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Cali Dorszynski
Western Washington University

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Paper Butterflies

By Cali Dorszynski
Mr. Ortega was not particularly experienced with fighting dragons. But he’d had a fair bit of practice running away from them. It all came down to the counting. Typically, dragons are capable of breathing a fire blast every ten seconds. That means ten seconds to run as far and as fast as possible before finding new cover to shelter behind. Luckily, the ruins of the old stone castle he was running through offered plentiful cover. Unluckily, this particular dragon was only a few years old, which meant two things: smaller fire blasts and more frequent fire blasts, about every seven seconds. The dragon was also small, capable of following Mr. Ortega through the halls and corridors of the ruined castle.

“One, two, three,” he counted out loud to himself, bolting from the doorway he’d been sheltering in and digging through his coat pocket for his compass.

“Four, five,” He opened the compass, glancing down at it and making a sharp right turn down a hallway.

“Six,” He ducked into another doorway, pressing his back against the cold, damp stone as he heard the dragon skittering through the halls in pursuit.

“Seven.” A flash of orange light illuminated the walls and a wave of dry heat washed over him. The dragon was close, but not close enough, flames falling short of reaching Mr. Ortega through the twisting halls.

“One,” he bolted from the doorway, racing down the hall, following the point of the compass.

“Two, three,” He rushed past a row of rooms, heavy wooden doors decaying on their hinges. He turned a corner and started up a steep, winding flight of stairs. Of course, he thought, looking up the spiral to the landing far above. Of course they had to put the gateway I need in the tallest tower.

“Four, five,” He heard the dragon roar from somewhere below, a screeching bellow that echoed through the halls, reverberating off the old stone. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. There was no cover in this stairway. If the dragon found him here, he would be toast.
“Six, seven,” He counted, hazarding a glance down the stairway below him. The bottom few stairs glowed with the light of a fire blast. The dragon was close, too close for comfort.

He immediately started a new count, legs burning as he pushed to climb the stairs faster. “One, two,” He was almost to the top.

“Three four,” The last few stairs. The dragon burst into the stairway, roaring furiously as it caught sight of Mr. Ortega for the first time since the chase began.

“Five.” He reached the landing, glancing over the edge as the dragon began charging up the tower, using long claws to climb the walls instead of using the stairs.

“Six.” He kicked at the remains of the wooden door, bursting into the room at the top of the tower. The room was small and round, with an empty fireplace on one side and three narrow alcoves beneath stone arches, and a few ruined furniture remains.

“Seven.” He said, ducking to the ground against the stone wall to the side of the doorway.

A jet of flame blasted up the tower and through the doorway into the room, the splintered remains of the wooden door spraying out like shrapnel. The wet stone sizzled and steamed as the heat filled the room. Mr. Ortega shielded his head with a fold of his coat, curling further into the wall to protect his body from the heat. After a moment the jet of flame subsided. Burning wooden fragments littered the room, and Mr. Ortega immediately jumped to his feet.

The dragon was still charging up the tower walls, and when it finally cornered Mr. Ortega in the inescapable room, it would savor the opportunity to roast him alive before reclaiming the treasure he had stolen.

“One.” Mr. Ortega reached into his shirt and grasped for the necklace he wore, a round emerald stone with a small hole in the center, suspended on a length of black cord; a gatekey.

“Two, three.” He lifted the stone to his eye, peering around the room through the hole in the center. The alcove on the far side of the room glowed the same green as the stone, signaling the presence of a gateway.

“Four.” He checked his compass one more time, satisfied that the needle pointed unwaveringly at the glowing alcove.
“Five.” He bolted across the room.

“Six.” He yanked the emerald stone from around his neck, snapping the silver clasp, and pressed it against the side of the stone arch.

“Seven.” The emerald glowed dimly to life, and he threw himself into the opened gateway just as the dragon burst into the room, flames already clawing after him.

He almost escaped unscathed. Unfortunately his right hand, the hand that held the gatekey against the stone arch, had not yet passed through the gateway as the dragon entered the room, and the back of his hand was fiercely burned by the dragon’s flames.

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Mr. Ortega tumbled haphazardly through the gateway and fell to the ground, which had turned from hard stone to soft grass in an instant. He lay there, chest heaving, breathing in the smell of the earth. A clear blue sky peaked through the trees above him. Sunlight filtered through the branches, and wildflowers dotted the grass around him as bees buzzed here and there. He hoped desperately that his journey was over.

As he reached reflexively for his compass, he caught sight of the scorched red mark on his hand and frowned. Red lines patterned the back of his hand like a forking bolt of lightning. Now that he had noticed it, searing pain lanced through his hand, previously unnoticeable but now inescapable. He winced, tucking the hand carefully into his pocket as he tried to ignore the pain.

He pulled the compass out of his coat pocket, praying his harrowing adventure had come to an end. The dial spun lazily in a circle, needle undecisive, pointing at everything and nothing at once. He breathed a sigh of relief, laying back in the grass as a smile sprung to his face and hearty laughter bubbled up in his chest. He had finally made it home.
“Come on Eve, you have to at least give him a chance,” Teddy Matthews said, trying to persuade his wife as he adjusted his tie in the bathroom mirror. “Mr. O has definitely surprised us before.”

“A chance for what, exactly?” Evelyn Matthews snapped, savagely applying mascara to her upper lashes. “He doesn’t even know the party is happening Ted, I can’t send an invitation to my dad if I don’t know how to find him, or contact him.” She switched to the other eye.

“For all I know, he’s been sleeping under a bridge somewhere!” She yelped as she jabbed herself hard with the mascara wand. The wand dropped to the floor as she cupped her hand over her eye. Teddy was at her side in a flash, the tie he had been retying now loose around his neck. He grabbed her hand and gently peeled it away from her face, murmuring softly.

“Let me see babe,” he held her face still with his other hand as he looked at her eye. Thick black tears were slowly sliding down one cheek as her eye protested the attack, trying to clear the makeup away. Teddy wiped away the tears, prompting her to look left and right as he assessed the damage.

“Looks okay,” he said, kissing her forehead gently. “A little red. Maybe skip the makeup for now?” She smiled softly in spite of herself, nodding. Teddy returned to retying his tie.

Evelyn turned back to the mirror, frowning at the smudged black streaks on her face. She gave up on the makeup, washing her face gently before tying up her hair and heading out of the bathroom. Teddy caught her hand as she left, giving her a quick, gentle kiss.

“Today will be great.” He said, giving her hand a quick squeeze before letting go. “Maybe he’ll remember. After all, it’s his granddaughter’s birthday.” He added, trying to be encouraging. She gave him a small smile before turning and leaving the room.

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Evelyn looked at her watch, then checked the list for the third time. It was hastily scribbled on the back of an old coffee-stained receipt, and detailed the last-minute preparations needed for Ellie’s eighth birthday party, happening later that afternoon. The party was set to start at 4 pm, and it was just a little after 10 am now.

- Pick up cake/snacks
- Chairs/tables
- Balloons
- Decorations
- Drinks

“About six hours,” She murmured to herself as she stared at the list, mentally ranking the items in order of importance, estimating the time it would take to accomplish each. After a moment’s contemplation, she stuffed the list into her back pocket and grabbed her keys from the hook in the kitchen, heading out the garage door. The late June sun blazed through the windshield as she pulled out of the garage. She reached for her sunglasses on the dash after turning onto the street.

The street was dotted with chalk drawings and several small groups of kids on bicycles. Smiling, she waved to a few that she knew would be at the party later, making a mental note to check the RSVPs one more time before guests started arriving. She left the neighborhood behind, flying through town to pick up the cake she had ordered and a few extra party snacks.

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As she was stopped at an intersection, she glanced out the passenger window, watching people bustle across the crosswalk. As she turned her head away, a familiar silhouette caught her eye. Her eyes snapped back to the sidewalk, to an older gentleman walking down the street. He was tall, well-dressed in a long brown coat and matching hat. He faced away from her, but she could see the edge of a graying beard, and a pair of silver sunglasses. He walked leisurely down the street, tapping a long, silver-tipped cane on the ground with each step.
She watched the man for a moment, studying how he moved, slowly satisfying herself that he was not who she had initially thought. Her father did not carry a walking stick, and moved with more purpose, steps steadier and stature more upright. A smirk crossed her face. She was right; her father wouldn’t come.

Her daughter’s bubbly voice flashed through her memory.

“I can’t wait to see Grandpa.” Ellie had said as Evelyn sat with her at the kitchen table. It had been a few weeks before, and the two of them had spent the day writing all the invitations for Ellie’s birthday party. Ellie had insisted they send one to Grandpa. Evelyn had tried discouraging her, warning that he would probably be busy, and might not get it.

“That’s okay,” Ellie had said, grabbing a blank invitation and scribbling Grandpa in the top right corner, adding a butterfly sticker from her collection before placing the card on the pile of finished invitations. Later that day, when they walked them to the mailbox, Ellie had saved Grandpa’s invitation for last, giving it a quick kiss before sending it off with the rest.

“The mail people will make sure he gets it.” She had reassured Evelyn, taking her hand as they walked back to the house. Evelyn had just smiled, shaking her head doubtfully, but Ellie had not noticed.

An impatient honk shook her from the memories, and she quickly stepped on the gas, proceeding through the green light ahead.

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She was back home in two hours. The cake she had ordered, double chocolate with purple frosting and decorated with little fondant butterflies, was now chilling in the refrigerator as she sorted through the snacks piled on the kitchen table. She checked the crumpled list again, crossing off the completed task and adding in a new one.

- Pick up cake/snacks
- Chairs/tables
• Balloons
• Decorations
• Drinks
• RSVPs

She pulled out the junk drawer in the kitchen, rifling through it and picking out the scribbled list of RSVPs she’d kept for the past few weeks, adding to it gradually as each party guest called to confirm. A few of the names were written in Teddy’s blocky, stable handwriting, from calls she had missed that he had picked up. She counted them, mentally tallying the number of chairs, plates, and cups she would have to set out. She left both scribbled lists lying on the counter and moved outside to set up tables and chairs in the backyard, pulling a stack of worn plastic chairs and foldable tables out of the small shed.

Once the backyard was set up, she moved back inside, checking her watch impatiently. Another hour before Teddy gets home. He would be bringing the balloons and a helium tank with him. Unlike Evelyn, he had been unable to take the whole day off of work, and had only managed to secure an early afternoon off by promising his boss an extra day the following week.

Evelyn busied herself hanging streamers on the gazebo that covered the porch – purple streamers with little pink and white butterflies printed on them. Once done, she pulled a piece of purple paper out of Ellie’s box of craft supplies and wrote a sign to hang on the front door, inviting guests to come straight through to the backyard. After taping it on the door, she reentered the kitchen and checked her watch again. 2:23. She double checked her list, crossing off the newly accomplished items.

• Pick up cake/snacks
• Chairs/tables
• Balloons
• Decorations
• Drinks
• RSVPs

She contemplated starting on the drinks, then decided against it, and instead headed upstairs for a second attempt at applying her makeup.
She was elbow deep in eyeshadow and mascara when Teddy entered the bathroom, swooping up behind her and wrapping his arms around her stomach from behind.

“The backyard looks great babe,” he said softly into her shoulder, and she smiled at herself in the mirror, setting down her makeup brush.

“Thanks Ted,” she turned into his chest, resting her cheek against his shoulder. “Did you bring the stuff for the balloons?” He grumbled in reply, burying his face in her hair.

“Yeah, but we can do that later.” He replied, slowly pulling her backward toward their room. “I’m suffocating here, help a poor man out of his tie?” He held her tighter, rubbing her back lightly. She smiled and chuckled, gently trying to wiggle out of his grip.

“C’mon Ted,” she checked her watch again, smile instantly dropping. “It’s already 3:15, we have to finish the decorations before people start getting here.” He grumbled again, this time relaxing his grip and allowing her to wriggle free.

She returned to the mirror, finishing her makeup in a flash before flying downstairs to mix drinks and blow-up balloons. He joined her after changing out of his work clothes, stuffy blazer and slacks exchanged for blue jeans and a white t-shirt. He took over blowing up the purple and white balloons while Evelyn set pitchers of water and lemonade on the snack table in the backyard.

The time flew by, for Evelyn it seemed like only a few moments had passed when the first knock came at the door. After realizing she’d forgotten to leave it unlocked after hanging the sign, she hastened to the door to let the guests in.
It wasn’t long before a steady stream of guests started filling the backyard. After gifts had been haphazardly piled on the gift table, adults milled around to chat politely in the shade while kids raced through the yard playing tag and wrestling.

At 4:15 Ellie arrived home, accompanied by her best friend Daisy. Evelyn had sent Ellie to Daisy’s house early that morning so she wouldn’t be underfoot as Evelyn prepared for the party, and now she zipped around excitedly, beaming as she waved at all her friends.

She ran to Teddy first, and he picked her up in a big bear hug as she squealed with delight. “Hi dad!” she said, laughing as he lifted her in the air. Once he set her down, she ran to Evelyn, hugging her tightly. “Hi mommy,” she said, and Evelyn smiled lovingly at her as she hugged her back. She let go after a moment, and after a quick glance around the yard she looked at both of her parents. “Thank you for the party!”

“Of course kiddo,” Teddy said, ruffling her hair gently. Evelyn smiled and nodded.

“Is Grandpa here yet?” Ellie asked, looking around earnestly at the grownups scattered around the yard. Evelyn’s smile dropped for a moment, but she hastily reapplied it as Ellie looked back up at her, shaking her head and pressing her lips together to keep her opinion trapped inside.

“No honey,” She managed after a moment, trying to sound apologetic.

“That’s okay, he’ll be here.” Ellie said confidently. Evelyn nodded stiffly.

“Okay sweetie,” Teddy said, gently placing a hand on Ellie’s shoulder and turning her toward the group of kids playing in the grass. “This is your party. Go play!” She immediately obeyed, shooting off like a laser to join her friends. Teddy looked back at Evelyn, who gave him a thin smile and turned away to greet the guests.

Evelyn flitted through the backyard, chatting with friends and acquaintances and parents from the neighborhood, welcoming and thanking them for coming. Teddy was stationary, talking with a few of the dads from the neighborhood about the upcoming fourth of July celebration.
After a while of cavorting in the late June sun, the kids had all but drained the lemonade pitcher, and the ice water had fallen far below half full thanks to frequent visits from talkative adults. Evelyn collected the pitchers and hurried into the kitchen to refill them.

She leaned heavily against the counter, waiting for the tap to run cold, resting in the quiet safety of her kitchen. She stared out the kitchen window at the crowd of moms she’d been trying to entertain. They leered around the yard, pointing and whispering to each other, disdainful expressions on their faces and poisonous words on their lips. Evelyn felt tears prick her eyes but refused to let them fall.

Gleeful screams reached her ears through the door she’d left half-open, and she turned her head to watch Ellie lead a stampede of kids through the yard with bottles of bubbles, blowing them in a frenzy, clouding the air with shiny pops of color. She smiled, watching her daughter show the other kids how to make bubbles by twirling in a circle. Soon the whole crowd of kids were spinning and stumbling around, laughing as a few of them fell over. They all looked happy, but Ellie kept throwing expectant glances at the door, eyes returning every few seconds despite chaos around her and kids clamoring for her attention.

As Evelyn stood at the kitchen window watching the kids blow bubbles and chase each other around, she heard a gentle knock at the front door. She turned off the tap and walked to the entry on autopilot, twisting the knob and opening the door without thinking.

“Dad.” Surprise crossed her face, but her voice remained even and indifferent.

“Hello Evie,” Mr. Ortega said, beaming down at her as he took off his hat. He glanced past her into the house as the laughter of the kids bubbled through from the backyard.

“Having a party?”

She didn’t answer.

“May I come in?” He asked, hesitation crossing his face as he tried to decipher her expression. Surprise had melted into something hard and unreadable.
“You’re late.” She said, looking at him coldly for a minute, watching embarrassment cross his face as he winced a little.

He said nothing, wringing his hat in his hands as he looked at the ground. When he lifted his eyes to hers again, her gaze had softened slightly. She allowed herself a small, tight smile as she stepped to the side, opening the door wider.

“She’ll be excited to see you,” Evelyn said honestly, watching him carefully to see his reaction. He beamed, picking up the large box next to his feet and shuffling through the door. Evelyn closed it after him, turning to watch him as he shrugged out of his coat and hung his hat on a hook by the door. She looked him over discretely, marveling to herself at how clean and put together he looked. His coat was brand new. He had a fresh haircut, his beard was neatly trimmed, and his suit was pressed and free of wrinkles and stains. He certainly didn’t look like someone who had been sleeping under a bridge.

She followed him through the house, pausing alongside him as he looked out the back door. The kids still played energetically in the yard while the adults mingled in the shade. She raised a hand to point out Ellie, suspecting that he might not spot her in the lively crowd of kids. He laid a hand gently over hers, stopping her from pointing. She quickly withdrew her hand.

“I see her,” he said. A warm smile spread over his face and his eyes crinkled. Evelyn smiled too. She opened the door and stepped out ahead of him.

“Ellie, look who’s here!” She yelled, and the gaggle of kids, who were now trying to dig for worms under the firewood pile, stopped as Ellie turned her head to her mom’s voice. Immediately a massive, beaming smile took over her face, and she jumped up and took off running across the yard.

“Grandpa!” She screamed as she ran, waving her arms wildly as she made a beeline for Mr. Ortega. He barely had time to set down the box again before she reached him, jumping into his outstretched arms as he lifted her up and swung her around. Evelyn glanced across the yard at Teddy, who gave her a pointed look, brow raised. She looked away.

“Hello my dear!” Mr. Ortega said, hugging her tightly for a few moments before groaning loudly and setting her down, hunching over and rubbing his back animatedly. “You’ve
“Gotten so big!” He said, continuing to grumble and massage his back, earning a giggle from her for his antics. He smiled warmly and straightened back up. Ellie looked up at him, grinning.

“You got shorter!” She held up a hand and feigned measuring his height against her own. He laughed, shaking his head.

“And older, unfortunately.” He said, stroking his graying beard as he stuck out his chin, scrunching his face to look like a grumpy old man. She giggled again, reaching up to give him another hug.

“Have you had any new adventures since last time?” She asked, hoping he would tell her another one of the grand, adventurous stories he always shared during his visits.

“One or two,” he said vaguely. “None worth interrupting your party for.”

“What happened to your hand?” she asked him, pointing at his right hand. He had covered his fresh burn with a strip of carefully wrapped white fabric, but it had shifted slightly, revealing the edge of the red burn scar.

“Oh nothing,” he said, adjusting the fabric to cover the wound again. He glanced around for a moment before leaning down, whispering to her secretively. “I’ll tell you a secret,” she nodded, eyes widening and face turning serious. “I got it from a dragon,” he grinned again before taking a step back. He mimed pulling out a sword, holding it at the ready to fight off the vicious beast.

“A real one?” She asked, looking at him in awe.

“A real one!” he confirmed, swinging his imaginary sword a few times before and sheathing it dramatically and winking at her. “Just don’t tell your mom.” Ellie giggled, the two of them glancing over at Evelyn, who stood several paces away, watching them with expressionless eyes.

Teddy moved to Evelyn’s side, waiting for a chance to join in the greeting. Mr. Ortega walked over to them, extending his hand.

“Mr. O,” Teddy said, smiling warmly. He couldn’t resist giving Evelyn a gentle I told you so nudge with his elbow.
“Theodore,” Mr. Ortega said, shaking Teddy’s hand firmly and giving him a friendly nod. “How are you doing son?”

“Pretty good,” he said, smiling first at Mr. Ortega and then down at Ellie who was bouncing impatiently, waiting for the adults to finish talking. “We’re glad you made it,” he continued, smiling as he put an arm around Evelyn. She nodded without smiling.

“So am I.” He said, nodding at them both for a moment, still trying to read the expressionless look on Evelyn’s face.

When no one spoke further, he turned and took Ellie’s hand. “Come now,” he said, looking across the yard. The group of kids had resumed digging in Ellie’s absence. “I want to meet your friends!”

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Mr. Ortega quickly became a favorite at the party among all of the guests. Ellie pulled him around excitedly, introducing him first to all of her friends and then to all of the adults. He greeted them all suavely, with firm handshakes for the dads, kisses on the backs of hands for the moms, and silly salutes or exaggerated bows for the kids.

Evelyn overheard a few of the moms whispering to each other as Mr. Ortega was challenging each of the kids to an imaginary swordfight.

“Is that Ellie’s uncle?” one asked, and another giggled at her.

“Her Grandpa – Evelyn’s dad I think,” one replied. “See how they look alike? She’s got his nose.”

“He’s so good with the kids,” one said, watching him with bit of admiration as the kids waited patiently to duel him one by one. “Look how calm they are.” A few nodded in reply.

“He’s so debonair,” another said, brushing the hand that Mr. Ortega had kissed, watching him with a bit too much admiration.
“How come we’ve never met him before?” Another asked suspiciously. “The Matthews have a party every year.”

One of the more audacious moms, Mary, broke away from the group and sidled up to Evelyn, who was busy rearranging the snack table.

“Evelyn, dear,” she began, voice dripping honey. “What’s the story with Ellie’s grandpa?” Evelyn stiffened slightly, staying still for a moment before turning and fixing a bright smile on her face.

“What would you like to know?” She asked, tone light and suspicions raised; she knew where this was going.

“Well, why haven’t we seen him at Ellie’s parties before?” She hummed, studying Evelyn’s face, then continued.

“I understand if you two aren’t close, I mean, it’s been years since I’ve spoken with my parents. I totally understand family drama and all that, and maybe you’d rather he stayed away.” She paused, again studying Evelyn’s expression.

“But he and Ellie must be close. She was so happy to see him.” She paused again for a moment, then continued.

“She doesn’t get to see him often, does she?” Mary had delivered the pointed, suggestive words with such an even, unassuming tone, Evelyn wondered if she was reading too much into them.

Evelyn had smiled throughout the questioning, her expression plain and impassive.

“He has a pretty demanding job. Secretive, too.” Evelyn hedged, dangling a bit of false gossip in hopes that Mary would latch onto it.

“Oh?” Mary said, taking the bait.

“Yeah, I think it must be something with the government. Could be FBI, or maybe CIA?” She continued, digging deeper. Mary nodded, eyes widening.

“I’m really not supposed to talk about it,” Evelyn said, shrugging. Mary nodded emphatically.
“Don’t worry about it, dear. I completely understand. I won’t say a word.” She smiled, winking at Evelyn. She then immediately marched back to the gaggle of moms who had been trying to listen in, swiftly spreading every detail she’d just heard to the group. They all turned back to Mr. Ortega as he played with the kids, some watching with suspicion and some with awe.

Evelyn once again found herself escaping into the kitchen to avoid the prying eyes and stop the tears threatening to fall. She quickly found refuge in some small, mundane task.

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Eventually, Evelyn gave up trying to entertain the moms and instead took refuge at Teddy’s side, listening to him chat with the neighborhood dads as they played poker in the shade, betting with handfuls of jellybeans from the snack table. If any of the kids wandered too close, the game would hastily transform from poker to go fish, tangled voices loudly proclaiming their desire for eights, or twos, or queens, until the kids had again receded to a safe distance.

The kids had been busying themselves with hula hoops and catch, but as more and more of them dropped to the grass tiredly, Evelyn judged the time to be perfect for cake. She whispered her intentions to Teddy, who nodded enthusiastically, offering to help. She declined—it was almost his turn—and got up, making her way across the yard to the kitchen door. Mr. Ortega, who had been resting in the shade and desperately fending off the advances of the more feral single moms, got up quickly as she approached.

“May I be of help?” he asked almost desperately. Evelyn did not want to raise suspicion, and so nodded with a bright smile.

“Sure, I’m just grabbing the cake.” She breezed past, leaving the door open for him to follow after her. He closed it gently behind him, approaching Evelyn as she rearranged things in the refrigerator to pull out the cake.

“Evie,” he said softly, hoping she would turn around. She stopped only for a moment before resuming the shuffle. “You seem upset,” he tried again. This time she straightened immediately, whirling around.
“Dad,” her voice cracked sharp like a whip. “We are not doing this right now.” She glared at him, and he looked back at her, his face an infuriating mask of confusion and innocent surprise. “Not while there are guests in my house.” She finished, turning back around to wrench the cake out of the fridge. She slammed the refrigerator closed behind her, wrenching a knife out of the kitchen drawer before stalking past him and back out the door.

“Alright,” Evelyn announced, carrying the cake out the back door to the snack table. All evidence of the ferocity from a moment ago had vanished from her voice, her face cracked wide in a bright smile. “It’s time for cake everybody!” She set the cake down in the center of the snack table as the kids started streaming over from all corners of the yard, adults not far behind. She started cutting into the cake, placing slices on the small paper plates stacked on the table.

Mr. Ortega took the spot next to her silently, passing out slices to the crowd of people. She gave him one last look, laced with acid and promise. His eyes reflexively darted to the knife in her hand. She relaxed her grip on it and turned away, letting her face go blank as she continued slicing the cake.

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The cake was thoroughly enjoyed by all, and the newly energized kids took off once again, starting up a new game of tag.

After a little while, Evelyn pulled Ellie aside, asking her if she was ready to open gifts. Ellie enthusiastically confirmed, racing off to gather her friends around the porch. After Evelyn made the announcement, everyone crowded around, and Ellie took her place beside the gift table, smiling gleefully. Evelyn stood on one side of the table next to Teddy, camera in hand.

Earlier, Mr. Ortega had opened the large box he had brought and placed a tall, oddly shaped item on the table, covered in a dark brown cloth. It was nearly hidden behind the many other colorful gifts. Now he stood off to one side, smiling as he watched Ellie look over the gifts excitedly. Once everyone was gathered and settled, Evelyn nodded at Ellie.

“Okay Ellie, go ahead.” She said, snapping a few pictures.
“I want to open Grandpa’s!” Ellie said excitedly, reaching for the strangely shaped object covered in cloth.

“No no,” Mr. Ortega said hurriedly, taking a step forward and raising a hand. “Why don’t you save mine for last – I was the last to arrive after all.” He pointed out one of the larger packages on the table, wrapped in colorful striped paper. “Start with that big bright one on the end there.”

“That one’s from me!” Daisy said excitedly, standing at the front of the crowd of kids. Ellie gently lifted the package off the table, looking at her mom and smiling for a picture before setting it down on the sun-warmed boards of the porch. “Here Daisy,” she waved her friend over. “Want to help me open it?” Daisy happily agreed, sitting on the other side of the large box. They both tore into it together, peeling back the colorful paper to reveal the gift inside.

And so, the pattern repeated itself; Ellie worked from right to left across the table, inviting each of her friends to help her unwrap the gift they had brought.

Finally, the table was cleared of all except the strangely shaped object covered in cloth. As she went to reach for it, Mr. Ortega stopped her again, gently interjecting.

“If I may,” he said, stopping her. “I would like the privilege of unveiling it to you, my lady.” He said, bowing grandly before reaching for the object and picking it up. A strange, barely audible rustling sound came from the object as he moved it. Ellie giggled and sat down cross-legged on the porch as Mr. Ortega set the object down in front of her.

“Don’t be frightened,” he cautioned, grabbing a handful of the fabric. “There may be movement.” Without a moment’s hesitation, before anyone could question the strange statement, Mr. Ortega swept the fabric off the object with a flourish. The quiet rustling instantly became chaotic fluttering, and everyone immediately leaned closer to catch sight of what had been revealed.

A round, gilded bird cage sat on the porch, resting on three ornately carved metal feet. A short length of gold chain was linked to the large loop on top of the cage, jangling softly against the metal bars as it swayed. Inside the cage were three massive white butterflies. They all had long tails on their wings, and were fluttering cacophonously inside the cage, creating a sound
like rustling newspaper. After a short moment they settled, each coming to rest and clinging to one of the metal bars, wings opening and closing lazily.

Ellie’s eyes widened, mouth opening in shock. She pressed even closer to the cage, taking in every detail of the butterflies within. Everyone shuffled closer, trying to do the same. Whispers began flying between half-covered mouths.

Ellie’s expression of shock immediately turned to delight, and she jumped to her feet to give Mr. Ortega a crushing, grateful hug.

“Thank you!” she said, squeezing him tightly. “They’re beautiful!”

“You are welcome my dear.” He smiled down at her.

“You’ll notice they are made of paper,” he said, gesturing at the butterflies, “but I assure you they are very much alive.”

He was right; everything, from their large, fine wings to their long, cylindrical bodies, was crafted from silky white paper. Even the tiny, delicate legs that clung to the bars of the cage were made from the finest paper slivers. The tips of their wings and tails were dipped in a deep purple ink, and one of the three had a detailed design on its wings resembling eyes. Ellie was the only one close enough to the cage to see the papery features of the butterflies, but at Mr. Ortega’s words the adults rippled with light laughs and a few badly concealed scoffs. Ellie heard none of this, and Mr. Ortega pretended the same.

“Come look!” Ellie said, lifting the cage back onto the table and waving her friends over. They all crowded around, oohing, ahhing, and clamoring to ask questions. Interest turned to shock and excitement as they all got close enough to see the butterflies’ papery features.

“Are they really made of paper?” Daisy asked, and Mr. Ortega nodded.

“How are they alive?” One of the older boys asked. Mr. Ortega’s reply was interrupted by more voices.

“Are they real?” someone asked, and a few others repeated the question.

“Can they really fly?” A few wondered.

“Are they magic?”
The kids’ voices grew louder, each trying to be heard over all the rest, each wanting to know about these strange creatures before them. One voice, a smaller girl off to the side of the group, broke through the noise with one question.

“Where did you get them?”

This question was immediately echoed by all the other kids, and after each had repeated it a few times they fell silent. Mr. Ortega looked to Ellie, who nodded at her friends and turned to face him.

“Where did they come from, grandpa?” She asked curiously, hoping he had found them on one of his fantastical adventures, hoping he would tell them the story. He nodded, stroking his beard as he considered how much to tell them.

“Very well,” he said finally, “I shall tell you how I came to have them, but only if you all want to hear the story.” Ellie nodded emphatically, and some of the kids agreed. Others were more hesitant, itching to return to their games in the sun. They shrugged and looked reluctant. Mr. Ortega saw their hesitation. “I’ll let you deliberate while I fetch a chair,” he said, turning toward the kitchen door.

Ellie turned to the group, spotting the look of reluctance and boredom on some of their faces. “You guys don’t want to hear the story?” She asked, and a few of them shook their heads while others just shrugged. Daisy spoke up—she was among the kids who were hesitant to sit and listen.

“Won’t that be boring?” She said, and a few of the others nodded in agreement.

“No way,” Ellie said confidently. “Grandpa always tells the best stories about his adventures!” Daisy looked unconvinced, so Ellie leaned closer to her. “See that thing on his hand,” she said, surreptitiously pointing at Mr. Ortega’s right hand as he carried a padded dining room chairs across the porch. The fabric wrapping had again shifted, the edge of the red scar revealed to the careful observer.

“Yeah,” Daisy confirmed. She thought it looked a lot like her older brother’s hands had looked when he had spilled the boiling water while making macaroni and cheese.
“He got burned,” she whispered loudly so all the kids could hear. “By a dragon!” Daisy’s eyes widened.

“A real one?” She questioned.

“A real one!” Ellie confirmed, nodding.

“Is that true?” Another kid asked in disbelief.

“Yeah!” Ellie answered confidently. “He told me so himself.” The group of kids buzzed with excitement, the word ‘dragon’ whizzing around like popcorn as the story spread through the group. A few of the adults overheard, Evelyn included, and several sets of eyes began to roll.

Though some of the kids were skeptical of Ellie’s claim, all were at least intrigued enough to listen to the story. By this time, Mr. Ortega had returned with his chair, and he now sat in the shade of the porch, waiting for his audience to gather before him. The kids sat fanned out in the grass in a loose semi-circle around him, with Ellie front and center and Daisy by her side. Once they had all quieted down, he began his story.

As the kids had deliberated and settled in for the story, the adults had been taking turns examining the butterflies in the cage, some fascinated and some doubtful. Evelyn had been one of the first to push forward to investigate them; when she saw that they were indeed made of paper, her face darkened with anger. Eventually, whatever trick her dad had used to make them fly would wear off, and then she would have to console her daughter and bring her back to the real world, where magic paper animals didn’t exist, and the grandest adventure one could have was getting a new job or going to the grocery store. Evelyn turned and gave Teddy a pointed, infuriated look. He reached forward and squeezed her hand silently.
“A bit of time ago I found myself in a grand, sprawling marketplace in a far-off land. Many different kinds of people were there, from many different places, selling and trading in wonderous and incredible things from their homelands: fine fabrics, strange fruits, herbs, spices, shining gemstones, foreign metals, and a great variety of magical objects. There, hidden among the most magnificent artifacts of all the worlds, I spotted an old woman with a most singular commodity for sale.

I approached her stall, looking over the selection—all manner of beautiful creatures made from delicate paper, some I recognized and some I did not. The creatures were collected in cages, crates, boxes, jars, and tanks, stacked on the ground beneath the low fabric ceiling of her market stall.

‘What do you seek?’ the woman asked, her voice both ancient and ageless. She sat motionless on a low stool in the corner, only stirring when I approached for a closer look. She waved a hand around, gesturing at the selection of delicate creatures. A constant low rustling sound filled the stall as the creatures moved lazily in their enclosures.

I looked around, searching the various cages and inspecting a few creatures I didn’t recognize. I already had in mind what I was looking for, but did not see them among the crates and cages in her stall.

‘Do you have any butterflies?’ I asked, turning my attention to the old woman.

‘If what you seek is not here, it can be made,’ she said. She gestured to a workbench in the back of the stall, piled high with stacks of paper, then pointed to an empty golden cage sitting beside it. I nodded, and she beckoned me closer into the small, covered space.

‘Butterflies,’ she said, rolling the word around in her mouth like she’d never said it before. She pulled a small notebook from the pocket of her apron, muttering something I couldn’t understand—it rather sounded like ‘psyche’—and flipped through it for a moment, stopping near halfway through and turning it around to display the page. Butterflies of all shapes and sizes were sketched on the page, each with a unique set of markings on its wings. I stepped closer, considering the many options, and finally pointed to the center of the page, where the
largest and most beautiful by far was drawn. She nodded, turning the page back around and looking over the drawing I had selected. ‘How many?’ she asked, tapping one finger on the page.

‘Three,’ I answered. She nodded, tapping the page still.

‘Very well,’ she said, pocketing the notebook once again. ‘But what price?’ She asked the question quietly, almost to herself. A silver cage full of songbirds caught my eye from the ground, and I leaned down to get a closer look, peering into the cage at their impossibly delicate paper feathers.

‘I will not take money,’ she said abruptly, slowly rising from her seat on the old wooden stool. This was good—I had no money. I only hoped she would not ask for something I could not give.

‘You have a key?’ she said, shuffling closer and pointing a bony finger at the emerald stone around my neck. I nodded. It had fallen from my shirt as I bent down to examine the birds. She glanced around suspiciously, shuffling to the front of the stall to unfasten a thick curtain. The fabric curtain fell across the entrance, shielding the interior from prying eyes. The room was immediately bathed in thick shadow. I felt suddenly worried that she might demand the key in return for the butterflies, or else attack me and try to take it, so enamored was she with the stone around my neck. But she only shuffled calmly back to her seat.

‘You must be a great traveler,’ she said, looking me over more carefully as she sat down. ‘Wise in the ways of many worlds. But you should keep such a thing carefully hidden in this place.’

‘Would people here try to steal it?’ I asked, tucking the stone carefully beneath my shirt once again.

‘There are those who would steal it,’ she said, looking at me with an amused expression.

‘And there are those who would simply kill you for it.’ I nodded gravely, and she pointed a finger at my chest. ‘A key like that is rarer than water in the desert these days. Those people who would not take it would likely pay a great price for your services.’ Her eyes flickered to the empty golden cage.

‘I see,’ I said, realizing that she was proposing a trade.
“And what would those people request of me?” I spoke furtively, expecting a whispered, clandestine reply. Instead, the old woman laughed. It was quite the cackle, and it went on for more than a moment.

When her laughter finally subsided, she looked at me, amusement still alight in her eyes. ‘What a serious young man you are,’ she said, chuckling again before going on.

‘I need you to retrieve something for me. I desire a very valuable treasure, a magical object, stolen from my people ages ago. It has changed hands many times since then, but now I believe it rests in the hoard of a pirate who roams the Golden Sea. He calls himself Bardurus. His ship is the Blackheart.’ As she spoke his name she gestured with her hands, a sign to ward off evil that I recognized from my travels.

‘You must find where he keeps his hoard and bring me what I seek. Then,’ she paused, waving a hand at the gilded cage. ‘You may claim your great prize.’ I stood there for a moment, considering her proposition, hoping the darkness of the room hid the contemplative expression on my face.

‘How do I reach the Golden Sea?’ I asked, dreading the chore of gateway hunting. Traveling between the worlds is not like going to the airport—finding the proper path to follow can be a complicated and arduous process. My journey would likely begin with a visit to my old friend, the cartographer. Without his guidance I would probably never be able to find my way.

‘How should I know?’ she said, cackling again. ‘You’re the traveler, remember?’ I smiled in spite of myself.

‘Very well,’ I said, giving the empty cage one last glance. ‘I will return with your treasure, and you will have the butterflies ready for me.’ She agreed, and we shook hands. She described the treasure to me, sketching a picture on a scrap of fabric. After waiving it in the air to dry the ink, I folded it carefully and placed it in the pocket of my trousers.

‘How free you must be,’ she said suddenly, looking almost longingly to where the key lay hidden beneath my shirt. ‘To have your own key, to travel at will to any world you like. If I were young again . . .’ she trailed off, still looking longingly.
‘I will tell you all about my travels when I return,’ I offered, and she brightened, grinning.

‘How exciting,’ she said, selecting several sheets of parchment from atop the workbench in the back of the stall. She immediately went to work, pulling out an old, rusted pair of scissors and slicing into the sheets of paper.

With that, I left the market behind, searching for a gateway that would lead me to the cartographer’s shop.”

Mr. Ortega paused, looking around the group of kids who sat, enraptured, listening to the story. As he paused, several hands went up in the group. Mr. Ortega chuckled, then waved his hands.

“Maybe we should take questions at the end,” he said, still chuckling, and the kids nodded, lowering their hands and listening attentively as he continued.

“The cartographer was an old friend of mine. I had visited his shop many times before in search of directions and various items to aid in adventuring. He was the one who, when I first became an adventurer, gifted me my compass, so that I would always be able to find my way home.

I followed a familiar path to his door. His name is Acamar. He greeted me warmly when I reached his shop, and after we had visited for a while, I asked him for the directions I needed.

‘Ah, the Golden Sea. I know it well—though hardly anyone asks for the way there anymore. Overrun with pirates now, I think.’ Acamar looked at me pointedly, watching for my reaction.

‘So I’ve heard,’ I said, chuckling. ‘That’s actually why I’m going there – an errand, for a new friend. She has asked me to . . . liberate a magical object from a pirate’s hoard and return it to her.’ I explained. Acamar nodded.

‘Ah, you’ve met Hestra, the paper woman. An old friend of mine.’ he said, fondness entering his voice. ‘What do you seek in return for this errand?’
‘She will craft three butterflies, for my granddaughter’s birthday.’ I answered. He nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

‘It is a fair price,’ he said after a moment. I agreed.

‘Very well, you will need detailed instructions.’ He pulled a thick book from a shelf behind him, dropping it on the countertop with a thud and opening the leatherbound cover. Columns of words and strange symbols were written neatly on each page, all in a language I did not recognize.

‘The way is not long from here, but it is complicated.’ He flipped through the record book, studying the symbols, making notes every now and then on a sheet of yellowed parchment. After a few moments he closed the book and beckoned me closer.

‘Your journey will begin in the living library,’ he said, pointing to the first line of notes on the parchment.

‘You must find this book,’ he pointed to a long line of symbols on the page. ‘Knock on the cover four times, like this,’ He rapped on the countertop, three quick beats followed by another after a short pause.

‘Are they putting gateways in books now?’ I asked, half-joking. A book would certainly not be the strangest object I had encountered containing a gateway, but it would probably be the smallest.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Acamar said, smiling. ‘A librarian will come to you – her name is Claris. Tell her you have been sent by Acamar, and that you seek the Golden Sea. She will guide you to the path.’ He pointed to the parchment again, where the instructions had been written in neat lines. I nodded.

‘Eventually you will reach a desert. The path from the library to the desert is not a gateway—it’s a convergence.’ I nodded. A convergence is a place where, instead of being connected by a single point through a gateway, two worlds are sort of smushed together, colliding to form a strange in-between space. They are uncanny places, often with distorted physics and threatening creatures.
‘Beyond this the records are vague,’ he warned, ‘but you must cross the desert until you reach the sea.’

‘Any idea how far?’ I asked, and he shook his head.

‘Vague,’ he said again, shrugging.

‘Very well,’ I said, ‘Do you have anything I might borrow to make the way easier?’ He nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

‘You may have a look,’ he gestured around the shop. ‘When you find what you need, bring it to me in the back.’

I perused Acamar’s shop for some time, eventually selecting three items. I chose from the bursting shelves an old canteen with a leather strap, a wide-brimmed hat, and a small leather pouch, which I tied securely to my belt. I made my way to the back room.

A huge mirror, nearly touching the ceiling, leaned against the back wall of the room. The mirror was mounted in a thick frame of darkened metal, engraved with strange symbols and inlaid with a strip of emerald in the center. Acamar stood beside the mirror, spinning a small dial that protruded from the side of the frame.

‘I wasn’t aware that these were still being made,’ I said, marveling at the magnificent gateway in front of me. I had heard of these types of gates before, but had never seen one in person.

Acamar stopped spinning the dial and pushed against it, until it slid flush with the side of the frame. The silvery surface of the mirror rippled for a split second before becoming still once again.

‘They are not,’ he said, stepping back and looking at the gateway with pride. ‘This one is mine. Two thousand years old, yet still as magnificent as the day it was built. The craftsmen of my youth were brilliant artists. You could not wish to pass through a finer gate, my friend.’ He said, still gazing at the mirror, eyes filled with pride and a touch of wistfulness. I nodded humbly. I had never been given the opportunity to pass through the cartographer’s gateway before, I was both honored and humbled by the privilege.
He looked me over, nodding quietly to himself, and beckoned me to stand before the mirror. ‘You may feel some resistance at first,’ he said, pointing at the silvery surface. ‘Just keep moving forward. You will emerge in the living library. Follow the instructions I have given you, do not forget to tell the librarian that I sent you, otherwise she may set a trap for you.’ I reached a hand into my shirt pocket to double check that his instructions were there. My fingers brushed the folded paper, and I nodded at him.

‘Thank you for your guidance,’ I said, extending a hand.

‘To guide is my duty. To guide you is a privilege.’ He took my hand, giving it a firm, sincere shake. ‘Be careful my friend.’ It was a familiar sentiment of his, repeated to me every time I set out from his shop on a new adventure.

‘I will be, Acamar. I always am.’ He nodded, smiling warmly at me. I took a step forward, hesitated a moment, then turned back around.

‘Shall I tell Hestra that you helped me?’ I asked. His eyes widened slightly, the barest hint of a blush coloring his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

‘Oh dear,’ he said, glancing hesitantly at himself in the mirror. ‘It has been too long. If I were young again . . .’ he trailed off. At length, he shook his head. ‘Hearing of me now will only complicate your arrangement. I would prefer to go unmentioned.’ He nodded to himself after saying this.

‘Very well. Goodbye my friend, until we meet again.’ I said, and he nodded.

‘Goodbye, Ortega.’ He stepped forward, raising a hand and pressing it against the metallic frame. The emerald inlay glowed dimly, and the surface of the mirror began to ripple gently once again.

I took a breath, hesitating for only a second before stepping into the frame, pressing through the rippling, silvery surface. I felt the cold whisper of silver against my skin, and found myself sinking slowly in the strange, thick substance. I struggled to keep moving forward, pushing my legs and clawing with my hands, a motion more like swimming than walking. I felt the silver seeping in, filling my closed eyes and trying to drip down my throat. I tried not to panic as seconds turned into minutes and holding my breath became harder and harder. Finally,
after what felt like an eternity, my feet hit a hard surface, and all at once I burst out of the silver liquid onto an uneven wood floor. I stumbled forward, grabbing the nearest thing to steady myself, a crowded bookshelf. I stood there for a few moments, breathing deeply, bent over to let the silver drip out of my eyes. After catching my breath, I looked behind me, curious to see what the far side of the cartographer’s gate looked like. I stared down a dark, empty aisle, lined on both sides by towering bookshelves that stretched on endlessly. The hall was lit at small intervals by flickering lamps mounted to the shelves, and it slowly curved away into the distance. A few small puddles of silver were splashed on the floorboards at my feet, but otherwise there was no trace of the gateway I had just passed through.

I assumed that I had successfully reached the living library, and I followed Acamar’s instructions to the letter. It was a long process to find the right book—the library is quite the endless labyrinth—and it took some time to convince the librarian that I was truly sent by Acamar the cartographer. Once she showed me the path to follow, I crossed through the convergence as quickly as I could, hoping to escape the notice of any strange or harmful creatures. Eventually I reached the other side without event.”

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“I had reached the edge of a massive desert, extending out before me as far as I could see. I stood sheltered in the spotty shade of a crumbling, empty bookshelf, the last remnant of the library I had left behind. High above the sand, suspended in a line in the sky, were three suns. Between the desert and I stood two massive pillars of white stone—marble, I think—set several meters apart, guarding the way forward. Between the pillars and I sat a large marble fountain, constructed from the same white stone as the pillars, but covered in a fine web of cracks. The fountain had three tiered basins, each slightly smaller than the last, stacked above the largest, which rested on the ground. The top of the fountain was adorned with a small gold statue, a woman with arms stretched up toward the sky, as if she had been caught dancing. She was beautiful, and expertly carved. I stepped closer to admire her. What I had thought were cracks in the stone were actually thin rivers of gold, running through the stone in a spiderweb pattern. The
woman was only about knee height, but stood above my head atop her marble pedestal, reaching
toward the suns in the sky. The rivers of gold in the stone all began at her feet.

The fountain was, regrettably, bone dry. I considered the empty canteen slung over my
shoulder and looked out across the massive, baking desert. It would be a long journey. I had
already removed my coat and rolled up my sleeves, but that did little to quell the dry heat
radiating off the sand. I hesitated for a few moments, loathe to begin the slow trek across the hot
dunes, and stood by to admire the fountain a little longer.

I stared up at the beautiful gold woman, wondering who had made her and who had
placed her here, at the edge of all this nothingness. I was lost in thought, still looking up at her,
when suddenly her head turned toward me, gold eyes staring straight into my own. I stumbled
back a few steps.

‘Oh—’ I said, startled. ‘I didn’t—I wasn’t—I’m terribly sorry,’ I said, flustered and
embarrassed, feeling immediately that I should apologize. ‘I didn’t mean to stare.’

She laughed. The sound was high, clear, and flowed from her golden lips like a mountain
stream. I took a few small steps forward, and she looked down at me with amusement in her
face. She swept one arm down, waving a flat palm above the smallest basin in a small arc. The
fountain gurgled suddenly, bubbling to life. Cool water flowed from the stone at the woman’s
feet, quickly filling the first basin and spilling down to the levels below.

I looked at her in awe. She held out an open palm, inviting me to drink. I cupped my
hands, filling them with water before lifting them to my lips. The water was refreshingly cool,
and almost sweet. Imagine the purest water on the earth, the sort that flows from mountaintops
and falls from the sky. A few sips were all I needed to feel restored. I nodded my thanks to the
woman, who watched me curiously. I looked out across the desert again, remembering the
journey ahead, and reached for the canteen at my side.

‘May I?’ I asked her, unsure if she would permit me to take the water. She nodded and
continued watching me, intrigued. I filled the canteen from the lowest basin and recapped it.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and she smiled. As I slung the canteen over my shoulder, she spoke.
‘What is your name, traveler?’ she asked. She moved much more freely than I expected, sitting down on the stone pedestal and swinging her legs over the edge like a child on a tree branch.

‘Ortega,’ I answered, instinctively reaching a hand up to shake hers in greeting. I dropped it again, realizing that one of my hands could nearly engulf her entire arm. ‘It is a pleasure to meet you, miss. . .’ I trailed off, unsure if it would be insulting to call her a fountain. I felt a twinge of embarrassment as my hesitation stretched into an awkward silence.

She laughed again, musical sound breaking the silence.

‘My name is Nereia,’ she said, bowing her head. Her golden hair fell forward and she gathered it over one shoulder, out of her face. As she bowed her head, I saw that she wore a tiny emerald crown atop it, nearly hidden in her golden hair.

‘Where did you come from, Nereia? I mean—’ I gestured around at the emptiness around us. ‘How did you get here?’ I hoped she would not find the question rude.

‘I believe I have always been here.’ She looked around her, a loving expression on her face as she regarded the stone pillars and sandy, barren expanse. ‘It is my purpose.’

‘Your purpose?’ I asked, puzzled. She nodded.

‘In another land, my sister sings the restless and the troubled to sleep with ancient music. Here, it is my duty to give water to travelers.’ She looked down at me, a flash of sadness crossing her golden features. ‘I do not see many travelers anymore.’

‘I am glad to have come this way, to have met you,’ I said, and she smiled brightly.

We spoke for some time; she told me stories of travelers from ages past, each one on a grand adventure of their own. I shared a few of my own stories, daring quests and far-flung voyages from long ago. The hours crept by, and the blazing day slowly slackened into a smoldering evening. After a while, she looked up into the sky.

‘It’s past the second sunset,’ she said, staring into the distance, where only a single sun remained above the horizon. ‘You should begin your journey.’ I nodded, knowing she was right.
I rose from my seat on the side of the fountain, and she climbed back atop the stone pedestal, raising one hand above her head. I hesitated, not wanting to leave her company.

‘Goodbye Nereia,’ I said reluctantly, sad to leave her alone again. ‘I will remember you,’

‘I will remember you as well, Ortega,’ she said, smiling softly at me. She pointed between the stone pillars. ‘Travelers must not return this way. Your path is forward, only.’ She warned, and I looked to where she pointed. The space between the pillars seemed to shimmer for a moment, but I was unsure if was simply the heat. ‘The way is open, and you will find what you seek.’

I looked back up at her. There was still a hint of wistfulness in her face.

‘Goodbye,’ she said finally, raising her other arm and turning her face toward the darkening sky. The spring flowing from beneath her feet slowed, then stopped altogether, slowly draining from through the golden seams and darkening the sand around the fountain’s base.

The sudden quiet felt heavy and thick without the constant bubbling of the water and the exchange of soft voices. I looked up one last time at Nereia as she stood, staring upwards at the slowly emerging stars. Soaked in silence, I passed between the pillars and began my journey out onto the whispering sand.”

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“I traveled through the night, climbing one dune after another, searching for anything on the horizon to break the monotony of the golden sand. Above me spun, bright, foreign constellations, chasing after each other through the sky, one by one falling below the horizon.

When the dark of night began to soften into a predawn gray, I spotted something far in the distance. It looked somewhat like a house, a small gray square that stood out against the dunes all around it. As I got closer, I realized that the structure was not a house, but a chapel. It stood ruined and crumbling, with blocks of gray stone scattered around the fallen steeple.
As the first sun began to split the sky with streaks of fire, I reached the chapel’s ruined walls. Wearily, I climbed through a gap in the stone, intent on resting inside the chapel through the long, hot day. It was the only shelter I had seen thus far, and as the second sun joined the first in the sky, the sand began blazing under the orange light. The dunes in the distance shimmered with the heat, but inside the chapel the air was cool. Shadows clung to the walls and slumbered in the dark corners. The interior was small, with one wall crumbling and a roof full of holes. A few splintered pews decorated the room haphazardly. I chose the sturdiest looking, stretching out on my back and rolling up my coat as a pillow. I stared up through the holes in the ceiling, watching the red light of dawn slowly dissolve into deep blue sky.

I rested there through the day, sleeping in small stretches. Though the sun beat down mercilessly on the little ruin, the corners of the room remained clothed in shadow, and a chill hung in the air. When the trio of suns finally dropped below the far horizon, I set out across the desert once again, stars dancing above my head.

I journeyed on through another night, watching the horizon intently, searching for a sign of the ocean’s edge. I continued on, resolute, confident in Acamar’s instruction, cross the desert until you reach the sea. His guidance had never failed me before. Though my boots grew heavy, weighed down by sand and fatigue, I continued on.

It wasn’t until the third morning that the sand began to move. The suns had not yet emerged, but the sky had lightened. The horizon was just beginning to glow with orange light when I noticed it. It didn’t move by much at first, just a ripple here and there. In the beginning I thought it was just the breeze, which had begun sometime the day before, blowing gentle and warm from the desert ahead. But then the sand started moving in waves—small at first, but gradually growing larger, and it became apparent that it was definitely not the wind.

Shortly after this realization, my feet began sinking into the sand with every step. I felt it would be wise to stop and get my bearings before blindly venturing on. I climbed atop a nearby dune, one that seemed relatively stationary, and tried to survey the path ahead.

Before me, illuminated in the light of the first sunrise, the entire desert was in motion, marching dunes that rolled and crashed like waves in the ocean. As they rose and fell, the
characteristic crash and roar of ocean surf reached my ears along with a constant rustling whisper.

I felt trapped. There was no path forward that did not lead into the turbulent waves ahead, and I knew from Nereia’s warning that returning the way I had come was not an option. I felt the light of the suns on my back, the heat of the day already setting in. I stood atop the last still dune in sight, unsure of my next move, contemplating my limited options.

As I stood there deep in thought, staring out at thousands of billows and swells in desert ahead, I spotted an odd shape floating on the sand, rising and falling on the dunes far in the distance. As I watched, it dipped into the trough of a wave, falling out of sight. I squinted, trying to get a better look, stepping forward and rising on my tiptoes to catch another glimpse of the strange object. This unfortunately turned out to be a mistake, because as soon as I stepped forward, the edge of the dune crumbled beneath my feet. Suddenly I was sliding down an avalanche of hot sand, straight into the turbulent waves below.”

The group of kids gasped, and Mr. Ortega nodded gravely at them.

“Did you die?” one of the younger boys asked, and his older brother smacked him on the back of the head.

“If he was dead, he wouldn’t be telling us the story Kirk.” His brother said condescendingly, and Kirk nodded, embarrassed.

“Thankfully, I did not die,” said Mr. Ortega, chuckling at Kirk’s question. “Though for a moment I was certain that I would. If not for a very gracious and honorable pirate captain who happened to come along at just the right time, I’m afraid I might not be sitting here telling you this tale.”

The kids stirred excitedly, murmuring to each other. A few kids glanced at Kirk’s older brother, Dale. His birthday, only a few months before, had been pirate themed. Ever since, he had been the unofficial pirate leader of the neighborhood kids. He organized their quests and adventures, sailing the seven seas in his backyard treehouse with his crew of friends. He straightened up at the mention of pirates, suddenly becoming much more attentive.
Evelyn, sitting next to Teddy on the covered porch, was entirely unable to control the exasperated look on her face. Teddy leaned over to her, rubbing his thumb on the back of her hand.

“What’s wrong Eve?” He whispered softly. She shook her head, sighing quietly.

“Ever since mom died his stories have been getting crazier and crazier . . . I’m just worried about him.” She said, giving him a tight smile. Truthfully, she wasn’t nearly as worried as she was annoyed. She had been watching Ellie carefully, watching her blindly believe his tall tale, hanging on every word, savoring every detail. She shook her head again, crossing her arms and shifting in her seat as Mr. Ortega launched back into the story.

“So you see, it was quite a shock to be suddenly falling into the waves. I panicked for a moment, flailing, trying not to breathe in. I couldn’t open my eyes, couldn’t tell which way was up, and I tumbled uselessly in the waves for what felt like minutes before eventually finding my bearings and swimming for the surface. Though the waves were only moving sand, they behaved very much like water, and swimming through them was fairly easy. I finally reached the surface, spitting out a mouthful of sand, looking around desperately for the solid ground I had been standing on a moment before. It was nowhere in sight. I was completely surrounded by tumultuous waves, bobbing along on the surface like a leaf in a stream, caught in a strong current. I’m a fairly strong swimmer, but everybody tires eventually. As I was swept quickly out into the sandy ocean, I worried that I would soon falter and sink below the surface. I tried to conserve my energy, lying on my back and moving my arms in slow semi circles to keep me afloat. I squeezed my eyes shut against the blinding white light of the three suns in the sky.

After a few moments of this, the adrenaline of my impromptu swim slowly subsided, replaced by fatigue and dread. I was floating in an endless sandy ocean, hopeless and utterly alone. As my muscles began to groan and cramp, I felt a cool shadow pass over my face, blocking the light from the sun. Faint shouts reached my ears from somewhere far above, and I opened my eyes.

A massive ship loomed above me, rocking gently in the waves, white sails billowing in the strong breeze. A black flag flew atop the tallest mast, the center printed with a single golden triangle. The figurehead at the bow was a woman, arms stretched toward the sky, long hair flowing
over her shoulders and tiny crown atop her head. *Lucky Lucy* was painted along the bow in swirling black letters.

The ship’s railing was lined with people, pointing down at me and shouting. One man stepped forward, stripping off his shirt and pulling off his boots before climbing atop the railing. He jumped off, diving expertly into the waves. After a moment he emerged, taking a deep breath before swimming swiftly to my side.

‘Alive?’ he asked, giving me a gentle shove. I flipped myself over, treading sand awkwardly as I faced him. He was a young man, face sober with concentration.

‘Alive,’ I confirmed breathlessly, and he nodded. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. Another man on the ship tossed a rope down. The young man beside me caught it, forming a small loop tying it off tightly. He instructed me to put my foot through the loop, and I did so.

‘Hold on,’ he said, pointing at the men on the ship. Together they began heaving on the rope, and I clung to it for dear life as I was rapidly lifted out of the sand and up the side of the ship. When I reached the level of the railing, several men grabbed me by my shirt, heaving me over the railing to safety. The young man was hauled up a few seconds later.

I lay sprawled on the warm wooden deck, panting, muscles groaning and sand spilling from the folds of my clothes. My hands flew to my throat, and I checked frantically that the gatekey was still around my neck. During my fall into the waves I had dropped my coat, losing both it and my compass in the process. That loss would be troublesome and sorely felt, but as long as I had not lost my key, I would not be trapped here.

The young man, who seemed none the worse for wear after his short swim, offered me a hand. I took it, and he helped me climb to my feet. More sand poured from my clothes, falling to the deck with a soft whisper. The ship’s crew were all crowded around, staring at me in awe.

‘How did you get here, stranger?’ The young man asked, glancing around at his crew, his own face mirroring their shock. I looked around at them, then out at the sandy ocean all around. I chuckled a little, half shrugging.

‘It’s a long story.’
The young man smiled, extending his hand once again.

‘I look forward to hearing it, stranger. My name is Caspian,’ he said, and I shook his hand firmly. His grip was strong, but not overpowering.

‘Ortega,’ I responded, and he gave me a friendly smile.

‘Welcome to the Golden Sea.’”

Mr. Ortega leaned back in his chair, looking fondly at the enamored faces of his young audience. Each pair of eyes were wide, each mouth slightly agape.

“I spent many weeks with Caspian and his crew. We sailed far and wide across the Golden Sea. If I were to tell you of all adventures we shared, we would be here for many more hours, and this story has gone on quite long enough as it is.” He glanced at Evelyn, disapproval and resentment plain on her face. Mr. Ortega cleared his throat and looked away.

“In return for my aid on a few short quests, Caspian and his crew helped me find the hoard of the captain of the Blackheart, and together we pulled off quite a genius heist to reclaim the treasure for Hestra. Caspian and Bardurus have long been enemies, and he swiftly agreed to help liberate some of the treasure. When we had escaped safely and were back aboard the Lucky Lucy sailing across the sea, I approached him. I asked him if there was a place on the sea I might find a gateway, unsure if he would think me insane. He was unfazed by the question, and told me that he knew of a place, a shining city across the sea. We set a course for it at once.

‘You know of the gateways,’ I said. In tone it was a statement, but in truth it was question. He answered revealingly, though not with words. He reached up to his neck and took hold of the thin black cord around it, lifting it over his head and holding it out to me. I took it, examining the pendant on the end. An emerald stone, carved in a perfect disk and polished smooth, with a hole in the center. A gatekey identical to my own. I chuckled, not quite surprised—I should have seen that coming. I handed it back to him, and he replaced it around his neck.

‘I used to be a free traveler, like you Ortega.’ He said, turning around and leaning back against the ship’s railing where we stood. I mirrored his movement.
‘I had always loved this world. There was nothing as beautiful to me as the sea, until I met my Lucy, and for a while I gave up my travels to be with her. What I would have given to be with her forever . . .’ his words trailed off, voice laced with sadness.

‘But it was not to be. When she died, I remembered my travels.’ He looked up to the crow’s nest, where a small boy was perched, peering intently into the distance, searching diligently for other ships. ‘So I came back. Brought my boy. Decided to stay.’ He smiled up at the boy far above, who caught sight of his father below and waved, grinning widely.

‘My Jackie. He’s a good boy. Loves the sea just as much as I do. Lucy would be proud.’ He cleared his throat, pausing. I interjected, giving him a moment to collect himself.

‘You have shared your world and your greatest passion with your family,’ I said. ‘For that I admire you. Not everyone is capable of that kind of bravery.’ He nodded, looking at me, then out across the golden sand. We stayed quiet for a moment, but another question burned through my brain and out my mouth before I could stop it.

‘Do you miss her?’ I asked, a little startled at the raw tone of my voice. ‘Do your adventures help?’ I tried to rephrase so the question was less pointed. He said nothing at first, only smiled as he looked across the sea.

‘She is with me,’ he said after a moment, looking down and patting the ship’s railing fondly. ‘And with Jack.’ I smiled softly and nodded. ‘Whoever you are missing, she is with you too.’ He added, glancing at me.

‘The city!’ young Jack cried from the crow’s nest. ‘It’s the city, I can see it!’ He waived and pointed ahead, where a shining silver speck was visible on the horizon. The ship’s crew gathered along the railings, pointing excitedly and shouting to each other. Caspian left my side, returning to his position on the quarterdeck.

The ship became a whirlwind of activity as we drew closer to the city. Caspian gave me detailed directions to the gateway, which was guarded by the city’s own cartographer, a woman named Canopus.
‘When you find her, tell her you have been sailing with me. She is an old friend of mine,’ Caspian advised from the deck of the ship. I stood on the pier below, rising and falling with the gentle lapping of the golden sand.

‘I will. Thank you for all your help, Caspian, I could never have done this without you.’ I said, gesturing to the leather pouch on my belt where Hestra’s treasure was safely nestled. Caspian grinned down at me, turning to his boy Jack and saying something I couldn’t hear, pointing to the quarterdeck. The boy scurried off.

‘Your quest was pure-hearted, my friend. Even if it hadn’t been, I would’ve gladly accepted the opportunity to steal from Bardurus.’ We both chuckled at his words.

‘I will miss our adventures my friend,’ I said, regretting the need to leave behind another new friend.

‘You are welcome aboard my ship any time,’ Caspian said, smiling down at me. ‘If you ever come back this way, we must sail together again.’ I heartily agreed.

‘Goodbye Caspian, it has been an honor.’ I said, raising a hand in farewell. I turned to leave and took a few steps down the pier.

‘Ortega!’ Caspian called, and I turned back. He tossed something small over the side of the ship, and it flashed as it spun through the air. I caught it, turning it in my hands and holding it up in the sun. A small gold coin, roughly the size of a nickel, and engraved with a tiny ship’s anchor.

‘To remember us,’ Caspian said. He stood beside his son, one hand on the boy’s shoulder, and they both smiled warmly down at me.

‘I could never forget,’ I said, nodding up at them before securing the coin safely inside the leather pouch. The coin jingled against the treasure inside. With that, I waved once more, and turned away from the Lucky Lucy, heading into the city.

I searched the streets for the cartographer’s shop. Caspian had told me her name was Canopus. When I reached it, she seemed reluctant to help me at first, even after I told her of my adventures with Caspian. I mentioned my good friend Acamar, another cartographer, and immediately she began treating me like an old friend, jumping to help me complete my quest.
She led me to a hidden room below her shop, where a gateway identical to Acamar’s stood, dusty and unused, against the far wall. It took her a moment to adjust the dial, struggling to shove it back into place. She was sending me directly back to the marketplace. As I prepared to pass through the mirror, I thanked her, and she nodded.

‘To guide is my duty,’ she said, bowing her head.

I passed through the gateway, emerging in a quiet alley. I could hear the bustle of the marketplace close by, and followed the sound to the busy maze of vendors. I followed the same path through the market that I had the first time, eventually spotting the place I was searching for.

The old woman, Hestra, was hunched over her workbench in the back of the stall. The golden cage sat at her feet, two butterflies already fluttering around inside. She held up the third, inspecting it intently, before wetting a paint brush with dark purple ink and carefully painting a design on the butterfly’s wings. Once she finished, the butterfly began to move, flapping lazily at first as it stretched its paper limbs. She set the cage on the benchtop, opening the door and quickly placing the new butterfly inside before the others could escape.

‘They look perfect,’ I said, ducking beneath the low fabric ceiling. She grinned as she turned around, looking me over.

‘What an adventure you must have had,’ she said, eyes filled with delight. ‘Tell me all about it.’

After recounting my tale, I gave her the treasure, and she placed the butterflies in my care. After that, I traveled back home. And here I am.”

Mr. Ortega winked at Ellie, who smiled. “And now the butterflies are in your charge,” He said to Ellie, standing from his chair. “I trust you will take good care of them.” Ellie nodded emphatically, grinning.

‘Of course!’ Mr. Ortega smiled and nodded, then addressed the group of kids.

‘I think that’s quite enough storytelling for the day. Go and play!’ he said, spreading his hands as if he were releasing a dove at a wedding. The kids immediately scrambled off, shouting and laughing. He gave Ellie another hug, then sent her to play with the other kids.
Mr. Ortega glanced over at Evelyn. She shook her head at him and stood from her chair, immediately walking through back door and slamming it behind her. Teddy looked at Mr. Ortega and shrugged apologetically. Mr. Ortega nodded.

The kids were starting a grand adventure of their own. They had formed into two groups, rival pirate crews, battling each other on the high seas.
A few hours later, after the sun had set and the guests had all gone but one, Evelyn stood at the kitchen counter pouring herself a glass of wine. Mr. Ortega sat next to Ellie in the backyard, the two of them staring into the night sky and pointing out the stars. Teddy returned to the kitchen after locking the front door and wrapped his wife into a big hug.

“You did great today,” he said, squeezing her tightly.

“Thanks,” she replied, hugging him back halfheartedly. He took in the frustrated, contemplative expression on her face.

“What is it?” She sighed and turned away, setting down her glass.

“I don’t want to talk with him,” she said, looking out the window where her father and daughter sat together. “It always goes the same way. Nothing ever changes.”

“You don’t have to,” Teddy said. He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I can ask him to leave,” he offered. Evelyn shook her head.

“He’s with Ellie.” She tapped her fingers on the counter, picking up her glass and moving away from the kitchen window.

“I know you don’t think he’s a good influence on her, but—” Teddy started. Her face darkened at his words, and he paused for a moment.

“But look at how happy he made her today.” He finished cautiously. Evelyn sighed again, indignant.

“Exactly the problem, Ted.” She said, looking him in the eye. “Today. He showed up this time. This time. What about next year? What about all the years he’s missed before?” Teddy looked away, staring at the floor.

“I just think maybe it’s time you gave him another chance.” Teddy said. Evelyn immediately opened her mouth to snap back at him, but was cut off.
Ellie burst into the kitchen, Mr. Ortega trailing behind her. “I have something to show everybody!” She said excitedly, zipping through the kitchen to the living room. When she didn’t return, the three adults followed.

She was crouched beside the big coffee table in the living room, digging through her purple backpack, notebooks and colored pencils flying.

“What are you looking for kiddo?” Teddy asked, taking a seat on the couch beside her. Evelyn followed suit, sitting next to him on the couch. Mr. Ortega also sat, choosing the big armchair across the room from them.

“I drew a picture at summer camp,” Ellie said, pulling a stack of colorful construction paper out of her backpack and flipping through it. “We were supposed to draw what we were looking forward to most for the whole summer.” She removed a page from the middle of the stack, handing it to her dad first.

“It’s my party!” she said happily, pointing at the banner she’d drawn at the top of the page that read Happy Birthday Ellie.

“It’s beautiful sweetie,” Teddy said, leaning over and holding the drawing out so Evelyn could see it too. Evelyn took the page, looking over it for a moment before nodding and smiling at Ellie.

“And everybody’s here!” She said, taking the page and running across the room to show her grandpa. She handed him the paper, leaning over and pointing at each of the stick figures on the page.

“That’s mom and dad,” she said, pointing them out on the left side of the page. “There’s Daisy, and the kids from school,” she pointed to a little crowd of short figures on the right. “There’s me,” she pointed to a little purple figure, standing beside a very tall figure drawn in dark green. “And there’s you grandpa! Look, I knew you would be here, way back then I knew!” she said, twirling in a little circle in the middle of the room.

“I knew you would come, I told mom over and over that you would.” Ellie looked back at Evelyn, who smiled thinly at her.

Mr. Ortega examined the drawing closely, raising an eyebrow in exaggerated suspicion.
“Are you sure this is me?” He asked playfully, pointing to himself in the drawing. “This one here?” She nodded emphatically. “I don’t know,” Mr. Ortega said doubtfully, stroking his beard. “He looks much too tall to be me.”

“Yes, grandpa it’s you! I knew you would be here. I just knew!” She insisted, laughing as he raised a quizzical brow. He pointed out a few of the other stick figures in the crowded drawing, asking her questions about them.

Evelyn gave Teddy a pointed look, crossing her arms.

“Alright Ellie, it’s time to get ready for bed,” Teddy said quickly, rising from the couch and grabbing her backpack from the coffee table.

“But I want to stay and hang out with Grandpa!” She protested, hanging onto the arm of Mr. Ortega’s chair.

“No, grandpa and mommy are going to talk for a while. I’ll read you a story,” Teddy offered, and she nodded slowly. “Say goodnight to Grandpa sweetie,” he said, stuffing the scattered pencils and books back inside the backpack.

“Okay dad,” she said slowly, turning back to Mr. Ortega as he rose from his chair to give her a hug.

“Goodnight my dear, sweet dreams.” Mr. Ortega said, wrapping her in a hug. She hugged him back tightly, holding on and giggling as he lifted her up and twirled her around in a circle again. “Happy birthday.” He whispered, and she smiled.

“Goodnight grandpa, thank you for coming, I’m glad I got to see you.” She said as he set her down. “I love the butterflies.” She said, smiling brightly at him before racing out of the room and up the stairs after her dad.

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“She’s been talking about this for weeks,” Evelyn began, shifting sideways on the couch until she sat directly across from Mr. Ortega. “Talking about how you would be here and how
wonderful her party would be. She was so sure that you’d be here,” she said, gesturing to the
drawing that was still clutched in Mr. Ortega’s hand.

“But I wasn’t. I really didn’t think you’d be here. What would I have said to her when
you didn’t show up?” Her voice was cold like iron, volume conversational, but with a tone that
cut like a knife.

“Evelyn, I—” Mr. Ortega tried to interject, but she cut him off.

“You showed up this time,” she said, gesturing at the room vaguely. “But what about
next time? What about all the times before?” Her eyes burned into his, but he did not lower his
gaze from hers.

“What do I say to her, to explain your absence time after time, to tell her I have no idea if
you’ll be here because I have no way to contact you?” She looked around the room, throwing out
her hands.

“I really was—” he started again, but she kept talking.

“I had no way to tell you we’re having a party today. I couldn’t call you, couldn’t even
mail you an invitation because, as far as I know, you don’t even have an address!” S
he pointed
an accusatory finger at him now. “Are you sleeping under a bridge somewhere? For all I know
you could be!”

“It’s my travels—” he tried, but her eyes flashed, and she immediately cut him off again.

“No dad, I’m tired of the stories. I’m just tired of these stories! Like the one you told
tonight, like the ones you always tell,” She crossed her arms. “They just keep getting crazier and
crazier. You come here and you fill my kid’s head with wild stories about adventures and
dragons and pirate treasures, and it’s my job to bring her back to the real world, every time,
every time you visit!” She struggled to keep her voice quiet.

“They are not just stories,” Mr. Ortega said softly, but she shook her head at him.

“What really happened to your hand? Are you hurting yourself now?” She paused, looking him over.

“They believe that? Do you even know what’s real?” She paused, looking him over.

“What really happened to your hand? Are you hurting yourself now?” He didn’t answer,
knowing the truth would only fuel her blazing anger. After a moment of silence, she tried a different tack.

“You show up randomly, talking nonsense about adventures and other worlds, then you disappear, and I never know when you’ll come back again. What do I do when you just stop showing up? Do I assume you’re dead? Do I come looking for you?” She folded her arms, for once pausing for him to answer.

“It probably means I just lost my gatekey,” he said honestly, and her anger flared hotter.

“What are you talking about?” She looked at him now, a twinge of fear mixed with her anger. She was honestly a little scared for him, though the fear was buried beneath flames.

“It’s like you’re living in some fantasy world; ever since—” she hesitated, sitting perfectly still. Then she stood up and started pacing back and forth across the room. “Ever since mom died, and you left…” she paused, measuring her words, the hurt plain in her voice.

“You disappeared, and it’s like you came back a different person. You’re telling all these wild stories; you disappear for months or years at a time—” she paused, shaking her head, before looking him in the eye.

“Is this just how it’s going to be? You just show up, and I have to hope it’s at the right moment? This would’ve broken Ellie’s heart if you hadn’t been here today, she was so sure you’d be here and I wasn’t, I really didn’t think you’d show up. We have this conversation every time you reappear, and nothing ever changes!”

Her voice cracked sharp like a whip. She drew a breath to continue the onslaught, but was cut off by the pounding of tiny feet. Ellie came flying back down the stairs.

“Grandpa!” she called, racing over to Mr. Ortega and jumping into his arms. “Dad said I could have one more hug before I went to bed.” She squeezed him tightly, clinging onto him; he held her back just as tight.

“I love you so much grandpa,” she said, burying her face into his shoulder. Evelyn turned away, tears filling her eyes. “I’ll miss you until you come back.” After another moment she pulled away, smiling up at Mr. Ortega. He lifted her gently and placed a kiss on her forehead.
She giggled as he set her down, and she started toward the stairs. Halfway there, she turned back around for a moment.

“When you see Caspian again, will you tell him I said hi?” She asked, and Mr. Ortega nodded, smiling at her. She beamed, racing back up the stairs to bed.

Mr. Ortega looked back at Evelyn, who had returned to her seat on the couch.

“She’s a good kid,” Mr. Ortega said, trying to read Evelyn’s expression. The anger had left her face, now only sadness in its place.

“She is a good kid. And she loves you so much—she needs you around.” She paused for a moment, weighing her words, before continuing. “I do too, dad.”

Mr. Ortega got up and crossed the room, sitting beside her on the couch. She looked him in the eyes for a moment, measuring. “Stay.”

“Evelyn,” Mr. Ortega started, his tone already filled with regret. She grabbed his arm, squeezing it tightly.

“Stay, dad. Just for a few days. Be here when she wakes up. Keep telling your stories, just . . . be here to tell them.” He looked at her, searching her face, searching her eyes for the acceptance that he craved. If only he could truly share his world with her. If only she would believe him.

He said nothing for a moment, breathing deeply before speaking.

“They aren’t just stories,” he said softly, reaching into his pocket. Evelyn sighed, a mixture of sadness and frustration—this fantasy of his was never ending, this cycle was doomed to repeat itself over and over without change. She was tired, and ready to give up.

He held a small object out to her on his open palm, metal shining in the soft light. A single gold coin. It was small, barely the size of a nickel, and engraved with a tiny ship’s anchor.

“A coin?” She said incredulously, brows furrowing in confusion. After a moment the confusion cleared from her face, and she looked up at him with a small, condescending smile.

“What is this supposed to prove?”
“Absolutely nothing,” he said cheerily, perfectly masking the hurt from his voice, still holding the coin out to her. “If you won’t accept it.” He closed his fingers over the coin, waving his hand with a flourish before opening his fist and revealing an empty palm. She chuckled in spite of herself.

“I think I’ve gotten a little too old for your magic tricks, dad.” She said, a sad smile crossing her face.

“If you say so, Evie.” Mr. Ortega replied softly, looking at her, love and wariness colliding in his eyes. After a moment’s hesitation, he gently pulled her into a hug. She did not resist, but only halfheartedly lifted an arm to hug him back.

“I miss mom.” She said suddenly, surprising herself with the words and the emotion in her voice. She regretted saying it instantly, regretted uttering those sacred words to the one person who had made that loss so much worse, so much lonelier, so much more unbearable. A cacophony of emotions crossed her face—anger, guilt, pain, sadness—and she was thankful he couldn’t see.

“So do I.” He said, squeezing her a little tighter. For a moment his voice was overwhelmed with pain.

“I see her in you,” he said, pulling away and looking into Evelyn’s face. She quickly composed her features, hiding the emotional turmoil in her head and heart. She smiled sadly at him, realizing the weight of his words, an explanation and an apology mixed into one. For a split second, the casual mirth that usually filled his eyes was gone. Instead they held a cavernous well of pain and sorrow, the torturous abyss that haunted him day and night. It was only visible to Evelyn for a tiny moment before the familiar mischief returned, armor to cover his true emotions.

He reached behind her ear; she felt his fingers brush her hair for a moment before he pulled his hand back into view, the same gold coin clutched between two fingers. She smiled, remembering how he used to make her laugh for hours with that trick, pulling more and more unlikely items from behind her ears. She met his eyes, and he smiled genuinely at her before setting the coin down on the coffee table.
‘Eve,’ Teddy said softly from the top of the stairs. ‘She won’t go to sleep without a kiss goodnight from mom.’ Evelyn chuckled for a moment at that.

‘She’s always been stubborn,’ Evelyn said. Mr. Ortega laughed.

‘Like you?’ he said, smiling at her. She smiled back at him.

‘Like you.’ She said, rising from the couch. Mr. Ortega chuckled at her words as she headed toward the stairs.

When she returned, Mr. Ortega had gone. His hat and coat no longer hung by the door. Though she felt disappointment, it was not accompanied by surprise. She crossed the room slowly, taking in its emptiness, and returned to her seat on the couch. The room felt colder somehow, a liveliness it had held now absent. Her eyes swept around the room, finally landing on the spot the coin had sat on the coffee table. The coin was gone, but in its place was a small square of purple paper.

She sat up instantly, reaching for it with a haste that contradicted her disbelief. The invitation looked like new, free of crumples or stains, and had no postmark. She held it closer, inspecting every inch carefully. The word Grandpa decorated the top right corner of the paper in Ellie’s handwriting, next to the butterfly sticker she’d added. Evelyn’s eyes swept over the page, shock coloring her face. She turned it over, trying to find some explanation for its reappearance. There, on the blank back of the card, was an address, written out in Mr. Ortega’s swirling, intricate handwriting. The ink was still wet.

Evelyn jumped to her feet, racing to the front door without a second thought. She wrenched it open, barely even pausing to throw on a pair of Teddy’s boots before racing out to the sidewalk. She scanned the surroundings desperately, shuffling a few steps this way and that as she searched for any sign of him down the dark street.

He was gone.
Dear Dad,

I hope you’re doing well, and staying safe on your travels. I sent a picture Ellie drew of the five of us. We have another hanging on our refrigerator now.

I found some old pictures of you and mom in the boxes of her stuff. If you want them, I can send them in the mail.

Ellie is taking good care of the butterflies. She just started the third grade. She asks about you all the time. She wanted to make sure I asked about Caspian again. I think she wants to be a pirate when she grows up.

Teddy and I are doing well. He just found a new job. We’re thinking about getting a dog.

I want to talk about what happened on Ellie’s birthday.

I love you dad. Visit soon.

~ Evie