

Trouble at the Refuge for Imaginary Friends

The screen read: UNKNOWN CALLER.

Thinking it might be her dad, from the Sunnyside Nursing Home, Carolyn lifted the phone off the counter. "Hello?"

"Ms. Isaacs?"

"Speaking."

"This is Honey."

Carolyn switched on the coffeemaker. "I'm sorry, who?"

"Honey Niles. From The Refuge."

"The ... refuge ..." The name flickered in head fog. "Oh. Hey."

"You remember me?"

"Well, it's been ... I forget."

"Almost four years."

"Hang on." Carolyn stepped away from the percolating gurgle of the coffeemaker wondering what the woman could possibly want. Out the kitchen window a black cloud blotted the morning sun. "So, what can I do for you?"

"We have a problem. It's about your daughter's imaginary friend."

"Um Num?"

"Yes. Um Num is causing a great deal of trouble."

Carolyn almost chuckled. "Trouble" was the reason Skylar's imaginary friend had to go. "And this is *our* problem because?"

"If not handled, it could become everybody's problem."

"Not following." Carolyn never told anyone her daughter's pretend playmate had to be put out to pasture. Too bizarre.

"Sorry if I sound vague or manipulating," Honey said. "But it would be best if you and your daughter came to The Refuge as soon as possible. We can explain it all here."

"Bring Skylar?"

"It's crucial she comes."

"No way. She's a skulking fourteen-year-old with all the stormy weather that comes with ... wait, what am I saying? *I'm* not going to drop everything and ... "

“We don’t see how to resolve this without her, Ms. Isaacs.”

Carolyn pulled a white coffee cup from an open shelf, thinking: Skylar may not remember any of it. She was ten when we took her “friend” to The Refuge. No. That’s not true. It wasn’t ‘we.’ Alex left long before.

“I don’t know how to coax you and Skylar, Ms. Isaacs, but we’re praying you come soon.”

“Stop right there. We paid the fee, and you signed off. Called it a success.”

“We did. And it was. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Carolyn would agree, if not for the dubious nature of the call.

“Unfortunately, there’s been a development,” Honey went on.

“And you won’t tell me what that is,” Carolyn shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. Now I need to go to work.”

“Ms. Isaacs, do you hear the panic in my voice? We’re desperate. Lon and I have never dealt with such a threat before. It’s not like there’s a police department we can call.”

Police?

“I beg you. Please, please come.”

“Not going to happen,” Carolyn replied. “We’re done here.”

“We’ll refund your payment. In full.”

Carolyn cracked Skylar’s bedroom door. “No school today, sweetie. We’re going on an outing.”

“We’re what?”

“You need to get dressed.”

Carolyn didn’t keep the receipt of payment from The Refuge. But she recalled the fee was around five thousand dollars— the price of Mom’s burial at Highland Cemetery, she thought at the time. A ridiculous amount. And for what? To separate a ten-year-old girl from her make-believe bestie?

Carolyn googled the address. The Refuge was out in the country, seventy or so miles north.

“Are we going to visit grandpa?” Skylar stood barefoot in the kitchen wearing a knee-length, name-faded rock band tee shirt.

“No.”

“Then where we going?”

“We’ll talk about it in the car.” Carolyn bagged cheese, bread, and apples for the trip. “And bring your books.”

“What do I wear?”

“Dress for rain,” Carolyn said.

Skylar didn’t argue or even utter a scoff of resistance.

That was easy, Carolyn thought as she re-poured the coffee into a stainless-steel travel cup. Too easy. I didn’t have to hold Skylar’s phone hostage. The girl seemed relieved not having to go to school. What to read into that? Carolyn took a gulp of coffee. Don’t overthink, she told herself. Instead of guessing, ask.

Sitting behind the wheel of her Honda Pilot, Carolyn watched Skylar emerge from the front door of the duplex. What an awkward age for someone so shy, she thought. Her daughter’s body changing by the day. Other than the grey-green eyes, there was no resemblance. As if the girl had a different birth mother. How are these genetics decided, anyway? Is there an invisible distribution center that doles out physical features? Skylar’s long limbs from Alex, the high cheek bones from great-grandma Bethyl. And who donated the dimple in her chin? No ancestor from my family tree.

Skylar dropped her daypack and rain jacket in the back seat.

“We’ll pick up some things on the way.” Carolyn keyed the ignition.

Skylar lowered the visor mirror, fluffed out her shag-cut hair. “Are you going to tell me what’s happening?”

“Okay, buckle up. I got a call from that refuge—the place we took you that time?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Does the name Um Num ring a bell?”

“Um Num?” Skylar grimaced, stung by a traumatic memory.

“The woman there called. Remember Honey?”

“Creepy. No, she was okay, it was that man. Beluga huge.”

“Well, she called and insisted we come right away. And no, I don’t know what the drama’s all about.”

“What does it have to do with me?”

“She’ll explain when we’re there.”

"I don't like it." Skylar slammed the visor back up.

"Me neither. But they're going to refund what I paid."

"Scam alert."

"Not like we can't use the money."

"And you believe her?"

"I do. This is their livelihood. Bad publicity for such an unconventional business would destroy them."

That had some logic to it. Skylar quieted, earbuds affixed, until they reached the highway where her breath revved, almost to a pant, as she recalled her father, Alex, hollering, "Sky! You tell your Um Num demon to shut up or take a time out right now!"

"Stop the car," Skylar said.

"What?"

"Stop the car!"

Carolyn took the next ramp and parked in the lot of a big box store. Skylar burst out the passenger door, shouting, "I'm not doing this!"

Raindrops dotted the windshield. Carolyn killed the engine and got out.

"Sky ..."

Skylar paced back and forth, fuming. "I'm not taking Um Num back!"

"Oh, God no. That's never going to happen."

"Is Um Num the reason Dad left?"

Oh, there it was, the festering, unspoken question, long overdue.

"Wha?"

"You heard me!"

"No, no sweetheart," Carolyn said. "We, Alex and I, we weren't a good fit for each other." Memories flashed like snapshots. Her daughter telling Alex: "Um Num says you drink too much." "Um Num wants to know why you're always gone." Um Num says this, Um Num says that.

For a time, Carolyn thought Skylar's made-up friend was kind of cute. As if they had two children. "Um Num says, 'You go to hell!'" But it wasn't cute for Alex when he became the target of Um Num's wrath. "From now on your Um Num stays outside when I'm home!" he commanded. Which only pissed off Um Num,

escalating the nuisance to harassment. “Um Num told Grandpa what a bad man you are, Dad.”

For Alex, Um Num’s incessant belligerence became an “Um Num or me” ultimatum.

“Who’s the adult here?” Carolyn would chant. Little did she know then how a cute imaginary friend could become vicious.

Did Um Num contribute to the break-up of their marriage? Contribute, yes. But Carolyn would never guilt her daughter with that. Besides, she and Alex had personal lifestyles in collision. She craved a stable, suburban household. He craved the road—playing bass guitar in nightclubs. “Don’t marry a musician” she’d been warned. The intermittent alimony payments ended when he died of an overdose.

Rain pelted the parking lot.

“Come on, Sky. Let’s discuss it in the car.”

“Why hasn’t Um Num, like, disappeared? They said!”

It felt ludicrous to apply reason to the disintegration of an imaginary being, but Carolyn kept her cool. “Tell you what. We go, we collect the refund, and when you say it’s time to leave, we leave.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Carolyn said.

“Okay. It’s time to leave.”

“Good try, but we have to be there first. So, let’s get in the car before we’re soaked to the bone.”

“Can we visit grandpa on our way back?”

“Not today.”

As they drove, Carolyn recalled the time a fellow physical therapist suggested she take Skylar to a child psychologist. The bald, silver-goateed man with rimless glasses didn’t perceive Skylar’s imaginary friend as a problem, simply one of life’s passages.

“Some children give voice to dolls, plush toys, and puppets,” the doctor said. “It appears your daughter’s invisible playmate took on a life of its own.” He encouraged Skylar to say bye-bye to Um Num for the peace and harmony of the family. To which Skylar spat back in his face, “Um Num says you eat shit!”

In private the man shared a concern with Carolyn that if Skylar's relationship with her "fantasy friend" continued, it could lead to a split personality disorder.

Shortly after that, Alex packed his things. Shutting the door behind him sounded like a detonated bomb. A week later, as if knowing his end was near, Um Num turned on Carolyn "You do what I say from now on."

Does this happen to other children? Carolyn wondered. Other families? Was a split-personality shaping itself before her eyes like the psychologist inferred?

She took her worry online. It led to The Refuge for Imaginary Friends. Sounded crackpot crazy. But feeling desperate, Carolyn called. Honey referred her to a client who recently placed their daughter's stubborn friend at The Refuge. The client said, "Honey and Lon provide a fabulous service. Don't blanch at the cost. It's worth every penny. Cleared the air like a thunderstorm. Some see it as a last resort. The heck with that. It's the first."

Honey helped Carolyn understand the dilemma when she said, "Most children outgrow their imaginary friends. But imaginary friends don't outgrow their host. And some won't go away without an ugly fight."

Skylar sat quiet in the car, scrolling texts. Buildings gave way to open land. Nearing The Refuge, the rain let up. As they sped past fields of round-bound hay bales and rows of cornstalks, she remembered Honey telling her mom, "As attachments go, Um Num is a leech. A bite-down, bear trap possessive."

"Can you separate them?" her mom asked.

The act of detachment was not a raving, neck-spinning exorcism. Although it was quite emotional for the ten-year-old girl. She sat in a cane chair on the front porch of a big house, her face cold white, paralyzed with shame for causing a problem. Honey encouraged Skylar to thank her imaginary friend out loud.

"Thanks for being there for me, Um Num. I could share things with you. And you could say stuff I was afraid to say myself."

Honey kneeled before the girl. "Good, Skylar. And now say, 'It's time we part ways.'"

Lon stood to the side. It looked like his right hand was delicately plucking unseen threads behind Skylar's head like harp strings.

"Um Num is getting really mad," Skylar said.

"Okay, you need to tell Um Num this is for the best," Honey coached.

"Um Num wants to bite you."

The extraction took an hour with breaks and half a box of Kleenex.

Finally, Lon said, "All clear."

"You're here now Um Num," Honey said. "Enjoy your new home."

Exhausted, Skylar slept the entire drive back.

After Um Num was placed at The Refuge, the tension at home deflated instantly. How Honey and Lon did it, Carolyn didn't ask, or wonder what would've happened otherwise. It was over. Painful at first for her daughter. A blessed relief for her.

Carolyn stopped the Honda at an ornate, wrought iron gate and idled the engine as Lon drove up in a utility vehicle. Big as a moose, the man tapped buttons on a security box. The gate parted.

Lon's mottled face filled the driver's window. "Park at the front steps and go straight inside." Ghostly, steel-blue eyes. A hedge of close-cropped white hair. "Barley won't bite."

"Must be their dog," Skylar said.

"What, we don't merit a 'thanks for coming'?" Carolyn said. Out the rearview she saw Lon cringe with a hitch in his step. Sciatica, she suspected. A disability she could relieve with treatments and stretching exercises.

The brick driveway led through a colonnade of maple trees. Carmine red and yellow leaves glazed by autumn rain. Ahead, a grand, three-story Queen Anne Victorian rose off the land like a citadel with a cone-roofed tower and a wrap-around porch.

Carolyn and Skylar stepped from the car into a silence that amplified their hesitant breath. As they climbed the porch stairs, the bark of a dog broke the stillness.

Honey opened the door, holding what looked like a ledger book in one hand. She had a pear-shaped body, puff-ball cheeks, and soft, listening eyes. At

Honey's heels, a black and white border collie wagged a happy tail like a metronome.

"That's Barley." Honey greeted them with a grateful smile. "Thanks so much for coming, Skylar ... Ms. Isaacs."

"You can call me Carolyn."

They trailed Honey inside.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee, herbal tea, cola?"

"The refund," Carolyn said, flatly.

"Yes, of course." Honey pivoted into a carpeted room off the entry. She opened a desk drawer and returned with a bulging envelope. "It's cash."

Carolyn stuffed it in her coach bag. She'd count it later.

Honey led them through a white, subway-tiled kitchen to a solarium with tree ferns and clay pots of orange and purple tulips. The space smelled of fertile soil.

Having cash in hand, Carolyn settled. "Looks like you've made some changes since we were here."

"Oh, my lord, yes. Extensive landscaping. Little by little we're turning it into an arboretum with various fruit and deciduous trees, conifers, and flowering foliage. I'd love to give you and Skylar a tour of the grounds, but presently, it would not be wise."

Honey gestured for them to take a seat at a round glass table. "I know you want me to cut to the chase and share the reason for the urgency. But please allow me to bring Skylar up to speed about The Refuge."

Honey set her book and phone on the table and sat. "Nine years ago, Lon and I felt a need for a new kind of sanctuary. Not for people, but for imaginary friends. Often these childhood companions are bewildered at being aged-out and cut off from their hosts. They feel rejected. Many grieve. They lack an interim place, a haven, however provisional, to ease the shock of separation.

"You're saying they suffer?" Carolyn said.

"Wouldn't you?"

"But they're not physical. It's all make believe."

"Well, we believe in make believe when it comes to friendships." Honey set her palm on the book. "Friends are friends be they born of flesh or mind. They all

have names, personalities, and they have influence, yes?" Honey didn't wait for an answer. "So, since they're not made of blood and bone, we can discard these friendships like trash?"

Neither Carolyn nor Skylar responded.

"Are you sure I can't get you two something to drink?"

"As a matter of fact," Carolyn said, a tone of relief in her voice. "A cup of coffee sounds good right now. Black."

"Nothing." Skylar waved a fretful hand, eager to get on with the visit and out of there. Barley picked up on Skylar's anxiety. The dog leaned against the girl's leg to soothe her distress.

Honey went into the house. Drops of rain from overhead branches tap-danced on the solarium's glass roof.

Skylar squirmed. "I left my phone in the car."

Carolyn reached to touch her daughter's hand. "It's okay, Sky."

Skylar retracted. "Don't."

Carolyn plucked the envelope from her purse and counted seventy 100 dollar bills. Much more than expected.

"You got your money, so let's go." Skylar stood.

Honey's phone chimed on the table. They stared at it. The voice message said: "The Refuge is currently closed until further notice. Sorry for the inconvenience. If you leave your name and number, we'll get back to you when we reopen." There was a ding, then another voice: "It's Lon ... you there? ... I'm being ... tacked. S-stay inside. I mean it."

"What was that?" Carolyn said. "Could you make it out?"

Honey returned. She set a tray on the table with a carafe of coffee, cups, napkins, and a plate of brownies. "Where was I?"

"Why you made this place," Skylar said, still standing, arms crossed.

"Well, of course the skeptics made us the laughingstock of the universe until some positive reviews trickled in. We currently foster between 75 and 90 friends. The number fluctuates month to month with new ones coming as others pass on. The fading out can be slow. All depends on the duration and degree of bonding. Some hang on, hoping to be re-instated with their host."

Honey opened her book to a page with a grid of names and dates. She slid her fingertip down the list. "There's Ambi. There's Budder. They've been here a few years. We don't push it. We really can't. Most take a year or two before they completely air away."

"Blah-blah. So why are we here?" Skylar said.

"I'm getting to that, young lady. You see, the host connection is like food, simply thinking of them, however distant, is felt.

"Thinking?"

"Yes. Our thoughts may not *have* matter, but they matter. So, when a host does not visit, or send a warm thought, the friends can become sad. But in your Um Num's case, he became a terror."

"In what way?" Carolyn asked.

"By conspiring with other friends to revolt."

"Oh, gimme a break." Carolyn rolled her eyes. "They talk to each other?"

"On some level, yes," Honey said. "Some ultrasonic form of rapport. It's a mystery how they ..."

"I'm sorry but I can't go there," Carolyn cut her off.

"Welcome to our world, Carolyn. You're breathing higher altitude air here. A finer sensitivity, easily denied."

"What makes you think it's Um Num?" Skylar asked.

"Jonah. When he last visited, he felt a threat. 'A turbulence invading my mind.' His words."

"Who's Jonah?" asked Skylar.

"Then, the other day, Birdie, our groundskeeper, started talking dumb as a hockey puck. He described it as a fly buzzing in his brain."

"And who's *Jonah*?"

"Our son. He's at the University. It all began with him. But that's another story. Anyway, he alerted us to be vigilant. So, Lon investigated. He has a psychic sense about these things and identified the culprit." Honey stabbed a finger at Um Num's name in the book.

"So what do you need us for?" Skylar asked.

Barley barked. The sliding door opened. Lon staggered into the solarium, shoulders hunched.

“You alright?” Honey said.

“Didn’t you get my message?”

“No.”

“I was attacked.” He slumped in a chair, blinky-eyed, unable to focus. “Give me a minute. Got to clear my head.”

Seeing the big man so shaken convinced Skylar it was no act.

Honey poured him a cup of coffee. “Here ...”

He took a sip and said, “I went to check out the area Jonah mentioned. I thought I could deal with any disturbance. Big mistake.” Lon clomped his boot on the stone floor. “Um Num’s inciting a rebellion. Our intentional fences are strong, but they won’t withstand an all-out assault.”

Honey turned to Skylar. “We have to end this before it ruins our reputation and we lose The Refuge.”

“Even worse,” Lon said. “If Um Num and his gang break out, they’ll go after other imaginary friends and turn them against their hosts.”

“Oh stop. This is utter nonsense.” Carolyn pushed back her chair. She’d had enough, while her daughter was now fully engaged.

“We need to get up to the tower.” Honey stood.

“We need to leave.” Carolyn took Skylar aside.

“Not yet, Mom.”

They followed Honey inside.

“You said something about a fence?” Skylar asked Lon as they climbed the staircase. “The only fence I saw was open.”

“That’s the split rail. But we set up an intentional fence to keep the friends from wandering off. It’s basically a mental construction Honey and I project. I tell newcomers the fence is there to keep them safe. Ya’know, power of suggestion. Back in the early days one got out—Eechie, the little devil. He tied his host’s mind up in knots. Big lesson. So, we fortify the fence once a week with concentrated attention.

“Oh, my god, now I’ve heard everything,” Carolyn said as they entered the round tower room.

Tall windows gave a panoramic view of the ninety-acre refuge. Below them, crushed limestone pathways circled rose gardens, lilac hedges, herb and

wildflower beds. To the north, a grove of oaks. To the south, a wood duck pond and beyond that, a forest of white pines.

Lon pointed to the spot he was attacked. "Right there by the raspberry bushes. That's where they nailed me."

"So you called us here to do what?" Skyler said.

"To talk Um Num down," Honey said.

"Or take him out," Lon said. "You made him. Only you can unmake him."

"Unmake?"

"Kill him."

"What?" Carolyn said.

"Cut off the snake's head and the body dies," Lon said. "No other way to stop these rascals."

"Oh, this is absurd."

"How do I do that?" Skylar asked.

"Don't listen to him," Carolyn swatted the air.

"With an imaginary assassin," Lon said.

"No, no, no, that does it!" Carolyn turned to the door. "Sky, we're out of here."

"Mom, wait."

"Do you want Um Num to break out like Eechie and seek revenge on your daughter?" Lon said.

"Enough! I went along at first. Admittedly, I was impressed by whatever wizardry you used to remove Um Num. But you've gone off to looney town. We're out of here."

"Mom!"

"This is crazy-making. Come on!"

Carolyn hurried down the stairs, stamping each carpeted step. Skylar slow behind.

"I wouldn't go out there if I were you," Honey warned. "If they got into Lon's head, they can surely get into yours."

"Bullshit." Carolyn flung back the front door. "Skylar, get in the car."

"Mom, stop." Skylar froze on the threshold.

Before she reached the Honda, Carolyn held up. Her vision smeared as if swiped by a squeegee. "Where's ...?" She rubbed her eyes, glanced at her hands. "My keys, my bag. Where's my bag? What did you do with my coach bag?!"

"You left it in the solarium," Honey said.

"I where?"

Among the distant, buff-colored grass came the cluck of a pheasant.

"Someone's coming," Skylar gestured to a vehicle speeding up the driveway.

"It's Jonah," Honey said. "He got my text. Thank God."

The eighteen-year-old stepped from a mini-pickup truck. He was lean as a post and as unemotional. He wore a canvas vest over a hooded sweatshirt along with jeans and sneakers.

Jonah lifted his nose and scanned the property as if sniffing the perfume of the air. "Feels about to burst."

"You're blocking my car," Carolyn said.

Jonah stared at the woman for two seconds before speaking in monotone, "Here's what we're going to do. We're going inside."

"We were just leaving."

"Not yet," Skylar said.

"Carolyn, come get your bag," Honey said.

Jonah ushered Carolyn back into the house.

"Can't say how glad I am to see you." Honey wanted to give her son a hug but being touched made Jonah cringe as if bruised. "This is Carolyn's daughter, Skylar. The troublemaker was her friend."

Jonah flicked his hood back revealing an iron face with brooding lips. His eyes, blue as the chalk on a cue stick, looked out and in at the same time.

"What's your friend's name?" he asked Skylar.

"Um Num."

"Human? Animal?"

"Huh?"

"Is Um Num a he, a she, a they, an it?"

"More like a he, I guess. A furry, owl guy with shark teeth and superhero lasers for eyes."

"Okay."

“They want me to talk him down or have him killed.”

“Um Num’s started a mutiny,” Lon said. “Scrambled Birdie’s mind the other day. Jumbled mine a little while ago.”

“Claptrap,” Carolyn said.

They all spoke at once.

“Everybody quiet down.” Jonah stared out the front window. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’ll reach out to Juba.”

“Who’s Juba?” Skylar asked.

“Jonah’s childhood friend,” Honey said.

“I’ll find this Um Num and see what can be done,” Jonah said.

“Can I come?” Skylar said.

“No, Sky.”

“This is on me, Mom.”

Carolyn turned to Jonah. “I just need to retrieve my bag and we’re out of here.”

“Might be good if she came along,” Jonah said. He gave Skylar a grim face. “You need to do what I say. I say run, you run. I say stop, you stop.”

“Okay. I say let’s go,” Skylar said.

Honey snatched a black umbrella off the hat rack by the door and handed it to Skylar. “You may need this. More rain is coming.”

“Keep your phone handy, Mom,” Jonah said. “I’ll call when we know something.” He turned to Lon. “Okay if I borrow the Ranger?”

“You bet. And be careful.”

Skylar shouldered the umbrella as she and Jonah descended the porch stairs. Her attraction to Jonah was immediate. Seriously wooden, she thought, but not gamey. Someone she could trust. His rigid personality seemed mathematical.

Carolyn, Honey, and Lon watched the two wheel away in the Ranger utility vehicle with Barley trotting behind.

“Let’s fetch your purse and get back upstairs,” Honey said.

Feeling flustered, Carolyn shuffled behind Honey through the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, Skylar will be fine with Jonah,” Honey assured her. “He’s the reason we created the refuge. He was a silent, inward child the first six years of his life. All the while Juba spoke through him. We didn’t know it until one morning

another voice piped up. A cracked, little voice. The real Jonah. We're grateful to Juba for helping our son express his feelings until he felt safe to speak on his own."

Jonah steered the Ranger around the grounds. "Juba may be by the fountain in the rose garden. Where he likes to hang."

"What's Juba like?" Skylar asked.

"He's a caregiver. Kind and wise. Been a faithful presence in the family all my life. This is Juba's home. He's like an intermediary between the friends and us."

"You hear him? Talk with him?"

"Sometimes. It takes being in a certain zone, like dialing a radio frequency."

"What's he look like?"

"Like a cloud with two wings."

Jonah stopped the Ranger by a row of rose bushes. Although their petals drooped, their sweet fragrance filled the air. '

"I'll see if I can make contact." Jonah half-closed his eyes and called out, "Juba, it's me. We're looking for the source of the trouble." He made a humming sound in his throat as he listened for a full minute. "Yeah ... okay."

They drove on.

Jonah felt willing to do everything he could to settle the unrest. But he doubted the girl would be much help.

"What's your name again?"

"It's Skylar."

"Okay Skylar, no telling how your Um Num will react. And because you were his host, he can still read your mind."

"Like what I'm thinking?"

"Feeling. So, calm your fears."

They reached the end of the path.

"We walk from here." Jonah stepped out of the Ranger.

Being driven everywhere in her young life—to school, the mall, the movies—hiking across open land was a new sensation for Skylar. Need to get out more, she thought.

They climbed a knoll, Barley at Skylar's side. At the top, an unfamiliar sound lifted their eyes—the woh-woh-woh wingbeats of Canadian geese flying south in vee formation.

“Where to now?” Jonah hummed for ten long seconds. “Okay.” He called Honey in the tower. “We’re being directed to the woods beyond the pond.”

“We can see you,” Honey said, handing the binoculars to Carolyn.

“You okay, Sky?”

Skylar gave a half-wave.

“I’ll keep the line open.” Jonah slipped the phone in his vest pocket. “You may lose sight of us soon.”

A looming cloud front darkened the sky. As Jonah and Skylar neared the trees, Barley snarled, aware of a threat.

“Barley.” Jonah laid a hand on the dog’s back.

The dog quieted, but her eyes remained locked on something unseen.

“What’s going on?” Honey said.

“They’ve assembled. Juba says they’re looking for weak points in the fence.”

“Try to speak to them warmly,” Honey said. “See if they can be turned.”

“Is Lon there?”

“He’s lying on the couch.”

“I can hear you.” Lon opened his eyes.

“The corners are hinges, as you know, the most vulnerable,” Jonah said. “So put your full attention on the southwest border.”

“Alright, I’m there. I’ll make it indestructible.” Lon shut his eyes and pictured the high wall of a castle fortress.

“I need to shut off the phone for a while to concentrate,” Jonah said.

“Is it true?” Skylar asked. “If they get out, they’ll turn other imaginary friends against their hosts?”

“We’ll take the deer trail,” Jonah said. “Stay behind me. If you get distracted, feel your feet.”

A light drizzle fell.

Barley barked.

“That’s right, Barley. It’s fierce,” Jonah said as they entered the pines. “Even the trees sense a menace.”

Skylar cringed at the thought of facing Um Num's fury. Honey's words about friendships came back: "So, just because they're not made of blood and bone, we can discard them like trash?"

Jonah raised his right palm. "We come in peace."

The two padded between the tree trunks, the scrunch of needles underfoot.

"Will I need to make up an assassin?"

"That'd be foolish. Play it out. Think of the consequences. Conjuring an assassin would start an unending cycle. An assassin to kill the previous one and so on."

"Then ..."

"Try to talk him down. And if that doesn't work, there's always the third option."

"What's that?"

"Shh." Jonah stopped walking. After a long silence, he said, "So, it's true."

"Huh?"

"Your Um Num feels betrayed and has infected others."

"Betrayed?"

"According to Juba. When was the last time you visited?"

"I-I haven't." Skylar stepped out from behind Jonah. "You're saying, if I visited Um Num, that would help?"

"You're visiting now, so, ask him."

"How? I'm not ... it's been years ..."

"He can't be re-imagined. Just like we can't go back in time. Speak to the Um Num you left here."

They entered a small clearing among towering pines.

"We're being watched."

"I can't see or hear anything," Skylar said. "I'm trying but ..."

"You don't have to look far. He was an extension of you."

"How do you hear Juba?"

"I listen with the ears of my heart."

"Ears of my heart ..." Skylar took that in, then asked, "Can Juba get Um Num to stop?"

“First thing I asked. Juba said Um Num is unwilling to talk to him. So, it’s on you.”

Skylar inhaled a deep breath. “Um Num, it’s me. It’s Skylar. I’m sorry I haven’t visited.”

“Let him come to you.”

The drizzle turned into a steady rain.

“I still don’t ... ”

Jonah took the umbrella from Skylar. He sprung it open. The canopy broad enough to shelter them both. “It may help to close your eyes.”

Time stopped.

“What’s happening?” Jonah hummed and lifted a finger. “All right. Got it.” He looked at Skylar. “Hold the umbrella for a minute.”

She grasped its curved handle as Jonah pulled out his phone and called the tower. “Hey up there.”

Carolyn, Honey, and Lon all spoke at once.

“Skylar are you okay?”

“We can’t see you.”

“What’d you find out?”

“It’s like Lon saw,” Jonah reported. “Um Num is an instigator. He’s got others trying to escape. Juba says ten or so. They’re new ones placed over the last year. Um Num’s got them feeling lost and confused about their hosts.”

“Confused about what?” Honey said.

“What they don’t know. Why were they left here? What did they do wrong? What must they do to rejoin their host? They want to go home. They fear the unknown. They see others fade away and want to know where they ... hang on.” Jonah hummed for a while. “And that’s why they invade our brains. It’s not an attack. They’re looking for answers.”

“Oh,” Honey said. “And what did you ...?”

Jonah cut her off. “They’re asking: ‘Is the reason you people are so cruel, so hateful, and depressed because your host abandoned you?’”

“Our host?” Skylar asked.

“Yeah. *Our* host. As if we pass our pain and suffering onto them.”

The line erupted with indecipherable comments until Skylar piped up. "Ah! He's here."

"Quiet, everybody," Jonah said.

"You hear Um Num?" Honey asked.

"I feel him," she frowned.

"Go with it," Jonah said.

Lon shouted, "Talk him down or take him out and make it fast, my focus is dwindling!"

"I'm shutting off the phone for a minute," Jonah said.

"No!"

Jonah stood motionless. He stared into space and passed on what Juba heard. "Um Num's saying, 'You came back.'"

"Yes, I came back," Skylar said.

The rain intensified. Hard drops drummed the ground.

"Juba is telling me Um Num says, 'You ditched me. You wanted your father gone. I helped you with that, didn't I?'"

"I wanted him to be different. I needed you because I wasn't brave enough to stand up for myself."

"Um Num says, 'And you think you are now?'"

"I - I," Skylar stuttered.

Um Num says, "I did my job and you threw me away."

"You got really mean."

"I spoke what was inside YOU!"

Hearing that, Skylar caved. "I can't do this."

"You're doing it," Jonah said. "Ask him what he wants."

Skylar exhaled a jittery breath. "What do you want, Um Num?"

"Oh, I have what I want. I have impact and that makes me something, not an outgrown, abandoned nothing. I waited and I waited. For what! You never came, never gave me a second thought."

"I'm here now."

"Too late!" he says.

Jonah felt a cold, tingle ripple his blood. He called the tower. "Sorry, for the delay. Got a standoff here."

"We can barely hear you," Honey said.

"It's the rain."

"So what's going on?"

"Where's Skylar?" Carolyn shouted.

"Um Num will not be talked down."

"Then kill him!" Lon interjected. "I can't hold the fence any longer!"

Skylar lifted a finger. "Jonah?"

"Wait. Skylar's trying to tell me something."

"Now I know what has to happen. I gotta take Um Num back."

"That's it," Jonah said. "That's the third option. To take him out is to take him in."

"But I can't. I'm too scared."

"I get it. But hey, courage doesn't live where there's no fear."

"He'll take over. Make me crazy, do awful things."

"Only if you let him own you." Jonah could see the dread in Skylar's eyes.

"Look at it like a reunion where you'll meet a missing part of you."

"Yeah? So why don't you take Juba back? Isn't he a part of you?"

"No. Juba came with me. He's a part of all of us."

"How's that?"

"Listen. If you're willing, I'll do whatever I can to help. But you got to stand fast. Now or never."

Skylar moaned. Jonah took that as a "yes." He tapped numbers on his phone, held it to his ear. "Hey, she's gonna try to take Um Num back."

"No! That's not an option," Carolyn said.

"Maybe she's ready to handle him," Honey argued.

"Well maybe I'm *not!*"

Jonah shut off the phone. "You ready?"

"Not really."

"Then you're ready."

Skylar pressed her lips together. She held the umbrella in both hands and shut her eyes. "I'm here, Um Num."

"Good," Jonah encouraged.

Barley felt something shift and growled through bright canine teeth.

Skylar's pulse jumped. Her faun-freckled cheeks blushed red. "Oh God, he's ..." As if struck by a bolt of lightning, she foundered, folded at the waist, and dropped to her knees. Her hands lost their grip on the shaft. The umbrella collapsed over her head and torso.

Jonah went to help her back up but stopped when he heard a voice say, "So, you came to watch me fade away? Is that it?"

It was Um Num speaking.

"No. I want you to come back home with me."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe them. Liars. Making us think there's a fence. If there is, we'll punch a hole and be free of this prison. And there's nothing you can do to stop us."

The walls of the umbrella shuddered, but Skylar made no attempt to stand.

So absorbed by the surreal scene, Jonah lost contact with Juba. He hunkered close by, tilting an ear. It was Skylar speaking. "So, after you break out, what then? Were you going to find me? Frighten me? Scramble my brains? Well, I'm here. I'm right here."

Jonah heard no response.

"I'm here to take you back."

Still, no response.

"To be my friend again," she said.

Not a word. Whatever was happening in the black tent was between Skylar and Um Num. Barley didn't know what to make of it. The dog pranced in place and shook the rain from her pelt.

"There," Skylar said. "Come on my friend, let's go home."

Jonah thought he heard Skylar whimpering. Then she shouted, "Damn you! Damn you!" and launched the umbrella off her body. It landed on its tip and lazily spun. "Bah!" she gasped, swabbed rain and tears from her eyes. A trickle of blood slid out the corner of her mouth where she'd bit her lip.

Curious, Jonah studied her face.

"What are you looking at?" she scowled.

"Wanted to see who's who."

Skylar shook her head and groaned, "I saw my father's face. His bloodshot eyes."

“O-kay?”

“He was a good dad ‘til he changed. I was like eight or nine. He stopped being there. Was gone all the time. Stopped caring. Then stopped coming around.”

“So, he left you and your mom?” Jonah asked.

“I want to scream.” She pounded a fist on the ground.

“Then scream.”

Skylar stood in spongy-wet sneakers and let fly the agonized wail of a wounded animal. So loud it flushed a family of cawing crows into the sky above the pines.

“That help?”

“Still boiling,” she huffed.

Barley stood at Skylar’s feet. She took in the dog’s earnest brown eyes and cracked a weary smile.

“No more Um Num,” Jonah said. “It’s all Skylar now.”

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