Title

I briefly glimpsed my reflection as I walked in the glass door of the Starbucks Coffee shop. I stood about five inches taller than I really was. My snakeskin high heels clacked as I walked on the cement, the cork of the heels bending ever so slightly with each step that I took. My dress was white with large green polka dots. It had three-inch shoulder straps and the skirt came just above my knees. My long brown hair was naturally curled, coming down to my mid-back. I had frameless sunglasses with brown lenses, hiding my dull, gray eyes. I smiled darkly. I was perfect.

People looked up as I walked in. Ignoring them, I walked up to the cash register. I ordered a bottle of water, not wanting to drink anything that could potentially harm me in the future. The cashier fumbled with my money, dropping change as he handed me my water. Rolling my eyes at him, I took it and sauntered over to a table where an older man was reading a newspaper.

“A little old-fashioned, Rocky,” I said tauntingly.

“I’m not exactly young, Aspen.” Rocky said. “Back when I was a boy iPads were just coming out.”

I studied Rocky carefully. It had been a while since I last saw him, and his age was beginning to show through. Gray hairs were peeping out through the black ones. Wrinkles around the corners of his eyes were becoming a permanent feature. Even his eyebrows were acquiring little wisps of gray. He wasn’t dressed in his usual black suit and shined shoes, but rather a red plaid shirt, jeans, and an old brown belt. He was looking more and more like he could have been my real grandpa.

“So, why are we here?” I asked, knowing that there had to be a reason that he said to meet him.

“A feral horse has been causing trouble, and now I can’t find it. I think it might be trying to cause trouble with some of our mares. Now get into a change of clothes. I will be expecting you back home.”

The codewords sunk in quickly. It was too dangerous to talk about what we really were without using codewords, because then people might have started to suspect us. Rocky was saying that there was a person of unknown origin that had showed up and had been causing trouble. I pulled out my phone and stood up. Rocky let me go. He had my number. The apple sign was nestled on the back of it. It wasn't really an apple product, it was a totally different operating system that was only used by people like me, making our phones literally impossible to hack.

I glanced around me to see if there were any suspicious characters that could harm me before I flagged down a taxi. The car screeched to a stop in front of me. Hurriedly, I opened the door and leaped in. The driver turned around and flashed me a bleached smile. One of his teeth was just a little crooked, and his cheeks were hollow. He reminded me of somebody that I had seen before.

"Where to, sweetheart?" he asked gingerly.

"Pier 39, please."

I still couldn't get over how familiar he looked. I thought about the man I had encountered that looked just like my taxi driver. Snickering rather darkly, I recalled the unpleasant encounter.

I could see him from a distance, walking down the rainy street. The streetlights glowed and the gutters were spilling over. He was trying to act casual, walking down the sidewalk, holding a newspaper over his head. I narrowed my eyes. A full week of exhausting undercover work had finally paid off. I began to drive faster, the windshield wipers straining to keep the water away. The LED lights illuminated the rain streaking down in front of me. I bit my tongue in excitement. I had yet to get used to the thrill of my job. I pulled my black car over next to him. He began to run, but I didn't give him any time. I got out of the car and tackled him to the ground. His breath came out in a short, hard gasp. I collapsed on top of him. My brown hair became heavy with water. Slowly, it dripped into his face. I stared into his hazel eyes. His skin was studded with water droplets.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

"Your worst nightmare." I said, laughing darkly.

"What is my worst nightmare?"

"A bounty huntress," I said, "and a good one."

He struggled to push me off. He managed, but I had a tight grip on his wrist. He was yanked back onto the ground when he tried to stand up. I leaped up and grabbed his upper arms. I wrestled him to his feet and pressed him against the car with my body. He grunted slightly. I could fee his whole body shaking in fear. I almost felt bad for him, but I was having too much fun to care. He brought this upon himself. I quickly opened up the car door and grabbed two handcuffs and a blindfold. I handcuffed his hands behind his back, his ankles together, and then put the blindfold on to lessen his already slim chances of escaping.

Shoving him into the back seat, I got back in and locked the doors. My boss would be so proud. I had made it this far without anybody but my captive knowing what I really was. A dark grin spread across my flawless face in the dark. I floored the gas pedal and shot out through the rain, leaving the small town behind me.

"I am awesome." I said as I recalled the memory.

The cab driver threw a glance back at me. I shut my mouth. I rarely slipped up like that. But he wouldn't have guessed what I was thinking about anyway. Normal people were never bright. Even the people I found myself chasing weren't that bright, considering that I always caught them. I was at the top of the food chain, even above my boss. He just found out who needed to be caught, told Rocky to tell me, and then repeated the process for other hunters. Ever since I had started working as a bounty hunter, I had gotten better and better. I was only put on the impossible cases; the people that could not be caught, the people that were too dangerous to send somebody ordinary after them, or those that were just plain psychopaths. I was done with chasing the average escaped convict. Those cases were so lackluster.

Breaking away from my train of thought, I looked out the window. Blue flags billowed in the wind, "PIER 39" written on them. People crowded the sidewalks. It was busy, and I knew that I would feel crowded once I got onto the streets. Waiting until the taxi driver looked away, I bent down to my shoes. I had tucked part of it in to make me fit the different parts I was trying to play. I unrolled the hidden fabric. My open-toed summer shoes turned into boots that would have been a fashion statement from somewhere in the Southwest region in the U. S.

"Thank you." I mumbled to the driver, handing him the money.

I stepped outside. The pier was relatively warm for being right on the water. Briefly, I glimpsed Alcatraz in the distance. Ships full of people went back and forth. I looked around for somewhere that I could buy stupid tourist crap. A small deli caught my eye. It had food, along with several keychains and clothing items.

I picked out a few items that made me look like a tourist. I bought a tacky keychain and a rainbow-colored scarf with "San Francisco" written all over in black letters. I walked up to the register.

"Is this all for you today?" the cashier asked, clearly bored with her job.

"It sure is." I said in a perfect southern accent.

"Where are you from?" she asked, putting my things in a bag as she talked.

"I'm from Sweetwater, Texas."

"Mmm. And what are you doing in San francisco?"

"I came up to see the city. It ain't like anything back home. My Mama didn't want me to come to the city because she was afraid that I wouldn't come home, but I think I'll return soon."

I could tell by the weary look I got from her that she bought my story, but she didn't care. It didn't matter. If anybody that was looking for me asked her if she talked to me, she would say that she met a girl that was from Sweetwater. As far as anybody knew, the girl they were looking for was from Fort Collins, Colorado. Thanking the irritated cashier, I skipped out. I was glad to be away from her. She was beginning to get on my nerves, thinking that she was better than everybody else, which she wasn't.

Leaving the small shop behind, I took the trolley to a few other shopping units, buying as many diverse types of clothes that I could, considering that I had no idea where I would be going.

The bitter wind of the arctic stung my cheeks. The snow hit me in the face, clumping up around my eyelashes. I rubbed it off as best as I could, but more came. I looked up to the sky. It was a solid wall of gray clouds. I could not see the sun at all, the land had gone from sunny to dark. I was losing track of time, and after getting to know the arctic well, this was not good. I had to settle before dark, and I had no clue when that was.

I turned my back on the harsh wind. There was not a sound, other than the howling of the storm overhead. I ducked behind a snowdrift. I dug into it a little bit, curled up, and closed my eyes. I listened to the power of the wind. I hated resting, it made me think of everything that I had to face. Whenever I was busy, I was focusing on what I was doing, but the second I relaxed, thoughts always came back. I reopened my eyes. The snow was coming down a lot harder now. In a little bit, I would have to get up and clear the snow away from the front of the snowdrift so I wouldn't be trapped inside it.

I let out a shaky sigh. I should not have been here. I was wanted back home, and if I returned, I would be arrested, or killed. I was probably wanted here as well, in this desolate wasteland of cold and darkness. I could feel frostbite leaking into my fingertips. I flipped my hood over my head before I pulled my arms inside my coat and pressed them against my skin to warm them up. I would have to leave here very soon. I couldn't count on the arctic to be my refuge for long. I would probably die if I hid here any longer. It was a nice hideout from bounty hunters, but they would find me here as well. If I didn't keep moving, not only would I die, but I would be caught.

My brown hair, which was entwined with clumps of snow and ice, was beginning to thaw. The water dripped down from the messy bun it was pulled up into, and trickled down my back. I shivered violently. My teeth started to chatter. Back home, I was far from attractive. I was nothing more than another ugly thief, murderer, and arsonist. I was almost relieved to get away from that place now, but getting here was a frightening ordeal. While trying to escape from the asylum, I had taken a wrong turn and stumbled into a laboratory. I fell right into an experiment and got sucked into a portal of some sort. I was still on earth, but I didn't know if I was even in the same time zone. For all I knew, people weren't even a species yet.

The storm didn't last nearly as long as I thought it would, and I left my makeshift sanctuary as soon as it left. I looked up at the sky. It was night, the countless stars twinkling in the cosmos. The North Star glimmered, pointing me north. I turned my back on it. I couldn't go any farther north. I was already at the top of the world. I trudged through the snow, coming up to the middle of my calves. I began to sweat, despite the frigid temperatures. If the asylum that I was in hadn't been in Antarctica, I wouldn't have had warm clothes and I would have been dead by now. That was the only reason that I could think of that made me thankful for being in there.

I heard ice cracking in the distance, and I picked up my pace. Even though I knew I wasn't under a great threat, I hated the sound. It was spring right now, but I had good enough knowledge to know that I should be able to find Svalbard, and from there on I could hide on a cargo ship that was leaving and make my escape to somewhere a little less icy. Night faded into dusk, and before I knew it, it was daytime again. I spotted something in the distance. It was very small and it appeared black. Whatever it was, it had to be manmade. There weren't any rocks out here that could have been large enough to be spotted in the distance, and it definitely wasn't an animal.

As I got closer, more began to appear. they were houses. I had reached Svalbard. To my relief, I was right where I thought I was. I could have been in the arctic above Russia or Canada. I began to look around to see if there were any people. There were none that I could see. I picked up my pace. I had no idea how often cargo ships came here, but if I had to wait too long, I would just tell the locals that I was a part of a National Geographic expedition that ended tragically. Making up stories was something I had always been really good at.

As if they had heard my thoughts, a group of three people came out of one of the houses. I couldn't wee them or the houses very distinctly, but they could clearly see me. They started to shout, running towards me. They came closer, and before I knew it, they were standing in front of me. They were human marshmallows, orange and non-versatile. Their faces were covered by ski masks, and I couldn't tell the difference between the three of them.

"Where did you come from?" one of them asked me. I strained to make out the words, but once I figured them out I answered, my lie coming easily off my tongue.

"Me and a group of four other National Geographic photographers came up to study the remaining polar bears, when one of our members was killed by a bear. The rest of us had been surviving off the limited supplies that we brought, and using our survival skills, but two more of my partners got scurvy and died. The other one froze to death, and I was the last survivor. I would have called for help, but our equipment froze."

One of the people grabbed my arm. They began to walk me back to the houses. They were small, the looked like there were no more than one story high and only had about two or three rooms inside. The windows had lamps by them, the artificial light something that I hadn't seen in a long time. The houses were made of some kind of high-tech, wood-like material, and I could only assume that there was a lot of insulation. One of the people opened the thick wooden door and gestured for me to go in. I shuffled through the door. Stepping into the door, I felt the warm air envelop me.

It was cozy inside, with small gas-burning heaters next to every chair, table, and couch. The walls were made of wood, several posters of actors and movies hanging by several pieces of tape. There weren't any windows in this room, but I could see light coming in from another room. A small light fixture hung from the middle of the ceiling. On the right side of the room there was a long couch that was a dark brown. There was a bedroom pillow on it, and a very thick alpaca blanket and sleeping bag on it, like somebody had been sleeping there. An old wooden coffee table had old bowls scattered on it. Wood stains from where coffee had been sat down on it without a coaster beneath it were all over the surface. Adjacent to the couch on the other side of the room, there was a computer table with a laptop on it. There was a desktop on it, connected to some speakers, and an antennae coming out of a strange box that was also hooked up to the computer. The whole table was a mess of wires. I couldn't tell where one wire began and another one ended. Bulky bags of supplies were crowded around the legs of the table and a plastic folding chair was shoved up against the table.

A rug had been very casually thrown into the center of the rug. It had an eskimo-style pattern to it. One of the people gestured for me to sit down on the couch. He (or so I thought it was a he, I really couldn't tell through the coat and ski mask) began to bark orders at the other three. He unzipped my coat and threw it to the side. He put his ear to my neck to listen to my breathing, making sure that I didn't have pneumonia. He took off my boots and checked my toes and my fingers for frostbite. He relaxed a little bit when he saw that I was fine, aside from having dry skin on my face from the air, and just being a little chilled. He wrapped the blanket around my shoulders and took some of the old bowls into the other room, which I assumed was a kitchen or a storage room.

While I was waiting for somebody to come back in, I watched the screensaver on the computer. A little red ball bounced around, hitting the black walls and sending it in another direction. It slowly changed color, shape, and size. It morphed into a larger ball, then into a square, which turned green. Breaking my focus, one of the people came back in. They set a little dish of Ramen soup with a fork in it in front of me on the table. Then pulling the ski mask over their head, they said, "We'll give you more later, but for now, you need to eat slowly."

I looked into the eyes of the person talking. She had dirty blonde hair that was long and slightly matted from the ski mask, and let loose about her shoulders. Her eyebrows were a darker color than her hair by several shades of brown and her hazel eyes, close together, watched me closely from either side of her tiny, perfect nose. The skin around her eyes was red from the holes in the ski mask that didn't protect her skin. Her cheeks were rosy, buy everything else was about as pale as the snow outside.

"Thanks," I said in a voice scratchy from cold air and misuse.

The girl, no older than thirty, sat down next to me.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

I hesitated. What was my name? I hadn’t heard it in a long time, or had to tell anybody what it was that it had slipped my mind. Not wanting to look stupid, I made one up as fast as I could. ‘

“I’m Lydia Grace.”

”My name is Sarah. I’ll be right back.”

Sarah got up and left. Without hesitation, I dug into my food. The steam coming off the soup warmed the skin on my face as it caressed my skin. I stirred the tantalizing brew, noodles falling off the fork as I lifted it up. I could smell the broth as I stirred it. Had I been back at the asylum, I would have hated to see a bowl full of soup sitting in front of me, since that was basically all that we ever ate, but it was going to save my life.

I ate like a wolf, not even bothering to chew. I ate the whole thing, the warm broth sliding down my throat. I could feel the warmth leaking down my chest and into my stomach. I wiped my lips on the back of my hand and sat back. Sarah came back in with the other three people and introduced the others, but I was falling asleep and didn’t really remember much of what she told me.

There was one more girl that didn’t look that different from Sarah, aside from the red hair, was named Kate. She and Sarah were siblings, perhaps. A man in his late forties, who had a five o’clock shadow and a few extra pounds, and was a little taller than both Sarah and Kate, went by Jerry because he hated being called Jerome, and the last person was stalky and short. His head was entirely bald, not even a comb over or anything. His eyes were beady, his skin looked like it had been taken off him, stretched, and put back on, and his teeth were yellowing.

“This is Stephen,” Sarah said, “He’s the leader of the expedition.”

I found that hard to believe, considering that Sarah had seized the situation at hand and straightened things out. If anybody would have been the leader, I would have assumed that it would have been her.

“Let the poor girl sleep.” Stephen said to Sarah, who seemed a little let down by him. Once they all walked out I lay down and pulled the blanket over my head. My eyelids closed, and even if I wanted to fight sleep, I couldn’t have. I was out like a light.

I walked away from the window. The whole house was dark, not a single light on, not a single device running, not even shoes on my feet, all in order to cut down the noise level. Silently, I paced the floor. I fought not to bite my nails. I would only break them, and that wouldn't be good for my image. No girl of such a high status had nails chewed to the quick. It just wasn't right.

A gentle knock came from the front door. I jumped at the sound. I slinked up to the door, making as little movement as I possibly could. Peeping through the peephole, I saw Rocky standing patiently. i scurried back into the bedroom, nearly tripping over things as I went. I couldn't see anything in the dark, and I stubbed my toes on several things as I went. Finally feeling my way around, I found a bathrobe and threw it on over my dress. If there was anybody that was watching us right now, this could throw them off the trail for a little bit.

Acting groggy as I unlocked the door, I slowly opened it. Rocky stepped inside. I locked the door behind him. My whole house was infested with unseen devices that scrambled signals, so anybody that tried to use a device of some sort to hear the conversation would just pick up gibberish. The walls were soundproof. In general, the whole house was soundproof, and a safe place to converse about the problem that was at hand.

"Our satellites picked up a bizarre phenomenon in the Arctic, just north of Svalbard, and there is no way to describe it but to call it a tear in space."

"Sort of like the opening of another dimension?" I said, "modern science has proved that paranormal activity only exists because of weak spots in the walls of other dimensions."

"I guess you could call it that," Rocky said, "Because shortly after that happened a humanoid appeared right around the same area. Assuming that this thing is from another dimension, it could be incredibly dangerous. We don't know what kind of world that exists beyond our own. We are taking a risk sending you up there to catch it, but I know that you'll do just fine. You're the best bounty huntress that our league has."

I beamed. I enjoyed praise from Rocky, since he was my predecessor. If he said that I was the best, it just confirmed my belief. I turned on the lights, illuminating my kitchen. It was not terribly fancy, and my house wasn't that large, despite my money. If I was to play the part of an average middle-class American, I had to look like one. I had wooden floors throughout the entire house, an island in the middle of my kitchen, which was the only thing visible right now, aside from the hallway that branched to the right and the left of it. On the island there was a marble countertop, which was also present in the rest of the kitchen. Tall wooden chairs surrounded it, and a couch with a glass coffee table were pushed up against the window at the far side of the kitchen.

I glanced around to make sure all the blinds were closed, just in case there really was somebody watching us. Once I was sure that everything was closed, I went up to the fridge.

"Want some iced tea?" I asked Rocky.

He shrugged, and I took that as a yes. I got two glasses from the cupboard. I took out the pitcher of iced tea that had been chilling in the fridge for about a half hour now. I poured some into both the glasses and handed one to Rocky. We both sat down on the couch. We sipped on our drinks for a little while before I decided it was time to address the problem at hand.

"Where will I be going?"

"To catch this one, I really don't know." Putting his drink down, he said, "For the first time, I think you may be going on a wild goose chase. You may stay in the north, or you may be led south. Plan for the north, but there is a likelihood that you could go anywhere if the humanoid decides to run. Does that make sense?" I nodded. Rocky continued. "There will be a red 1970 Audi convertible arriving here at 11:00 tomorrow, with the license plate number DR682Y5E. If any other car comes up, don't get in. And if anybody asks what I was doing here late at night, my printer broke down and I had to have an assignment for my job done by the morning, so I sent it to you, my niece, and I was just here to print it off."

Rocky stood up, grabbed a random stack of paper, unlocked my door, and headed out. In order to complete the authenticity of his story, he turned around and yelled, "thanks for letting me use your printer!"

"You're welcome, Uncle Rocky."

He got into his white mid-sized Sedan and drove off. I watched him leave before I ran back inside. I locked the door and pushed a chair from the kitchen against it. Luckily, this was the only door that was in the house. My windows were bulletproof, and the inside of my walls were lined with pressure sensors that would alert me if there was a fire or a break-in. But despite all the protection this house provided, I was still paranoid. The night before the mission always spooked me. I didn't know why, but it did.

I took the hallway that headed left from the kitchen. A small bathroom was at the end of the hallway, and my room was to the right of it. My room was simple, just the same hardwood floor, a bed with a white comforter, sheets, and gray pillows. A tiny dresser acted like a bed stand, and it was nestled just to the left of the bed. On top of it was a small lamp with a black wire-frame base and a brown lampshade. The dull white walls stared at me.

Despite the lackluster of my bedroom itself, the closet, which was across from the bed, was much more interesting. I walked up and opened it. There were mounds of things inside, and despite being a walk-in closet, it was overflowing. I pushed clothing out of my way as I dug around for my suitcase. I found it and pulled it out, It was plain black. I unzipped it and started to throw things inside it. Everything that was thick, jackets, coats, snow pants, ski masks, went in first. Then I began to stuff in lighter jackets, tee shirts, jeans, and finally, tank tops and shorts. I zipped it up. I didn't care about the neatness of my packing, just as long as everything fit.

I took my luggage to the front door and left it next to it. I walked into the bathroom, with white countertops and shower curtains, and brushed my teeth. Going back into my bedroom, I changed into something more comfortable and crawled into my bed. I knew that sleep was essential, and in some cases could be the difference between life and death, my body refused to let me rest. I stayed awake for about an hour before I finally forced myself to sleep.

The sleeping bag was tangled around me as I woke up. I struggled to get myself free. Right around the same time, others began to meander in. Kate sat down on the chair in front of the computer. She turned it on and typed some incredibly long password into it before it beeped and let her in. A map of the area showed up. It consisted of green lines that formed all of the little physical features. Flashing dots blinked at me. They were in the shapes of various animals, such as bears, seals, birds, and caribou. The people living here must have been biologists.

"Are you guys biologists?"

"You guessed it," Kate said, turning around in the chair, "We're tracking animals' movements as their habitat decreases as a cause of global warming."

"Is this how you saw me?" I asked.

"Yep," she said, "Humans are indicated by a starfish-like shape. Keep your eyes on the screen."

Kate opened the door and walked outside. As soon as she stepped outside the "starfish" appeared on the screen. Kate ran back inside, the icon vanishing.

"When we saw the starfish icon we knew there was something wrong."

Kate sat back down and began to closely study the screen and all the icons on it. I leaned back on the couch. It was a good thing that these people were so isolated or they would have known who I was. And it didn't take much knowledge to know that that would be bad. There would be a bounty out for me, and I knew that it would be over a million. I couldn't lose my temper and give myself away. In the past I knew that it wouldn't be easy to get what I wanted, and that I would have to fight for it, which lead to my incarceration. I could not let that old morale get in the way of my escape.

A few of the others meandered in and out before Sarah showed up again, sitting next to me. I could tell by the way she was acting that something was up. I began to get nervous when she ran her fingers through her hair and cleared her throat, sitting down next to me.

"Are you telling the truth about why you are here?"

My back went rigid. "Of course I am." I said with confidence, hoping that she would believe my lie.

"Because we were recently in contact with the CEO of National Geographic, and he said that they had no plans, in the past or the future, of sending a team of photographers up to the arctic."

"Why would you ask them?" I asked, trying to hide the tremor in my voice, "Didn't you believe my story? I'm telling the truth!"

"Well, if there were more of you, like you claimed, then our tracking devices would have picked all of you up from many miles away and alerted us. It almost seems like you just appeared. So no, I don't believe your story and honestly, I think you are hiding something."

A foghorn blared from outside, not even that far away. Sarah tensed, her face turning red when she realized that she had brought this up way too soon. Now I had an easy way of escape. Sarah leaped for my wrist, but narrowly missed as I jumped back. Sarah called for help. One against five were not good odds at all, despite my criminal past. Kate leaped to her aid, and the others started to show up, but it was too late. I was already out the door, the cold arctic wind throwing snow onto my cheeks. They started to sting again.

I could hear the others running after me, but the fugitive inside me roared to life. Running faster across the frozen tundra, I quickly lost them. They were in no way active, sitting inside all day, watching dots move across the screen. I, on the other hand, had frequently had close calls like this and my whole body had become equipped for physical exertion like this.

In the distance I saw a large black shape breaking through the wind and the ice. Supplies were being delivered. I risked a glance back. My pursuers had disappeared. I ran faster, even though I knew I was safe. The farther ahead I could get the better. I slowed down as I got closer, hoping I could sneak inside without anybody knowing. I could see things being lowered down ramps on the side of the cargo ship. I slinked to the other see of the boat. It was much taller than me, the hull damp with ocean water. Old ropes hung from the side, looking up at them making me dizzy. The metal was black and covered with small dents and bangs. Some of them were small, looking sort of like a dent a bullet would make, others looked like another ship had rammed into it.

I could hear men shouting at each other. Taking my chances, I walked around to the other side of the boat. Looking at what everybody else was wearing, I didn't look all that different. I ran along the side of the towering cliff and up to the workers that were unloading wooden crates. I scurried up the ramp. The deck was wooden, covered in sea water and chunks of ice. There were crates that were tied down with nylon ropes, men taking them off the ship. Men came out of a doorway, and from behind that doorway there was a flight of stairs. I glanced around me before I ran down them.

As I went down the smell of fish clogged my throat. I could taste the salt in the air, and the moisture pressed in against me. The air around me grew more dank as I went down. It got darker and darker, the stairs wet and slippery. I fought for my traction as best as I could. Right when I though the whole place was about to be swallowed in darkness, light came to my eyes from the bottom of the staircase. It was a nearly empty room, all that there was were a few old crates. Whatever was in here had been moved out. I spotted a crate large enough to hide me until we had left the arctic.

I crawled inside. I wanted to gag. At this point the smell of fish was overpowering, when I touched the wood inside, a cold, reeking slime was left on my fingers. I pulled the top over me. It was completely dark, aside from a few small holes in the wood that let in narrow streams of light. Fish scales sparkled in it. At this point I felt like my throat was going to close up. I was slightly claustrophobic as it was, and the smell was making it worse. I rested my head against my knees. I tried to breathe from my mouth, which only helped a little bit. I could still taste what I was smelling earlier.

I heard heavy footsteps coming down the staircase. I hoped that it wasn't anybody that was looking for me. A smoker's cough rang through the room just before the light flicked off. The electricity stopped humming, a sound that I didn't even know was there until it was gone. I listened to the footsteps proceeding up the stairs, followed by the slamming of the door at the top.

I was completely alone, submerged in the dark. I pushed my way out of the crate. scrambling to get away from the reeking if fish. The smell covered me. I ripped off the layer of clothes the smell was stuck to, leaving me in a black turtle neck and thick black sweatpants. Underneath this was my uniform to the asylum, which I couldn't wait t o remove. It was scratchy and, from what I remembered about it's looks, ugly. Not that I cared what it looked like, I just didn't like the recognition that it brought when people saw it. The uniform wasn't anything that ordinary people wore.

Feeling much colder after I lost my thick layer, I felt around for something I could use for warmth. My fingers brushed against a coarse cloth. I didn't know what it was, but there seemed like there was a lot of it. Perhaps it was a worn down tarp, or something of that nature. I pressed down on it, the crinkling noise loud in contrast to the silence around me. my suspicions were confirmed. It was a tarp.

I felt a little hesitant about crawling underneath it after how dreadful the crate had turned out to be, but I didn't have a choice. That is, unless I wanted to freeze. The tarp was a terrible blanket, but it would warm up alright. I crawled under it, hiding myself perfectly. Nobody would think much of what was underneath it. It didn't feel as stiff as a new tarp, so it must have been a old tarp that the crewmen didn't want, but didn't need to get rid of. I sat in the dark for a while, growing more and more impatient. I knew that getting up would be risky, since moving around could draw attention of somebody on the deck. I was going to be here for a while.

I threw a sideways glance at my phone. It flashed a map of the fugitive's movements briefly on the screen. They were crossing the ocean, most likely headed to Iceland to fuel up before it would reroute to Canada. I would have to schedule a new flight. I wasn't going to have to head to the arctic. My Icelandic was really rough, but most of the people there spoke English. I glanced around to make sure that nobody was looking at my phone before I turned it on.

I canceled my entire trip to the north and scheduled a new one for Iceland. I would be waiting for my prey, and the second they decided to get off that ship I would know where they were and I would find them.

Above all of us, up in outer space, about a thousand satellites were orbiting, tracking the escapees for the bounty hunters, so we could catch them. Modern technology had changed a lot since Rocky was a boy, apple products had advanced to the point where speakers were being planted into our ears so we didn't have to hold the phones up. We had a colony on Mars, a small one, but still a colony. Cars were not fueled by gasoline anymore, in fact, nothing was. It was all wind-powered.

I checked my new terminal number and scurried off to find it, picking up my ticket along the way. I dropped my luggage off, luckily I didn't check it yet before I changed my flight. I took my seat. People stared at me. I was used to it. I may have stood out because of my looks, but at least nobody knew what I really was. I had made it just in time, because First Class was starting to board. I was lucky that I had even found a flight to Iceland in the little time that I had. I got up and walked into line.

I was tired of the safety regulations, since I knew these things already. But on the bright side, the airport no longer required that your electronic devices be off. I toyed around on my phone until there was nothing left to do. The blue sky faded into dark a lot faster than I had thought. The flight was a long one, and it had only taken off a little time ago. Either way, I had to take every chance I could to sleep. Curling up against the seat, not even bothering to get out my tacky pillow, I went to sleep, even though I wasn't tired.

My stomach lurched with every motion of the boat. My stomach felt like it was going to give way. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. I tried not to think about it. The reek of fish didn't make my situation any better. I groaned and took a steady breath. It had been three days now, and I didn't know how much longer I could go without food, water, or solid ground. Time passed endlessly, but after a while I realized that I was feeling better. I assumed that I was just getting used to it, but I realized that the ship had stopped moving.

I forced my way out of my hiding place. It was still pitch black, but I felt my way around the floor until my fingers hit the bottom of the stars. Like a young child, I went one stair at a time. I began to see a horizontal sliver of light coming from above me. It stung my eyes badly. I blinked and shied way from it, not wanting to look at it. As I crawled up my eyes began to adjust. At long last, after almost slipping on several stairs, and hitting my knees several times, I made it to the door.

I peered out the crack. I didn't see any feet walking on the wooden deck, so I opened up the door. It groaned. I bit my lip as I broke out in a cold sweat. The door's hinges were loud and rusty. I couldn't risk anybody hearing it, so I left the door open. It was risky, but if I remained unseen nobody would know that it was me.

The wooden walkway was lowered again. I scuttled across the deck and down it. My feet hit the ground. It felt weird to be walking on something that didn't sway beneath me. I breathed out a sigh of relief. I ran off into the surrounding town before anybody could see me.

Everything was green, from the hills, to the lawns that were in front of every old house. There weren't many homes, and what was there was small. The paint was white and cracking. Most of the homes had sheep of some sort, chickens, and swine. They were all very spread out. In between them, wild ponies grazed on grass.

The sign at the front of the town read, "Höfn" and I instantly assumed that I was in Iceland. It looked right, the names sounded right, it was one more trip and I would be in the United States. Iceland would be the safest place for me right now, so staying in town would be ideal. I would wait here until I got the vibe that I was safe.

A plane flew in overhead, and I watched it until it disappeared into the distance. I wondered who it was carrying. Scuttling off into the town, I knew that I would be a free woman for once in a long time.

The red dot flashed a lot faster, my proximity to my target much closer. My blood began to race as I felt the pull of the thrill of the chase. I barely even took the time to get a rental car. Höfn wasn't that far from Reykjavík, and I could have walked there if I was driven enough. But I knew that driving a fast convertible would be more fun.

The cashier handed me the keys. I ran out to my car. It was black, the deepest black I had seen on a car. The hubcaps were perfectly polished, shining like the silver on a set of polished silverware. The seats were leather, the steering wheel polished wood, shimmering in the light. The roads through the middle of the island were less traveled, and I would be able to drive through them as fast as I wanted.

I got in the car. The leather seats were comfortable and squishy, making the unpleasant drive feel a little shorter. I Ignited the car, pressing the ignition button. I hit the gas. Driving through Reykjavík, I had to go slow, but the second I was out of town I put the petal to the metal.

I drove fast, the wind blowing through my hair. It was cold, and the sound of the wind pounded on my ears, but I didn't care. It was too exciting. As I drove through the green countryside, clouds began to gather. Rain started to fall. It was swept over the windshield. Not a drop came on me. I pushed the car to go faster. If I had to stop I would be drenched in no time. The cold air began to make me shake, but I didn't want to put the top up. Luckily, the rain stopped about a half hour after it started and the sun warmed things up again.

I threw another side glance at my phone. the small white indicator of my position was closing in quickly on my target. I could feel the excitement mounting. My blood was heating, my heart pounding, and my head spinning. I threw caution to the wind. Even though I was dealing with something from another world, the chase was too fun to let something as small as my well-being get in the way.

A few more cars showed up on the road, and I was forced to slow down. I was getting closer to Höfn, only about fifteen more minutes until I could get out and chase them on foot. I wound through the streets until I found a vacant lot to park my car in. The yellow paint was fading, cracks in the cement overrun with grass, and pebbles tripping me as I got out of the car. Luckily I had worn boots, since chasing someone in heels was something I couldn't do that well. I had on black tights, blending in with the rest of the young female population in Iceland. I just had on a regular gray tank top, jean shorts, and a black jacket. Nothing fancy, but that did not matter now.

I flipped my phone out and checked my location. The map rippled before it gave me a much clearer image of exactly where I was. I walked out of the lot and onto the sidewalk. It picked up my movement. Sorting out which person I was after would be a piece of cake. I wandered down the street. There were hardly any houses around, and what was there was old, with peeling white paint. I walked down into a park just by the ocean.

There were no trees at all, moss clung to the ground instead of grass, and the old, slippery black stones were about as numerous as grains of sand on the beach. After Iceland had advanced so far technologically, I had expected this place to be much more toned up and not still being run by nature. I threw another glance at my phone. My target was stationary, most likely sitting on a bench or something.

I put my phone away. I stared at the ground. The clouds overhead made the park seem even more destitute. Old fishing lines flew around in the grass like gossamer. Broken fishing bouys were underfoot. They gently crunched under my feet. A blast of the salty air blew through my hair. I smelled seagull droppings and fish almost more than I smelled the salt in the breeze. An old candy wrapper rolled over my feet. I kicked it gently as it went by.

I looked up from the ground. Facing the sea, there was a bench that sat among crabgrass and broken sea shells. With her back turned to me, she sat there. Her curly brown hair swayed gently. It was matted and oily, but still elegant as it billowed. She was in all black, the color giving her a grim reaper look. I could tell just by the aura that she gave off that she meant business. I would definitely have to tread much more carefully than I had first thought. I stepped on another bouy, announcing to the still figure that I was here. She didn't even turn her head, she just sat there. Worry began to build. I really had no idea what I was dealing with.

I slid my sunglasses over my eyes and sat down next to her. I looked out at the sea gently crashing on the rocks that spilled into the sea. From the corner of my eyes I looked over the outlander. She had bags under her eyes. She hadn't slept well in a little while. I couldn't get that good of a look at her at all, but that one thing was obvious. I felt bad for her, in a way, but at the same time I felt an emotion that I hadn't felt in a long time: fear. This being was about as strong, and at least twice as intimidating as me. As the wind blew, I could smell the reek of fish that came from her. I couldn't pick up any social clues that might have indicated that she was fearing anything. I had no idea when the right time was to strike, but my gut told me that now wouldn't be that bad.

I struck like a cobra, leaping out at her. But to my dismay, she was faster. She stood up, and I landed hard on the wooden bench. I scrambled to my feet without a moment's hesitation. The outlander was already running. I started to go after her. I was right on her tail when she stopped and spun around. I collided with her body. She grabbed me by my shoulders. Her grip was like stone. My shoulders throbbed in it. She threw me to the side. I staggered off the stour trail, my feet leaving the ground for a few seconds. I hit the grass hard. My head banged hard on the ground. Waves of pain shot up my spine. I tried to catch my breath as I watched her leap over the boulders by the sea and vanish. I flopped back into the grass. My head throbbed like it was a human heart as it occurred to me that I had lost her. I was the best of the best, and I had lost to a slimy outlander that had crawled off a cargo ship.

I immediately began to feel hate towards that grim reaper. I would always win, even if this wasn't my time to do it. She would see who the boss was in this world. It was me, nobody else held that position. I sat up slowly. I felt a throbbing, excruciating pain in the back of my arm like something dull had penetrated my skin. I lifted it up. I had landed on the fragments of a buoy, the cuts beginning to bleed. I picked out the fragments. My hate slowly grew stronger. This had only begun.

I scurried along the rocks. Fear pushed me on over the slime and algae that clung to the shore. I splashed through small tide pools. My toes were soaked, and with the last of my energy I crawled behind a boulder that pinned me against the rocks of the shore. I could feel the crustaceans' bumpy surface as I brushed my fingers against them. Still, the sea sat stung my nose. I was growing sick of the permanent smell of the ocean. no matter where I went I could still smell it. But the smell of salt water was the least of my problems. I held my breath and listened for the sounds of pursuit. The sound of the ocean was all that I could hear. The waves dragged rocks against each other. The noise was faint, but it was just loud enough that it could cover up the sounds of footsteps.

I didn't want to take the risk of standing up to see if there was anybody there. If my pursuer was there, I was undoubtedly trapped. I remained crouched behind the boulder for about an hour before I decided that I was safe. Crawling out from behind it, my legs stiff and my throat parched, I stood up. Every muscle ready to flee, I slowly made my way back down the beach. I was trembling gently in fear as I walked. If I was caught now, I would never have my freedom. There was even a chance that I would be executed. I peered up over the edge of the rocks. There was nobody there. My assailant had vanished.

Not even bothering to check the map of the reaper's movements, I flung open the car door and sat down. I could feel my blood still pumping through my veins from the anticipation of the chase. I could have easily gone after her, but after the way she fought back I knew that chasing her would be futile. It was wise just to save my energy. I slumped down in the seat and looked up at the sky. The storm clouds were still hanging overhead. The sun that was behind the clouds was setting, and the land around me slowly grew darker and darker. Now would be the perfect chance to go after the grim reaper. Night was when I thrived, and I moved through shadows like a ghost.

I flipped on the map. To my surprise she had somehow made her way to the center of Iceland. I had no time to waste. If I was going to get my revenge I would have to catch up first. I ignited the engine and took off in the dusk.

As I drove the stolen car down the road, I began to think about my actions. I had been a thief, a liar, a murderer. All of these things were wrong. I began to wish that there was some way that I could change my past. I must have been insane to think that what I was doing was right. I stared through the dirty windshield at the dark, intimidating broadleaf trees that surrounded me. From far ahead, I saw a sigh that was written in both Icelandic and English. "Varast", "Beware". I knew about the culture well enough to know that the Icelanders believed in haunted forests. Not even thinking about what I was doing, I pulled the car over beside the sign and got out. I fled into the forest, which enveloped me in darkness.

The grim reaper had stopped moving along the road and had begun to move into the forest. I threw my phone down on the car seat in anger. It bounced off the black leather upholstery and onto the floor. I turned my attention from the phone back to the road. The yellow lines that were painted in the middle flashed before my eyes. The headlights illuminated them as they flashed by. I tore my eyes from the dark road and stole a glance at my speedometer. The little red needle was inching past 120. I ground my teeth in frustration.

The wind was whipping through my hair, a deafening roar in my ears. I pushed the car to go faster. I had to catch her. And when I did, I would kill her. I could imagine myself killing her now, leaping out from behind a tree, tackling her, the two of us rolling down the hill and crashing in a small creek. I would be pinning her down, staring into her panicked eyes, whatever color they were. I thought of all the ways that I could kill her. A smile broke out on my face, a gentle laugh passing through my lips. The laugh grew louder, until I was laughing crazily. My crazed laugh turned into a scream. "I WILL FIND YOU, GRIM REAPER! I WILL ALWAYS BE BETTER THAN YOU!"

I spotted the sign that warded people away from the forest, and I slammed my foot on the brake. I stopped about one hundred yards from it. Not even bothering to walk back to where it was, I blundered into the cold forest. I was running like a hound, my legs carrying me as fast as they would let me.

I could hear pounding footsteps from behind me. I stood up from my hiding place, the base of an old, mossy tree, and began to run again.

Please, I thought, stop chasing me! I know that what I did was wrong, and I know that I should have never even done these things in the first place, but I have changed, I promise! I want to be good now!

My lungs were beginning to burn as I inhaled the moist air. I could almost taste the decay of the leaves. my legs, abs, everything was sore. My head was pounding, and dark spots flashed before my eyes as the most ground flashed peat my eyes. The bubbling of a creek could barely be heard over the pounding footsteps, and before I knew, it I was standing atop a hill, that creek meandering through mossy stones. I turned around just in time to see my assailant flying through the air right at me.

I gripped the grim reaper's shoulders tightly as she and I fell down the hill. I hit small rocks as I went down, the pain exploding in my shoulders and back. I could feel my heart pumping as it occurred to me that I would finally be able to see the face of my captive. She landed on her back in the water, splashing up on her. I looked into her eyes. They were panicked, as I had thought they would be, but they were gray, just as dull and gray as mine were. On her left cheek there was a small brown mole, exactly where mine was. Her hair was the same color as mine, same facial structure, and suddenly the whole world fell down on me. I was staring at myself. There was only one thing that I could do now. A scream ripped from my throat, tears streamed from my eyes, and I released the shoulders of the other me and fell back into the creek.

I struggled to my feet. My knees were shaking vigorously, my head was throbbing, and my entire back hurt. Water soaked me. A cold breeze blew through the trees, rustling as it met my cold skin. I shuddered. When I had fallen through the portal, it was into another universe. And I had switched places with myself from this universe. I stared at the poor wretch as she writhed on the ground. She had gone barking mad. I took her wrists and pulled her out of the creek. I led her up to the main road. I looked around and saw her car. I put her in the front seat, pulled out a hidden set of handcuffs from beneath the back seat, and clipped them onto her wrists. I heard an obnoxious ringing from beneath the seat. It was a cellphone, an apple. but I knew from experience that this wasn't an apple device.

I unlocked it, the Face Recognition feature letting me in. I answered the call. It was from somebody named, "Uncle Rocky." I remembered him from my own world well. I answered it.

"Did you get it?" He asked in an agitated tone.

"It?"

"The humanoid from the other dimension."

I glanced at my twin in the car. "Yeah. She's in the car right now."

"Drop her off, you know where to go. I will see you when you return. Well done, Aspen."

"Thank you."

I hung up. I looked around for the keys. They were on the front seat. I put up the top of the convertible and drove down the road slowly. My twin babbled to herself. It was almost too hard to look at what I had once been, so I tried to focus all of my attention to the road. If this world was the polar opposite of where I had come from, then I would be taking my twin to the building where we held captives. It wasn't even that far from here, and I was glad of that. I didn't want to be in the car with my twin for any longer than I had to.

I pulled into the hidden lot. I drove underneath more garish trees. Finally an open lot appeared. I stopped the car. My arrival was being expected. I prayed that it was dark enough that nobody could tell that me and my captive were identical. People opened up a trap door from beneath the cement. They came up a ladder, opened up my car door, and took her out. She threw me one last glance over her shoulder. Her gray eyes, insanely sparkling in the moonlight, met mine. They spoke to me, saying,  *I may be insane, but I knew that I wouldn't be lie this if you hadn't come along. If I am ever free, I will get you.*

I looked away from her and drove away. I couldn't get away fast enough.

After returning home, everything had gone back to normal, or what I imagined that the old Aspen's normal would have been like. I walked into the coffee shop in San Francisco once again. Rocky was sitting in his usual spot. I came up and sat down next to him. He smiled broadly.

"I am so proud of you." He said.

I smiled back. "Thanks."

"You've changed since you got back," he said, "not as stuck up as you once were."

*You have no idea,* I thought. I looked him in the eyes. He thought that he knew me. But he never would. I came from too far away. If only he knew where I had really come back from.