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Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Spring 2023

## The Others

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The Others

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

## The Púca

Victoria dipped her brush into the blue on her palette and painted with steady precision until she was satisfied. She wiped the sweat from her brow and set the brush and palette down on the wooden stool next to the easel. She took off the headphones, putting them next to her art supplies on the stool, and turned off the music blasting clearly from a foot below.

Victoria had gotten permission from her art teacher to stay after school for a few extra hours to finish her piece in private, away from the prying eyes of her classmates. The kiln in the back of the room filled with the disfigured frog and bird sculptures of the first-years gave off an orange glow through its window. Unfortunately, the kiln was kind of cheap, so the heat leaked into the art room. Every once in a while, a cool September breeze would come in from the open window, posters on the adjacent wall swayed back and forth, and the cool wind blew against Victoria's moist forehead.

She put her headphones back on, turned on the music that her mother would probably tell her would make her deaf one day, and got back to work, this time dipping her brush in pink. Victoria worked for a few more minutes, using white to clean up the painting and fill in a few spots, until she was finally done. She took her headphones off in triumph. This painting had taken longer than usual for her to paint, especially since it was more personal than academic, and she was filled with pride looking at her finished work.

She took the painting and hid it behind her teacher's desk. Ms. Jacobs would see the painting tomorrow morning and put it somewhere more secure. She had helped Victoria hide

other personal paintings in the past that needed to dry and that Victoria didn't want other people to see. Ms. Jacobs was one of the only people in this school that Victoria trusted and respected to confide in.

As Victoria was packing up to leave, she heard a faint scream coming from the hallway. At first, she thought it was the football players being obnoxious coming from practice or one of the clubs that met that day had ended, but there was something about the scream that felt different from that.

She set down her bag and started to walk towards the door when there was another scream from the same voice, this time closer. Victoria hesitated for a second at the door, not knowing whether she should go out or call for help. She waited for another scream, but it never came.

Victoria flung the door open and ran in the direction she thought the voice had come from. She raced down the hallway and turned the corner into a dead end. The lights were dimmed and some of them were completely out.

Victoria walked into the darkness and started trying the doors to see if she could find who was screaming. The doors were completely undisturbed and every door she came to was locked. She walked toward the last door on the left, and a smell like pennies permeated the air. She tried the door handle, but this time the door was wet and locked like the others. Victoria immediately pulled her hand back. She felt the weight of her cellphone in her pocket and remembered that she had put it in her pocket before the screams happened. She pulled it out with her dry hand and turned on the light. Victoria scanned the light over her hand and saw it covered red with sticky, fresh blood.

She immediately wanted to wipe it off, but someone must have been hurt nearby. Victoria scanned her light over the blood on the door and followed the trail until it led to a mass slumped over in the corner in front of a row of lockers. She carefully walked towards the form and knelt down. Victoria could feel blood start to soak into the knee of her jeans, but ignored it. She held her phone up, quickly realizing that it was a body.

She moved her light from the blood on the floor, slowly up the length of the body. Victoria noticed deep scratch marks all over, tearing away flesh and what appeared to be a suit. When she got up to the neck, she found the source for most of the blood. The deepest slash was across his neck, and blood was still pouring. Victoria looked up at his face and recognized him. He was her math teacher, Mr. Lewis. She had seen him a few hours before in her second to last class before the school day ended. Everything had seemed fine and normal.

Mr. Lewis was a tall, thin man with light brown hair that was now caked with red streaks of blood and brown eyes that were open and staring lifelessly up at her. She moved closer to him, but could not hear any breathing.

Victoria's mind raced with unanswered questions, some of which she was scared to find the answer to. What happened to him? Who did this? What did this? Were they still here? She stood up and tried to remain calm, but she couldn't stop the panic from slowly rising within her. She moved away from the body and the blood. The same blood she could feel drying against her palm. Once she had a bit of distance, she ran from that dead end and rounded the corner, determined to find help.

When she rounded the corner, she couldn't react fast enough to stop herself from crashing into another body. She almost fell from the impact, but their hands reached out, keeping her upright. Victoria looked up, recognizing her English teacher, Mr. Smith, looking down at her.

“Whoa, where are you going in such a hurry?” asked Mr. Smith after making sure that Victoria was steady on her feet. He took a step back to assess the situation better, and recognition flashed across his face. He changed his line of questioning and questioned, “Victoria? Are you okay?”

Victoria couldn't bring herself to answer. She didn't know what to say. She could only stare at the faint red hand print left behind on Mr. Smith's white button-down shirt. Mr. Smith looked down, seeing the mark. He looked at her hand and then down at the blood stains on her pants legs.

“Oh, I don't think the nurse is still here, but I think I know where she keeps her products for our female students.” Mr. Smith responded, touching the top of his short, black hair.

“What? No! You know that's not possible with me” Victoria exclaimed in exasperation, being taken out of her fear slightly.

“Then, whose blood is that?” Mr. Smith said with concern, staring his dark brown eyes into her gray.

“It's Mr. Lewis. He's not breathing and there's so much blood...” Victoria explained.

She took Mr. Smith to the body, and he did everything he could to handle the situation. Everything after that was a blur. He called security, they came and called the police. The police, a firetruck, and an ambulance came rushing to the front of the school. She stood outside near the

entrance as she watched them load the body bag into the ambulance. She could feel eyes on her, and she looked at the crowd forming filled with students and faculty, but none of them were looking at her. Mr. Smith thankfully left her well hidden from the sight of the crowd to wait for the police to take her to the station for questioning.

Victoria looked around again, but she couldn't see anyone else that wasn't preoccupied with the ambulance driving away or the flashing red and blue lights illuminating the night as more police cars arrived. She still couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Victoria was being analyzed and examined. She retreated further back into the shadows, wishing for this night to end.

Victoria's parents finally came, and they all went to the police station together. She was questioned at length about what she saw, and Victoria answered every one of their questions until they let her go home. The way that they questioned made her feel like they thought that she killed him.

...

The body was found on Thursday night and school was canceled for Friday. Victoria spent the entire weekend restless and unnerved. She barely left her room while she tried to process the first dead body she had ever seen. She skipped school on Monday, which proved to be a mistake because she did the exact same thing she did on the weekend. Against the wishes of her parents, she decided to go to school on Tuesday.

When she walked through the front doors, Victoria expected everyone's eyes to be on her, but to her surprise, they all just ignored her like they usually did. The only signs that

something happened last week were the whispers she would hear from the groups of students and sometimes teachers gathered in the hallway.

Victoria went through her classes spacing out and replaying the events of last Thursday until third period inevitably arrived and a small part of her was hoping that Mr. Lewis would be sitting at his desk like he always did. Of course, he wasn't there. There was a substitute teacher sitting in his place, greeting everyone as they filtered in. She grabbed the handout from the sub and finished the assignment within the first minutes of class. Victoria spent the rest of the period spacing out and trying to not have a breakdown.

The last period was art class, but she couldn't conjure up the same amount of enthusiasm as she usually had. She ended up going to the back of the room next to Kiln, pulling out her sketchbook, and taking out her frustration on the page.

"That's amazing," Ms. Jacobs said, coming up behind Victoria.

"Oh, thanks."

"Are you okay? I'm sensing a lot of emotions from this piece; the lines are really harsh, and the space used has a claustrophobic effect."

Victoria stared into Ms. Jacob's earnest eyes, but she couldn't come up with a response. She didn't want to have this conversation, and she didn't want to explain what she was drawing. Victoria could barely explain the drawing to herself. She ripped the page out of her sketchbook and crumpled it up.

"Oh, I didn't mean to make you upset."



“It’s fine,” Victoria stated. The bell rang quickly after that, she quickly packed her things, and left the room before anyone else.

She walked fast through the hallway with her head down, weaving through the other students until she arrived at her subconscious destination. She was back at the dead end. They must have cleaned it over the weekend, but it was still partially blocked off by tape. She dunked under the tape and went over to where Mr. Lewis’ body used to be.

Victoria stared at the area, slightly unnerved by how clean it was now and how easy it was to wash everything away and move on. If it weren’t for the tape, you wouldn’t even be able to tell that something horrifying happened here. She stayed wrapped up in her thoughts for a few minutes until she noticed something out of the corner of her eye.

She looked over at a locker a few inches away from her. Toward the bottom of the locker near the ground, there were deep scratch marks embedded into the blue metal. Victoria knelt down and ran her fingers along the edges of the lines.

Victoria wondered what left these scratch marks in the locker and how it must be connected to Mr. Lewis’ death. The police barely released any information since Thursday night, except to say that Mr. Lewis had died from an animal attack, but how did an animal big enough to leave these marks and kill a man get into the building without breaking anything. The more she thought about this, the more she wanted answers to her questions, no matter what it took. She pulled out her phone and took a picture of scratches.

As Victoria was putting her phone back in her pocket, she felt a light tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see a tall girl with long, wavy brown hair and brown eyes filled with concern staring down at her.

“Hi, Emma,” Victoria reluctantly greeted in recognition as she stood up.

“Hi... Victoria, right?” Emma responded in a bright, cheery voice.

“Yup, that’s my name.”

“Oh great, I asked someone in your art class for your name, and they didn’t exactly seem confident in their answer.”

“Why are you asking people for my name?”

“Well, I just wanted to check up on you after what happened last week.”

“You know about that?”

“Yeah, I was staying after school on Thursday and I saw you outside.”

“Okay.”

“I wanted to ask if you were okay.”

“Why because you want me to tell you what happened or because you think this will get you my vote next year when you run again for Student Body President?”

“No, because you didn’t look like you were doing okay that night, and neither do you look like you are doing okay right now. I just wanted to check in.”

“Look, we’ve been in the same classes since I moved here in middle school, and I think this is the first time we have ever had a conversation together. I don’t need your help nor do I need your pity,” Victoria said, walking past Emma. She could hear Emma calling her name as she rounded the corner and walked out of the nearest exit.

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The air was cold and the wind harsh against Victoria’s exposed skin. She pulled the sleeves of her flannel down to cover her wrists and walked faster in the direction of her home. She was supposed to text her parents as soon as she got through the door, and Victoria knew her parents would be worried until they got that text.

The sky was darkening into night, which was another thing for her parents to worry about. It was getting dark so early and since Victoria usually either walked or biked it made it even more stressful for them. She loved her parents, but they definitely worried and doted on her too much. Victoria was lucky though; she would much rather have them doting than cold or even abusive like so many other people had to deal with. They probably would tell her she should have been nicer to Emma. They always tried to bring out the best in her.

As Victoria was crossing the street, when she looked both ways, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. There was a man standing in the shadows of a tree about a block behind her. She would have almost missed him if it weren’t for the whites of his eyes that were staring directly at her. She couldn’t make out any details about him since he was too far away. He didn’t move when she caught him. Nothing about his demeanor changed; he just continued to stare at her.

Victoria didn't want to take her eyes off of him, but she also needed to get home before it got too dark. She crossed the street, but with her head slightly turned to keep him in her peripheral vision. She just needed to keep walking a few more blocks and her house would be right there. Victoria stumbled over the curb, taking her eye off the man for one second, but when she looked back he seemed to have gotten closer. He was still standing in the shadows, but now he was only a few houses away.

Victor pulled out the pepper spray her parents had gifted her when she started walking home from school. She clutched it tightly in her hand as she started to walk faster down the sidewalk. She had to turn a corner to get to her street, so the man was out of sight for a few seconds. When the man rounded the corner, he was much closer, but still walking at the steady pace he had been walking in this entire time.

Now that the man was closer, she could distinguish a few more details about him, but not many as it was getting increasingly darker. The man's face was completely hidden, but his eyes could still be seen, never blinking, and always staring ahead at her. He wore a black trench coat that covered the rest of his clothes, so she couldn't really make anything else out.

She glanced forward and realized that her house was at the end of the next street. The man was closer again, and she started to hear heavy, labored breathing from him. There was an earthy scent that filled the air. She could make out his eyes better; they were hazel, but had a golden hue to them. She uncapped her pepper spray and quickly, before he could react, sprayed him in the eyes. The man howled in pain and growled in anger.

Victoria made a break for it, running as fast as she could towards her home. She saw her mom's car in the driveway from down the road and pulled out her phone to call her. She could

hear heavy footsteps coming from behind her as the phone rang, and she waited for her mom to pick up. Victoria couldn't look behind her. She had to focus on running and making it to the door. Victoria heard the sound of her mom's voicemail. She felt a small bit of hope and optimism slip away from her, but she could see her front door now.

She made it to the door, but she struggled to use her keys to unlock the door. Victoria couldn't keep her hands steady, and she knew that every move she made could be the difference between life and death.

She heard heavy footsteps running at her, getting increasingly closer. She heard them right behind her, not breaking momentum, and she jumped away from the door. Victoria fell onto her front lawn and heard a heavy bang against the door where she just stood a moment ago. She saw the man hunched over, standing at her door. She could hear his heavy, violent breathing. Victoria could see his eyes now glaring down at her as he started to step towards her. He was no longer composed and steady. He was no longer pretending.

There was nowhere for her to run. She couldn't get up in time. She was going to die or worse be taken. What did he want with her? She couldn't even scream. What would that do? He would have her by then. She stared up at him as he approached.

She could see more of him now. He wore tattered and dreary clothes under his trench coat. He had a rather sullen and hollow face that was framed by wild, dirty, and long black hair. Victoria could tell that he was much taller than her now that he was getting closer. She hoped that maybe he was a homeless man that was a little unstable and needed some help. However, the venomous glare in his eyes and the way he stalked towards her dispelled any sense of hope she had in her mind.

He stood over her motionless. He just stared at her. Victoria held her breath, not knowing what would set him off. He was like a wild animal waiting to pounce. She just stared back at him. She was tired and without any other options. If he was going to do something, then why didn't he just get on with it. She would not go down without a fight.

Victoria subtly moved her keys in between her fingers as a makeshift weapon and readied her body for the attack that she knew would come. She was dead and she knew that. The streets were empty and silent around them. The air was unusually still.

He smiled at her then. This was a game and Victoria was finally playing.

The teeth that made up that sinister smile were yellow and jaggedly sharp. He took a step forward, and Victoria finally noticed that the man wasn't wearing any shoes. He was barefoot, with his feet blackened all over with long, chipped nails similar to his teeth. The man bent down and reached out one of his hands towards her. The hand matched his feet and teeth, with dirt under the nails and black hair creeping out from under the sleeve of his coat.

Victoria's phone rang, cutting through the silence and breaking the spell of the encounter. The man growled at the sharp sound. Victoria looked down and saw her mom's name on the screen. She heard the front door open and her mom's voice calling her name. When she looked up, the man was gone. She saw her mother standing in the doorway and looking outside with her phone up to her ear.

Victoria got up, grabbing her things, and quickly walked over to her mom. When she got to the door, she noticed claw marks embedded in the door, similar to the damage done to the locker at school. They went inside the house and for the first time tonight she felt like she could

breathe. She didn't tell her mother about the man because she wasn't completely sure he was a man at all. There was something off about him; something not completely human. She made up a lie to her mom and went up to her room to be alone. She couldn't tell her what happened.

Victoria didn't think her parents or the police could help her, but she needed to do something soon. She had always dealt with creeps on her own, and this wasn't any different.

...

The next day at school, Victoria had her dirty blonde hair up in a tight ponytail, but the slight frizz still revealed the lack of sleep she had gotten the night before. There were deep bags under her iron gray eyes that had accumulated over the course of this stressful week. She spaced out through most of her classes and would occasionally sketch out the strange man in her sketchbook. Victoria didn't notice the boy sitting behind her during English class, peering over her shoulder.

"That's amazing. Who is that?" Victoria heard from behind her.

Victoria turned around to find a boy with dark brown, curly hair and annoyingly bright hazel eyes staring at her. The expression on his face reminded her of Emma, who was sitting across the room. A slight pang of regret reverberated through Victoria when she thought of Emma and how rude she was to her yesterday. Emma was just trying to help, and she had this way about her that made you want to let her. Victoria refocused on this unfamiliar boy and twisted her face in a scowl.

"None of your business." Victoria said, turning back around sharply.

"Well, it's really cool."

“Thanks.” Victoria said hesitantly.

The bell sounded a few minutes later, signaling the end of the school day. Victoria quickly packed up her sketchbook and was out the door before anyone else. She walked quickly through the students, weaving and avoiding bumping into anyone. A girl turned a corner right when Victoria was passing by, and they crashed into each other. They both fell to the ground.

“Oh, sorry about that.” Victoria immediately said. She quickly got up and went to help the other girl up.

The student looked up and Victoria immediately recognized the glare. It was Gabrielle Chase; another classmate from middle school. Gabrielle narrowed her dark brown eyes even more, and Victoria retracted her hand.

“What, are you brain-dead? Watch where you’re going.” Gabrielle said coolly. She looked back and Victoria noticed a group of girls in cheer uniforms watching their exchange. The cheerleaders helped Gabrielle to stand. She made sure her long, black braids were fine and then turned to glare at Victoria with her group.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going? I don’t have time for this.” Victoria snapped and walked through the group. She shoved them out of the way, and every girl except for Gabrielle moved. Victoria had developed a reputation in middle school and her first year of high school. She had no problem getting suspended for a few days for putting someone in their place; funny how it was always in self-defense, but the school didn’t care about that. Victoria shouldered past Gabrielle and glared at the group as she passed, daring them to say anything, but



they kept quiet. Some of the girls were the bullies she had dealt with in middle school, especially Gabrielle.

“Whatever. Let’s go, we’re late for practice.” Victoria heard Gabrielle say from behind her.

Victoria walked until she got to one of the side exits of the school. She was about to walk through it, but hesitated. She looked at the sky above, annoyed that it was darkening earlier than yesterday.

“Are you okay?” Victoria heard a familiar voice from behind her. She turned around to find the boy from English class looking at her.

“What, are you stalking me?”

“No, I was going to the parking lot, and you’re blocking the door, but you seem kind of freaked out.” Kieran explained.

“That is also none of your business. Is this a hobby or a personality defect?” Victoria fired back snidely.

“My name is Kieran, by the way.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Well, I told it to you anyway.”

“Cool, can you go now?”

“You’re still blocking the door.”

“Right,” Victoria awkwardly replied. She released her firm grip on the door handle and took a step to the side.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Why can’t you and leave me alone? Huh, is there something about me that screams I want to be talked to. Am I losing my touch? Is my reputation slipping?”

“Oh, you know Emma?”

“Kieran, sorry I’m late. I had to talk to Mr. Smith about something and…” Emma said as she walked up, but paused when she saw Victoria.

“Speak of the angel.” Victoria said sarcastically.

“What a pleasant surprise. I didn’t think you two knew each other.”

“We don’t,” Victoria quickly replied.

“We could,” Kieran replied after.

“I’m good.”

“Victoria, how are you feeling after yesterday?” Emma asked in a sickeningly sincere tone.

“What do you mean?” Victoria responded confused. How did they know she was attacked yesterday?

“Well, you seemed really upset when we talked yesterday. I’m sorry if I was prying. I have a habit of doing that sometimes, ask Kieran.”

“She does.” Kieran added.

“No, you did nothing wrong. Just drop it”

“Hey Victoria, I was about to give Emma a ride home. I could drop you off too.” Kieran offered.

“My mother always told me not to get into a car with strange men, so no, thanks.”

Victoria replied, turning around and finally walking out of the school.

The air whipped her ponytail and chilled her skin. She narrowed her eyes against the attack. Then, the wind stopped and all was quiet. There were no students or faculty in the parking lot. They had already left or were staying after school. She was about to cross the parking lot when something felt off. She stopped and paused. It was the same feeling that she felt the night that Mr. Lewis died. She was being watched.

Victoria looked around, scanning the tree lines next to the parking lot and behind her. She saw nothing, except for Emma and Kieran staring at her in worry.

“I know I’m going to sound like a broken record, but you don’t seem okay, and I am really worried about you.” Emma said walking up to Victoria.

“Fine.” Victoria relented. She took another glance around, still not seeing anything.

...

Kieran dropped Victoria off first, since she only lived a few blocks away from the school. He drove towards the edge of town and dropped Emma off at her house a few minutes later. He

continued past her house and down the long road. They were almost neighbors if it weren't for the woods and miles of distance between the houses in this area.

He and Emma were more acquaintances than friends; they used to be closer in elementary school, but Emma became busy with extracurriculars, so they hadn't hung out in a while. It reminded him of the good old days. While Emma joined multiple clubs and kept busy, Kieran slightly withdrew within himself. He got along with everyone at school, but none of it ever felt personal like his friendship with Emma. She was the only one who ever checked on him, and he was happy to feel useful, giving her a ride home.

Victoria was interesting. She could be rude and standoffish sometimes, but her sarcasm was amusing. She didn't say much on the way to her house, but he could tell something was weighing heavily on her mind. Kieran wished that she would open up to him. Emma knew at least something, but she wouldn't betray Victoria's trust by telling him. Kieran was glad to have this chance to reconnect with her and hoped that Victoria would open up soon.

He drove his green jeep toward the edge of town while reminiscing. He almost didn't notice the dog in the middle of the road. Kieran swerved out of the way, barely missing the dog. Kieran pulled the car over to the side of the road and got out. The black dog trotted over to him with its tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth. It stopped in front of Kieran, sat on its hind legs, and looked up at him with its head tilted. Kieran reached out his hand. The dog smelled his palm and then started licking it after a few seconds.

Kieran felt warmth spread throughout his chest, and he considered taking the dog home. It didn't have a collar, and it seemed really friendly. This was the biggest dog that Kieran had ever seen, and its fur was blacker than the tar road below. He was about to call Grandad to ask

his opinion, but the dog suddenly went rigid. Kieran looked around to see what set off the dog, but there was nothing and no one in sight. He turned back to the door, and it was gone. The dog's tail could be seen disappearing into the forest. Kieran called the dog, but it didn't come back.

He got back in his car, but it stalled every time he tried to start it. Kieran sighed at his bad luck and reluctantly got out of the car with his satchel. He lifted the hood to take a look at the engine. He stared blankly for a few seconds, scanning the interior. Kieran tried to recall every piece of advice Grandad had given him about car maintenance, but none of it seemed helpful at this moment.

Kieran decided to walk home and bring Grandad back to take a look at it himself. He didn't want to call Grandad before them, making him worried for no reason. He couldn't call his parents as they were out of town on a business trip. Kieran walked down the road towards the direction of his house. It was only a few minutes away, and he didn't completely mind the walk. He did mind when the wind started to pick up, and he had to put up his red hoodie to keep his ears from getting cold, and when the sky started to fill the woods on either side of the road with shadows.

He started walking at a faster pace so that he could make it home before it got even darker. Maybe he should wait until the morning to bring Grandad to look at the car, and he will just leave it there for the night. The wind was blowing against his back and the trees swayed next to him. He was already more than halfway there and just needed to relax.

He pulled out his phone and started to play a random game to distract himself. While trying to beat a particularly difficult level, he heard something moving to his right. He turned his

head to the side, but couldn't see anything through the evening shadow. He continued walking faster, knowing that the driveway to his house should be coming up soon.

Kieran couldn't believe that not a single car had come down this road. He was alone and the streetlights above that would appear sparingly did nothing to ease his nerves. He walked into darkness and heard a branch snap from behind him. Kieran turned around and saw the dog from before, standing under the streetlamp light.

He held out his hand. It slowly walked over to him and sniffed at his palm. Kieran expected the dog to lick his palm again, but instead it bit down. Kieran screamed in pain and pulled his hand back when it let go. It licked its chops, savoring his blood, and it seemed to smirk up at him. There was something not right about this dog. Now that Kieran had more time to examine the animal, this seemed more like a wolf than a dog. It stood there examining him as well before it bared its sharp teeth and started to growl at him. Kieran backed away slowly, trying to get as close to his house as possible without provoking the animal.

The wolf pounced and Kieran used his bag filled with textbooks to hit the animal as it came close to snapping at his neck. The wolf was knocked to the side, falling into the bushes, and Kieran used this chance to run. He felt the ground below his feet change from dirt to brick. Kieran realized that this was the driveway leading up to his house. He ran, making a turn to the right, his heavy footsteps filling the silent evening air.

He could see his house up ahead, but the lights were off. Grandad wasn't home. Kieran heard a bark from behind him and loud growls drawing near. He stumbled up the wooden front steps of his mahogany home and used his keys to open the front door. He closed the door and felt a heavy thud against it. Kieran locked the door and slid the chain into its locked position as well.

He looked through the window at the top of the door and could see the wolf on his porch. The wolf started to claw and scratch at the door, trying to get in. It stopped scratching and stepped back. It looked up at him with its golden eyes. Something about its stare unnerved Kieran, and he stepped away from the door. He ran to the kitchen to get a knife.

When Kieran was walking back to the door, he saw the door knob being twisted back and forth. Someone was trying to get in. Maybe the wolf had left and it was his grandfather. Maybe it was Grandad and the wolf was after him too. Kieran ran forward and saw the top of a figure's head in the window above, but when he got close to the door, the figure was gone.

Kieran peered through the glass again and saw the wolf still staring, sitting on its hind legs. He must have imagined the figure. He got lost in the wolf's eyes for a moment. They looked as if they were glowing. Kieran had never seen any animal with eyes like that. The corners of the wolf's mouth quirked up into a human-like smirk, putting Kieran even more on edge than he already was.

He stepped away from the door and sat on the couch to calm down. The wolf continued scratching at the door. Maybe the wolf would get bored and go away, but what if the wolf didn't go away before Grandad got back? He took his phone from the pocket of his hoodie and called his grandfather to warn him from coming back to the house.

"Grandad, where are you?" Kieran said as soon as his grandfather picked up.

"I'm on my way back home. The bus was late, but it should be nearing the entrance to our driveway soon," Grandad responded with a hint of worry at his grandson's tone.

“Stop, do not come back here. Get off a stop or two early and stay with one of our neighbors until I call you again”

“What is going on? Is everything okay?”

“There’s a wolf outside the front door. It followed me home, and it won’t leave.”

“Alright, listen to me. Just remain calm. I will get there soon and...”

A black mass burst through the living room front window, shattering the glass. Kieran closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw the wolf standing in the middle of the living room unharmed and baring its teeth.

The wolf launched itself at Kieran, but Kieran threw his body to the right to avoid the wolf’s teeth and claws, while dropping his phone in the process. He quickly got up and ran to the stairs. Kieran was halfway to the landing when he felt a sharp pain, causing him to scream and his body pulled down. He landed hard on the steps. The wind was knocked from his lungs as he was violently pulled back down. He looked back and saw the wolf had sunk its teeth into his ankle.

Kieran grabbed the banister and tried to kick the wolf off with his other foot, but the wolf would not let go. He could only hold on for a few seconds before the strength of the wolf tore his grip away from the banister. Kieran was roughly pulled down the remaining steps, and they were almost to the bottom when Kieran looked back again. He stared into the wolf’s eyes and stabbed the wolf in the side of its head. The wolf’s grip eventually lessened, and its body slumped to the side.



Kieran pried the jaws open to remove the teeth from his ankle. Blood poured out of the wound onto the floor below. He took off his sweater and wrapped it around his ankle, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. Kieran took a second to collect himself. He had never killed anything before.

There was a sound from the door and Kieran looked up to see someone trying to get in, but the door chain was preventing the door from opening fully. Kieran slowly got up and limped over to the front door. He could see his grandfather through the crack. He closed the door and pulled the door chain loose. The door immediately opened and Grandad stepped into the house, taking in the destruction.

“What happened? Where is the wolf?”

“The body is over there...” Kieran started to say, but stopped in confusion and horror when he saw that the body was gone.

“You’re hurt.” Grandad said, helping Kieran over to the stairs to sit down. He left to go get a first aid kit.

“I don’t understand,” Kieran said to himself as he continued to apply pressure using his blood-red sweater.

Grandad came back a few seconds later with the first aid kit and immediately went to work cleaning up Kieran’s wound. They didn’t notice the wolf staring at them from the other side of the living room, completely healed and unharmed and the knife lay stained on the floor next to it.

The wolf slammed into Grandad from his side. Grandad's head slammed against the wall, knocking him unconscious. Kieran turned around and stumbled up the stairs. When he reached the top, he looked down and saw the wolf baring its teeth at Grandad's body.

"Leave him alone!" Kieran screamed, getting the wolf's attention.

The wolf turned to look up at Kieran and the corner of its mouth curled up into the hint of a grin. It bounded up the stairs after Kieran. Kieran ran to the closest door, closing it behind him. The wolf slammed against the door, trying to break it down.

Kieran looked around the room and then realized that this was his own room. He scanned for anything to defend himself with until his eyes landed on the window facing the side of the house. He ran over to the window, opened it, and looked out, trying to find a way to escape instead. Kieran saw a drain pipe with reach and hoped that it was strong enough for him to slide down.

He leaned out of his window as the bangs and scratches against the door continued. He gripped the drain pipe with one hand and slowly eased himself through the window until most of his body was out of it. Kieran took a deep breath, grabbed the drain pipe with his other hand, and moved the rest of his body out of the window.

He fell fast until both his feet landed on the ground below. He had to stifle his screams of pain as he landed on his injured ankle. Kieran ran as fast as his injuries could allow back to the front of the house. He went through the open front door and knelt down next to his grandfather. He was still unconscious. Kieran could hear the wolf still trying to get into the room he was no longer in.

Kieran tried to rouse his grandfather, but he was not responding. He stroked his grandfather's short white hair and whispered his name as loud as possible without alerting the monster upstairs.

Kieran was pushed backwards, banging his head against the ground, disorienting him. He looked up and saw the wolf standing on top of him. Its claws were pressing down into his chest, and it was slowly moving its face closer to his. This time, Kieran knew there was nothing he could do to get out of this situation. He just hoped that his grandfather woke up and got away while the wolf was busy with him.

The wolf let out a deep guttural growl, and it snarled, showing him every one of its teeth. Kieran closed his eyes and turned his head, waiting for the inevitable. Nothing seemed to happen for a few seconds, so Kieran opened his eyes. The wolf was staring down at him in amusement. Kieran looked into its golden eyes, which betrayed supernatural intelligence. The wolf's eyes were strange; they almost seemed hazel. Kieran realized that the eyes were similar to his, except the gold was more prominent for the wolf and his eyes seemed to glimmer and shine.

He heard movement from his left and a sharp, ear-piercing yelp from the wolf above him. Kieran opened his eyes to see Grandad was awake and standing over the both of them. He looked at the wolf and saw the handle of a pocket knife sticking out of its side. Grandad roughly yanked the knife from the wolf's side and plunged the knife into its back. The wolf howled in pain. This was apparently doing damage, unlike when it crashed through a window or when Kieran stabbed it in the head. Grandad pulled the knife out again and went to stab at the wolf, but it bounded off of Kieran and out of the front door.

They watched it run down the driveway and disappear into the night. Grandad helped Kieran up and sat him back down on the stairs. He closed and locked the door. Kiernan just watched his grandfather as he looked at all the damage. Grandad knelt down next to Kieran and administered first aid to his injuries.

“Are you okay? How’s your head?” Kieran asked as Grandad finished treating his wounds.

“Don’t worry about me. I just have a slight concussion and headache from when that thing slammed me into the wall.”

“Maybe we should go to the hospital.”

“No, everything will be fine. I’m sure it’ll be gone by tomorrow, and your injuries should heal soon. I’ll take care of cleaning up this mess, and you get some rest.”

“Why are you so calm? We literally almost died, and we don’t know if that thing will be back.”

“It won’t. I promise you that.”

“How do you know? What aren’t you telling me?”

“We will talk in the morning and I will tell you everything I know. Right now, you need rest and I need to go get some old boards from the back to cover that window”

Grandad put away the first aid kit and Kieran got up to head upstairs, the injuries from the night finally taking a toll on his energy.

“Grandad, thank you for saving me,” Kieran said in a wavering voice.

“No, thank you for saving me,” Grandad replied as he walked towards the back of the house.

...

In the morning, Kiernan woke up sore and bruised. He slowly made his way out of bed and into the bathroom across the hall. He turned on the light and looked in the mirror. There were dark circles under his eyes. It felt like he hadn't slept, even though he had been able to get a few hours in. The sleep wasn't the best, as he kept having nightmares of the black wolf with the golden eyes.

He checked his hair and found a speck or two of glass in it. Kieran took off the clothes that he had been wearing the day before to inspect the damage. He winced slightly as he tried not to use his bandaged hand too much. He had claw marks on his chest from where the wolf's paws had dug into him. Kieran had two bruises that faintly resembled the shape of paws stood out from the pale skin on his chest. There was a larger bruise on his back from when the wolf pushed him to the ground. He looked down at his ankle and saw the bandage and gauze wrapped around it.

Kieran felt more healed than he should have. The wolf attack was only a few hours ago, yet his body felt like the attack was weeks ago. The scratches on his chest were already starting to heal, and he could put some pressure on his ankle without it hurting too badly. He took a shower to wash away some of last night and got dressed for the day.

He walked downstairs to the living room completely clean. There was no glass on the floor and the front window was boarded up. Kieran could smell breakfast wafting towards him

from the kitchen and walked towards the delicious smell. Grandad was standing at the stove stirring something in a pan. He turned around when he heard Kieran walking in. Two matching sets of eyes met, and Kieran noticed that he seemed unaffected by the events of last night. He was wearing his unusually button-down shirt and slacks, and his hair was in its usually short, white style.

“Morning Kieran, how are you feeling?” Grandad greeted.

“I’m feeling a little better; I’m a little sore and tired, but I’m okay.”

“Let me take a look at your ankle.”

Kieran went through the archway to his left into the dining room and sat down in the chair closest to the kitchen. Grandad finished up breakfast, plating the food. He grabbed the first aid kit from the counter and knelt down next to Kieran. He carefully unwrapped the gauze and remarked in confusion at how healed Kieran's injuries were.

Kieran took a look over Grandad. He was concerned that he was focusing too much on him, but his Grandad seemed fine.

“Grandad, how’s your head?”

“I’m doing better. I still feel a bit spacey, but that’ll go away. Right now, we need to make sure that you didn’t get an infection.”

Grandad applied fresh gauze to Kieran’s ankle. He cleaned the area of dried blood and applied fresh gauze to Kieran’s ankle. Kieran really admired Grandad’s focus. It took him back to when he was a child and his Grandad would clean up his scrapes after he would inevitably hurt himself doing something random. Grandad was a doctor before his retirement. When he was

younger, he worked at the local hospital, but settled down after Kieran was born into family practice.

They ate breakfast in silence, which was not a common situation, as usually Grandad would be telling joke after joke to make him laugh, and he would be telling his Grandad about the day ahead. Kieran did appreciate the breakfast, as he realized he hadn't had the chance to have dinner the night before. They both finished eating and Kieran helped Grandad with the dishes. Grandad decided that they should talk on their way to fix Kieran's car. Kieran was ready to have at least some of his confusions dispelled.

They walked out of the house together, and Kieran stayed on alert. He saw deep scratches at the bottom of the door from the wolf, but he also saw that the door knob was slightly dented. He pulled out his phone and took a picture of the damage. Kieran realized that maybe the figure in the window last night was real.

"Make sure to step over the salt line," Grandad called from a few feet ahead.

"What?" Kieran said in confusion as he stepped over a line of salt in the grass that seemed to circle around the house.

"It's a superstition from Ireland to keep out fairies," Grandad called back.

"Fairies?" Kieran exclaimed as he caught up to Grandad, and they walked together towards the car.

"That wasn't a normal wolf that attacked us last night. I think it was a púca, but I'm not sure; I didn't think they were real until last night."

"What's a púca?" Kieran inquired.

“Remember when you were younger, and I would tell you bedtime stories.”

“Yeah, some of them gave me nightmares.”

“Do you remember any of them?”

“There was one story about a changeling, and I was scared for a week that I would be snatched away in my sleep and replaced. I remember stories about the marrow that were very different from the mermaids that I watched in my cartoons.” Kieran reminisced.

“What else?” Grandad prodded.

“I remember this story about a shapeshifting fairy that would play tricks on people and when given offerings would help farmers with their crops.”

“That’s the púca.”

“Those stories don’t really match with what happened last night.”

“Well, sometimes I didn’t tell you certain stories or watered down some of the details. I didn’t want to give you even more nightmares than you were already having, and your parents wouldn’t have appreciated it. I would have stopped, but you would always ask me to tell you a new story, and it felt so good being able to share some of my culture from my home country.”

“Yeah, I remember I would always bug you until you would give in, and even my parents couldn’t last long against my whining.” Kieran and Grandad laughed for a bit, reminiscing about the past, until Grandad’s expression darkened.

“I have to warn you that if this is a púca then you are in danger. They can be very friendly when they want to be, but they also have the capacity to be sadistically cruel.”



“Kind of like people.” Kieran surmised.

“People don’t have the ability to shape-shift or bring bad fortune onto individuals, like the bad fortune that caused your car to break down.”

“I didn’t even consider that thing could have caused my car to stop. Are you sure it’s safe to be walking around right now?” Kieran replied in bewilderment.

“I think so; the stories always describe the púca as nocturnal.”

“Do you have any idea why the púca is targeting me?” Kieran asked.

“I have no idea. It can’t be because our family is from Ireland because there are many families that have ancestors from Ireland that to my knowledge haven’t been attacked.”

“My math teacher died last week from an animal attack. I don’t know why it took me until now to connect that with what happened last night.”

“Maybe the wolf followed you home.” Grandad questioned.

“But I wasn’t there the night that Mr. Lewis died.” Kieran reasoned.

“Maybe ask around to see if anyone noticed anything strange”

“Well, Emma was there that night; I know she had a student council meeting. I could ask her if she noticed anything. Is there anything I can do to protect myself besides being covered in salt?”

“I’m not sure. I’m as out of my depth as you are. Similar to you; I always loved when my own grandfather would tell me stories, but they were just stories until now. I could look through some of our family heirlooms in the attic and basement to see if there’s anything that can help.”

“Okay, in the meantime I’ll talk to Emma”

They reached the car and Grandad examined the engine. He was able to figure out that some of the spark plugs were blown, so he used the spares in his tool kit and replaced them. The car was up and running a few moments later. Kieran dropped Grandad back at home, changed clothes, and left for school, determined to find Emma.

...

Emma was acting out of character; she was low energy and quiet throughout most of her classes. Teachers and classmates stopped her many times during the day to check in on her. Emma was starting to get annoyed, but she would always respond with a smile and an explanation that she didn’t sleep well last night. It wasn’t a lie. She had woken up in the middle of the night and couldn’t go back to sleep. She was so sleep-deprived that she had started hallucinating. Emma thought she heard whispers coming from the woods outside her house. She could have sworn it was her name being whispered over and over again for hours.

She looked through her window and didn’t see anything. The world was still, other than the whispers; not an owl or cricket could be heard. It stopped when the sun came up and Emma was able to get an hour of sleep before having to get up for school. The hour wasn’t enough, but she didn’t want to be rude to her teachers by falling asleep during class, so she just pushed through until the final bell sounded.

Emma searched for Kieran so that he could give her a ride home. She appreciated every time he would give her a ride. Sometimes she felt like she was taking advantage of their past friendship, though. She didn’t really give him anything in return, and they hadn’t done anything

together as friends for the past few years. She was just so busy. Emma liked being busy and being helpful through all the clubs that she was in, but Emma would be lying to herself if she didn't acknowledge that this came at an expense. Maybe she could try to be there for him more the way he was there for her. Victoria needed her help too. Emma didn't know what's wrong and Victoria wouldn't let her in, but she knew that it was something serious.

Emma finally found Kieran in the art room and was surprised to find him in deep conversation with Victoria. She hadn't seen Victoria so talkative since when she first moved to town. Victoria was very different in seventh grade; she was so open and optimistic. Maybe that's why Emma was so set on helping Victoria, whether she wanted her help or not.

Emma felt a pang of jealousy course through her as she saw the two of them together. She wanted to be the one to help her. They didn't even know each other a week ago. The exhaustion was making her lose control, and she was starting to become consumed by these negative feelings.

Emma took a breath, coming back to herself; she usually wasn't this quick to anger. She could still be there for Victoria. She didn't have to be the first one she confided in. Emma looked through the window again. She noticed that Kieran had bandages on his ankle and hand. What happened to him? She finally opened the door and walked over to them in worry. They stopped talking when they heard someone coming toward them, but relaxed when they realized it was Emma.

"Hey, Emma," Victoria greeted.

"Are you okay?" Kieran asked, noticing her tired and worn-down disposition.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night, but I’m okay. Are you okay? Why are you all bandaged up?”

“I was just filling Victoria in on what happened to me last night. I was going to tell you because I knew you were at school when Mr. Lewis died.”

“Mr. Lewis? What does Mr. Lewis have to do with anything?”

“I was attacked two nights ago by this strange man,” Victoria admitted.

“What? Are you okay? Did you go to the police?”

“No, I didn’t.” Victoria replied.

“Why? I don’t understand.” Emma said confused.

“Because I was also attacked last night,” Kieran interjected.

“What do you mean by 'attacked'?”

“There was this wolf that followed me home, attacking me and Grandad.”

“Is he okay? Are you okay?”

“We’re fine. We were able to fight it, but it got away”

“I don’t understand what this has to do with Mr. Lewis or the man that attacked Victoria”

Victoria and Kieran gave each other a look that briefly reignited the jealous feelings from the hallway. Kieran hesitantly started to explain what happened to him last night and the information that Grandad had told him. Emma could tell that he was worried that she wasn’t going to believe him, and truth be told she was having a hard time doing so.

Victoria explained in more detail what happened to her two nights ago and why they thought the two attacks were linked with Mr. Lewis' death. Emma tried to listen and take in everything, but she was exhausted and everything they were saying was so outlandish.

"You don't believe us. Do you?" Victoria said abruptly.

"I'm trying to." Emma responded sincerely.

"I have to show you something," Victoria responded.

Victoria got up with her bag and walked out of the art room. Emma and Kieran followed after her. She led them to the place where Mr. Lewis died. Victoria pointed to one of the lockers, urging Emma to look. Emma saw scratch marks along the bottom of the locker. Kieran pulled out his phone and showed Emma a picture of scratch marks on a door that matched.

"What does all of this mean?" Emma finally asked after taking a moment to process.

"It means we were attacked by a púca." Kieran replied grimly.

"I just don't understand, and this is a lot to take in. What is a púca?"

"You remember those stories that I would tell you that Grandad would tell me."

"Yeah, you would always tell me a new story on the bus ride to school the next morning."

"Well, the stories, at least some of them, are true."

"I don't know what to do with all this information."

"We don't either."

“We don’t know what it wants or how to stop it.”

“Grandad is looking into it, but that doesn’t help us for tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was attacked the first night, and Kieran was attacked the second. We think you might be attacked the third.” Victoria explained.

“Why? What did I do?”

“We don’t know. We don’t know what any of us did.” Kieran explained.

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, that’s what I was talking to Victoria about when you walked in. I was trying to convince her to stay the night at my house, and I was going to ask you the same.”

“I don’t think that will do anything; your house was already attacked,” Victoria replied.

“Exactly, so the púca won’t expect Emma to be there. It will expect her to be home.”

“I think this is a good idea,” Emma interjected.

“Of course, you do,” Victoria replied sarcastically.

“Come on Victoria.” Kieran prodded.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you do it for me? I’m scared, and it seems like it’s my turn to be attacked.” Emma implored.

“I…fine.” Victoria finally conceded.

“This is great; strength in numbers and all that.” Kieran replied cheerfully.

...

Emma woke up slowly. There was a haze enveloping her mind and her body felt heavy. Kieran was fast asleep in his bed, and Victoria was snoring on the floor in her sleeping bag. Emma had chosen to sleep on the bay window with the moon shining down on her. She checked her phone and saw that it was one o'clock in the morning. She laid back down and tried to go back to sleep. As she closed her eyes, her mind started to wander, and she reminisced about the past.

She used to love to come over here when they were children and play for hours until she had to go home, but sometimes she was able to convince Kieran's parents to let her stay until morning. She missed being here and felt a pang of guilt for how long she'd been away.

The sleepover was one of the best nights Emma had in a while. Kieran had driven and stopped at their houses, so that Emma and Victoria could get clothes for tomorrow and supplies. Grandad greeted them at the front door and gave Emma the warmest hug. He gave Victoria a hug too, but she was a little more hesitant. However, Victoria was soon laughing at all of his jokes and wouldn't leave his side. There was a joy in her eyes that hadn't been present before. Later, when they were winding down in Kieran's room, Victoria revealed that her maternal grandparents were dead, and she wasn't in contact with her father's family. She wouldn't give a reason why, but Emma knew.

Emma remembered when Victoria first moved here, and she looked slightly different than she did now. She had more masculine features, and the girls in the class were relentless.

Emma didn't think they knew Victoria's secret, but that didn't stop them from being cruel about her looks. Victoria stood her ground and pushed back, eventually silencing her bullies. Victoria was so strong and Emma admired her so much for that, but she remembered the one time she caught her crying in the bathroom. Emma comforted her and wished Victoria would let her in. Victoria just thanked her, wiped away her tears, and left. That moment was the closest the two had ever been until now.

Emma had fallen asleep first. She was too exhausted from the night before to stay up, but she fell asleep peacefully, listening to Victoria and Kieran bickering into the night. She was glad that they were getting along and that she was part of that. Emma hoped that together they could figure out what was going on. The things that Victoria and Kieran had told her were unbelievable and could not be possible, but they were so earnest. Victoria would never admit this, but Emma knew that she was scared.

"Emma," Emma twisted her head toward the window. She could see the trees swaying aggressively in the wind.

"Emma," Emma's eyes widened, recognizing the voice from the night before.

"Emma..." Emma flinched. The voice sounded like it was being directly whispered into her ear.

"Come play Emma," Emma started to feel dizzy and couldn't think clearly. She tried to stand up, but almost fell. She tried to steady herself and wake up her friends.

"Now Emma." The voice was impatient and convincing.



Emma felt something pulling at her body, urging her to go outside. She slowly left Kieran's bedroom, unable to alert the others. She gripped her phone tightly in her hand. Maybe they could track it to find her. Maybe she could break free and call for help. She was about to die and no one would find her body.

Emma's mind raced with every possibility while her body steadily moved through Kieran's house towards the front door. What would this thing look like? What would it do to her? It already attacked Victoria and Kieran. It almost killed them. They were able to fight back. Emma couldn't. She was trapped in her mind. Emma's limbs felt heavy. There was nothing she could do, but allow her body to open the front door and move her down the front steps.

The púca was waiting for her. It was standing at the edge of the salt circle. It was beautiful. The púca had taken the shape of a horse. Emma was mesmerized by its pitch black mane. She stopped in front of its face and looked into its eyes. The eyes had a rich golden hue with flecks of green and hazel. They were intelligent eyes. She could see the púca's playfulness. She could see the hint of cruelty hidden beneath.

Emma couldn't do anything about it. She was alert in her mind, but her body was welcoming. Emma ran one of her hands through the púca's hair. It felt like silk, and she wanted to spend the rest of her life combing and tending to it. She walked over to its side. The púca knelt its massive body down to allow Emma to get on. She ran her hand along its body. It felt like the smoothest velvet she had ever felt. Emma wanted to feel more. She dropped her phone onto the grass below and used both hands to feel the púca's powerful body.

Emma climbed on top of the horse's back. She wrapped her arms around its neck. She let her head rest into its hair, smelling pine cones and honey. Emma smiled. She screamed in her

mind for help. Emma screamed to be free. She wanted her parents. Emma wanted Grandad to save her the way he saved Kieran. She wanted her friends.

The púca stood back up and whinnied in triumph. It felt disgusting having this thing on its back. These past few days had been the most fun the púca had ever experienced. But all games come to an end. There had to be a winner. The púca trotted towards the forest and blurred into the foliage.

...

“Emma!” Kieran exclaimed. He bolted upright.

“Huh. Why are you yelling?” Victoria said groggily waking up.

“Emma is missing.” Kieran had panicked after finding no trace of her in his room.

“What?” Victoria said fully awake.

They called Emma’s name and checked the other rooms of the house. She was nowhere to be found. They last checked the kitchen and Kieran checked the location app they all had downloaded for safety, but the app signaled that Emma was still on the property. Victoria suggested looking outside and they searched the front yard. Kieran found her phone on the ground on the other side of the salt circle.

“So, the púca did take her.”

“Emma is still alive.” Kieran suddenly said from beside her.

“What? How do you know that?”

“I don’t know. There’s no blood, and I feel like the púca would want us to know if it had killed her.”

“But you said that she’s alive, so matter of factly. How do you know she’s alive? Things about you aren’t adding up.” Victoria questioned.

“What do you mean? Do you not trust me? What, do you think I’m the púca in disguise?”

“Of course not, but there are things about you that don’t make sense.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that you knew that something was wrong with Emma. How did you know she was missing?”

“I had this dream. It was really blurry, but all I knew when I woke up was that Emma was in trouble and needed me.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s been bothering me. Also, your wounds have completely healed and it’s only been a day. That’s not possible.”

“I think we are way past the realm of possibility.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“I don’t know. I’ve just had this weird feeling since coming into contact with the púca. It feels as if we have a connection”

“A connection.”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean you’re going to start sprouting fangs and claws?”

“I don’t think so.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do; a púca is a fairy, and I am not a fairy.” Victoria raised her left eyebrow at that and Kieran responded, “You know what I mean.”

They decided to go back inside and come up with a plan, Kieran was so concerned with Emma’s disappearance that he hadn’t realized that Grandad was also gone. They walked into the kitchen. Kieran was about to call Grandad, but Victoria interrupted him.

“What’s that?” Victoria asked, peering into the dining room, and pointing to a box on top of the table.

“I’m not sure,” Kieran replied as they walked over to the box.

There was a sticky note on top of it. The note was from Grandad, explaining that he had found this box in the attic. He hoped that the contents of the box would be of some help. Grandad explained that he had gone to the local library to find out more information.

Kieran lifted the lid to the ornate black box. He pulled out a covered iron dagger, gripping it by its dark brown leather handle, and pulled off the leather sheath. The blade gleamed in the light as he twisted it around. Victoria reached into the box and did the same thing to the other dagger. She felt the weight of it in her palm and loved the feeling.

“Okay, well whatever’s going on with you, how do we use it to find Emma and don’t say ‘I don’t know.’ I am so tired of that answer” Victoria said.

“We could wait until Grandad gets back. Maybe he might have an answer.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“Then, what do you suggest?”

“Well, let’s think about this. What started all of this?”

“Mr. Lewis’ death?”

“Exactly, but why?”

“I don’t...” Kieran started, but stopped when Victoria gave him a look.

“Maybe he left something behind. Do you know where he lives?”

“No.”

“Great.”

“But I do know that his desk hasn’t been cleaned out.” Kieran added.

“Really? His desk?”

“It’s worth a shot.”

“Fine. We need to do something. Emma needs us.”

...

She ran through the woods, her long, brown hair getting caught on the branches and brambles, slowing her down. She didn’t dare look behind her as she focused all her energy on maneuvering around or over the logs and rocks in her path. Tried to listen for anything behind her, but she heard nothing.

She didn't know where she was going. These woods felt endless, and she just needed to make it out of here and find help. She had no idea how long she had been stuck here, and she had no way of calling for help; that thing had snatched her phone from her hands. It was not a normal wolf.

She reached a clearing, and she could see the darkening sky up above. She rested for a moment, but kept her ears on alert for any noise besides the crickets starting to chirp. She heard a sound from above, but it was too late as she felt sharp talons pierce her shoulders and she couldn't feel the ground beneath her anymore. She was being taken away, but to where she had no idea.

...

Victoria and Kieran were sitting on the floor with messy piles of papers, folders, and notebooks between them. They were intently scanning one page at a time and quickly going to the next. Victoria was growing impatient with the rambling sentences that Mr. Lewis used to write in, much like how he talked. Kieran was just trying to keep up with how fast she was going through pages and notebooks.

They had to wait until the last period to search Mr. Lewis' desk. There was a class every other period in that room. Emma found unmarked folders, notebooks, and envelopes at the bottom of one of the drawers, buried under mundane history textbooks. They had been going through his research for an hour, but a lot of it seemed to be incoherent gibberish.

"I think I found something!" exclaimed Kieran

Kieran moved closer to Victoria and showed her a notebook detailing the existence of the púca. There was a map on another page that showed Mr. Lewis' exploration deep into the woods behind the school.

"Look! This part of the woods behind the school is circled. Do you think that's where Mr. Lewis encountered the púca?" Victoria pointed to a section toward the top of the map, far away from the school.

"I think so. I've been trying to read this notebook for a while. The only thing I can glean from it is that Mr. Lewis was trying to find treasure."

"Treasure?" Victoria questioned.

"Yeah, it seems like he's been searching for this treasure for years and believed that the fairies were hiding it."

"Do you think that's where the púca has taken?"

"Maybe. Do you think the púca still lives there?"

"Possibly. It looks pretty secluded, and the only one who seemed to know about it was Mr. Lewis."

"We should pick up Grandad, so he can help with the rescue." Kieran implored.

"There's no time. Just call him on the way." Victoria reasoned.

"Alright."

They packed all of Mr. Lewis' notes into their backpacks to look through later. They walked through the school in silence, thinking through everything they had learned so far.

Victoria could hear the sound of shouting and the squeak of sneakers as they passed the gym. She was so deep in thought with her thick eyebrows furrowed that she didn't notice that Kieran wasn't walking next to her anymore.

“Now that we know where the púca and maybe Emma is too, what's our plan when we get there?” Victoria asked. There was no response.

Victoria turned around and saw that Kieran was peering through one of the doors leading into the gym. She walked over to him and stood next to him. He didn't acknowledge her presence and continued to stare unmoving through the door. She tried to follow his line of sight past the basketball team practicing and toward the corner of the gym where the wrestling team were practicing.

“What are you looking at?” Victoria said suddenly. Kieran flinched, completely broken out of his adolescent trance. He slowly turned toward her and fear was visible in his eyes.

“I was just thinking...what if I die tonight?”

“We won't. We both handled the púca before, and we'll do it again.”

“If only I could be as self-assured as you.”

“Well, we can't break down now; Emma needs us. We have the daggers and the púca doesn't know that we know where it lives.”

“That's true, but what if everything doesn't work out? I'm not backing out of this; Emma is one of the nicest people I have ever met, and she doesn't deserve what that thing can do to her. I will do anything to save her.”



“Okay, then what’s the problem?”

“I just don’t want to die with regrets.”

“Regrets? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know; not being myself, not having the classic high school experience, wasting so much of my time alone, letting my relationship with Emma grow distant, not speaking up when my parents decided to work out of town, not being nicer to my Grandad...not coming out.”

Kieran rambled out, but whispered the last part.

“Kieran...”

“I’m...um... Gay.” Kieran interrupted Victoria to get it out.

“Oh...um...thank you for trusting me,” Victoria replied in a gentle voice; the nicest she had been in a while.

“Well, we might die together so...”

“Since we are sharing things about ourselves and like you said, we might die tonight. I have never said this to anyone but my parents, psychologist, and doctor, but I am trans.”

“You are.”

“Oh, don’t act so surprised.”

“I’m not acting; I really didn’t know. I don’t think anyone at this school knows.”

“Now it’s my turn again to be shocked.”

“Why? You should hear the way some of the guys in gym class talk about you. Of course, they stopped after I told them off, but I’m sure they still talk when I’m not around.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Gross.”

“I know.”

“So, who were you looking at in there?” Victoria said, peering through the plexiglass gym door.

“David Blaisdell,” Kieran responded, peering with her.

“Oh, which one is that one?”

“He’s a wrestler. One of the best ones. He just finished his practice match. He’s drinking from his water bottle right now.”

“The one with blonde hair.”

“No, the one with brown hair and blue eyes.”

“How am I supposed to see his eye color from here?”

“Well, you can see his hair color, can’t you?”

“Oh, the one with the smile. He’s cute” Victoria remarked as they both turned back to each other.

“He’s mine” Kieran said with a mock edge.

“He doesn’t know you exist, does he?”

“Nope.”

“Well, let’s find out. He’s coming this way.”

“What?”

David waited for them to move out of the way of the doors. He walked past them, but stopped in recognition. He turned around.

“Victoria, right?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m in your art class. I’ve seen some of your work. It’s really impressive.”

“Oh...thanks” Victoria awkwardly replied. She could see disappointment on Kieran’s face from the corner of her eye.

“I’m sorry; I don’t think we have any classes together. What’s your name?”

“Huh...oh...my name is Kieran.” Kieran replied in confusion, but perked up when being talked to directly by his crush.

“Nice name; much better than boring old David.”

“I like the name David.” Kieran said hesitantly.

“Thanks,” David replied. The smile that was ever-present on his face deepened.

They made eye contact for a few moments. Victoria thought about making a sarcastic comment, but she wasn’t going to ruin the moment.

“Well, it was nice meeting you both, but I have to drive home and shower.”

“You don’t have to shower.”

“You’re funny. See you around.” David chuckled and walked toward the exit.

“Why did I say that?”

“I don’t know, but it was pretty entertaining”

“Ugh.”

“If we survive tonight, you have to ask him out on a date.”

“What?”

“Come on. Think of it as motivation.”

“Fine”

“That’s my word. Deal?”

“Deal,” Kieran affirmed with a chuckle.

“Now let’s go save Emma.”

...

Emma woke up sore and bruised. It took effort to open her eyes. The first thing she noticed was a girl with brown hair similar to hers. She was kneeling in front of Emma with worry and fear in her eyes. It took a moment for Emma to recognize the girl as one of her classmates. The girl’s name was Jessica, and she sat next to Emma in math class. Emma even remembered sharing her notes with Jessica before she got on the bus a few days ago.

Jessica didn't look well. She was dirty and bruised. Emma noticed that her eyes would frantically dart around, and she jumped at even the small sound. Both of her shoulders were bleeding and there was a gash on her forehead.

Emma slowly stood up with the help of Jessica and took in her surroundings. She was in a hole in the ground. There was dirt all around her and the hole was too deep for her to reach the top even with her fingertips.

The fog that plagued her mind the night before slowly started to lessen, and she remembered how she got here. The púca had kidnapped her. She looked up at the sky and determined that she must have been knocked out for most of the day.

“Did that thing take you too?” Jessica finally spoke for the first time since Emma woke up.

“Yeah, how long have you been down here?”

“I'm not sure. Maybe two or three hours.”

“What exactly happened to you?”

“I was smoking near the edge of the woods when I heard a strange noise. It sounded like a dog was hurt. I went into the woods, but it started to change when I tried to help it. Its bones started to snap and its insides twisted. I tried to escape, but this man grabbed me from behind. I was able to fight him off, but he was blocking the way to the parking lot, so I had to run deeper into the woods. It was getting dark, so I could barely see where I was going. Eventually, I got to this clearing, but a gigantic hawk came down and grabbed me. I was dropped in this hole a few moments later.” Jessica detailed.

“I was at a sleepover at a friend’s house when it took me.”

“Maybe your friends will report you missing, and the police will find us soon.”

“I’m not sure if it's smart to wait for that.”

“Then what should we do.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. This hole isn’t too deep. I could help lift you out of the hole and you could go find help.”

“I don’t know. What if that monster is up there?”

“Have you heard him recently?”

“Well, he dropped me off here and left. He came back an hour later, but left again.”

“If we want to make it out of this alive, we are going to have to risk it. You could lift me up, and I could run for help?”

“No, I don’t think I’m strong enough to do that, and that thing hurt my shoulders.”

“Okay, then, do you remember the direction the hawk flew from.”

“Yeah, I think I can make it back to school.”

“Alright. You got this. I know you can do this.”

...

Jessica ran through the woods. She knew that she was going in the right direction when she passed the clearing. The trees started to be spaced out more, and her nerves lessened the closer she got to the school. She was focused on what she was going to do once she got out of

this forest. Emma was so brave to stay behind when that thing could come back any minute. Jessica didn't even want to think about what it could do to her. She had to be brave as well.

The púca was waiting behind one of the trees, waiting for Jessica to pass by. It was in the shape of a man again. It loved the specific tone of fear it inspired. Jessica's heavy footsteps could be heard coming toward him and smirked. The man walked out from behind the tree. Jessica stopped in her tracks and almost fell to the forest floor.

The man slowly started to walk towards her. Jessica looked around for anything to help her. She saw a large branch on the ground next to her. She picked it up and clutched it in her hands. The man continued his advance undeterred by her weapon.

Jessica swung against the man, but it moved out of the way at the last second. Jessica swung again, but the púca grabbed the branch and snatched it from her. It broke the branch in half and threw it to the side. Jessica backed away from it, but bumped into the tree behind her. She pressed into the trunk as the púca got closer.

The púca smirked down at her, showing its fanged teeth. It knelt down slightly, moving its face closer to hers. The púca moved further down and started to sniff at her neck. Jessica tried to back further away, but the tree would not give. She knew that this thing was strong from how it was so easily able to carry her, but she had to do something. There was no telling what this thing would do to her nor what it would do to Emma.

Jessica used all the strength that she could muster and focused it into her knee. She smashed her knee into the man's groin, making him regret choosing that form. While it was

stunned, she pushed it away from her, and the púca fell over. She ran past its body to the edge of the forest. Jessica could see the red bricked walls of her high school.

The púca had transformed into a wolf and ran after her. It was done playing with her. She didn't play fair. Jessica heard footsteps closing in behind her. The wolf was too fast. Before she could pass the edge of the woods, the wolf caught up to her and grabbed at her ankle with its canines. It pulled her back, causing her to fall to the forest floor. It let go and Jessica tried to crawl away, but before she could get any distance, the wolf pounced on her. The creature tore at her skin with its teeth and claws. She screamed in agony, desperate for anyone to hear.

...

Victoria and Kieran quickly grabbed their daggers from their hiding spot in one of the bushes. They had heard screaming from inside the school when they were close to the parking lot exit. They ran to the edge of the forest and headed inside. The woods were still, and they couldn't figure out where the scream had come from. Victoria and Kieran searched the area.

"No!" Victoria screamed. Kieran ran back to her.

"Is that Emma?" Kieran asked. He was scared of the answer.

Victoria knelt down. She was shaking. She recognized the hair color. If this was Emma, she swore she would tear that monster limb from limb. She took a second to compose herself before brushing some of the bloodstained hair away from their face.

"It's not Emma." Victoria reassured Kieran.

"It's not. Then, who is it?" Kieran asked. He knelt down for a closer look.



“I’m not sure.”

“I think I know her. She was in my math class. She sat in the back row.”

“Why would the púca kill her? Did you interact with her at all in the past few days?”

“No, not that I can think of.”

“Me neither. Do you know if Emma is still okay?”

“She’s still alive.” Kieran replied after a few moments. He didn’t know how it worked, but he just knew that what he said was true.

“Alright then, let’s go before that changes,” Victoria said grimly. They both got up and headed further into the woods.

...

Emma had been at work digging at the edge of the pit. She was covered in dirt, but had made tremendous progress. She had dug enough that she had exposed the root of a tree. She used that root to pull herself from the hole. It took all the strength she had in her to get out, and she laid on the ground, catching her breath. While Emma was recuperating, she heard a faint groan. She stood up and followed the sound of the groaning to another pit. When she looked down, she saw Grandad, dirty, bruised, and slouched in the corner.

Emma called down to him, and he raised his head to look up at her. He recognized her immediately and slowly stood up. Emma reached out her hands to help him out of the pit. It took a few tries, but she was able to pull him out. They were both bruised, exhausted, and covered in dirt. She told him what happened to her last night and the night before. He told her that when he

had left the library, a huge bird came and snatched him while he was waiting at the bus station. He didn't know that she had gone missing. Grandad expressed guilt and regret since she was in his care last night. Emma informed him that there was nothing that he could have done, and they hugged.

They were about to get up to leave when they heard a snarl from behind them. Emma turned and saw a large, black wolf stalking toward them. Its muzzle was stained red with blood, and its eyes seemed to glow menacingly in the shadows. Emma had no time to react when it pounced at her, but she felt Grandad throw her to the side. The last thing she heard before hitting the floor of the pit was the sound of flesh tearing and Grandad's screams.

...

Kieran ran beside Victoria after they heard Grandad's screams. The screams had stopped. Kieran didn't want to think about what that meant. They ran until they came upon an empty pit. When they saw no one was there, they continued on past it.

"No!" Kieran screamed.

They had come upon the second pit. Grandad laid in a puddle of his own blood. The wolf was standing over him, biting into his throat. Kieran was frozen in place. He couldn't believe this. He started to shake. Kieran dropped the dagger as his hands trembled in front of him. He could hear the tearing of flesh, but he could also feel the small spark of life still left in his grandfather. Kieran felt a warmth surge throughout his body. He felt a burning sensation concentrated on his hands. Kieran looked down at a growing fire that had developed between his outstretched hands. It grew until it could barely be contained in his palms. Kieran pushed it

forward with all his strength. The fire left his hands, burned through the air, and slammed into the side of the púca.

The púca was thrown by the force into a nearby tree. The smell of burnt fur filled the air, mixing with the smell of blood. Kieran broke out of his daze and ran over to Grandad's body. He could still feel a hint of life left there. Kieran could feel his grandfather fighting.

He heard the sound of a growl and looked up to see Victoria fending off the wolf with her dagger. Victoria seemed almost as angry as Kieran was. She used that rage to put strength and power into her movements. She slashed at the wolf with venom in her eyes.

Kieran focused back on Grandad. He didn't know what to do. There was too much blood and the gash in his throat was so deep. Kieran thought about how much he loved his grandfather. How much he couldn't lose him. Grandad spent his life helping others and did not deserve to die this way: dirty, broken, and alone. The last moments he was conscious, he was alone.

Kieran felt something surge inside of him again. However, this time felt different. The warmth wasn't scorching like an inferno, but welcoming like a hearth. It spread throughout his body, calming Kieran's nerves and putting him at ease. It concentrated itself into his hands, and bright light with a green hue spread from his palms. The bleeding ceased and Grandad's wounds started to close. Kieran could hear his breath getting stronger. The green hue faded and Kieran felt drained.

"Is he going to be okay?" Kieran heard from below him. He looked down and saw Emma staring up at him from the pit. He reached down with both hands and helped her up.

"I think so." Kieran replied.

Emma picked up the dropped dagger, and they turned their attention to Victoria. She had scratches and a bite mark on her arm, but she was still standing. The púca seemed worse off. There were deep cuts and stabs into its side. One of its hind legs seemed to have a limp to it. Kieran and Emma joined Victoria's side to face the púca together.

The púca lunged at them. Kieran kicked it in the face. It recoiled, dazed. Victoria and Emma plunged the daggers into the púca's sides and did not pull back. The púca screamed and tried to shake them off, but could not. It struggled for only a few moments longer until it collapsed. Its chest and breathing stilled. The púca was no more. Victoria, Kieran, and Emma had won.

Kieran had used every ounce of strength he had saving Grandad, so when it was over he laid down next to Grandad's body and passed out. Victoria took the daggers and hid them in the woods under a log while Emma called the police.

...

Grandad was taken to the hospital. The others came as well to make sure he was okay, get their own wounds attended to, and answer the police's questions. They came up with a half lie before the police had arrived, and they told them that they were attacked by a wolf. Jessica's body was found and all of their wounds confirmed their story.

Kieran would have healed the others, but that would be way too suspicious. He did try to conjure another fire in his palm once Grandad had woken up, but he couldn't even start a spark. Grandad thanked all of them for saving him and defeating the púca. Emma thanked Victoria and Kieran for coming to save her.

Emma felt guilty; Grandad almost died and Jessica was dead, but felt at least a little satisfied being able to help avenge her. Kieran was excited and scared about his new powers. He wanted to learn more and knew that Grandad could help with that. Victoria was glad that this was all over, but couldn't help to wonder whether it truly was. She was sure about the friends that she had made. Kieran, Emma, and Grandad were everything she secretly wished for. She felt like she belonged with them. They had done everything to help her, and she did the same. Victoria wondered what others were out there. What other things were hidden, waiting to emerge. She had no club, but she knew that Kieran, Emma, and Grandad would stand with her, and together they would handle whatever came next.