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A Brief Respite

Four months later…

It was the end of term at last and the students of St Proximus were letting off steam, racing around the courtyard shouting and laughing, their uniforms in disarray and their ties unknotted. Oksa Pollock and Gus Bellanger were more than ready for the holidays—they'd begun to think the school year would never end. So much had happened… What with the revelation of Oksa's mysterious origins and the vaporization of Orthon-McGraw, the last few months had held more than their fair share of exciting discoveries and terrifying ordeals. Oksa shook her head, determined not to let these dark thoughts dampen her high spirits, and walked over to Zoe, once her sworn enemy, now her second cousin and firm friend.

"Everyone's having a great time!"

Zoe smiled back at her. It hadn't been easy winning Oksa's friendship. She'd held a deep-seated grudge against Zoe for the gift of the poisoned soap which had made Marie so ill. It hadn't been long, though, before the Young Gracious had realized that Zoe had been an unwitting pawn in Orthon's hands. And when Dragomira had told her great-niece about the magical origins she shared with the Pollocks and the Runaways, Oksa had been extremely supportive, providing a shoulder to cry on

when necessary and helping her to master the powers which, until then, she'd had no idea she possessed… Now, the two cousins were virtually inseparable.

"Hey! Why don't we go and annoy Gus?" exclaimed Oksa suddenly.

"You go, Oksa. I'd rather stay here," replied Zoe.

Oksa gave her a worried look. Zoe tended to withdraw into her own shell when she felt sad, which was quite often, even though she tried hard to stay upbeat.

"I'm fine, honestly," she said, seeing Oksa's sceptical expression.

Oksa headed over to Gus and began dragging him towards the fountain in the middle of the paved courtyard. He struggled to free himself, laughing.

"It doesn't take a genius to guess what you're up to!"

"How could you say no to a refreshing dip in honour of this red-letter day?" exclaimed Oksa, pulling her friend by the arm with all her might.

"You're making a big mistake if you think you can use brute force. Perhaps you've forgotten that nothing and no one can make me do something against my will!"

He brushed back a strand of dark hair with pretend arrogance. Weak with laughter, Oksa let go, and, losing her balance, crashed into the edge of the fountain.

"Ouch," she yelped. "My elbow!"

A ring of blood appeared around the tear in her blouse.

"That really hurt," she grumbled. "Dammit! Look at the mess I've made of myself."

Gus held out his hand to help her to her feet. She twisted round to take off the little bag she wore slung over her shoulder and handed it to him.

"Would you look after this for me while I go and clean myself up?" she asked.

"Wow… the Young Gracious's magical accessories? What an honour!"

Oksa smiled at him and headed off in the direction of the grey stone

cloister. Gus watched until she vanished into the shadowy staircase that led into the magnificent building.



Twenty minutes later Gus was still there.

"Come on, Gus!" yelled a fair-haired student. "We're going to play basketball."

"I'd better not, Merlin, I'm waiting for Oksa."

Sitting there patiently against a low wall with nothing much to do, Gus gently pressed the bag. Inside he could feel a soft, round shape—the Tumble-Bawler. He hoped it wouldn't make a fuss. As if it could read his mind, the Tumble-Bawler said:

"Don't worry, young Master, discretion is my middle name! It has to be, since high volume doesn't make for a low profile."

This quirky motto made Gus smile.

"Come on, Oksa… what on earth are you doing up there?" he grumbled after a few more moments.

"I can inform you that the Young Gracious is currently in the first-floor toilets, fifty-six yards north-north-west of here," the small creature volunteered in a muffled voice.

Gus shuddered at the thought of someone overhearing this bizarre conversation, but all the other students were having too much fun to pay attention to him. Tired of waiting, he finally stood up and headed over to the staircase.

Walking along the deserted corridor, all he could hear was the sound of his own footsteps and the hubbub from the courtyard. It was strange thinking back to the awful events that had taken place just four months earlier—Oksa injured, fiendish McGraw showing his true colours, Miss Heartbreak… He couldn't help glancing through the lab window as he walked past and, as he did, he heard someone singing a sad, slow song that sounded like a lament. Intrigued, he turned the door handle—the

lab was unlocked. Gus walked in and looked around. He couldn't see anyone, but he could definitely hear someone as clearly as if they were standing right next to him. He opened Oksa's bag: the Tumble-Bawler hadn't made a sound.

"What's going on? What is that noise?"

He walked round the room, clutching Oksa's bag tightly. He looked under every desk and opened the door to the storeroom, then the large cupboard. Nothing. And yet he could still hear the soft, mournful weeping. He stopped searching and stood in the middle of the room listening hard, all his senses alert. He could now make out what sounded like faint words amongst the sobs.

"What are you saying? Where are you?" he asked falteringly, looking around despite his fear.

He heard a voice which sounded as though it were coming from a long way off and yet was very close, saying:

"I'm here, right in front of you. I need your help. Please come and set me free… *I'm begging you*!"



Oksa was hurrying back to the courtyard, her shirt still damp, when the wail of a foghorn caught her attention.

"Hey, that sounds like Gus's mobile!"

The ringtone grew louder as she walked past the first-floor lab, then cut out. Oksa stopped and listened for a few seconds. With a smile, she heard what she'd been expecting to hear: Darth Vader's rasping voice saying that someone had just left a message. It was definitely Gus's phone. She pushed open the door and walked in.

"Gus! Are you in here?"

No answer. Oksa glanced around and looked under the desks. Her friend didn't usually play tricks like this, but you never knew what he might get up to. Suddenly she spotted his mobile on the floor.

"What's his phone doing there?" she muttered with a frown.

She picked it up and gazed around again with a puzzled expression, then walked out of the room and went to join the others.



"You haven't seen Gus, have you?"

Zoe looked up, an expression of concern on her pretty face. Annoyed with herself for needlessly worrying her friend, Oksa hurriedly continued:

"What an Incompetent he is. Look, he's lost his mobile! He must be around here somewhere. Let's go and find him."

She grabbed Zoe's hand and, as impulsive as ever, dragged her off to hunt for Gus.



"Just wait till he dares to show his face again…" grumbled Oksa.

After half an hour spent searching fruitlessly for him, the two girls were back where they'd started and were both feeling more concerned than they cared to admit. It was getting late and the other students were beginning to file out of the school.

"You'd better phone home," suggested Zoe, her forehead creased in an anxious frown, which only made Oksa feel more apprehensive.



By the time Pierre Bellanger and Pavel Pollock had arrived in the courtyard, the girls were beside themselves with worry. They had spent nearly an hour searching the school again from top to bottom with mounting desperation.

"He isn't at Bigtoe Square or at home," declared Pierre, sliding shut his mobile.

The caretaker locked St Proximus's heavy gates and they had to come to terms with the harsh fact that Gus was nowhere to be found. Oksa and Zoe gazed at each other, eyes brimming with tears. The peace and quiet of the last few months had obviously just been a brief respite.



The Runaways were in shock. Brune and Naftali Knut, the imposing Swedish couple, and Dragomira's brother, Leomido, had rushed over to the Pollocks' house in a show of solidarity. Night had fallen long ago, doing nothing to lighten the heavy mood. Pierre, his face furrowed with worry, had his arms around his wife, Jeanne, who couldn't stop crying. Dragomira walked over and gave them a hug, but couldn't think of anything comforting to say. Standing behind Marie's wheelchair, his eyes fixed on Oksa, Pavel felt paralysed by a creeping sense of anxiety.

"Perhaps we should inform the police?" suggested Oksa hoarsely.

"We can't do that, Oksa," replied Abakum, the protector of the Runaways. "Anyway, you know they'd just say he's run away."

"Gus wouldn't run away from anything. He's been kidnapped!" cried Jeanne, frantic with worry.

"But by whom?" they all wondered, though no one dared to voice their thoughts. Only Oksa plucked up enough courage to say what they were all thinking:

"You don't think it could be a Felon, do you? Orthon-McGraw can't have been the only one to have got out of Edefia; who's to say there weren't others?"

They looked at her with some degree of gratitude. This was the best-case scenario for all of them. It meant that Gus would be used as a bargaining counter by the mystery kidnapper and wouldn't be harmed while negotiations were under way. But what if the kidnapper wasn't a Felon? It didn't bear thinking about.

They sat there all night constructing theories and possibilities, mobiles in hand and eyes glued to the front door. Around five o'clock in the morning, slumped on a sofa next to Zoe, who was as devastated as she'd been the night before, Oksa suddenly discovered what was to be their first lead. She'd kept Gus's phone and was listening for the umpteenth time to the last message that had activated the voicemail alert she'd heard. It was from Jeanne. "Gus, I haven't been able to get hold of you. Your dad will pick you up in an hour. See you later!" Amazed that she hadn't thought of it before, Oksa carefully examined everything on her friend's mobile. There wasn't anything much of interest in his messages, but there was something weird in the phone's picture library: just before his mother had called—the clock on the phone confirmed it—Gus had taken an odd photo.

"Look!"

Oksa showed them the thumbnail on the screen of the mobile.

"What on earth is that?"

Pavel immediately switched on his computer to enlarge the image and everyone crowded round to take a look. As soon as the picture appeared, Zoe cried out:

"That's my gran, Reminiscens!"

"Are you sure?" exclaimed Dragomira.

"Of course I am!"

They all stared at the screen: the picture showed the upper half of a woman who looked around seventy. She was slim, dressed in dark colours and her drawn face aroused compassion. Her pale-blue eyes, wide with despair and fear, were gazing straight ahead.

"That's my gran…" repeated Zoe, her voice hoarse with tiredness and emotion.

Dragomira and Abakum exchanged surprised glances. Suddenly, understanding dawned and, still looking at each other, they chorused:

"Impicturement!"