, she sighed and made her way back to the tunnel. Soon she was making the long trek back to the underground city of Artik, her reluctant home. But now she had a ray of hope; there was truly life on the surface, and it was not completely terrifying and dangerous as Harshen had claimed. She now had a chance to live beyond

the limitations and dictatorship, and she anticipated another opportunity to explore the world of the surface again.

“If only I could convince my mother to come with me,” she thought.

When Myda returned home, her mother was anxiously waiting for her. Myda’s presentiment was correct; her mother was fearful that something awful had happened to Myda, and soon Myda was facing a barrage of questions about where she went.

“Why did you disappear? I was worried about you,” her mother demanded.

“I was just going on a journey,” replied Myda vaguely. She was worried that if she revealed the tunnel, her mother might forbade her from ever exploring it again, out of fear that something terrible would happen to her.

“But what kind of journey?” her mother continued. “I need to know. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

Haltingly, Myda slowly began to admit a little of the truth. “I... I was exploring a tunnel, and I found it lead to the surface of our planet,” she began.

Her mother frowned for a moment, but then she started to laugh skeptically, and shook her head.

“There’s no viable life on the surface of Kazar,” her mother said. “Harshen told us anyone who tried to get to the surface would die. There isn’t even a livable atmosphere there. You must be imagining things!”

“No, mother, there really is a life on the surface! I saw people and even a town,” Myda protested.

But the more Myda tried to convince her mother of the reality of the world beyond their underground city, the less her mother seemed to believe her. Her mother only had eyes and ears for Harshen’s words, and Myda felt helpless to convince her otherwise. Myda even wondered if perhaps she had been imagining it all, and she was hallucinating a world beyond the surface because she longed to be free of Harshen’s control so much....

But then she remembered the park, and the kind young man she met, and the happy, friendly people. All those things were real, and it was her mother who was in such deep denial, she could not imagine a world beyond Harshen’s rule.

When she went to bed that night, Myda sighed. She realized she would probably be all alone in her explorations and her desire to see the outside world. However, she didn’t give up. She felt that if she could learn the ways of life on the surface, she would one day be able to live there, permanently setting herself free from Harshen’s domination. There was nothing that could prevent her from continuing to persevere, even if her mother didn’t believe her.

IV

During the rest of her trips to the world on the surface, Myda kept most of her observations to herself. She felt that most people wouldn't believe her if she told them there was a world beyond the underground city, and so she decided it would be better to explore on her own.

But one day, as she babysat her younger cousin, Terrie, who was a bright, sprightly ten-year-old, Terrie asked her a curious question. The question startled Myda, and she took a second look at the child after she asked it.

"Myda, didn't people used to live on the surface of this planet? I remember your grandma used to talk about it. Everyone thought she was just telling stories... but what if what she said was true?" Terrie questioned.

Myda haltingly stammered, "Well – uh, I'm not – not sure we should talk about this," she said.

"But Grandma must have brought it up for a reason," Terrie countered. "I don't think she was just lying about it for attention. She must have known something more."

Myda looked carefully at Terrie, whose dark brown eyes gazed curiously into her own. Myda felt it wouldn't be right to lie to her cousin, so she finally admitted, "Well, there really is a life on the surface of the planet. People do still live there. We're just not allowed to really know much about it because of Harshen. Most people feel that it would be insane to even try to live on the surface again."

Terrie's eyes widened. "Have you been up there?" she asked.

Myda nodded. "I've tried to explore it for myself," she replied. "But my mother didn't believe me when I said I knew there was a world beyond the underground one." She heaved a mournful sigh.

Terrie, whose excitement was piqued by Myda's revelation, said hopefully, "Maybe one day I can come up there with you and see what it's like on the surface! I'd like to explore it, too."

Myda was thoughtful. She wondered if Terrie was perhaps too young to witness a world beyond the underground one for the first time, but at the same time, she felt it would be irresponsible to never give her cousin a chance to see the life on the surface of the planet. What if she wanted a life different from the lonesome, entrapped one that so many of the citizens of Artik endured? Perhaps through Myda, Terrie could finally have a chance to be free.

Myda also felt comforted by the fact that Terrie believed her, and didn't instantly ridicule her or accuse her of lying about her explorations of life on the surface.

"I will take you with me one day," Myda said at last. "It's only right... and there really is a world beyond this one. We just haven't really been encouraged to explore it."

Terrie grinned. "That's awesome!" she cried. "I'd love to go!"

Myda smiled, and ruffled Terrie's thick, curly black hair. The young girl was an orphan and was mostly raised by Myda and her relatives, but she was closest to Myda, who felt more like her aunt than her older cousin. Terrie could always entrust her most adventurous hopes and dreams with her wise, thoughtful cousin.

“Now I finally have a companion for my journeys!” Myda thought. She was grateful that Terrie was open to exploring the outside world with her.

But for a moment, Myda had to postpone her inspections of the world on the surface. There was a big shortage of basic necessities, such as food and water, on the planet of Kazar. Under Harshen’s control, many of these necessities were harder to obtain, because he forbade people from buying and selling to each other. Instead, all the products in his economy were created and shipped by his government, and corruption among his officials led to most of them taking the majority of the products for themselves.

Harshen was told about the upcoming calamity as shortages increased, but he stubbornly shook his head and said, “Nothing bad will happen. I know how to run things!”

Unfortunately, Harshen’s obstinacy led to dark times for Kazar, including his most important city, Artik. The city of Artik had already been falling apart and suffering from an increase in homelessness and poverty, but after the shortages of basic necessities, the inhabitants were in dire straits.

Myda was one of the few people who was aware that the living conditions in Artik were unsustainable. She knew that sooner or later, the people would have to awaken themselves and find a new way of living that didn’t depend on Harshen and his government. Her mother, however, and many other citizens still felt that Harshen would somehow save the day. They trusted in his every word, and he was constantly assuring them that the shortages would end any day now, and prosperity would return to the planet.

When Myda began stocking up on the few products that were still left in the stores, her mother scolded her. “Don’t you trust in Harshen?” her mother said disapprovingly. “He said he would make sure we would never suffer.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” said Myda in a skeptical voice. “In the mean time, I’d better get us ready in case things don’t work out in the way he says they will.”

Now, more than ever, Myda saw the urgency of starting a new life on the surface of the planet. Although she longed for her mother to join her, she knew that her mother would have to make that crucial choice for herself. Her only companion at the moment who wanted to accompany her was Terrie, her cousin, but she was deeply grateful for her cousin’s eagerness to join her explorations. Terrie, unlike the rest of her family, was full of hope and curiosity about the world on the surface, and she listened with empathy and attentiveness as Myda would tell her about the journeys she made.

“She helps me feel less alone,” thought Myda, and she knew Terrie would live a much better life once she was free from the underground.

V

It was an early morning, and Myda and Terrie were cautiously creeping towards the tunnel that led to the surface. Myda was full of excitement and hope, but she also felt the nervous anxiety that often came with her worry that she would be apprehended by Harshen's guards. They sometimes patrolled the city to ensure that no one would leave it.

Fortunately, today she did not see the imposing, intimidating figures of the guards. "It's safe," she whispered to Terrie, who clutched her hand.

As they arrived at the surface, Terrie gasped in delighted astonishment. It was her first time seeing the brilliant suns of Kazar, rising slowly in the sky. She had never seen sunlight in all her years of living in the underground city.

"It's amazing!" she cried.

"This is just the beginning," Myda said with a smile.

She led Terrie to the wonderful park, where the curious child touched the trees and marveled at the glorious flowers. Myda noticed that Terrie's cheeks began to glow with a healthy, ruddy tinge. It was clear the fresh air and the great outdoors was beneficial for her cousin.

As they walked along in the park, they came across the young man that Myda had met a few weeks ago. This time he looked more closely at Myda, and he said in a quiet, curious voice, "You know, you remind me of a woman my grandfather used to know. He said her name was Lorren. She would walk here sometimes in the park. You look a lot like her!"

Myda smiled pensively. "I know who you're talking about," she said. "Lorren was my grandmother."

The young man looked at her in astonishment, and then his eyes twinkled with delight. "My goodness! No wonder you both have that family resemblance! She was an amazing woman. I always wondered why I didn't see her more often."

Myda was hesitant for a moment, wondering if she should reveal the dystopian life she once lived in her underground world, and how her grandmother's courage gave her the inspiration to discover a new world on the surface.

She gazed into space, then looked into the young man's eyes. They were kind, and she felt she could trust him.

Then Myda explained the difficult and inhumane life she once lived underground, and how she was one of the few people to explore the planet and escape the life under Harshen's rule. The young man listened in awe, carefully taking in her whole story. At first, he wasn't sure if he could possibly believe it, but Myda's candor and her detailed, earnest account convinced him that she was being entirely truthful about her experiences.

"You are really brave to explore the world above," he said respectfully. "You were the underground ones for so long. If you need any help starting a new life here, I'd be glad to help you. My name is Aven. I've never lived anywhere but on the surface of this planet, so I know life here very well. I had heard there were people who lived underground, but I thought maybe it was just a myth or a legend. I'm glad you are here and you're okay!"

Myda gratefully replied, “Thank you so much. I’d really appreciate your help. We are really new here! And the underground city where we lived won’t be livable much longer. Everything is falling apart down there.”

Terrie grinned in delight. “So are we going to stay up here, Myda?” she asked.

Myda looked thoughtful, and she glanced at the ground beneath her feet. As much as she liked exploring the world on the surface, a part of her was still a bit frightened by the idea of letting go of the past, of the underground life she had experienced for so long. But when she thought of Harshen’s domination, the increasing hopelessness and poverty of the underground city, and the impossibility of living there forever, she knew she had to move forward.

“Yes, we’ll stay here,” she said, and Terrie jumped up and down for joy.

As Myda and Terrie walked away with Aven, Myda felt expectancy and optimism fill her heart. The dark past, with its painful memories, seemed to be fading away. Despite the struggles that she had endured for so much of her life, she knew there would be so many things to discover in her new life on the surface. It was time to let go of the life that had stifled her and so many others for decades, in the hopeless underground world. There was a new life to be lived, and a new world to explore.

Myda was grateful that her grandmother was a shining light and an inspiration for her escape from the underground. Without her grandma, she would never have found a way to free herself.

“Thank you, Grandmother,” she thought to herself, and she followed Aven to his house, where the sun was already peeking through the open windows.



June 2024



The Has-Been



It was a stormy day, and Marcus gazed moodily out the window, watching the rain beat against the windowpane. It was one of those days that somehow made you feel pensive and reflective about your life, and Marcus was certainly doing a lot of reflecting today.

Years ago, he had once been one of the most famous actors in the USA. His face appeared in hugely successful movies and films, and for a moment in time, movie critics were praising his every move – he was the fresh, talented, young actor who could awe the audience with his impressive performance.

But now, there was hardly a peep about him in the papers and in the news. Today, he was struggling to revitalize his acting career at 50 years of age. As the new actors came onto the scene, they became the fresh, talented ones, and he was written off as a “has-been”.

Marcus heaved a deep sigh. He always longed for the fame that had once been in his grasp, and around the house, he obsessively wrote his stage name, Marcus Ace, on nearly everything he owned. Seeing the stage name helped him to feel he was like someone lighting an important beacon for the world.

“What should I do now?” he wondered. “What should I do with my life?”

It was so hard to imagine life without his fame. He had thought it was going to last forever. When he became a celebrity at 25, it felt like joining an exclusive, magnificent club. All the other stars fawned over him and invited him to special parties, the fans nearly swooned when he signed their autographs, and a dizzying array of agents and directors wanted him to star in their films. It was intoxicating, yet overwhelming at the same time.

And then the day came when he finally lost his stardom – it happened after he chose an ill-fated movie role in a box office disaster. When the movie flopped, his reputation began to fall with it. The critics started to find flaws and faults in his acting, saying it was too over-the-top and excessively dramatic. The stars began to keep their distance, making excuses for their sudden absences in his life. Soon, he was no longer invited to the famous parties, and the fans began to forget about his face as they rushed to the next new star.

Marcus, astonished and heart-broken by his fall from his grace, ended up having a nervous breakdown. He was sent to the hospital, where he spent several weeks, yelling, screaming, punching the walls in frustration and agony.

“Please, please let me out,” he begged to the nurses. “They will forget about me! The fans will forget about me...”

By the time Marcus was finally released from the hospital, many of the fans did forget about him. They were already moving on to another young actor, and Marcus was no longer the star they wanted. Marcus kept acting, finding his way into many different films over the years, but none of them reached the peak of success he had in the earlier part of his career.

“Now I’m just a has-been,” he thought bitterly. “Nothing but a has-been!”

He felt the tears spring into his eyes, but he defiantly wiped them away. He didn’t want to cry. Crying was useless anyway, he felt.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. “Who is it?” yelled Marcus irritably.

“It’s me,” said a soft, muffled voice.

Marcus opened the door. He was surprised to see a woman, her black hair in disarray. He noticed tear stains on her cheeks.

“Mabel, it’s you!” he exclaimed in astonishment.

“I didn’t think you remembered me,” said Mabel in a weary voice. She smiled slightly, but her eyes looked at Marcus with a touch of sadness.

“I do remember you very well,” said Marcus. “You were in the movie ‘May the Chips Fall Where They May.’”

“That’s right,” said Mabel softly. “But that was many years ago... many, many years ago.”

Marcus led Mabel into the house, and she collapsed on the sofa. Her eyes filled with more tears, and soon she was loudly sobbing. Marcus, feeling sorry for her, laid his hand on her shoulder.

“I just don’t understand it!” she wailed. “Why do they have to bring us up just to tear us down?”

Marcus frowned. He knew what Mabel was talking about – like him, she had had a storied career in the beginning, with the media and movie critics praising her films and her roles. But after failing to top her early success in her later years, she too fell from grace, and now she was trying to make a living acting in local theaters and plays.

He had known Mabel well during their days of stardom. In those days, it seemed like their fame would last forever. It was hard to imagine that it could ever end.

Now he was trying to comfort the distraught actress on his shabby sofa, because both of them were has-beens.

“I don’t know why it happens this way, Mabel,” he said. “But maybe we just have to move on somehow. We can’t turn back time.”

Mabel sighed. “I know, I know,” she said. “But it just feels so unfair. We had everything, and then it was all taken away.”

“Well... maybe it wasn’t everything,” Marcus said softly.

Mabel looked at him in surprise.

“I mean, if it was truly everything, why weren’t we happy when we were at the top? Sure, it was thrilling in the beginning, but then it started feeling like anything else – it even became a burden after a while...” Marcus admitted.

His mind flashed back to when he was a superstar, and the fans mobbed him after one of his big movies. At that moment, he didn't feel elation or joy; he just felt a wave of terror as he heard the fans scream his name and demand autographs, and he tried to hide his face in the limousine. When he returned to his hotel, he started to cry, but he could not understand why he was so upset at the time. Wasn't this supposed to be the dream – fans yelling your name and worshipping you? But in that moment, all he felt was shock and terror, and his body trembled all over.

At the same time, fame beckoned him like an alluring siren. Even now, he felt himself longing for the days when he was still a beloved star in the acting world.

"I don't know," Marcus went on. "Sometimes I want to go back there and be a star again. But it wasn't always a wonderful feeling, you know?"

Mabel frowned, and looked at him rather coldly. "But I don't want to spend the rest of my days as a has-been!" she retorted.

Marcus felt uncomfortable. Mabel's angry response wasn't what he expected.

She stood up swiftly and said tersely, "Thanks for inviting me into the house, Marcus, but I'd better be going on my way. I have another audition to do."

She left the house, and Marcus watched her tall, imposing figure walk away. Despite her slightly drooping shoulders, she was trying to portray herself in a confident manner, as if she were still a star again. Marcus suddenly realized how absurd it all was – how meaningless it was to chase fame, how none of it truly made him happy, and how it seemed like a drug that was nearly impossible to escape.

He looked at the sky, watching the rain fall, and a slow smile crept onto his face. There were so many things he had taken for granted – his health, his peace, the quiet life he could live now he was away from the fame. Even the beauty of the rain and its musical patter against his window-pane were things he ignored when he was younger.

As he gazed out the window, he realized he was not just a has-been – he had lived a full life, and there was so much more he could experience in his older years, if he had the wisdom to appreciate it. The true meaning of life was something he was still trying to understand, but he knew that beyond the fame, there was another life, one deep and full of purpose, that he could create for himself.

"It's not too late," he thought, and he smiled. "It really is not too late!"



August 26, 2024



The Enchantment



Terrence Davidson was eagerly playing the slot machines at the Star Winner Casino. Despite the many times he lost thousands of dollars, he hoped that this time, maybe just once, he would win all of his money back. As his sweaty palms kept pressing the buttons, he waited in anticipation for the reward, only to be disappointed again and again.

As he lost another thousand dollars, he yelled in frustration, "What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I keep losing? If only I could win just once!"

At that moment, a mysterious man, wearing a dark blue jacket and pants, walked up to him. The man's hair was long and black, and his eyes seemed friendly, but a little mischievous at the same time.

"Looks like you're having a hard day, Terrence," he said.

"I sure am, always losing at this game... but how did you know my name?" asked Terrence.

"Oh, I've seen you around a lot," the man replied vaguely. "You come here nearly everyday. I'm sure a lot of people are used to seeing you at the slot machines."

Terrence sighed. "I keep thinking maybe this time, I'll finally win back all the money I lost," he admitted. "Maybe one day, I can do it! All I need is one win."

"What if I gave you the win you desire so much?" the man responded. "I could cast a spell that will give you the opportunity to win a million dollars from the slot machine."

"Are you a wizard?" asked Terrence skeptically.

"Indeed I am. I've cast many spells over the years, and they always work. My name is Darnell, but people like to call me Enigma because they marvel at the mystery of my enchantments," the man replied.

"Well, nice to meet you, Enigma," said Terrence, trying to be polite, and he shook the man's hand. However, Terrence couldn't help doubting the man's words. What made the wizard so certain he could cast a spell that would help him outsmart the slot machines? After all, Terrence had lost money to gambling so many times. The future seemed so bleak and discouraging.

Nonetheless, Terrence decided he had nothing to lose, and he said to Enigma, "Cast your spell!"

Enigma nodded. He took out a weird book that appeared ancient and mysterious. He began to scrawl strange symbols and words on the pages of the book with a pen. Terrence gazed on, frowning in disbelief, but he decided not to interrupt Enigma's process.

At last, Enigma put down the book. He said in a deep, serious voice, "I've cast the spell. Now tomorrow, come here early in the morning, and play the slot machine. I guarantee you'll win your million dollars."

"And what if it doesn't work?" Terrence countered.

"It will work," said Enigma, with a strange confidence that took Terrence aback.

"Well, if you say so, but if it doesn't work out, I won't ever listen to you again," muttered Terrence.

Enigma laughed. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," he said, and he waved good-bye before he walked out of the casino.

The next morning, early in the day, Terrence was back at the casino. He played the slot machine, and watched in astonishment as 3 symbols – cherries – appeared in a perfect row. "Congratulations, you won!" flashed on the screen. A million dollars went straight into his pocket.

Terrence was so amazed, he could hardly breathe. "The spell – the spell worked!" he exclaimed.

"Pardon?" asked one of the casino workers curiously.

"Oh, nothing," replied Terrence, hastily leaving the casino.

Terrence was delighted with his new win and his newfound fortune. He was so giddy with excitement, he splurged on a brand new Mercedes, fancy outfits, and fine dining. His friends and family members were awed by his sudden opulence, and they asked question after question about how he could have come into so much wealth.

"It's a long story," said Terrence, with a knowing smile. "But I have to say, sometimes a little magic and a little luck makes a difference!"

As Terrence created his new luxurious lifestyle, he felt content at first. But after a while, a million dollars somehow didn't feel like enough money. He kept eyeing the slot machines, wondering if he should play again and earn even more. The temptation to gamble again was hard to resist.

When he spotted Enigma lingering around the casino, Terrence quickly strode up to him.

"Enigma, your spell worked so well, I'd really like you to do it again," Terrence said.

Enigma looked at Terrence with a worried expression on his face. "Isn't one win enough?" he asked. "If I keep casting spells to make you win each time, I don't think it will ever be enough for you. Won't it look suspicious, too?"

"Oh, come on, Enigma! Just one more time. I promise this time it will be enough money," said Terrence.

Enigma shook his head. "I already feel pretty bad about granting you the first spell," he admitted. "The older wizards were scolding me for giving into the temptation of casting spells for money. They say it always ends badly."

"Well, maybe those older wizards were old fogies! You could be part of the cool newer generation who knows how to adapt to the times," Terrence said flatteringly.

Enigma sighed. "I really shouldn't do this... I feel like I'm only helping you in your gambling addiction, and you really should stop playing these machines..." he muttered.

But Terrence continued to wear the young wizard down with persuasive words and flattery, and finally, Enigma relented. He cast another spell to help Terrence win even more money – two million dollars!

When Terrence won his next batch of cash, he leaped into the air and laughed. "More money, more wins!" he thought, stuffing all the dollars into his wallet.

With his new income, he bought even more extravagant things – fancy TVs, a yacht he surely didn't need, even more exotic and luxurious food, and even more stylish outfits. Again, his family members and friends marveled at his wealth and wondered where he possibly could have earned all this new money. But this time, they began to ask for favors, hoping he would help them with his wealth. Soon, Terrence was facing a deluge of requests from relatives and friends to give them loans or pay off their debts. It became so overwhelming, he had to hire a secretary to keep track of all the letters.

Even though Terrence's life filled with stress, his new winnings were too exciting to resist. After a while, the two million dollars just didn't feel like enough money for him to be happy. He longed to win even more money, and soon he was following Enigma around in the casino, trying to persuade him to grant another spell for a new win.

"Please, Enigma, just one more time! I promise this time, this will be enough money for me to be content," said Terrence.

But Enigma firmly shook his head. His eyes looked so dark and serious, they startled Terrence.

"No, I won't do it again," Enigma said in a stern voice. "I've made up my mind. It will never be enough for you! If I grant you another million dollars, even if it's three million instead of two million, you will be satisfied for a moment, but then you'll want more again. I hate to say it, but I think you have an addiction to gambling, and you need some help with it. I'm not making anything better if I cast spells that help you win more money. In fact, I'm thinking of leaving behind this whole wizardry business..."

Terrence frowned in disappointment. "I'm not addicted to gambling!" he shouted. "I just like to play with a little more risk than other people do, that's all!"

"I don't think you see the problem you have," sighed Enigma. "But I'm stopping here. No more spells for you."

He walked out of the casino, and Terrence bitterly glared after him. Then he heaved a sigh and sat by the slot machine. It was beckoning him as an irresistible enchantment, just like a spell itself.

"I'll just play one more time, for the three million Enigma could have given me if he weren't such a party-pooper," thought Terrence. "But I don't need him anyway. I can win on my own!"

He pressed the buttons on the slot machine, convinced that he would surely win again. The cherry symbols appeared on the screen, but a pear came in between them, and the screen flashed the words, "Sorry, you lost!"

"Wait a minute, what?" Terrence yelled. "That's impossible!"

"I'm sorry, sir," said one of the casino workers, watching the scene unfold. "But sometimes that's just the way it goes. Are you ready to pay up the three million dollars?"

Terrence, sweat dripping down his face, could only meekly nod in response.



The End

September 17, 2024

