

An excerpt from

Guardian of the Elements Book One: The Paladin and the Pirate

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Part I

Chapter One ~ Peacock Blue

THE SOUR SMELL of vinegar filled the classroom. Una yawned behind her hand as she watched Ali and Jenna pour out the contents of their half-filled beakers.

“Stand back,” Mr. McDaniels called.

Jenna and Ali stepped away from the paper-mache mountain, which quickly threatened to melt into pulp. Una shook her head. Mr. McDaniels was the only teacher not running a movie or having some kind of party on the last day. Grades for the year went out the day before, so doing a project was just an exercise in meanness, as far as she was concerned. *Just like him to be so lame.*

Instead of watching the volcano disintegrate, she turned her attention downward. Below the bright pages of her earth sciences text, the yellow-edged pages of a second book poked out. She pulled this book out and set it on top.

“You better put that away,” Reed whispered.

“Relax,” Una said. “It’s the last day of school, what’s going to happen?”

Reed shook her head and looked back toward Ali and Jenna’s table.

She's worse than my mom sometimes. Her best friend for nearly thirteen years, Reed never missed a chance to keep Una in line at school.

Ignoring the oohs and aahs around her, Una flipped to the place she'd marked in *Lady Captains and Pirate Queens*. It still tickled her that she'd stumbled across this particular book when she researched pirates for her year-end history project. It was the only one dedicated to she-pirates. The image staring back from the open page was of the most mysterious she-pirate of them all: Korina of Kingston with her trusted crow, Fidelius.

The black-lined sketch made up in detail what it lacked in color. From the plume in her hat to a single hoop earring dangling from her left ear to the sword hanging at her side, Korina looked as dangerous as she did lovely. Her crow, Fidelius, sat atop the shoulder of Korina's brocade coat. He was no regular crow either, according to the story. The tale mentioned he was born of the sea, and bore the mark of the ocean in a feather of peacock blue under his wing.

Reading on, the story said that at the height of Korina's power, her ship, *La Rambla*, and its entire crew disappeared en route to the West Indies. *Bet it was in the Bermuda triangle*, Una thought as she turned the page. She breathed deep. Being on a ship sailing the seas with she-pirates, now that sounded like fun. Anything had to be better than sitting through Mr. McDaniels rotten idea of fun for the last day.

Reed nudged her arm.

"What?" Una quietly groaned.

Reed answered with a look that directed Una's attention to the front of the class.

"Earth to Miss Kannon," Mr. McDaniels said. "Are you with us, Varuna?"

This was met by a round of stifled laughter.

"Yeah, I am," Una said, heat singeing the edges of her ears. "Sorry."

“Never mind,” huffed Mr. McDaniels. “Miss Yin, can you answer the question?”

Reed’s sleek, black ponytail bobbed with a nod of her head. “The force of one plate sliding under the other...”

Una’s irritation eclipsed Reed’s words. Why did Mr. McDaniels have to make her look like an idiot? It’s not that she didn’t find volcanoes interesting—her dad made them sound interesting—but Mr. McDaniels was sooo boring. It wasn’t her fault he couldn’t keep her attention, so why did he have to humiliate her in front of the class?

Una slumped down, resting her chin atop folded arms. She couldn’t wait to get out of school. *I wonder if my book arrived finally.* She’d ordered The Adventures of Terrince Blue last week after seeing a large display at her local bookstore depicting a young girl sailing aboard a pirate ship. It was her lousy luck they’d been out of copies that day, but they promised it’d be delivered within seven days.

Her eyes drifted toward the clock. She couldn’t wait for it to turn three, but the hands were barely at twelve.

The fresh smell of a new vinegar volcanic eruption, forced her attention back to the class. Una’s gaze shifted back to the half-filled beaker of vinegar sitting in front of her. Just beyond, the volcano’s base was a watery distortion. *Stupid Mr. McDaniels and his stupid earth sciences!*

Thwack!

Una’s head whipped left. A crow scratched at the window as it unceremoniously slid down the glass to the ledge, parting a group of a half-dozen sparrows.

“What the...” Una mouthed.

“Una, what’d you do?” Reed exclaimed as she jumped back from the table, knocking over her chair.

Looking back at her table, Una watched wide-eyed as the volcano shuddered violently. Red-dyed foam bubbled out.

“I didn’t do—” Una pushed back from the table, just avoiding the cascade flowing down the volcano and off the table.

“Miss Kannon, Miss Yin, I thought I made it clear that you were to wait your turn!” Mr. McDaniels’ voice cracked.

Una shot a hurried glance at her teacher. His normally pale face now an abnormal fuchsia.

Where’s all this coming from? Una backed away from the approaching crimson pool.

“Do something!” Reed said.

Una ran to the sink and came back with towels. With Reed’s help, she tried to stay the flow and sop up the mess, but it didn’t work. The smell from the frothing mixture grew so rank that people began to cough.

“Mr. McDaniels,” whined Ali as she waved a hand in front of her nose, “can we leave? The smell is making me choke.”

“All right, everyone out into the hall,” Mr. McDaniels ordered. “Except you two.” He turned a menacing eye to the two girls.

Reed flashed Una an annoyed look. Wide eyed, Una shook her head and held her nose as she looked back at the volcano.

Mr. McDaniels scurried over to the windows and, with some effort, pushed three of them open. The birds on the ledge fluttered out of the way. The air immediately became less oppressive. He turned toward Una and Reed, and the disaster.

Una looked down. A red mini lake surrounded her. A sucking-pop sound came from her right shoe as she unsuctioned it from the floor. Liquid dripped from the edges of her white sneaker. *Eew, it looks like it's bleeding.*

A woeful thud rent the silence as the volcano toppled from the table onto the floor. Laughter came from the open doorway to the hall. Una looked over. She met the stares of a half dozen classmates. Just then, the lunch bell rang and the doorway cleared. *Thank you!* Una thought as she rolled her eyes upward.

“Well, ladies. What happened?” Mr. McDaniels leaned against a nearby table, his thick, hairy arms folded across his chest.

“Nothing,” Una said.

Mr. McDaniels’ mouth fell into a frown. “Clearly, it wasn’t nothing,” he said, shifting his gaze from girl to girl.

Reed lifted their beakers from the table. “Mr. McDaniels, the vinegar is still in our beakers,” she said. “I don’t know what happened.”

Their teacher’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the half-filled beakers. “Regardless, volcanoes don’t just explode on their own. You two are lucky this was my last class of the day. I expect you back here after school to clean up.”

Una traded a swift glance with Reed.

“But it’s the last day of school!” Una protested.

“Yes, and I can still give detention to students who make messes like this.” Mr. McDaniels motioned his hand back and forth across the blood-colored scene. “You two can go on to lunch, but I expect you back at three o’clock sharp.”

Una jammed her books into her blue and green backpack then hurried from the room.

Reed was right behind her.

Just inside the hallway, Reed let loose. “Una, how could you do that? I know you were bored, but now *we* have detention!”

“I didn’t do anything, I swear!” Una tightened the grip around her backpack strap and quickened her pace.

Reed grabbed Una’s shoulder and spun her around. “Your beaker was empty.”

“It was? I didn’t know that,” Una scanned Reed’s face to determine if she was telling the truth.

“Yeah, it was,” Reed said. “When Mr. McDaniels opened the windows I switched it with one from Steve’s table.”

“Why’d you do that?” Una asked. “You could’ve just let him think I did it.”

“I thought—I thought he might believe it was an accident,” Reed said.

Una relaxed the grip on her backpack strap. “Really? Thanks.”

“Seriously, though,” Reed’s voice calmed, “why did you do it?”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t do anything,” Una said. “I was just looking at the book and he caught me and embarrassed me. I was angry, but that’s it. I swear.” Una held up her finger and twisted the silver friendship ring on it. “I don’t know what happened, honest.”

Reed stared at the ring and sighed, “Alright, I believe you.”

“I’m sorry you got detention, too,” Una said, then smiled, “but I’m glad I won’t be alone.” Even if Reed was bossy from time to time, she always had Una’s back.

“Yeah well, I’m going to let you do most of the cleaning,” Reed said, as they continued on to the cafeteria.

When the girls reached their usual table, they were met by a small round of applause.

“Nice work,” Steve said with a broad smile as he ushered them to open spots at the gray plastic table.

“Shut up, dork,” Una said. She opened up her backpack and pulled out a container displaying a colorful mash of leftovers.

“What’d you put in that thing, anyway? A skunk?” asked Ali. She laughed at her own comment, which caused her to spit out some of the peach iced tea Snapple she’d just sipped.

Una snorted a laugh. “I don’t know, maybe you did it. It looks like you’re pretty good at making messes.”

Ali scowled at Una as she wiped her hands and mouth with a napkin.

“Chill out, girls,” Steve said, “it was just an accident. Right?” He raised his dark, mustache-like eyebrows.

“Right,” Reed answered. “But we got detention for it.”

“On the last day of school?” Jenna asked. “Can he do that?”

“I guess so.” Una shoved a forkful of what tasted like cold vegetable casserole mixed with cous-cous into her mouth.

“Ah, forget about it,” Andy said. “It was totally cool.” He grinned at Una and held up his hand for a high-five.

Una hesitated a moment, then slapped his hand and smiled. Glancing over, she saw Reed rolling her eyes at the scene. Reed probably thought she was silly for playing up to a bad-girl reputation she hadn’t really earned.

All the same, it was nice to know others thought she was capable of something edgy. A certain mystique came with every detention earned, and this was Una's third for this year. The other two, for being tardy, hardly counted as cool.

"Listen, do you two want to come to Alderwood Mall with us tomorrow?" Jenna asked as she dug into her gold sequined purse. She removed a polka-dot nail file and went to work shaping one of her polished pale-green nails.

Una cringed at the sight. She looked at Reed, whose face had broken into a wide grin. *She's going to say yes, ugh.* Una beat her to the punch. "No, sorry, we're leaving for...a weekend camping trip. Both our families are going."

Reed's grin fell as she glared at Una, but held her tongue.

Going to the mall with Jenna and Ali was so lame. They only wanted to hang out in clothing stores or junk-jewelry boutiques. Even when Una managed to escape to the bookstore, they tracked her down and guilted her into staying with them. Few things were more boring than three hours of clothes shopping and drooling over boys..

"Oh, really, where are you guys going?" Ali asked.

Una didn't like her tone, it bordered on accusatory. "We're going to Deception Pass."

"Totally boring," Ali said. She produced a glittery tube of lip-gloss from a Hello Kitty pouch and rubbed the pink gel across her lips.

Jeez, I hate all that girly stuff.

"Hey, I'm going there too," said Steve. "We're leaving tomorrow morning. Maybe I'll see you guys there."

Doubt it. "Maybe, huh." Una offered a weak smile and sipped from her bamboo colored Sigg water bottle.

Una could feel Reed's glare boring holes into the side of her head. She glanced over as Reed looked away and dropped a half-eaten sandwich back into her lunch sack.

After she stuffed her lunch sack into her bag, Reed turned back to Una. "Want to go outside for a few minutes before Mrs. Perry's class? It's nice right now, which means it'll probably be raining by the time detention is over."

What's wrong now? Despite the fact that Reed was probably right about the Seattle summer weather forecast, that didn't seem like reason enough to cut lunch short. But it was Reed, so Una nodded and pulled her backpack over her shoulders. Reed gave a cutesie wave to the others before they walked to the door at the far end of the cafeteria.

Out in the courtyard, the sun shone through passing clouds. The rays warmed Una's face. She took off her thin, blue sweater to let her arms get toasty. They made their way to a brown recycled-plastic bench resting in the partial shade of a cherry tree. Una stretched her legs out and leaned her head back against folded arms. Waxy green leaves fluttered a few feet overhead, letting patches of golden light shine through.

"So what was that all about?" Reed asked.

"You mean about not going to the mall?" Una asked, though she'd realized the problem by then. "I didn't think you'd mind if I made up an excuse."

"Actually, yeah, I do mind," Reed answered. She folded her arms and slouched against the back of the bench. "I'm not as content as you, looking like I rolled out of bed into the first outfit I found on the floor. Some of us care about looking nice. Some of us like to shop."

"Hey!" Una started. Reed didn't like the way she dressed? This was news to her. True she didn't care about fashion that much, but since when did jeans and t-shirt fall out of style?

Besides, she wore clean clothes everyday right down to her underwear. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t know it mattered that much to you. You’ve never really said anything about it.”

Una gave Reed’s outfit a once over: green skirt, pink blouse with matching green trim and even a pair of sandals with pink and green flowers on them. *Where did she find those?* Reed always looked like she walked off the pages of her favorite magazine, *Seventeen*. What was she complaining about?

“You know, you don’t look like a slob or anything. You have fashion sense, and stuff,” Una said. She hoped that would appease Reed.

Reed swatted Una’s shoulder and grinned. “Una, you’ve been so caught up in reading those pirate books lately, what do you think I’ve been doing on the weekends while your hiding out in your room?” She didn’t pause long enough for Una to answer. “I don’t sit at home waiting for you to finish. I actually hang out with Jenna and Ali sometimes. And, yes, we go to the mall.”

Una sat silent. Why hadn’t Reed said something before? *So what if she hangs out with them sometimes. She’d never pick them over me.* Una pushed the jealous stirring out of her mind. “So, do you drool over the boys like they do?”

Reed snorted. “No. They’re dumb about that.”

Una grinned, her lips parted, about to say something.

“Caaaw-caaaw.”

Looking up, Una saw a crow perched in the branches above her. The sheen of the bird’s feathers glistened in the sunlight and looked stark against the green of the leaves and white of the scattered clouds behind it.

The bird tilted its head. “Caaaw.” It flapped its wings to adjust its position on the branch.

“Did you see that?” Una asked.

“What?”

“The crow. I swear it has some blue feathers under its wing. Just like the kind you see on a peacock.” Una shielded her eyes from the sun and tried to get a better look.

Reed said, “I don’t see anything. It’s all black.”

“No, under its wing.” Una waited for it to move again. The crow only cocked its head a couple of times. She sighed, “Oh, never mind. I probably imagined it.”

Reed looked at her pink Paul Frank watch—last year’s birthday present from Una. “Ten minutes,” she muttered. “Let’s go. I don’t want to be late for Mrs. Perry’s sundae party.” She stood up and smoothed out her skirt.

Una got up and assessed her own Capri jeans: wrinkled. She did look like a slob. Further down, her sneakers still looked like she’d walked through a crime scene. *What a mess.* A little water from the fountain would help the shoes at least.

“Wait a minute,” Una called to Reed. She stopped at the fountain and cupped her hand under the spout’s pitifully small stream of water. *Jeez, this’ll take forever.* The fountain made a strange burping sound followed by a hydrant-like spray.

“Aaaah!” Una cried, as she raised her hands to defend herself. It was no good; the fountain was winning.

“Get away from it!” Reed said.

As Una moved away, the fountain’s spray subsided.

Reed looked at Una, then the fountain, “Must’ve been air trapped in the pipes. I read about that.”

“Air. Right,” Una said, shaking her hands. Her clothes were soaked through to the skin. “This has got to be the worst day of an already crummy year. I hate junior high.”

“Forget it. Let’s go to the bathroom and try to get you dry. There’s enough time before class.” Reed opened the hallway door nearest the bathroom. She glanced inside, “I don’t see anyone, so hurry up.”

Una ran ahead of Reed, into the bathroom. It was empty. Looking at her sorry reflection in the mirror, Una frowned. Normally light brown hair was three shades darker and stuck to her cheeks and forehead; she pulled it into a sad-looking ponytail. She grabbed paper towels to wipe the water from her face. The whites of her grey-blue eyes were stinging with redness, like she’d just gone swimming.

Checking her watch, Una decided there was just enough time to dry her shirt using the hand dryers. She positioned herself in front of one and hit the button. Warm air rushed out and blew across her shirt as she fanned it away from her stomach and chest.

“Good thing you’re wearing a blue t-shirt.” Reed giggled. “Imagine if it’d been white.”

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TRUE TO HER WORD, Reed let Una do most of the cleaning in Mr. McDaniels’ room. The clock read nearly three-thirty by the time they finished. He bade them farewell and something else about studying over the summer. Una didn’t hear what he said exactly because she let the door shut behind them as the final words left his mouth.

The sky was still mostly sunny when they left school. For the first time all year, Una looked forward to the half-mile walk home.

“So, have you thought of anything else you want to do over the summer?” Una asked as they passed beyond the school grounds to the first block of houses. They’d already short-listed a half-dozen movies, and it looked like Reed’s dad and her dad would take them to Wild Waves. “Should we try to get our folks to go camping again? Last summer was fun. Ooh, and let’s bike the Slough. I think my mom will take us.”

“That sounds all right,” Reed said hesitantly. She slowed down, scuffing the bottoms of her sandals on the ground, and took a long breath, “Don’t get mad, but—”

“You can’t tell me not to get mad,” Una said.

“Okay, fine, get mad if you want,” Reed started. “My dad’s planned a trip to Hong Kong and I’m leaving in three days. We’ll be gone for a little over a month.”

“What!” Una stopped and stared at Reed. “When did this happen? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“School was crazy today. Dad just told me last night. It was a surprise. He has business there and it’s my thirteenth birthday…” Reed trailed off.

“You’ll be gone for our birthdays?” As far back as Una could remember they had always been together on their birthdays, first Reed’s then five days later Una’s. That’s how it was.

“What do you want me to do? My dad just sprang it on me.” Reed shrugged her shoulder and bared her palms.

“Can’t you make him un-spring it?” Una asked.

“If he didn’t have work, maybe, but he does, so that’s that,” Reed answered.

Una dropped her gaze to the sidewalk and let go a heavy sigh. She didn’t think the day could get any worse, but somehow it managed to. Her almost-dry Capri jeans still stuck

uncomfortably to her legs. As she picked at them to loosen their grip from her skin, she glanced at her 'blood'-edged shoes and sighed again.

She couldn't bring herself to look at Reed. She thought she might cry. Normally, Una wouldn't have been too bothered by any one of these things, but all at once...it was too much.

"Caaaw-caaaw," sounded from ahead of her.

Una looked up and squinted against the sun's light. A crow was perched in the top branches of a young cedar tree. *Stupid crow*. She pulled a bite-sized Milky Way from her pocket and peeled the sticky foil off. "Get lost already," she yelled as she took aim and threw the candy.

With a jerk of its head the crow caught the candy in its beak.

Una's jaw slackened and she looked at Reed. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah," Reed nodded, eyes wide. "That was weird."

Returning to Reed's announcement, Una said, "Well, I hope you have a nice time on your trip, at least." She tried not to sound too upset, but she wasn't one to hide her disappointment well.

"Thanks, I guess," Reed replied. Then she added with a weak smile, "I'll bring you back something really nice."

"Just as long as it isn't clothes or make-up or a boy." Una wrinkled her nose.

A pinecone lying in her path became an easy distraction, so Una kicked it along the sidewalk. She didn't want to think about the summer anymore. The next obvious topic was the lousy school year. Particularly the matter of how one of their friends had changed into a lip-gloss wearing, fashion obsessed snob.

“Do you remember when Ali used to just hang out and watch movies with us and the guys?” Una asked. She could barely believe that she and Ali had been good friends at some point. The sixth grade felt like forever ago. “Now she’s so stuck up. Everything is about make-up and clothes. She barely talks to Steve or Andy anymore. Did you notice that?”

“Yeah,” Reed said. “I think she likes Steve. She’s gone all boy-crazy.”

“You mean *likes him* likes him?” Una smiled. It was funny picturing Ali and Steve holding hands or kissing. Kissing Steve? Gross! That’d be like kissing her brother, if Una had one.

“Yep. As Ms. Lawson would say ‘It’s the hormones, ladies, just the hormones,’” Reed said in her best nasally impression of their health teacher.

They passed in front of Mrs. Barnett’s yellow painted, white shuttered house. The brick-lined flowerbeds, with her prize winning gladiolas, were abuzz with hummingbirds. Una stopped to watch the mix of browns, greens and reds dart from bloom to bloom.

Una sighed and turned to Reed. “Don’t you ever wish you were a bird?”

Reed gave Una a strange look that signaled *you’re crazy*, and shook her head, “Not really, why?”

“You know, they can fly anywhere they want, anytime they please. I’d love to just fly off on some adventure somewhere.” Una’s eyes fixed on one bird, which was smaller than the others. It hovered near a stalk of closed candy-striped blooms. *Poor little guy. That flower needs to open just a little bit more.* The flower rustled in a breeze Una couldn’t feel and closed blooms opened.

“Whoa, cool...” Una muttered.

“What?” Reed asked, straightening up from smelling a magenta colored rose.

“Oh nothing,” Una answered. “It’s just been a weird day.”

“Caaaw-kaaaw.”

Una glanced behind her. In the corner of Mrs. Barnett’s yard stood a mature flowering plum tree. In the lower branches, Una spotted the crow. *Is that bird following me?* Just then, it spread its wings and took flight, leaving the branch to bob in its wake. Una followed the crow’s path with her eyes. As it passed overhead, she was certain she saw a patch of peacock blue under its wing.

Chapter Two ~ Dream a Little Dream

“HOW WAS YOUR DAY?” Una’s mother asked as she entered the living room.

“It was okay.” Una drew her attention away from the book she was reading. She spotted the mail in her mother’s hands. “Anything in there from Reed?” she asked. It’d been five days since the last postcard and four days since their last on-line chat.

“Let’s see,” her mom’s slender pink fingers flipped through the pieces of mail. She muttered, “Rajir, Brooke, Rajir, Rajir, Brooke, Mr. and Mrs. Kannon, current resident,” then said louder, “Sorry, sweetie, nothing from Reed.” She offered a conciliatory smile. She set the mail on the carved teak entry table and walked down the hall towards her bedroom.

Una again thought back to the email Reed sent on Friday. It had been Reed’s birthday and the message was short and strange. Reed complained that her father surprised her with a couple of gifts that she hadn’t expected. Una couldn’t imagine what the problem was with getting extra gifts.

In a subsequent chat session, Una pressed Reed for details, but she never explained the email. Instead, she told Una that she’d need a few days to think about things. Since when did Reed think through things without talking to her? It was totally weird.

Her mother returned to the living room, wearing gardening overalls and one of her dad’s old t-shirts. She walked over to Una and bent down to kiss her forehead. “Did you take a bath today?” she asked picking up a section of Una’s hair.

“No,” Una replied, batting her mom’s hand away. She didn’t want to get into this conversation again.

“Honey, it’s ridiculous that you’re avoiding the shower.”

“Easy for you to say, you aren’t the one getting attacked by water,” Una said through tight lips.

For nearly a month she’d been plagued by mishaps. The last one happened just a few days earlier—*on Reed’s birthday*, Una noted—when the showerhead popped off from a sudden surge in water. Una vowed she’d avoid the shower for the rest of the summer. Already she’d kept her word for four days, though she was starting to feel pretty gross.

Her mother smiled and let out a little chuckle. “Accidents are bound to happen from time to time.”

“Accidents?” Una tensed. “Do you call what happened with the fountain at school an accident? How about Mr. Rosenbloom’s sprinklers? And the *showerhead!* I’m telling you I’m cursed. I read about things like this. I think its Voodoo or black magic.” She covered her face with her book.

“Honestly, Una,” Mom said. “Don’t you think you’re blowing this out of proportion? Black magic? Voodoo? Maybe it’s better to blame it on bad plumbing or even something else.”

Una slid the book off her face to look at her mother. How could she be so casual about this? Clearly, this was more than a plumbing issue. The planets were out of sync or something.

“Well, if you insist on being dirty, you can at least come and help out in the garden for an hour or so. Okay?” Her mom tucked her blonde hair into her wide-brimmed gardening hat. “My hands have been in the water all day and I’d like to get them into the earth.”

Una’s mother worked as a water conservation specialist and her job had called her away early that morning to test water at the Snoqualmie-Skykomish Watershed. She’d offered for Una to tag along, but Una claimed she wanted to finally start, and try to finish, *The Adventure of*

Terrince Blue. What she really wanted to do was hang around the house so she could check for emails from Reed. Nothing came though.

“Fine.” Una nodded and put down her book.

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WEEDING WITH HER MOM for an hour might seem like a drag, but Una was happy to have some time alone with her. She especially liked it because she’d get her mom to tell one of her stories.

They made their way outside to her mother’s raised flowerbeds. Lavender, peace lilies, tiger lilies and chrysanthemums crowded each other for space. Una knelt down next to one of the lavender plants and began pulling out rogue grass shoots.

After a minute she asked, “Can you tell me the story about the Marundine and the Mermaid?” She’d heard the short story countless times. She never got over how real it sounded when her mom told it; just like she’d been there. Though the Marundine shared the same physical description as her mom, Una could imagine herself as the heroine of the tale.

Smiling, mom said, “Well, all right...”

The golden haired, blue-eyed Marundine perched atop her carrier cloud. Though she was young and inexperienced, she tried to quell the approaching tidal wave.

Unfortunately, she was no match. The wave overtook her, enveloping her in its teal waters. Disoriented and frightened, she forgot the channeling word that would allow her to water-breathe.

“What was the word she forgot?” Una asked, as usual.

“Aquipulma,” Mom responded.

“Aquipulma,” Una whispered.

Her senses were fading, but then she felt a tug at her waist. She turned and came face to face with a mermaid. She'd never seen one before, except in her training books. The mermaid, whose pale green skin shimmered like abalone shell, swam with her to the surface. Warm air filled the Marundine's lungs. With the mermaid at her side, they rode the wildly rippling crest of the wave. Fear filled the Marundine's mind. She turned to the mermaid, whose blue and gold hair trailed behind her in the wind. The mermaid simply smiled and nodded. They rode the wave till it made land fall, then slid down its back side. The mermaid brought the Marundine to the beach. There the girl stood in the wet sand and waved as the mermaid swam back to the open ocean.

Una sighed. She never tired of hearing that story. She never tired of imagining herself in it. "I don't know how you come up with those stories, mom, they sound so real."

"A good imagination, I guess." Her mom smiled and shrugged.

Just what I was thinking. Una smiled back and returned to pulling out grass shoots.

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WHEN THEY'D FINISHED, her mom pestered her to take a bath. Una conceded. It must have been a lucky hour of the day because nothing out of the ordinary happened. Just regular warm water flowed over Una's head. By the time she'd dressed and made her way to the dining room, the air in the house smelled of dinner: turmeric, coriander and cumin mixed together.

"I've made your favorite: eggplant," Mom said when Una appeared in the doorway.

"That's not my very favorite," Una replied. When she saw her mother's forehead furrow she quickly added, "But it's in the top three."

"I think I heard the garage door a minute ago. Why don't you see if your dad needs any help?" her mom suggested.

Jumping three steps at a time, Una made her way downstairs. Her dad was still in the garage, struggling to take something from the back of his silver-blue Prius.

“Too many dang—”

“Hey dad!” Una called from the doorway.

Her dad’s smooth brown face and short black hair appeared from behind the trunk lid.

“Oh hey honey. You want to help me with these?”

Una walked to the trunk and looked inside. Tube-like rolls of paper filled the space.

“What’s all this?”

“Geological diagrams. I have some homework to do.” He turned his attention to finding a box amongst the clutter in the garage. “Ah-ha, here we go,” he said, handing the box to Una.

She held the box as he stood the rolls of diagrams inside it. Having the job of seismic geologist made him an official nerd in her book. That said, she still thought the work he did was pretty cool. Whenever Una wandered into his office, he would stop what he was doing to explain things to her. Like how his computer programs worked to monitor seismic activity and predict the likelihood of earthquakes or volcanic eruptions.

“That’s the last of it,” Dad said as he closed the trunk. He took the box from Una and waited for her to lead the way inside.

After taking a seat and dishing out potato and pea curry next to the eggplant on his plate, her dad asked, “So, how was your day, kiddo?”

“It was alright. Not much happened,” Una replied, reaching for a roti. “Oh, but I did finally start that book I’d ordered, *The Adventure of Terrince Blue*. It’s about a girl who was kidnapped by pirates, but then ended up joining their crew.”

“Aargh, shiver me timbers, girl pirates, eh?” He squinted his eye at her.

“Dad, you're such a nerd!” Una tried to stifle a laugh.

Her dad laughed and took a bite of eggplant. “Your hair looks nice, but the way. Did you stop avoiding the shower?”

Heat rushed to Una’s checks and she stuffed a piece of roti into her mouth. “Like I said, nothing happened today.”

“Una, at least cover your mouth when you've got food in it. You know, I don't like see-food,” Mom said, clearly restraining a smile.

“Why’s that so funny?” Una asked.

“See-food, silly. Pirates?”

Ugh. “Mom, you're as big a nerd as dad.”



AFTER SHE CLEARED the dinner plates, Una curled up in the soft brown folds of the reading chair and opened her book. Images of she-pirates and pirate queens and ragged girls having adventures swelled in her mind. She lost track of time and only looked up when her mother tapped her on the shoulder.

“Get ready for bed, okay?”

Una groaned, “Five more minutes, I’m almost done. Besides, it’s summer break.”

“Summer break or not, it’s already ten-thirty and we have a big day tomorrow.” Her mom offered her hand and pulled Una up from the chair.

In the bathroom, Una hesitated for a moment before she turned on the tap. The water poured out in a clear steady stream. *Good, maybe the curse is gone.* She brushed her teeth and washed her face before she found her dad to say goodnight.

“Sleep well, honey.” Dad kissed her forehead and tousled her hair.

“Dad,” Una whined softly, reaching up to smooth down her hair.

Moments later, Una crawled into bed, pulling the pale blue sheets, printed with suns and moons, up to her chin. Her mother came in and sat on the edge of the bed. She reached down to the floor and retrieved Una's well-loved star pillow.

"Remember when I made this for you?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, for my fifth birthday," Una replied. She took the pillow from her mother and fondled the loosening silver threads that edged its perimeter.

Her mom sighed. "To think, tomorrow you'll finally be thirteen." She reached over and pushed a few strands of hair from Una's temple. "Are you excited?"

"I guess so." Una kept her eyes focused on the pillow.

"That doesn't sound very excited," Mom said. "What's on your mind?"

"It's just weird not having Reed here for my birthday. I haven't heard from her in four days. Plus school's right around the corner."

"What about school? I thought you love school," her mom said.

"I loved school until last year." Una sighed. "Everything changed with my friends and the teachers are awful and the last day was miserable."

"Maybe next year will be better," Mom offered.

"I doubt it. For one, I'm practically the only girl not wearing skirts and makeup or going crazy over boys," Una rolled her eyes.

"Are all of your friends boy crazy? What about Reed? She still seems pretty focused on school."

Her mom was right. She knew Reed almost as well as she knew Una. When Reed's mother died in a warehouse fire three years before, it seemed like Una's mother was the only one who knew how to make Reed feel normal again. She insisted that Reed come to their house

everyday after school for the rest of the year. She made special treats for Reed that, until then, it seemed only Mrs. Yin had known how to make. Una felt a little jealous, but she didn't let it show for Reed's sake. Besides, at least Una still had her mom.

“I know, but that's just Reed. What about my other friends? Ali and Jenna? They're acting like snobs because they think they're women now, or something.” Una let out a sigh.

Her mother's hand found Una's chin and gently tilted it up. “Una, you're very special. You might have different likes and dislikes, but you're just as mature as any of your friends. So what if you still like to read books and use your imagination. That doesn't make you any less smart or any less of a woman.” Her mom leaned in and gave Una a hug. “But why are you letting this bother you so much? Is there something else?”

“I don't know what it is. Everything feels so weird. I can't put my finger on it. Plus, all these accidents over the last month...it's creeping me out.”

“Maybe you're just a little nervous about turning thirteen. Everything changes at that age.” Her mother's smile was reassuring, but didn't put Una's mind at ease.

“I guess so,” Una said as she turned her gaze toward the ceiling.

Her mom kissed Una's forehead. As she pulled her face away, Una saw a curious expression on it. Was it concern? *What could she be concerned about?* After all, nothing strange happened to her recently. She wasn't turning thirteen the next day.

Stroking Una's head once more, her mother said, “Goodnight, sweetie, I'm sure you'll feel right as Seattle rain in the morning.” She got up and walked to the door. She paused in the blue trimmed doorway and met Una's gaze for a moment before she switched off the lights and left the room.

Lying in bed, Una thought about her mom's funny comment: right as Seattle rain. She always said that when Una was troubled about something. Una hoped her mom was right. She hoped she'd feel better the next day.

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UNA DRIFTED INTO an uneasy sleep, the haze of a dream took shape behind her closed eyes...

She was at school. *But school hasn't started. Am I late?* Something was different about her. She looked down at pudgy little arms and legs. *How old am I?* She grasped at her hair: pigtail braids. *Great, they're all gonna laugh at me.*

"Go back to preschool, little girl," came the mocking tone from a trio of girls. Their lips glistened with gloss, their eyes colored with shadow. *Reed, why are you with Ali and Jenna? Why are you making fun of me?*

Without warning, a thundering noise pierced the din of hallway chatter. The wall to the right exploded. Pieces of butter-cream colored cinder block and lime-green butcher paper confetti fluttered through the air like butterflies beating hard against the wind. Una covered her head, but dared to peek through her fingers. Miserable creaking and scraping accompanied the appearance of a ship's sea-goat figurehead and bowsprit through the gaping hole. Smoke rose from a gap in the ship's railing, revealing the muzzle of a deck mounted cannon. With a crunch and a shudder, the ship ground to a halt. Shouts rang out from the ship. *Pirates? Women pirates!* Rope ladders unfurled over the edge and the she-pirates climbed down.

Help! Una looked around, but she was alone in the hall. Glued in place, she had no choice but to watch. The pirate crew moved down the hall, forcing open lockers with their swords, pulling out books, papers and backpacks.

Halfway down the hall they paused in front of a beat up looking locker graffitied with a stylized 'x.' *I've never seen that before.* Two women pressed on a single sword to pry it open. Out poured gold coins, jewelry and other treasures. *Treasure in my school? Whose locker is that?* She suddenly saw through the eyes of one of the she-pirates: two-thirteen. *My locker?*

The she-pirates pumped their fists in the air, but Una couldn't hear anything from their mouths. A strong pull drew her attention to the ship. *There she is, the captain.* Atop her head a large hat, decorated with a bright red plume. Her left ear sported a single gold hoop. *Where have I seen her?* A crow perching on the captain's shoulder beat its wings once. Una saw peacock blue. *The crow!*

The captain was at the pile of riches in a blink. *How'd she do that?* She crouched next to it. Her hand moved like a frog's tongue and snatched the end of a thin silver chain. From the chain dangled a solid, silver star set inside a circle, with a purple stone set in its center. Una squinted at the pendant; each point of the star had a different stone. The captain's eyes narrowed and a smile spread across her face. *She knows I'm looking.* Una wanted to hide, but couldn't move.

In a blink, the captain was back aboard the ship. She reached her arms out and picked up a small, brown haired girl. She set the girl atop the railing and dangled the necklace in front of the child. Smiling, the captain handed it to a leathery-skinned woman who had bits of leaves and dried grass matted in her hair.

The woman held the necklace in one hand while she circled her free hand over it. Her lips moved ever so slightly. *What's she saying?* She nodded and stretched out her

arm. The captain took the necklace and fastened the chain around the girl's neck. Leaning in, the captain whispered something to the girl, and this Una heard.

“I’m watching you.”

Fear streamed through Una. The captain walked away with the others. The girl remained atop the railing, playing with the necklace. Light glinted off the stones and silver as she let it fall to her chest. *Look at me.* The girl turned to face Una. Una’s jaw dropped: the girl was her. The girl smiled at Una and lifted a hand to wave. The ship jerked into a slow recession and it, along with the girl and the sea-goat figurehead, withdrew from sight.

Where am I going? Una asked of the girl—herself. She was desperate to move, but her feet wouldn't budge. *Where am I going?* Tears rimmed her eyes. She stared down at her traitorous appendages as the first tear dislodged, slipped down her cheek and rolled off her nose. *Look up, look up!* The wall was mended, butter-cream paint, green butcher paper and all. Her feet responded and she ran down to locker two-thirteen. *Ugh, what was the combo?* Her mind couldn't remember but her fingers moved instinctively. She swung the door open and...

Una woke with a start. Her breath was ragged and her heart thumped in her chest. She reached up to feel her face. It was damp with drying tears. She was no stranger to vivid dreams, but this felt real. She sniffled and thought the smell of cannon smoke lingered in her nose. *The pirate book, it must have come from the book. And that crow, the one that followed me.*

She didn't know how much time passed as she thought about the dream. She tried to recall the details, but specifics started to slip away the moment her eyes opened. Thoughts of the

necklace, the red-feathered hat and the crow were all that lingered. Soon even these images melted into a soupy mix as she finally drifted back to sleep.

Chapter Three ~ Two Gifts

EARLY MORNING SUNSHINE filtered through the blinds as Una stretched. She threw off her covers and lay there for a moment.

“Thirteen,” she said to herself.

Her mom was right. She did feel better today. Finally, she was a teenager! She could see PG-13 movies by herself and...and...well nothing else came to mind right away, but it didn't matter because *she* was thirteen!

Una sat up, dangled her legs over the edge of the bed, and slipped her feet into the cool plastic of her powder-blue indoor flip-flops. She kicked away a pair of crumpled jeans as she made her way to the door.

Just outside the door, in the hallway, Una nearly tripped over a vase of fresh cut lilies from her mother's garden. There was an envelope sitting next to it. She picked it up, flipped it over and untucked the flap. Inside was a card decorated with a watercolor print of a mermaid. *Just like in mom's story.* A smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Una opened the card, inside it read: Happy birthday to the new you! Love Mom and Dad.

Weird. Sweet, but weird. Sometimes she just didn't get her parents.

She grabbed a small pile of composition books from the top of the bookshelf just inside her door and tossed them to the floor. The shimmery pearl-like vase looked pretty, set on top of decoupage images of corals and tropical fish. Una looked back at the books she'd just tossed, then across the rest of the room. *Jeez, this place is a mess; maybe I should clean it...tomorrow.* Today was her birthday and first things first: it was time for breakfast.

Una followed the smell of pancakes down the hall. Her mom looked toward her and smiled as she set down her cup of tea.

“Happy birthday,” Mom said.

Her dad got up and caught Una in a bear hug. “How’s the birthday girl today?” He lifted her a few of inches off the floor.

“Dad, stop,” Una moaned.

“What? Just because you’re thirteen, you’re not my little girl anymore?”

Una rolled her eyes and sat down.

“You look tired,” her mom said. “Did you sleep all right?”

“Yeah,” Una said, sliding steaming blueberry pancakes onto her plate. “I was just up thinking for awhile.”

Her mother’s mouth opened like she was about to say something else when her dad butted in. “That’s what the excitement of a birthday will do to you.” He sipped from his brown coffee mug. “So what do you ladies have planned for the day?”

“Since I’ve taken the whole day off from work,” her mom’s smile widened, “I thought we’d go for lunch at that Mexican restaurant she likes so much.” Then turning to Una she said, “You remember? The one where they sing?”

“Oh, Mom, please no,” Una groaned. Her parents had ‘surprised’ her with lunch at that restaurant last year. It was so humiliating. The sombrero, the singing, the flash of the camera, Reed’s uncontrolled laughter, all of it still haunted her.

“What? I thought you loved that place?” Her dad winked.

“Dad, I about died!”

“Don’t worry, sweetie, I was teasing. This is a very special birthday. I wouldn’t put you through something *that* awful again.” Her mother’s voice was sweet and assuring, but Una wasn’t one-hundred percent convinced.

“Thanks,” Una replied and shoved a bite of pancake into her mouth.

“Actually I was thinking we could do a bit of school clothes shopping and then you could pick out a few books at Magus. Afterward we could have lunch downtown and walk through Pike Place Market, or something. Does that sound tolerable enough?” Her mother reached over and patted Una’s knee.

“Sounds good to me,” Dad chimed in. “Wish I could play hooky from work and join you ladies, but the daily grind beckons.” He stood and slung his workbag onto his shoulder then looked at her mom and said, “Have fun.”

Her mom nodded and swatted the air toward him.

Then her dad turned to Una. “Give me another hug.”

Una got up to hug her dad again. This hug was extra long, but he left her on the ground at least. He kissed her mother goodbye then headed out the door.

“So, Dad liked it, how does the plan sound to you?”

“It sounds good, Mom,” Una replied. “Oh, and thanks for the flowers,” she added as she caught a glimpse of the tallest blooms in her mother’s garden through the window.

“You’re welcome,” Mom said. “Anything goes on your birthday.”

Alright! That’s what Una liked to hear. She snatched the last bite of pancake off her plate as her mother reached to clear it from the table.

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AFTER A MIX AND MATCH LUNCH from the stalls at Pike Place Market, Una chose a strawberry ice cream cone from Chocolate and Ice Cream Delight. Her mother had her usual

vanilla. They crossed back over to the covered area of the Market and meandered their way through.

Una loved the colors and smells. The local growers had huge bouquets of flowers that might have impressed her more if her mother wasn't such a good gardener. Next to the first flower vendor they passed was a jewelry seller. Una lingered there; eyeing pieces made of silver and set with semi-precious stones like amethyst and turquoise. *Maybe it's time to get interested in this stuff*, she told herself, thinking back to her year-end scuffle with Reed over shopping.

She spotted a necklace with a pentacle pendant. It was plain silver and surrounded by Celtic-styled knots. She held up the pendant to show her mom.

"What do you think of this?" Una asked. "It's kind of pretty."

Mom half smiled. "Don't you already have a star pendant?"

Do I? Una couldn't remember. She hardly wore the jewelry she had. Maybe her mom was right. Una set the necklace down. They walked past tables displaying honey, decorative light switch covers, prints of Seattle area photos, and so on until they reached the outdoor stalls and, finally, the sunlight.

They continued down to Steinbrueck Park. Una popped the last bit of cone into her mouth as they reached the railing on the west edge of the park, overlooking the Puget Sound.

Una smiled. She liked being thirteen.

As she and her mother looked out over the Sound, Una was convinced that she now had a more mature appreciation for the scene. She noted, with self-admiration, the way the sun's rays looked like white gold as they played off the gently rippling waters. *I wouldn't have noticed this when I was younger*, she told herself.

Salt-water smells of the Sound mixed with sweet and savory smells of the Market and drifted in as Una breathed deep. The heat of the sun wrapped her whole body in warmth. She was certain this was going to be a birthday she'd remember. She smiled again and looked over at her mom.

Her mother's eyes appeared fixed on something. Her face was expressionless. Una followed her mom's gaze out across the water, but all she could see were a handful of boats and a ferry with a trail of white tips in its wake.

When she looked back, her mother's blue eyes were set on her and a relaxed smile softened her face.

"Una." Mom's hand came to rest upon Una's shoulder. "I've got something else for you. Well, it's really from both your father and I."

"More presents?" *Cool!* This was turning out to be a great birthday. She'd already gotten the customary clothes plus three 'new' books about real-life pirates from Magus. Her parents weren't usually over-the-top gift givers like this. "Should we wait until we see dad tonight? You know, so he doesn't feel totally left out."

"No, no, that's fine. We agreed I'd give it to you now." Her mother motioned toward the nearest bench void of afternoon nappers. "Why don't we sit so you can open it?"

Her mother pulled her shoulder bag around to rest on her lap. Una realized she didn't recognize it. Her mom usually carried a messenger-styled bag—always toting around odds and ends related to her job—so Una hadn't paid any attention to this one. Until now.

The bag's heavy, black canvas exterior was worn and somewhat faded. Embroidery showing a blue ocean scene decorated with small colored stones covered the front facing side. A few loose threads and a bit of fraying indicated it was old, but Una couldn't guess its age.

Her mother tugged at the edges of the bag as she pulled at the gift. Una crossed her fingers. She hoped for something really cool. Finally, out came a wrapped box the size of a...notebook computer, maybe. *Oh man, I hope it's a computer!* Her mom held onto it for a moment, glancing from the gold and blue foil wrap to Una. Then she took a deep breath and handed Una the gift.

As Una took it in her hands, the weight of the box reinforced her.guess *Can't be anything small, for sure.* She tore open the foil wrapping and slid the lid off the box. Inside was a book. The leather cover was Prussian blue with thick jute running through its binding. The outline of an embossed gold flower outline of gold decorated the center of the cover. Within the flower, was a silver five-pointed star. Within the star was a vaguely familiar three-pointed figure of copper.

Una just stared, her excitement withered.

A book? A big, giant story book? She loved books, and all, but this didn't look like a book she'd pick for herself; not like the true-life pirate stories. This was a kid's book, as far as she could tell, and she wasn't a little kid anymore. She was thirteen. Practically grown up. Was it so wrong to wish for something cooler from her parents than an old-fashioned (and it did look old) book? An iPod or a Kindle, those would have been cool. But this...this book? It was so twentieth century.

She looked at her mom and asked, "What is it?"

"It's a book silly." Her mom's gentle smile crinkled the corner of her eyes.

Duh! She knew that. "I mean is it a story book or a journal or something?" she asked. How was she going to fill this thing if it was a journal?

She moved her fingers along the outlines of the metallic figures on the cover. Then she ran her fingers across the leather and down the side. The page edges felt rough, uneven under fingertips.

"It's not a journal. Open it up and see for yourself." She nudged Una with an elbow.

Una glanced at her mom, again. Her mother's face—wide eyes and big smile—shone with anticipation. She turned back to the book and gripped the cover's edge.

As she pulled it open, the warm afternoon breeze fluttered a few pages against the backside of Una's fingertips. She calmed the pages down and read the bold blue print of the title page: *The Guardian's Guide*.

A storybook. Una grimaced. Her thirteenth birthday and her parents bought her a storybook. She didn't get it. Hoping her mom hadn't noticed the look on her face, Una screwed her mouth into a smile and lowered the cover. Her mother reached out and held the cover open.

"Don't you want to see more?" Her mom's forehead furrowed slightly, her tone insistent.

"Um, okay, but really I can read it later."

Una noticed a blue satiny ribbon marking a page an inch down from the top. She tugged at it. The book fell open to a page titled: *The Element of Water*. Una's mouth slackened.

The watery designs accompanying the writing swirled like small whirlpools that were deciding whether to form fully or not. She couldn't believe what she saw. *It must be one of those holographic books.* She moved the page back and forth, but the swirling didn't change with the motion. Her eyes returned to her mom's face, which beamed in return.

"Do you like it?" Mom asked.

Una shifted her eyes between the swirling images to her mom several times. *How is it doing this?*

“Do you like it?” Mom asked again.

“Unh-huh,” Una nodded dumbly. “But what is it?”

“Before I answer that I have a second part of the gift for you.”

Something else? Una’s earlier excitement for unexpected presents had dwindled into cautious skepticism.

Her mother reached back into her bag. This time she pulled out a small wooden box with a brass clasp. Una took the box and slowly opened it. *What if something pops out of it?*

However, there was nothing more exciting than a silver necklace nestled in a blue velvet lining. Una picked up the half-dollar sized round pendant and held it in the light.

A solid five-pointed star set inside a circle, an amethyst set in the center of the star. There were small indentations at the tip of each of the points. Then it dawned on her.

“Mom, I know this necklace. I saw it before,” Una said as details of the previous night’s dream returned.

“Did you?” mom asked. “Where?”

“I dreamt about it, last night. No, I mean I saw it in my dream last night,” Una clarified. She slipped the chain over a finger and let the pendant dangle. It was so light.

“You dreamt about it?” her mom’s forehead furrowed deeply and a frown tugged down the corners of her mouth.

Una described the dream to her mom. Her mother’s head nodded, but the look of concern remained on her face. Once Una finished, her mom looked away for a moment and then turned back with a strained smile.

“Wow. That sounds like a fascinating dream,” her mom said. “A female pirate captain with a red-plumed hat and a crow on her shoulder, I think you’re the one with a great imagination.”

Una smiled. “Actually, she looked a lot like the picture I found in a book when I did that project on pirates. Remember that?”

Her mother nodded.

“I think her name was Catrina or something,” Una said.

“Korina,” her mom barely said aloud.

“Yeah, that was it,” Una nodded. “Did you look through that book too?”

“I probably did,” mom said, biting her lower lip.

“Mom, are you all right?”

“I’m fine sweetie.” She shook her head. “Your dream, it reminds me of a movie I saw or something.” Her mother’s words were faint and unconvincing.

Una pursed her lips as she stared at her mom. *Why is she acting so strange?* It was just a dream.

Her mother cleared her throat and picked the necklace up from Una’s hand. She held it up between them and said, “I want you to know that this is a very special necklace.”

Una just stared at the circumscribed pentacle. It looked pretty common to her. Silver wasn’t that special, neither was amethyst. She’d just looked at a huge tray of jewelry made of the stuff a half hour before.

“What’s so special about silver and amethyst?” Una asked

Her mom shook her head and her face softened with a smile. “It’s special, honey, because not just any person can have one of these. They have to be gifted it. On their thirteenth birthday, in fact,” her mother said, though her words faltered with sound of emotion.

Una stared at her mother and asked. “Okaaay, so?”

“You see,” Mom began, but stopped. She reached into the black canvas bag, returning the necklace and box, and fished out the car keys. “You know what? Why don’t we go home and I can finish telling you there.”

It was Una’s turn to feel disquieted. Why was her mom acting so weird? Okay, so the book was pretty strange with the moving swirls, but there had to be an explanation. But the necklace, well, it was just plain silver. Where was the mystery there? And her mom’s reaction to the dream, that was pretty strong.

Una collected the book and its wrappings into her arms and followed her mother. They walked in silence back to the car. Una wished she could see her mom’s face, but she could only see the back of her head. Every time Una tried to move next to her, her mother turned her head away. Una swore she heard her mom sniff a few times like she was crying.

The car ride home was silent, except for the sounds coming from the radio. Una closed her eyes and listened to the woeful jazz song. The music matched the mood. She ran her fingers across the top of the book again and sighed. This day had gone from totally great to totally bizarre in a matter of minutes.