

Chapter 6: Yay... New People

I'd always had the strangest dreams, a symptom of being a writer, I thought. I spent my free time creating worlds where other people could escape, and while I slept, my brain extended the same courtesy to me.

So, dreaming about a junkie, his mysterious cube, and a jump to another plane? That was normal for me.

What wasn't so normal was waking up to strangers crowding over me. Three faces, two of which were framed by brilliantly orange bushes of hair and one who was bald, look down on me with scrunched eyebrows while vivid green and blue pinpricks drilled through me. These people had *the* most vibrant hair and eye colors I'd ever seen and...

It hadn't been a dream. I had been whisked away from home and would soon need to begin my search for a way back. Why, why, *why*? I'd somehow gotten trapped in a story, and its creator had insisted on using my *least* favorite plot device. It was enough to make me want to scream.

I didn't do that, of course. Shouting for no apparent reason didn't seem like a good way to establish first contact with these strangers, but then again, I, socially inept and solitary person that I was, had no clue how to do that in the first place.

"Tha i na dùisg," said the man hovering over me. "Rachaibh ag innse do bhrathair."

That wasn't, of course, what he'd actually said. It had been such a jumble of foreign syllables and sounds rolled into one that I had trouble picking the words apart. But it was what my brain translated the mush to in my head: an approximation of a somewhat familiar language I'd been learning back home.

As the youngest of the strangers ran off, I felt my countenance souring. They didn't speak English. Of course they didn't. English wasn't the only language back home. Why should I expect that it would be in this hellish, frozen...?

Frozen.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I lifted my hands in front of me, and after taking a deep breath, I squinted at them.

I'd expected ruined fingertips. Blisters across bleached skin. Possibly no hands at all with the limbs having been removed to save the rest of me from necrotic tissue. What I got was my hands: whole, flushed, and healthy.

Shooting upright, I flipped them a few times before running them over the rest of me, seeking any sign that I'd almost frozen to death, but I found nothing. I should have at least a mild case of frostbite, but I could detect nothing wrong with me besides a pit in my stomach.

"That's only hunger," I said, pressing my hands to my abdomen.

Perhaps this place wasn't as terrible as I'd thought. Obviously, human civilization existed here, and from my perfectly healthy state, I'd say it was a fairly advanced one, more so than what was found on Earth.

Now that my health and existence had been verified, perhaps I should examine my surroundings. Instead of getting lost in my head again. Yeah, that seemed like a good idea.

I was sitting in a room with only the older woman still nearby. Ignoring her avid gaze, threatening to gobble me whole, I instead scanned what little I could see of the room.

Gel formed pads on the slab I was sitting on, and unnaturally still curtains flanked it, closing me into a skinny rectangle. These weren't like the plain dividers used in hospitals back home, the ones that always induced an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of one's gut. They were intricately woven with every shade of blue intertwined, presenting a fabric painting of ice and sky. On this, splashes of silver and gold had become stars and fire. I didn't know if an evening landscape had been intended with the presentation given, but it was what I saw.

A ripple dropped through the curtain from top to bottom, and curious, I poked it. A shimmer spread away from my finger with a brief glimpse of what lay beyond it given before the image restabilized, and a faint chuckle puffed from me. A hologram. One I'd mistaken as real for far too long.

With a dry mouth, I peered over the slab's edge, half-expecting to see further fancy laser work, but all that greeted me was milky blue... stone? It looked almost like condensed ice, but I had no intention of testing its properties unless it was required. I'd had too many cold experiences recently.

The same material made up the ceiling, although its carved blocks had etchings in them, swirls and patterns that might have been found in the floor back home. Strange that their placement was switched here.

In the furrows between these blocks, a white... liquid, bright phosphorescence to light the room, flowed. Why wasn't it falling from those cracks? Nothing held that plasma to the ceiling, and yet, there it stayed. Fascinating.

Now for my least favorite subject of interest, the other human with me. She stood at the end of the slab, blocking my view outside of the rectangle. With her hands folded in front of her waist, she returned my stare with eyes the color of sapphires, of the ocean deep, of...

Hmm. On Earth, we have these poisonous frogs, found most commonly in the rainforest. They're decorated in some of the most vivacious colors a living being can find. This woman's eyes were blue like theirs, and that same vibrancy infused her hair. It was orange like flames. Orange like a

pumpkin.

And so. many. freckles. Crossing her button nose. Invading her near-colorless lips. Brushing her tiny ears and plunging down her neckline.

Now, I wasn't into women. Or men for that matter. But I did appreciate people's physical attributes, especially when they were pleasing to the eye. This woman was *gorgeous*.

And she hid that beauty in the weirdest looking outfit I'd ever seen. A black, high collared cape billowed from her shoulders to her knees with two holes in the front of it allowing her arms to pass through. A white undershirt peeked through the cape's deep neckline before getting eaten by it. Puffy—*clown* puffy—white pants emerged from the cape's hem, tucked into black ankle boots.

And at every seam, a glowing strip sent pulsing blue along it.

Ok, maybe not the weirdest outfit I'd seen—fashion shows back home could get unnatural at times—but it was certainly strange.

The bald man returned with a bowl, brushing his green eyes over me before turning to the woman.

“A bheil thu cinnteach gum bu chòir dhuinn a beathachadh?”

Fluttering her fingers where they clutched one another, the woman said, “Mura dèan sinn sin, bidh e troimh-chèile?”

Sighing, the man extended the bowl toward me without looking my way. Rude.

“Thanks ever so much,” I said as I accepted.

While I examined what he'd given me, the man stalked away. Had they noticed me complaining about my hunger earlier? Wait. Did that mean they understood me?

Meeting the woman's eyes, I said, “Your home is... beautiful.”

What little of it I can see.

Her only response was a blink, which could mean she hadn't understood me or that she refused to make polite conversation. Either of those would be acceptable to me. For now.

Lifting the bowl to my lips, I sipped it. If they'd meant to kill me, they could have left me to die in the blizzard. I doubted they'd poison me now.

A fruity concoction hit my tongue, and gagging, I took a moment to reassess my belief. Wines should be sweet. Deserts should be sweet. Soups, on the other hand, should not. Forget all of the recipes back home that claimed something different. I didn't care. Hot soups should. be. savory.

Having begun to drink their offered meal, however, I couldn't think of a polite way to refuse it. I made myself swallow mouthful after mouthful of what tasted like something between an apple and a watermelon. Once I was finished, I lowered the bowl while fighting to retain my stomach contents.

And still, the woman stared at me.

"I get it. You're creepy," I said, "and you're probably someone important too, based on the fancy clothes. I didn't catch what your husband- Sorry. You might not be married. For all I know, you might not have the concept of marriage here. So, let me start again. I didn't catch what the man from earlier was wearing because I was so... entranced by your outfit."

Again, I only received blinking in response, so with a sigh, I scooted to lean against the wall, crossing my arms.

"I'm pretty good at staring contests too, you know."

But I had a weakness when it came to boredom. After around five minutes of placid silence, I was about ready to launch myself at the woman. Before I could, though, a commotion started outside the holographic curtains. Footsteps slapped toward us with a crash punctuating every fifth one. With a smile plucking at her lips, the woman turned away from me before stepping out of view.

"Cuimhnich a bhith faiceallach, a mhic," she says.

"Tha, tha. Leig mi faicinn i."

A sigh drifted through the hologram before the woman spoke once more.

"Gabh spòrs."

A kid took the woman's place. Well, I say kid. He was probably fourteen or fifteen, at the tipping point where his behavior might qualify him as an adult where his body wouldn't. A mild case of acne mingled with his freckles while stubble tried *so hard* to make a beard.

Don't worry. You'll get there soon enough.

He wasn't bald like the other man, but his shockingly orange hair was cropped close to his scalp. Lime green eyes—and I did mean *lime* green—sat above a crooked nose and the same near colorless lips I'd seen in two of the other three. He'd already achieved his full height, a few inches shy of six feet, or I hoped he had, for his sake, but he hadn't quite grown into it yet, all awkward proportions and lankiness.

As for his clothing, it was more what I'd expected, if perhaps not for this frozen world. Stiff pants reminiscent of blue jeans, dyed black, hung from his hips. A collared shirt, waistcoat, and formal jacket, all in stark white, covered his torso with all of its corners tapering to points. The jacket didn't have a lapel or buttons, just an opening that started wide at the hips before cinching at the

midline and nearly touching at the neck. A collar rose from this to half-circle the neckline, and a black and white, checkered tie hung from the shirt to be tucked into a buttoned waistcoat.

And as with the woman, strips that were oscillating with blue illumination provided accents at the hems.

Crouching, the boy folded his arms atop the slabbed surface I was on. He rested his chin on them before looking up at me, although he refused to meet my eyes.

“Are *you* who we were waiting for?” I asked. “Interesting. What’s so special about you?”

Wincing, the boy clapped his hands over his ears before licking his lips.

“Air do shocair,” he said, lengthening each syllable.

Did he think I was stupid, or...?

No. No, no, no. I was *done* with negativity. Yes, I was far from home. Yes, it sucked, but *I was far from home*. I was physically in a place that was similar the settings of the books I enjoyed. The act of finding my way home might end up being a pain in the ass, but I *would* enjoy each step along the way.

So, either I believed this boy was condescending to me or...

He was just as confused by the language barrier as me. He probably wanted me to slow down.

Straightening from the wall, I poked my chest.

“Brennan,” I said. “Brennan Adams.”

Lowering his hands from his ears, the boy pointed to himself.

“Ellair Baran.”

That had been easy. I had a name for him. How about one for where I was? Waving my hand around me, I shrugged.

“What is this place?”

For a minute, Ellair blankly stared at me, frowning, and with a groan, I scrambled for another way to ask my question. He, however, copied my movement, forestalling my effort, before cupping a space in front of his face.

“Colavar.”

He pulled his hands away from one another, creating a much larger space between them.

“Dalliesh.”

After swinging an arm over his head, he folded both of them on the slab again.

“Brighde.”

So, Colavar was a smaller location, probably a city or town. Dalliesh would be somewhere mid-range like a nation or continent, which made Brighde the planet’s name. Presumably. If so, I was sitting within the protection of Brighde’s atmosphere.

And this kid had conveyed that in three words and a few hand gestures. Tapping my temple, I pointed at him with a smile.

“Smart,” I said.

Blushing, Ellair nuzzled his chin into his arms, and I decided I liked him. It had been so long since I’d last felt like I could relax in another person’s presence, and that was shown in the beaming grin I gave him. He hesitantly returned it with his lips twitching, and I leaned forward.

“My things,” I said. “I’d like them back, please. I need to write...”

His eyes had gone wide as milk saucers, and sighing, I mimed using a pen and paper.

“Writing,” I said. “I need it. I...”

Biting my lip, I stared at my hands.

“If I don’t do it, the pressure builds,” I said with my lip caught in my teeth. “Abstain, and I’m an explosion of ideas, anxiety, and tears waiting to happen.”

Making an explosive noise, I burst my hands apart.

“And with everything that’s happened—finding myself here, worrying about the people I left behind, nearly dying—I need to get it out. I have to write it down-”

“CUS!”

Jerking my head up, I caught Ellair jumping to his feet with his hands plastered to his ears. He beat them against his head, staring with wide eyes past me as he continued screaming.

“CUS, CUS, CUS!”

Spinning, he fled from me with his voice chasing him.

“Chan eil, chan eil, chan eil, chan eil...”

It faded to silence, and I was left staring.

“Well,” I said. “I messed that up. Somehow.”

The woman from before stormed into view, and as she tapped at the air, her face was cloudy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what I did, but I didn't do it on purpose. It-"

When the gel covering the slab changed from gray to green, I swayed in place with the world swimming.

"Oh, shit."

As quickly as I could, I laid down and just in time too. Within two seconds, I went from completely alert to submerged in dreams.

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