

REVEN

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REVEN: Across Golden Skies
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Content Warning

This book has subject matter that some readers may find upsetting. An alphabetical list of challenging topics is provided below.

Ableism

Acephobia

Ageism

Aggression against animals (in self-defense; no animals die)

Arson (property damage only; no loss of life)

Body horror (magical)

Child abuse (physical; emotional) and child endangerment

Classism

Colonialism

Death of a parent (illness)

Dismemberment of a hand (referenced as backstory)

Grief

Immolation (threatened)

Imprisonment

Murder and manslaughter

Outbreaks of mass illness

Panic attacks

Police extortion and corruption

Racism

Religious extremism

Slavery

Toxic friendship dynamics

Transphobia and parental rejection

Violence (brawling; sword fighting)

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REVEN

Across Golden Skies

By Emily Swaim

1

An Ichor Shortage

Wendi was doing an excellent job of hiding her panic attack from everyone else in the room. She kept her breathing steady and arms tucked in to hide the growing patches of sweat on her Unity Academy uniform. None of Wendi's classmates noticed her trembling. They were all focused on their own tests.

This exam was Wendi's last chance to boost her history grade before the semester ended. Mrs. Chides had promised the test would only cover the events of the Ichor War, so Wendi had spent the last week reading and re-reading her notes from that unit until her eyeballs burned. She'd missed family movie night studying for this test.

But the blue hologram floating above her desk had no dates. It was a map, asking Wendi to label islands and cities. Her flashcards had been useless, because her teacher had lied.

She peered around her map to check on her classmates. Four rows of Year Eight students sat stiffly in their gray button-up shirts. The hum of twenty holos buzzed throughout the room, echoing off the curved white walls and the glass ceiling before drowning in the thick black carpet on the floor.

Rowan sat at the desk in front of hers. His feet tapped nervously, a quirk he'd had since they were children. Over the broad curve of his shoulder, Wendi could see the neon glow of the world.

Wendi's map wasn't a glitch, then. This was the real test.

"Eyes on your own exam, Miss Darl," a voice droned behind her ear. Wendi flinched and turned around. Mrs. Chides loomed behind her in an ink-black dress that stretched from her neck to the floor. Rimmed glasses teetered on the edge of her nose.

She could feel the class turn around to stare. Rowan's feet stopped tapping, and he shifted to block her view of his screen. Wendi wanted to burrow into the carpet. "I wasn't..."

"Eyes on your own holoscreen," Mrs. Chides said again. A talon-like finger pushed Wendi's head back to its proper position. "If I catch you peeking again, I'm deducting ten points."

Humiliation heated her cheeks. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am." She trained her eyes on the map in front of her, not really seeing it, just waiting until the teacher's muffled footsteps passed.

Deep breaths. That was what Mom always told her to do when she was anxious. Breathe in. Breathe out. Start with what you know.

Reven's twelve islands scattered across the bottom of the map. Her home, Othan, was the shell-shaped land mass hovering near the left edge. Wendi's stylus bled digital ink into the air as she wrote Othan's name.

Wendi found Macalor, Reven's biggest island, to the east. That was where the treaty between their nation and Viccania was held. She found Viccania easily, since it was the bloated oval country dominating the top of the map.

Then came Borim and Aldrig and...oh! Most of these places had been the sites of Ichor War battles. The thrill of a solved puzzle crackled in Wendi's brain. Maybe her flashcards hadn't been useless after all.

She was writing the name of Viccania's capital when a faint electric charge shivered through the stylus into her fingers. The map flickered off, leaving behind the smell of ozone. She tapped her holotablet embedded in the desk, but it didn't respond.

Oh no. Not now. She had just figured out the trick of the exam!

Rowan's test blinked off next, then Mia's. The shutdown rippled across the desks, and when it reached the walls, the classroom lights went dark. The other students screamed.

"Calm down, everyone! It's just a power outage," their teacher shouted. "It happens every year, for goodness' sake."

Blackouts did happen every year, but the adults on Othan never prepared. They knew at the very start of each year how much fuel they'd have available. If the island city rationed its ichor, everyone could make it through Golden Day with the lights on.

Wendi had been eleven years old the last time adults successfully kept the city running. Every year since had been an exercise in disappointment. Usually the fuel stores ran dry one or two nights before Golden Day. Three days was a new record for the powers of municipal mismanagement.

Mia raised her manicured hand. "Mrs. Chides, I only finished half my test. Is that going to affect my grade?"

The class murmured anxiously.

"Don't be silly. That would be a nightmare of paperwork." The teacher pushed her spectacles up her nose. "I'll simply calculate your semester's grades without this test."

Wendi gritted her teeth as the other kids cheered. Of course her classmates were happy—their grades didn't matter. Their parents were rich enough to pay their tuition out of their own pockets. But Wendi needed her scholarship if she wanted to stay at Unity Academy. If she dropped out of this school, the closest alternative was on a different island.

She'd worked so hard this year. Most of her grades were good, but her scholarship demanded perfection. The school had sent her a stern letter one month ago, saying if she didn't get her history grade up by the end of the semester, she'd lose her tuition.

This test was supposed to be her lifeline. But now her education was in jeopardy because her teacher hadn't bothered to come up with a back-up plan for an utterly predictable event. Judging from the knowing sneer that Mrs. Chides gave Wendi, her teacher was entirely unsympathetic to that fact.

Mom would be so disappointed. She'd always warned Wendi not to take her education for granted—not all families on Othan could afford to send their kids to school past Year Seven. Wendi could kiss her dreams of being a doctor goodbye if she dropped out. Now she would have to work at the ship factories and probably get sick with—

No. She couldn't think about that.

Wendi took another deep breath, then distracted herself by looking outside. Unity Academy was one of the few original Revenni buildings left standing after the Ichor War, so it still had its dome shape. Its glass ceiling curved like a snow globe, offering a clear view of the surrounding city.

Office buildings loomed above the school, blocking any sight of a horizon. They had a more Viccan style of architecture, common after the war, full of angles and pointed spires that seemed to stab the sky. Golden Day was this weekend, and the ever-growing ichor clouds had transformed what should have been a blue afternoon into muddy twilight. Wendi watched the swirling golden gloom and wished she were somewhere far, far away.

“—and with that in mind, you are all dismissed. Have a safe Golden Day,” Mrs. Chides announced. “Or New Year's, for those of you who celebrate,” she added for the Revenni students.

The students exploded into activity, detaching their tablets and shoving them into schoolbags. Whenever blackouts or storms occurred, classes were automatically canceled. The sooner they escaped this classroom, the sooner they were free.

As Rowan lifted his holotablet from his desk, his dark eyes briefly met Wendi's. Before she could speak, he broke contact and rushed out the door.

Wendi stiffened. That was the first time Rowan had made eye contact with her in over a month. Was it an accident? Or was he upset by Wendi peeking at his test? If Wendi apologized, could that be the foot in the door she needed to talk to her best friend again? She chased him out of the room into the hall flooded with students.

The only light in the corridor came in straight down through the glass ceiling, making it impossible to pick out her friend's face in the shadowy crowd. Footsteps and voices echoed through the hall, flowing around the curved wall as more students poured in.

A wave of students jostled her forward. Someone pushed past her, and Wendi's leather shoes skidded across tile. "Hey!" Her protest drowned in the hum of the crowd.

Wendi washed out of the Academy doors with the rest of her class and met a wall of sticky summer heat. Her dense, shoulder-length curls immediately began wilting in the humidity.

Students mingled on the cobblestone street, hugging friends and sharing their plans for the long weekend. Given the safety risk of walking home during a blackout, many students started forming groups to walk home together. Others rushed to meet their parents trudging out of the office buildings across the street.

As adults and children mingled, it was hard to tell who belonged where. The office workers' suits looked much like the students' uniforms, with stiff

gray shirts and ankle-high boots. But the adults were allowed splashes of color in their outfits—a yellow pocket handkerchief here, violet hosiery there—small privileges of self-expression denied to the children.

Wendi spotted Rowan, already taller than some adults, angling his way through the monochrome crowd. He met up with redheaded Mia in the shadow of an office building. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

Wendi stopped an awkward distance away. No one had told her those two were dating. Then again, Rowan had been the only classmate she spoke to regularly. Her other childhood friends—Lorune and Sam—had moved on from school to paid employment as soon as they were old enough. They were both too busy to keep in touch.

Mia noticed Wendi first. She clutched her boyfriend protectively. “What do you want?”

Wendi stumbled over her words. “I...I wanted to apologize to Rowan. About earlier. I wasn’t trying to copy your test.”

Rowan wouldn’t meet her eyes with his girlfriend watching. “It’s fine. I guess this time of year would be hard for you.”

“I wasn’t looking at your answers!”

“So you were staring at *him*, then?” asked Mia. “That’s rich. After you humiliated him in front of the whole class, now you catch feelings?”

Wendi’s stomach dropped. She hadn’t meant to hurt Rowan. But his confession had come out of nowhere, in front of all their classmates no less. The entire room had directed their eyes to her, smothering her with expectation. Wendi then fell into a sweaty, shaking panic attack and fled the classroom.

Once she had calmed down, Wendi desperately tried to apologize to Rowan. But he wouldn’t talk to her or answer her messages on the holonet. Today was the first time he even acknowledged her existence.

“Go easy on her, Mia. She didn’t mean to lead me on.” Rowan shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance, though Wendi could hear the bitterness in his voice. “She wasn’t ready for a real relationship.”

They’d had a friendship. When did that stop counting as ‘real’?

Mia scoffed. “She didn’t have to throw a tantrum, though.”

“She’s got anxiety,” Rowan explained. “She’s always been afraid of relationship stuff. Wouldn’t even go to the Year Six dance.”

That wasn’t true. Wendi wasn’t afraid of romantic relationships. She just couldn’t get herself to care about them. Every time her classmates gushed about their crushes, she found herself tuning out. Wendi thought she had a refuge from all the drama with Rowan, but now he’d left her behind too.

“Can’t we go back to how we were before? As friends?” Wendi croaked. She could still be a good friend for him. Help him draw his ideas for comics. Tutor him in biology. Even bring him lunch sometimes. She could keep giving him her time and talent and affection. Just not her heart. Wasn’t that enough?

Rowan still wouldn’t look her in the eye. “It’ll be healthier for both of us to move on,” he muttered. Then he grabbed his girlfriend by the hand and led her away. “Come on, Mia, let me walk you home.”

Brianna and Faith ran up to them, also holding hands and pointedly ignoring Wendi. All the social rules had changed seemingly overnight, and no one would forgive her for breaking them.

Wendi leaned against the brick wall, blinking quickly so she wouldn’t cry. The shade didn’t protect her from the heat, but it did spare her any pitying stares from passersby. The crowd slowly dissolved, leaving Wendi alone on the street.

Wendi’s father showed up half an hour after everyone else had gone. He still wore his work clothes: heavy yellow boots, red suspenders, and a

loose cotton shirt. A lamp technician's uniform wasn't suited to cross-city treks, so when her father reached the school, his face and arms were slick with sweat.

"Wendi!" He wrapped her in a wet hug, squeezing her into his generous belly.

She hugged him so hard she almost melted into him. "You're late," she scolded.

"I couldn't help it. The crew and I were repairing some street lamps at Eight West when the power went out." They walked down the cobblestone street together. Her father explained how his boss wouldn't allow him to leave until he triple-checked that there really was a blackout. "You're lucky the teachers let you out early when they realized you couldn't work."

"Not that lucky," she muttered under her breath.

Her dad's fuzzy eyebrows crinkled together. "What's wrong?"

Wendi bit her lip. Where could she even begin? The false cheating accusation? Rowan's rejection? "Mrs. Chides isn't going to count today's test towards my history grade because of the blackout. I'll probably end up with an eight this semester."

"Don't worry about it. The history in your textbooks is all fake, anyway."

"Dad."

"I'm serious! Look at the bank here." He pointed to a three-story building with square parapets lining the roof. The walls were made of gray bricks stacked in unnaturally neat rows. Its windows had rose-tinted glass, likely treated to keep out moisture and ichor dust. A marble lion statue stood guard in front of the doors. "How old would your teacher say the bank is?"

Most of the island was rebuilt after the Ichor War, so this specific building was probably seventy years old or so. But knowing her father, this

was probably a trick question. “I’d guess the original bank was built, um...300 years ago?”

“There was no bank here.” Her dad’s smile grew bitter. “Before the war, this was where the Chief and his council met. Your great-grandfather worked here.”

“Oh.” Her great-grandfather had died long before Wendi was born, so she couldn’t summon much emotion beyond vague nostalgia.

“You see, the Viccans bombed every island in Reven trying to conquer us. But when that didn’t work, they threw up their hands and said, ‘Sorry, we’ll build it all back.’ Except that was a lie. Instead of rebuilding the council hall with modern architecture”—he pointed to the dome behind them, then gestured disdainfully at the bank—“the Viccans built this joke that looks like it’s from a thousand years ago.”

Wendi shifted uncomfortably. When her father got going about Vicania, he lasted a long time, and she really didn’t want to stand in this heat longer than she had to. “I think that’s just their style. Sam’s originally from Iflen. He once told me that Viccan buildings look like this on every island.”

Her dad smirked. “Yeah, it *is* their style, isn’t it? Viccans want to pretend they never tried to conquer the world, so they dress everything up as though the last couple centuries didn’t happen.” He approached the lion statue and tapped its glass eye. When Wendi leaned closer, she could see the security camera hidden behind it. “But you can’t erase the past that easily.”

She sighed. “Dad, this isn’t going to fix my grade.”

“An eight in history is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s better than most of your classmates have, I bet.”

Mom would have understood. “I have to get nines or above to earn scholarship money,” she reminded him. “Otherwise I’ll have to drop out

and go to a smaller school, which will be less impressive on college applications, which means I won't get into the good medical programs—"

Her father clapped her shoulder. "Wendi, calm down! If you lose your scholarship, we'll figure out another way to pay." He led her away from the bank. "You're too young to worry about the future this much."

"I'm fifteen," she muttered. And she'd seen the bills on their kitchen counter. Her family's budget was already stretched to the limit.

"The perfect age for a girl to help her dad with some holiday shopping!"

Wendi stumbled on a loose cobblestone. Her anxiety transformed into a looming dread. "Please tell me you're joking."

A hurt expression crossed her father's face. "I thought you loved shopping for Golden Day."

Wendi loved shopping with Mom. This was the first year Dad was in charge. "I...I do, but it's a little late to get groceries, isn't it? The ichor is snowing down in three days."

Her dad beamed. "That's why we've got to hurry! The stands are getting picked clean as we speak!" He walked briskly down the street. "It's actually good that I was able to pick you up here. The walk to the Cloud Market will be a lot shorter..."



The walk to the Cloud Market was neither short nor quick. It was a hot, miserable slog through a maze of shadowy buildings. Ichor clouds gathered above the island, as if a golden fleece had been tossed over the city, cloaking every tower and tenement in shadow. Thankfully enough sun came through the clouds to see by.

After the Ichor War, many of Reven's islands had to be completely rebuilt from the rubble. Othan was one such place. The original city had been full of interconnected domes. The shopping district and City Hall were in the center, and the homes and streets spiraled out like petals of a flower.

The Viccans, however, had preferred squares to circles. They crammed square buildings between curving streets, trying to transform a spiral into a grid. The result was a curled labyrinth of brick towers, with addresses marked by cardinal direction and how many blocks a building sat from the island's center.

At least the buildings had a consistent aesthetic. While the Viccans and Revenni were rebuilding Othan, one of the few things they could agree on was their distaste for the Empire's architecture. The mainland's buildings had too much steel, too little style.

So Othan decorated itself with the trappings of each civilization's younger days. Instead of modern skyscrapers, the city built Viccan-style towers of stone and brick. Othan's destroyed subways were replaced with trolley cars from Revenni history books. The city stained its holographic billboards to look like posters and coated its escalators in vinyl to look like marble stairs. Granted, the towers had been assembled by machines and the tenements all had air-conditioning, but that didn't matter. To the city planners, the appearance of age was all that counted.

Wendi passed several stalled trolley cars. They were painted like children's toys, bright red with fake wooden trim. And like toys, the cars had been abandoned in the middle of the road without any attempt to stow them away.

The whole city had fallen dormant, with every window empty and every streetlamp dark. As they got closer to the Cloud Market, Wendi saw more and more people on the streets, rushing through errands while there was still daylight.

Of course, that was why the Cloud Market existed in the first place. Island-wide power outages usually didn't happen until shortly before Golden Day. However, smaller stores often ran out of ichor well before harvest time. They couldn't sell their wares in dark buildings, so they built

stalls on the street. The thicker the golden clouds above, the busier the market below.

Stalls crammed the sidewalks around Wendi, overflowing with goods. A perfume stall marked its territory with a dozen floral scents, while a bakery down the road fought back with the smell of fresh pastries. A hosiery store hung its wares from clotheslines, and tights of every color fluttered above the stalls.

An elderly lady to her left coughed into a handkerchief. The woman was probably sweating due to the humidity, not Saffron Fever, but Wendi still stumbled away as quickly as she could.

“Wendi, hurry up!” her dad called. She joined him at a wooden stall. A painted sign read: “FRESH GOODS FROM ALDRIG: A TASTE FROM ANOTHER TIME!”

The clerk spoke in a breathy accent common among Reven’s central islands, full of rushed vowels and sharpened consonants. “Good afternoon! What can I get you two today?” Given the man’s accent and his shop sign, Wendi guessed he was from the Aldrig band of the Revenni tribe.

“One sack of sugar,” her dad answered. “Wendi, do you want any fruit?”

Wendi examined the mostly empty crate of mint melons. Their tangy smell suggested they were closer to rotten than ripe. “No thanks.”

The clerk handed a bag of sugar to her father. “Sugar costs twenty shills.”

“Twenty? I could buy two sacks for that money!”

“If you want lab-grown sugar, sure. This stuff’s all natural. The farmers don’t use pesticides or weed killer. They don’t even use ichor to power their tractors. They grow their crops the same way people did a thousand years ago.”

“People from a thousand years ago also thought that leeches cured dementia and that gargoyles were fashionable,” her dad countered. “Just because something’s old doesn’t mean it’s better.”

The clerk shrugged. “Hey, if you don’t want to cook New Year’s biscuits with your girl, you don’t have to buy anything.”

Her dad winced.

Wendi touched his arm. “We don’t have to make biscuits this year.”

“Of course we do.” He threw twenty bronze coins onto the counter. “We’ll simply have to skimp on the vegetables.”

Wendi and her father circled the stalls, gathering the rest of the items on their list. Their choices in produce were disappointing at best. If Mom had been in charge of the shopping, she would have gotten all the groceries a week in advance. But thanks to Dad’s procrastination, they were forced to scavenge the Cloud Market for leftovers.

As Wendi inspected a basket of corn cobs, a chorus of horns blared in the air. The people in the Cloud Market paused their haggling and craned their heads towards the sky.

The Harvesters flew into position overhead. Each ship had a square frame with a net dangling below. Propellers in each corner allowed the ships to hover in place. Every ship also sported the Emperor’s coat of arms on its side: a silver vulture surrounded by cacti. The sign proved the ship was authorized by His Highness to gather ichor.

On Golden Day, the ichor would snow down from the clouds into the ships’ nets. The treaty between Reven and Viccania ensured the Harvesters had no competition in the sky above Othan. The more golden powder the ships harvested, the more the nets swelled. When the ships were full of ichor, the bulging nets looked like a school of puffer fish.

Most of the Harvester ships would fly away, carrying a year’s worth of ichor back to Viccania. But a few Harvesters would float down to Othan’s

refinement centers, where they'd turn the ichor dust into fuel. Then, and only then, the city would finally get some air-conditioning.

As if on cue, several young men in blue and silver coats rushed out with stacks of flyers. One of them shoved a sheet of paper in Wendi's hand. The flyer had a picture of a family cowering in their home while ichor dust flowed through a crack in their window. It read:

Did you know? Exposure to ichor particles can cause Chenson's Cough and Saffron Fever. Protect your family—buy updated filters at your local community center TODAY!

Some girls in the same uniforms were setting up a stall down the road. It didn't take a genius to guess what they were selling.

Wendi nudged her father. "Dad, do we have updated ichor filters?"

He snorted. "No! All that poison talk is hogwash. The Empire only says ichor's toxic because they don't want the public collecting it themselves. Then they couldn't sell our people filters. Or charge eighty damn shills for a tank of fuel."

An older couple nearby gave them dirty looks.

Wendi whispered, "Dad, quiet. People will think you're paranoid."

His voice grew even louder. "They're the paranoid ones! Revenni have been living on these islands for thousands of years. We'd let ichor snow in the streets, track it in our houses—heck, when I was your age, your aunt and I would play outside during storms. And you know what happened to us? Nothing."

Wendi crinkled the flyer in her hands. Frustration edged into her voice. "But Mom got Saffron Fever. And Mr. Elson down the hall—"

Her father whirled around. "That had *nothing* to do with Golden Day. They caught the fever at the factory from some fool who came in sick."

"If there's even a slight chance it's true—"

“There isn’t! Saffron Fever showed up in Viccania first, and you don’t see any ichor clouds up there, do you? If these folks actually wanted to help the average person, they’d give us sick leave and respirator masks, not half-baked propaganda.”

Wendi threw the flyer to the ground. “Then how do we make sure we’re safe?”

Her father frowned. “Wendi, you’re not going to get sick.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do!” He grabbed both her shoulders. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Ever. Okay?”

“...okay.” Wendi wished she could believe him. But love couldn’t stop death. Nothing could. All she could do was avoid thinking about it.



One hour and an absurd amount of money later, Wendi and her father carried out the week’s groceries. As they walked, they discussed potential dishes for the holiday. Wendi was making an impassioned case for fried yams when she finally noticed the unfamiliar buildings around her. “This isn’t the road to home.”

Her father smiled. “Nope. We’re taking a detour to Bayside District.”

“That’s not a very safe part of town.”

He sighed. “Wendi, can you stop worrying for one afternoon? I’m trying to give you a nice time here.”

“Right. Sorry.”

She would worry less if he told her what he was planning.

Her father led her through some back-end streets to a secluded cove. The cliff had been paved over to form a skywharf. A wall of cargo sat on one side, a fleet of ships on the other. Sailors crowded on the pavement, laughing, haggling, and occasionally doing work. A rusted sign read GURRIN SKYWHARF.

A new ship entered the wharf. Its steel hull glided through the humid air, and pipes streamed out golden exhaust from the back of the ship. A white sail fluttered in the wind, useless except for displaying the ship's name: *The Laughing Pixie*.

The propulsion jets rotated left, causing the *Laughing Pixie* to turn. The pilot guided their ship into a paved trough notched into the cliff, docking inside like a key into a lock. The engine turned off, and the vessel settled into the trough, leaving the ship's deck perfectly level with the rest of the skywharf.

Ahead in the crowd, someone let out a loud, startled cry. A pale man in a red coat burst through and nearly bowled Wendi over. She stumbled into her father, who shouted after the running man. "Hey!"

"Sorry!" The man yelled as he scrambled away.

A pack of kids in green shirts chased after him. "Hook, you coward, get back here!"

The kids pushed a sailor out of the way. He dropped the barrel in his arms, which rolled off the cliff and dropped thirty feet into the ocean. Wendi hoped the barrel hadn't held anything valuable, because he certainly was not getting it back.

Her father helped her stand upright. "Are you okay, Wendi?" She nodded. He turned to some sailors nearby. "Do any of you know who that man was?"

A middle-aged woman answered, "The brats are from the ship parked next to mine. I've never seen the guy in red."

"Well, if he gets near my daughter again, I'm shoving him off that cliff."

"Dad, I'm sure it's a misunderstanding."

"I don't care. You can't let other people push you around," her father scolded.

Pulling was apparently okay though, as he grabbed her arm and led her to an older ship in the back of the wharf. Scratches and dents marred the hull, and cargo cluttered the deck. Even the railing looked flimsy, and that was supposed to keep everything from sliding off the ship.

Only the sail showed signs of care. The crisp fabric displayed the ship's name in bold cursive: *The Jolly Roger*. Under the name, neon fibers formed an animated parrot mascot. Every sixty seconds, the parrot raised a glass of golden juice in its claws and winked.

In spite of the ship's shoddy appearance, a crowd of people lined up outside the back cabin. A muscular guard in a tight shirt guarded the door. He glanced a clipboard. "Ed Tammel? Five o'clock, Ed Tammel?"

"Good, we're early," her father muttered.

"Early for what? Why are we here?"

He grinned. "Cooking supplies."

Cooking supplies? Was that supposed to be a joke? As Wendi puzzled over her father's strange sense of humor, an oily gas wafted from below deck. Wendi held her nose. "Dad, if ichor isn't toxic, why can't I breathe?"

"I don't know. Something about the way they process the dust into fuel. But this gas is—" He stopped to cough. "—mostly chemicals. The natural stuff's harmless."

Wendi resolved to ask Uncle Len about ichor filters. He was more sensible about these things than her dad.

"Sorry, guys," a voice shouted from below. "Little bit of engine trouble." Everyone laughed.

Wendi looked around, baffled. Why was that funny? A leaking engine was a serious fire hazard.

The guard cleared his throat. "Next appointment is Jorrok Darl. Is Jorrok Darl—"

"Here!"

Her dad led her into the cabin, then down a short hall and into the captain's office, a musty room with iron walls and one large window. The captain relaxed in the singular chair behind a long table, leaving his guards to stand on either side of him.

The captain, a sharp-eyed man in his fifties, wore a gold-trimmed vest over a gauzy black shirt. He was in remarkable shape for his age, with taut arms and a solid torso. But time had still marked his body, tugging back his hairline and digging wrinkles into his face. In a show of defiance, the captain had dyed his beard an oily black. It changed colors depending on the light, looking almost rainbow from certain angles.

Her father shook the man's hand. "Honor to meet you, Captain Blackbeard." He said the name without a hint of irony.

"The honor's all mine, Mr. Darl." The man turned to Wendi, who shrank away from his prying gaze. "And who's the young lady?"

"This is my daughter, Wendiaqui," her father answered, saying her full name for formality's sake.

"A lovely name for a lovely girl," said Blackbeard. He offered the compliment to Wendi's father rather than Wendi herself.

Her dad laughed. "Good thing she takes after her mother and not me."

As the captain and her father chatted, Wendi's attention drifted towards the noisy hall outside. A customer walked by the doorway with two heavy tanks that sloshed as he walked, dripping a trail of gold liquid. Was that ichor? This wasn't a government fueling station.

She smelled a whiff of sickly sweetness again. *Wait a minute. The tanks. The gas. The flag. Oh.*

"You're an ichor smuggler," Wendi interrupted.

The captain cackled. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

Wendi had heard of people like this. Thieves who harvested ichor dust from the storms, refined it in the bellies of their ships, then sold it at black

market prices. Men like him were part of the reason Othan suffered from ichor shortages—part of the reason she lost her scholarship.

She whirled on her father. “Dad, this is illegal!”

“Making it is illegal. We’re only buying it.”

“It’s not any good if you’re buying it from a thief!”

“Darling, I assure you, I am no thief,” said Blackbeard. “My crew and I harvest all the ichor ourselves from a storm the Empire’s ships don’t visit. The Harvester ships don’t patrol past Aldrig, you see. It takes too much fuel for them to fly that far south.”

“That’s even more selfish!” Wendi gestured out the window. “The ichor shortage has put most of Othan out of commission, and you’re hoarding a secret stash of fuel for yourself?”

Blackbeard’s expression soured. “There is no ichor shortage. Reven’s storms make as much ichor as they always did. If you’re upset about the power outage, blame the Emperor that’s sucking our country dry.”

Wendi tensed. She hoped these walls were soundproof. They could get into real trouble talking about the Emperor like this. “There’s nothing we can do about Viccania. We signed over ownership of our ichor storms in the Treaty of Macalor.”

“Even the Emperor himself can’t own a storm, child. The ichor clouds only exist for a handful of days out of the year.” The captain leaned forward in his chair. “Besides, it was more of a ransom notice than a treaty. Revenni didn’t have much choice in signing it, what with half our soldiers taken hostage.”

“But we signed the paper. And Viccania gave all of the prisoners back.” Wendi shifted her feet. “Even if it’s a bad deal, we still gave our word. A law is a law.”

“You sure?” Blackbeard stroked his whiskers. “Say some crooks take over your neighborhood. They give you a piece of paper asking you to sign

over your house. If you don't sign it, they'll beat you up and take it anyway. Aren't they still thieves?"

"I...probably?"

"So does the contract make the house theirs?"

"It shouldn't, but..." Wendi trailed off. In a fair world, the contract wouldn't count. But they didn't live in a fair world, so weren't laws the next best thing? Life would probably be a lot closer to fair if adults followed their own rules.

Sensing her hesitation, Blackbeard pivoted his argument. "Say you want to take your house back. No, you don't even want the house. You just want to drink some water out of the sink. Are you stealing?"

"If I were a country, and I signed a pact—"

"But you said the paper shouldn't matter. It's still your sink."

Before Wendi could continue her argument, her father interrupted. "We're not hurting anyone, Wendi. We're just taking a little ichor back to the apartment so we can have a fun New Year's."

"It won't be fun if we're arrested. We should go home and pretend we were never here."

Her father shook his head. "You don't want to make everyone eat cold tappo soup in the dark, do you?" She held his gaze. He sighed. "Come on, Wendi. Think about what Mom would want."

Mom had loved New Year's more than her own birthday. She'd bake enough biscuits to feed the whole apartment building and decorate every window with candles. Since fireworks were banned within city limits, she would make her own sparklers out of sugar, saltpeter, yarn, and wire, then hand them out to the neighborhood children. If New Year's was at stake, Mom would take the ichor.

Blackbeard grinned. "Go on, Wendi. You can't welcome the new year without giving a proper goodbye to the old one."

She clenched her fists. Why did they have to corner her like this? She couldn't say yes, she couldn't say no...what was she supposed to say?

"Do what you want," Wendi muttered. She sped out of the room, almost crashing into the guard and his clipboard. The customers on the deck murmured in concern as she pushed her way past them and off the ship. She brushed dust off a wooden box and sat down, letting out a long sigh. What would Mom think if she saw Wendi now?

2

A Bribe

Wendi waited fifteen more minutes before her father came out. He looked around with a deliciously worried expression. She let him sweat for a couple seconds before waving to him from the skywharf.

He smiled and headed her way, dragging an iron cart behind him. Anyone over two feet tall could see the ichor tank amidst their Cloud Market groceries, but Wendi was too tired to protest. The sooner they got home, the better.

They walked through the streets in silence. Occasionally pedestrians would glance at their contraband, but no one stopped them. Everyone on the street was eager to get indoors before dark.

“You did the right thing,” her father murmured. “Mom would be happy.”

Wendi let him pull her into a hug. “If anyone asks, this was your idea.”

“Deal.”

By the time they got to their neighborhood, night had taken over the sky. The streetlamps on the cul-de-sac remained dark. The brick tenements squatted around the lamps like travelers around a dead campfire.

Strings of laundry hung between the fire escapes of each building. The clothes dryers ran on ichor power like everything else, but the laundry still had to be done. Ceremonial robes dripped water onto the street below.

Most of the robes were blue, proving their wearers belonged to the Othan band of the Revenni tribe. Sometimes she saw a green or purple robe, worn by someone from a different island.

Revenni weren't obligated to live in the Tackhill neighborhood—they could live anywhere in Othan they wished—but Tackhill was one of the few affordable neighborhoods in the city, so the choice of housing was often a false promise.

Wendi's building was in the very back, closest to the cliff and the neighborhood memorial. Uncle Len opened the door as they approached. He wore a clean button-up and slacks, but his face still shone with oil from the factory smoke. "Hey! Our dynamic duo has finally found their way home. We thought you two had been eaten by crakow birds."

Wendi followed the adults inside. Candles lined every table and windowsill, scenting the air with jasmine. Virtually the entire building was crowded into the lounge. The elders drank tea, the working adults had started a series of card games, and the young children played marbles on the floor.

Her father lifted up the tank of ichor. "We found some treasure on the way back."

Faces lit up around the room. "Ohoho! Jorrok, you rascal!"

"Looks like we'll have a decent New Year's after all!"

"Come on, let's put some in the generator."

The adults followed her dad into the basement, like little kids chasing after a kite. Wendi sighed. Not one person had asked him where the ichor came from. Did they even care?

Nanna chuckled softly from her couch by the kids' marble game. She wore an indigo headscarf around her curly hair and a matching shawl over her bony shoulders. Her face was weathered as sandpaper, but her smiling

teeth could rival ivory. “Has Jorrok been roping you into some mischief, Wendiaqui?”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Oh, I’m sure.” The lantern above them hummed. A jet of ichor gas filled the glass sphere. A spark ignited, and the lantern glowed a gentle gold. The other lanterns along the wall followed suit. They reminded Wendi of glowing pearls, sitting neatly in their clam-like sconces. She had to admit, the room looked a lot cozier with the lights on.

The children looked up from their game, rubbing their eyes as they adjusted to the light. Wendi’s cousin saw her and sprinted over. “You’re back!”

She patted his fluffy hair. “Hi, Mikal. How was your day?”

“Boring! The holo wouldn’t turn on, and the grown-ups were too busy to read us stories.” He looked around the room. “Did you and Uncle Jorrok get the sugar?”

“Mm-hmm. Lots.”

The five-year-old bounced on his heels. “So we can make biscuits now, right?”

Wendi sighed. “Mikal, New Year’s isn’t for three more days. If we bake anything now, it’ll go stale.”

“Then let’s eat the biscuits early!”

“I don’t know, Mikal.” Nanna took Mom’s old pocket watch out. “It’s awfully close to your bedtime, see?”

Wendi immediately turned her head. She hadn’t been able to look at that thing since Mom died. Even the faint ticking sound bothered her.

“Please?” Mikal whined.

The old woman sighed. “Fine. I can’t say no to the miracle boy, can I?”

“Yeah!” The children raced to the communal kitchen, tripping over themselves in their enthusiasm.

Wendi was about to follow suit when a long, painted nail tapped her shoulder. Aunt Sochi appeared behind her. “Wendi, I know you just got back, but...I noticed that the memorial is still bare.”

Nanna had been decorating Mom’s shelf up until this point, but she had a scary fall about a month ago, so the task had gone to the next closest relative, Wendi’s father. But just like with the holiday shopping, he put off doing anything that reminded him of Mom.

Her aunt frowned in understanding. “Really, it should be your dad’s responsibility, but...”

“I’ll do it,” Wendi promised. The memorial made her hair stand on end, but she’d endure for her mother’s sake. “Later. I want to help Nanna with the biscuits, make sure none of the kids burn themselves.”

Aunt Sochi smiled. “Thank you. You’re always so helpful. You’ll be a great mother someday.”

Wendi cringed. She hadn’t even graduated school yet, but the to-do list of adulthood already felt overwhelmingly long.

She retreated into the community kitchen, full of comforting browns and yellows. All the children crowded around Nanna at the counter as she measured out ingredients.

“Wendiaqui, turn the oven on for me, won’t you?” asked Nanna.

Wendi turned a knob on the side of the oven’s wide barrel body. A gas ring spouted tiny flames and emitted a faint smell of ichor gas—not enough to be dangerous, but enough to annoy her.

She rejoined the kids at the counter. Two-year-old Lila was trying to consume a chubby fistful of raw dough, and Nanna was gently explaining to her why that was a bad idea. Wendi accepted some dough from Mikal and rolled the grainy mixture in her hands, patting it into a perfect sphere.

When they had enough biscuits, Nanna stacked the balls in a mesh crate and lowered the basket into the oven. The children ran up to peer through

the glass lid. Nanna gently pulled them back. "Careful. Don't want to burn your toes."

After a minute, Lila tugged Nanna's dress. "Done yet?"

She chuckled. "Not yet. They take a while to grow. How about I tell you a story while we wait?"

"Sorry Nanna, I left my holotablet at the school," Wendi explained.

"I don't need a tablet when I have my own memory right here," she said, tapping her wrinkled forehead. "Come on, children, circle 'round." She settled onto a stool. The kids circled around her, while Wendi leaned against the counter.

"Now, you know that our planet ages just like you and I. Every year it grows older, and the ocean sinks lower. But when the world was young, the ocean was so full that it touched the sky, and you could walk straight from the land into the sea without falling."

Some of the younger children visibly struggled with the concept of a beach. Even for Wendi, the sky felt much closer than the ocean.

Nanna continued. "Before humanity learned how to fly, they rode wooden ships that floated across the water. These ships had to move with the water and the wind, as if they were dancing, and it took a lot of skill to make a ship dance well. The most talented of these sailors was a young Revenni from Othan..."

Wendi's mind wandered back to her lost scholarship. She really didn't want to change schools if she could help it. Unity Academy had a good reputation, and she was proud to wear their uniform. Plus, commuting to another island for class would take hours out of her day. She was lonely enough without Rowan. She couldn't lose family time, too.

The oven beeped. "Oh, it looks like our first batch is done!" Nanna grabbed some mitts and pulled the basket out of the oven. A buttery smell

filled the air as she placed the sweets on a tray. The biscuits were golden brown, fluffy enough to squeeze but dense enough to hold their shape.

Mikal reached up to grab one, but Nanna stopped him. “Not yet. We have to powder them first.” She sprinkled sugar onto a biscuit, stalling so that the dough had time to cool. The moment she finished powdering the last biscuit, tiny hands flooded the tray.

“Hey! Leave some for Nanna and me!” said Wendi. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mikal sneaking away with four biscuits all to himself. “Mikal, where are you going with those?”

Her cousin sprinted out of the kitchen.

She followed him to the lobby, but he was nowhere in sight. “Mikal?”

Her father snickered from a nearby couch. “Your thief went outside, Wendi.” Sure enough, there was a trail of sugar leading through the hallway past the kitchen to the building’s back door.

Wendi ran into the field behind the apartment building. The garden shed was empty, and so was the alley. Then she turned towards the cliff. Mikal crouched by the memorial, hiding in the shadow of the pavilion. Wendi shivered despite the humid air.

Almost every neighborhood in Othan had a memorial. It didn’t matter if the community was rich or poor, Viccan or Revenni—Saffron Fever chose its victims without prejudice. When outbreaks of the disease ravaged a neighborhood, like the one in Tackhill last year, the city put up a memorial in the victims’ honor. The monuments were gestures of sympathy to survivors, but also omens to passerby, reminders that this place had been touched by death.

Tackhill’s memorial sat a stone’s throw away from the cliff. A pavilion shielded the monument from ichor dust, and the concrete floor guarded the structure from erosion. The memorial itself was shaped like a three-sided pyramid, with shelves stepping their way to the top. Embedded in each shelf

sat pictures of the people who had succumbed to fever, protected behind a long pane of glass.

Mikal had placed three plates on the floor in front of the memorial. He sat cross-legged on the ground, nibbling on his first biscuit.

Wendi roughly turned her cousin around. “Mikal, come back inside. This isn’t a place for hide-and-seek!” She reminded herself to lower her voice. A memorial demanded whispers, not shouts. “Besides, you can’t eat four biscuits at once. You’ll make yourself sick.”

Mikal leaned his head back. “The last three aren’t for me. They’re for Aunt Alia and the others.”

Wendi realized Mikal had placed the biscuits in front of their building’s designated shelf. The shelf held a photo of each of the three victims: their neighbor Don Elson, his daughter Talili Elson, and Alia Darl, Wendi’s mother.

Wendi crouched down before the last photo. Mom smiled at the camera, eyes sparkling as if she’d told a joke. She had a moonish face like Wendi’s, but prettier, with dimples on each cheek. A daisy pin sat above her ear, nestled in silky coils, and her abalone watch poked out of her breast pocket.

Her mother had died a few days after Golden Day, meaning the anniversary of the outbreak was next week. Wendi couldn’t believe it had been almost a year already. It felt like her mother had just been here.

Eighteen people in the neighborhood had died. Out of all the infected people, only Mikal had survived. He was only five years old, though...did he understand what he’d lived through?

“Mikal...do you remember when everyone in the neighborhood got sick? Mom and the others didn’t get better like you did. They stayed sick.”

"I know. That's why we had to send them away on the rafts. Mommy said they were going somewhere the fever couldn't follow." Mikal swallowed another bite of biscuit. "But when they come back, they'll be hungry."

Wendi felt a lump rising in her throat. "They aren't coming back."

Mikal frowned, confused. "But it's New Year's. The ichor clouds come back. The flowers come back. Why wouldn't people?"

"They're dead. They don't use their bodies anymore."

"Oh." Mikal pondered this for a moment. "Then their spirits can eat the biscuits instead," he concluded. He pushed the plates closer to the memorial. "It's not fair if I'm the only one who gets to eat them."

Wendi blinked back stinging tears. Did her cousin feel guilty for surviving? She never, ever held it against him. If anyone should feel guilty, it was her. Wendi had heard her mother complain about a headache, but she'd left her mom alone and gone to school without a second thought.

"Thank you, Mikal. I'm sure Mom and the others will love them." This wasn't a lie. Her mother always did love sweets.

Wendi stood up. If a five-year-old was brave enough to visit the memorial by himself, then certainly she could decorate the place. "Do you want to help me set up the flowers?"

"Sure!"

Wendi walked back to the narrow garden shed and filled three vases with water from the rusted sink. Then she carried some clippers to the herb garden. Past the basil and coriander was a patch of moon lilies. The lilies weren't edible, but they were a classic New Year's decoration, so her family grew them alongside the herbs.

Wendi cradled a moon lily in her hand. Its petals twisted tight in the shape of a star. A moon lily was too delicate for sunlight, so its petals only opened after dark, relying on the moths for pollination. When its petals unfurled, they created a white circle to mirror the flower's namesake.

Once each vase was full, she and Mikal carried them to the memorial. Circles of rust marked the shelves where the vases usually sat. Given how many holidays Reven celebrated, the memorials were decorated more often than not: hibiscus flowers for the Treaty Anniversary, plumeria for Family Week, and so on. On the islands of Reven, even the dead were expected to participate in community affairs.

Wendi placed the largest flower by her mother's photo, then looked back at the family garden. Mom had loved this place so much. Even as she was dying, she'd worried about the flowers more than herself.

"Leave! You have no right to be here!"

Wendi and her cousin jumped at the sudden noise. Mikal tugged her sleeve. "Was that Uncle Jorrok?"

Wendi frowned. Dad never raised his voice around kids. She ran back inside.

The adults were gathered around the front entrance. A stranger stood outside the entryway. His appearance was impeccably neat, from his crakow-skin shoes to his slick blond hair. A silver police badge embossed with the Emperor's coat of arms glinted against his gray uniform. Wendi's blood became ice in her veins.

The officer stared coolly at her father. "It's a policeman's responsibility to investigate all questionable activity. The fact that you're the only ones in this neighborhood with working lights raises a lot of questions."

"Our community has its own officers," her dad countered. "If one of our neighbors has a complaint, they can contact Officer Rewn."

"Your neighbors aren't asking the questions," said the man. "I am. Specifically, how come the entire shopping district is using candles, but a Revenni slum is lit up brighter than City Hall?"

The crowd hissed. Her father crossed his arms. "I don't have to answer that."

The officer spotted Wendi in the corner. “Perhaps your accomplice will prove more helpful. Come here, young lady.”

Her father visibly tensed. “Leave my daughter out of this! She’s just a child.”

“She looks old enough for an adult conversation.” The police beckoned her over. “Come. That’s an order.”

Wendi reluctantly shuffled through the crowd to join her father in the doorway.

“What’s your name, young lady?” asked the officer.

“W-Wendi.”

“I’m Officer Mullins. Now Wendi, I got some reports earlier today of a suspicious person carrying black market ichor out of Bayside District. The witness said he had a girl with him from Unity Academy.” He pointed to the crest embroidered on Wendi’s uniform. “Was that you?”

Wendi bit her lip so she couldn’t say anything stupid. Unfortunately, she couldn’t stop her face from flushing.

Officer Mullins clucked his tongue. “Wendi, you know ichor smuggling’s a serious crime, yes? You’re hoarding fuel that ought to be serving the whole island. Seems a little selfish, doesn’t it?”

Wendi pushed her hands into her skirt pockets. The cotton pouches felt too small for her fists. Yes, smuggling was a crime. She’d said so herself earlier today. But...it was only one tank. One tank wouldn’t turn on the streetlamps or get the trolleys running again. Nobody would miss it. And it would mean the world to her family.

Besides, a dozen other people had bought ichor from Blackbeard. The customer ahead of them had bought two tanks—he was twice the criminal they were. But Wendi and her dad were Revenni, so they were suspicious. They were the ones reported. They were the easy targets.

“I want to talk to Officer Rewn,” she mumbled.

“Officer Rewn isn’t here right now,” the man said with a smile. “Besides, if you and your father have broken a treaty law, I am more than qualified to arrest you.”

The officer was right. The Revenni usually policed themselves, but if a crime involved Viccania in any way, then the Empire’s police took charge of the case. Black market ichor definitely fell under his authority.

“Have you ever been to juvenile detention, Wendi? It’s not pleasant. You get the bare minimum food, bare minimum sleep, and bare minimum privacy. I’d hate to send you to such a dreadful place, but unless you give me information—”

“Leave the girl alone,” said Uncle Len. “She’s not going to tell you anything.”

“I’m simply helping Wendi understand her choices.” Officer Mullins turned to taunt her some more. “I imagine Unity Academy has strict policies about student conduct. Even a short stint in jail could interfere with your education.”

Wendi reeled from a wave of dizziness. Forget losing her scholarship—she could be expelled at this rate! What other school would take a girl with a criminal record? What job would hire her?

She could feel the rush of an oncoming panic attack. Her whole future was about to collapse, all because she helped Dad with his foolish ichor scheme.

Her father left the doorway and stepped between the two of them, leaning down so his face and Officer Mullins’ were mere inches apart. “Don’t you say another word to my daughter, or I will—”

Officer Mullins stepped backwards and unclipped a weapon canister from his belt. He twisted the metallic cylinder two clicks clockwise, and a bright red light shot out of the top, shifting into the shape of a sword.

“Or you’ll do what, Mr. Darl? The moment you touch me, I have license to do *whatever it takes* to defend myself.”

Her father stared as the tip of the sword singed a hair on his chin. He didn’t move, not even to flinch.

“That’s what I thought,” said Officer Mullins with a sneer. “Now, if none of you are willing to talk, perhaps I should inspect the premises.”

Her father stubbornly remained in place. Aunt Sochi and Uncle Len pushed past Wendi to try and talk the officer down.

Wendi needed to stop this before Officer Mullins hurt someone. She helped her father buy the ichor. She could help undo their mistake.

As the officer argued with her family, Wendi slipped back inside the lobby and rushed down the building’s stairwell. The generator sat in the back of the crowded cellar. Wendi ripped out the long clear hose connecting the generator and the ichor tank, splashing golden liquid on the floor. The adults upstairs shouted in surprise as the power went out.

The ichor tank bounced against Wendi’s shins as she lugged it up the stairs. The crowd parted when they saw her, giving her a clear path outside to Officer Mullins.

“Wendi, what are you doing?” her dad shouted.

“I’m sorry!” Her breath came out in ragged gasps. “This is...all the ichor...Blackbeard sold us...Now everything’s good...right?”

Officer Mullins deactivated his weapon canister. The sword disappeared from her father’s chin. “Almost. This Blackbeard was your dealer, yes? Tell me which skywharf he’s in. Then we can be done here.”

Her dad shot her a warning look. Wendi’s mind blanked. “I don’t remember.”

“That’s disappointing.” Officer Mullins sloshed the ichor in the tank. “Hmm. I just noticed—there’s about forty shills’ worth of ichor missing. You’ll have to pay a fine.”

“What? We didn’t use half that much,” Uncle Len protested.

“Officer, be reasonable!” Aunt Sochi pleaded.

“It doesn’t matter which skywharf Blackbeard was at,” her dad argued. “He’s got his own ship. He’s probably sailing over the Southern Sea by now.”

Officer Mullins smiled. “Then perhaps we still need to talk at the station.”

“No need.” Nanna shuffled out into the sticky night air, her sharp eyes set on Officer Mullins. “I’ve got your payment.” She shoved her pocket watch into his expectant hand.

Officer Mullins turned the watch over to examine the shiny blue moth design embedded in the back. “What is this?”

“Abalone shell. Hand-carved. It’s worth about forty shills, give or take.”

Wendi bit her tongue. Was the family watch really the only object they could offer? It was one of Mom’s few possessions that had escaped quarantine. Even if Wendi wasn’t ready to take care of it yet, she had still hoped to inherit it when she was older.

Officer Mullins laughed. “Ma’am, I’m not sure how the police did things back in your day, but we only accept cash.”

“Oh? Pity. The banks are closed until after Golden Day. I’ll call Officer Rewn next week, and she’ll pick up the money for you then.” Nanna gave the policeman a long stare. The choice was clear: take the bribe now, or go through a web of paperwork with the Revenni law enforcement.

The officer paused, then pocketed the watch. “You know what? I think I’ll waive the fine for now, since Miss Wendi was so...cooperative.” He nodded to her dad. “I’ll visit you later.”

Then Officer Mullins strolled away, whistling to himself.

The residents returned inside and closed the door with a muffled *click*. Silence flooded the room. Wendi took a deep sigh of relief. Her eyes

adjusted slowly to the candlelight, and she realized everyone was staring at her.

Her dad's voice was low and sharp. "Wendiaqui...didn't you promise to help me today? We agreed our family deserved a good New Year's."

Wendi stiffened. "Mom wouldn't want to see you arrested."

"She wouldn't want to watch you sell out your family, either!"

"I didn't sell anyone out. We broke the law. I apologized." Wendi struggled to keep her head up under the circle of piercing stares. "It was the right thing to do."

Her father threw his hands in the air. "The *right thing* would have been to stand by your father."

"Really? You wanted me to just stand there and watch him stab you?"

He winced. "The sword was a bluff. I had the situation handled."

The absolute audacity of his lie made something inside Wendi snap. "You haven't had anything handled, Dad! Not the grocery shopping, not my tuition, not the memorial, nothing. Why would I count on you to handle the policeman when I can't count on you for anything else?"

Her father flushed as if she'd physically slapped him. The other adults in the room rushed to his defense. "Wendi, you can't talk to your father that way," Uncle Len scolded.

"He's doing his best," Aunt Sochi argued. "He's had a very difficult year."

This year had been rough for Wendi, too. Why were her feelings less important than his?

Nanna patted her shoulder. "I know you were trying to help, but you shouldn't have intervened in adult affairs."

Wendi felt herself shrinking, even though she knew she was in the right. "I saved us," she protested.

"You've *doomed* us," her father yelled. "Without physical proof that we visited Blackbeard, the worst thing that officer could have done was question me at the station. Until you gave him the ichor, which is plenty of evidence to arrest me whenever he wants." He thrust out his arms. "Worse, now he has evidence you were involved, too!"

Wendi's chest hurt. She struggled to fight off another round of panic. "That wasn't...I didn't mean to..."

Nanna stepped in. "Jorrok, enough. He took the bribe. He's got no reason to come back."

The other adults began to murmur. "The police don't need a reason for greed."

"They let you pay a fine for these things, right? We can all pitch in..."

Mikal sobbed outside the door.

Aunt Sochi paled. "Is that Mikal? What in the world is he doing outside?" She and Uncle Len ran to comfort their boy, but they were too late. The other children realized the lights weren't coming back on and started crying too. Their siren wails filled the building.

"Congratulations, Wendiaqui," her dad spat. "You've officially ruined New Year's."

"Yeah? Well, it wasn't worth saving, anyway!"

Wendi sprinted into the stairwell and up the stairs, not caring when her feet tripped against the last step. She tumbled into her family's apartment and hurled the door shut. The angry slam echoed through the hallway, acknowledged by no one.

3

A Biscuit Thief

Wendi didn't remember falling asleep. She didn't remember changing clothes or even tucking herself in. And yet she must have done all of these things, because when she woke up, she was in her bed.

Wendi sat up and lifted her nightcap. Her room was dark, and her lamp wouldn't turn on, so she checked her curls by touch, making sure her hair hadn't gotten tangled while she slept. She hated waking up to bedhead in the morning.

Morning. Wendi shuddered. She dreaded what her family would say when she walked into the lounge for breakfast. Or worse, they might not talk to her at all, and simply stare in judgmental silence.

She drew a blanket around herself. If everyone in the apartment started shunning her the way her classmates had, she really wouldn't be able to cope.

It wasn't fair. The policeman wouldn't have come if Dad hadn't bought the ichor. Wendi had warned him it was a bad idea, and she had been right. But when Wendi cleaned up his mess, everyone blamed her!

Officer Mullins would have found the ichor tank no matter what. He would have forced his way through the house with his sword, or coerced the tank's location out of Dad during his interrogation. At least Wendi's way,

everyone could stay safe at home. It was better to celebrate New Year's in the dark than behind bars.

Unless Officer Mullins came back. Wendi's stomach clenched. Could the police still arrest her dad, even though they returned all the ichor? If Dad went to prison, would she be able to stay with Aunt Sochi and Uncle Len, or would the police take her to juvenile prison? Would this be her last night at home?

Nausea crept up her throat, sharp and bitter. Wendi pressed her palms into her eyes. She wished she were back in her dreams.

Actually, why had she woken up in the first place? She wasn't thirsty, and she didn't have to pee. Nanna was snoring in the next room, but Wendi always slept through that.

Something shattered outside. Wendi got up and peeked out her window. A dark figure crouched in the shadow of the pavilion, barely visible in the moonlight seeping through gauzy ichor clouds. Was that Dad? Was he saying goodbye to Mom before he was arrested?

Wendi needed to talk to him. She tiptoed through her family's cluttered living room, then crept through the hall and down the stairwell. It wouldn't have been the end of the world if a neighbor spotted her. Wendi was wearing her favorite nightgown, the blue one with the high collar and the breast pocket, so she was dressed modestly enough. But she only had the emotional bandwidth for one awkward conversation at a time.

The grass outside tickled her bare feet. As she approached the memorial, she saw a broken plate on the pavilion floor. Kneeling above the pieces was a man...

A man who was definitely not her father. His nose was too crooked, his cheekbones too gaunt. His skin looked pale and waxy, and his hair curled past his shoulders like burnt candlewicks.

He wasn't a policeman, either. His coat was crimson, not gray, with gold buttons on the front. A white ruffled shirt poked out of his collar and sleeves. His black pants had too many buckles, and scuff marks lined the toes of his boots. No policeman would dress so messily.

The man rooted through the shards of a plate. He plucked a biscuit off the ground, the powdered sugar coating his fingers. He was about to bite into it when their eyes met.

Wendi cleared her throat. "What are you—"

"I'm a ghost. A mirage. It doesn't matter," the man assured her. He looked unreal in the moonlight, like the reflection of a real person. "Everything's fine. You're dreaming. Go back to bed."

Wendi almost believed him. After all, what self-respecting thief would steal from a memorial? But when he bit into the biscuit, her mind sharpened. "Those are for Mom and the Elsons. Leave them alone."

The thief glanced at her mom's photo. He gave Wendi a condescending smile, much like the one Officer Mullins had worn. "Kid, I don't pretend to know much about the afterlife, but I'm pretty sure the dead don't eat biscuits."

"It doesn't matter! Don't touch them."

The thief popped the rest of the biscuit in his mouth. "Shorry, but I need theesh way more 'n your mom." He swallowed the biscuit and grabbed a second one off an intact plate. "I haven't eaten all day."

"That's not my problem."

"And your mom's afterlife diet isn't mine." The man looked over her short frame and soft arms. Judging her harmless, he took another defiant bite of biscuit. "We all have to look out for ourselves, Biscuit Girl. Nobody else is going to do it."

Rage crackled in Wendi's chest. How come adults never followed their own rules? Everyone around her just took, took, took, not caring what they were stealing or who would get hurt.

She lunged forward and snatched the biscuit out of his hand. It crumbled in her fingers. Her shoulder knocked into the thief, sending him backwards. He fell atop the memorial, knocking two vases to the ground. Glass and water splashed across the concrete.

"Are you crazy?" he hissed. "They're just biscuits!" The thief grabbed a third biscuit and turned to leave.

Wendi lunged again, and they tumbled into the memorial. The thief's elbow broke through the glass covering the pictures. Mom, Mr. Elson, and Talili Elson fell backwards into the hollow pyramid. Their shelf was now a jagged hole.

"No!" Wendi reached into the hole, scratching her elbow on the glass. Her arms were too short—she couldn't reach the photographs. Wendi couldn't even see her mom anymore. She was gone.

The man grimaced. "That was not my fault."

"Not your fault? If you had given back the biscuits when I said—" She yanked his right arm towards her, hoping to retrieve at least the last biscuit. But she grabbed the wrong arm. It was not only missing a biscuit; it was also missing a hand.

Crakooooow. A call tremored through the night. Crakows normally didn't fly this close to Tackhill. The bird must've been on the hunt.

The crakow called again. Its voice was joined by another, and another, until their cries became a chorus. Wendi focused on the man's nonexistent hand.

Gold-painted metal capped the stump of his arm, going four inches past his wrist. The face of the contraption was polished flat. Three glass rings

were embedded into the face, creating a bulls-eye with a black hole in the center.

Wendi let go of his arm. Had she picked a fight with some sort of serial killer? What kind of person welded a weapon canister to his own wrist?

The thief scanned the sky for silhouettes. His already pale face grew ash white. “And that is my cue to run.”

He stood up. Wendi moved towards him. He pointed his stump towards her and twisted the cap. The rings lit up red, and light flashed from the hole, temporarily blinding her. When her vision returned, she was staring into the business end of a glowing red hook.

The man’s voice grew strained. “I’m sorry, Biscuit Girl. Normally I’ve got better manners than this, but I’ve been on the run for hours, and I’m tired of playing tag. Please, go back to bed.”

He edged away, keeping his hook pointed towards her. Wendi froze, too scared to even breathe. When he saw she wasn’t following him, the thief ran into the alley by her building. His shadow disappeared as he rushed out of sight.

Wendi didn’t move until she was confident the man was gone. She rubbed the blood off her elbow, wiping her hand in the grass. Then she assessed the damage to the memorial.

Her building’s shelf was a hole of jagged glass. A slurry of water and powdered sugar doused the shelves underneath. A few chunks of vase littered the ground, but Wendi knew there were more shards hidden in the shadows, waiting to cut an innocent foot.

Maybe she could fix it. She stumbled to the garden shed. Her hand floundered in the darkness until it grasped the cool handle of a broom. The metal’s chill anchored her, let her focus on something solid and simple.

Wendi carried the broom to the mess. The sugar smeared against the concrete as she swept. She pushed the glass shards to the corner where they

wouldn't hurt anyone. Her broom caught one of the crushed moon lilies and pushed it into the broken glass. The flower wouldn't bloom again—it was too damaged.

The thief's voice broke through the silence. "But I didn't go inside the buildings!"

Wendi nearly dropped her broom. Was the man coming back for revenge? She spun around but saw nothing.

A young woman's voice came from the alleyway. "Then where did you come from just now?"

"None of your business!"

Wendi bit her lip. Was that another thief? Or a bounty hunter? She crept across the field with the broom. Pressing her body behind the garden shed, Wendi peered around the corner.

The thief stood in the middle of the alleyway. His head was craned back, his hook pointed to the sky. Wendi followed his gaze.

Five children perched on a fire escape across the alley. They all looked her age, give or take a few years. The boys wore forest green shirts with wide collars and loose black pants. The one girl wore a strapless green dress that fluttered around her knees. Each of the children wore a round, rock-like pendant tied with a leather strap.

Wendi recognized the children, though she couldn't remember how. They weren't from her school, and they didn't live in Tackhill. Why were their faces so familiar?

One redheaded boy, about fourteen or fifteen, leaned over the railing. His voice was smooth as fresh milk. "We agreed civilian homes were out of bounds. That was *your* rule, remember?"

"I said we shouldn't *involve* civilians. Everyone here is fast asleep," the man lied. "You've been chasing me for hours, Peter. I deserved a break."

Wendi pressed herself against the wall. She was right: the man wasn't some opportunistic burglar. He was a criminal on the run. But who were the kids? They could be Navy trainees, but none of them wore uniforms. Plus, they looked too young to make arrests...

The redheaded boy, who seemed to be called Peter, grabbed his pendant. The rock glowed phosphorescent gold in his hand. "Rules are rules, Hook."

He somersaulted over the railing and kicked himself off the fire escape. Spreading his arms wide, he sailed through the air like gravity was a cloak he'd thrown off his shoulders. The boy landed on the balls of his feet, sandals clacking against the cobblestones.

"And when you break the rules...you get a penalty!" Peter punched the thief in the gut and sent him flying clear across the alley.

The man crashed into a pile of trash cans. His body lay sprawled amongst wet newspapers and moldy bread. Wendi felt a rush of satisfaction.

Peter turned to his friends. "I think Hook is 'it' now."

The other children laughed, and suddenly their rocks were glowing too. They jumped down, flying across the alley as easily as their leader. When the four children landed, they formed a ring around the so-called "Hook". It was clear they'd done this before.

Wendi pressed herself into the shadows. What was going on here? Nobody should be able to jump that far, not without spraining an ankle.

Clearly the glowing rocks had something to do with it. But how? From what little she could see, they didn't have any propulsion system or ignition. They could be electromagnetic, but that wouldn't explain the super strength. None of this should be possible!

Hook got to his feet. Peter stepped forward, but the blond girl stopped him. "You had the first hit." She activated a green dagger in each hand. "It's my turn."

The girl sprinted so fast she blurred. The man twisted his cap, and his hook transformed into a sword. He parried her first dagger, then dodged the second.

The girl moved like a windmill. Whenever one dagger was parried away, the other was already coming in for a hit. "This is for sabotaging my ship!" she cried. "This is for leading us on a goose chase across the city! And *this* is for—"

"Tink! Don't you remember how to play tag? The 'it' is supposed to do the chasing." Hook stepped aside, using Tink's momentum to shove her down. Then he turned and nicked a boy's ear with his sword. "Tag. Now Nibs is 'it'. See?"

"Ah!" The boy clutched the side of his head. Even from her hiding place, Wendi could see dark blood in his hair.

Two more boys chased the thief back into the circle with their swords. They were tall, skinny, and seemed to be twins. "Play fair, Hook!"

"Fair? It's six against one!" Hook looked around the alleyway. "Five against one? Where's Smee?"

Peter helped Tink off the ground. "Smee is at home with his family," he said.

The man laughed. "You mean I scared him off."

"Please. You couldn't scare a dog."

"I scare Nibs." Hook jabbed his sword at the boy he'd cut earlier.

Nibs yelped and jumped far out of the man's reach.

"Leave him alone!" Peter shoved Hook into the wall. The thief ducked just as Peter stabbed the brick. His sword left a scorch mark on the building.

"Don't get mad at me, Peter! You're the one who can't take care of his own crew. It's no surprise your friends keep leaving you."

Peter charged like a bull after a red cape. He swung his sword down so hard it made sparks against Hook's weapon.

The man's knees buckled, but he kept that obnoxious grin. "But don't feel bad. You'll always have me!"

Back by the garden shed, Wendi covered her mouth to keep from yelling. This was like watching Officer Mullins and her dad all over again. Except she didn't have any ichor left to barter for peace. She didn't know how to help this time around.

The twins rushed Hook from behind. He parried both their swords but wasn't quick enough to dodge Peter's. It tore the side of his coat, making a shallow gash under his ribs. Tink and Nibs blocked the exits to the alley.

The man stumbled and clutched his side. He glanced towards Wendi's building at a ground-level window cracked open for fresh air.

Wendi realized Hook's plan before anyone else. He had maneuvered all of the children to the left wall of the alley so he could escape into her building on the right. That lowlife was going to move the fight inside her home!

"It's too bad Smee ditched you!" Hook called out. He moved right next to the window. "I don't think you can catch me with just five—"

"Six!" Wendi lunged from the safety of the garden shed. Her broom smacked the thief's cap with a metallic twang. The broom's handle bent from the hit, but it managed to dent the cap. The sword fizzled and disappeared.

The fight stopped. Everyone stared at Wendi as if she'd materialized out of the shadows. "One against six," she insisted.

"Damn it, Biscuit Girl," Hook groaned. "You should have gone back to bed."

"And you should have left our memorial alone, thief."

One of the twins yelled, "You stole from a *memorial*? What's wrong with you?"

Wendi shouted across the alley. "What did he steal from you?"

“Nothing,” answered Tink. Her lips pressed into a pout. “He’s been *trying* to steal our necklaces, and *trying* to sabotage our boat, but all he’s done is be a nuisance.”

“I was only taking back what was rightfully mine,” Hook told Wendi. He tried twisting his cap. A spark leapt out and singed his fingers.

Peter grinned from ear to ear. Rowan used to smile at her like that, too. “Want to share revenge with us, Biscuit Girl?”

Wendi’s body was shaking from fear and adrenaline, but she nodded anyway. Before she could fully think about what she was doing, Wendi found herself caught up in a wave of children. They herded the man across the field, chanting, “Six! Six! Six!”

They made a half-circle around the cliff and pointed their weapons at the thief. He stepped back. His boot dislodged a few rocks from the cliff, tumbling into the ocean below.

“You were saying something about catching you?” asked Peter.

Hook’s chest heaved as he stared down at the ocean. Hair clung to the sweat on his face. When he turned back to the kids, Wendi noticed heavy bags under his eyes. “Fine. You got me.”

Peter frowned. Hook knelt down and put his arms behind his head. “No. Really. I surrender. You all can guard me here while Biscuit Girl calls the police to arrest me.”

Wendi’s stomach flipped. She pictured Officer Mullins strutting across the field, chatting Hook up as he placed the thief in handcuffs. Then he’d turn around and place the children in handcuffs too, because Wendi was fairly certain you couldn’t get a weapon license until you were seventeen. He’d probably confiscate those necklaces as well.

The hazel-eyed twins turned her way. They were almost identical, but one brother had a slightly larger nose and greener eyes. “You don’t need to call anyone,” Green Eyes told her.

"We can take care of him ourselves," said Brown Eyes.

Wendi perked up. "Really?"

Hook tensed. "But don't you *want* to call them? I did break your memorial."

"My punishment's better," Peter assured her. He took off his necklace. The rock was lumpy, full of divots, but the texture was smooth as ceramic. Veins of gold branched through the stone. Peter rubbed the rock with his thumb. The veins glowed, and the black stone became sunny gold.

"You see, me and the Family often find ourselves in fights like this." Peter lowered his pendant towards Hook's forehead. "We're heroes—"

"Vigilantes!" Hook cried. He smacked Peter's hand away with his dented cap.

Peter thrust the pendant towards him again. "And we fight bad—"

"Misunderstood!" The man grabbed Peter's arm, struggling to hold the boy back.

"—guys like him." Peter stepped forward. "And when we catch them, we zap them so they can't hurt us—"

"No!" Hook cried as he clipped Peter's head with his cap. Before Wendi and the others could intervene, the man kicked himself over the cliff, out of their reach.

Everyone ran to the ledge. The ocean churned thirty feet below. Dark waves frothed against the cliff.

Wendi hugged her broom. "Is he...dead?"

Tink scoffed. "Hook? No. He's like a cockroach. No matter what you throw at him, he always crawls back."

Sure enough, Hook's head soon bobbed to the surface.

Green Eyes cupped his hands around his mouth. "*Crakooooow.*"

Hook sputtered and flailed in the water. The kids laughed.

Wendi relaxed. She'd wanted the thief gone, but she was relieved he hadn't killed himself. Getting dunked in a freezing ocean with a broken weapon seemed punishing enough.

"Peter, are you okay?" Nibs asked as he fixed some medical gauze to his ear.

"Fine. He just caught me off guard." Peter stopped holding his forehead, revealing a shallow gash above his eyebrow.

Nibs tore off a strip of medical gauze and pressed it to Peter's cut. He poured water over his friend's bandage before his own.

"Give her some too," Peter ordered, pointing to Wendi's elbow.

"Thank you," she told Nibs as he bandaged her arm. Her skin tingled as he poured water on her injury. This must have been hospital-grade gauze, the kind with quick-healing medication coating each strand. Her cut became pleasantly numb as the medicine washed in.

Green Eyes peered over the cliff again. "Hook's swimming pretty fast. Should we go after him?"

"Nah. Water's too cold. We'll get him next time," said Peter. He peeled off the gauze and wiped the goop off his skin. The scratch had already scarred over into a dark blotch. He turned to Wendi. "What do you think? Does it look cool, or should I heal it all the way?"

"Um..."

Tink pressed the gauze against Peter's forehead. "It looks like a third eyebrow. Heal it."

They stood there for a minute, looking oddly comfortable with the intimacy. Wendi couldn't tell if they were siblings or dating. Peter called his group the Family, but his round, freckled face bore little resemblance to Tink's pale, pointed one.

Tink leaned in, staring at Peter's lips. Wendi wondered if she was going to be third wheel to yet another kissing session today. But to her relief, Peter

waved Tink away. “Ugh, Tink, are you using that perfume again? You smell like grass.”

The other boys laughed. Tink stepped away, face flushed. “Well, your breath smells like fish!”

“I ate fish earlier. Did you eat grass off somebody’s lawn when we weren’t looking?”

Wendi giggled. Now this was how boy and girl *friends* were supposed to talk to each other. No expectations for the friendship to be anything other than what it was. She missed that.

“Guys, I think somebody heard us.” Nibs pointed to the apartment building next to Wendi’s. A man leaned out of the top window, squinting down into the now-empty alley. By some miracle, he was the only one awake.

“It’s fine,” said Peter. “Even if he saw us flying around, nobody would believe him.”

Honestly, Wendi had trouble believing what she’d seen, too. She examined the children’s pendants. They’d faded to black again. Even up close, she couldn’t see any machinery. They looked like genuine rocks. “How did you fly like that?”

Brown Eyes sighed. “We can’t actually fly.”

“It’s more like we jump really, really far,” said Green Eyes. He nudged his brother. “But super strength is a better power anyway, ’cause we can punch while we jump.”

“It’s not the same,” Brown Eyes muttered. Wendi got the feeling they’d had this argument many times before.

“It’s still amazing,” she argued. “It almost looked like magic.”

“It is,” said Peter. He held his pendant to the light. “I made a wish on a shooting star, and the sky threw a meteor down by our home. We picked up the meteor shards, and we’ve had powers ever since.”

Wendi blinked. "Is that a joke?"

Peter laughed. "What, you don't believe in magic? You saw us using the stones with your own eyes. What else could they be?"

Wendi paused. Her best guess was that they were some secret military technology. Or a holographic illusion of some sort? No matter what the necklaces were, the kids wouldn't tell her. They had only met her a few minutes ago. Wendi was nobody to them. "I don't know."

Peter shrugged. "We're telling the truth."

"Okay." Wendi heard muted cursing from below and peered over the ledge. Hook paddled through the tide, battling his way to a distant safety ladder up the coast. "What should I do when he comes back?"

"He won't," said Peter. He peeled off his bandage again. This time the scar was completely gone. "Once we leave, he will too."

"Ah." Wendi peeled off her own bandage. Her elbow was a smooth brown, as if her injury had never happened. She looked back at the broken memorial. One more mess her family would probably blame her for. "I don't suppose your meteor shards have any repair magic?"

Tink shook her head. "We're heroes. We don't clean."

Green Eyes frowned. "Sorry. If we had caught Hook a little sooner—"

"It's not your fault."

"You're not going to tell your family about us, are you?" Brown Eyes whispered. The other children tensed.

"Of course not!" Wendi stared down at her muddy broom. "They wouldn't believe me, anyway."

"At least we helped you get revenge," Peter reminded her.

"Mm-hmm," Wendi forced a smile. "Thanks." She would have rather pushed Officer Mullins over the ledge, but Hook was a good substitute.

"You're welcome!" Peter rested his hands behind his head. "It's nice to get some gratitude for once."

Tink nudged him. “But...”

Peter sighed. “*But* we should go back to our boat now. We got things to do, things to see. You know. Hero stuff.”

“Sounds fun.” Wendi shifted the broom in her hands. “I wish I could leave.”

Peter's eyes widened. “Do you?” He leaned right into her face. His breath really did smell like fish, but his eyes were the brightest blue she'd ever seen. “Do you want to leave the island with us?”

Wendi stepped back. Was he making fun of her? “I mean, it would be nice, but I wouldn't expect you to take me.”

Peter leaned even closer. “But do you want to come?”

“Um...” Was he really asking her to run away with him? Right now? “What would I even pack?” she wondered aloud. She'd never traveled off of Othan before.

“Nothing. We've got extra shampoo and stuff back on the ship,” Nibs promised. “We could grab anything else you needed later.”

“Guys, we met her ten minutes ago,” said Tink.

Peter put a hand on Wendi's shoulder. She could feel his warmth through her sleeve. “And in those ten minutes, she smashed Hook's weapon and drove him over a cliff.”

Tink crossed her arms. “And we're all very grateful for the help, but I don't think she *understands* exactly what we do.”

“She understands the basics.” Green Eyes told Tink. He pointed to the group. “Good guys”—he pointed towards Hook—“fight bad guy”—he held up his necklace—“over magic rocks.”

Even Tink's scowl was pretty. “We've been over this before. We can't keep taking in any kid who feels like having an adventure. They're not puppies.”

“But she's not any kid,” said Peter. “She's Biscuit Girl.”

“Wendi,” she whispered.

Peter squeezed her shoulder. “*Wendi* wants to come. And I say we let her. We could always use more help against Hook.”

The group bickered over whether or not to let Wendi join. Somehow they’d gotten the impression that she had volunteered. Wendi opened her mouth to clear up the misunderstanding, then paused. Her eyes scanned the glass littered around the memorial. The stench of spilled trash mingled with the sea air.

What if she did leave? Home wasn’t much of a home anymore. Mom was dead. Dad was going to jail. Everyone in the building blamed her for giving up their ichor.

All Wendi’s academic plans were ruined, too. Her last friend at school had turned against her, and Mrs. Chides had sabotaged her scholarship.

If her dad was right, Wendi might have to leave anyway. Mullins could drag her off to some juvenile detention center whenever he wanted. No matter how hectic Peter’s lifestyle seemed, it couldn’t be worse than prison.

Besides, these kids wanted her around. They hadn’t seen the coward side of her. They only knew her as the tough girl who fought off Hook.

Peter clapped her on the back, pushing Wendi out of her thoughts. “We’re all agreed then! Wendi’s our new number six!” The other boys smiled at her. Tink huffed but said nothing.

Peter asked, “Are you ready to go?”

The broom handle slipped in Wendi’s grip. Was she really doing this? Leaving home with no luggage, no plan, no goodbyes?

She threw the broom in the grass behind her. “I’m ready.”

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happens next!*